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The Cross-Border Migrant Experience in Lang Son Province, Northern Viet Nam

Donald Hickerson, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Danièle Bélanger, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in
Sociology

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THE CROSS-BORDER MIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN LANG SON, VIET NAM

Thesis format: Monograph

by

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Graduate Program in Sociology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
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London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

The crossing of national borders between nations of the developing world provides opportunities for the poor who seek sources of livelihood, while putting migrants, especially women migrants, at risk of exploitation and abuse. It is against the backdrop of these contradictory effects of migration for poor women that this thesis examines the experiences of a group of daily cross-border migrant women in northern Viet Nam. The study focuses on the role of networks in their lives. Based on 22 in-depth interviews with Vietnamese women migrants who work at the Viet Nam-China border region, I develop an analytical framework that seeks to unpack the role of networks in this migration flow. The analysis indicates differences in experiences and the roles of networks between women who use official and unofficial crossing points. The analysis indicates the need to map the network beyond the migrants themselves and to recognize that networks ties are both protective and exploitative.

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Table of Contents

Certificate of Examination	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Tables	vi
List of Figures	vii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Cross-Border Migration as a Livelihood Strategy	3
Viet Nam	5
<i>Socioeconomic Context</i>	5
<i>The Viet Nam-China Border</i>	6
Research Objectives	8
Contribution of this Study	8
Thesis Outline	10
Chapter Two: Theoretical Discussion	12
Situating Trans-local Cross-Border Migration	13
Borders	14
Networks and Social Capital	16
<i>Spatiality of Networks</i>	19
Proposed Framework	20
Chapter Three: Literature Review	
Migration In and From Viet Nam: Policies, Roles, and Patterns	22
The Role of the State	22
<i>Gender and Family</i>	24
Internal Migration in Viet Nam	25
International Migration from Viet Nam	27
The Feminization of Migration	29
Labour Migration: Risk and Reward	30
Migrants' Networks and Social Capital	32
Chapter Four: Methodology and Study Location	37
Study Location	37
Research Design	38
Data Collection, Sampling, and Recruitment	40
<i>Data Collection Strategy</i>	41
<i>Sampling Strategy</i>	42
<i>Engaging the Participants</i>	43
<i>Interview Locations</i>	43
<i>Interview Language</i>	44
Analysis	45
Epistemology	45

Chapter Five: Crossing the Border	47
Daily Crossings	47
Legal Crossing in Tan Thanh	49
<i>Daily Experience</i>	51
<i>Solidarity and Reciprocity</i>	55
Illegal Crossing in Dong Dang	56
Comparing the Legal and Illegal Crossings	61
Markets of Lang Son	64
Chapter Six: The Networks of Border Crossings: Solidarity and Social Capital	
Becoming a Cross-border Migrant	67
Network Hierarchy: Couriers, Migrants, and Bosses	74
Group Hierarchy	75
Networks in Dong Dang: Mitigating Risk	78
Social Ties: Interdependence and Reciprocity	81
Networks of Tan Thanh: Residency, Solidarity and Social Capital	84
Chapter Seven: Conclusion	
Opportunity and Exploitation	88
Borders	90
Networks	92
Migrants or Day Labourers?	93
Study Limitations and Future Research	93

REFERENCES

APPENDIX

Curriculum Vitae

List of Tables

Table 1: Table of Research Participants	39
Table 2: Networks, Roles and Social Capital amongst the Different Groups	73
Table 3: Relationship Pathway and Hierarchy	74

List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of Viet Nam with the Location of Viet Nam Noted	38
Figure 2: Women on a <i>ba banh</i>	51
Figure 3: Map of the Dong Dang Mountain Crossing	58

Chapter One: Introduction

In recent decades, migration studies have shifted from focusing on the macro-level processes of migration linked to state-level migration policies to ‘grassroots’ micro-level movements. The dominant view of migration as the movement of peoples from one nation and culture to be assimilated and assumed by their new host country has given way to more complex approaches. Globalization and rapid developments in communication and technology now position the migrant as being equally ‘here’ and ‘there’. By reconceptualising the international migrant as a transmigrant, Glick Schiller et al. (1992) linked the migrant with their country of origin and their host country. Portes (1996, 1999) developed a new perspective on cross-border communities that focused more on the individual and community level transnational activities and the complexity of migrants’ and non-migrants’ social networks.

Arguably the *forces majeures* of globalization play a crucial role in shaping the migration process (Castles and Miller, 2009; Massey and Espinoza, 1997). The polemic around globalization positions the migrant with both new opportunities and risks of exploitation. Critics of globalization point to the mass exploitation of the world’s poorest populations; whereas, proponents contend that the opportunity for migrant labour hinges on global free-market economies. At the forefront of the globalization debate are transient labour markets. The global labour market, cross-border marriages, and historic trade-routes that cross national borders (Bélanger et al., 2010; Michaud, 2000; Vertovec, 2004) are among the phenomena that impact at the global and grassroots levels.

Academic attempts to research the increasingly widespread form of *temporary, circular,*

and short-term migration have presented a new focus on *trans-local cross-border* migration. In some cross-border migration flows, like the one studied in this thesis, migrants cross an international border on a daily basis, generally for the purpose of work. They are transient and temporary international migrants. While they still reside in their country of birth, they may spend time across an international border on a daily basis. According to the United Nations' definition of an international migrant – someone who lives outside his or her country of birth – the migrants studied here are not international migrants. Nevertheless, their lives are spent in two countries and they have more experience of border crossings than most migrants in the world.

Cross-border migration has been examined through the lenses of sociology, economics, geography, feminist studies, anthropology, and multi-disciplinary approaches; however, only recently have we begun to hear the voice of those experiencing cross-border lives. Much of the scholarly work on cross-border lives is either focused on the determinants of migration or the socio-cultural impact on the sending and receiving communities (De Haas, 2010; Faist, 2010; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). Studies on cross-border migration have contributed important levels of understanding of the migrant experience, but often lack the narratives of actual accounts.

The study of how networks are central to migration flows and migrants' lives has flourished in migration studies (Boyd, 1989; Vertovec, 2004). Research to date has documented how personal networks contribute to explaining how migration begins and how it is sustained (Gielis, 2009; Massey, 1993). Other research emphasizes how networks need to be expanded in their conceptualization to include all actors involved, some of whom may exploit the migrant rather than support him or her (De Haas, 2010;

Krissman, 2005; Piper, 2004). In this thesis, I examine the role of social networks in cross-border migrants' lives in an attempt to use network theory to a very specific and understudied type of labour migration

Cross-Border Migration as a Livelihood Strategy

There is a wealth of academic work on the migration patterns stemming from the global economic shifts, with many scholars recognizing the impact that late-capitalism is having on global trends of mobility (Featherstone et al., 2010; Gills and Piper, 2006). The demand for temporary migrant labour is a growing trend globally and has presented employment opportunities for the economically disadvantaged. Bailey (2001) sees this international mobility as being tied to economic insecurities and the prospect of capital enhancement.

The rural poor in developing countries face a multitude of economic insecurities; as Massey (1998) contends, a country in development creates a highly unstable economic environment. When possible, migration can counter this economic uncertainty and strengthen the overall household income (Stalker, 2001). With a concentration in Asia, temporary contract-based labour migration between developing countries accounts for 40 percent of the world's labour mobility (King and Skeldon, 2010). Recent migration studies have shown that *temporality* increasingly characterizes migration flows and that there exists various forms of temporality. As a result, the idea of *permanency* in migration has become increasingly rare. Recruiting workers to fill temporary low-skilled jobs for a fixed period of time has become a global phenomenon (Freeman, 2006). The current trend in migration, particularly important within Asia, is for low-skilled

individuals to migrate temporarily. Most contract labour migrants in Asia can reside in their destination country from three to nine years and have no access to permanent residence or citizenship. In addition to this type of migration, there are also seasonal migrants destined to one sector for which activities are more intense during some months of the year. Migration in border regions – both documented and undocumented – is also another very important migration trend in Asia. Some of these migrants cross from one country to the other monthly, weekly, or daily, thus blurring the notion of place of residence, the definition of an international migrant, and the sense of belonging and identity. Daily life in more than one national space requires a new framework.

Whether it is temporary, circular, or permanent, migration has become a prevalent household economic livelihood strategy in Asia. The benefits of migration are often seen as a costs/rewards matrix, with the financial expense of the initial move being offset with an increased or new income. Among policymaking circles, the emphasis is generally on the economic benefits, which are seen as being positive for all parties involved (migrants, receiving countries, and sending countries). Other costs besides economic ones are rarely accounted for, except by migrant rights' advocates.

Developing countries in Asia, such as Indonesia, The Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Viet Nam, supply a large number of guest workers recruited to work abroad in menial jobs (Kusakabe and Pearson, 2010). Because an increasing number of temporary migrants from these countries are women, migration scholarship has developed a gender perspective. The global market economies that fuel temporary migration flows often fail to account for migrants' rights or safeguards (Piper, 2006). Temporary migrants, particularly women migrants, are precariously positioned and risk

exploitative demands from both the sending and receiving countries (Kusakabe and Pearson, 2010; Lutz, 2010; Piper, 2004). A wealth of research on Asian domestic workers working worldwide has been particularly effective at integrating a gender perspective into migration theories and showing how migration requires a gender lens to be understood.

Viet Nam

Socioeconomic Context

The question of livelihood strategies can be better understood through the lens of Viet Nam's macro-economic position. A recent report from the International Monetary Fund (2011) places Viet Nam as one of the world's fastest growing economies; however, this is a relatively new development with the social transformation of a rising economy yet to be realized by the majority of the population. In addition to growing rural and urban inequalities, significant income and gender disparity remain (Schoenberger and Turner, 2008). The average daily income in Viet Nam is approximately USD \$3, with previous studies suggesting significantly less income generated in rural communities (Phan and Coxhead, 2008). Outside the two major urban centres of Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City little money is invested in infrastructure, such as schools or road maintenance. Moreover, previous researchers have alluded to significant governmental corruption that accounts for less money being allotted for projects in rural areas (Turner and Bonnin, 2012). While the Communist Party of Viet Nam maintains overall economic control, the people are free to work in any field they choose. In other words, Viet Nam currently stands at the

doorway of change, with the socialist government rooted in the tenets of Communist ideology yet embracing capitalism.

The political and economic isolation that emerged from conflict with Western democratic forces led to economic sanctions and trade embargos that greatly impacted Viet Nam's global economic position. Spearheaded by the American government, the trade sanctions began after the 1975 fall of Saigon, effectively continuing the American-led aggression against the communists, and remained until the Clinton administration. These sanctions and embargos, coupled with the Communist Party's attempt at post-war collectivization, led to Viet Nam's 1980s economic collapse. Following the protracted war with the American lead forces and more recent conflicts with neighbouring Cambodia and China, Viet Nam is currently attempting to redefine itself and claim a position on the global economic stage. The economic collapse in Viet Nam during the early 1980s led to the Communist Party reforming its centralized economy policy. The most significant change occurred with 1986s *renovation policy* or *Doi Moi* reforms. The policy changes of *Doi Moi* led to a socialist-oriented market economy, wherein the state continues to play a significant role in the economy, but encourages private enterprise. Despite the economic and social reforms of 1986s *Doi Moi* that offered certain freedoms for the Vietnamese people, the Socialist government retains an omnipotent control over nearly every aspect of the population (Hardy, 2001). One centerpiece of *Doi Moi* is the opening to foreign investment and increasing trade relations with other Asian countries, including China.

The Viet Nam-China Border

The Viet Nam-China border has a long history of conflict, warfare, and political tensions. The most recent conflict in 1979 saw Chinese forces invade Viet Nam along the northern border provinces. This resulted in the Vietnamese border being officially closed to China. For nearly a decade the border remained closed and only in 1988 did Viet Nam officially reopen the border to cross-border trade (Schoenberger and Turner, 2008). Viet Nam-China relations were officially normalized in 1991, and Viet Nam emphasized the role of cross-border trade with China in developing the northern border regions (Chan, 2005).

Along the 2,363 kilometre border with China, there are six provinces in Viet Nam. At the northeastern part of the border is the province of Lang Son. It is a sparsely populated (750,000 people) mountainous province approximately 155 kilometers north of Ha Noi, yet strategically important because of its trade routes to China. The border province of Lang Son – the site of this study – has two significant border crossings, the so-called *Friendship Gate* in Dong Dang and the trade crossing at Tan Thanh. The crossing in Dong Dang is one of the few places along the Viet Nam-China border that allows crossing for international travelers. Tan Thanh sits at the northernmost part of the Vietnamese national highway and the border gate is a hub of commercial trade traffic. The small-scale cross-border trade at these two sites is markedly different as one is a legal crossing (Tan Thanh) and the other illegal (Dong Dang).

The Viet Nam-China border offers a rich terrain for studying how cross-border migration by local and economically disadvantaged populations may offer a livelihood strategy. Because migrants who cross this border on a daily basis to do small trade are mostly women, the study site also provides a good case study on how women migrants negotiate border crossings.

In this thesis, I address the question of cross-border experience through an examination at the local level, with the goal of adding an additional perspective to the existing body of research on trans-local or cross-border migration. This will be explored through an analysis of the accounts of a group of women cross-border migrants in a rural border region of Lang Son in northern Viet Nam. I use the terms trans-local cross-border migration because I refer to the international border crossing within one circumscribed geographical zone whereby migrants live close to the Vietnamese side of the border and cross that border on the Chinese side for the purpose of work. As such, they work within a trans-local zone divided by an international border.

Research Objectives

My research began with two objectives. My first aim is to provide a rich description of the women who cross the Viet Nam-China border on a daily basis to earn a living.

Because this group of trans-local migrants has not been studied in the region where I conducted my fieldwork, I intend to provide a detailed account of the lives of female migrant workers. Who are these women? Why do they become cross-border migrants? What are their daily lives as migrant workers crossing into China like? What are their experiences with state authorities? My second aim is to examine the role of networks in these migrant women's lives. What roles do networks play in becoming a migrant and in maintaining one's job and status? How do networks serve to protect or weaken women's position as cross-border migrants?

Contribution of this Study

I believe this thesis is of value to migration studies as it addresses two key points. First, empirically, since it addresses the experiences of daily cross-border Vietnamese migrant women working in a remote border region, it will contribute to the scarcity of scholarship on cross-border migration, gender, and work in a Vietnamese context. The analysis reveals that one central element to the experiences of migrants is whether they cross legally or illegally. Because the women's experiences in the crossings differ and present a host of unique processes and dynamics the two locations are addressed separately. The intent is to add to migration studies by being positioned alongside similar work in other Vietnamese border regions as well as other Southeast Asian nations.

Secondly, because studies pertaining to networks and social capital have been predominately focused on international migrants, such as those belonging to the Vietnamese Diaspora formed after the end of the American War rather than cross-border migrants, there exists a gap in the literature. The existing studies on trans-local migration from Viet Nam to border countries are mostly concerned with marriage migration and forced migration, human trafficking, historic trade ties, or kinship systems (Bélanger et al., 2011; Schoenberger and Turner, 2008; Ullah and Hossain, 2011). Studies that explore migrant networks at the local-level are lacking. In addition, the specific location of Lang Son has not been studied. By having the migrant women of the region provide personal accounts of social networks in their cross border migration we are better able to gain a complete picture of the dynamics at work.

