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Hoang, Kimberly Kay

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New Economies of Sex and Intimacy in Vietnam

by

Kimberly Kay Hoang

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Women, Gender, and Sexuality

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Raka Ray, Chair

Professor Barrie Thorne

Professor Irene Bloemraad

Professor Peter Zinoman

Fall 2011

New Economies of Sex and Intimacy

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Kimberly Kay Hoang

Abstract

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Professor Raka Ray, Chair

Over the past two decades, scholars have paid particular attention to the growth of global sex tourism, a trade marked by convergence between the global and local production and consumption of sexual services. In the increasingly global economy, the movement of people and capital around the world creates new segments of sex work, with diverse groups of consumers and providers. This dissertation examines the dialectical link between intimacy and political economy. I examine how changes in the global economy structure relations of intimacy between clients and sex workers; and how intimacy can be a vital form of currency that shapes economic and political relations. I trace new economies of sex and intimacy in Vietnam by moving from daily worlds of sex work in Ho Chi Minh City [HCMC] to incorporate a more structural and historical analysis. Drawing on 15 months of ethnography (2009-2010) working as a bartender and hostess I analyze four different bars that cater to wealthy local Vietnamese men and their Asian business partners, overseas Vietnamese men living in the diaspora, Western expatriates, and Western budget travelers. Drawing on 180 informal interviews with 90 clients and 90 sex workers across four niche markets of HCMC's sex industry, my dissertation incorporates three levels of analysis.

I show how contemporary processes of globalization re-stratify an already stratified sex industry in HCMC, as well as how the industry is a vital player in the generation of business. Vietnam's opening to foreign direct investment since *Doi Moi* in 1986 has created a domestic super-élite, connected to the levers of political power, who channel incoming foreign capital to specific projects in real estate and manufacturing. For this super-élite, conspicuous consumption provides both a lexicon of distinction and a means of communicating hospitality to potential investors from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other East Asian countries — and, using a different symbolic vocabulary, to Western investors. A new, ultra-high-end tier of sex workers has emerged in tandem with the emergence of this new group of clients. These sex workers only succeed to the extent that they can deploy the right vocabularies of consumption and sexuality in an elaborate

symbolic dance tailored to the needs of individual capital deals. They are valued not only for their beauty, but also for their ability to help their clients project masculinity, deference, and collegiality in the specific context of entertaining foreign investors: they must also be able to modify this performance for East Asian clients as well as white clients. As a result, racialized desires, social status, business success, and hope for upward mobility are all played out in the bars of HCMC. The same is true in the middle and lower tiers of the industry, but in radically different ways. In short, HCMC's sex industry is not just a microcosm of the global economy, but also a vector shaping financial globalization itself.

I examine how sex workers, male clients, bar owners, mommies (formally known as madams), and the police all work to create and maintain certain types of raced and gendered hierarchies according to the niche in which they are involved. I also focus on the practices of everyday life in the bars and examine how men and women construct their relations with each other, which lead to different kinds of intimate and emotional relationships that sometimes allow women to experience mobility, but at other times are self-destructive. Sex work, I argue, provides a unique lens through which to examine not only how transformations in the global economy reshape intimate life but also how the emotional intimacy (and not merely sex) provided by sex workers serves as an important currency in transnational business deals. Comparing four niche markets within HCMC's sex industry, I found that local Vietnamese men and their Asian business partners participate in business-related entertainment while Western expatriates, in contrast, participate in HCMC's sex industry for recreational purposes outside of work. Racialized desires, status, business success, and hope for upward mobility are all played out in the bars of HCMC, where dreams and deals are traded. This sex industry is not just a microcosm of the global economy; it also helps fuel its growth.

To my parents Richard Men Hoang and Nancy Ha Hoang who have made countless sacrifices in their own lives so that I could chase after my dreams. I am humbled by your grace, dedication, and extraordinary courage.

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At the University of California, Berkeley my faculty advisors provided me with a great deal of intellectual support. I would like to first thank Raka Ray, my dissertation chair, for providing me with more intellectual and emotional support that I could have ever imagined. In this postmodern era, Raka met with me several times over Skype in order to guide me through my fieldwork and help me think through many of the emergent themes that eventually became the chapters of this dissertation. She believed and encouraged me every step of the way and she trusted me to find my own way in the field and in the writing process. She also taught me the importance of learning how to find balance both in the field and through the writing process so that I would bend rather than break when moving across rough terrain.

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Chapter 1
Introduction:
New Economies of Sex and Intimacy in Vietnam

It was noon, and I was sitting in a room at an upscale karaoke bar with about thirty other women putting on makeup, fixing our hair, and eating a quick bowl of hu tieu noodles before getting dressed. Hanh, the head madam (locally known as a “mommy”), walked into the dressing room and said, “Hurry up and finish getting dressed. Dai Ca (Big Brother) Xanh just called and reserved a table. He will be here in an hour with nine other people.” The women quickly slurped up their noodles, wiped their faces, and applied their makeup.

At 1:00 pm, a black Bentley and a dark blue Rolls Royce pulled up in front of the bar, which was in Ho Chi Minh City’s business district. Three of the bar’s male service staff stood downstairs to greet the clients. Two of them walked up to the car doors and briskly escorted the clients to an elevator hidden from view. The men rode the elevator up to the bar, where they were directed to a private karaoke room equipped with a full sound system, a private dance floor, a long coffee table, and a set of couches.

Hanh, the head mommy, walked into the room. She was dressed in black pants, a white button-up shirt, a multicolored Louis Vuitton monogrammed belt, and Gucci high heels. She greeted the men, sat down next to Chu Xanh, and asked him to introduce his guests to her. Chu Xanh introduced the men to Hanh, signaling the implicit hierarchy among the men using Vietnamese honorifics so that she would know how to properly address each man at the table. She then ordered the male service staff to bring in a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label and place it on the table. After opening the bottle, she poured each of the clients a drink, and welcomed them into her bar by raising her glass to toast them.

Meanwhile, Hanh’s two subordinates — “junior mommies” — were in the back room looking over each girl to make sure that her clothes and makeup were presentable. Hanh then walked into the dressing room and said to me, “Your uncle is here, go sit next to him.” She was referring to Chu Xanh, a key informant who helped me gain access to the bar. She then turned to Phuong, a 20-year-old hostess/sex-worker, and said, “Chu Xanh asked to sit with you [too].” Phuong and I walked into the room and sat next to Chu Xanh. There were nine other men at the table: five local Vietnamese and four businessmen from Korea.

Chu Xanh introduced me as a hostess and his protégé who spoke English and Phuong as his girlfriend. Two minutes later, the door swung open and twenty-seven women lined up on the dance floor. One by one, the men pointed at each woman and invited nine other women to sit at the table with them. Over the next two hours, the women sang karaoke for the men, sat and talked with them, and played drinking games to break the awkward tension in the room. They helped Chu Xanh, their client, transition from a formal style of interaction with his Korean business partners to one that was informal, fun, and personable. The goal was to get the men to bond with one another. The clients went through eight bottles of Johnnie Walker Blue Label, at a cost of US\$250 each, before they began to loosen up and laugh with one another.

Over the course of the night, I watched as the Vietnamese men displayed their Vertu mobile phones (worth between \$10,000 and \$20,000 USD), Rolex watches, and keys to their cars to the women in the room. The act of showing these items to the hostess workers in the bar enabled the Vietnamese men to showcase their wealth to their foreign investors from Korea. Chu Xanh turned to me and asked, “Have you seen a Vertu phone in America?” I smiled and jokingly said, “No. Show me more.” Chu Xanh picked up phone and, in front of everyone, called Louis

Vuitton and asked to speak with the store manager. Then he handed his car keys to me, told me to tell one of the service staff to give the keys to his driver, have the driver pick the Louis Vuitton store manager up, and escort him to the bar.

The store manager arrived with several shirts and accessories. Chu Xanh tried on a few belts and shirts, asking the women for their opinion. He chose a few items and pulled out a wad of cash to pay. Hoang, a wealthy 48-year-old local Vietnamese man at the table, turned to me and said, “Vietnam is no longer poor, is it? You see how we play?” Dung, a 49-year-old Vietnamese man, added, “We play with cash... we play with *real* money. Not like the Americans, who play with fake money [referring to credit]. And we pay thirty percent more because of the luxury tax.” Unsure of how to respond, I bowed my head, picked up my glass, and toasted them.

Over the course of the night, Chu Xanh revealed to me that he and his colleagues were negotiating a \$30 million USD land development project to build a new commercial property that would include office space and a shopping center. The Korean men at the table were potential investors, while the Vietnamese men at the table were businessmen with strong political ties who could assure that this project would move forward quickly. Chu Xanh confided, “It’s not just about trust, but about making the men feel confident that Vietnam is a nation worth their investment. They need to see that we are serious and that we can make money.” As many other men stated over the course of my project, Chu Xanh went on to tell me that while the West is mired in the 2008 global financial crisis, Asia’s economy is booming. Just as China is on its way to becoming the next global superpower, he said, Vietnam is also ready to ride this economic wave.

While the United States and Europe have been entangled in the global financial crisis, Vietnam and many other countries in Asia are experiencing an economic boom. Since joining the World Trade Organization in 2006, Vietnam has experienced significant gains in capital through foreign direct investment allowing men like Chu Xanh to contest racial hierarchies in the global imaginary and assert Vietnam’s place as a strong nation in the new global economy. This dissertation examines the dialectical link between the political economy and intimacy through Ho Chi Minh City [HCMC] Vietnam’s contemporary sex industry. I argue that Vietnam’s sex industry is not peripheral to the changing economic arrangements, but rather is central to them, helping to attract particular groups of men and facilitating relations among them that keep the business relations and political ties going. This dissertation examines how that the organization, social relations, practices, and meanings of sex work have changed along with the political-economic shifts following the escalated movement of foreign investments in Vietnam. In analyzing HCMC’s sex industry, I show how sex work plays a crucial role in facilitating the flow of capital through foreign direct investment and overseas remittances into the country that drive the dynamic growth and development.

Second, this dissertation examines the emergence of new affective economies alongside rapid industrialization in Vietnam. In these new affective economies sex workers, I argue, drive the local economy by establishing new markets that provide male clients with the space to assert varying masculinities while simultaneously producing an emotional product that allow clients to enhance their sense of self. To do this workers embodying modernity or third-world poverty in accordance to their clients desires while simultaneously engaging in sexual, intimate, and

relational exchanges with their clients. Male clients rely on sex workers to serve as intermediaries between men and as cultural brokers who help men assert their masculinity and secure business deals. In short, I examine how changes in the global economy structure relations of intimacy between clients and sex workers; and how intimacy serves as a vital form of currency shaping economic and political relations.

Global Sex Work and Political Economy

Over the last two decades a rich body of literature has examined the global sex industry around the world. Studies of sex work have examined the lives of women working in global cities like San Francisco (Bernstein 2007), New York (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006), Birmingham, England (Sanders 2005), and Oslo (Hoigard and Finstad 1992). Scholars of sex tourism have examined vacation destinations in the Caribbean (Brennan 2004; Cabezas 2004; Kempadoo 1999; Sanchez Taylor 2000), Thailand (Askew 1999; Bales 2002; Jeffrey 2002; Truong 1990), Malaysia (Lim 1998), Korea (Nagel 2000), and the Philippines (McIlwaine 2006). Researchers have paid particular attention to the growth of global sex tourism, marked by the convergence between the global and local, and the production and consumption of sexual services (Wonders and Michalowski 2001). The literature clearly illustrates how geopolitical relations between nation states lead to new economies of sex work as men from industrialized nations travel to less developed nations, because the purchasing of sexual services is seemingly more affordable and is in faraway exotic places where men can remain anonymous (Kempadoo 2004).

Scholars of sex work tend to focus on ways in which changes in the political economy alter the structure of sex work. That is, they utilize top down approaches, doing one-way analysis of processes of globalization and of the in which sex industries emerge as part of the “unintended consequences” of modernization and development. This approach implies that there is some sort of linear progression towards a future already instantiated in the rich world (Altman 2001). Researchers have also examined multiple ways that the state regulates women’s bodies, thereby altering the structure of sex work (Bernstein and Schaffner 2004). In post-industrial cities like San Francisco, indoor sex work has burgeoned as a result of the criminalization sex work involving the streets (Bernstein 2007). Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo (2008) argues that as societies like Vietnam liberalize and become a part of the global economy, governments begin to regulate the privatized intimate desires of citizens and the kinds of “social problems” such desires create. The government, Nguyen-Vo argues, shapes citizens’ desires through intense intervention in what it represents as an empirical attempt to eliminate the “social evil of prostitution,” in the case of Vietnam, set against authentic tradition. Moreover, international NGOs set up in Vietnam which perpetuate images of “trafficked victims” that need to be saved, overlook the multiple ways in which sex workers act as agents who help to facilitate the flow of foreign capital into the country while simultaneously expanding the economy by establishing new affective economies. In this dissertation, I assert that sex work not only provides a unique lens through which to examine how economic transformations reshape intimate life, *but also* a lens through which to understand how people both help create and contest global economic transformations themselves. Sex workers in HCMC’s sex industry have played a vital role in Vietnam’s economic development by expanding and creating affective economies alongside manufacturing and other sectors in the midst of rapid industrialization.

This dissertation forges a new direction in studies of sex work in three ways, paying particular attention to the tensions at play in local spaces as workers and clients actively shift racialized and classed hierarchies in the global imaginary. First, in my examination of four sectors of HCMC's sex industry that cater to wealthy local Vietnamese men and their Asian business partners, *Viet Kieu* (overseas Vietnamese) men, Western expatriates or businessmen, and Western budget travelers, I demonstrate how HCMC's sex industry has changed in and through relations and tensions from both the top down and the bottom up. In other words, I argue that men and women on the ground play a central role in shaping the structure of Vietnam's political economy. In these ways workers activated the local market and contributed to its dynamism by directly and indirectly facilitating the flow of money into the country.

Second, I argue that class and racial variation amongst male clients reflects and helps reproduce the structure of the global economy. Highlighting local tensions on the ground, I build on and extend the work of Elizabeth Bernstein (2007) who provides a systematic analysis of attuned to the social class dimensions of different sectors of sex work in San Francisco. While Bernstein highlights how sex workers in the lower-class sectors provide their clients with sexual labors while higher-end workers engaged in emotional labor, her work does not systematically analyze variation in the social class or racialized position of clients. In Chapter 5, I examine how male clients engaged in a variety of practices to reconfigure their place in global racialized hierarchies. I argue that all of the types of men I studied seek to construct themselves as dominant males in the global imaginary through their racialized, classed, and transnational relations with each other. In this dissertation, I also incorporate an analysis of a *racially* and *economically* diverse group of clients. Employing a *relational* analysis of four different sectors of HCMC's sex industry, and contrasting the present arrangements to those in 2007, I complicate existing frameworks for studying global sex work by analyzing the sex industry of a developing economy where white men did not always command the highest paying sectors of sex work and where local ideals of the modern were distinctly non-Western. As I will argue throughout, the flow of capital brings with it new conceptualizations of global racialized, classed and gendered hierarchies.

Third, I illustrate through my ethnography of HCMC's sex industry, how Vietnam no longer measures its modernity solely in relation to Western nations. Tiantian Zheng's (2009) research in Dalian, China, examines how local Chinese men construct themselves as "modern men embracing a Western-oriented model of modernity" and rejecting "artificial restraints imposed by puritanical Confucian-socialist system," (106). However, I argue that while the global economic crisis that hit the United States in 2008 has had profound economic effects around the world, it is has also affected the way that small countries like Vietnam view their place in a shifting world economy. Individuals in Vietnam's local economy no longer measure their county's progress or development solely by Western notions of the "modern and cosmopolitanisms;" rather they measure their progress by comparing themselves to people in China or those living in fully-developed capitalist economies within Asia like Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and Taiwan. In Chapter 6, I show how the sex workers I studied helped local Vietnamese businessmen attract foreign direct investments from their Asian business partners by constructing themselves as *modern subjects*, while women who catered to Western expatriates living and working in Vietnam were pressed to construct themselves as *Third-World subjects* and as cultural brokers for Western men.

