

Heidi Hoefinger

(2013) *Sex, Love and Money in Cambodia: Professional Girlfriends and Transactional Relationships*. London: Routledge. 214 pages. ISBN: 978-04-15-62934-8.

Anthropologist Hoefinger's provocative and in-depth monograph is a welcome contribution to the field of sexuality studies in Southeast Asia. Based on her doctoral dissertation, the book explores the multi-faceted, fluid and gift-based relationships between Cambodian bargirls and foreigners in the tourist bar scene of Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh. These relationships intertwine sexuality, feelings, interest and multiple forms of compensation. Hoefinger places the Cambodian women at the core of her research, showing that they act with ingenuity and resilience, take informed decisions and skilfully negotiate both structural constraints (gender, culture, family, economy) and their relationships with Western and Asian men. By highlighting their representations, strategies and manoeuvres, the author shows that they are in control of their lives.

A major goal of the book is to challenge feminist views that portray bargirls in an essentialist way—"as anything other than 'prostitutes,' and 'prostitutes' as anything other than 'poor victims,' 'greedy thieves' or 'bad girls'" (p. 6). Contrary to the abundant victim-narrative research on prostitution and sex tourism in the global South, the book offers an empirically-based, nuanced and refreshing view on the topic. To better escape the framework and language of prostitution, Hoefinger bases her analysis on two original concepts. That of "professional girlfriend" emphasises that women "do rely in the formation of these relationships as a means of livelihood and their motivations are initially materially based," "engage in multiple overlapping transactional relationships, usually unbeknownst to their other partners," and includes a "performance of intimacy, whereby the professed feelings of love and dedication lie somewhere on a continuum between genuine and feigned" (p. 4). Borrowed from the ethnography in South Africa, the second concept of "transactional sex" refers to women whose initial motivations consist of "obtaining something from the intimate interactions, such as gifts, drinks, money or even houses and visas" (p. 3).

Hoefinger conducts intimate ethnography in three areas of the city where tourist bars are located: (1) the Lakeside with numerous backpackers, guesthouses and bars on the Boeung Kak Lake; (2) the Strip, a busy street near the central market known for its nightlife; and (3) the Riverside area on the edge of the Tonle Sap River, with numerous bars located on parallel and intersecting roads. The author conducted 189 conversations/interviews, mainly in English, for over seven years. The sample includes 281 participants, including 115 women, 124 men and 42 representatives from aid organisations, government

institutions and Cambodian academia. Hoefinger combines ethnography and three “methodological explorations.” These include the “Relationship and Intimacy Survey” about relations and intimacy filled in by 164 respondents, a “Film Project” about an art photographer, and the “Global Girls: Autobiography and E-Literacy Project” aimed at empowering female informants through improving writing skills in English. All three projects signal the author’s desire to engage in research and activism. Hoefinger addresses her positionality during the field investigation over a significant number of pages: ethnographic and personal relationships with the respondents, power relations, reflexivity, self-presentation, the role-playing involved in sustaining multiple identities, ethical and moral considerations regarding confidentiality, loyalty, emotional investment, and feelings of betrayal and abandonment. At a theoretical level, the author utilises a wide range of references on the fields of multiple identities, the intersection of sexuality and identity, patron-client relations and sexuality and gender in Cambodia.

The book presents many fascinating findings. Hoefinger examines the issue of hierarchy among Cambodian women involved in sexual commerce from an emic perspective, although Cambodian society relegates all of them to the stigmatised categories of the “prostitute” or the “broken” woman (*srei kouc*). Professional girlfriends demarcate themselves from the taxi-girls who engage in sex-for-cash arrangements, and from Vietnamese sex workers, on which Cambodian men project a fantasised sexuality, but who are socially and professionally discriminated against because of their ethnic origin.

Professional girlfriends form alternative kinship groups in which solidarity, mutual support and feelings of sisterhood prevail. In addition, they produce a “bar girl subculture” that prevails in the bars, as well as in the market and salons they frequent. This subculture encapsulates the tension between Cambodian norms on gender and family on the one hand, and global consumption standards on the other. Professional girlfriends constantly juggle between tradition, deviance and modernity.

Hoefinger examines the topic of celebrity and prestige. The self-presentation, style and display of wealth, the mastering of foreign languages and the proximity to Westerners enhance their prestige within the group, and their reputation among male foreigners at the bars. In addition, the family-care economy allows them to gain prestige among relatives, despite the risk of being labelled as “broken” women.