At the regional level, and more broadly speaking, this research enriches our understanding of the centrality of gender in migration flows in the Asian context. In addition, the study offers a powerful example of how poor citizens manage to strategize

and use new opportunities to cross an international border to make a living. While border openings of communist nations (in this case China and Viet Nam) make the headlines for the global trade they facilitate and the political opening they symbolize (The New York Times, in press 9/09; Voice of Vietnam, 7/12 online), women at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder may find ways to use this opening to their benefit. At the same time, the work these women perform can be highly exploitative. These women's lives as migrants, workers, wives, and mothers encapsulate the contradictions of globalization and international migration and the impact on poor rural women of a developing country. Together, the focus on women migrants and trans-local cross-border migration shows how migration, networks, and work are intertwined, gendered processes.

Thesis Outline

The thesis begins with a theoretical discussion of the main building blocks of this study: networks and social capital, borders and space. Much of Chapter Two presents the groundwork on which I base my theoretical framework. Chapter Three addresses the wealth of scholarship on migration at the local level, with a particular focus on Viet Nam. A number of studies are summarized in regards to their general findings about migration in Viet Nam. The chapter further examines literature on state policies, gender, and borders in the Vietnamese context, with special attention to how networks are developed and used as social navigation tools. The methodology discussed in Chapter Four outlines the research design of this study and provides a contextual sketch of the region. Through the analysis of fieldwork observations and in-depth interviews, Chapter Five documents the women's experiences of working along the Viet Nam-China border. The women's

firsthand accounts provide the narrative to this ethnographic reflection. Both types of crossings – legal and illegal – and the different dynamics and approaches needed for each are discussed. Chapter Six deepens the examination on networks specific to the women working in Lang Son. In this chapter, the women’s voices on their experience illustrate how the two different types of border crossings present unique challenges that reflect their network construction and maintenance. Chapter Seven provides a general discussion on the research findings and links concepts to existing literature on migration networks, social capital, and employment. Finally, I close by commenting on the limitations of this study and the potential for further research.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Discussion

This chapter deals with the predominant theories that directed the course of this research. This thesis deals fundamentally with the process of migration; however, it is a distinct form of migration that is location-specific, with a complexity of issues relating to borders and gender. To aid in the understanding of the processes involved in cross-border migration among the women of Lang Son province, I will provide an overview of the theoretical components of this study. I begin by situating *trans-local cross-border migration* in current migration studies; then I revisit the theoretical shifts that have brought micro-level analysis of migration to the forefront. The earliest scholarship on cross-border migration began by furthering the focus of transnationalism.

Transnationalism considers the processes by which migrants develop relationships between their country of origin and the host country. Moreover, *migrant transnationalism* focuses on the individual and his or her network, rather than the larger processes of migration. Secondly, I consider how borders can be both physical barriers and abstract ideals. Borders are political institutions, representing the physical boundary, but they can also become social constructions. Thirdly, I discuss social capital and networks. The concept of social capital stems from the Marxist traditions of power and inequality. An important consideration in social capital theory is social relations or networks. In the fourth section I discuss the importance of space in network theory. The process of group connections and networks are produced and reproduced by individuals interacting in a spatial place. Lastly, I conclude with a proposed framework that will draw from the perspectives discussed in this chapter.

Situating Trans-local Cross-Border Migration

Early migration studies were concerned with large-scale, macro-level patterns of mobility and determinants of mobility. A more recent trend in migration studies is to focus on small-scale, micro-level patterns of migration that include temporary, circular, and daily migration. Rather than large migration patterns that address diasporas, refugees, and large population movements, a branch of scholarship on micro-level migration focuses on the individual making short duration movements. The latter includes temporary labour migration, where migrants take up residence in the host country for employment for a predetermined period of time, which is the case for trans-local cross-border migrants who make monthly, weekly, or daily crossings and return home soon.

When discussing migration, it is my intent not to consider migration as a whole, but rather to focus on trans-local patterns of regional cross-border migration. This thesis aims to add to the understanding of micro-level migration flows, as I specifically focus on the daily trade that occurs at a particular border location. By micro-level, I also refer to migration flows set in motion by migrants themselves, rather than by state-level migration policies and programs.

In this thesis, I consider individuals who cross borders and stay in another national space for a short duration of time as *international migrants* even though they constantly go back and forth. Although they would not qualify as international migrants according to the United Nations definition because they do not reside in a country other than their country of birth, they permanently move between borders and national spaces. Their lives raise questions with respect to what constitutes a migrant and what represents a border. There is a wealth of scholarship on other border regions, such as the United

States-Mexico border and the porous and open borders of the EU (Alvarez, 1995); however, there is currently a scarcity of studies that have examined cross-border migration on the Viet Nam-China border. The scholarship that exists on the northern border regions of Viet Nam focuses on issues of trade (Schoenberger and Turner, 2008; Yiming and Dianmo, 1998), ethnic enclaves (Michaud, 2000, 2008) or political histories (MacLean, 2009).

Borders

Borders are equally physical spaces, political social constructs, and abstract concepts (Newman and Paasi, 1998). Borders can have many functions and carry different meanings; they can be, at once, political boundaries, physical obstacles, and cultural expressions (Gielis, 2009). The women migrants in Lang San both politicize the border and impart cultural meaning on it. Spatially, the cross-border migrant experiences the border as a difference of being here and there; a socially constructed ‘in-betweenness’ that re-enforces social identity (Alvarez, 1995). Because of this, I too must theorize the border as a political space and as a cultural abstraction. Borrowing from contemporary border scholars who see borders as meaningful concepts that are both political boundaries and social constructions, (Collins, 2009; Gielis, 2009; Yeoh, 2007), I reify the migrant’s conceptualization of borders through the underpinnings of social theory.

Political geographers Newman and Paasi (1998) argue that borders are expressions of the territoriality of states and contend that borders can be equally social and discursive constructs that are rooted in historical contingencies. Recent scholarship has pointed to the increased permeability of borders (Gielis, 2009; Kearney, 2004;

Stuver, 2006), yet, arguably, borders have always been porous. Historic trade routes, clandestine migration, and trafficking have regularly functioned, despite the manifestation of political boundaries. Local populations do not necessarily see social and spatial boundaries as political manifestations (Newman, 1994). In his study of highland minorities along the northern border regions of Viet Nam, Michaud (2000) argues that the political border is representative of the state. Schoenberger and Turner (2008) reaffirm this argument in a study of cross-border migrants in the Northwest Vietnamese province of *Lao Cai*. The ethnically embedded social relations of the migrants in *Lao Cai* subvert state borders. With this in mind it is important to position the Viet Nam-China border in a contemporary context.

The socio-political importance of the Viet Nam-China border can be better understood by linking the political representation of the border with the concept of a cultural manifestation. Paasi (1996) argues that the specific actors in a particular social context reinforce state boundaries. As a political boundary, the border divides one nation-state from another – a barrier that can either enable or prohibit migrant access. The extent to which a border is restrictive or porous is dependent on governments (Vertovec, 2004). Alvarez (1995) demonstrates that a good relationship between nations enables a porous border. Gielis (2009) argues that, when borders no longer function as a barrier, they are no longer important. Moreover, when the political barrier function is low, transnational migration is allowed to flourish (Gielis, 2009). Active cross-border migration challenges the political construct of borders by removing the specific social context of boundaries (Vertovec, 2004). In this light, the border can be seen as something that simultaneously

separates and connects places. As a political structure, the border separates one nation from another; as a social space it connects the 'us' and 'them' (Gielis, 2004).

Tilly (2004) considers social boundaries as what separates us from them. Borders, by definition, construct identities through numerous social, political, and cultural practices (Newman and Paasi, 1998). Borders are connected to territory and sovereignty. According to Appadurai (1995), migrants, by the very nature of their mobility, conceive and construct identities in a placial way. It is through the lens of place and nationalism that migrants position themselves. Kearney (2004) argues that negotiating the border, crossing from a 'home' nation to an 'other' place, is what shapes the cross-border migrant experience. For this thesis, when in China, the migrants interviewed in this study self-identify as Vietnamese women, thus reaffirming the socio-political constructs attached to space and place.

Networks and Social Capital

The concept of social capital has generated a great deal of discussion in the past 30 years. Social capital theory builds on the Marxist notion of exploitative social relations, where the dominant class controls the means of production and the circulation of commodities, giving those with wealth and power more social status. In this circulation, wage labourers generate income, which, in turn, is reinvested into commodities, generally at a higher price than the production cost. The dominant class makes the initial investment and is rewarded with the surplus value of the commodity sales (Marx, 1933). Human capital theory views the return on investment as an individual benefit (e.g. a greater education investment equals better financial returns) (Becker, 1964). Similarly, cultural capital

represents the investment made by the dominant class in producing and reproducing a set of meanings and symbols that are internalized by the masses as heuristic values (Bourdieu, 1977). Likewise, social capital is the investment in social relations with an expectation of a return (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 1995). It is through networks of social relations that an investment is made, with rewards, such as knowledge, generated by these associations (Massey, 1998).

At the heart of social capital is the role of networks and group dynamics. Personal networks can facilitate group inclusion, with individual contacts acting as the gatekeeper for group membership. The larger group network is, in part, reflected in the collectivity of individual members; that is to say, the strength of the network stems from its members. The characteristic of the individual is what produces the strength and value of the group. Bourdieu (1986) sees this individual *resource* as group social capital. In social capital theory, the network stresses a duality of relational outcomes. This perspective emphasizes how strong community ties contribute to a sense of belonging and community, while weak community ties prevent inclusion (de Haas, 2010; Lin, 1999; Massey, 1998; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). The primary function of group solidarity is to enhance the individual member's social and economic standing. It can also foster exclusionary tactics that isolate others from information and opportunities. Group inclusion, particularly among the economically disadvantaged, is considered a vitally important tool for socioeconomic protection (Kozel and Parker, 2000).

An important consideration in social capital theory is that there exists a problematic duality. The social connections that create a sense of solidarity and produce value through the transmission of resources can also have negative consequences if group

loyalties are too rigid (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). In other words, a group's success may be the result of its network ties, but the same network may very well work to prevent success. Generally, three factors contribute to beneficial network relations: the flow of information, level of social influence, and group identity (Lin, 1999). At the group level, social capital is produced and maintained as a collective asset. Through the exchange of information, members are able to access resources that may enhance their lives, producing a greater level of social influence. However, as Lin (1999) points out, the group's value is determined by the aggregation of its individual members. Therein lies the issue of whether a group will necessarily be successful or not. A group can be tightly connected (dense); however, if the individual members lack any real social position or influence, the benefits for the collective may be few.

Another issue related to networks and social capital is group identity, or a sense of solidarity. The bond of mutual recognition is a central ingredient in reproducing and preserving a group's cohesion. The stronger the ties are within the group, the greater the sense of collectiveness or solidarity. From a class perspective, Bourdieu (1986) considers social capital investment as a tool for the dominant class to maintain its position. This, however, assumes that the dominant class is a dense network with strong ties and equal group commitment. Offering a different perspective, Coleman (1990) sees social capital as a public good, available to all group members, regardless of individual contributions, with network density being the primary group advantage. As Lin (1999) sees it, dense networks have an advantage when preserving or maintaining resources, but he doesn't discount the importance of outsider group connections in networks. These connections to others outside the group, or bridges, provide group members with access to knowledge

and resources beyond the immediate membership. By reaching beyond the confines of the group, one may be able to access external information and exert influence.

Dense network bonds can give the group its strength, yet without external bridges detrimental issues can arise. At its worst, rigidly exclusive groups with weak external ties can manifest sectarian polemics (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). More often, networks are used to foster an exclusionary form of social inequality (de Haas, 2010); however, as Granovetter (1983) argues, it is because of weak social ties that initial bonds are developed. A network does not exist as an island; it is through the web of association that networks can be produced and maintained.

Spatiality of Networks

Cross-border networks have been widely studied with regard to a group's spatial reality (Alvarez, 1995; Gardner and Grillo, 2002; Gielis, 2009; Massey, 1994; Vertovec, 2006). This study is highly site-specific, and by adding a place perspective, it provides an additional tool for understanding network dynamics. Related to the importance of spatial location is the role the border plays in the lives of the women cross-border migrants. The abstraction of the border serves to impose systemic regulations from both governments involved, and it represents an obstacle to be negotiated by the cross-border migrants. Here I consider the importance of space and how this relates to networks and the cross-border migrant experience.

As Gielis (2009) states, “the uniqueness of a place is not embedded in the local, rather it is defined by the ways the people in the place interact with places and the social processes beyond” (277). The migrant women in Lang Son are not simply crossing the

border as a function of their employment; they must negotiate and navigate the spatial environment. Gielis (2009) sees space as an experienced locality. When considering the space in the network perspective, Gielis (2009) argues that “people perceive their social world in a placial way” (275), meaning that social networks are inherently ascribed to location. A social network of colleagues at work or school is situated *at* the office or university; however, as Gielis (2009) cautions, not all networks are embedded in a single location. Branches of social relations are fluid and there always exists the possibility of several places or networks intersecting. Social relations commonly intersect; for example a work colleague may also be a social partner. An individual’s work-related network may be wholly separate from other social networks, but on poker night the different networks may interconnect. In this way, places are social constructions filled with social meaning (Appadurai, 1995). Massey (1994) argues that any place is related to many places simultaneously, with places regarded as interlinked and fluid.

Smith and Katz (1993) define locality as a multi-dimensional space where “diverse social and natural events and processes take place” (68). The cross-border migrants in Lang Son may qualify as migrants because of their employment, but the process is inexorably tied to their location and social networks. When considering the spatiality of groups, Featherstone et al. (2010) see networks as “overlapping and contested material, cultural, and political flows that bind different places together through differentiated relations of power” (386). Networks used by the migrant women of Lang Son are integral to negotiating their social realms and navigating the complexities of cross-border migration. The access or barriers embedded in cross-border trade can be

enriched or mitigated through networks of social relations, family links, and kinship systems.

Proposed Framework

This thesis examines the extent to which cross-border migrants negotiate and experience borders, how networks impact on their lives, and how trans-local cross-border migration translates as an effective economic strategy. I will use an analytical framework, drawing from the perspectives discussed above. I intend to illustrate how the abstraction of the border impacts on network construction and maintenance, and I will examine how cross-border migrants navigate the border experience using network connections. I will argue that the embedded resources of social capital – information, influence, social status, and identity – impact on the lives of daily migrants. Negotiating the border crossing, be it structural or metaphorical, is facilitated by network inclusion and the aggregation of its embedded resources. I will discuss the cross-border migrant experience in two parts. First, I propose that the border crossing experience is a process that women negotiate through social connections. I contend that social relations and network connections have multi-dimensional functions, facilitating employment, mitigating risk, overcoming obstacles, and providing group identity. Second, I consider the implications of cross-border migration in Lang Son and the role that social capital plays in the women migrants' lives. I will integrate the migrants' experiences with the perspective that social capital is an embedded resource in social networks and that borders have a polymorphous and constitutive role in migrants' lives.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature that addresses the intersections of migration, employment, gender, and networks. It sets the contextual stage from which to position the women migrants in my research and situates the methodology that follows.

