

Relational work and careers of intimacy: Rethinking the cultural interpretation of the sex trade in Vietnam

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Nicolas Lainez

Centre Asie du Sud-Est (CASE/UMR 8170, EHESS, CNRS, Inalco), France

Abstract

Cultural interpretations of the sex trade are pervasive in Southeast Asia, in particular, the argument that daughters enrol in sex work to repay a debt of life and support their parents. While useful to illuminate the role of culture in shaping economic action, this narrative carries the risk of viewing people as robots guided by stable and supra-individual forces. Drawing on ethnographic data collected in Southern Vietnam and Cambodia on precarious and indebted Vietnamese families that encourage their daughters to sell sex, this article disturbs deterministic cultural accounts of sex work by describing how families interpret, negotiate and (re)produce cultural scripts through relational work. More specifically, it shows how these families draw from familistic scripts about hierarchy, duty and sacrifice conveyed in popular culture to assemble relational packages. Deeply imbued in affective undercurrents and power asymmetry, these packages allow families to negotiate taboo trades like the repayment of debt through the sale of their daughter's virginity. Overall, a relational work framework provides a better understanding of female participation in the sex trade in Vietnam than explanations based on normative accounts of culture or problematic trafficking binaries.

Keywords

Vietnam, Cambodia, culture, family, relational work, sex trade, virginity trade

Contemporary writings have drawn attention to cultural scripts and reciprocal ties between parents and children to explain female participation in the sex trade in Southeast Asia. A popular argument is that women repay a debt of life to their parents through the provision of care and remittances. While useful to illuminate the role of cultural structures in shaping economic action, this argument carries the risk of viewing scripts as

Corresponding author:

Nicolas Lainez, Centre Asie du Sud-Est, Centre Asie du Sud-Est (CASE/UMR 8170, EHESS, CNRS, Inalco), 54 boulevard Raspail, Paris, 75006, France.

Email: niklainez@gmail.com

rigid principles and people as robots acting on internalized norms. This article disturbs this rationale by stressing how people continuously make, challenge and rework scripts through relational processes. Drawing on ethnographic data collected in Vietnam and Cambodia on Vietnamese families that encourage their daughters to contribute to family economics through sexual labour, it shows that parents draw from familistic scripts about filial responsibility, duty and sacrifice to assemble 'relational packages'. Understood as unique combinations of relations, transactions, media and negotiated meanings (Zelizer, 2012, p. 151), these packages allow families to negotiate controversial practices including the payment of debt through the sale of women's virginity. Deeply imbued in affective undercurrents and power asymmetry, these packages are viable when daughters perceive the role of co-debtor of family debt through sex work as an acceptable care practice to which they consent, instead of an illegitimate abuse which they reject. I examine the production of these packages using a 'relational work' framework applied to economic action.

Relational work refers to the process by which 'people erect a boundary, mark the boundary by means of names and practices, establish a set of distinctive understandings that operate within that boundary, designate certain sorts of economic transactions as appropriate for the relation, bar other transactions as inappropriate, and adopt certain media for reckoning and facilitating economic transactions within the relation' (Zelizer, 2012, p. 146). Relational work approaches relationality in economic life as a dynamic process imbued not in social (Granovetter, 1985) or cultural (Zatz, 1997) structure, but in meaning (Zelizer, 2012) as well as in affect and power asymmetry, and shaped by institutional forces and processes (Bandelj, 2015). As this study shows, economic action is not constrained by sociocultural variables but constituted through relational work infused with meaning, affect and inequality, in particular through matching relationships, transactions, media and cultural meaning. This perspective approaches culture as a set of dynamic and contingent 'shared understandings and their representations in symbols and practices' (Zelizer, 2002, p. 103), which people translate and negotiate relationally to achieve economic activity. Overall, this article deepens our understanding of relational work by fostering the link between a macro- (political economy) and micro-level (relationality) analysis of culture and meaning-making and by stressing its underlying affective and power underpinnings.

Culture allows drawing boundaries between transactions considered as reputable or disreputable. A focus on relational work reveals how people differentiate relationships that, if confounded, might generate criticism and sanction, and negotiate 'hostile worlds' views about the incommensurability of intimacy and the economy, two separate spheres which, according to hostile worlds exponents, contaminate each other upon contact (Zelizer, 2005). Relational work is critical to securing economic activity in settings where the blending of intimacy and the market is perceived as dangerous, exploitative or immoral. People challenge taboo trades with 'obfusatory relational work', particularly through 'rhetorical reframing' that stresses solidarity and de-commodification, and 'structural obfuscation' that reshapes the market structure of exchange as bundling, brokerage and gift (Rossman, 2014). Rhetorical reframing and structural obfuscation as gift are found in reproductive labour including the US egg donation market (Haylett, 2012), aesthetic labour performed for free by women in VIP night-clubs (Mears, 2015) and

sexual labour provided by ‘professional girlfriends’ in Phnom Penh (Hoefinger, 2013). In the specific case discussed here, Vietnamese families capture the income generated by their daughter through sex work and override the socially and legally reprehensible practice of parental procuring by emphasizing the cultural script of filial duty through relational processes.