Scholars have challenged the idea that there is a singular pathway towards modernity because this process occurs in an unequally balanced world. They argue for a broader

conceptualization of modernity as a *multiple* phenomenon, composed of “alternative” or “parallel” forms forged through the complex interplay between imperial forces and the contexts of the local political economy (Appadurai 1996; Chakrabarty 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 1996; Gaonkar 1999; Rofel 1992; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003). Rofel (1999) asserts that “modernity persists as an imaginary and continuously shifting site of global/local claims, commitments, and knowledge forged within uneven dialogues about the place of those who move in and out of categories of otherness” (3). By relocating projects of modernity and viewing them from the perspective of those who are marginalized or excluded from a universalizing center, I empirically illustrate how conceptions of modernity becomes a *mutable* project developed in unequal cross-cultural dialogues and contentions (Rofel 1999: 12). Building on Lisa Rofel’s (1999) theoretical framework, I argue that sex workers’ bodies are in constant tension through mutable projects of modernity that occur in different spaces as women actively construct themselves as modern women where the measure of the modern is increasingly *non-Western*. Contrary to other studies that examine processes of modernization by measuring the development of specific countries in comparison to the West, I examine a context wherein the West no longer figures in the local imaginary as the hegemonic ideal. In other words, I argue that not all sex workers in Vietnam turn to the West for ideal standards of beauty, nor do male clients turn to Western hegemonic ideals to assert their masculinities. Instead, both men and women work to emulate the figures of those who live in fully developed countries within Asia developing new local ideals of the modern man and the modern woman.

Affective Economies

Eva Illouz (2007) argues that “sociologists have traditionally conceived of modernity in terms of the advent of capitalism, the rise of democratic political institutions, or the moral force of the idea of individualism, but have taken little notice of the fact that, along with the familiar concepts of surplus value, exploitation, rationalization, or the division of labor, most grand sociological accounts of modernity contain another story: namely descriptions or accounts of modernity in terms of emotions” (1). Building on Illouz’s framework, I argue that in newly industrialized economies like that of Vietnam, affective economies (Hardt and Negri 2004) have emerged alongside manufacturing work as Vietnam has sought to become a modern nation in the new global economy.¹

In 1983, Arlie Hochschild coined the term *emotional labor*, turning attention to workers in service sector economies who evoke, shape, or suppress their feelings in order to produce a desired state of mind in others. Subsequently, a whole body of literature emerged that builds on Hochschild’s theory of emotional labor in service occupations like fast food restaurants (Hall 1993; Leidner 1993) or in long-term caring occupations (Lopez 2006). As this field of study expanded, scholars have added nuance by theorizing intimate labors (Zelizer 2007) caring labors (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002), and sexual labors (Boris, Gilmore, and Parrenas 2010) which workers provide in feminized service sector occupations. These scholars have focused mostly on workers (rather than clients) and *on labor* processes, highlighting the ways which workers become alienated from their labors as they engage in emotional performances.

¹ I would like to thank Rhacel Parrenas for encouraging me to think through this concept of affective economies.

In 2004, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri introduced the concept *multitude* to capture the importance of recent shifts in the global economy. They argue that the “industrial working class no longer plays a hegemonic role in the global economy, although its members have not decreased world wide; production today has to be conceived not merely in economic terms but more generally as social production— not only the production of material goods but also the production of communications, relationships, and forms of life” (Hardt and Negri 2004: xv). *Multitude*, they argue, may be comprised of diverse entities of social production. In fully developed capitalist societies, industrial labor has lost its hegemony while *immaterial labor* — “that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response”— has become more central (Hardt and Negri 2004:108). The authors highlight *affective labor a form of immaterial labor*. *Affective labor*, I argue, is a more useful concept because it brings together Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) theory of *emotional labor* and Milian Kang’s (2010) concept of *bodily labor* in thinking about how workers manage not only their emotions but also their bodies in service sector work. Moreover, Hochschild (1983) and Kang (2010) pay close attention to the racialized, gendered, and classed relations that emerge as workers engage in these kinds of labors. Paying attention to these relations of differences enable us to examine why certain types of *immaterial labor* are more masculinized or feminized in structuring inequality. However, unlike the terms, *emotional* or *bodily labor* that scholars employ to analyze short-term service encounters, the concept of *affective labor* allows us to analyze service encounters that develop into long-term relations as workers sell their ability to foster intimately connected human relationships that are specially tailored to individuals over a longer period.

Building on the work of Hardt and Negri (2004), Rhacel Parrenas (2011) uses the idea of *immaterial labor to examine* how Filipina hostess workers in Japan produce affect through the manipulation of corporeal bodies (via aesthetic and bodily labor), through the generation of emotions (via emotional labor and storytelling), and the achievement of cultural familiarity. They perform these immaterial labors, she argues, to generate profits and meet their sales quotas in the bar. However, while this work sheds important light on the labor processes in hostess work, it does not explore the client side of these relationships. In other words, we know very little about the emotional *product* that workers produce as they perform these labors.

This dissertation moves away from a focus solely on the labor process of an individual worker within an organization and instead examines the economic structure that emerges as a *result* of worker’s performances of emotional, intimate, sexual and caring labor. In affective economies, the product is not a material *good* that one can buy, sell, and exchange, rather the products are *emotional commodities* that create feelings to help minimize people’s fears, provide them with the space to cope with loneliness or lust, and an outlet for aggression among others. Expanding Aura Wilson’s (2004) use of the concept of *intimate economies* to grasp interactions between economic systems and social life with respect to gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, I argue that the term *affective economies* go beyond the emotional and intimate labor that workers provide, to encompass the organization of work as a whole as well as the clients’ positions, practices, and experiences within these spaces. *Affective labor*, I argue, provides *clients* with the space to assert their masculinity, achieve social dignity, and engage in male rituals of bonding with other men in very public spaces. Furthermore, drawing on the works of Eva Illouz (2007), who expands Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984; 1986) concept of cultural capital to include the idea of *emotional capital*, I argue that sex workers develop an *emotional product* that is specially tailored to the particular relations they seek to develop with their clients.

Detailing complexities of HCMC's global sex industry, I examine how affective economies shapes and reshape varying relations of intimacy, clients' varied senses of self, and workers' patterns of embodiment, including their performances of femininity. The affective economies I describe and analyze provide sex workers with differing pathways of upward mobility. Sex work in the new global order has emerged alongside other kinds of service sector industries that produce patterns of emotion rather than the sort of *product* or commodity, which is produced in the manufacturing sectors and sold between buyers and suppliers as part of a global commodity chain. My research examines dialectical connections between intimacy and the political economy in the emergence of affective economies. I examine how changes in the global economy structure relations of intimacy between clients and sex workers; and how affective economies can be a vital form of currency that shapes economic and political relations. My examination of HCMC's sex industry incorporates three levels of analysis. At a macro-global level, I show how contemporary processes of globalization re-stratify an already stratified sex industry in HCMC, as well as how the industry is a vital player in the generation of business. I begin by asking: *In what ways do larger structural forces, such as histories of colonialism and contemporary processes of globalization, converge to produce a stratified sex industry in HCMC?*

Vietnam's opening to foreign direct investment since Doi Moi in 1986 has created a domestic super-élite, connected to the levers of political power and channeling incoming foreign capital to specific projects in real estate and manufacturing. For this super-élite conspicuous consumption provides both a lexicon of distinction and a means of communicating deference and hospitality to potential investors from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other East Asian countries — and, using a different symbolic vocabulary, to Western investors. A new, *ultra*-high-end tier of sex workers has emerged in tandem with the emergence of this new group of clients. These sex workers only succeed to the extent that they can deploy the right vocabularies of consumption and sexuality in an elaborate symbolic dance tailored to the needs of individual capital deals. They are valued not only for their beauty, but also for their ability to help their clients project masculinity and collegiality in the specific context of entertaining foreign investors. They must also be able to modify this performance for East Asian clients, as well as white clients. As a result, racialized desires, social status, business success, and hope for upward mobility are all played out in the bars of HCMC. The same is true in the middle and lower tiers of the industry, but in radically different ways. Thus, HCMC's sex industry is not just a microcosm of the global economy, but also a vector shaping financial globalization itself.

On a meso-level with respect to social structure and the organization of work inside the bars, I examine how sex workers, male clients, bar owners, mommies, and the police all work to create and maintain certain types of racialized and gendered hierarchies according to the niche in which they are involved. The literature on sex work, and conventional wisdom, suggest that sex workers who share spaces in the bars are competitive and do not get along with each other. Adding empirical nuance, I show how each type of bar that I studied was organized around distinctive moral ethics and codes of conduct. Women workers, bar owners, and mommies collectively managed the equilibrium of exchange and reciprocity. I show how structural relationships in the four niche markets helped generate a wide range of intimate relations, including client-worker, boyfriend-girlfriend, and husband-wife. I found that clients who engaged in business-related entertainment tended to develop short-term client-worker relations with sex workers. However, those who engaged in recreational sex often had longer-term

relations, some of which moved on a trajectory from client-worker to boyfriend-girlfriend, and even to husband-wife.

At a micro-level, I focus on the practices of everyday life in the bars and examine how men and women shaped their relations with each other in part through constructions and performances of masculinity and femininity. I analyze ways in which male clients in each niche constructed particular types of masculinity, drawing on different classed, gendered, or racialized relations to try to establish themselves as dominant men in HCMC's contemporary global economy of sex. Female sex workers, in turn alter their bodies using a wide range of technologies, including plastic surgery, facial tattooing, darkening and lighting facial creams, and dress, in order to cater to the classed and racialized desires of their clients. For example, women who catered to Asian men altered their bodies to look more modern while those who catered to Western men altered their bodies to look like Third-World subjects. Moreover, female sex workers engaged in conscious performances of femininity (West and Zimmerman 1987) that intersected with men's classed and racialized desires. Sex workers consciously and reflexively engage in these performances of racialized and classed femininities as a strategy to experience upward mobility.

Sex work, I argue, provides a unique lens through which to examine not only how transformations in the global economy reshape intimate life but also how emotional intimacy (and not merely sex) that sex workers provide serve as an important currency in transnational business deals. By looking at four niche markets within HCMC's sex industry, I found that local Vietnamese men and their Asian business partners participated in business-related entertainment while Western expatriates, in contrast, participated in HCMC's sex industry for recreational purposes outside of their varied forms of paid work. Finally, I argue that racialized desires, status, business success, and hope for upward mobility are all played out in the bars of HCMC, where dreams and deals are traded. This sex industry is not just a microcosm of the global economy; it also feeds into its growth.

Research Site: Ho Chi Minh City's New Global Economy

In June of 2005, I returned to Vietnam alone for the first time as an adult. As I traveled from Ho Chi Minh City [HCMC] (formerly known as *Saigon*) to Hanoi, I was surprised to see how much the country had changed. Images of young women dressed in white *ao dai*'s riding their bicycles along the streets, etched in my mind from a trip in 1993, were replaced by women dressed in trendy outfits on motorbikes and scooters maneuvering through the chaotic yet organized traffic on the streets. Internet cafes had cropped up in all parts of the country where one could sit and play games, chat, or surf the web for only forty-cents an hour. Overseas remittance money flooded the country with newly built mansions sitting alongside makeshift shacks. While living in Vietnam for those three months, I became aware of an economy bifurcated between those with access to US dollars and those who could only access the local currency. In the fall of 2006, I returned to the United States where I began a year of intense reading and research on sex work around the world. Then after receiving approval from Stanford University's board of human subjects, I returned to Vietnam in the summer of 2006 to conduct seven months of ethnographic research in three distinct phases (summer, winter, summer).

By 2006, Vietnam had formally joined the World Trade Organization, and President George W. Bush had paid an official visit to Vietnam, starting a new phase of bilateral relations. During President Bush's visit, the Vietnamese government effectively shut down hundreds of

bars and cafes, tried to ban alcohol in karaoke bars and police took to the streets to arrest sex workers. All of this was part of an effort to provide an image of Vietnam as a nation in which prostitution is criminalized and family values are promoted. Sex work moved from the streets to indoor venues where women worked as disguised bar tenders or club-patrons in bars and karaoke establishments. At this time, several non-governmental organizations in Vietnam secured funding from the United States federal government to “save” women and children from the tragedy of human trafficking and to promote abstinence and family values. As the police took to the streets, sex work moved to indoor venues disguised as barbershops, cafes, massage parlors, and karaoke establishments.

Although several organizations on the ground were dedicated to saving women and children, few of them knew where to go to find “trafficked women,” that is, women who were forced into the sex trade. As a feminist researcher and scholar, I too wanted to study “trafficked women,” or “victims” of the sex trade. However, when I began my research in 2006, I found that hardly any of the women in my study were “trafficked women.” As far as I could learn, no one appeared to have forced any of the workers I spoke with into prostitution, nor were they pressured by pimps or bar owners to have sex-for-money against their will. Several of the nongovernmental organizations that I visited also failed to find “trafficked women,” so they turned to the streets to try to help women and young girls by teaching them an alternative trade so that they could keep their numbers of “saved women” up and maintain their foreign funding. One organization even created a small business teaching workers how to sew clothing that they exported as “fair trade” products to the United States and Europe. While the issue of forced labor and human trafficking is certainly an important issue that several scholars have critically examined (Brennan 2005; Kempadoo 2005; Limoncelli 2010; Masika 2002; Parrenas 2011; Shelley 2010), this dissertation instead examines the broader structural conditions that shape the range of choices sex workers make in entering the sex industry.

The site of HCMC, Vietnam, is ideal for the study of ways in which local-level masculinities and femininities have reconfigured in response to changes on a global scale. The contemporary sex industry in HCMC, formerly known as Saigon, serves a racially and economically diverse clientele who construct their masculinities in the context of a postcolonial history and the contemporary global economic structure. Remnants of French and American colonialism figure into the contemporary political, social, and economic landscape as the country comes to terms with its war-stricken past while simultaneously trying to establish itself as a player in the global economy (Peiley 2002). As Bill Hayton (2010) points out, Vietnam cannot cheerfully celebrate its defeat of the United States when it requires support and resources from the U.S. to build its economy. The stratification of HCMC’s contemporary sex industry and the relations that men develop with each other on the ground reflect these tensions.

Over the past thirty-five years Vietnam has undergone rapid economic restructuring, attracting the flow of global capital and people from around the world. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Vietnam closed its doors to the rest of the world. However, after a decade of economic stagnation, lagging productivity, and rapid inflation, in 1986, the Vietnamese government introduced a renovation policy called *Doi Moi*. Under this new policy, Vietnam effectively transitioned from a socialist to a market economy and opened its doors to foreign trade and investment. The normalization of ties with the United States in 1995 eased the movement of people, capital, and culture across national borders, profoundly affecting Vietnam’s local economy. *Viet Kieu*’s began to return to Vietnam in large numbers to visit relatives, increasing the flow of remittances to Vietnam (Thai 2008). By 2005, the World Bank (2007) reported that

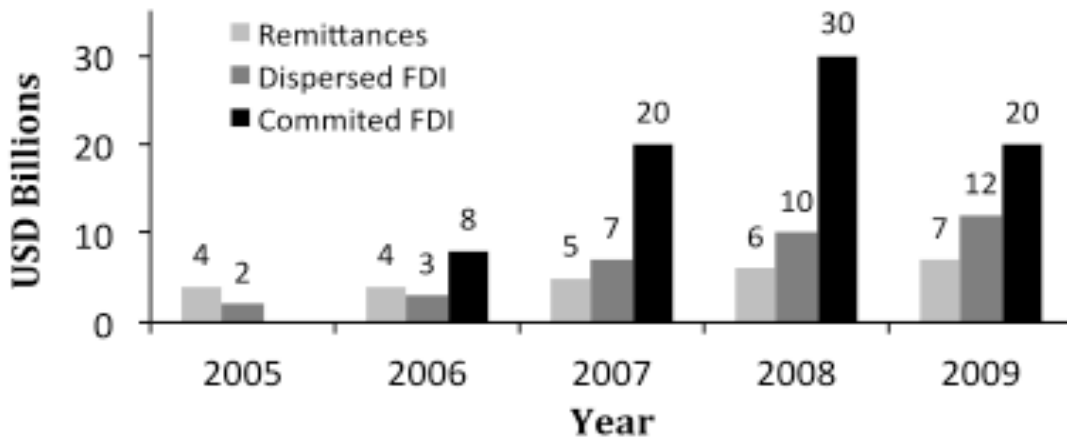
Viet Kieu remittances reached \$4 billion USD, a dramatic increase from the \$35 million USD reported in 1991 (Nhat 1999; Thai 2006) and nearly double the reported \$2 billion USD of foreign direct investment (FDI) brought into the country (The World Bank 2008).