Migration In and From Viet Nam: Policies, Roles, and Patterns

The fall of Saigon in the 1970s saw an estimated 1.5 million Vietnamese flee their homeland and an additional one million be internally relocated by the government (Desbarats, 1990; Steer and Sen, 2010). The exodus and state policies on relocation left population gaps in pockets of the country (De Brauw, 2010). Following the reunification of North and South Viet Nam in 1975, the government took more control of internal migration. During this time, reuniting with families or moving for state jobs were the only officially recognized forms of internal migration (Hardy, 2000). As discussed in the opening chapter, 1986s *Doi Moi* economic reforms had a significant impact on Viet Nam.

The Role of the State

Hardy's (2000) review of the strategies and patterns of migration in contemporary Viet Nam shows that state policies accounted for both large-scale migration and the considerable controls on migration. In an effort to deurbanize Saigon and populate areas for agricultural exploit, the state introduced the new economic zones program. The program was intended to relocate workers to areas with sparse populations and limit any spontaneous mobility within the country. This program was highly successful in

relocating vast numbers of Vietnamese people from large urban centres (namely Saigon) to the sparsely populated regions of the Central and Northern Highlands. Although official statistics and independent audits differ, it has been estimated that nearly 2.5 million people were forced to relocate between 1971 and 1985 (Desbarats, 1990; UN, 2007).

As successful as state controls on migration were, Hardy (2000) documented administrative failures that were common and problematic. Many Vietnamese people chose to relocate where they wished and forgo official residency status; others used the official policy and applied for residency change to reunite with family members. According to Hardy's (2000) study, the use of family networks was instrumental in both methods of subverting official policies.

Among the policy changes brought about by the *Doi Moi* reform was the *ho khau* policy or household registration system. This registration program effectively monitors the internal migration of the Vietnamese by placing strict administrative structural demands on citizens through residential categories that limit access to goods and services, including land rights, motor vehicle registration, public utilities, health care, etc. (UN, 2010). Only those registered as permanent residents in a specific region can access governmental services in that area; others are excluded or must pay cash (Hardy, 2000). By prohibiting those without official residence status from accessing services, the state government has established systemic controls that can moderate or undermine internal migration. Some authors have suggested that, in response, some Vietnamese use networks as a strategy to circumvent the official policies on internal mobility (Anh, 1999; Hardy, 2000; Michaud and Turner, 2000).

Gender and Family

Werner (2002) investigates how the *repositioning* of the household under the *Doi Moi* reforms acted as a vehicle for economic transition and affected gender roles. The post-socialist free-market economy of Viet Nam has seen the labour roles of women return to informal sectors, home-based work, and the traditions of petty trade. As Viet Nam has moved away from a state-run public sector and has allowed for the development of a free-market economy, women are seen as disadvantaged because they constitute the vast majority of informal, small-scale trade businesses (Werner, 2002). According to Werner's study, the *Doi Moi* policies that ushered in an economic transition did so without implementing the safeguards of formal controls that limit the exploitation of small-scale, petty trade businesses, leaving those involved to implement informal controls.

Teerawichichainan et al. (2010) suggest that the post-socialist free-market transition since *Doi Moi* continues to include women in the labour force; however, with the more recent economic downturn in 2008, women have been relegated to the traditional roles in the petty trade. The Teerawichichainan (2010) study considers urban and rural differences and shows that rural households are more traditional, have less equality, and place greater household demands on women. Despite state policies and recent social transformations seen in Viet Nam, women continue to do the majority of household chores.

Teerawichichainan's (2010) article furthers the earlier work of Knodel et al. (2005) that was conducted in the Red River delta region, just south of Lang Son. This

region is more populated, with more small and intermediate urban centres than the province of Lang Son. The significance of traditional gender roles among women of Lang Son remains unclear as the linkages of trade and social capital could undermine them.

Internal Migration in Viet Nam

The last two decades have seen a great deal of scholarship on migration patterns in Viet Nam. Following the economic reforms, internal migration has steadily increased in Viet Nam (De Brauw, 2010; Hardy, 2000; Thanh et al., 2005). A study by De Brauw (2010) on seasonal migration in Viet Nam sees a significant increase in temporary agricultural migration since the mid 1990s. More relaxed government policies and the need for seasonal labour has increased mobility (Anh, 1999; De Brauw, 2010). A recent UN report on Viet Nam suggests that 70 percent of internal migrants relocate for employment or to improve living conditions (UNFPA, 2007). That is not to say that there is not a historic tradition of mobility for trade and labour in Viet Nam, but the aforementioned state policies that worked to control the distribution of the population have since been eased (Hardy, 2000).

Phan and Coxhead (2008) investigate the role economics play in migration by quantifying the income disparities among households in different provinces within Viet Nam. Using aggregate data, this study demonstrates that the link between patterns of internal migration in Viet Nam corresponds to household income levels. Their study illustrates how patterns of migration increase within households with higher income levels. Further, the provinces within Viet Nam with higher rates of low-income families tend to be under-represented in migration internally. Phan and Coxhead (2008) show a

possible determinant for internal migration by comparing internal migration rates to mean incomes and the distance between the two, then combining them with non-economic vectors. By including non-economic conditions (e.g. occurrences of past migration and a proxy for networks as a cost reduction strategy) in their equation, Phan and Coxhead (2008) demonstrate how social capital is a determinant for internal mobility within Viet Nam. The border regions of the Northern Highlands have not benefited as much from recent economic reforms as more urban areas (Michaud and Turner, 2000), and household income levels in the Highlands are significantly lower than in other regions of Viet Nam (Phan and Coxhead, 2008). What impact these factors have on the dynamics of internal migration in border areas is uncertain. Previous scholarship would suggest, however, that internal migration is driven by opportunity and relocation to border regions may present favourable circumstances.

An investigation by Thanh et al. (2005) considers how the changing economic structure of the country impacts on households in two small villages in the Red River delta region of Viet Nam. The study demonstrates how families earn a livelihood by having men migrate seasonally for work in the agricultural sector and women engage almost exclusively in small-scale handicraft production. This study is affirmed by the de Brauw (2010) study that finds the majority of season migrants are young males. Along with state economic reforms and relaxed policies on movement, the Thanh et al. (2005) study argues that two major factors contribute to an increase in migration – a vastly improved infrastructure, with better roads and transportation systems, and an increase in the development and use of social networks.

A complementary study that addresses the patterns of rural-urban migration in Viet Nam suggests that, while urbanization remains relatively low, there has been a significant increase in movement since the political and economic reforms of the mid-1980s (Mundle and Van Arkadie, 1997). The majority of migration was rural to rural, with large flows of migration from the northern border regions to the more populated Red River delta region. Using the Viet Nam Living Standard Survey (1994), Mundle and Van Arkadie (1997) suggest that Lang Son has experienced large out-flows of migrants in search of opportunities in the Red River delta.

International Migration from Viet Nam

According to the bilateral migrant stock matrix of Parsons et al. (2007), nearly half of the migrants from Asia relocate to neighboring countries. While Viet Nam sees fewer documented out-migrants than its neighbouring counterparts, the vast majority of migrant women are mobile within the immediate region (Kaur, 2010). This strong bias for intra-regional migration suggests many structural factors influence this phenomenon. Kaur (2010) considers the regional geopolitics in Southeast Asian migration practices.

Countries with solid economies, like China and those with rising economies, like Viet Nam, tend to foster migration (Vertovec, 2004). Yet countries with a socialist regime are better able to impose strict governance on migration (Kaur, 2010). Bureaucratic hurdles, like obtaining passports and exit visas, can make migration impossible, particularly among the poor. Such restrictions make legal migration difficult to access and, consequently, foster a necessity for unofficial migration (Mundle and Van Arkadie, 2007). Many scholars recognize the precarious position unofficial migration places on

migrants with little or no formal safeguards (de Hass, 2010; Freeman, 2006; Gielis, 2009). Others have suggested that this precariousness is even greater in the migrant experience among women (Boyd, 1989; Gills and Piper, 2006; Piper, 2005). As Shipper (2010) demonstrates, this it is particularly relevant in Asia. Furthermore, the state controls designed to regulate (and officially safeguard) Vietnamese migrants act as barriers for those who cannot afford official visas or for those who choose to circumvent government channels (Michaud, 2009). Despite increased opportunities for temporary migration in Viet Nam, clandestine international migration continues to be significant.

More recent migration trends in Southeast Asia include the phenomenon of transnational marriages (Bélanger and Linh, 2011) and diasporic marriages that reunite old kin networks with immigrants in the U.S. or Canada (Thai, 2008). Bélanger and Linh (2011) investigate the impact of marriage migration and gendered power relations in separate communities in southern Viet Nam. They recognize the role of regional transnational networks in marriage migration and demonstrate how marriage migration is a factor in social transformation that impacts the family (Bélanger and Linh, 2011). Cross-border marriages have created a dynamic that sees rural women increase their social capital, due, in part, to a regional scarcity of available brides and the local economic gains of emigrant marriages. A complimentary study by Bélanger and Wang (2011) adds to previous work on transnational marriages by examining the significant growth in marriage migration in Asia and the social impact on the sending and receiving communities. Bélanger and Wang (2011) demonstrate how marriage migration is a solution to a scarcity of available wives, but also fulfills the need for caregivers, while

providing new transnational economic opportunities for individuals with low social and economic capital.

The Feminization of Migration

Recent data show that the once male dominated labour migration movement is now equal and split between men and women (Gills and Piper, 2006) and that numbers of women who migrate on their own have increased steadily. Many scholars attribute the feminization of international migration to an increase in opportunities for low-skilled workers and the increased global economic disparity (Gills and Piper, 2006; Lutz, 2010; Shipper, 2010). The sex-segregated labour markets of domestic and service work channel women migrants into low paying jobs that create a cycle of interdependence. That is, the household becomes reliant on the income generated from work abroad. Moreover, the global economic downturn in 2008 has greatly reduced labour market opportunities traditionally occupied by men, a trend particularly relevant in the Asian arena. Opportunities for women migrants and the male labour surplus in Asia have given rise to a gendered shift in migration (Shipper, 2010).

Yeoh et al. (2005) consider the significance of gender roles in the processes involved in transnational mobility specific to Asian families. They demonstrate how the habitus of ideology reflects in the gender politics of the family. The role of social identities is used to explain connections and challenges present in transnational migration and the importance placed on social capital in the family dynamic. Through a perspective of human geography, Yeoh et al. (2005) explore the complexities of transnationalism and how they relate specifically to Asian families engaged in transnational lifestyles. Their

study supports the notion that, while Asian women are seeing an increase in social capital through transnational marriages and migratory labour, they still must meet the expectations of family traditions.

Labour Migration: Risk and Reward

Many scholars point to globalization as the reason for the increased demand for labour migration (Bailey, 2001; Collins, 2008; Kivisto, 2001). Some governments have moved to ease or deregulate migration and increase international trade, which has fostered an increase in migration in the region both internally and internationally. The demand from global markets for an inexpensive workforce has promoted an increase in cross-border labour migration in Asia that is often exploitative, with workers having very little socio-political power while abroad (Kaur 2010; Piper, 2004; Shipper, 2010). As mentioned, the uncertainty of undocumented migration offers little in the way of protection, legal or otherwise, for migrants. The regional demand for inexpensive labour has promoted a degree of flexibility for Vietnamese people wishing to migrate; however, structural barriers in immigration policies effectively prevent any spontaneous migration (Shipper, 2010).

Looking at regional migration trends in Southeast Asia, Kaur (2010) investigates the labour migration channels from sending countries, like The Philippines, Cambodia, and Viet Nam, and destination countries, like Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. This study demonstrates the heavy reliance on guest worker programs in labour-importing developed countries in the Southeast Asian corridor. It is estimated that there are 13.5 million migrant workers in the region, with temporary workers dominating the numbers

(Kaur, 2010). This study reiterates the gendered migration of temporary workers and the potential exploitation of female guest workers. Kaur (2010) contends that, while governments actively sponsor the recruitment of guest workers, the absence of any legal rights and protections makes them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. As Kaur (2010) points out, the exploitative work remains and goes largely unpunished, yet sending countries remain actively involved in the process.

Concerns of exploitation are echoed in a study on cross-border human trafficking in the Greater Mekong Subregion (Ullah and Hossain, 2011). Their study reveals that some unscrupulous employment agents recruit women for supposedly legitimate work, but then sell them to work as sex workers, as domestic slaves, or in sweatshops. Because this human trafficking begins under the guise of legitimacy, many realize only when it is too late that they have been deceived. Ullah and Hossain (2011) also demonstrate an embedded cross-border network with border officials and police often complicit and knowledgeable. Once abroad, the victims are highly vulnerable as they lack any legal status or safeguards and risk becoming reliant on their traffickers for survival.

Other studies have documented the systemic exploitation of migrant workers from Vietnam to Taiwan (Bélanger and Wang, 2011). In a study of over 600 returnees from Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, and Japan migrants reported having to work, on average, 18 months to pay back the cost of their migration (Bélanger et al., 2010). Exploitation was frequent prior to migration and also in the destination countries with most employers confiscating passports, not respecting contracts, and even holding salaries. In the case of Vietnamese migrants in Japan, the exploitation was so great that it was more advantageous for some legal migrants to become illegal and free themselves from the

bonds of contract labour (Bélanger and Ueno, 2011). Overall, this research questions the benefits of labour migration for migrants and their families.

Migrants' Networks and Social Capital

While economics may remain a key determinant for migration, more recent scholarship has given increasing importance to micro-level concerns. Moving beyond macro-level descriptions of mobility patterns, Levitt and Jaworsky (2008) called for a more focused consideration on determinants to address a more specific set of themes and questions. Structural approaches to migration emphasize the linkages used to negotiate migration (Lin, 1982). These links demonstrate migration systems are not static; rather, there is interdependence between the migrant and host (Collins, 2008). An individual may choose migration to take advantage of opportunities offered abroad. With that in mind, the micro-level determinants of cross-border mobility are better understood at the ground level (Hewison and Young, 2006) and are often dependant on location-specific forms of social capital (Massey, 1998). Migration is negotiated (forced migration aside) through a process of interaction, knowledge exchange, and understanding – much like the construction of social networks.