Relational work complicates cultural interpretations of the sex trade in Vietnam. A number of scholars describe Confucian scripts as a supra-individual force that guides daughter’s filial care practices through sex work, as a ‘strong relationship and interdependence of parents and children in Vietnam, which is well documented . . . , explains why, for the sake of their families, so many of the girls accepted a job they disliked’ (Rubenson et al., 2005, p. 409). In a discussion about power and decision-making, Rosanne Rushing (2006, p. 479) argues that ‘parents made the decision for the daughters to migrate, or when the decision was made by daughters, it was strongly influenced by the parents’ situation and feelings of obligation. Filial piety (or the duty to be obliged or honor one’s family) is central to Vietnamese culture. A daughter is expected to obey and honor her parents and elders.’ Kathleen Barry (1996, p. 145) takes the argument a step further by stating that ‘traditional values that shape the culture, particularly the belief in fate and filial piety that shapes familial relationships, produce conditions that can be exploited by sex industries to expand prostitution markets’. Similar ideas apply to child workers whose childhoods are marked by heavy obligations which foster a sense of belonging and self-worth (Rubenson et al., 2004b, p. 153; see also Rubenson et al., 2004a, p. 403). In short, this scholarship appropriately situates care economies in transitional contexts of rapid but uneven development. However, it tends to approach culture as a static, bounded and stable force that governs people’s actions, thus risking to fall into a ‘nothing but’ cultural determinism by which culture becomes an independent variable (Zelizer, 2005, p. 29). An examination of how welfare institutions and families continuously interpret, negotiate and (re)produce scripts can illuminate the role of culture in shaping women’s participation in sex work.

Methodology, sample and context

This study was conducted in Southern Vietnam (Châu Đốc district in An Giang Province and Cần Thơ city) and Cambodia (Phnom Penh) between 2008 and 2010, with follow-ups until 2015. The choice of these sites was guided by an original focus on cross-border trafficking and migration for sex work from Vietnam to Cambodia (Reimer, 2006). This migration trend became popular in the 1990s but dried up in the mid- to late-2000s due to a campaign driven by anti-trafficking NGOs to close Svay Pak, the main Vietnamese red light area located in Phnom Penh’s suburbs. Moreover, Vietnamese women had started to migrate to provincial capitals including Ho Chi Minh City where the sex industry had quickly developed. I began my investigation in Châu Đốc, a sending and transit district for Vietnamese sex workers heading to Phnom Penh and beyond. I embedded myself in a group of street sex workers for 16 months. While my initial goal was to explore trafficking, I found few women who had been deceived, transported and exploited, the three main legal features of trafficking. Instead, I met highly mobile women (some had gone to Cambodia), indebted to moneylenders via personal and familial loans, involved in care economies and engaged in sex-for-cash and transactional sex

arrangements with local men. The Women's Union, a mass organization, facilitated access to 10 sex workers, 17 families, three moneylenders and 16 destitute sewing apprentices. I then continued my investigation in the Women's Union shelter for trafficked and sexually exploited women in Cần Thơ, a project supported by the NGO alliance Anti-Traffic I collaborated with during my PhD years. My informants included three women labelled as trafficked victims, two sexually exploited sisters and three women who had worked in Phnom Penh's brothels. I found that the Women's Union had limited access to trafficked women because it relied on a poor inter-provincial referral mechanism and victim's identification system based on binary categories and flawed indicators. Lastly, I settled in Phnom Penh for six months to study Vietnamese migrant sex workers. I interviewed 17 of them, three families, four procurers and five educators. The NGOs SFODA and Pharmaciens sans Frontières/ACTED granted me access. I met only one woman who considered herself as having been trafficked to Thailand. The lives of the sex workers were similar to those of their peers in Châu Đốc, except that they endured higher levels of precarity and insecurity due to discrimination by the wider Khmer society including the police.

