

the commitment to excellence in the publication of scholarship on Thailand of Gerald Jackson and NIAS Press—have made informed consideration of such questions more likely.

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*Black Market Business: Selling Sex in Northern Vietnam, 1920–1945.*  
By Christina Elizabeth Firpo. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020.  
xiii+259 pp.

Christina Firpo’s latest book is a lively social history of the black market sex industry in late French colonial northern Vietnam, known then as Tonkin (1920–45). Focusing on impoverished Vietnamese women, an understudied group in the historical scholarship, Firpo maintains that the booming underground sex industry thrived because of what she calls the “spaces of tension” (p. 3) brought about by the inequality and discord of colonial policies. The policies led to inconsistencies in law, culture, economics, geography and demography that incentivized historical actors—pimps, madams, kidnappers, traffickers, sex workers—to exploit loopholes to seek out more favourable economic opportunities. The portrait that the book paints is nevertheless a sobering one. For the female sex workers whose lives Firpo reconstructs, most of whom were rural migrants, the sex industry was often the last resort to survive. Working conditions, as Firpo demonstrates, were often poor with high risks of catching venereal diseases.

Chapters 1 and 2 establish the geographical and legal contexts of Tonkin’s illicit sex industry. Chapter 1 looks at the “geography of vice” (p. 20), surveying sex work’s spatial dimensions. Firpo shows how each of the different geographic conditions—whether physical, political, economic or urban—shaped the migration and distribution of sex workers. Colonial policies that impoverished peasants forced

women to seek alternative income sources, thus driving them to urban areas. Chapter 2 investigates how French laws regulating sex work ironically exacerbated the conditions they sought to ameliorate. The Tonkin law of 1921 adopted a system of sex worker registration and weekly medical examinations. Sex workers who tested positive for venereal diseases had to be admitted to a dispensary. The system's intrusive character, however, discouraged participation, especially since doing so also meant significant income loss.

Chapters 3 and 4 look at forms of unfree sex work. In chapter 3, Firpo focuses on the phenomena of debt bondage and human trafficking. Women involved in debt bondage accepted cash advances, clothing, and room and board in exchange for their sexual labour. While this arrangement furnished the capital for some to strike out on their own, unscrupulous managers often devalued their wages or added compound interest to their loans, effectively depriving them of the means to earn their freedom. Trafficked women likewise were sold against their will to brothels. Here, Firpo uncovers the disturbing phenomenon of *mẹ mìn*, elderly ladies who roamed the Vietnamese countryside in search of young women and girls to lure and kidnap for sale in the sex industry. In chapter 4, Firpo examines underage female sex work—defined by the standards then as work performed by those under eighteen—to demonstrate how the activity was a function of rural poverty. Such poverty was driven by the radical economic changes that the French instituted through levying high peasant taxes and transferring land ownership to the wealthy few—namely, French companies, colonists and collaborators. The schemes of debt bondage and human trafficking also applied, if not more so, to underage sex workers.

Finally, chapters 5 and 6 deal with illicit sex at entertainment venues—namely, *ả dào* houses and Western ballrooms, respectively. In premodern Vietnam, *ả dào* was an elite form of female performance art. During the French colonial period, as Firpo demonstrates, *ả dào* houses became fronts for clandestine sex work. The *ả dào* houses exploited the blurred line between art form and sexualized activity to turn their venues simultaneously into brothels. In chapter 6,

Firpo investigates illicit sex work in Western ballrooms. The female ballroom dancers attracted male clients by selling the alluring image of the 'modern girl'. Adhering to the latest Western-style fashions and lifestyles, the 'modern girl' symbolized the idea of independence and sexual liberation. The majority, however, were migrants who worked as dancers to escape rural poverty.

*Black Market Business* is an absorbing historical study of clandestine female sex work, a poorly understood topic of late colonial Vietnam. While the inherently hidden nature of such work renders the topic challenging to investigate, this rigorously researched study testifies to Firpo's high scholarly calibre. Accessibly and lucidly written, the book will be of interest to general readers, students and scholars alike from many disciplines, including anthropology, criminology, law, literature and cultural studies, as well as gender and sexuality studies.

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*Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization.* By Rosalind Galt. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. xii+290 pp.

The pontianak, a mythic ghostly figure in the form of an undead stillborn child, has long informed and shaped the Malaysian and Singaporean popular imagination to the extent that she has invariably become a popular subject of the silver screen. This book by Rosalind Galt is the first comprehensive study of the pontianak film subgenre, which has become part of popular culture in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore.

Galt argues that the pontianak's ubiquitous presence across the history of Singaporean and Malaysian cinemas offers rich and