A 2010 UN report on internal migration in Viet Nam suggests that strong family ties act as a significant determinant when deciding to migrate. The study states that 80 percent of women who migrated involved others in their decision, and three in four migrants already had friends or family at their destination (UN, 2010). The UN study had few respondents reporting difficulties upon arrival, further highlighting the importance of

networks. Those who did report issues solved their problems through established networks.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, those lacking official residency status must go outside official channels to access health care, permanent housing, and other government services. Because migrants are forced to resort to services from sources outside official providers, it increases their need for well-established networks. This is echoed in Schoenberger and Turner's (2008) research in Lao Cai, where border crossing permits present an additional barrier, and in Hardy's (2000) investigation of migration independent of official channels. Schoenberger and Turner (2008) examine how historic trade networks negotiate political borders and demonstrate how historic border trade among ethnic groups continued despite government hostilities officially closing the border. Hardy's (2000) investigation on mobility within Viet Nam demonstrates how networks are used to negotiate spontaneous migration. As Hardy argues, having familial connections can facilitate location-specific migration and make it possible to have residency status dealt with after migration.

Networks as a determinant of internal migration is further demonstrated in a study on seasonal agricultural migration in Viet Nam. As a household strategy to improve living standards, many rural families rely on seasonal migration for financial benefit (particularly in the north) and use family or kinship networks to negotiate the mechanics of mobility (de Brauw, 2010). In an exploration into the effect of seasonal migration on agricultural production and source communities, de Brauw (2010) builds on the Carrington (1996) model that migration networks lower the cost of mobility and suggests that networks can have a positive effect for both the receiving and sending families. In

the context of the Northern Viet Nam border region, Mundle and Van Arkadie (1997) suggest that out-migration from Lang Son is a household income strategy. Their study looks at policy and development strategies and does not include networks in their analysis per se; however, the relationship between economics and migration in Viet Nam is evident (Phan and Coxhead 2010).

A study by Schoenberger and Turner (2008) examines how networks can impact on the process of trade, both socially and economically. By providing access to goods, having interpersonal connections can contribute to the development of cross-border social networks. Schoenberger and Turner (2008) demonstrate that, by gaining site-specific knowledge from trade networks, access to trading opportunities, and developing cultural capital skills, cross-border migrants are able to enhance their social capital. Their study examines the historic and on-going cross-border trade in Lao Cai and how it has resulted in highly established networks that provide the local women with valuable social and cultural capital skills that enable them to negotiate borders and state policies.

Schoenberger and Turner (2008) conclude that, by using the collective information gathered from the established social capital networks, migrant women accessed an important knowledge base on the dynamics of trade (access to key goods, market position, etc.), which enables them to best exploit livelihood opportunities. Their study was furthered recently with additional interviews with the women traders of Lao Cai that questioned the linkages of access to commodities (in this case cardamom), strategies of trade, and access or barriers to resources (Tugault-Lafleur and Turner, 2009).

Studies conducted regionally have further established the broader use of networks to facilitate cross-border livelihoods and family demands. A study of Burmese women

that migrate to Thailand to work in factories investigates the use of networks as a strategy to guard against structural and cultural gender constraints, as well as a conduit to family in their home country (Kusakabe and Pearson, 2010). Based on 58 interviews of women labour migrants, the study seeks to understand the strategies of cross-border migrants when negotiating the responsibilities of work abroad and the demands of family at home. The women report many structural difficulties while working abroad. Although the women were granted work permits, their status remains that of an illegal and many report issues with police, supervisors, and state officials, all under the constant threat of deportation.

Along with the difficulties encountered with officials, the Burmese women also report issues when trying to balance work and family. Most women see migration as a family livelihood strategy, with women migrating because of increased opportunities, yet the cultural demands of home persist (Kusakabe and Pearson, 2010). The women report a reliance on networks of family and kin to meet the demands of the continued role of family caregiver while abroad. While contextually different from the study in Lang Son, the traditions embedded in Southeast Asian culture place strict demands on the majority of women (Yeoh et al., 2005).

Cross-border migration has received considerable academic attention in recent years. The literature shows how the historic and current social, cultural, and economic climate of Viet Nam has impacted migration. Various studies show how migrant social networks are navigated to better ensure economic success. As well, the literature on the status of women shows the importance of gender in the migration process. Building on

the previous contributions of those studying the migration process will allow this thesis to be contextually based and theoretically sound.

Chapter Four: Methodology and Study Location

Cross-border migration in the Northern Highlands of Viet Nam provides a rich context in which to frame the relationships between migration, networks, and economic livelihood strategies. In this chapter, I will address not only the approach and standpoint of the research, but also speak to the contextual importance of location. Conducting research in a socialist setting like Viet Nam involves navigating a very bureaucratic context. Similar research conducted previously along the northern Viet Nam border offered insight to the strategies necessary for success (Bonnin, 2010; Michaud, 2009; Turner, 2010) In addition, doing a study at the border with China was considered particularly politically sensitive and presented significant challenges.

Study Location

Towering out-crops of carbonate karst spires dominate and frame the lush valleys of Lang Son Province. Forested land accounts for nearly 80 percent of the terrain in the region. The fertile alluvial lowlands are sparsely dotted with agricultural and livestock farms. The province of Lang Son is one of the least populated in northern Viet Nam. The majority of Lang Son's approximately 760,000 residents are rural, with the capital having a population of 150,000 (General Statistics Office, 2008). Located on the Viet Nam's national highway, Lang Son city sits 155 kilometers northeast of the nation's capital Ha Noi. An additional ten kilometers north towards China is the village of Dong Dang. At the most northern point of the national highway, on the border to China, is the hamlet of Tan Thanh.

Figure 1: Map of Viet Nam with the Location of Lang Son Noted



Research Design

To address my research goals, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews from a total of 21 women. Of these, 19 women were directly involved in the daily cross-border trade from Viet Nam into China and two women were employed as non-crossing couriers who ferry products for cross-border migrants from the Vietnamese side of the border to the Dong Kinh market in Lang Son city. One interview was done with two sisters who jointly own a retail stall in the Lang Son market (see Table 1 below). An additional interview was conducted with my Vietnamese research assistant (RA), who was able to

accompany some of the research participants to the illegal border crossing point. As a foreigner, I could not access that site and relied on post-interview reviews with my research assistant to gather additional data. The data was then coded using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Along with the interviews, additional data in the form of participant observation field notes were used to better understand the experiences of female cross-border migrants.

Table 1: Table of Research Participants

Name	Location	Work Status	Age	Years Working
Thoi	Dong Dang	Cross-border	39	7
Thu	Dong Dang	Cross-border	37	6
Hai	Dong Dang	Cross-border	33	8
San	Tan Thanh	Cross-border	55	11
Khiet	Dong Dang	Cross-border	42	14
Nga	Tan Thanh	Cross-border	55	12
San	Dong Dang	Cross-border	36	2
Phuong	Tan Thanh	Cross-border	55	22
Thuy	Dong Dang	Non-crossing	31	6
Hoa	Tan Thanh	Cross-border	47	15
Thuy	Tan Thanh	Cross-border	35	5
Bich	Dong Dang	Cross-border	53	11
Hoa	Tan Thanh	Cross-border	49	5
Khoay	Tan Thanh	Cross-border	52	21
Chinh	Tan Thanh	Cross-border	46	10
Hop	Tan Thanh	Cross-border	34	8
Ngat	Tan Thanh	Crossing/Non-crossing	50	13
Lam	Tan Thanh	Cross-border – Fruit Seller	55	10
Quyen	Lang Son	Market Seller	37	5
An	Lang Son	Market Seller	42	5

At the heart of this study is how women employ networks to benefit from opportunities, while conducting trans-local, small-scale trade along the border; therefore, it is necessary to reflect on how the political and economic climate tempered my methodology. This

research does not intend or attempt to ameliorate the social issues reflected herein, only to give voice to Vietnamese women on economic and gender inequality.

Unlike quantitative research, which assumes an objective and distant standpoint, the goal of this work is to co-create knowledge with the study participants within the context of their spatial realities. To avoid a distorted or incomplete understanding of the migrants' experiences, my aim is to give the women most actively involved in cross-border migration in Lang Son a voice and understand their experiences and points of view. For this thesis, I employ the descriptive research method, using firsthand data from interviews with respondents, to identify the role networks play in their lives and to fully explore their migratory experiences. According to Creswell (1994), the descriptive method of research is to gather information about the present existing condition. The emphasis is on describing in a critical, objective way, rather than interpreting subjectively. The aim of descriptive research, and to this study, is to add to previous research and further expand the dialogue. The descriptive method allows a degree of flexibility in that any data that arises during the study can be considered for further investigation. This approach allows the study and presentation of the participants' experiences to be investigated in a more holistic way through the voices of the women.

Data Collection, Sampling, and Recruitment

Data Collection Strategy

The formal partnership between a Vietnamese academic institution, the Vietnamese government, and I demanded that the interview questions be vetted prior to commencing any fieldwork. The previously mentioned governmental controls extended

to the research process. As a requirement for conducting official research in Viet Nam I was tethered to the Institute of Population and Social Science (IPSS), a branch of the National Economics University in Ha Noi. This institute oversaw the fieldwork and provided me with a Vietnamese-speaking research assistant, who was able to conduct the field interviews. Additionally, a female representative of a branch of the Communist Party, the Viet Nam Women's Union (VNWU), was present during all work in the field. Aside from initial field observations, I was accompanied at all times when conducting interviews or observing participants. Questions pertaining directly to the legality and mechanics of border crossing were to be removed from the interview schedule. Questions regarding the women's income were considered too sensitive and had to be reworded. Because this research is descriptive in nature the interview questions were structured as to maintain the focus on the research questions, but also allow the women the freedom to tell their stories.

The data were collected between June and August 2011. I went to Lang Son four times in total and stayed in the study location 27 days. I first made an informal trip as a tourist to observe the location, a second time to take informal notes and to enter into China. I went two more times after obtaining approval to conduct my study. While in China I was able to observe the warehouses where the Vietnamese migrants gather the orders.

In doing my qualitative data collection, I had to take into account several considerations. First, it was important to allow the participants the freedom to express their opinions, which meant I needed an interview process that allowed for exploring questions generated during the process. The interview was designed with open-ended

probes to elicit meaningful and culturally salient information unanticipated by the researcher. This type of data collection is often rich in explanatory detail, including personal histories, individual perspectives, and past experience (Patton, 2002). During the interviews the differences and similarities between the participants were highlighted, while emergent themes within the interviews could be better questioned and understood.

Sampling Strategy

Owing to the centrality of voice in the research objectives, this study employed a purposeful sampling strategy. The most central and obvious criterion was that all the participants were women actively engaged in small-scale, cross-border trade with China. Beyond this, there was some consideration for physical location, age, and ethnic self-identity.

Initial participatory observations and conversations that I conducted with market retailers in Lang Son revealed that the women couriers exist as a tightly knit group. Two women who own an import business in Lang Son and employ several courier women became key informants and acted as liaison for other interview participants. The initial strategy was to interview 20 to 25 women couriers. While in the field, it was decided that, in addition to the interviews with the women who act as couriers, the two importers who employ them would also be interviewed. The inclusion of their perspective would allow for a more complete understanding of the mechanics of the trade, as well as offer a juxtaposing viewpoint. I also interviewed the Vietnamese research assistant, since the VNWU did not allow me to accompany her to certain research locations.

Engaging the Participants

As mentioned, a requirement of the official partnership with the Vietnamese institutions was that a Vietnamese research assistant (RA) would conduct the interviews. Prior to entering the field, the research assistant was given a background on the research objectives, the nature of the study, its purpose, and its objectives. The stipulations of the Research Ethics Board of the University of Western Ontario (the primary researching school) were outlined with the understanding that they would be met. Due to the nature and location of the study it was decided that oral consent would be obtained. Observing formal research ethics protocols, interviewees were free to participate or not, and could withdraw at any time if so desired. Prior to leaving for Viet Nam, this project received ethical approval as an addendum to an existing project and maintained the existing framework. As a goodwill gesture, and to compensate the participants for their time, a modest honorarium of 50,000 VND was offered to each.

Interview Locations

In order to obtain a complete picture of the women's experience in this work and to better understand the contextual spatial differences while doing similar work, a variety of interview locations were needed. The interviews began in the Dong Kinh market in Lang Son city, and subsequent interviews were conducted in the border towns of Dong Dang and Tan Thanh.

For the most part, the participants decided upon the interview locations and they were given the liberty of choosing a place most convenient and comfortable for them. Initial interviews were conducted at a streetside *tra da* (tea) stall adjacent to the Dong

Kinh market in Lang Son city, which, although convenient for the women, proved to be problematic to the process. The high volume of foot traffic, my obvious outsider status, and the rarity of research interviews often attracted a crowd that interfered with the process and direction. It was then decided that subsequent interviews would be conducted at the warehousing lockers in the market where the women finish their workday.

Prior to the interviews, participatory observations were conducted in the markets of Lang Son city, Tan Thanh, Dong Dang, and across the border from Tan Thanh in the Chinese town of Pingxiang.

Interview Language

Given the fact that the interviews were conducted in the Northern Highlands of Viet Nam there was no expectation of conversing in English. Owing to my lack of fluency in Vietnamese and the stipulation of working with a Vietnamese research assistant, all the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. This presented two unique challenges to the interview process. First, it was important that the dialogue maintain its focus and direction, and, second, other forms of communication and social cues needed to be recognized.

The former concern was addressed during the initial interviews. Although I am not fluent in Vietnamese, I could follow the conversation with my limited understanding of the language. Post-interview meetings with the research assistant allowed me to revisit the interview, where I could make suggestions on the interview direction, offer probes to elicit emergent themes, and better my understanding of the conversation.

Apart from the spoken word, the participants communicated a great deal from their dress, interaction with others, and body language. Recognizing these forms of communication helped me a great deal in grasping a more holistic perspective on their experiences. Detailed field notes on the women, taken during the interview, provide an additional source of data. To reiterate, post-interview meetings with my research assistant, augmented with photographs, provided me with an understanding of location-specific variables for the interviews I was unable to conduct.

Analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed into Vietnamese, then translated into English. During the post-interview reviews my research assistant and I recapped the various elements and highlights of each interview. After the translated transcripts were evaluated, they were coded using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

Epistemology

I have strived to remain rooted in the feminist tenets of objectivity and engagement (Berg and Longhurst, 2003). Some scholars contend that the gender of the researcher can never be dissociated with the data collection and evidence (Lutz, 2010). The in-depth interviews establish a relationship with the migrant women and our conversations enable their personal experience to be voiced. According to the feminist standpoint theory, knowledge is socially constructed (Hooks, 2000); therefore, I have attempted to offer an understanding of cross-border migration by emphasizing the experience and viewpoints of those involved with dignity and respect.

The methodological approach I described here was crafted in order to achieve my research objectives. These objectives, the theoretical framework, and my epistemological stance together led me to conduct an ethnographic study based on observations, informal interactions, and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Given the building blocks of my study and the specific context of the Viet Nam-China border, I believe that this approach is the most suitable one.

Chapter Five: Crossing the Border

This chapter describes the experiences of the Vietnamese cross-border migrants who cross the Viet Nam-China border daily as a way to earn income. Given the limited research on this group of migrants, it is important to provide a detailed account of their daily lives. This chapter will begin with a general outline of the cross-border migrant in Lang Son. Following that, the experiences of each group of women are described. The group of women migrants who cross at the legal border in Tan Thanh has established embedded groups and the crossing is more structured. In contrast, those who cross illegally through the mountains in Dong Dang voice their experiences of power relations, the hazards of crossing, and exploitation from the people they work for, officials along the route, and kidnappers. Lastly, I conclude the chapter looking at the destination markets of Lang Son.