In all the sites, gaining access to my informants' endeavours required much trust-building, which I gained with the help of a local research assistant. While the sex workers and their parents spoke easily about poverty, debt and care, some were reluctant to address sensitive topics like the virginity trade. These topics became pivotal though as, throughout the investigation, I shifted my initial interest on trafficking and its problematic binaries between voluntariness and coercion, victim and victimizer, truth and lie, legality and illegality and freedom and slavery, which 'do not reflect actual divisions between distinct fields of human experience' (O'Connell Davidson, 2015, 198), to what I refer to as sex workers' 'careers of intimacy'. This concept considers sex workers' trajectories in economic, migratory, care, sexual and moral terms while locating them in broader structures and political economies (Lainez, 2015). A crucial aspect of sex workers' intimate careers was high levels of debt in a context of rapid expansion of segmented credit markets, financial exclusion and rising living costs. Although credit abounded in rural areas of Vietnam, with the Bank for Social Policies and Agribank acting as main providers, access was restricted. As a result, excluded borrowers turn to the flexible informal credit sector embedded in social relations, especially moneylenders who provided consumption loans at a monthly rate of 25%. These loans were popular but also risky as they could rapidly lead to juggling practices and over-indebtedness. In most cases, families share their burden among their members including their children (Lainez, 2014, 2018).

Signifying duty and sacrifice through reified cultural scripts

Families draw from familistic scripts to signify care practices through relational work. These scripts are better understood through the lens of a political economy of welfare rather than as a standalone phenomenon. In Vietnam, the family adheres to overlapping and often conflicting principles drawn from Confucianism, Buddhism, socialism and capitalism. Family scripts are historical products that have been continuously reshaped in the changing contexts of colonization, the Indochinese and Vietnam wars, socialism

and the Reform era (Barbieri & Bélanger, 2009; Marr, 1984). Recently, as part of the 1986 Renovation reforms (*Đổi mới*) aimed at putting Vietnam on the path of a socialist-oriented market economy, the government promoted a welfare regime that combines redistributive, neoliberal and communist-corporatist principles by which the state, the market, households and third-party actors (insurance) ensure welfare provision (London, 2011, pp. 78–81). On the ground, the government provides just basic health, education and poverty reduction services due to its limited capacity to collect and distribute revenue. Beyond that, families must rely on labour and themselves, thus rendering kin relations a vital resource.

In reality, the government actively promotes familism, a welfare regime in which families assume responsibility for their well-being and reproduction. While some scholars apply this notion to Vietnam (Bélanger & Barbieri, 2009, p. 9), others prefer that of ‘informal security’ as ‘Risks are concentrated on the poor rather than being spread more equally across society through mechanisms of risk pooling and enforced solidarity’ (Priwitzer, 2012, p. 39). Since the early stage of the reforms, the government has implemented campaigns aimed at re-culturalizing traditional family and gender values and norms. The ‘cultured family’ (*gia đình văn hóa*) inspires individuals to commit to public life and internalize vague cultural values about the traditional family (Nguyen, 2019), and to foster couples in which women carry the burden of nurturing physically, emotionally and intellectually their husbands and children (Leshkovich, 2016, p. 83). In addition, the ‘family happiness’ (*gia đình hạnh phúc*) campaign links modernization to ‘couples’ ability to create “happy, wealthy, harmonious and stable families” (Phinney, 2008, p. 654). All these goals are contingent upon men’s ability to produce and behave as breadwinners and women’s capacity to reproduce, act as household head, endure and sacrifice for the family. The government disseminates these campaigns through mass organizations, propaganda, television and print titles like *Báo gia đình* (Family Newspaper) and the celebration of Vietnam Family Day. In the event held in Hanoi in June 2017, the organizers wished to exalt the ‘traditional values of the Vietnamese family’ and offer families ‘an opportunity to share their experiences in building cultural families through the integration period’ (Nhân Dân, 2017). This event showcased seminars and an art show about gender and the family and a calligraphy exhibition that featured old proverbs on family values and expected behaviours in ‘traditional’ households.

