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Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work. By Kimberley Kay Hoang. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2015. xiv+229 pp.

In her study of the sex industry in Ho Chi Minh City, Kimberly Kay Hoang not only casts gender studies in Vietnam in an entirely new light but also raises a host of challenging new questions. Her book posits that intimate relations between men and women in the sex trade allow them to pursue “hopes, dreams, and desires” (p. 14) along gendered and hierarchical lines, thus reimagining how they position themselves on a changing political, economic and global landscape. She asserts that the sex industry has brokered Asian and global capital entering Vietnam because women and hostess bars have played a crucial role in the creation of trust and bonds among businessmen operating in a risky entrepreneurial environment. New constructions of masculinities appeared in Ho Chi Minh City in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, when Vietnamese and Asian elites adopted rhetorics asserting Asian ascendancy and Western decline. These rhetorics were used in the performance of Vietnamese masculinities as male members of the economic and political elites brokered deals with Taiwanese, South Korean and other Asian investors. These elites must persuade the investors to invest in land, banking, and manufacturing deals in southern Vietnam that, while very profitable, were risky, had little oversight, and enjoyed no legal protection. This was the “Vietnamese way of doing business”.

Hoang undertook fieldwork in Vietnam from 2006 to 2010, focusing on sex work in four bars serving different market niches: a high-end hostess bar where members of the economic and political elite entertained foreign investors, a bar catering to Việt Kiều, a bar

serving Western businessmen, and a Western backpacker bar. Hoang wanted to find out how Vietnam's "economic volatility destabilized the terms on which diverse men understood their masculinity that hinged on local women's various performances of femininity" (p. 185), and how economic change may have given these men the means to "reclaim [their] male hegemony" (ibid.). By focusing on the newly segmented sex industry in Ho Chi Minh City, she was able to differentiate the ways in which *different* kinds of masculinities were being constructed in response to global flows of capital and to local economic processes. By this same methodology she was also able to analyse how sex workers "stylized" (p. 52) different kinds of submissive performative femininity to fit the narratives of masculinity in the four types of bars. Her approach at first relied on interviews, but about halfway through her research she switched to participant observation and became a hostess-worker herself. She describes this experience as humbling, one that gave her admiration and respect for sex workers.

In the high-end hostess bar where she worked, members of the political and economic elite, including top government cadres, wooed foreign investors with a show of hyper-masculinity as a means of building confidence in the new national prowess of Vietnam as an investment-worthy country. They did so with the skilled assistance of the hostesses. Vietnamese hosts thus asserted Asian ascendancy, while contesting Western dominance. They displayed signs of conspicuous consumption in the form of expensive alcohol, flashy material acquisitions and other accoutrements, generous tips — all meant to demonstrate their high status, upward mobility and knowledge of how to treat people well. The hostesses conformed to the female aesthetics of Korean pop stars, the current beauty standard in modernizing Asia. The entire scene evoked wealth, vigour, a nation on the move.

In the Việt Kiều bar, Vietnamese men wished to be coddled in the bosom of their "ancestral home" (p. 44) by loving, caring, unquestioning, admiring women. The sex workers helped to relieve them of their burdens. These men brought in millions of dollars in remittances every year and were big spenders in the bars. They were

flattered by the women's ability to pamper (*chiêu chuông*) them and to act like "traditional" women.

In the Western expatriate bar, Western businessmen were giving Ho Chi Minh City a chance after failed careers in Western cities. They used the bar as a home away from home. They often took up a woman for a long-term relationship and "invested" (p. 96) in a business opportunity for her or her family, either in the city or her home village. Here the men wanted "authentic" (p. 147) Vietnamese women, not Korean pop stars — dark skin was okay, not artificially lightened skin and nose jobs. The Western men wanted to feel as though they were "making a difference", helping a Third World country out of poverty.

In the backpackers' bar, Western male superiority was also played up, but Vietnamese women's exoticism was particularly valued.

Aside from the great depth of empirical data upon which it draws, amounting to hundreds of interviews with sex workers, clients and bar owners, the strength and originality of this study lie in the way that the author links capital flows and economic processes to constructions of masculinities on the one hand and sex and the performances of femininities to these masculinities on the other. Hoang asserts that hostess bars were essential to brokering the deals behind the spectacular growth that Ho Chi Minh City experienced in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. These were "backroom" deals and, in her view, deals that had to be brokered on the basis of trust and male bonding. But is sex work integral to economic practices in Vietnam? Why not go to a golf course? Hoang quotes one businessman who ruefully notes, "nobody wants to think about prostituting [their] women to develop the country, but what choice do we have?" (p. 84). But if Vietnam was *obliged* to sell its women to make Vietnam's economy grow, what are the reasons for this?

It goes without saying that Asian business practices differ from Western practices. But not all Asian countries, even during their rise, substantially relied on a "hooking economy" (Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong 2008, pp. 3–24) to attract foreign investment and overseas remittances while stimulating local business. Of course, male

drinking cultures are firmly entrenched in Asia, as are entertainment establishments. As Asian countries modernized, Japan, as the lead “tiger”, adapted some of its historic rituals to modern-day practices, but it also adopted Western business practices. In fact, golf courses spread all over Asia and became places where Asian businessmen, like their Western counterparts, “got to know one another”. There are plenty of golf courses in Vietnam. Why don’t they serve the same purpose?

If hostess bars and private soirees with sex workers are essential to deal-making, to the “informal way” of doing business, and to the *đổi mới* brand of economic development, why has this pattern developed in Vietnam? Is it just a momentary flash in the pan? Or is there something in Vietnamese culture that was submerged by revolutionary asceticism, only to re-emerge under the new found “freedoms” of the *đổi mới* era? Perhaps revolutionary asceticism itself and the strictures and puritanical hardships of Marxist-Leninist ideology and two long wars wiped the slate clean, so to speak, and now there is a *tabula rasa*, a new slate to work with? Or are colonial or pre-colonial practices coming to the surface? Most people in the sex trade attribute the spread of the hooking economy to foreign investors’ preferences and customary practices of female companionship, but this hardly explains why prostitution has spread far beyond the confines of “the foreigners”. There are just as many prostitutes in Vietnam today — about 500,000 — as there were at the height of the Second Indochina War, when the most potent symbol of American imperialism was an American GI and a Vietnamese bar girl. Not only does revolutionary morality seem to be irrelevant in today’s modernizing Vietnam, but so does Confucian morality. The political and economic elites brokering deals, of course, are the very same group that fought the Americans.

Hoang does not and cannot address any of these broader concerns in her current study. But her book leads a long-time student of gender studies in Vietnam to start to pose these questions. It also leads me to wonder whether the revolutionary agenda of gender equality will have any lasting effect, especially if Hoang is correct that sex and the

new construction of hyper-masculinities and submissive femininities are the new face of the changing political economy of Vietnam.

If so, I wonder if the gender training workshops sponsored by various United Nations agencies, the Vietnamese National Committee for the Advancement of Women, and other organizations will do much to improve the status of women. “Integrating women into the development process” has been a mantra for the development community for some time now, with its community projects, quotas, gender-sensitive policies, gender units, gender checklists, training kits, and other paraphernalia. There may be more at work than cultural and bureaucratic resistance to gender reform.

For Vietnam specialists and those about to undertake work in the field, Hoang’s fourteen-page reflection on her fieldwork experience in Vietnam is the best such account that I have seen. It treats her family background, what sparked her interest in her research topic, the methodology used, the constraints confronted, the dangers she faced, and the personal impact and costs. It is painfully honest, poignant, and it shows the dedication, diligence, and forbearance required to produce a thoughtful, enduring, scholarly study.

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