Daily Crossings

All the women who participated in this study, except for the two market sellers, work as couriers. They travel across the border between Viet Nam to China and ferry goods back from Chinese warehouses to Vietnamese markets or retail sellers. Interview participants reported that they generally entered into China without goods and returned only with the products requested by the market bosses. In the summer months, or when a particular harvest is at its peak, the women will occasionally bring fruits and vegetables into Viet Nam to sell. These exchanges, however, are uncommon and merely offer an opportunity for the women to either trade for small personal items or earn a little extra money. Nearly all the women who took part in this study are, therefore, hired guns; they enter into China

because a retail buyer from the Lang Son market has ordered a specific item or items from China. Of the 19 women interviewed, only one acted as her own purchasing agent. This woman has been in the business for 12 years, had sufficient capital to purchase goods, and had established the necessary network of buyers to act on her own accord. The women cross-border migrants enter into China daily to return with a variety of commodities to be sold in Viet Nam. Items traded and carried from China into Viet Nam typically fall into four categories: electronics, clothing, toys or trinkets, and household goods. A retailer from the Lang Son market will contact a migrant woman by cell phone and request a product to be picked up in China and delivered in Viet Nam. Each vendor specializes in a specific commodity. The women will then cross into China to pick up the order and return to the Vietnamese market to deliver the goods. Most of the migrant women have cultivated a relationship with certain vendors, so when goods are needed the migrant women are contacted and orders are arranged.

The women will network amongst themselves in order to maximize the profit in crossing. For example, if the order is too small or too large, the women will cooperate to ensure a crossing as financially beneficial as possible. The interviewees reported that, if the order was small, they would try to augment their load with additional orders from other retailers or colleagues who had too many orders to carry.

Women earn less money as cross-border couriers than they could in other daily jobs available to them, in agriculture or construction for example. Depending on what is being carried, the migrants earn an average of 10,000 to 30,000 VND per trip or approximately 50,000 to 70,000 VND (\$2 to \$3 USD) per day. Some women make only a single crossing per day; many make at least two trips; and in rare cases women make trips

four or five in a day. Study participants repeatedly state that they only earn money when they receive orders and make trips to China. The migrants must negotiate their pay from the market retailers. The delivery of some commodities, such as larger or heavy items, may entail a higher pay. Because of this, the women work for three or four bosses with whom they develop guarded working relationships. Women who have been working as cross-border couriers for a longer period of time have developed closer ties to the market bosses. One migrant worker, Ms. Khiết, explained that those with years of experience as migrant workers have “better bosses, with more orders and better pay.” However, it is the market boss who exercises the relational power, particularly for those working illegally.

Legal Crossing in Tan Thanh

The legal passage takes place in the border town of Tan Thanh, which is situated along the northern border with China at the northernmost part of the Vietnamese national highway. The majority of heavy truck trade passes by Tan Thanh carrying imports from China destined for further distribution depots in Ha Noi and beyond. Because of this, Tan Thanh sees a highly transient population, giving it an air of licentiousness. The village has two markets that sell goods imported from China, a large beer hall catering to the truck drivers and the few locals, and several rest houses that offer hourly beds, along with sexual services. Tan Thanh is a typical Vietnamese village – ramshackle market stalls interlaced with aging concrete buildings. The bustling streets of Tan Thanh are strewn with discarded cigarette packets, empty drink containers, waste from food vendors, and the occasional chicken.

My excursion across the border from Tan Thanh into China revealed a dramatic contrast. Most obvious was the infrastructure of the two villages: Tan Thanh displays all the hallmarks of a developing country, but across the border in China it is decidedly more modern. For example, the temporary food stalls and carts common in Tan Thanh (and all of Viet Nam) are less common. Unfortunately, I could not experience the Tan Thanh border gate crossing firsthand because it only serves Vietnamese and Chinese nationals on official business. Instead, I crossed the border at the tourist entry in Dong Dang, 10 kilometres East of Tan Thanh on the road returning to Lang Son city. This entry is unrelated to the Dong Dang mountain pass (discussed below) and is very similar to the gate at Tan Thanh, with some heavy truck traffic, but mostly tourist coaches.

My observations in Tan Thanh revealed that the women cross daily through the border gate to ferry only a small amount of goods. The two governments allow the Vietnamese women courier's official entrance into China for a small fee; however, the cross-border migrants cannot stay overnight in China nor venture past the border town of Guangxi. This migration is legal, and the women crossing reported only a few problems. As I will discuss later, the main issue is that to qualify for the mandatory border-crossing permit Vietnamese women must officially reside in the area close to the border.

Women crossing at the border gate in Tan Thanh do so mostly on three-wheeled bicycle carts, or *ba banh* (see Figure 2). These tricycles are modified cruiser bicycles with large metal baskets attached, which allow the women to ferry loads of up to 135 kilograms from China with relative ease. However, the age of the tricycles, their steel frame construction, and the weight of the load would constitute a demanding workday for most. The daily migrant women will ride their tricycles through the border gates to the

warehouses on the Chinese side. There are several warehouses, the closest being about two kilometers from the border gate and the furthest about ten kilometers away. When asked to transport fruits from China the women will simply meet the waiting trucks that have gathered in a vacant lot. The fruit trade is both less common and less profitable for the migrants and, as the women state, done mostly to augment their other work.

Figure 2: A Migrant Woman on a Ba Banh



Daily Experience

The process of crossing the border at Tan Thanh is very structured. Migrants are issued a permit (*laissez-passer*) from the Vietnamese government that allows them to legally cross

daily into China. The pass costs 10,000 VND and is valid for a three-month period. The Chinese border gate has no such pass, so the migrant women must pay 10,000 VND for each crossing. The women told us that strict controls are in place to regulate what products are crossing the border. According to Ms. Lai, a cross-border migrant, the charge is only levied occasionally and only when goods are being carried out. Well-known couriers seem to have a degree of leeway, as Lai states, "...we only earn a little money every day from this work. We only get paid a maximum of 10,000 VND for one crossing with goods. Thus, as an old woman who can only carry small goods, I would earn nothing if I had to always pay for the ticket".

Both the Chinese and Vietnamese border gates have restrictions on the amount and type of goods the women are allowed to carry. All goods that cross are considered taxable goods (paid by the market vendor) and the women report frequently being searched at the gates. There are controls in place at the border gates and the women migrants in Tan Thanh rarely return with goods other than what was ordered, yet, as regulated as the border is, the women told us of occasional lapses in protocol.

The group of cross-border migrant women in Tan Thanh were very well interconnected and relied heavily on established networks. The in-group of veteran women migrant workers has developed relationships with specific vendors for whom they courier. The migrant courier/retail vendor relationship is of key importance here. If the vendor has not sold product in the market, there will be no need for more; consequently, the migrants will work for two or three vendors to minimize any work shortage. Most often a market vendor will call the courier in the evening to arrange for a delivery of goods the following morning. The daily cross-border migrants are largely free

to set their own schedules, with the first crossing done when the border gate opens in the morning. Once the morning deliveries are complete, some will choose to return to China without additional product orders in the hope of an unforeseen need for goods to ferry.

When not busy, the women gather at a teacart to pass the time, discuss product orders, and, if necessary, determine who was due for work. While in Guangxi, China, I met Ms. Hanh, a Vietnamese cross-border migrant woman that I had met previously in Tan Thanh. Ms. Hanh took me to a Chinese warehouse (less than 10 kms from the border gate) where she would occasionally do business. The warehouse was an unremarkable looking distribution centre, with docks for large trucks and smaller doors for handling small orders. She explained that it was typical of the places they did business with. She would only spend from 30 to 60 minutes there. When asked about her experience at the warehouse, Ms Hanh said it usually went smoothly; however, the men working there could be rude and sometimes verbally abusive. When asked if this was common, she simply stated that people occasionally have bad days. The temperature on the day that I spent with Ms. Hanh was in the high 30s, and, because she had little work that day, we went to tea stall where other Vietnamese cross-border migrants gathered to socialize and pass the time waiting for work or orders. Ms. Hanh explained that this group of cross-border couriers would often meet there to “*uong tra da, va tin don*” (drink tea and socialize). If orders were filled or there was no work to be found, the women would return to Viet Nam in the late afternoon.

The interviews with other migrants that followed revealed similar experiences. Ms Khoay stated that she would be ready to cross when the border opened the next morning and she would work until the orders were complete. When asked what her

typical day is like, Ms. Khoay said, “I leave at 7 am – the border gate opens at 7 am. When I return home, it depends, I’ll finish my work at 3 or 4 pm if I am tired or there is no more work. If not, I finish at 5 pm. The gate closes at 5 pm. ... If there are a lot of goods ordered, I can make 5 to 6 trips a day, sometimes 2, sometimes only 1, it depends. Sometimes I have to wait all day long, just sit and wait like this.” Because there is no trade traffic allowed after 5 pm, she reported that occasionally the women had to leave their trikes at the Chinese warehouses and return for them in the morning.

Many of the women told us there is little tolerance for smuggling and most did not dare take the risk. Ms. Khoay, however, told us that, if she was bringing something across that is prohibited (for example, rice into China or fireworks into Viet Nam) she would hide the items under sacks. In describing how she would brazenly bring rice into China, Ms. Khoay said, “Sometimes there is a lorry stopped there, [the Chinese customs office] hiding their view, so we can take rice across then. If they see us, they will seize everything and keep both the rice and the *ba banh* until the evening, then we have to beg them for release.”

In one unique case, Ms. Ngat, who lives and works with other cross-border migrants, has no *laissez-passer*, yet she will occasionally be allowed to cross. Ms Ngat is not a resident of Tan Thanh and only comes there after the harvest to earn additional income. She works with her two sisters, who are residents and who hold the *laissez-passer*. “I don’t have the *laissez-passer*. So I have to ask the border guards to get across. If they allow me to go, I go... sometimes they do not allow me across the border.”

Ms. Ngat’s experience is unique, but other lapses in protocols were explained. The *laissez-passer* allows the migrant women to exit Viet Nam, but they must still pay a

small fee of 3 RMB (10,000 VND) at the Chinese customs office. As Ms. Hoa explained, women who have worked in Tan Thanh for years and cross often have cultivated a relationship with the border officials. Because of this familiarity, some migrant women may occasionally have their fees waived and pass without cost. Ms. Hoa told us that this is more likely to happen if there are few orders that day.

Solidarity and Reciprocity

During lean times, some women would migrate across solely on the chance of being hired. When demand is high and there is a lot of product to ferry, the women will network amongst themselves to maximize delivery and profits. There is a degree of good-natured competition amongst the migrant women, as Ms. Hai states, “we fight with each other over favoured goods, ordered goods sometimes... it’s so fun, especially during the Tet holiday, we compete each other...” On the other hand, Ms. Lai, a more senior cross-border migrant, cautions that, “serious competition would negatively impact on our work” and the women repeatedly told us of assisting or sharing with others. The migrant women in Tan Thanh all reported the importance of being connected with fellow couriers and would often support each other when needed. The women reported occasional shortages of work, during which times, the women migrants will hire-out or share work among themselves. The elder Ms. Lai, referring to in-group sharing reports that, “everyone loves me and sympathizes with my status [her age and social position], so they have helped me... to carry goods for them.” Others told us that, if a product is heavy, such as rice, and it is too much for one person to pedal the trike, the women would assist each other by pushing the *ba banh* to the border gate. Although one of the youngest

migrants working in Tan Thanh, Ms. Hop has established embedded group relations from working as a cross-border migrant for 8 years. She told us that, “We always help each other. For example, when crossing the gate, I can’t push the *ba banh* alone, so 2 or 3 people in my group will help me. It’s quite steep on the road to the gate.”

Illegal Crossing in Dong Dang

The other way to cross into China is along the centuries old trade routes through the historic mountain passes along the Viet Nam-China border (Michaud, 2001). Although it is illegal to cross the border here, it sees significantly more small-scale traffic than the legal gate at Tan Thanh. Dong Dang is the site of illicit trafficking, albeit well-organized and unhidden. Choosing to cross illegally presents a host of issues that the women must negotiate in order to succeed in their trade.

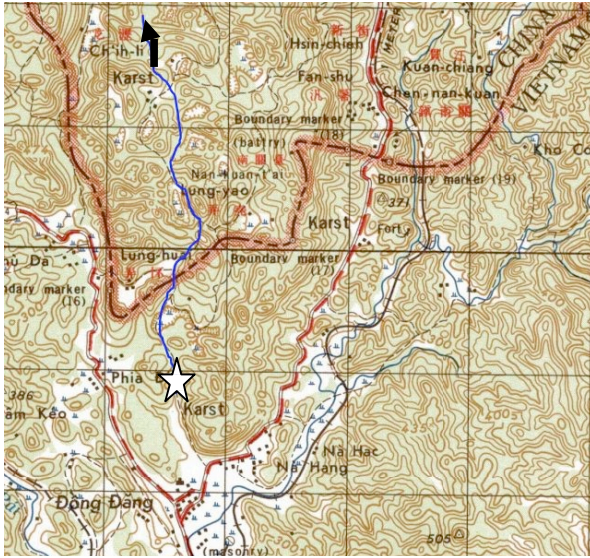
Many of the interview participants described the mountain crossing as arduous. Instead of using the *ba banh*, like the women of Tan Thanh, women who ferry goods through the mountains must transport the goods on their backs. They transport loads of up to 70 or 80 kilograms through steep mountain passes over a one kilometre route described as dangerous and tiresome. Through contacts at the market in Lang Son, I was taken there to witness the crossing. Local authorities did not want me to access this location; border officials took me back to town shortly after my arrival. My research assistant was allowed to accompany the women for a longer period of time and described the illegal crossings to me.

The women begin their trek from Dong Dang to China at an old railway customs

checkpoint; they walk along the tracks, pass through farm fields, and then continue along narrow, well-established mountain routes. The apex of the mountain pass is a 500 metre summit. It was common to see women so laden with goods that they were unable to walk erect. The route through the mountains crosses a variety of terrains. The tree-lined path through the mountains is narrow and steep. The flat sections through farm fields may be less physically demanding, but they offer no respite from the sun or rain. Moreover, the restrictions of the route allow government officials to easily detain or inconvenience the women with random checks. These checks often lead to pay-offs to the officials that the women cannot easily afford, resulting in delays or rerouting or simply a loss of goods. The border patrols are well aware of the women going back and forth with goods and seem to only occasionally interfere. The Dong Dang crossing is a hub of activities. There is a nearly continual stream of women re-entering with goods from China. Because of the traffic, there are makeshift stalls peddling drinks and sundries. Nothing about the mountain route suggests any level of subterfuge – while this trade may officially be considered smuggling, it operates openly and efficiently.

Figure 3 below illustrates the route the migrants take through the mountains. The star indicates the start point at the abandoned rail station in Dong Dang; the arrow points toward the destination warehouses in China. This map is based on a hand-drawn map one of the migrants provided to the research team.