To make familism viable, the government reconfigured the family as the main production and reproduction unit. Moreover, it institutionalized intergenerational support by reforming family law which, implicitly, reinforces the power of parents over their children. Article 64 of the 1992 Constitution states that, ‘Parents are duty bound to bring up and educate their children into useful citizens of society. Children have an obligation to respect and care for their grandparents and parents.’ This precept was expanded in article 35 of the 2000 Marriage and Family Law. It states that, ‘Children have the duty to love, respect, show gratitude and piety to, their parents, pay heed to the good advice of their parents, preserve the good traditions and prestige of their family. Children have the obligations and rights to care for and support their parents.’ These scripts are more symbolic than legal in scope since the law does not sanction impious children. In practice, people easily translate them through a vast cultural repertoire of songs, proverbs and literary works that promote Confucian ethics of filial piety. As pointed out by many of

my informants, many proverbs remind children of their obligation to reciprocate the gift of life by showing gratitude and help their parents. They include *ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây* (remember the person who planted the tree when you eat the fruit). A popular folk poem titled *ơn nghĩa sinh thành* (love and gratitude for parents), which is taught in primary school, begins as follows: *uống nước nhớ nguồn. Làm con phải hiếu. Em ơi hãy nhớ năm xưa. Những ngày còn thơ. Công ai nuôi dưỡng* (drink water, remember the source. To be a child, you have to be pious. The young person must remember the past years. The days when you were still young. The pain of raising you). Filial piety is exalted in proverbs like *ngàn việc dữ, tà dâm đứng trước. Muôn việc lành, chữ hiếu đứng đầu* (among the evil things, the obscene ones are the worst. Among the good things, filial piety is first). In short, these and many more idioms inform and reinforce familistic scripts about duty and filial piety.

This ethic echoes that of ‘sacrifice’ (*hy sinh*), a term widely used in Vietnam during war and peace to convey patriotic, nationalistic and familial ideals. According to Merav Shohet (2013), *hy sinh* is closely associated with practices of filial piety. It typifies the sociomoral order of society in which ‘ethical devotion to the family and community can involve routine . . . acts of suffering such as forgoing food, medical care, or education . . . to meet the perceived expectations of one’s relatives or community, rendering “sacrifice,” in analysts’ view, an insidious and iniquitous practiced value’ (Shohet, 2013, p. 212). Sacrifice is a central topic in *The Tale of Kiều*, the jewel of Vietnamese classical literature written by Nguyễn Du in the early eighteenth century. This poem tells the tragic journey of a virtuous woman who saves her indebted father from prison by giving herself to a man who deflowers her and sells her to a brothel. She is then deceived and resold as a concubine and servant. Eventually, she meets her first love, but instead of marrying him, she devotes herself to serving her family. Today *Kiều* remains an iconic symbol of filial piety, sacrifice and the inexorable logic of fate and karma, but also of exploitation and injustice in popular (Ha, 2013) and scholarly (Barry, 1996, pp. 146–148) accounts on sex work and trafficking in Vietnam.

Families inculcate familistic and Confucian scripts in their children through socialization (Shohet, 2013). However, their interpretation is class-based. While the middle-class families I met and lived with in Ho Chi Minh City associated filial piety with children’s display of respect, right behaviour and fulfilment of ancestor worship duties for sons, the disadvantaged families I met in Southern Vietnam and Cambodia emphasized children’s duty to provide material support and repay family debts. The poorer the family, the more monetized the obligations were. The sex workers and their families expressed familistic and Confucian scripts through a moral lexicon that included the terms *quan tâm* (to care about), *chăm sóc* (to look after/care), *lo* (to worry about) and *trả/báo hiếu* (to show filial piety). The prerogative to assume responsibility (*có trách nhiệm*) arises from the gift of life: parents give birth (*sinh ra*), feed (*cho ăn*) and raise (*nuôi*) their children who, in return for this painful (*đau đớn*) and difficult (*khó khăn*) endeavour (*công sức*) and sacrifice (*hy sinh*), must show gratitude (*trả ơn*). Here, children feel obliged – but not indebted (*mắc nợ*) – to their parents. As for *hy sinh*, my informants rarely used it and when they did during interviews, they stressed devotion. According to a sewing apprentice in Châu Đốc, sacrifice is about ‘suffering from misfortunes so that others can be happy’. Regarding brokered marriage migration that became popular in the 2000s,

another trainee explained that ‘a woman who marries a foreigner because her family is poor and hopes to get money to help commits a sacrifice for her family’. Beyond sacrifice, a well-entrenched narrative of duty permeated my discussions about care, sexual and debt economies with sex workers. In Châu Đốc, Thảo (all names are pseudonyms) explained why she supported her destitute, ill and indebted mother:

I see how my mother is so I give her money. She is ill. I think that caring for her comes first. If I don’t give her money, she does not complain. But if I care for her truly, I will die peacefully. I give it to her voluntarily. I show filial piety because she carried me for nine months and ten days, then she breastfed, dressed and fed me. This is why I think I must care for her. To show gratitude, earning money is the most important thing because it allows getting by every day. My mother does not need care, just money . . . Lacking filial piety means insulting parents, don’t give them money, earning money without sharing it. Those who lack piety will suffer a karmic retribution. They will have an accident in this life and pay the price . . . Sacrifice means sacrificing myself to support my parents, no matter what job I do. Me working as a sex worker to help my mother is not called sacrifice, but showing filial piety. Asking money from men I run into to help my parents is showing filial piety.