Economic reform rapidly increased in 2006 when Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization, thus attracting new flows of foreign people and capital into the country. FDI dramatically increased each year between 2005 through 2009. The General Statistics Office of Vietnam reported that FDI reached \$4 billion USD in 2006, \$8 billion USD in 2007, \$12 billion in 2008 and 2009 (GSO Vietnam 2009). The dispersed FDI was \$12 billion US in 2008 and 2009 (GSO Vietnam 2009), nearly six times the amount of foreign capital brought into the county in 2005. The figures listed here represent reported capital that has been registered and dispersed. The committed or promised capital is actually much higher. Committed capital was \$8 billion USD in 2006, \$20 billion USD in 2007, \$60 billion USD in 2008, and then it dropped to \$20 billion USD in 2009.²

As a country regionally positioned in Asia, the sources of FDI in Vietnam began to shift as Asian countries like Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia, Japan, and Singapore began to play a major role in structuring Vietnam's contemporary economy. Between 1995 and 2005, Australia, Canada and the United States were the largest providers of FDI in Vietnam (Dodsworth et al. 1996). However, by 2009, Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia, Japan, and Singapore were the five top countries to invest in Vietnam while Vietnam's former colonizers the United States fell to 7th place and France fell to 13th place (Vietnam Economic Times 2010).

These macroeconomic changes have altered the structure of the economy, which, as reflected in my ethnographic data, has affected the hierarchical stratification of Vietnam's sex industry. With the influx of global people and capital, new sectors of the sex industry emerged that catered to foreign men. In 2006, I found that the highest paying clients were overwhelmingly *Viet Kieu* men who were largely engaged in practices of conspicuous consumption while touring or visiting relatives in Vietnam (Hoang Forthcoming 2011). This was not surprising given the fact that *Viet Kieu* remittances were nearly double the reported \$2 billion USD in FDI brought into Vietnam between 2006 and 2007. However, when I returned to Vietnam in 2009, I was surprised to find that the sex industry had changed in response to macroeconomic changes: at that point the highest paying sector of the sex industry catered to very wealthy local Vietnamese and Asian businessmen. See figure 1.0 below for an illustration of the shift in Vietnam's reliance on *remittances* to sources of FDI.

² The figures of dispersed capital reported by The World Bank are a little bit more conservative. They reported dispersed FDI figures of roughly \$2 billion USD in 2005, \$2.5 billion USD in 2006, \$7 billion USD in 2007, and \$10 billion USD in 2008 (The World Bank 2008). They do not have data on 2009, which is why I used the data reported by GSO in the main text. The important thing to note, however, is that both the GSO of Vietnam and The World Bank report significant increases of FDI brought into Vietnam each year after joining WTO.



*Figure 1.0: Amounts dispersed and committed foreign direct investments in Vietnam

As witnessed in Russia (Gerber 2002), China (Gallagher 2005), and other post-Soviet nations (Greider 1997; Hoogvelt 1997), the transition to a capitalist market in Vietnam created a newly moneyed class stratum that went from having no capital during the socialist years to acquiring significant capital through land acquisition in the midst of Vietnam's transition. Vietnam's opening to FDI, since the 1986 implementation of *Doi Moi*, has created a domestic super-elite. Real estate entrepreneurs have amassed significant capital gains by building networks and relationships with state agencies and attracting foreign investors (Kim 2008). The macroeconomic changes that have taken place in Vietnam led to the creation of new segments of the sex industry as an entrepreneurial Vietnamese class emerged that was heavily dependent on the consumption of commercial sex to establish and maintain business ties (Nguyen-Vo 2008). Moreover, while Vietnam's economy has grown nearly eight percent each year since 2006, the rest of the world has been mired in a global economic slowdown. Vietnam is Asia's second fastest growing economy after China (Karmel 2010), and PricewaterhouseCoopers forecasts that Vietnam will become the world's 17th largest economy by 2025 (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2008). These changes in Vietnam's economy have provided the super-elite with political connections and economic ties in Vietnam with the space to reconfigure global racial hierarchies and assert their dominance in relation to Western businessmen and *Viet Kieu* men. HCMC's sex industry, therefore, is not just a microcosm of the global economy, but also a vector that, in turn, shapes financial globalization, as business deals are secured through informal relationships established in bars.

In an attempt to connect the micro-level interactions that I witnessed through ethnography to the larger macroeconomic changes that have taken place in Vietnam, I strategically focus on HCMC, the site with the greatest concentration of foreign people and capital in the country (GSO Vietnam 2009). HCMC has attracted the largest numbers of both investment projects and chartered capital as well as the largest flow of foreign people and foreign capital in Vietnam. As the "Southern Key Economic Zone," HCMC accounts for 35% of Vietnam's gross national product (Pham 2003). Over the past twenty years HCMC has developed a distinctive *sexscape* (Brennan 2004) that caters to both global and local men as businessmen from all over the world who regularly travel in and out of HCMC to conduct business. The diversity of men in this *sexscape* creates the space to systematically examine the construction of differing relations of intimacy and multiple masculine and feminine

subjectivities, connected with varying pathways of upward mobility for women. I argue that racialized desires, status, business success, and hope for upward mobility are all played out in the bars of HCMC, where dreams and deals are traded.

Fieldwork in Ho Chi Minh City's Hostess Clubs and Bars

I conducted twenty-two months of ethnographic research for this project in two main phases: 2006-2007 and 2009-2010. In the first phase, between 2006 and 2007, I conducted seven months of field research on three sectors that catered to *Viet Kieu* men, Western tourists in the backpackers area, and poor local Vietnamese men (Hoang 2010). During this first phase of research, I studied fifty-six sex workers and twenty-six clients in HCMC's sex industry that catered to *Viet-Kieu*, Western backpackers, and poor local Vietnamese men.

In June 2009, I returned to Vietnam to conduct another fifteen months of ethnography. In this second phase, I incorporated two new sectors of clients: wealthy Vietnamese men /Asian businessmen and Western expatriates. I also revisited (Burawoy 2003) the spaces that cater to *Viet Kieu* and Western backpackers to examine how the sex industry had changed over the three years after Vietnam's integration into the World Trade Organization. Between June 2009 and August 2010, with permission from the University of Social Sciences at Vietnam National University, The Southern Institute of Sustainable Development in HCMC, and the Board of Human Subjects at UC Berkeley, I decided to follow and build on Anne Allison's (1994) and Titian Zheng's (2009) methodological approaches by working as a hostess and bartender to better observe relationships among owners, mommies, police, clients and sex workers in the bar. To enable me to gain behind-the-scenes access to a variety of spaces, a professor at the University of Social Sciences in HCMC introduced me to a local police officer who served as a key informant.

Between June 2009 and August 2010 I worked at Lavender, a bar catering to *Viet Kieu* men. I worked from 4 p.m. to 1 a.m., seven days a week, and then spent the mornings writing my field notes. The bar owner, Anh Dong, introduced me to several other bar owners, alcohol distributors, and wealthy local Vietnamese businessmen. He taught me how to mix drinks, serve, and use his bar as a space to network and gain access to future bars. I worked as a free consultant for several wealthy business owners translating their company pamphlets, copy editing their emails, reviewing the language in their business plans, and sitting in on several business meetings. This work helped me establish rapport and trust with wealthy local businessmen who eventually helped me gain access to Khong Sao Bar, the most expensive bar in HCMC. There, I spent two months -- September and October -- working as a hostess from 12 p.m. until 2 a.m. seven days a week. I then spent the months of November, December, and February working in Secrets, a bar that catered to Western expatriates.³

In Khong Sao Bar, the owner of the bar, all of the workers, and all 25 of the clients whom I studied were aware of the fact that I was a researcher. However, as a hostess working in the bar, there were tables that I had to sit in on where the clients did not know that I was a researcher. I did not write field notes about my experiences with those clients, nor do I write about them in

³ I was not paid by the bar owner in any of these bars. However, I earned money through client tips. This amount varied in the different bars anywhere from \$100 USD per month to \$500 USD per month. I made much less than the other women because I refused to leave the bar with a client and I was the least attractive woman working in these spaces.

my research. In all of the other bars that catered to *Viet Kieu* men, Western expatriates and Western backpackers, I was explicit about the fact that I was a researcher.

During the months of June, July, and August, I went back to do fieldwork with the wealthy Vietnamese businessmen with whom I had developed rapport over the past year. I had established close enough relationships with them that I could ask more detailed questions about the kinds of business projects they were working on. I once again consulted for them translating business reports, company profiles, and letters for free in order to build social debt with them which would allow me to gain access to the bars. I also helped them entertain foreign clients and visited several of their construction sites. This allowed me to comprehend the magnitude of diverse projects with which each company was engaged, and it helped me to understand how local Vietnamese businessmen conduct business differently than Asian businessmen (from China, Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Hong Kong) and Western businessmen.

Between June 2009 and May 2010 I became acquainted with hundreds of sex workers and clients across four sectors of HCMC's sex industry. I decided to narrow my project down to 20-25 clients and sex workers in each sector. Each night while at working in the bars as a hostess worker and researcher I focused on two to three people whom I would informally interview based on a set of standardized, but informal, questions. I took notes on my phone and then wrote up everything the next day. I informally interviewed 180 participants and took extensive field notes on each of them over several days. Most of my informal conversations with clients took place inside the bar, over coffee and meals, and in the car on long drives to examine development projects. These interviews were semi-structured, informal, not tape-recorded and lasted anywhere from one to five hours. I spoke a mixture of English and Vietnamese with clients in all sectors. In addition to fieldnotes taken in varied settings, this dissertation is based on informal conversations with 5 bar owners, 8 madams (locally referred to as mommies), 90 clients, and 90 sex workers, who consented to being a part of my study.

The Chapters that Follow

New Economies of Sex in Vietnam examines the contemporary sex industry in Ho Chi Minh City. I argue that sex work provides a unique lens through which to examine how economic transformations reshape intimate life. From a macro-global level perspective, I examine the place of sex work in Vietnam's globalizing economy. On a meso-level with respect to the dynamics of particular institutions and structured domains of social life, I examine how sex workers, male clients, bar owners, mommies and the police all work together in a collegial and collaborative fashion to create a positive and supportive working environment. On a micro-level, attending to the practices of everyday life, I examine how men and women construct various masculinities and femininities in relation to each other, reflecting clients' and workers' desires for a modern world that no longer measures itself against the West, but rather imagines a modern world where Asia defines the global center.

Chapter 2 provides a brief historical overview of Vietnam's sex industry during the pre-modern and colonial periods. I provide evidence that illustrates that the sex industry has and continues to involve much more than just sex. In both the colonial periods and in the contemporary moment there have always been different segments of the sex industry that cater, among other things, to a foreign and a local market. However, hierarchies among the male clients shift with respect to the changing political and economic relations. Second, I argue that female agency is not only a contemporary phenomenon. Sex workers have not always been positioned

as victims of male exploitation. Historically during periods of colonialism, several scholars document the history of coercion and violence against women in sex work (Enloe 1990; Yoshiaki and O'Brien 1995). However, this chapter illustrates how some women actively chose to engage in relations with male clients; records show that some women consciously duped men for money just as contemporary workers do. Third, I argue that the sex industry has always provided some women with much clearer pathways to socioeconomic upward mobility than other forms of work. The last section examines the complexity of social relations caught between boundaries of love and money.

Chapter 3 turns to HCMC's contemporary global sex industry. Drawing on my field research between 2006-2007 and 2009-2010, I examine the changing spaces and contours of sex work in light of shifting flows of capital from *Viet Kieu* remittances to FDI (foreign direct investments). Describing the four sectors of sex work. I discuss where they were located and how new ones emerged in response to changes in the global economy within the past 4 years; how many men and women I met in each sector; and the ages and racial-ethnic, composition of men and women in each sector. I then discuss the structure of the bars and the varied kinds of relationships that emerges. I link this chapter back to the introduction to paint a picture of how Vietnam's changing position in the global economy has led to shifting changes with respect to sexual space and place. I also discuss the emergence of a whole new sector that catering to white expats as well as a much more visible sector of local male clients who engaged in displays of conspicuous consumption in efforts to change people's perceptions about Vietnam in the larger global imaginary.

Chapter 4 examines the social structure of work in the bars and the moral and ethical codes that guided interactions among owners, mommies, workers, and clients. Few of the women in my study felt forced into sex work, nor are they victims of sex trafficking. Rather, I illustrate how women establish positive working relations with each other as a strategy to maintain order and balance within the bars. Moreover, I assert that the different moral codes that guide client worker interactions lead to different relationships of emotional intimacy.

Chapter 5 engages with theories of masculinity to demonstrate how the sex industry in particular provides a space to examine how local and global men capitalize on Vietnam's changing position in the global economy to assert themselves as dominant men in relation to each other and to the workers in the bar. This chapter pushes theories of masculinities forward by pushing critically thinking about *shifting masculinities* as they are linked to the global economic context at the intersection of race, nation, gender and class. In focusing on male patrons of these bars, this chapter provides a much more nuanced analysis behind the "othered" anonymous image of the John in the popular media on studies on sex work by analyzing a racially and economically diverse set of clients from around the world. This chapter also examines the shifting hierarchies in the client's global imaginary as wealthy local Vietnamese men and Asian businessmen command the highest paying sector of HCMC's sex industry, thereby asserting their superiority in relation to Western men.

Chapter 6 examines sex worker's bodies and changing patterns of embodiment. I argue that women who successfully cater to wealthy local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men must construct themselves as modern subjects through the self-disciplining of their bodies and plastic surgery. Notions of "modern" emerge as women compare themselves with Korean and Japanese women in the same sort of social and work stratum. However, the workers in these two high-paying sectors must also simultaneously engage in particularized performances of femininity through deference and submission. Workers who cater to Western

expatriates and backpackers, on the other hand must be pressed to construct themselves as Third-World subjects in order to cater to their client's desires. These workers, however, also feel pressed to engage in performances of "agency" as they work with the men to "escape" poverty.

Chapter 7 examines the different pathways of mobility for sex workers. Nearly two thirds of the women in my project had left factory work after realizing that the "manufacturing" sector offered them no pathway towards upward mobility. However, women in the different sectors of sex work carved out different pathways of mobility. I analyze the ways in which mommies moved into these higher-paid positions from sex work, and I show how workers who catered to local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men experienced rapid upward and downward socioeconomic mobility, while those who catered to Western expatriates and budget travelers experience steady upward mobility

I conclude by discussing how Vietnam's state of transition figures into the multiple ways which both global and local actors involved in HCMC's sex industry create new imaginaries relating to modernity and progress. The changing political economy maps onto the ways which local men construct their masculinities and women alter their bodies and performances of femininity. New affective economies provide sex workers with varying pathways of mobility that vary with respect to their structural positions in HCMC's hierarchal sex industry.