Figure 3: Map of the Dong Dang Mountain Crossing



As mentioned above, the women in Tan Thanh pay a small fee to legally cross. Similarly, the women crossing through the mountains must pay a small fee of approximately 10,000 VND to the unofficial border guards, or mountain bosses. These men have no official position, nor do they offer much in the way of protection or safety; rather, they are merely another form of corruption that exploits the women migrants. Additionally, when crossing through “private” property, the women must give the landowner a small fee for passage. When asked about the fees, a respondent said, “our goods are smuggled but we still contribute. However, we don’t know where the contributed money goes.” While these fees are modest, the success of the crossing lies in whether the women are stopped by the border patrol.

Once the demands of the mountain pass are over and the women are back in Vietnam, the majority of interviewees then couriered the goods to the Lang Son market by bicycle, which they store at friends before they cross. Along the steep graded ten

kilometre route from the border crossing to the market in Lang Son, the women must compete with heavy truck traffic and road construction. Occasionally, women will have goods ferried to the market by motorcycle or car, but, due to costs, women prefer to use bicycles. The bicycles are mostly older, steel-frame, single-speed cruiser style models with modifications for carrying goods. Many of the women I interviewed stated that life is difficult, but they have few options to earn a living and feed their families.

As with their counterparts in Tan Thanh, the migrant women that cross in Dong Dang rely on in-group networks. When asked if the women that cross in Dong Dang aid each other, Ms. Khiet, a 43 year old who has been cross-border migrating for 15 years, reported that they do, but only within their own group. Ms. Khiet crosses with three other women. Each migrant usually has ties to a specific market vendor, yet the women will assist one another. As Ms. Khiet told us, “if the goods are too heavy for me to carry alone, they [other in-group migrants] will help me carry some of the goods. When I’m busy with personal stuff, I tell them to go across, package the goods, and I will go later to carry them across.”

A collective network, which goes beyond the small inter-personal groups, counters the risk of the mountain crossing. The *Sao Xanh*, or border patrols, are infrequent, but they represent a significant challenge to the cross-border migrant. The migrant women take full responsibility for their goods while crossing, and if detained by border officials (or, in rare cases, robbed) the migrant will forfeit the order. The market retailers give the migrant women money up-front to purchase goods from the Chinese warehouse (some vendors will demand a personal deposit from the migrant). If the goods are confiscated by the border patrol the migrant women will be indebted to the market

boss for the full cost of the goods. To minimize the risk, the location of border patrols is communicated through the network. Because the migrant women are carrying large sums of money they also run the risk of being robbed. While this rarely happens, the women will inform each other if they see something or someone suspicious or unfamiliar along the route.

In addition, the migrants who cross that border at Dong Dang must be cautious of the people who hire them. Ms. Khieu, and others, state that the relationship with specific vendors is important for employment, but also to guard against being exploited. As Ms. Thuy warns, “some vendors buy goods by themselves while we [the migrant couriers] are not there...when we delivered the goods, we were told to go to this place or that place, but didn’t get paid for the delivery.” When asked what was done in this situation Thuy said it would be reported to the police and “together, if we could, we would help the police catch the swindlers. Sometimes we would catch them ourselves...sometimes someone saw the swindlers and told us their location, then we would go there and get the money.” Ms. Khieu claims that this practice is rare, and only done by buyers from Ha Noi, but she stated that the women “must look out for each other.”

The women do not only face financial exploitation. Ms. Lam now works at the legal crossing, but she began working as a cross-border migrant in Dong Dang. She told us of her alarming experiences in the mountains:

Ms. Lam: In the past, I was not allowed to go the official border-gate between Viet Nam and China so I had to go through the paths in the hills. Some men in the mountains kidnapped me. These kidnappers demanded a ransom of

about ten million VND. I have been taken three times since I was there [Dong Dang].

Researcher: You mean that they wanted to sell you?

Ms. Lam: Yes. They wanted to sell me to a Chinese man, and I would have had to be the Chinese man's wife. The second time, I managed to escape from the kidnappers. The third time, I went by the hills way and kidnapped. Then my husband gave them the ransom and they released me.

Ms. Lam described the harrowing ordeal and reiterated the importance of interpersonal connections while working in the mountains. She reported,

They brought me to Bang Tuong, China. They sold me to the boss of a brothel, but I was lucky to escape from there. Another time, I went through the hills there were five guys that abducted me. They had a long knife that they placed at my neck. So I had to go to Bang Tuong with the kidnappers. I was made to suffer many difficulties. Fortunately, I met my acquaintances there and they helped us pay the ransom. If it hadn't had met them, I could have been sold to the brothel for a long time.

Women who lack the official documentation to legally be in China risk reprisals from Chinese officials if detained. Ms. Khuy told how her sister recently avoided a large fine of 10 million VND while in China by explaining to Chinese officials that she was a poor labourer and that she could scarcely afford a fine.

Comparing the Legal and Illegal Crossings

The risks faced by the cross-border migrant women who pass through the mountain route are substantially greater than those who migrate from Tan Thanh. The women do so because the pay is better. Whereas those crossing at Tan Thanh will average 50,000 VND a day, the women crossing illegally at Dong Dang can make 70,000 to 80,000 VND or more per day. However, along with the higher incomes, the women crossing at Dong Dang faced greater risks and the work was much more difficult. When asked why they chose to do this work, many interviewees stated that they could not find other work. When questioned as to why they didn't work in Tan Thanh, the residency issue (see Chapter One) was a central concern, as was the availability of work.

In addition, many of the market vendors will demand that the courier cross through the mountains so they can avoid paying taxes or tariffs. The demand for goods brought through the mountains is, at times, so great that the migrant women will hire other women to carry goods for them. The migrant will ferry goods from China to a safe storage (usually a trusted tea vendor along the mountain pass) just inside the Viet Nam border. She will then hire additional women to bring the product to market. If additional labour cannot be found, as Ms. Khiem says, "I will have to go back up to carry the goods down; I have to divide the goods into parts and carry them two or three times because I'm not strong enough to carry all at once."

The migrant women who cross the border at Tan Thanh and Dong Dang are very distinct. Perhaps owing to the less physically taxing crossing, the women who cross at Tan Thanh are older than their counterparts in Dong Dang (over 40 years at Tan Thanh, as opposed to 30 years at Dong Dang). Moreover, the women migrants in Tan Thanh have a more embedded presence, with a greater established hierarchal in-group network.

At Tan Thanh, for example, the group of women migrants number 30 or so (14 share a single room). Although there are a few independent couriers crossing at Tan Thanh, through a highly effectual in-group network, about 20 or 30 women dominate the cross-border trade of small product there.

During the interview process, the migrant women in Tan Thanh spoke of “graduating” to the legal crossing. Ms. Bich, a 53-year-old migrant woman who has been working as a courier for 12 years, spent her first years as a courier through the mountains. Initially, she began working as a cross-border courier in Dong Dang as a way to generate household income. Although she was able to earn more, she found the work to be too physically taxing, as many other women do. Through the network connections developed over her time working as a cross-border migrant in Dong Dang, she was able to transition to a position in Tan Thanh. Ms. Hoa, 46 years old, who has been working as a courier in Tan Thanh since 1997, began her work as a courier at the mountain crossing as well. All of the cross-border migrants we spoke with in Tan Thanh reported that, although they earned less money than those working in the mountains, they chose to work at the Tan Thanh crossing because it was less physical demanding. A twenty-year veteran in Tan Thanh, Ms. Lai states, “[By] using the official way of carrying goods, I get paid less than using the mountain crossing; however, crossing through the mountains is too exhausting.”

Ms. Lam, who once crossed through the mountains in Dong Dang and is now crossing in Tan Thanh, goes further and claims, “No, my job is a cushy job. We go to China to buy goods then return them to Viet Nam. It’s a simple job.” In contrast, Ms. Toi, a migrant worker crossing at Dong Dang carries mostly electronics, often exceeding 70

kilograms, with a shoulder pole. She said, “the work is very exhausting, especially when carrying heavy goods...sometimes I cannot work because my body is too sore.” Women migrants who cross at Dong Dang rarely spoke warmly of their work and often expressed the desire to find other employment. Those migrants who cross at Tan Thanh often regarded their work with relative ease.

The Markets of Lang Son

The majority of goods ferried across the border by individuals are destined for two markets in the Vietnamese provincial capital of Lang Son (city of Lang Son, Province of Lang Son). The principle market is the Dong Kinh market located in the city’s centre; the other is the smaller open air Ky Lua night market. Dong Kinh, a sprawling three-story market, features a vast array of goods. The main complex is ringed by fresh good market stands that cater to the locals’ needs for foodstuffs. Inside, the vast majority of items are inexpensive counterfeit goods ferried in by individuals crossing from China. At the Dong Kinh market, virtually anything imaginable can be purchased: from inexpensive “Ipods” to hand-made carpets to a vast array of toys and electronics. Ironically, local vendors explained that most of the shoppers at the market were Chinese in search of lower cost goods “Made in China.”

Conversations with sellers at the market also suggested that it is rare for Vietnamese people from the locality to venture into the market proper because the Dong Kinh market has become a destination for shoppers from Ha Noi. The period leading up to the New Year celebration of Tet sees the market’s economic apex. Just prior to Tet, carloads of shoppers from outside Lang Son arrive to buy gifts and goods for the

celebration. In contrast, the Ky Lua market is much smaller and features mostly clothing. It too attracts shoppers from outside the city, but mostly caters to locals.

Throughout this chapter the women cross-border migrants have shared their experiences. A small group of women working on the Viet Nam-China border have provided insight into a form of migration rarely researched. The two crossings, used by the women, are similar only in that both groups experience a border crossing. Women who crossed legally at Tan Thanh encountered fewer physical demands and inherent risks, but less monetary rewards; whereas, the migrant women who crossed illegally at Dong Dang faced substantial physical demands and greater risks, but a slightly greater financial opportunity. It is through the voice of those experiencing this form of migration I have been able to add to the dialogue on migration studies.

Chapter Six: The Networks of Border Crossings: Solidarity and Social Capital

In the previous chapter I documented the cross-border migrant experience of two different, yet similar, groups of women in Lang Son. Here, I will look at the networks the women build and maintain that go beyond the border crossing and how these networks are used to navigate the mechanics of the cross-border trade. My central aim is to understand how the daily cross-border migrant women negotiate established network patterns to enhance their social position.

As discussed in the previous chapter, because it is illegal, the women who cross the border at Dong Dang do so cautiously. By acting collectively to safeguard the journey, the women have developed a collective network structure. Similarly, the migrant women in Tan Thanh have developed a densely embedded in-group network that emphasizes a more hierarchal structure based on social credentials. These in-group networks provide the migrant women with specific forms of social capital that facilitate the functionality of their work, as well as provide additional resources of opportunity based on social ties. The social capital generated by the networks I consider here is a labour exchange opportunity; however, these opportunities arise from the exchange of information, group inclusion, social credentials, and the maintenance of group resources.

This chapter examines how the cross-border migrants employ networks to initiate work, to guard against the risks of illegal crossings at Dong Dang, and to reproduce and maintain the hierarchical form of social capital in Tan Thanh. The two border crossings are unique in function and approach and will be discussed independently. Both groups of migrant women engage in a form of migration – crossing the border and returning daily –

as a function of their employment. Both groups are employed in sustenance work, in that their migration (and work), which is intended to relieve household economic pressures, is controlled by the demand for flexible, low-paid labourers. The women who risk border-crossing at Dong Dang may earn more than those who cross at Tan Thanh, yet both groups of women spoke of earning only enough to meet their daily needs.

Common in these networks are hierarchies of connection and experience that produce or maintain specific social credentials (Bourdieu, 1986; Portes 1998). The market retailers or *bosses* are at the top of the work structure, yet they don't necessarily constitute the peak of network inclusion. The daily cross-border migrants share a unique experience. Whether it is the legalities of a porous border crossing, being a foreigner abroad, or simply trying to sufficiently meet household economic needs they have established highly functional, dense network connections.

Becoming a Cross-Border Migrant

Becoming a daily cross-border migrant is facilitated through personal linkages and connections with established group networks. Networks play an important role in the process of migration (Boyd, 1989; de Haas, 2010; Massey, 1998; Tilly, 2004) and also in preserving and maintaining social assets (Bourdieu, 1980; Putnam, 1995). For the daily cross-border migrants in this study, the development and persistence of networks play a crucial role in enhancing earnings. Many of the women in our study became cross-border couriers through interpersonal network connections; that is, they were introduced to this work by others already working as couriers. Others independently sought out the necessary connections for group inclusion.

The process of becoming a cross-border migrant here is largely based on two factors: network accessibility and situational demands. In other words, the women are introduced to this work by interpersonal connections and begin working out of household economic necessity. For the majority of women in our study, the decision to begin this work resulted from a lack of employment opportunities and poverty. These situational factors were repeated throughout the interviews. The following statements reflect women's responses to the question, "Why did you choose to work as cross-border migrants":

- "I started because I was poor. I was told that this work could help me earn more money."
- "I have been working as a courier because I was unemployed, so I started to do this work to make money to meet our daily needs."
- "I decided to try this because of my situation [lack of work] and because I could not find any job here."

A cross-border migrant since 1990, Ms. Phuong began working as a courier because of her dire household situation. Her husband, a decommissioned military man suffered from mental illness, which put Ms. Phuong in a tenuous economic position. With her husband unable to mend their deteriorating house and unable to find other work she became a courier. She explains,

"I had to try to bring up our 3 children by myself. We could see stars in the sky at night and when it rained, we had to run and I used a raincoat to cover my children from the rain-water."

Twenty years later, Ms. Phuong's daughter now works with her as a cross-border migrant.

A twenty-year veteran of cross-border work, Ms. Khoay, initially began working as a courier to supplement the family's income from farming. In the late 1990s, her family had to forfeit the majority of its land to the government for the construction of a new highway. She now works solely as a daily cross-border migrant and says,

I was unemployed and only grew plants like corn to sell and made little money. I was asked by a friend [a cross-border migrant] how much I could earn selling corn...then she asked if I wanted to carry goods with them because there were only a few people working [as couriers] then, so I followed them and I've been working with them ever since.

The migrant women use networks to ameliorate tenuous economic positions by accessing the group's resources and assets. The social capital they gain from network resources can be financially rewarding, in terms of a source of income, but also instrumental, in terms of access to better jobs in the role as a cross-border migrant.

The interpersonal networks among the cross-border migrant women are used to transmit knowledge and information specific to their work. Through network connections, the women are initiated into the work, which, in turn, allows individuals to navigate through the hierarchical structure of the group. When asked how they became daily cross-border migrants, the majority of the women in our study were introduced through interpersonal connections. Often women will begin working as a non-crossing courier, ferrying loads to the market. Ms. Thu began working as a bicycle courier, taking

loads from Dong Dang to the markets in Lang Son. She explains how she came to work as a cross-border migrant,

“It happened naturally. I saw the people earn money and I didn’t have a job, so I bought a bicycle and began working as a courier for other people...”