This quote could be read as an expression of a coercive Confucian tradition. However, this conclusion would be hasty as it overestimates the power of culture as a totalizing force. Moreover, it would underestimate the way the post-reform state has reified and re-culturalized cultural scripts to develop the market economy while limiting its commitment to welfare. It would also downplay the way families accommodate, mediate and adapt these scripts through relational work to ensure security and reproduction. Here we shift from a macro-level analysis of culture as historically constituted to a micro-level analysis of scripts as relationally negotiated.

Matching relationships, transactions and cultural meanings

Families interpret, accommodate and enact cultural scripts to match their relationships, transactions and media, especially to negotiate controversial and interwoven debt, care and sexual economies that stir up strong emotions, reinforce hierarchy and muddle consent. Most sex workers from my sample shared a substantial part of their income with their families, albeit with some differences. While those who lived with their parents in Châu Đốc and Phnom Penh provided financial (cash), material (groceries), affective (company) and personal (services) care to them, those originating from rural areas but working away from home remitted about half of their earnings. Surveys conducted by Alliance Anti-Traffic in 2005 ($n = 1683$) and 2011 ($n = 4981$) stress the prevalence of this care economy, with respondents reporting having enrolled in the sex trade to support their families (47.7% and 29.4%, respectively), to help a sick parent (5.2% and 7.3%) and to meet their needs (31.3% and 45.7%; percentages don’t add up to 100% because respondents chose multiple responses). These data, however, tell us little about relational work, which I could only examine through observations of care practices and discussions about the virginity trade. I reported this practice for eight women. In rural Vietnam, especially, women are expected to safeguard their virginity until marriage. Nevertheless, some men seek to purchase it for they believe that it provides them with ‘good health’ (*sức khỏe tốt*),

'longevity' (*sống lâu*), 'luck' (*hên*) and 'prosperity' (*lâu già*). Their demand boosts a hidden market that attracts prospects in need of substantial cash.

The case of the Nguyễns from Châu Đốc illustrates the role of relational work and cultural scripts in facilitating the virginity trade. In 2005, this family borrowed \$500 from a moneylender to reinforce the unstable structure of their house. Unable to keep up with the tight repayment schedule, the Nguyễns were regularly harassed by their creditor. This crisis prompted Lan, the mother, to arrange the sale of her daughter's (Xuân) virginity in Ho Chi Minh City for \$1000, then aged 16. This transaction was shameful for Lan. She never discussed it or acknowledged it with me, but only mentioned that a sudden influx of cash had improved their situation at some stage. Lan also kept this taboo trade from other people. In Vietnam, parents who encourage their daughter(s) to engage in sex work do not break any law. However, those who act as procurers, for instance, by arranging to sell their children's virginity, are liable to prosecution under the Penal Code, according to the Law on Child Protection, Care and Education and the Trafficking Law. These parents also risk public criticism in a country where prostitution is lambasted as a 'social evil' (Nguyen Vo, 2008). Fully aware of this risk, Xuân only agreed to talk about the transaction once she fully trusted my assistant and I.

According to Xuân, Lan first tried to convince her using cultural arguments: 'now that you are a grown-up woman, you can help your family like all children do'. Lan also stressed the severity of their situation by adding that, 'the moneylender is fierce! If we don't pay, he could kill us with a knife or we'll have to leave forever.' The request scared Xuân, who stated that, 'I never suspected my mother would ask me to do something like that.' Her concern was that, in a rural town like Châu Đốc, a woman who loses her virginity before marriage risks stigmatization from a prospective husband, especially if he discovers the nature in which it was traded. At first, Xuân declined her mother's demand: 'I was afraid that if I lost my virginity, my mother-in-law would not accept me and my husband would disrespect me because I gave my virginity away.' Lan then assuaged Xuân's fear by adding that, 'go ahead, my daughter! Times are hard for me. You go and try. It's the same as when you get married, except that you make money here. Go sell yourself! Then I will find you a husband.' After three days, Xuân agreed to the transaction, admitting that, 'I couldn't not go', but adding that 'virginity must be important to my mother because she cried when we decided to sell it'. The trade was thus painful for Lan, who, nevertheless, obfuscates her daughter's consent. Xuân held limited bargaining power and could not decline but stressed that, 'I voluntarily agreed to sell my virginity to help my parents repay their debt', thereby expressing her agency and desire to 'provide for' (*chăm sóc*) and 'sacrifice for her family' (*hy sinh cho gia đình*). After the transaction, Lan praised her as a 'dutiful' (*có hiếu*) and 'responsible' (*có trách nhiệm*) child, two compliments that stirred reassurance, pride, joy and belonging in her. Ultimately, Xuân admitted that, 'I was very sad but not angry with my parents because the money was used to pay off their debt.' She only complained about the abdominal pain resulting from the multiple sessions of intercourse she had had with the client.