Chapter 2 Between Love and Money: Histories and Hierarchies of Prostitution in Colonial Vietnam

Introduction

The literature on prostitution in Vietnam begins in the pre-modern period with *The Tale of Kieu* an epic poem written by Nguyen Du in the early 1800s. The poem tells a story of Kieu, a beautiful, chaste, and virtuous daughter born into a well-educated family, who sells herself into prostitution in order to save her father and brothers from debtors' prison. This text portrays prostitution as a courtesan-based system modeled after that in China where highly skilled women traded more than just sex. Kieu sold her ability to allure men with musical talents and affect. During the pre-modern period very little is known about the segmentation of prostitution that later emerged in the colonial period.

This chapter briefly examines the structure of prostitution during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century through *The Tale of Kieu* and then brings together secondary sources to provide an imaginative reconstruction of prostitution during colonial Vietnam.⁴ The scholarship on prostitution during the colonial period focuses mostly on different Vietnamese and French representations of women as prostitutes (Bradley 2001; Marr 1980; Tai 1992), but not on prostitution itself. French Historian Alain Corbin notes that, "The prostitute, in brief, did not write about herself" (Corbin 1991). There were no letters, journals, or manuscripts written by prostitutes that might provide insight into their world (Malarney 2011). As historian Haydon Cherry (2011) argues, this is because prostitutes, like others who comprised the urban poor in Saigon have left so few traces in the colonial archives. What is known about prostitution comes mainly through laws, orders, and decrees, framing these women as the objects of regulation and control (Cherry 2011; Marcondes and Edmonds 1967). In 1932, the League of Nations published a report on the trafficking of women and children in the Far East, stating that there were more than 200 prostitutes in Saigon (League of Nations 1932). However, these figures are much too low because they ignore the large number of women engaged in clandestine prostitution rings dominated by the sex trade.

Rather than providing a historical overview that traces the changing contexts of prostitution during the French and American colonial periods, this chapter points to the continuities in historical texts on the colonial past that intersect with some of the major themes in my ethnography of the contemporary sex industry. I turn to these texts in an attempt to examine change as well as continuity in prostitution from Chinese imperialism to French and American colonialism. These texts highlight the fact that prostitution and/or sex work is not a bounded transaction between two people. Rather, this chapter illustrates how the global flows of people and capital into Vietnam, shaped by relationships with different colonial and imperial powers, have facilitated relations among local prostitutes /sex workers. I examine four themes that emerge in both the French and American colonial periods through the present. First, I examine

⁴ I refer to women selling sex-for-money as prostitutes in colonial Vietnam because that is how historians write about them. However, when writing about contemporary women in the contemporary, I refer to them as sex workers in order to highlight the fact that the women who I study are not forced into prostitution and that they have varying degrees of agency in choosing to enter the sex industry. (For debates on the terminology of prostitution versus sex work see Bernstein, Elizabeth. 1999. "What's Wrong with Prostitution? What's Right with Sex Work? Comparing Markets in Female Sexual Labor." *Hastings Women's Law Journal* 10:91-117.)

hierarchies or segmentation within the sex industry in both local and foreign markets. Second, I turn to these texts to highlight the tension and variation between force and choice that prostitutes, even during the colonial period, exercised in relation to their clients thereby challenging the idea that all women were solely victims of male sexual exploitation. Linked to this idea that women were not always victims, I illustrate how women engage in a variety of *affective labors* feigning love and care, in order to manipulate their clients for money in order to provide a more nuanced analysis to the complexity and variation in relations between male clients and female sex workers. Third, I examine how commercial sex has provided some women with pathways towards socioeconomic upward mobility unavailable to men during those times. Lastly, I argue that these affective labors are not always bounded by direct sex-for-money exchanges. Relations of intimacy between clients and prostitutes may involve porous boundaries, and in some cases lead to enduring relationships, including marriage and even having children. Marriage, itself however, during French colonialism was not a sacred institution relegated to the realm of private life; it was a part of an affective economy or an industry where workers married multiple men as a strategy to make money. The complexity of these relationships around love and commerce sheds light on the fact that prostitution / sex work has always involved a complex set of economic and intimate intertwinements.

This broad overview of the past contextualizes the ways in which the flow of people and capital through Vietnam's colonial relations structures the sex industry. Women have long served as key figures facilitating the flow of foreign capital into the country through trade, by assisting local men in the development of relations with foreigners (Andaya 1998). Moreover, I argue that Vietnam's place in the larger global economy under colonialism shapes the structure of the sex industry and affects the dynamic relationships between client and sex workers. Affective economies helped colonial men establish relations that tied them to the colony as women directly and indirectly facilitated the flow of foreign money into the nation. Indeed, during the French colonial period there was a whole industry of women who made careers out of marrying multiple European men, which offers a powerful challenge to the assumption of women as inevitable victims of colonial men (Phung 1934:2006). Local women engaged in relations with French and American men that sometimes evolved from client-worker relations to boyfriend-girlfriend relations, and then sometimes to marriage and children (Phung 1937:2011). The flow of people into the country at different points in time fundamentally altered the structure of sex work, as well as the dynamic intimate relations between men and women. In analyzing Vietnam's sex industry, I argue that local classed and racialized hierarchies' shift with respect to Vietnam's place in the global order and its relations with other nations, and the rapidly changing political economy.

Prostitution in Pre-modern Vietnam

China ruled Vietnam from 111 BCE to 939 CE and after the Vietnamese gained independence in 939 they continued to adopt Chinese political institutions and social values while creating their own distinct cultural world. Weaving foreign and national elements *The Tale of Kieu* written by Nguyen Du in the early nineteenth century was based on a Chinese novel entitled *The Story of Kim-Van Kieu*, written by an author under the pen name of Thanh-Tam Tai-Nhan in the sixteenth or early-seventeenth century. Nguyen Du provides some insight on the structure of prostitution modeled after the Chinese courtesan culture and the arts. This poem highlights one system of prostitution that resembles higher-end sex work in the contemporary

moment where women provided men with more than sex. In the pre-colonial period prostitutes engaged in a stylized type of singing known as *a dao* where they had to master complex texts and poems written in Sino-Vietnamese. These women were famous for their performances in front of highly educated and high status Vietnamese men. Prostitutes in this courtesan based system served leading men who were merchants from well-bred families. These highly skilled women attracted clients through their artistic talents. For example Nguyen Du described Kieu as a woman:

By Heaven blessed with wit, she knew all skills:
she could write verse and paint, could sing and chant.
Of music she had mastered all five tones
and played the lute far better than Ai Chang (Nguyen 1983:3)

Female entertainers in the late 1700's performed multiple roles alluring men with their grace, artistic talents, and sexual prowess. In addition, highly skilled courtesans cultivated the art of flirtation and feigned love, performing affective labors for their clients. For example, in a conversation that Kieu, the main protagonist, has with Madame Tu, the Madame lectures Kieu saying:

“The trade of love, my girl, takes care and pains,
and we who ply it must know all its tricks.”
“Men are all alike:
they'll get their money's worth or won't come here.
There are more things to love than meet the eye
and ways to cope with men by day or dark.
Know these men by heart— learn seven ploys to catch
and hold a man, eight ways to please in bed.
Play with them until you've played them out,
till heads must swim, till hearts of stone must spin.
Now flirt with eyebrows, now coquet with lips.
Now sing the moon, now sport among the flowers.
There you have it, our house's stock in trade:
Learn it and be a mistress of our craft!”
(Nguyen 1983:67)

In this excerpt from the poem, the Madame teaches Kieu about the craft of prostitution and learning the art of affective labor. When Madame Tu suggests to Kieu that “there are more things to love than meet the eye,” she reminds her that physical beauty and sexual attractiveness are only part of the trade, but prostitution involves much more than sex, including the ability to control men's hearts, feelings, and emotions. Women must learn to make men fall in love with them and be so intoxicating that men lose their ability to think clearly and rationally. While contemporary scholars tend not to see beyond women as victims of their circumstances, this excerpt points to the complexity of these relationships between men and women. By engaging in affective labors and performing care, love, and attraction, women could ideally control men's emotions and ability to think rationally. Part of the art of a courtesan involves emotional control not only of her own emotions but also those of men.

The ability to control men enables Kieu to make men not only fall in love with her in the space of the brothel, but to want to build a life with her outside the brothel. In this way, highly skilled courtesans also possess the ability to carefully blur private and public boundaries. In the poem, a young man named Ky Tham Thuc, who comes from a well-to-do merchant family, falls in love with Kieu and wants to have a relationship with her that is not confined to the space of private pleasures. For example Thuc says to Kieu:

“Since we have known each other...
my heart has nursed for you a steadfast love.
But if we plan to live as lifelong mates
I must retrace the stream to its own source.”

....

He paid the ransom into her own hands
and notified the law of Kieu’s release.
Once he had settled with both laws and men,
she soon escaped the circle of their woes.

As lovers joined their lives beneath one roof,
their love grew deep, deeper than the sea.
Like fire and incense, mutual passion burned—
her jade-and-lotus beauty gleamed and glowed.
For half a year they lived as intimates.
Now, in the courtyard, planes mixed with gold and jade.
(Nguyen 1983: 71).

Blurring the boundaries between private and public desires, Thuc pays to take Kieu out of the brothel and brings her into his home where they lived as intimate lovers. These porous boundaries between love and money illustrate the idea that prostitution even in the pre-modern period did not always revolve around a bounded transaction. Rather, prostitution, as in contemporary times, may have involved a complex set of intimate and economic exchanges. Although, *The Tale of Kieu* is a fictional poem, it provides insight to Nguyen Du’s imaginations of prostitution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This poem alludes to the structure of prostitution during those times as being heavily influenced by Chinese imperialism. When men and women engage in complicated relations with one another in ways that blur the boundaries between sex-for-pay and sex-for-love, they complicate assumptions that prostitution was exclusively a bounded transaction. While the literary text provides an image of what prostitution might have looked like in the pre-modern period it does not, however, lend itself to an analysis of the kind of segmentation that emerges in the modern period. But as this entertainment craft moves into the French and American colonial periods one can begin to distinguish between women who worked for higher or lower paying clients. The rest of this chapter examines the structure of Vietnam’s sex industry during French and American colonialism, highlighting the key dynamics that lend themselves to continuity, rupture, and change.

Sex in the Changing Political and Economic Context of Colonial Vietnam

French Colonialism

The commercial sex industry in Southeast Asia dates back to the early modern period of the sixteenth century. In her research on gendered relations in Southeast Asia, Barbara Andaya (1998) argues that by the sixteenth century there was a rise in the number of single males from Europe in the port cities of Southeast Asia who relied heavily on prostitutes and temporary wives to welcome them as traders into the community. Women developed relations with foreign traders to bring wealth and prestige commodities into the region (Andaya 1998).

Vietnam first encountered the French in the seventeenth century through missionaries like Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes. Until the mid-nineteenth century, religious interests dominated French relations with Southeast Asia. However, when the British gained Hong Kong in 1842, French desire to establish a trading base in Southeast Asia were renewed (Cooper 2001). In 1867, France invaded and developed a French colony in Cochinchina (the South). Then in 1883, France invaded and seized (the north) and Annam (the Center) making these regions part of a French protectorates. A decade later, in 1887, France created the *Union indochinoise*, which consolidated the territory by bringing together Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin, Cambodia and later Laos.

The sex industry grew rapidly during the French colonial period as prostitution expanded alongside the intense French colonization creating new segments which served colonial men. While Vietnam was predominantly rural before French colonialism, the development of large urban centers where administrative power, trade, and finances of the colony were concentrated caused an upheaval in the economic structures of the country that favored the development of prostitution (Guenel 1997). Saigon-Cholon, later renamed Ho Chi Minh City, was the city most affected during this era of the *belle colonie*. It was known as the “pearl of the Far East,” with its population rapidly increasing from 13,000 in 1883 to 250,000 in 1932, and became a symbol of Western influence (Guenel 1997: 149). In the early period of colonization, unmarried soldiers from France dominated the European population of Saigon. This created an imbalanced ratio of seven men for every one woman in the European community. The imbalanced ratio of men to women as well as the permanent stationing of French military troops in Saigon led to a growth in prostitution (Rodriguez 2008). In fact, by the 1930s, “Saigon was the main urban center and one of the multiple links in the chain of human migration, closely connected to the world of prostitution” (Rodriguez 2008).

In cities like Saigon, colonial men and colonized women interacted intimately with each other (Proschan 2002). Although, prostitution was legal in French Indochina throughout the colonial period, it was regulated; for example, French colonialists required prostitutes to register themselves in local municipalities. The primary rationale for regulation was to protect colonial men from sexually transmitted diseases (Stoler 1991; Stoler 1992). However, regulation was unsuccessful because clandestine prostitution rings dominated the sex trade (Rodriguez 2008). These organizations often operated from brothels that were disguised as cafes, opium houses, and in drinking establishments, all of which made the sex industry difficult to regulate (Rodriguez 2008).

By the 1930s, Saigon was not the only major city inhabited by the French. Hanoi, which had been under French colonial control for over fifty years, also had a vast commercial sex industry. As in Saigon, prostitution was legal and regulated. On December 21, 1888, the Hanoi

Municipal Council officially passed legislation to regulate prostitution, which included a dispensary to examine the bodies of prostitutes for venereal diseases. This makeshift structure, as described by Vu Trong Phung a local journalist at the time, was made of thatch and bamboo. Records from the city's Bureau of Hygiene indicate that in most years Hanoi had approximately twenty licensed brothels, or "red-numbered" houses (Coppin 1930). Phung (1937:2011) quotes Mayor Edouard Henri Virgitti, at the beginning of *Luc Xi*, who estimates that by 1936 there were roughly 5000 women working as prostitutes, of whom only 600 were registered.⁵ The movement of people and capital into the country during French colonialism expanded the market thereby catering to foreign and local men. However, most of the texts that examine prostitution during the colonial period focus on the regulation and control of women who officials feared would spread syphilis. These accounts do not provide a portrait of the social lives of women working in the sex trade.

Following nearly 100 years of colonialism, relations between local women and French colonial men began to decrease in the country as a whole and in Hanoi altogether after the French were defeated in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu and were forced to withdraw from Vietnam. This defeat culminated in the country's division along the seventeenth parallel between North Vietnam led by the Viet Minh and South Vietnam led by Ngo Dinh Diem. Following the withdrawal of French military and economic aid, the United States moved from providing political advisors to also supplying the South with hundreds of thousands of troops to fight the Viet Cong. The gradual replacement of United States support following French colonialism fundamentally altered the structure of the commercial sex industry in the whole region of Southeast Asia.

American Colonialism

During the Vietnam War, the Viet Minh worked to abolish all forms of prostitution in the North because they sought to equalize men and women in order to incorporate women into the military as soldiers fighting for national liberation. Women from Hanoi and the countryside fought alongside their male counterparts in the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese military against the South Vietnamese government and their French and American allies between 1945 and 1975 (Taylor 1999). The national liberation movement held to a strict code of ethics that prohibited rape and prostitution of local women. Therefore, prostitution was virtually non-existent in Hanoi.

However, the political economy of South Vietnam changed as a result of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Between 1962 and 1975, Vietnam was by far the largest recipient of US aid. The war as a whole cost the United States \$168 billion, which was more than all economic aid from all sources to all developing countries combined during those years (Wood 1986). This flow of US capital into Vietnam triggered a massive growth in prostitution not only in South Vietnam but also in other parts of Southeast Asia, as entire outlets for rest and recreation [R & R] were established to entertain soldiers from abroad. Moreover, forced urbanization, bombings, and defoliation eventually swelled Saigon's population to four million, with the U.S. Senate Sub-Committee on Refugees estimating that more than ten million Vietnamese fled their villages between 1965 and 1973 (Bergman 1974). The American destruction of rural plantations established by the French led to the movement of people from

⁵ *Luc Xi* is one of Vu Trong Phung's non-fiction works that illuminates the culture of prostitution in Hanoi during the colonial period.

rural to urban spaces (Fitzgerald 1972). As a result, the commercial sex industry grew rapidly in the urban centers of Saigon.