Once initiated into the group, the women could then take advantage of the in-group knowledge to gain a better position. Ms. San has been cross-border migrating for 2 years and began working in the border region as a non-crossing courier. She told us how she began working as a courier. However, because Ms. San lacks the more durable network connections her more senior peers have, she will still occasionally work as a non-crossing courier.

“After packing [carrying goods from China], they [cross-border migrants] ask us to transport goods for them so they call for us, we just carry goods to the market. ... There are days they [market retailers] do not have goods for me to cross with, so I carry for the others that do cross.”

Once established within the group, individual connections can be used to extend the network. These individual social ties exert influence on the group on the relational level and can serve to enhance and benefit the network collective. The accumulation of individual assets benefits the network by enhancing the group’s collective capital. The reciprocity of resource sharing among the women migrants enhances their individual and collective social capital. This is particularly relevant with densely knit groups (Lin, 1999). Ms. Hoa, a 49 year old who works at Tan Thanh, is among the closely-knit group

of cross-border migrants there. She shares a small room with 14 other daily cross-border migrants, colloquially known as the “t-dog junction.”

“When I started this job I followed a woman from another province, she took me here, introduced me and showed me the work. After that, I now tell others to come here.”

The senior Ms. Khoay told us of a similar situation.

“I was the first person in my village to work as a courier ... and now I know the work and got to know all the bosses ... now all the others in my village gradually started to do this work.”

We often heard from the women that they had introduced others into the group. This networking was repeated through familial ties. Households and family units often mediate networks and act as socializing agents (Crummet, 1987). Ms Nga, who works with her two sisters and has been a cross-border migrant for over 10 years, has introduced other family members to cross-border work.

“My sister in-law now helps me carry goods from China ... she had no job so I asked her to help me ... and now she works with me everyday”

In 2001 Ms. Nga moved to Lang Son after her marriage to a local man. Initially, she had a small streetside stall pedaling *banh ngot*, or sweet cakes. Her two sisters-in-law worked as cross-border migrants in Tan Thanh. She was asked to join them in 2004 and has consequently sold her stall and now works as a daily cross-border migrant. She has since recruited her two paternal sisters to work as couriers also.

Becoming a daily cross-border migrant may not necessarily depend on network inclusion. However, many of the women we spoke with reported that the process began

through personal linkages and connections with established group networks. If there are no linkages with in-group members, there must be an established relationship with a retail vendor to become a cross-border courier in Lang Son. Two women in this situation explain,

- “I knew of the work, so I introduced myself to the market bosses and gradually they had me work for them”
- “Transporting goods is hard work, in order to do this work we have to meet some people who know... one day I met some market bosses; they told me they had some goods that day and asked if I would transport for them.”

Establishing a working relationship with a market retailer is essential. As mentioned, the cross-border migrants work directly for specific market vendors. The migrants are contracted on a per-need basis. The more senior daily migrants have more established relationships with market vendors. Because their work is predicated by supply and demand, it is important to be networked with more than one retailer.

- “I work for a few bosses, about 5 or 7 bosses, sometime a certain boss will have goods and other times other bosses will have goods. But all the bosses don’t always have goods regularly, so I will transport goods for any boss that has something”
- “Today this person tells me to take goods, tomorrow another tells me, there are about 4-5 traders who I take turns working with.”

Inclusion into unique social networks or outsider social groups is often negotiated through personal contacts and in-group exposure (Coleman, 1990). The unique work of

the daily cross-border migrant has the same path-dependent inclusionary process. The social ties and network connections of the migrant women can foster a sense of inclusion. When asked why they chose to become cross-border migrants, many of the women stated that social ties often tempered the decision. However, not all women cross-border migrants relied on networks to begin working and not all group connections are static and equal.

As depicted below in Table 2, the groups are clearly delineated, with the non-crossing and cross-border groups being the most fluid with intergroup exchange. Through exposure to the mechanics of the crossing, and the information gleaned by association, the non-crossing group may become members of the cross-border group. The cross-border group has the greatest investment in maintaining (and excluding) membership. The Chinese warehouse sellers see the migrants as mere couriers, with little concern for relationship building. Their relationship to the couriers is a product of the relationship with the Vietnamese market vendors, and vice versa. The market vendors in Viet Nam perhaps exercise the most control, since the orders they place are the reason for the migratory crossings.

Table 2: Networks, Roles and Social Capital amongst the Different Groups

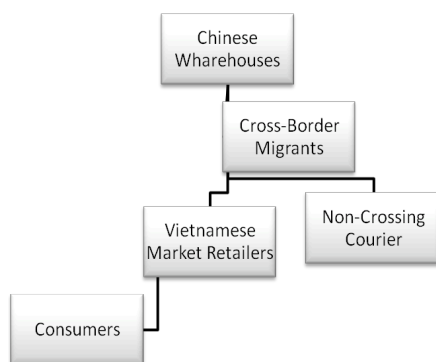
Group	Role	Measurement of Social Capital	Network Ties	Social Capital Indicators
<i>Non-Crossing Couriers</i>	Ferry goods for cross-border migrants	Few network resources; Weak contact status; Access constraints	Weak, but fluid with possible transition in roles	Group exposure and association
<i>Cross-Border Migrants</i>	Bring goods from China to Viet Nam markets; Hire non-crossing couriers	Bridge access to all groups; Strong network resources	Dense in-group ties; Reciprocity and interaction; Solidarity	In-group exchange, knowledge and transmission; Social Position

<i>Chinese Sellers</i>	Provide goods for transport to Viet Nam	Authoritative control	Strong ties with Vietnamese merchants; Little need for ties with cross-border migrants	Power; Social status
<i>Vietnamese Market Vendors</i>	Purchase goods from China; Hires cross-border migrants	Authoritative control; Financial power; Social position	Dense ties with migrants and Chinese sellers	Network bridge; Authority; Wealth; Power; Social status

Table based on previous work by Nan Lin (1999)

As illustrated in Table 3 the Chinese warehouses interact most directly with the cross-border migrants and the market retailers in Viet Nam. The non-crossing couriers deal directly with the cross-border migrants, to a lesser degree with the Vietnamese market retailers, but never with the Chinese warehouses.

Table 3: Relationship Pathway and Hierarchy



Network Hierarchy: Couriers, Migrants and Bosses

A key dynamic in the networks of the women in our study was the strength of their ties.

The sociological concept of networks delineates strong ties – close friends and relatives –

from weak ties – the association of acquaintances (Boyd, 2011; Granovetter, 1983). This dichotomy is represented in the cross-border migrant group versus the non-crossing courier group. Migration networks are seen as a location-specific form of social capital; however, they can potentially produce inequality between the groups (De Haas, 2010; Massey, 1998). It became clear to us that the women migrants and market bosses guard against, and moderate, group inclusion through strong network ties, so the labour force is not diluted and the status quo is maintained.

During our conversations, the cross-border migrant women told us of the importance of personal ties to market bosses. A strong tie with a market boss ensures that there will be work. Moreover, as piecemeal work, the individual returns for the migrant are based on the amount of product carried to the market. The women told us how developing a close relationship with a specific boss (or two) has its benefits. A good market vendor naturally needs product, so being attached to the network of a vendor with high sales means steady work. Additionally, if the bonds are close and the network dense, the economic benefits are more favourable.

Group Hierarchy

Personal connection and initiation is paramount for group inclusion, and the in-group hierarchical structure acts to mediate specific duties as well. Like most forms of capital, the women migrant's social capital is gained from experience and is a coveted commodity. Bourdieu's class perspective (1986) argues that the dominant group (or network) ensures its dominance through the reproduction and maintenance of group solidarity through clear demarcations of position. It became evident while observing and

conversing with the migrant women that the network hierarchy was firmly established, with clearly delineated roles.

“We all have our jobs to do, we don’t compete. Each one knows their position”

As mentioned earlier, there is a positional structure among the labour exchange at the border (also illustrated in Table 3). There is no rigidly systematic approach to bringing goods from China to Viet Nam; however, I have illustrated the most common method in the previous chapter. What was not demonstrated then was the group and interpersonal connections embedded in the trade.

Lin’s (1982) social resource theory proposes that access to the embedded resources of social networks can lead to improved socioeconomic status. Moreover, he sees access to resources as positional – those with strong hierarchical group ties are able to make use of those with weak group ties for greater individual rewards. Only the women hired by the market boss will migrate daily into China and return with goods. The sub-contracted couriers do not cross the border and will be hired to carry goods to market. The more experienced women that cross-border migrate will hire others to carry the order to the markets in Lang Son when needed.

“I hire a courier to carry a half of the load for me and I carry the other half, I can’t carry all of the goods by myself, I have to pay them so I will only pay them 20,000 or 30,000 – it depends ‘cause sometimes the goods are heavy but other times they’re light.”

While we were unable to interview more than two women that work as non-crossing couriers, the cross-border migrants we spoke with were able to provide a

complete picture of the experience. The hierarchal positioning of workers has a strata of delineated duties acquired through the social capital inherent to social network ties (de Haas, 2010). The cross-border migrants will ferry goods from the Chinese warehouses and store them along the mountain route at tea-stalls or with people they can trust.

“I have to collect goods from a few warehouses and it takes me a while to do that. I depend on some woman for a look after my goods. If not, someone might steal them.”

Once their order is complete they will hire another woman to carry the order down the mountain and to the markets.

A senior cross-border migrant in Dong Dang, Ms. Nga, told us that she frequently hires people to help her carry goods to the market. She will only hire woman that she knows, or those that have been deemed trustworthy by other cross-border migrants. Ms. Nga explained that she began working as a courier only and began cross-border migrating once she had more experience. This was common throughout the interviews. Many of the cross-border migrants began this work through interpersonal connections with those already working as such. Once the women working as couriers made the requisite group connections they can be asked to cross into China to purchase an order. As Ms. Hai states,

Other women who had been doing this work for a while guided me. First, I was afraid, I would only carry a few orders – didn’t dare take many... now I cross the border into China to buy goods. I cross through the mountains to buy goods and carry them back. I now hire the people who live here [Dong Dang] to carry a half of the order and carry the rest myself.

The network hierarchy was commonly mentioned in the interviews. Most women who cross the border daily were introduced to the work through connections and began as couriers only, not crossing into China. Occasionally, non-crossing couriers that work with the cross-border migrants will be asked by either the daily migrant or market boss to take orders from China.

“I had no idea about my job. At first, I was very worried about doing this work. I was afraid that I could not do this type of work. I did not know how I could manage. Luckily I now have experience and connections.”

Once in-group connections are established the women are able to establish trust and greater network inclusion.

“I began by carrying goods from Dong Dang back here [Lang Son market] by bicycle... now I go across because I now know the bosses and they hire me to transport goods for them.”

Networks in Dong Dang: Mitigating Risk

What emerged from the conversations with the women that cross through the mountain route at Dong Dang was that they were more independent, but they also relied heavily on group networks. Unlike the Tan Thanh group, the women at Dong Dang would most often cross independently or in small groups; however, the importance of a group network at Dong Dang was greater. The network connections for the cross-border migrant women working at Dong Dang act as both a form of in-group solidarity and as social capital. The risks of crossing illegally are lessened by network connections. Every

interviewee that works in Dong Dang reported the importance of “looking out for each other.”

As Woolcock and Narayan (2000) state, by allowing people to act and work collectively, networks foster group inclusion. The women who cross daily into China at Dong Dang are positioned to earn the most; however, the opportunity gained through strong social ties and network hierarchy does not come without risk. Because they lack the *laissez-passer*, or official permit to cross, they must be alert to guards on both sides of the border. When crossing, the women viewed being detained by border patrols more as a financial burden than an arrest, because they would likely be made to pay a fine or have their order confiscated. The women were more likely to be detained by Chinese authorities than Vietnamese guards. If detained by Chinese officials, the women would most often be able to keep their goods, but would have to pay a small fine (3RMB or 10,000 VND). The resulting economic loss is minimized through the use of networks.

“We use the unofficial crossing ... if the Chinese police catch us and we don’t have the *laissez-passer*, we will be arrested and have to pay [a fine]. Many people have been captured.”

In addition to the fines, women are occasionally detained by Chinese authorities and made to work as day labourers. One woman reported that some people have been forced to plant trees or perform other menial work when arrested in China, then released later the same day.

“The way we go across is unofficial and illegal. If someone is arrested by the Chinese police, they will make us go work for them until late afternoon and then let us return.”

The women can scarcely afford the additional cost of fines or payoffs, so, when asked if they do anything to reduce the risk of arrest while across the border, Ms. Hai said,

“When we heard from others that the Chinese have arrested some of us, we would leave the goods there [in China], phone our bosses, and say that we would not take the goods anymore and would come back the next day.”

According to the women in the study, they must actively guard against being detained by the Vietnamese *Sao Xanh*, or border patrol. If caught, the women will have their goods confiscated and will have to pay the market boss for the cost of the goods. The orders are often in the millions of Viet Nam Dong and the women reported that this would be a significant financial burden that would take months to repay.

In an effort to minimize the risk of being detained by border patrols, the women migrants network when patrols are present. While in the mountains cell phones do not always work, so the women communicate with each other as they pass on the mountain paths. If necessary the migrants will store their goods in China or along the route, then return empty-handed until the patrol leaves. As Ms. Khiet states,

“When the border guards go up the mountains to patrol, they don’t allow us carry goods down, so we stay up there and wait. But when they are not on watch, we carry goods down, but if they suddenly come up and see us carrying goods, they will confiscate all the goods.”

When asked if being detained was common, Ms. Khiet claimed that the patrols were often there, but through the group network the women were often able to avoid detention. She went further, stating that, even though there is a network of exchange

among the migrants to warn of patrols they would occasionally still be spotted and detained. She told of us about her encounter with the border patrol that she was still indebted for.

“I was carrying goods down the mountain when the border guard officers ambushed me; they took me to a checkpoint and confiscated the goods – which cost 2-3 million, I lost that much money and I still owe [to the market boss].”

Ms. Nga, who has been crossing the Dong Dang border daily for nearly ten years, stated that she has been detained a number of times over the years. Most of the women claimed that they were arrested at least once or twice a year and stated that, if they didn't work together, it would happen more often.

It is important for the cross-border migrants who travel illegally to establish a durable group network. The in-group dynamic among the cross-border migrants links each member to the network and establishes a reciprocal relationship based on interconnectedness. Owing to the very nature of their work, which is arguably state-sanctioned smuggling, an active network is required to navigate the many pitfalls inherent in their crossing. It is important to understand how a small group of rural women, living in poverty, can bond together to earn enough for their household to survive.

Social Ties: Interdependence and Reciprocity

Current research on migrant networks emphasizes the role social relations and networks play in shaping social linkages and economic outcomes. As discussed in chapter 2, Boyd

(1989) views migration networks as a social product, meaning migration networks are formed by the blending of individual actors with social, political, and economic forces. As a social product, the networks employed by the women in Lang Son allow them to navigate social relationships and the structural barriers inherent in their work. The information transmitted across space and time is critical in the daily migrant experience when attempting to reduce the risks of the border experience. It is no less important when considering the economic opportunities.