Overall, the alignment of a relationship (parents–daughter and especially mother–daughter), its boundaries (parents act as care-receivers, the mother as a procurer and the daughter as a sex worker and co-debtor), transactions and media (cash from a sexual economy repays family debt), and its meaning (cash epitomizes filial help, cultural

scripts override unequal power relations and parental coercion and procuring) allowed the transaction to occur despite strong emotional resistance and fear of sanctions. The trade was facilitated by a significant imbalance in power between the parents and their daughter, knowing that inequality was inherent to their structural position based on kinship and reinforced by cultural scripts that outlined differentiated roles and expectations. Lan used these scripts throughout the negotiation – which *de facto* was not one – to reassert her power and arouse strong and conflicting emotions. The relational match highlights the co-constitutional nature of relationships, economic activity and cultural meaning produced through relational work imbued with affect and inequality. The virginity trade generated shame, fear and pain, especially if arranged by parents acting as procurers. However, the Nguyễns overrode this taboo by adhering to cultural scripts that brought satisfaction, self-worth and belonging. In other words, they reified a cultural script to counteract sexual deviance. Obviously, parents have many tools at their disposal to force their children to act in specific ways. During my investigation, I observed how Lan occasionally used psychological and physical violence when cultural scripts failed to compel Xuân's obedience and willingness to engage in transactional sex with men (Lainez, 2012). However, even in these cases, the cultural script of duty and sacrifice remained a powerful signifier that permitted families to rationalize and negotiate care economies informed by sex work, and daughters to swallow the bitter pill of having to sell sex 'for the greater good'.

The Phùng family provides another example of a relational match. In the early 2000s, this family lived near the Vietnamese border. Their situation deteriorated when the husband fell ill and lost his fishing business, his wife became addicted to gambling, and their son died of cancer. To deal with these contingencies, the Phùngs borrowed money from moneylenders but struggled to repay them. Eventually, they tried to escape their creditors by fleeing to Chhbar Ampov, a Vietnamese slum in Phnom Penh. Unexpectedly, a moneylender found them and claimed the outstanding debt. To resolve this crisis, the mother Huy asked her daughters Trang aged 16 and Nhung aged 17 to sell their virginity for \$700 and \$1000. Here too, the sharing of financial responsibilities within the family led to a conflation of the moral duty to 'show gratitude' (*trả ơn*) with the financial obligation to 'repay family debt' (*trả nợ cho gia đình*). Trang explained, 'we didn't have money to pay the debt. Before, my parents gambled a lot and lost a lot of money. I saw them indebted and worried about moneylenders coming every day to shout at them. My mother was sad and cried. Later, my family broke the debt to come here. I got deflowered to have money to repay the debt.' The decision was difficult to make. Trang was not concerned about discrimination, as it was common in Chhbar Ampov for women to resort to sex work to get by due to their lack of access to education and the local labour market. Instead, she was concerned about the sexual act itself: 'I felt very nervous and upset, I could not eat. No matter how brave I was, I couldn't sleep, or eat. I was very scared. I didn't know what being deflowered was about. I heard people talking about it, but what it was, I didn't know.' Huy reassured her by choosing a client she deemed appropriate. In our discussion, Trang stressed her free will and rationalized the transaction with expressions such as *trả ơn* (showing gratitude) and *có con nhờ con, có của nhờ của* (if you have children rely on them, if you have property rely on it). A year later, the mother made the same request of Nhung, who reacted as follows:

My mother asked me to go and get deflowered with a man aged 40 or 50. She told me that this man was a good person. At first, I refused, but then I reconsidered my decision seeing that my father was sick and my family was still in debt. Then I told my mother to tell my father that 'I was willing to sacrifice myself, I thus volunteered'. When my sister got deflowered, my father felt very sad. At that time, he and I were still living in Neak Lung and my mother had just gone to Phnom Penh with my two sisters. While sleeping next to my father, he said to me, 'your sister got deflowered, I felt pity for her'. I also felt sorry for her because she had sacrificed herself. After that, I knew it was my turn. If she had sacrificed for us, I had to do the same. I could not say no. My family was miserable, my father was sick, it was impossible for me to say no. If I had refused, I would have been treated as an ungrateful daughter.