While French colonialists worked to legalize and regulate prostitution, the official policy of the United States Department of Defense during the Vietnam War was to suppress prostitution wherever possible. However, the US military relied on prostitution as a tactic to ease American soldiers into the country and help them adjust (Enloe 1990). Thus, during the 1960s there was a general relaxation of American societal mores governing sexuality (Sun 2004). By 1966, Saigon contained over one thousand bars, over one hundred nightclubs, and at least thirty cabarets (Sun 2004: 131). As the United States increasingly poured military men into Vietnam during the war, there was an increase in the demand for prostitution. In 1967, five hundred thousand American and South Vietnamese troops were in Vietnam and an estimated several hundred thousand women passed through the sex industry (Dunn 1994). At the height of the war, there were an estimated 300,000-500,000 prostitutes in Vietnam with over 200 agencies that recruited women into prostitution and 20,000 bars, hotels, and brothels offering sex for sale (Barry 1979). The Vietnam War further triggered an explosion of sex industries in other Asian countries like Thailand, Korea, and the Philippines which were rest and recreation sites for military men (Enloe 1990; Lee 2010). Rest and recreation sites were set up to help boost the morale of American soldiers during the war (Lee 1991).

The sex industry during the Vietnam War was not a monolithic, catering only to foreign men. The U.S. military fought alongside the South Vietnamese Republican forces against the northern Vietnamese communist force. Although the National Liberation forces of Ho Chi Minh had a strong interest in controlling and prohibiting prostitution because Vietnamese women in the North were fighting as equals among the men, under the U.S. and Republican forces in the South, men on both sides of the war engaged in the sexual relations with prostitutes working in the South. The next section of this chapter examines the stratification of the sex industry during the French and American colonial periods.

Hierarchies in Vietnam's Sex Industry

The writings on prostitution by both French and Vietnamese writers during the French colonial time investigate mostly relations between French authorities and local Vietnamese women. According to Isabelle Tracol-Huynh (2010) there is little documentary evidence on relations between prostitutes and local Vietnamese men in the French archives of the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, or in the Vietnamese National Archives Centres 1 and 2. The writings that do exist seem to hint at the fact that French colonial men were generally the highest paying clients. However, it was not uncommon to see colonial men with women in a range of spaces from expensive hotels to cheaper brothels. This is because French colonists came from a variety of different class backgrounds. Local accounts distinguish between minor civil servants and business people from France as distinct from male administrators and servicemen who were part of the French army and were living in Vietnam. For example, during French colonialism glorified brothels slowly replaced *A Dao* houses present during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century that once catered to the Vietnamese elite where the women lacked artistic talents and skills. In fact, the brothel's clientele had changed significantly with the move away from being the exclusive domain of the literate Vietnamese elite to becoming "democratized" for clerical workers, men engaged in commerce, and European clients (Virgitti and Joyeux 1938). Thus, while French colonial men occupied the highest paying sectors of

Saigon's sex industry, the men also came from different class backgrounds leading them into both higher and lower paying spaces.

Accounts of prostitution can be found in the reports of Vu Trong Phung, a journalist and novelist who had access to and wrote about the dispensary in a book titled *Luc Xi* first published in 1937. Phung was concerned with the changing social and economic conditions that underlay the growth of prostitution that catered to local Vietnamese men during the colonial period. However, he was also sympathetic to the plight of prostitutes, arguing that, "poverty brought many women into prostitution and that compulsion forced them into a life of suffering and multiple indignities" (Malarney 2011:12).

Vu Trong Phung's novels and journalistic accounts point to multiple dimensions in prostitution at the time. While *Luc Xi* (Phung 1937:2011), takes a look into a dispensary regulated by French colonialists, *Lam Di* (Phung 1936) is a work of social-realist fiction set in Hanoi in the late 1930s that highlights the plight of a woman named Huyen, a daughter of an elite family, who catered to local Vietnamese men. These two texts highlight the hierarchical structure of prostitution during the colonial period as Phung wrote about social relations between prostitutes like Huyen who came from elite families and those who came from impoverished families catering to poor local Vietnamese men. Roger Charbonnier (1936) commented on the variation of fees according to the type of client. Prostitutes charged a "coolie" 10-20 sous (1-2 hao), a soldier or laborer 25-30 sous (2.5-3 hao), a Vietnamese non commissioned officer or European soldier 50 sous (5 hao), and a European 2-3 piasters (20-30 hao) (Charbonnier 1936). At that time, a copy of a local Vietnamese newspaper cost 3 sous while a high-quality satin top cost 20 piasters (200 hao). The range of men women prostitutes serviced led to racialized and social class. European men paid more than Vietnamese men, while "coolie" men and laborers paid less than highly-ranked officers.

Phung also accounts for the geographical structure of prostitution in this context by detailing hierarchies that emerged in different spaces. Prostitutes who operated in a low-end local Vietnamese market provided low-cost services to men in thatched huts., with the price in those spaces based on the types of clients (Charbonnier 1936). Wealthier clients could afford to have relations with prostitutes in nicer hotels. However, women operated in a range of markets that catered to foreign and local men who had varying access to money and foreign commodities coveted in Vietnam. While the sex industry was certainly racialized with respect to the hierarchical structure of prostitution (with French men commanding the highest paying sectors of the sex industry in Vietnam compared to local Vietnamese men) the *spaces of* prostitution also contributed to social class divisions. Contrary to popular belief, Phung notes that there were upper- or middle-class women married to Vietnamese men with small salaries, who worked periodically to pay off gambling debts or purchase prestige objects (Malarney 2011). In this way the *type of client* and the *space* where men and women engaged in different sexual and relational exchanges with one another determined class stratification within the sex industry. There were similar patterns in the American colonial period.

American Colonialism

During the Vietnam War, American men commanded the highest paying sectors of the sex industry, maintaining the racialized hierarchies established by the French. However, the literature points to the stratification of prostitution with respect to the *type of woman* in addition to the *space* where men and women engaged in sexual relations with one another and the

status of American GIs or civil servants. The flow of US dollars and foreign capital into the country opened up new markets catering to military men.

The streets in downtown Saigon and those near U.S. housing compounds and military bases were thickly lined with bars that catered almost exclusively to American males (Jamieson 1995). In fact, military bases began to welcome prostitutes onto United States bases as “local national guests.” Susan Brownmiller (1975) writes that:

By 1966 the 1st Cavalry Division at An Khe in the Central Highlands...twenty-five miles north of Saigon... established official military brothels within the perimeter of their base camp [and] refugees who had lost their homes and families during the war and veterans of the earlier Saigon bar trade formed the stock of the brothel. Inside the [military] compound were shops that sold hot dogs, hamburgers and souvenirs, but the main attraction was two concrete barracks, each about one hundred feet long- the military whorehouses that serviced the four-thousand-man brigade. Each building was outfitted with two bars, a bandstand, and sixty curtained cubicles [where] the Vietnamese women lived and worked. The sexual service was ‘quick, straight and routine,’ and the GI clients paid the women 500 piasters (\$2US) for each turn [Pg 94].

The combination of new military bases as well as the Vietnamese refugees fleeing their villages in the midst of the war created new spaces for a burgeoning sex industry. Sex went for 500 piasters (\$2US) at the start of the conflict (Brownmiller 1975), but was only 75 cents an encounter near the end of the war as more women occupied the sex industry, thereby lowering the cost (Bergman 1974). As more women entered into the commercial sex industry, the cost of sex ranged from cheap two-dollar sex to higher-end services provided by women working in brothels or bars operated by madams. Vietnamese women, “racially different from their invaders, first the French colonists, then the United States forces, satisfied the racist curiosities of customers who were pursuing racially different female bodies,” while simultaneously helping men transition into life in Vietnam (Barry 1995:131).

In her memoir, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, Le Ly Hayslip (1990) describes three different sectors of prostitution during the Vietnam War. The status of women, their relations to different officials, and the space of sex work determined the hierarchical structure of the sex industry. The lowest paid women were widows or rape victims; women in the middle were controlled by a madam or worked in brothels; and the highest paid women were those who worked in brothels that were controlled by the police. Female prostitutes serviced both colonial men and local Vietnamese men from the North and the South (Huong, Duong, and McPherson 1995; Ninh 1991). Hayslip (1990) writes:

The regular prostitutes, by comparison, had a much better life. The cheapest whorehouses, those located near the military installations, were often no more than shacks whose owners rented a room (or even single beds that were lined up like those in a hospital— only a curtain shielding them from the bed next door) to girls who plied their trade with resident servicemen. Many of these girls were widowed by the war or were rape victims who despaired of a proper marriage [224].

Prostitution during that time cut across different economic sectors. These hierarchies change with respect to the changing flows of capital into Vietnam as well as Vietnam's relation to Western countries and its position in the global economy. Women played a crucial role facilitating the flow of capital into the country and helping foreign men establish ties in local spaces. The next section of this chapter sheds light on female prostitutes as savvy, agentic women.

Women as Performers of Affective Labor

Scholars who write about prostitution in times of imperialism, colonialism, and war have written extensively about women as victims of male violence and sexual exploitation. Prostitutes, they argue are victims of circumstance where economic poverty pushes them to sell their bodies. This is evident in *The Tale of Kieu* as the author depicts the tragedy of a woman born into a well-respected family who must sell herself in order to settle the debts of her father and brother.

French colonialists actively constructed images of local Vietnamese prostitutes as fragile, child-like, and asexual (Tagliacozzo 2008; Tracol-Huynh 2010). Postcards sent from French colonialists in Vietnam to those in France conveyed an image of colonial men sharing women among themselves, with rules that governed sexual morality relaxed in the colony. French historians have analyzed the depiction of local prostitutes using the term *congai*, which in Vietnamese means "young woman, girl, or female child," but its semantics in the French discourse shifted over time from "woman" to "wife" to "mistress" to "whore" (Proschan 2002). As Frank Proschan (2002) argues, this term highlights how "the prostitute," for the French colonials, was an all-encompassing category that included all Vietnamese women. Within the French colonial imaginary, the image of the *congai* led to the creation of male desires and fantasies of relations with women in the colony.

While I do not wish to suggest that violence against women was not prevalent, I suggest that the literature pays little attention to varied ways in which women who sold sex may also have been agents in their relations with men. This section highlights the importance of understanding women's varying subject positions in varied relations that they had with colonizers, as they sometimes duped and tricked men for money.

In *Luc Xi*, Phung (1937:2011) tells his readers:

Honest women should pay attention to impure women. Dear Sirs, look and see!
Over there, a group of women most of whom are nicely plump, yet their complexions are pale and sallow, the coarse garments of the Dispensary make them look disgusting, and the body of each is full of either the gono, the spiro, or the Ducrey germ. But here what is important to understand they are plump as if they are normal! (81).

In this passage Phung warns that the prostitutes in the Dispensary do not look that different from honest women outside of the sex industry. They do not look impoverished or like victims of poverty. Instead these women look plump and normal. In fact he goes on to say that all of the women have faces "without a trace of worry, full of life, without a care" (81). While Phung describes the women as victims of economic circumstance, he also highlights their embodied agency and their ability to lead "normal" lives similar to women who are not engaged in prostitution, in effect to "pass" as non-prostitutes and thus to fool men.

In *The Industry of Marrying Europeans* Vu Trong Phung (1934:2006) describes how women engaged in affective labors in order to manipulate multiple men for money. Phung asked two *dames* and Madame about their unions with European men and if any of them married for love. Both *dames* immediately replied, “No? Why wouldn’t it be for money? Just think about it: how would it be possible for us to marry them for love? Furthermore, to them it is certainly not for love! We are simply their long-term toy dolls” (Phung 1934:2005, 46). While this conversation highlights the motivations for women to engage in relations with Western men, it also alludes to women’s affective labor, that is, their feigning of love and care. In this business, marriage is not a sacred institution. It is a job, as Madame Corporal explains: “to [the dame], getting married or getting divorced is just like owning dishes: if one breaks it, so be it” (Phung 1934:2005, 47). In this business, women worked to gain sympathy from European men; they pretended to cry and complain about their harsh lives so that men would feel sorry for them and send them money. One dame pulled out a stack of letters and pictures from a Japanese tin, explaining to Phung the “tricks” she used to allure her three husbands. Pointing to a photo of a legionnaire, the dame Thi said to Phung:

This is my second husband... and this picture here, is the third.... This handsome fellow here, on the other hand, was very clever and cunning. But he couldn’t outdo me, I am not stupid, you know. Actually being literate does have an advantage. I just hit the emotional side on, they they’d all fall for it. If only I had finished elementary school, I could easily have gotten a few more traps. [Phung 1934:2005, 49]

The *dames* in this book play on emotions to get men to sympathize with them and to trick them into sending them more money. By turning the *emotional side on* these women attempt to control men’s emotions and feelings so that they can get more money out of them. Moreover, this passage illustrates how women try to be *more* clever and cunning than men, constantly staying one step ahead, in order to not be emotionally outdone. In this same scene, dame Thi pulls out a bunch of letters that she has sent to the men and the different letters that men have sent her, as proof of her ability to trick them into sending her money. Thi showed Phung letters that she sent, including this one addressed to an older European man:

I am dying of hunger, but I am not thinking about getting married to another man. Everyone else is dangerous. I am not just anyone. No one is as honest as you, my dear old man. Jeanette will not have a daddy, but I don’t give a damn right? Please send me money from time to time and your daughter will be happy [Phung 1934:2005, 50].

In order to prove, to Phung that she was capable of making multiple men empathize with her and send her money, Thi also showed Phung letters that men sent her. One of the letters from an old husband read:

You are the dearest person to me. I am in pain for leaving you because of my illness. Jeanette looks very pretty in this picture. I like it very much. I am very sad to be apart from her. I have been drinking a lot these days because I am terribly depressed. Please try to write often. I have enclosed a check for one hundred

francs. A hundred kisses for my daughter, and a thousand kisses for you [Phung 1934:2005, 49].

The French husband felt emotionally connected to Thi and turned to her even from afar for comfort, care, and solace in his depression. He sent her money to look after their daughter and to maintain ties with her. After showing Phung the letters, dame Thi said to him, “So you see how scheming we are. Please don’t ever be mistaken that we marry them for love” (Phung 1934:2005, 50). She used evidence to back up her assertion about actively “ticking men.”

Women’s relations with French colonial men involved complex relations that did not just revolve around emotional manipulation. Scholars often highlight the physical violence to which colonial men subject local women to in their relationships. While violence against women is certainly true, these scholars overlook the multiple ways that women may react and stand up to men in instances of physical violence. For example, in a scene where Ai and Tich, two dames, ask Madame Sergeant about men’s violence, Madame Sergeant responds to them saying:

Hey who told you to mess around with the lioness? What are you afraid of? Unless they catch you sleeping with someone else. What’s right is right. If you are right and they are wrong, then scream at them; if they curse at you, then curse back. Do you know what kind of old girl I am? One time, somebody hit me; I slapped him back three times. Once, someone raised a knife to me, and I pulled up my brassiere. None of them would dare mess with me, you know.... You have to be smart... If you ever catch them in the act [with another woman], you don’t need to wait for any explanations, just pull on their hair and bite and slap them. [Phung 1934:2005, 53].

Women thus fought back when necessary, stood up for themselves when they could, and taught each other how to do the same. By slapping men or acting like they are not afraid when men threatened them they were able to take charge as active agents in some moments, while stepping down in others. The emotional and physical struggles between men and women point to friction and slippages where men are not always control of their relations.

