

KIMBERLY KAY HOANG

*Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline,
and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*

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Kimberly Kay Hoang's book explores the sex industry in Hồ Chí Minh City in the years surrounding the 2008 global financial crisis, a time when Vietnam was trying to reposition itself in the new global financial arena. Hoang argues that the 2008 financial crisis was an important moment in the decline of Western influence and the rise of an emerging pan-Asian hegemony. This rebalancing of global financial power forced the main actors of the sex industry in Vietnam, mainly clients and sex workers, to reconfigure their masculinity and femininity and to renegotiate their intimate relationships within categories of race, nation, class, gender and age. The book is based on participative ethnography conducted in four bars where the author worked as a hostess and bartender. She produces a typology of these bars based on the characteristics of their clients: Vietnamese and Asian elite businessmen, Vietnamese living overseas, Western expatriate businessmen, and Western backpackers. These bars are governed by particular economic and cultural logics that the author examines in detail throughout the book.

Hoang reflects on her positionality by discussing how she established trust-based relationships with informants, her feeling of being a "temporary insider and forever an outsider" (23) in the sex industry, the types of cover she used while working in the bars, the embodied cost of "deep acting," the ethical issues she was confronted with, the way she negotiates critical academic feedback (for instance, she refuses to answer the question that is often posed to her about whether she slept with clients), and her feeling of belonging to a "triple minority" within American academia as a woman, a Vietnamese American and a researcher studying the sex industry in Vietnam.

The study of clients and madams or "mommies," two key figures in the sex trade that remain largely absent in the literature, is central to this book. Hoang challenges the idea of "clients" as a monolithic group. Vietnamese economic elites establish business relations with Asian entrepreneurs in exclusive bars in which hostesses enact northeast Asian norms of femininity,

inspired by pop culture from Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan. This allows these Vietnamese elites to create trust bonds and interpersonal relationships with their business counterparts from other parts of Asia, which is crucial for attracting foreign capital to Vietnam. Doing so, Hoang argues, reinforces pan-Asian ascendancy. As for Vietnamese men living overseas, Hoang contends that by consuming large amounts of branded and expensive alcohol in bars that limit access to foreigners, they “distinguish themselves as better than Westerners” while simultaneously acknowledging their inferiority vis-à-vis Vietnamese elites (although this claim is not clearly supported) (67). In these bars, hostesses enact a femininity that blends Western and Vietnamese norms. Western expatriate businessmen frequent bars where hostesses display a “traditional” vision of Vietnamese femininity through things like long dresses. These men feel superior to backpackers because of their economic power and their alleged knowledge about Vietnam’s language and culture. These Western businessmen establish long-term relationships with hostesses, rather than sex-for-cash exchanges. They perceive Vietnam as a Third World country and see bar hostesses as metaphors of poverty, a view that drives their desire to become well-intentioned saviours inclined to rescue them. Finally, Western backpackers go to bars where they can negotiate sex-for-cash transactions, which on occasion lead to long-distance relationships. Here, hostesses with tanned skin and generous chests present themselves as poor women from rural areas and organize fake tours to the provinces. In these bars, hostesses engage in “philanthropy-oriented intimacy,” constructed around developing intimate relations with clients that attract overseas capital framed as benevolent remittances (79).

Hoang’s treatment of *mommies* and hostesses is equally nuanced as her discussion of clients. Hoang argues that the *mommies* in her sample do not act exploitatively and in an authoritarian manner towards their hostesses. Instead, they establish non-coercive and respectful relations with them. The high profits generated by sex work allow hostesses to escape poverty, and in some cases to save and to invest their savings, hence allowing them to become *mommies* and to move away from selling sex. Some clients provide advice on and fund these business ventures, especially Westerners who perceive it as “benevolent remittances” that need to be monitored (39). This reveals hostesses’ economic trajectories and pathways to upward mobility. In

a chapter on the production of desirable bodies, Hoang explores how hostesses produce, transform and manipulate their bodies and their femininities to attract their clients. As such they acquire a suitable wardrobe, they learn how to present themselves and how to behave in public, and they alter their face and chest through plastic surgery. This process allows them to shape both the femininities circulating in the sex industry and the image of Vietnamese women in the global imaginary.

This book's analytical, contextual and theoretical bases do provide grounds for criticism. One important point concerns its adoption of an approach, which remains common in studies on sex work, which imprisons the informants in social categories. Although the distinction between Vietnamese and Asian businessmen, Vietnamese living overseas, Western expatriate and Western backpackers may seem meaningful at first glance, these are not analytical categories. Not only do they remain undefined in the book, they are based on multiple criteria delimited by blurred boundaries: class, age, race, nationality, professional and visa status. Most importantly, these categories are not representative of the vast and polymorphic sex industry in Vietnam, which caters mainly to working and middle-class Vietnamese men, and only on rare occasions to foreigners.

More importantly, Hoang's categories leave little room for contextualising structures and phenomena. With the exception of the fluctuations of foreign capital in Vietnam, Hoang provides little context of the economic situation of the country before and after the 2008 global financial crisis, the familialistic welfare regime promoted by the state since the launch of Renovation economic reforms, which partly explains the economic dependence of parents on their children, state policy regarding sex work and its formulation in the stigmatizing idiom of "social evils," and the management of sex establishments by local officials on the basis of systemic corruption. This absence of contextualisation could have been partially resolved by relying on the growing literature on sex work, human trafficking, social evils, sexuality, gender, HIV/AIDS, familialism, welfare regimes, credit, household economy, rural-to-urban migration and transnational marriages in Vietnam, and on sex tourism in other parts of the region.

Hoang's analysis of sex work also skirts close to economic determinism. In most of the encounters she describes, money prevails over the affective

and moral economies that shape all kinds of intimate exchanges, especially in long-term arrangements. Surprisingly, the author examines sex work from the lens of desire, which is pertinent, but leaves aside that of power, which is even more relevant in studies on sex work, sexuality and gender. Hoang, who presents herself as a “feminist researcher and scholar,” paints a somewhat rosy picture of sex work in which free and consenting hostesses reject victimizing and paternalistic discourses about sex work (17). Instead they emphasize their autonomy, their desires for upward mobility and their choices for well-paid jobs in the sex industry rather than poorly paid jobs in the factory sector. According to the author, these women earn considerable sums of money in an almost pleasurable activity, and without having to endure excessive professional, family and moral constraints. Such a portrait leaves aside the patriarchy and gender inequality of Vietnamese society that strongly shape Vietnam’s sex industry. In other words, the book does not sufficiently explore the difficulties that the hostesses experience in attracting and pleasing their clients. One would have expected a feminist scholar to explain how women feel about and negotiate their inferiority and adaptive femininity in local and global patriarchal structures, which are reinforced and perpetuated by the Vietnamese and foreign men they encounter in the different niches of the sex industry. Similarly, while Hoang argues that “men construct and compete within hierarchies of race, class, and nation in such a way that ‘Western ideals’ and ‘pan-Asian ideals’ transform our understanding of which racialized masculinities are inferior or superior,” she does not make clear why and in what ways these masculinities exist in competition (17).

Despite these criticisms, this book remains an important contribution to studies on sex work in Vietnam. Its treatment of clients, mommies and hostesses provides a nuanced portrait of their professional, economic, and social condition and trajectories. Future studies on sex work in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia will have to take into account her contributions.

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