This quote illustrates the strong affective underpinnings of relational work, a process invested with empathy in the parent–children bond, sadness caused by a taboo trade and fear of exclusion for impious daughters; all emotions that stem from cultural and sexual scripts. It also illuminates the power imbalance between parents and children, especially between the mother who commanded domestic, economic and children's matters in line with gender roles diffused by familistic campaigns, and the father who simply followed his wife's course of action. In any case, power inequality provided the conditions to muddle consent. Nhung acknowledged this by admitting that it was her 'mother's decision' (*mẹ quyết định*) to sell her virginity, but that, 'my mother didn't force me, I went by myself. I was willing to work and to sacrifice myself.' After the sale, Nhung was praised as a 'grateful daughter' (*con có hiếu*). Her sacrifice was incommensurate with her debt of life though, as she added, 'if calculating the money brought by my virginity and the labour that my parents put in for raising me from small to big, it is imbalanced'. This remark reveals a rarely expressed logic of accountable reciprocity in the debt of life narrative, which remained rather abstract as my informants were unable to quantify how much love, effort and capital they had received from their parents and thus how much they owed then in return. This inability to fully reciprocate and thus to escape moral duty allows care economies to last for years, with adjustments to changing conditions through relational work. After selling her virginity, Trang became a successful sex worker and mistress of a Northeast Asian expat. As she proudly displayed, she shared a substantial part of her earnings with her parents (Lainez, 2015, pp. 325–333).

Relational mismatches, or when relationships come under stress

The importance of relational work becomes apparent in cases of relational mismatch, or when relationships, transactions, media and meaning are misaligned. An example is the Ngô family from Cần Thơ, whose case was brought to court and publicized in the Vietnamese media (Pham, 2009; Phat, 2008). When the parents separated in 2001, the mother, Quỳnh, took her eldest daughter and left behind two other daughters – Trâm and Giang – and a son with her husband, a modest farmer. In 2008, after seven years of absence, Quỳnh reconnected with Trâm and Giang. One day, she picked them up from school and locked them up at her place. With the help of her first daughter, she arranged to sell their virginity for \$1000 and \$500 and then forced them to provide sexual services for four months. She used their earnings to repay gambling debts. Eventually, the sisters

escaped from captivity, sued their mother with their father's help and joined a recovery program at the Women's Union Centre in Cần Thơ where they remained for several years. Like most sex workers from my sample, Trâm and Giang had been socialized to be dutiful daughters. They quit school to work as waitresses in a coffee shop in Central Vietnam to help their father. In our discussion, Trâm stressed the usual behavioural duties tied to 'showing gratitude' (*trả hiếu*), but also her desire to support her father and grandfather in return for their care:

When I am older, I will buy a house for my father, feed him and care for him. If I have money, I will spend four tenths on my father, four tenths on my grandfather, and two tenths on myself. And if my sister and brother need money, I will also spend on them . . . Having money and not spending it on your parents is lacking filial piety.

The desire to help did not apply to their mother, though. For Trâm and Giang, what could have been a legitimate form of care displayed as an assertion of love and gratitude for Quỳnh became a criminal act punishable by law. They rejected her request to sell sex and her role as a procurer and sole beneficiary of their earnings. As a result, Quỳnh subjugated them through verbal abuse, threats with a knife, slapping, food deprivation and confinement in an overheated room. All these actions were an overt expression of power imbalance through blunt physical force. During the trial, Giang made clear that, 'even if I had refused, my mother and my sister would have forced me to do this despicable thing' (Pham, 2009). Relational work failed because the mother had abandoned her daughters for years and coerced them through fear, pain and misery without simultaneously providing them joy, pride and belonging as the Nguyễns and the Phùngs did. Quỳnh used cultural scripts to persuade her daughters to accept her request as well as the judge during the trial, arguing that, 'the children must show their gratitude to their mother, because it is her who gave birth to them. I did the same until adulthood with my mother who gave birth to me' (Pham, 2009). Yet she failed to convince all parties. The two sisters regarded cultural scripts as irrelevant to express care and love, with Giang noting that, 'there are also parents who use the duty to show gratitude to force their children to do things they don't want to do. In that case, parents don't love their children.' The judge supported this argument by sentencing Quỳnh and her accomplice daughter to nine and seven years in jail respectively.