Scholars also write about how women have been subject to extreme violence and rape (Enloe 2004), their bodies used to pacify military men’s sexual desires in times of war (Cho 2007; Enloe 1990). Susan Brownmiller (1975), Le Ly Hayslip (1990), and Kathleen Barry (1995) focus on the process of racial othering that military men engage in through sexual violence. During the Vietnam War, women were raped by men on both sides of the war as a means of psychological warfare to humiliate the enemy. In fact, during the Vietnam War, this seemed to be part of a standard operating procedure (Stuhldreher 1994). Raping a Vietnamese woman enabled young American men to assert their superiority, potency, manhood, and by extension ,their country’s masculine hegemony (Lawson 1991). As Le Ly Hayslip (1990) notes in her memoir, women who were raped often had to resort to prostitution as a survival strategy and were relegated to work in the lowest paying sectors. In 1969, the half million GIs in Vietnam were the biggest consumers of sex (Boyle 1972). However, virtually no text provides an in-depth portrait of the relations between Vietnamese sex workers and male clients during the Vietnam War. Scholars who write about prostitution during the Vietnam War tend to focus mainly on figures that estimate the number of prostitutes working during the war or the mass production of

prostitution at the height of the war. Moreover, very few works examine the lives of prostitutes themselves or the relations between men and women in the commercial sex industry.

Although, Le Ly Hayslip does not frame herself as a prostitute in her memoir, she does write about taking a very generous offer of \$350 US to sleep with two American GIs who were soon to leave Vietnam to return to the United States. No one forced her to sleep with these men, nor did they rape her. In the movie *Heaven and Earth*, directed by Oliver Stone, Le Ly displays strength, audacity, and varying degree of choice in sleeping with men for money. While Le Ly is walking the streets of Saigon trying to sell bottles of Red Label Johnnie Walker whiskey, Big Mike comes up to her and says, “You see those guys over there? They’re short timers leaving for the world today.” Le Ly asks him, “So what they want souvenirs? I got Chinese jade, very cheap.” Mike responds, “They want a real souvenir. They want to boom boom [have sex with] you.” Le Ly snaps back at him saying, “Beaucoup boom boom over there pointing to a bar.” Mike responds, “They have plenty of crabs over there too. Look Le Ly these kinds of guys are clean, they’ve been in the bush since they got here. One is going home his wife for Christ’s sake. They don’t want to go boom boom with some scum bag and bring home a dose of clam.” Le Ly yells at him saying, “Le Ly good girl. Fuck off!” Her lack of fear and her attitude in that interaction provides a glimpse of dynamic interactions between men and women, which do not always revolve around rape and sexual exploitation.

In the movie, Le Ly’s sister, Lan, works as a prostitute during the Vietnam War as a way of trying to gain access to foreign commodities, capital, and a better life. There are several moments when Le Ly’s sister, Kim [*known as Lan in the book*], engages in affective labor as a bar girl working in Saigon. In one scene Kim returns home to find Paul, an American soldier in her home.⁶ When she walks into the home, she pretends to be happy to see him even though she is clearly shocked and had been preoccupied with another man. Kim says, “It’s so good to see you honey. You know this is not a good time.” He picks her up and swings her around saying, “Ahh baby! I’ve been six weeks in the fucking bushes. I need pussy bad!” Kim tries to tell Paul that it is not a good time because her father is there, but he does not care. He picks her up carries her to another room. As he is carrying her, she turns to her father and says, “Just give me some time papa. He pays my bills. He’s my man. Come back in two hours Papa.” Her face looks guilty as she speaks to her father, but her voice remains flirtatious and she laughs and flirts pretending to enjoy Paul’s presence and company. Paul and Kim have sex, and then he leaves. This scene alludes to the many ways in which, in order to sustain an income, Kim must engage men and pretend to like their company, enjoy the sex, and provide them with the space to come to when they feel worn out by the war. It is clear that this is all a performance because in the subsequent scene Kim gets into an argument with Le Ly and in the heat of the argument Kim says to her, “You think I like what I’m doing. Some people have to make a living around here and you sure don’t know....I’m just trying to get out of this god damn country!” The transition from her performances of affect for Paul and the tears that she lets out as she screams at Le Ly illustrates her conscious decisions and the choices she makes under the conditions of her work. In choosing to engage in these relations with men, albeit for economic reasons, she is not simply

⁶ Although I consulted both the book and the movie for this chapter, I use the names in the movie Kim (Lan is the name of Le Ly’s sister in the book) and Steve (Ed is the name of Le Ly’s husband in the book) in order to maintain some consistency throughout this chapter. I draw on the movie to provide and imaginative reconstruction of what prostitution might have looked like during the Vietnam War rather than a presentation of ethnographic truths.

a passive victim of male domination and aggression. Her relationship with Paul is painful and complex. However, she performs a labor in return for access to foreign capital and the hope of a future in the United States. Women are not simple victims of male violence, rape, and sexual exploitation. They are hustlers who have to strategize and find ways to survive in a war torn city, by feigning love and care and creating new ways to dupe men to survive.

By highlighting these moments, I am not ignoring the atrocity of war or the structural constraints in which the women make their decisions. However, I want to argue that it is important to move beyond dualisms of domination and subordination, victimization and agency, and develop an analytical framework that pays attention to the ways in which relations of domination are constantly negotiated and contested between individuals over time. In taking this approach, I follow feminist ethnographers like Aiwa Ong (1987) and Helen Safa (1995) in suggesting that scholars must examine how women living in structurally oppressive conditions are able to resist and creatively strategize to improve their lives. These scholars all move away from an analysis of women solely as victims to frameworks to think about the varying degrees of agency that women possess both in relation to men and to social structures of domination. I found that the women I studied were local agents caught in a web of global economic relations, trying to take advantage of men with foreign capital, who, in turn, and took advantage of and exploited their sexual and affective labors.

Pathways of Economic and Social Mobility for Colonial Women

The commercial sex industry in Southeast Asia has shifted along with changing political economic relations of Vietnam with other countries. I have thus far examined continuities from the past to the contemporary moment, from changing histories and hierarchies to viewing women not only as victims but also as agents and an examination of the affective labors that women perform. In this section, I discuss how prostitutes experience economic and social mobility during French and American colonialism by participating in these affective economies. Chapter 7 of my dissertation examines the varying pathways of economic mobility for women working in the contemporary sex industry. While not all women experience upward mobility by engaging in prostitution, mobility in prostitution is not a new phenomenon. The sex industry has provided some women with access to global circuits of capital and goods as well as the opportunity to migrate and start a new life. While this is certainly not the case for all women, this section focuses on those who were able to achieve some kind of mobility both during the French and American colonial periods.

In *Luc Xi Phung* (1937:2011) provides one explanation for the that the plight of some prostitutes who strive to gain access to economic mobility. He says:

The girls who come from the countryside, or who forsook their husbands because they had to taste the bait of modern living or who left the provinces to work as servants but did not succeed, or whose hearts started pounding when, as they were sitting on the sidewalk, hungry and thirsty, a few Hanoi dandies with caring attitudes tenderly spoke false words into their ears... become victims of cunning schemes of the old hags who run the opium dens, the boys in the seedy hotels, the pimps, or the nighttime rickshaw drivers.

However, these women step out into these spaces and learn to hustle as they strive to obtain some kind of economic mobility through prostitution or social mobility in marriage.

In *The Industry of Marrying Europeans* Phung describes how prostitutes turned marriage into a business in order to achieve economic mobility. Phung began conducting research on interracial marriages in the colony after a woman made a public statement in a courtroom stating that her “occupation” was marrying Europeans. Madame Kiem Lam, the daughter of a rich family, who could have married a decent husband, instead went into the industry of marrying foreign men leading her along a bumpy path towards economic upward mobility. In a conversation with Phung, she reflects on her situation, “Of course, we get involved with them for money, never for love” (35). These marriages provided her with access to foreign capital and the ability to assert her agency in relation to men.

While there were certainly cases of genuine love and attachment which I discuss in greater detail later in this paper, Phung (2006) draws attention to some women who were in the “business” of marrying European men because they had no problem leaving their European husbands for other European men who had more money. Phung (2006) quotes Madame Kiem Lam who situates the position of prostitutes in the 1930s saying:

Our kind is the no-good kind, dear Mister. Even if society doesn’t denounce us, we know who we are. I am poor so I am not afraid of people laughing at me. I just want to get rich so I can get even with those who despise me. It’s just that things are going backward for me. In the beginning, I fared quite well. I was married to a civilian like a decent girl, but when he returned to France I floated around for a while. Then, I got married to a soldier in the colonial regiment, and now, the foreign legionnaires, and things are still not going well (34).

In this passage Madame Kiem Lam highlights the fact that while the industry of marrying Europeans does not provide one with a clear pathway towards social and economic mobility this is one place where she has fared well because in each marriage, she marries someone with more money and social status. For example, she goes from marrying a soldier to a colonial regiment to a foreign legionnaire. Moreover, Phung (2006) explicitly describes the pathway towards upward mobility by comparing these women’s trajectories to the likes of men obtaining higher education. He says, “My Dear Readers, the ‘career’ path of workers in the industry was indeed bumpy, muddy, and tortuous.... One could compare this to the career path of a woman who is married to the Europeans because every husband, or to be more precise, every marriage has a value, like a certificate or a diploma, for advancing herself in the business of marrying Westerners the occupation for her livelihood” (34).

While Madame Kiem Lam is fully aware of the social stigma attributed to her work because society views these marriages or unions as no different from prostitution she states, “I got married because of money.... But if I admitted it, they would call me a whore. If your wife is a whore then she might sleep with someone else who is more handsome when you are not home” (36). Women like Madame Kiem Lam who, as Phung states, is in the “industry” of marrying Europeans, mirrors contemporary relations between sex workers and their Western clients. Some women establish relationships with multiple men as a strategy to advance their lives as each marriage comes with different pathways of economic upward mobility.

Similarly, during the Vietnam War, the sex industry provided women with much greater access to pathways of economic upward mobility. Women could develop relationships with

American GIs, which thereby provided them with access to the large amounts of US dollars flowing into the local economy. While in Vietnam, these women had access to modern commodities and foreign goods. Some had American men who supported them and provided them with the basic necessities like a home and money to pay the bills. While their brothers served in the military fighting on both sides of the war, Ly Ly and Kim migrated from their village of Ky La to the city of Saigon where both of them worked in the service industry that catered to American GIs. Kim worked in a bar serving drinks and establishing short-term and long-term relations with them. Le Ly sold whiskey, cigarettes, and Chinese Jade on the streets, before moving to work in a bar that catered to Korean men. Kim Le Ly's sister, lived in an apartment in Saigon that was far from her village shack in Ky La. She had nicer clothing and access to Western makeup that allowed her to transform her body and embodiment from a poor village girl, to that of an urban cosmopolitan woman who spoke English and could move about comfortably in spaces that catered to foreign GIs. This rural to urban migration brought them into a world of Western colonialism filled with American men and global commodities.

Frances Fitzgerald (1972) a famous journalist who wrote about the Vietnam War described the scene around American bases:

Around American bases... there had grown up entire towns made up of packing cases and waste tin from canning factories— entire towns advertising Schiltz, Coke, and Pepsi a thousand times over. The “food,” “shelter,” and “jobs” that Westmoreland promised came to this: a series of packing case towns with exactly three kinds of industry: the taking of American laundry, the selling of American soft drinks to American soldiers and prostitution for the benefit of American [men] (Pg 252-353).

By working in and around these bases women strategized to find ways not only to survive and take care of their immediate needs but to develop long term relations that might lead to marriage and migration.

Although prostitutes led complex lives often with different trajectories of upward and downward mobility, I examine the complicated relations of intimate and emotional intimacy that sometimes led to marriage and migration. In this section I want to argue that prostitution provided some women a way out of Vietnam after the fall of Saigon and with the space to secure themselves a better future in the United States. Among Le Ly's six siblings, the only two who were able to make it out of Vietnam and to the United States were Kim (or *Lan*) and Le Ly. Both women left their brothers and mother behind, and fled with their boyfriends and husbands to the United States. While the book provides less information about Le Ly's life in the United States after migration, the movie alludes to her economic upward mobility. In one scene, when Le Ly and her husband first arrive to his mother's house, Le Ly looks at exterior of the house, the furniture, and household appliances as if she had stepped into a world of American luxuries. She takes a deep look inside of the refrigerator to see the abundance of food; again, a symbol of her knew life living the American Dream. In another scene, she walks through an American grocery store, amazed and taken away by the abundance of food that line each aisle. Although Le Ly's transition to the United States is fraught with tension in her relationship with her husband, her ability to migrate out of a war torn country and establish a life for herself in the United States has led her to a path of upward mobility. It is her peculiar position as a woman who migrated to the

city, worked around bases that catered to American GIs, and later married an American sergeant that allowed her to escape, leaving behind her mother and the men in her family.

Between Love and Money

The contemporary scholarship on sex work highlights the importance of multivalent emotional encounters. Sex work, scholars have argued, does not involve only direct sex-for-money exchanges, as some women often move from client-worker relations, to relations of deeper intimacy that sometimes lead to marriage (Brennan 2004; Cabezas 2009; Hoang Forthcoming 2011). However, these historical accounts show that the boundaries between transactional sex and relational sex have historically been porous. Under French colonialism, local women often moved between boundaries of the prostitute or the concubine in their relations with different colonial men. In *The Industry of Marrying Europeans*, Phung provides a documentary narrative that integrates facts from his research along with fiction in his narrative of the unions between Vietnamese women and European men (Tranviet 2006). Phung himself “questions the social condemnation of prostitutes by arguing that a one-time encounter with a prostitute is not actually much different from sex with a lifelong partner or wife [because]... marrying a good girl is like getting a life-term prostitute” (Tranviet 2006:14). Phung’s work highlights blurred boundaries between prostitution and marriage. For example, Phung provides a detailed account of local Vietnamese women who were already married, yet, in searches for more security or mobility, ventured to Hanoi to look for European husbands. The institution of marriage was often unstable, as women moved from one marriage to another.

Relations between local women and colonial men involved both direct sex-for-money exchanges as well as much more sustainable, albeit breakable, ties through marriage. While local officials viewed both prostitution and interracial relations as deviant behavior, they institutionalized formal regulation of prostitutes while leaving married women alone. As such, women who developed marital relations with colonial men constantly moved between deviant and normalized spaces. As Phung describes a wedding scene, he captures the delicate ways in which local women crossed over to become respectable women married to colonial men. He writes:

From the steps of the cathedral, forty cars lined up forming a strange gigantic snake wrapping around the block of Lagisquet Street: a European wedding....At one corner of the step a French family, 100 percent French, and a Franco-Annamate family were chatting lively. There were four people in the Franco-Annamate family. The French husband, his Vietnamese wife, and their two children (of mixed race, of course). The sophisticated French couple delicately shook the hand of the “Westernized” Annamate lady. She was laughing and conversing in fluent French, and her manner was natural, and even elegant.... A scene like that would almost make us proud, that a woman- from a country that is still considered “barbaric”- still manages to maintain her dignity, even though she has been married to a colonialist (Phung 2006:24).

In Phung’s description of the local Vietnamese woman as well as in his own analysis of them, he demonstrates how some women were able to maintain a sense of dignity in their marriages to foreign men. Local women who were able to partially assimilate into the colonial culture by

learning the language and altering their mannerisms were able to come across and pass as civilized citizens in the colony. They could maintain a sense of dignity and respect that did not come as easily to the prostitutes in the Dispensary that Vu Trong Phung (Phung 1937:2011) also writes about in *Luc Xi*. There were certainly different types of men in the colony, although the women at the time divided the men into three categories: civilians, colonial soldiers, and foreign legionnaires, who all had varying degrees of access to foreign capital and commodities. Local women sought to develop relations with these men in order to acquire these material goods and advance their “careers” either as prostitutes in the commercial sex industry or as wives in the industry of marriage.