A question central to this research is whether working as a cross-border migrant is a viable economic strategy. When asked if working as a daily cross-border migrant was an effective way of making money, many women reported making only enough to feed their families. Ms Nga told us that, despite the hard work, she felt she had few other options to sustain her family.

“In general I make just enough to eat every day, nothing more, I just earn enough for my family to live on.”

Ms. Thu who told us that she recently had a problematic childbirth and had to spend nearly two weeks in hospital (partly due to fetal malnutrition). She is now in debt, lessening her already meagre earnings.

“It somewhat improves because I can earn money to buy daily things for my family, things for raising game and to pay my children’s studies.

Raising game is like our savings, it will be used in case we get ill and I cannot do this work.”

The social capital gained through linkages and in-group inclusion can be transmitted into resources (Bourdieu, 1985), in this case economic. However, as we have

seen, the economic gains from this work are largely sustenance earnings. To maximize their financial gains the women migrants depend on internal networking, often finding it necessary to share what work is offered. The embedded group dynamics are layered; some women told us that they would often sacrifice a portion of their earnings if a colleague had no work.

We are close but each of us also has different bosses. Some women also work for the same bosses but others just work for their own bosses (for example if this woman was my boss, I would transport for her and if another was your boss, you would transport for that boss). But we are nice to each other; we work together. When my bosses don't have goods while another woman's boss does, then she will let me transport a little. We share with each other like that.

Others suggest that by working together migrants stand the best chance of earning more money. As Ms. Thuy says, when transporting goods to market they often act collectively.

“If there are only a few goods, we will put all the goods on a bike together – this way we have to pay less – just pay for one bike – then divide the money equally.”

Additionally, the women that cross the border often spoke of helping each other to carry large or heavy orders to the Vietnamese side. Ms. Thu told us of how carrying loads of up to 75kgs can be taxing.

“Sometimes if one of us is tired, another woman will help her carry the goods [from the Chinese warehouse]. In general, we need to help each

other, if not, we could not transport all the goods to the market and we will not earn much.”

Membership in a group often leads to a sense of solidarity and strengthens internal interpersonal relationships. The cross-border migrants exhibit a collectivity that is necessary to generate sufficient household income and aid others when needed. As I will illustrate next, this perception of group solidarity is stronger among the group in Tan Thanh.

Networks of Tan Thanh: Residency, Solidarity, and Social Capital

The participant observations and the interviews with the daily migrants in Tan Thanh revealed a highly developed interpersonal network with a well-established group dynamic. The networks in Tan Thanh function differently because of this. Because the women are considered legal migrants if they obtain a *laissez-passer*, the crossings are nearly effortless, and, once across, there is not a threat of detention. But, due to the legal parameters of residency in Vietnam where residency, and the *laissez-passer* and legal entitlements that are attached to it, is only granted to those with an official address in Tan Thanh, women migrants in Tan Thanh have more opportunities. Ms Hoa, who has been living and trading in Tan Thanh for more than ten years, told us of an incident that recently happened,

“Some lowlanders [people from Hanoi or the delta region] crossed without a register book and *laissez-passer*, and they were arrested last year.

[Someone else] arrested and had to pay for the big fine!”

As mentioned earlier, official residency in Viet Nam is state-controlled. It is not simply a matter of moving to another area. To be recognized as an official resident, one must first live in the area and then apply to the state for consideration of official status. The dense network among the women migrants in Tan Thanh, particularly those in the “t-dog junction”, is used to negotiate the systemic process of residency. Possessing official residency not only allows for legal crossing, it translates into a significant form of social capital. The migrant women in Tan Thanh often told us that they would invite friends to live with them if they wished to begin working at the border. Ms. Bich had been a farmer most of her life until a friend invited her to live and work in Tan Thanh. This was a common experience among the women we spoke with, and many have, in turn, invited others to live and work in Tan Thanh.

The “t-dog junction” houses approximately 14 daily cross-border migrants and constitutes the most established interpersonal cross-border migrant group network in Tan Thanh. Membership in this *group* provides not only official residency, but also an interpersonal social network of peers. Group inclusion provides members with important information, as well as social and financial assistance.

The networks of Tan Thanh, and especially the women of “t-dog junction”, can be seen as a location-specific form of social capital that can be used to gain access to resources (Massey, 1998). Bourdieu (1977) considers the benefits of social capital as being the aggregate of network size and durability and the degree of capital possessed by its members. Pragmatically, a residence, the “t-dog junction” also functions as a resource for obtaining *laissez-passer* status and group inclusion. Group benefits include immediate access to embedded resources from peers, shared information and knowledge, group

recognition, and kinship. Through group inclusion, tangible benefits, like cost savings through living together and meal sharing, are made available. Membership in the house encourages group solidarity. Durable group solidarity is the basis for acquiring forms of social capital, which serves to benefit the individual members (Bourdieu, 1986). The elevated social status of the “t-dog junction” belongs to the group, but is established because of the group.

Dense social networks foster a group solidarity that can produce an “us against them” mentality (de Haas, 2010). Elaborating on the work of Bourdieu, de Haas considers how networks are used to produce and reproduce not only solidarity, but also an exclusionary mentality. The dense network among the migrants in Tan Thanh attempts to limit and control access to the trade. The women told us of an increased number of people coming from other provinces to do trade. The women in Tan Thanh are uncomfortable with outsiders, as they are viewed as a threat to their income.

“If only the people in the village did the work, there would be enough work for us. However, there are actually many people from other provinces that come here [for work]”

As a larger group, the networks in Tan Thanh function like those in Dong Dang.

Like the migrants crossing in Dong Dang, the women in Tan Thanh face challenges of occasional work shortages. The solidarity gained from the durable group network in Tan Thanh works to minimize economic shortfalls and maximize internal work dynamics. The women migrants view the systemic hurdles of the cross-border experience as obstacles that can be overcome by working together. Through the lens of collective solidarity, the women are better able to profit from a meagre employment

situation. During discussions with the migrant women, we asked if there is competition among the group or whether they work together. We were told that, during strong economic times competition is common, but, when there is a shortfall of goods to carry, the women will work collectively. As a cost-cutting measure, when crossing the Chinese border, the women will avoid the marginal return fee by working together.

Sometimes we leave the three-wheelers behind [in China]. We just leave them there. Then we use only one of them to transport all of the goods, one person will steer the vehicle and the others will push it to the gate, and then only one-person brings it through the gate. We help each other that way.

Individuals are involved with, and engage in networking, to produce profits (Lin, 1999). In the case of the women interviewed, there are elements of their work that necessitate networking.

This chapter analyzes the two different groups of cross-border migrants and how their differing experiences reflect in establishing and maintaining networks. I have demonstrated, through the voice of the migrants, how those with strong group ties are better able to maintain collective capital, while individuals with weak or little network ties cannot benefit from group resources. Likewise, strong network ties are better able to enhance their social capital. The migrant experience in Lang Son is structured through positional status, group inclusion, and interpersonal ties, and the risks involved in crossing the border, particularly at Dong Dang, are reduced through active networking.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

The crossing of national borders presents multiple opportunities, as well as risks, for poor women of the developing world who seek livelihood opportunities unavailable on their “side” of the border. Burmese women cross to Thailand to work in factories; women from Zimbabwe go to South Africa to be domestic workers; and women from Guatemala enter Mexico to seek work or reunite with their families in the United States. In these border areas where insecurity and gender-based violence is often widespread, women migrants are among the most vulnerable and marginalized individuals. Women migrants who cross borders to flee chronic poverty, violence, and exclusion can find themselves in equally vulnerable positions in the process of migrating. Rapes, kidnappings, forced labour, deception, trafficking, and physical abuse are widespread experiences among poor cross-border women migrants. In fact, voluntary migration and human trafficking are often difficult to disentangle in physical border crossing in regions where states offer little protection to migrants. Despite the risks involved, women migrants continue to seek opportunities offered by the opening of borders when they need to survive or improve their lives.

This thesis has provided an additional example of the *experience* and *process* of border crossing with a study of a group of poor Vietnamese women who make a living as daily cross-border migrants between Viet Nam and China. By giving a voice to these women, I achieved my first study objective: to provide a thick description of their daily lives. The analysis showed them as agentic workers who leave home to support their family and find work as couriers at the Viet Nam-China border. They carry goods for vendors by bicycle or on their backs, legally or illegally. Their daily lives are precarious

and extremely demanding physically. The illegal border crossing point entails high risks, such as having one's goods confiscated, being temporarily incarcerated, and even being kidnapped and sold. The second objective of the thesis was to examine the role of networks in this type of mobility. Guided by conceptual discussions concerning borders and networks, my analysis has revealed how women, on the edge of economic survival, network to enter the job, protect each other, and maximize their earnings. At the same time, women are embedded in a hierarchical network of market vendors who take advantage of their vulnerability and poverty by letting them shoulder all the risks of border crossing while paying them meagre incomes. This case study provides evidence of the opportunities and risks that border migration represent for women globally. At the regional level, women's mobility at the Viet Nam-China border region takes place within the larger context of these nations' entry into world capitalism and their intensifying trade relations.

Opportunity and Exploitation

A theme that emerged from this study is that the opportunity for work is dependent on the demand for cheap labour. The cross-border migrants are engaged in sustenance labour, from which the market vendors reap the bulk of the financial rewards. It was noted in chapter two that networks could inadvertently produce and reproduce inequality (de Haas, 2010). This research demonstrates that the women in Lang Son reproduce a structure of inequality, by maintaining strong ties with market bosses, who are, in turn, producing a process of inequality.

The older, more experienced women in Tan Thanh reported being comfortable with their work and regarded their relationship with the market vendors as positive. Yet, as lower class foreigners without any rights or protection in China, they are vulnerable to abuses when crossing the border. The market vendors consider the migrant women short-term hires and not employees. The market vendors make no concessions of accountability for the migrants. As mentioned earlier, the onus of financial accountability is put upon the migrants while working abroad, yet the markets vendors have little or no responsibility to the migrants. This inequitable relationship is further complicated when crossing the border illegally. In an effort to avoid taxes and tariffs, some market bosses exploit women by demanding that goods be carried illegally through the mountains and making the women financially responsible for the goods they transport. If indebted to a market vendor for a loss of products, the migrant is in a very precarious financial position because their meagre earnings barely meet their daily requirements.

Echoing the theoretical elements of social capital, the delineated power structure here is highly dependent on levels of social capital. The market vendors have the greater social status, highly established connections, and, most importantly, the financial resources. While this trade is not human trafficking per se, it is financially exploitative. Because women of Lang Son have few employment opportunities, they must concede to the demands of the market bosses and continue to reproduce the structure of inequality.

Borders

The formal crossing at Tan Thanh typifies the political boundaries of borders. The interviews revealed that the cross-border migrants approach the border gate at Tan Thanh

with all the hallmarks of official border crossings. The bureaucratic hurdles, such as the *laisser-passer*, reaffirm the political representation of the border to the women. Similar to Canadians crossing the Detroit-Windsor border, the crossing is politicized by bureaucratic formalities. Once across, the projection of nationality becomes more salient than the politics of an international crossing. The women at Tan Thanh cross daily and have done so since the border officially reopened in 1988. They have normalized the crossing, acknowledging the political representation of the border, and while abroad they reproduce the political boundaries by identifying as Vietnamese guests in China. Supporting the claims of Kearney (2004) that the border experience is shaped by nationalistic comparisons, the women reported little interaction with the Chinese while abroad only socializing within their own group. When in China, the migrants reinforce their social identity as migrant labourers, fill the orders, and then return home after.

The politics of the border crossing at Dong Dang are less obvious in terms of a formal structure; they are nevertheless close to the surface. During the interviews many of the women disregarded the formality of the Dong Dang border, seeing the crossing as an opportunity for employment and income. Indeed, some of the women stated that border is only a 'line on a map', illustrating how they have deconstructed the Dong Dang crossing. The fact that migrants see the border as an abstract socio-cultural concept illustrates the Gielis (2009) argument that when borders no longer function as physical barriers they lose their intended meaning. For the migrants, the border connects a territory and, like Vertovec (2004) claims, cross-border migration challenges the embedded politics.

Active cross-border migration may challenge the intended politics of nation-states; the structural controls of borders represent the political clout of a nation. Migrants crossing at Dong Dang negotiate a highly politicized border, yet they don't see the spatial boundary as a political construct. By subverting formal controls, such as border patrols and official border gates, the migrants depoliticize and reconstruct the border as an income opportunity. Much like the highland minorities in Michaud's 2000 study in Lao Cai, the border is a representation of the state and is renegotiated at the ground level.

Networks

If viewed in a Bourdieuan sense, the individual social capital is dispersed throughout the hierarchical network relationship, with those at the top having more advantage. While it may explain that those who cross into China have more opportunities because of a close connection with the Vietnamese market vendors, it disregards the inequality among the lower group network connections. The network connections, particularly at the Tan Thanh crossing, demonstrate how they limit group inclusion. The migrant women are precariously close to having no income and by actively constructing barriers intended to limit newcomers they are better able to ensure economic survival.

Although not as embedded as the older group at Tan Thanh, the networks used in the illegal crossing serve a more functional purpose. The way Coleman (1990) sees group networks is that they serve a public good. In a sense this is how the networks at Dong Dang work. Perhaps owing to the fact that labour is shared more, with the hiring out of non-crossing couriers, the collective nature of networks is widespread. The solidarity among the group is limited when competing for work, but when mitigating risk the

network is very dense. Whether avoiding border patrols, guarding against human traffickers, or negotiating with Chinese officials, this network works as a highly functional tool for the vulnerable migrant women.

Migrants or Day Labourers

While the women in Lang Son are migrants, as they cross an international border, they do so with routine and are often migrants for only a few hours per day. As migration studies have examined the various forms of mobility and determined a multitude of migration flows, it is still difficult to place the migrant movement of the Lang Son women into the established criteria. The women act as couriers, delivering products from a warehouse to the market, but this is complicated by a political border. Arguably, the women do migrate, much like workers along the U.S.-Canada border who cross daily for work. Alvarez (1994) sees this state of temporality as a functional part of the migrant process. As migration studies take on more micro-level considerations it would be a disservice to exclude migrants who are mobile even briefly.

Study Limitations and Future Research

While this study investigates the border experience in Lang Son, the picture is somewhat incomplete. Much like Turner, Michaud, and Bonnin, who have conducted considerable research along the northern border of Viet Nam, negotiating access was problematic. Having restricted access to certain research sites limited the amount of data available. Moreover, we only spoke with two of the non-crossing couriers and two market vendors.

If explored more deeply, the relationships between the vendors and couriers may have revealed a more complex structure.

Vertovec (2004) states that countries with good political relations have more porous borders. As the political relationship between Viet Nam and China strengthens, and trade increases, there may be a demand for more cross-border migrants. The northern borderlands of Viet Nam offer a potentially fruitful research arena for migration studies. Because this is an investigation of a largely understudied migrant population, gaps remain and additional questions about the cross-border experience go unanswered.

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