Research on sex tourism typically examines the issue of misunderstanding, and Hoefinger responds to that. Professional girlfriends construct stereotyped images of foreign men in opposition to Cambodian ones. The former are perceived as more tolerant, liberal, educated and egalitarian than the latter; they

are also less violent, jealous and demanding. Foreign men construct Cambodian women in a similar way with regards to foreign women. In their eyes, professional girlfriends lie on a continuum: seductive and sexualised Asian woman on one end, venal and manipulative on the other. Reality often belies these clichés, as Hoefingers points out that violence toward each other is not rare within the mixed couples. A fascinating finding is that sex appears as simultaneously the cause of mistrust and the solution to uncertainty and doubt. If sexual infidelity arouses suspicion, unprotected sex expresses trust.

Another contribution lies in the analysis of the economic arrangements enforced by the couples in order to distance themselves from stigmatised categories and transactions. The practice of “going Dutch”, a term that indicates that each person participating in a group activity pays his/her share, manifests the desire to achieve an ideal of equality and to normalise the relationship. By agreeing to share costs on a 50/50 basis, professional girlfriends aim to show the authenticity of their feelings towards their partner, despite the glaring economic inequalities that separate them. This leads to a discussion about the materiality of everyday life and exchanges. Hoefinger ultimately proposes an examination of the relationships between professional girlfriends and their foreign male partners from the perspective of “connected lives”, a framework from Viviana Zelizer that stresses the extent to which all human relationships mingle economic activity with intimacy to varying degrees. This approach places the relationships studied “not within the framework of ‘exploitative’ and ‘power-laden’ stereotypes of commercial sexual relationships, but instead within the ‘normalising’ and ‘depathologising’ framework of the materiality and exchange of everyday sex and relationships around the world” (p. 169).

While the book is a major contribution to the field of sexuality in Southeast Asia, it has some drawbacks.

Chapter 4 sets out the historical (French colonisation, KR genocide, and militarisation of the region during the Vietnam war) and social background of the world in which professional girlfriends navigate. While the book does not cover in depth the darker aspects of the Cambodian sex trade, Hoefinger discusses incest, child sexual exploitation, the virginity trade, gang rape, sex trafficking and brokered transnational marriages. This choice is debatable. Not only is the analysis of these complex topics perfunctory, it is also foreign to many professional girlfriends. In addition, these topics reinforce the framework of exploitation and victimisation that Hoefinger seeks to challenge. As a matter of fact, the section on family care (under the title of “debt bondage”) is sketchy, and it promotes a cultural view that dominates in the literature on prostitution in Southeast Asia—that “dutiful” daughters engage in deviant activity to repay a moral debt towards their parents. The analysis of this issue instead should

take into account the political economy of the family and consider to what extent the cultural discourse produced by both families and their children is as one technique—among others—of justification and neutralisation of sexual deviance (see, for example, Howard Becker and Erving Goffman).

Hoefinger contextualises her background by using research carried out by NGOs (CARE, Chab Dai, Cambodia Women's Crisis Center, PSI, etc.) and international organisations (IOM, ILO, UN, etc.). What credit should be given to these organisations that might support ideological agendas framed in the “prostitution” and “sexual exploitation” frameworks? A critical analysis of the sources was all the more necessary given that the methodologies and conclusions of this grey literature are often contested on the grounds of lack of empirical authenticity. In addition, the author criticises the essentialist discourse of exploitation and victimisation that encompasses professional girlfriends and other women engaged in forms of sexual commerce, but does not provide detailed examples of the dominant discourse in Cambodia. In doing so, Hoefinger may appear to be essentialising the dominant discourse when, in fact, a constellation of anti-trafficking organisations and activists, whose practical objectives and political ideologies may differ significantly, produce nuanced and often conflicting views about sexual commerce and victims. The dominant discourse encompasses several voices and the reader may become frustrated at the lack of information on how exactly professional girlfriends are perceived by anti-trafficking and sex workers organisations from Cambodia. This would also be useful for comparisons with neighbouring countries, such as Thailand and Vietnam.

Last, but not least, despite the abundance of theoretical sources presented, Hoefinger does not draw upon the abundant research on sex tourism in Thailand in her analysis, such as the work on “open-ended relationships” from Erick Cohen whose reference is only cited in the conclusion, correspondence between bargirls and their partners, which illuminates the issue of cultural misunderstanding (Erick Cohen, Dave Walker and Richard Ehrlich), and moral “laundering” of sexual deviance through the economy of financial offerings to Buddhist pagodas (Khin Titsa, Marjorie Muecke).

Despite these criticisms, this pioneering work is a major contribution that consolidates the fragmented knowledge on sexuality and sexual commerce in Cambodia, which sadly is too often driven by applied research, and offers an original conceptual framework to overcome the shortcomings of the prostitution framework.

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