Similarly during the Vietnam War, prostitutes engaged in both short-term and long-term relationships with men. As they moved in and out of the spaces of sex work, many women became wives of GIs. Some men developed long-term relationships with local women and others sought to marry local women. In the movie *Heaven and Earth*, Le Ly provides us with a brief glimpse of the sex industry as well as the complicated relationship that men and women have with each other. Kim, Le Ly’s sister, worked in a bar that catered to American GIs, where she sits and drinks with men and occasionally provides sexual services for them. In addition, she has several different boyfriends who pay for her up comfortable apartment and who help her pay for the bills. When her boyfriends are away from the city and busy fighting in the war, she continues her work in the bar. However, when her boyfriends come into town they go directly to her home expecting her to provide them with sexual services. While it is clear that Kim did not engage in relations with men for love but rather money, she was able to make men like Paul feel loved enough that he would continue to support her even while he was away from the city.

Although, Le Ly did not work as a prostitute on a day-to-day basis, her relationship with her husband began through Kim’s introduction. Steve offered to pay Kim some money to introduce him to a “nice” girl. Kim first introduced Steve to her sister and while the two pretended to agree, Le Ly and Kim ran off with the money. However, Steve chased her down and continued to pursue her. Eventually they began to establish a relationship with each other. While Le Ly initially resisted Steve’s requests to be her boyfriend or to have a relationship with him, she acquiesced and slept with him, marking the beginning of something that would turn into long-term relationship and later a marriage. The slippages between love and money provided both prostitutes and women working around the spaces that catered to American soldiers with the opportunity to establish short and long-term relations with men. These relationships varied in nature; some were direct sex-for-money exchanges, others were intimate and relational exchanges, not bounded transactions. These unions sometimes led to familial relationships where men and women had children with one another sometimes in marriage and other times out of wedlock.

When America began to lose the war, many soldiers tried to send prostitutes back to the United States. Several men tried to help prostitutes flee Vietnam because they knew that these women would suffer terribly once the communist fighters from the North descended into the South (Dawson 1977). Many women, however, were left behind because they were not high on the list of diplomats or high-level officials who were first airlifted out at the fall of Saigon in 1975. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, over 100,000 Amerasian children were left behind (Yarborough 2005). These children, called *bui doi* (children of the dust), were badly mistreated and often denied basic civil rights during the war. Among the 100,000 children, only 2,000 were airlifted out of Vietnam as part of Operation Babylift, leaving behind many women and children with relational and emotional ties to American men.

Amerasian children left behind by their fathers and rejected by Vietnamese society suffered a great deal of hostility because the government viewed them as children of the enemy. Most of these children never knew their fathers, and their mothers abandoned them at the gates of orphanages. They suffered from a great deal of taunting from other children who made fun of their facial features. Children born from African-American soldiers' fathers fared even worse, facing taunts about their curly hair and their dark skin. Left behind at the end of the war, these children were wanted neither by Vietnam nor the United States. They were called children of the dust, which referred to uncared-for children treated as though they were as insignificant as a speck of dirt to be left aside. Many of these children were street children who lived in harsh and isolated conditions (McKelvey 1999). Local Vietnamese stigmatized mixed-raced children, otherwise referred to as Amerasian children, because they were seen as children of the enemy whose mothers were engaged in prostitution. However, journalistic accounts about the lives of children who were left behind rekindled public interest in the 1980s. In 1987 the United States Congress passed the Amerasian Homecoming Act that enabled Amerasians and their immediate family members the opportunity to immigrate to the United States. These children figuratively turned from dust to gold as families tried to claim them in order to have the opportunity to leave their poverty-stricken lives behind them and migrate to the United States.

The boyfriend-girlfriend and husband-wife relations illustrate how prostitution during the war in fact revolved around complex relationships that did not always involve direct sex-for-money exchanges. Some men and women engaged in relationships with each other involving marriage and children, challenging popular notions of the commercial sex industry that portrays women as victims and men solely as clients. Moreover, Amerasian children born out of relations between prostitutes and American soldiers were able to migrate to the United States not only because of the social stigma attached to their mothers but because the media framed them as sons and daughters with familial ties to American soldiers.

Conclusion

This chapter turned to epic poems, literary pieces, journalistic accounts, and films in order to provide an imaginative reconstruction of prostitution during pre-modern and colonial times. One could conceivably dedicate much more time to digging through archives or conducting oral histories of former prostitutes who serviced American soldiers. The purpose of this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive historical overview of the sex industry in Vietnam. Rather, I look to the past in order to highlight both changing and continuous themes that figure into the present. The sex industry, I argue, has a history of hierarchical relations shaped not only by the structure of the sex industry but also by the racialized desires that figure into relations that men have with women. During the colonial period, Western men commanded both the highest and lowest paying sectors of the sex industry. By tracing the flow of capital into Vietnam at different points in time, it is clear that global racial hierarchies figure into the relations in local spaces. While Western men no longer command the highest paying sectors of sex work in the contemporary sex industry, these colonial histories do in fact figure into the contemporary moment. It is no coincidence that *Viet Cong* men whom I describe in Chapter 5 assert their masculinity by consuming Johnnie Walker Blue Label, a brand of whiskey that women like Le Ly sold on the black market to American soldiers during the war.

In addition, this chapter stresses the importance of providing more nuanced and varied portrayals of women not only as passive victims of rape and sexual exploitation but also as

agentic figures who make the most out of their situations. While one cannot deny the atrocities and violence that women endured in times of war and that accompany some sites of sex work, I want to also highlight the multiple ways that women also stood up for themselves, defended themselves, and also hustled to dupe men for money. Women engaged in performances of affect pretending to love and care for men as a short-term survival strategy and a long-term advancement strategy. These affective labors provided women with opportunities for social and economic upward mobility unavailable to Vietnamese men. The sex industry provided women with the opportunity to gain access to modern commodities and find ways to survive in urban spaces where the standard of living is much higher than in their rural villages. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War some women were able to escape as wives of American soldiers. Lastly, this chapter has examined the porous boundaries between love and money in the complicated exchanges between men and women. Women like Le Ly Hayslip, represent the slippages and contradictions that exist in sex worker client relations. While, she does not consider herself a prostitute she does have sex-for-money when she gets a lucrative offer of \$350 USD for a one-time encounter with two American soldiers. Moreover, she meets her future husband through an arrangement where he pays her sister to introduce him to a nice Vietnamese girl. The slippages between love and money often led to the birth of Amerasian children who were left behind in the war. These children turned from dust to gold following the American Amerasian Act that allowed mix-raced children and their families to migrate to the United States. The next chapter turns to my ethnography in HCMC to look at the structure of the sex industry in the contemporary moment. I provide an overview of the structure of the contemporary sex industry and a brief foray into the different spaces where I conducted my research.

Chapter 3

The Contemporary Sex Industry: A Look Inside the Spaces of Sex Work

Introduction

While Vietnam's history with Chinese imperialism and French and American colonialism, has indeed created classed-differentiated structures within prostitution, this chapter turns to my ethnographic research between 2006-2010 to provide a portrait of the contemporary commercial sex industry. This chapter first moves away from a post-colonial frame that focuses on remnants of the past and instead examines the contemporary political economy to explain some of the structural shifts in the organization of Vietnam's contemporary sex industry. New flows of capital and people into Vietnam from Asia alongside the 2008 global economic crisis has allowed local Vietnamese men and Asian businessmen to assert their dominance in relation to Westerners thereby establishing new hierarchies where Western men no longer command this highest paying sector of HCMC's sex industry. Secondly, this chapter provides an ethnographic description of the four bars where I conducted my research. I illustrate the dynamic changes that HCMC's sex industry has undergone over the course of four years between 2006 and 2010.

The Commercial Sex Industry Post Doi Moi

After the Fall of Saigon in 1975, Vietnam effectively closed its doors to the foreign world, but after a decade of lagging productivity and rapid inflation, in 1986 the Vietnamese government introduced an extensive renovation policy called *Doi Moi* which moved Vietnam from a socialist economy to a market economy (Turley and Selden 1993). As a result, Ho Chi Minh City has become a city with heavy transnational flows of people and capital. As the Southern Key Economic Zone, Ho Chi Minh City accounts for 35% of Vietnam's gross national product (Vietnam News Agency 2007). By 1991, according to an estimate by Professor Le Thi Quy of the Women's Research Center in Hanoi, there were nearly 100,000 women working as prostitutes, with nearly half of them were concentrated in Ho Chi Minh City (Barry 1995). In 2006 Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization (WTO 2006), which thrust the nation into a global economy creating new relations with other countries for foreign trade and investment following similar economic restructuring by other socialist countries (Greider 1997; Hoogvelt 1997; Sassen 1996; 1998; 2000). The transition from socialism to a capitalist market has created new segments of sex work, thereby expanding the industry. Indeed, Bui Thi Kim Quy (1993) has observed that prostitution began to increase in Vietnam immediately after the adoption of *Doi Moi* with a current estimated 200,000 Vietnamese women in prostitution (CATW 2005).

While some scholars have studied the sex industry in Southeast Asia, few have focused on the contemporary global sex industry in Vietnam (Lim 1998; Nguyen-Vo 2008; Truong 1990). Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo (2008) was one of the first scholars to conduct a systematic analysis of the contemporary sex industry post-*Doi Moi* based on data she gathered after returning from the United States to Vietnam in 1995. Her book, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam*, examines contradictions in how the state deploys freedom in the economic sphere, where neoliberal leaders insist on free market forces and free economic agents. Simultaneously, Nguyen-Vo (2008) observes, how the government suppresses the cultural and social spheres and works to rid the country of social evils by regulating women's bodies. Tracking the governance of women's bodies as the government

deals with the neoliberal freedoms of a new transnational market economy, she argues that the Vietnamese socialist state is the biggest stakeholder in the market that is part of the neoliberal global economy. The governing of sex does two things: “first, the government’s promotion of entrepreneurial and consumerist freedoms in the market has unleashed a new native and masculinist sexuality funneling the sex trade while a new middle-and upper-class feminine sexuality in relation to consumption. . . . Second, the government seeks to produce gender, sexuality, and class-differentiated producers and consumers, employing simultaneously *different modes* of directing the behavior of a differentiated citizenry” (Nguyen-Vo 2008: xx-xxi).

Nguyen-Vo (2008) describes what she calls a *hooking economy*, with complicated relations between state entrepreneurs who were eager to strike up deals with one another and who are sought out by private entrepreneurs wanting aid from government insiders who can help them maneuver around market impediments. In this arrangement, foreign, state, and private entrepreneurs all need access to each other. The foreign investors need land, production sites, and knowledge about how business is conducted in Vietnam, while the state enterprises need business contracts, and private entrepreneurs need subcontracts. As these three different entities *hook* into one another they rely heavily on entertainment spaces and the commercial sex industry to help foster these relationships. The consumption of the sexual pleasure provided by women and their bodies allows men to construct themselves, not just as men, but as Vietnamese men of a certain class

Nguyen-Vo (2008) focuses mainly on establishments that cater to local Vietnamese entrepreneurs. My research expands her work by providing an ethnographic analysis from the ground up that examines significant differences among sex workers who cater to both local and overseas clients. Building on Nguyen-Vo’s (2008) framework, I examine how commercial sex serves to attract foreign men and foreign capital into the nation, underpinning government-initiated neoliberal market freedoms. I also provide ethnographic data that illustrates how commercial sex work as part of emerging affective economies provides local entrepreneurial men with the space to purchase sex as an expression of their class-differentiated and national identities. Affective economies in sex work are crucial to facilitating the relations between men in the hooking economies which Nguyen Vo (2008) describes. In addition, I incorporate a critical analysis of how local Vietnamese men’s participation in the commercial sex industry differs from that of overseas *Viet Kieu* men, as well as Western expatriates and budget travelers.

Rather than focusing on governmentality within the contemporary sex industry, I ask about the dynamics of commercial sex within the local economy as Vietnam emerges into the global economic system. I examine the how Vietnam’s entrance into the World Trade Organization in 2006 that created new and distinct niche markets within the contemporary sex industry that caters to both global and local men. Contemporary globalization, I argue, creates distinct markets that provide services specifically to Asian businessmen looking to explore entrepreneurial possibilities in Vietnam’s emerging economy, *Viet Kieu* returning to Vietnam in droves to reunite with their families (Packard 1999), Western expatriates, and Western tourists looking to explore an exotic developing country and assert themselves as moneyed-men across transnational social fields in HCMC’s sex industry. The movement of people and capital makes HCMC a critical site where globalization generates new types of inequality, which in turn create new segments of sex work. Globalization does not create a single market for poor exploited women who cater to wealthy foreigners; rather, it creates diverse markets and new segments that expand already existing inequalities. The next section of this chapter provides a description of

the changing contours of HCMC's sex industry I witnessed during the 22 months of my ethnographic field research between 2006 and 2010.

New Economies of Sex in Vietnam

The geographical landscape of the contemporary sex industry is spread throughout Vietnam. One can find karaoke bars, massage parlors, sex cafés, brothels, and mini-hotels that provide sexual services throughout the country from small villages in Soc Trang to the large metropolitan cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh. Local Vietnamese men, both rich and poor, frequent sex workers in a variety high-end bars and low-end massage parlors. However, Ho Chi Minh City has the largest concentration of commercial sex workers who cater to both global and local clients. Tourists who visit Vietnam tend to come through Ho Chi Minh City because of its war history. On the other hand, those who do business in Vietnam prefer to conduct business in the South because of its relaxed laws as compared with Hanoi, a city that is not as welcoming to foreigners as is HCMC.

In seven months between 2006 and 2007, I examined client-worker relationships in three class-differentiated sectors of Ho Chi Minh City's sex industry: a high-end sector that catered to *Viet Kieu* men, a mid-tier sector that catered to Western tourists and budget travelers, and a low-end sector that catered to poor local Vietnamese men (Hoang 2010). Drawing on data from informal interviews with 56 sex workers and 27 clients, I found that women in the low-end sector engage in forms of repressive emotional labor while women in the mid-tier and high-end sectors engage in other forms of expressive emotional labor (Hoang 2010). I also found that sex workers and clients drew on varied economic, cultural, and bodily resources to enter into different sectors of HCMC's stratified sex industry. Expanding the research on sex work by studying relationships between sex workers *and* clients, I moved away from the current understanding that sex work is bounded by clear economic transactions. Instead, I argue that sex work in this high-end sector is an *intimate relationship* best illustrated by the emotional binds that tie customers to sex workers (Hoang Forthcoming 2011).

Incorporating an analysis attuned to the dynamics of social class, I found that sex workers who catered to *Viet Kieu* men in the high-end sector came from relatively wealthy families and had high paying jobs in the local economy as managers in newly established foreign firms or as young entrepreneurs expanding their parent's businesses. Between 2006 and 2007 *Viet Kieu* men were positioned in the highest paying sector of the sex industry as they came to Vietnam in droves looking for a place where they could capitalize on their first world citizenship and convert it to social status and respectability in Vietnam (Hoang Forthcoming 2011). However, when I returned to Vietnam in June 2009 to conduct another fifteen months of ethnographic field research, I was stuck by how much HCMC had changed in just three years. The country was in the midst of rapid economic restructuring which was visible not just in the earlier form of small mom-and-pop shops and scattered mansions built up with money sent through overseas remittances, but by the presence of three new five-star (The Sheraton, Park Hyatt, and Intercontinental Hotel) in the city center. These large and lavish hotels reshaped the city's landscape and introduced international standards of cosmopolitanism. As I discuss in the Introduction, foreign direct investment [FDI] had emerged as the key source of capital reshaping the local economy. During these fifteen months of research in HCMC, I observed a lively and dynamic local economy. During each month of my stay, a new high-rise building was erected from the ground up. I watched construction workers build new roads and highways that paved

the way to new residential districts with luxury condos and villas. While riding my scooter through District 7 and District 2, the newly developed residential districts, I was amazed by how much these places resembled suburbia in the United States. There were wide street lanes, with proper traffic lights, lined with rows and rows of palm trees. Moreover, there were always new local and international restaurants, bars, and cafes opening in different parts of HCMC creating a dizzying effect as an emerging class of newly moneyed elites looked for new places to consume.