As powerful as cultural scripts are for rendering meaningful relations and transactions through relational work, they do not always suffice to create viable relational packages as people must also agree on the terms and boundaries of their relationship. The risk run by parents who misuse cultural scripts or combine them with psychological and physical coercion can lead to serious conflict that may break the relationship. Trâm and Giang clearly stated that they did not want to see their mother ever again. The Ngô case is rare and extreme because it involved severe violence. In most cases, however, relational mismatches had less severe outcomes. Sex workers, especially those living away from their family, often complained about their mother's persistent requests to be sent cash, of being treated like 'ATM machines'. Many just ignore these requests and distance themselves from their parents but without breaking the relationship. Linh, a sex worker I met in Phnom Penh, lamented that,

If I continue to be miserable, it is because I still care for my mother. If she continues to make me miserable, I will stop going home, though. My life is mine. Parents don't care for their children. My mother calls to insult me all the time. If I don't send enough money, insult. If I don't call after every three days, insult. Whatever I do, I am insulted. Here, I work to death. I try to work hard to send money back home. But if I am late for a few days, they call and insult me. It is just that I don't want to be an impious child [*con bất hiếu*] to my family and relatives. I work but they need money all the time. How much debt they have, I pay it all . . . Asking me to pay 500–600 USD a month, I cannot always afford it. I have to take care of my children.

Linh cared for her mother but also herself and her children. She also admitted her inconsistency in sending money, especially in times of hardship, and her desire to escape from her mother's grip and perpetual debt yet without breaking the relationship. In short, relational mismatches may occur when parents use severe coercion and violence to ensure support, but also when daughters establish their own family.

Conclusion

Cultural interpretations of the sex trade are pervasive. Thailand is a good case in point. The Theravada Buddhist concept of *bun khun* (debt of merit) presupposes that daughters repay their filial debt by supporting their parents whereas sons do so by becoming a monk. In line with the findings from the pivotal study *From Peasant Girls to Bangkok Masseuses* (Phongpaichit, 1982), many authors have argued that Buddhist-sanctioned gender hierarchies and expectations push rural young Thai women and children into sex work (Montgomery, 2001, 2014; Muecke, 1992; Taylor, 2005). However, religious scripts alone cannot account for this practice as other forces come into play including the appeal for modernity, consumption and display of signs of success (Mills, 1999) and tensions between family obligations and personal, material and professional aspirations for Cambodian sex workers (Derks, 2008, p. 182). This article enriches these debates by shedding light on cultural readings of the sex trade in Vietnam. It supports critical findings from the literature, namely that sex workers provide extensive support to their parents and use cultural scripts to rationalize care and their entry into sex work. It merely advises caution against deterministic approaches to culture as an independent variable and calls for a consideration of cultural scripts as relationally produced. This line of enquiry also disturbs strong culturalist views that Vietnamese scholars hold about a 'traditional family' whose core 'always strives for the spirit of the original source and encourages filial piety, caring for parents, worshiping ancestors, respecting family, faithfulness, gratitude, filial piety in behavior, etc.', which continue to inform familistic welfare policies (Le, 2018, p. 170).

Furthermore, this article contributes to economic sociology, notably to emerging studies on relational work in the economy by placing this process as it occurs in Vietnamese families in a broader context. Zelizer (2012, p. 164) concedes that 'people's creative adaptations operate within boundaries set by historically accumulated meanings, legal constraints, and structural limits', and that future research would benefit by exploring cultural, historical and institutional variations in the production of relational packages. This study pursues this avenue by illuminating the role of reified scripts in enabling or disabling relational work and taboo trades. This focus on structure and agency lies at the

heart of the ‘careers of intimacy’ concept (Lainez, 2015), located at the crossroads of the economic sociology of intimacy (Zelizer, 2005) and the sociology of careers as defined by the Chicago School of Sociology (Barley, 1989). In this article, the careers of intimacy of sex workers become apparent in relational processes located within families and broader sociocultural structures and political economies. These processes illustrate how families read, negotiate and reconfigure cultural scripts to trade their daughter’s virginity and muddle their consent against a backdrop of precarity, financial exclusion, (over) indebtedness and familism. As has been shown, however, relational work can be a smooth and efficient, but also painful and contested process. To sum up, a relational work approach provides a more dynamic understanding of a complex and sensitive phenomenon than interpretations that rely on static and normative accounts of culture. It also allows us to overcome the problematic either/or binaries that inform the trafficking paradigm often used in discussions about the virginity trade, which betray the complexities that permeate intimate and economic life.

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