On April 30, 2010, 35 years after the fall of Saigon, I attended the grand opening of a brand new seven-story mall lined with luxury designer stores from Jimmy Choo shoes and Armani clothing to Vertu cellular phones that cost between \$10,000 USD and \$20,000 USD. At the event, I had several conversations with local businessmen and overseas *Viet Kieu*'s about how much Vietnam has emerged from the ruins of its war stricken past. Tam, a thirty-year old local Vietnamese man, educated at Oxford and Stanford University, who now runs a local software company, said to me, "Saigon is becoming a cosmopolitan city with luxury designer stores like Gucci, Marc Jacobs, Louis Vuitton.... The locals are so rich now that they have no problem paying for these things even though they are marked up 30% because of a government imposed luxury tax." His friend Tri, a 27 year-old-man educated abroad at Cambridge who works for a local finance company added, "Locals will pay the 30% for those things here in Vietnam even though they could fly to Singapore or Hong Kong and buy these things for less because they want people to see that they *have* the money to pay *more* for those things." Moreover, over the past four years, automobiles began to replace motorbikes making visible Vietnam's rapidly developing economy. In fact automobile sales increased in Vietnam by nearly 30% each year between 2005 and 2009 (Hoang 2009). These cars are all marked up by 100%, 25% in tariffs and 75% in domestic luxury taxes. The vast majority of cars were luxury automobiles ranging from Mercedes and BMWs to Bentleys and Lamborghinis. Similar to many other rapidly developing cities in India and China, the towering new high rises, alongside droves of luxury cars and department stores, are visible signs of the nation's transition and progress, visible even to those living under extreme conditions of poverty (Friedman 2005).

These emerging economic conditions brought about changes in the spaces of sex work as well as the hierarchical structures of HCMC's sex industry. As I discussed in Chapter One, in 2006 *Viet Kieu* men commanded the highest paying sectors of the sex industry, which was not surprising given that they brought more capital into the country (in the form of remittances) than did foreign investors at that time. However, in 2009-2010, there was a clear shift in the hierarchal structure of the sex industry. *Viet Kieu* men now expressed a sense of loss of social and economic status while *local* Vietnamese men had moved into and seemed to command the highest paying sectors of the sex industry. Between 2006 and 2007 Western expatriates and transnational businessmen looking for sex often spent time in the girly bars of the backpacker's district, mixing and mingling with male tourists traveling on a budget. The backpacker's area provided Western men with the space to engage in relations with women who spoke some English. However, in 2008, Lilly, the madmen (locally referred to as the mommy) and bar owner of Secrets, which I describe later in this chapter, decided to open a new bar that caters specifically to the growing number of expatriates living and working in Vietnam. Lilly had worked in the backpacker's district for nearly four years and during that time she became attuned to the fact that some men were not looking not only for sex, but for long-term partners who could serve as cultural brokers or open up spaces where the men could practice speaking Vietnamese. Through several conversations with Western expatriates, Lilly also learned that men were looking for a place with pretty girls who were not highly aggressive or adamant about direct sex-

for-money exchanges. With a loan from one of her boyfriends, Lilly opened “relationship bar” that catered specifically to Western expatriates, the first of its kind in HCMC. By 2010, at the end of my research, there were roughly eleven bars of this kind within a two-block radius catering to mostly white Western expatriates. My dissertation research incorporated these changing spaces of sex work, and I began to examine class-inflected distinctions between Western expatriates and Western backpackers.

My dissertation research is largely animated by questions linked to Vietnam’s position in the global economy. I wanted to focus on global men who entered Vietnam and on relations between local Vietnamese men and foreign investors. I was less interested in the sale of sex and more interested in the role that sex workers played in directing foreign capital into the country. One of the fundamental questions in the current scholarship on globalization is how processes of modernization and transnational capitalism affect people’s everyday lives (Wilson 2004). As sketched in Chapter One, I am focusing not only on how macroeconomic and political changes taking place in Vietnam continually reshape the local economy, but also on how the local individuals actively shape the global economy from the ground up. The next section provides a description of the structure of the four main sectors and bars that I worked in as a hostess, bartender, translator, and participant observer. These bars catered to (1) wealthy local Vietnamese men and Asian businessmen, (2) *Viet Kieu* men, (3) Western expatriates/businessmen, and (4) Western tourists traveling on a budget. This chapter provides a portrait of each bar, the workers, as well as the varied clients who moved in and out of these spaces.

Khong Sao Bar [Zero Stars Bar]: Wealthy Local Vietnamese and Asian Businessmen⁷

Star Bar is located in the heart of Ho Chi Minh City’s District 1. However, very few people know about this particular bar because it is hidden, and in order to get a table the clients must have an existing relationship with the mommy or be introduced by a top-paying regular client. This is one of the most profitable bars in town because the country’s wealthiest businessmen and political officials as well as their Asian business partners frequent the bar. Although this bar generates around \$150,000 USD a month in revenue on alcohol sales alone, the aesthetics inside the bar do not convey high-end luxury the way one would expect. Compared with the bars that cater to *Viet Kieu* men, which are plush with velvet couches, large chandeliers, and long white drapes, *Khong Sao Bar* is plain indeed. It had a small desk at the reception with a bright blue neon sign that read, “karaoke luxury” in English; below, a red neon sign that read “thank you”, hung on a plain white wall with chipped paint. Next to the reception desk was a refrigerator stocked with sodas, bottled teas, and water.

Downstairs four service men dressed in black slacks and white button-down shirts met arriving clients and escorted them to an elevator where they ride up to a secret floor. Once the elevator opened, they met a woman in her mid-fifties who managed the reception. She summoned one of the mommies, greeted the men, and guided them down a dark red stained carpet into one of the private rooms. Each room had a dizzying effect created by walls with different, non-matching wallpaper patterns. Sofas lined the walls in a U-shape with two coffee tables in the center for food and drinks; a small dance floor was right in front of a television with

⁷ In order to provide anonymity to my research subjects, I have changed the names of all of bars and people in my study.

a karaoke set. This setting, one could argue, symbolized a shift from an old bureaucratic culture to a newly entrepreneurial culture that provides men with a place to build relationships with each other in a comfortable space. It was not nearly as luxurious or Western as the spaces in high-end hotels. Instead the display of affluent social class positions came through the expensive alcohol that the men consumed, the branded keys on their key rings, the \$20,000 USD Vertu cellular phones, Rolex watches, and Hermes belts wrapped around their pants.

Hanh, the main mommy, and Quynh and Lan-Vy, the two little mommies, ran the bar. At the time I conducted this research, roughly 40 women worked there, with about 20 regular clients who brought in their friends, business partners, and clients; in addition, there were ten male servers. Five VIP rooms provided the clients with private entertainment. Clients typically called the mommies ahead of time to reserve a room, and after the men arrived, they would routinely order bottle service; a service where men purchase bottles of whiskey or cognac rather than separate drinks. In addition they usually ordered multiple bottles. Rarely did clients walk out of the bar with a bill lower than \$800 USD on alcohol alone. Phong a 58-year old businessman who married to the daughter of a high-level official, and his partners typically spent \$1100 USD on alcohol and \$300 USD on tips for the women per night. They visited the bar three to four times a week. Over two months they spent over \$20,000 USD (each month) entertaining clients in this bar.

The women in the bar worked there illegally. Some were “registered” to work as servers, but the vast majority of worked under the table, with the risk of arrest. Every time there were police inspections, the women quickly exited out of the back door of the bar and down a flight of stairs while the police rode the elevator up to the bar. A few of the women had been arrested and put in education camps for six months. Everyone worked from noon until the bar closed at 1:00 am. However, many of the women went out with clients to clubs, restaurants, and hotels after the bar closed, and they often did not get home until 4:00 or 5:00am. The bar did not pay any of the women or the mommies a wage for their work. Instead, all of the money that they earned came from tips receives from the clients. At least one of the three mommies, Hanh, Quynh, and Lan-Vy, sat in at every table. They earned an average of \$150 USD per night in tips. Top earning women in the bar who were requested by multiple clients earned around \$100 USD per night from tips alone. Low-earning women earned \$15- \$40 USD per night, but there were many nights where we did not get in on any tables and did not earn any money. While the tips often varied between \$15-50 USD, clients typically tip \$30 USD per girl at each table. The popular women would run from one room to the next sitting with multiple clients at the same time. The women in the bar made on average \$1500 USD (\$200 USD on the low end and \$2000 USD on the high end) alone from tips as a hostess.

Although the women’s main job was to work in the bar as hostesses, they often served as escorts accompanying the clients to lunch, dinner, shows, more public clubs, and on vacations out of town. The women earned a tip for their company and extra for sexual services. Every woman in the bar (except for me) also provided regular clients with sexual services for \$100- \$200 USD per night depending on the girl. While direct sex-for-money exchanges often took place, many of the women also developed longer-term relationships with their clients and served as *gai bao* [hired girlfriends] provided with a monthly income to service clients privately. The top three women were able to get their clients to buy them small houses, condos, or provide them with some capital to start their own business. In addition to tips for providing company and payments for sexual services, the women often received perfumes, expensive cell phones, jewelry, clothing and accessories from their clients.

None of the women in the bar were college educated. The highest degree a any had earned was a high school education. When I conducted field research in 2006 and 2007, the highest-end women who catered to *Viet Kieu's* typically had college or trade school degrees, and they came from relatively wealthy families. However, the women who work in this bar in 2009 came from poor to middle class families. Two-thirds of the women came straight from poor rural villages into the bar through either mommies or a friend who brought them in while the other one-third of the women came from poor urban families. There is a huge incentive for women to work in this bar because they earn more than do people with Masters degrees in Vietnam. At this point in time, most of my friends who worked in finance, advertising, or education with Masters degrees earned roughly \$1500-2000 USD a month. Many of the women in this bar earned that much on tips alone and more than that for the sexual services they provided.

Nearly all of the men who reserved tables at this bar were among Vietnam's wealthiest businessmen from well-known companies. They were part of the privileged elite who had access to local political elites as well as foreign capital. While it is difficult to assess their actual wealth, it was clear that they were engaged in business deals worth millions of dollars. After nearly a year of getting to know Tin a 54 year-old local Vietnamese man, he told me that his total assets are worth roughly \$1 billion USD. While he may be exaggerating this figure, he also stated that over the past ten years he has been able to acquire land throughout the country and lease the rights to build on those properties through his political connections as well as his economic ties abroad. Many of the clients were from private and publically listed companies engaged in business projects worth millions of US dollars that involved a broad array of projects from land development projects to the import-export of steel, rubber, wood, textiles, automobiles, foods, and much more. Several clients spoke with me about their efforts as financial engineers to build Vietnam's local stock market and attract foreign investments. These men relied heavily on Khong Sao bar to help them entertain their Asian business partners from Taiwan, Singapore, Korea, Malaysia, and China as well as local political officials whose signatures they needed to move various projects forward.

When the regular clients arrived, they typically asked to sit with someone with whom they were already acquainted, and then the rest of the women would line up so that the new men could select a woman to sit with. The men referred to the hostess workers as "*gai lam bar*" (bar girls or karaoke girls) or "*dao*" (sex workers). It was understood that every man had to sit with a woman. Those who sometimes requested to sit alone were often ridiculed as being "gay" or un-masculine. Women in the bar pressured men to sit with someone so that they could bring in their friends in and help them earn a tip as well. The women served the drinks and food, sang karaoke, and at the request of clients, turned down the lights and provided exclusive private dances on the dance floor and the tables. Clients had free rein over the women's bodies and could touch their breasts discreetly. On a few rare occasions I saw some clients try to touch the women's genitals. Whenever there are new clients, clients who had somehow upset the mommy, or clients who were too aggressive with the women's bodies the hostesses would all team up and drink as fast as they could to push out the clients. The women could finish a bottle of cognac in 30 minutes by making sure everyone's glasses were full. The purpose of drinking so fast was to rack up a tab that was high enough for the clients to decide to leave.

None of the women in the bar were forced to work, and the mommies did not force the women to have sex with the clients. Nor did the mommies receive kickbacks from the women hostesses. There was an unspoken rule in the bar -- that the women were to arrange all sexual transactions with the clients on their own. If something went wrong, the workers were not

allowed to talk about it in the bar. The mommies did give the women in the bar advice on how to get more money out of the clients by refusing sex the first few times that a particular client asked for it. As a strategy to ensure their safety, most women would not “go” with a client unless he had been into the bar a few times, was a semi-regular, or was the friend of a regular.

Relations between workers and clients in this bar rarely ended up in marriage or steady upward mobility. In fact, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 7 women in this sector experienced both rapid upward and downward mobility in varied trajectories of sex work.

I conducted two months of ethnography working in this bar during the months of September and October of 2009. During this time, I worked seven days a week from noon until 2:00-6:00am. None of the women lived in the bar but many of them lived in shared apartments and offered to let me come live with them. However, I chose to live on my own in order to carve out a space where I could write my fieldnotes in the mornings and take a step back from the bar scene and reflect on my research methods and emergent themes. I spent the first week in the bar adjusting to the setting and learning the norms and codes of interaction; after that, I conducted two or three informal interviews a night. If there were glaring questions from my fieldnotes, I would conduct follow-up interviews. In the methodological appendix I provide a more extensive analysis of my research methods, describing processes of access and my positionality in relation to subjects of in each of the sectors I studied.

Lavender and Gold Bar: Viet Kieu men

I spent three months working in two different bars that catered to *Viet Kieu* men, which I will call Lavender Bar and Gold Bar; both had similar layouts. I worked in Gold Bar for two weeks before local authorities shut it down, so I spent the next two and a half months working at Lavender. Lavender is an upscale bar that catered mainly to *Viet Kieu* men located in the heart of District 1, a five minute walk from all three of the five-star hotels. In the area surrounding this bar were a host of restaurants and shops. An older architect and a local engineer designed the bar itself. Located on the third floor, it was much more spacious than Khong Sao Bar. There was a circular bar located in the middle of the room where the bartenders and hostesses mixed drinks. To the right was a stage where live performers came to sing every night. A large, handcrafted chandelier hung from the ceiling above the bar and provided dim white and yellow lighting. Surrounding the perimeter of the bar were semi-private rooms containing plush white sofas and a separate chandelier. The rooms were separated by long and thick purple and white drapes that were pulled half-way open so that those in the bar could look into the private seating area and those on the dance floor could easily view the V.I.P customers. In between the private rooms and the main bar were several round tables where customers could order table service and either sit on stools or stand. There was a live D.J. every night after musical entertainers had played mixes of American pop/rap, Vietnamese pop, and Korean pop music. On any given night one or two mommies managed the workers and the space inside of the bar. In the bar at any given night there were usually 25-30 hostess workers who doubled as sex workers.

Seven to ten service men greet newly arrived clients at the door. If they had been to the bar on a previous night, they were automatically escorted into the bar. However, getting into the bar depended on capacity. It was the service men’s job not only to remember each client’s name but also the type of alcohol he enjoyed and the girls who had previously sat at his table. Although the bar served a host of mixed drinks, most people ordered bottle service. The service men escort the clients either to a side room or to a standing table. It did not cost more to be seated in the side room, however, it was common knowledge that guests who get seated there

were V.I.P. guests who always ordered expensive bottle service. Therefore, getting seating in the side rooms provided men with a sense of social status in a semi-public space.

Once seated at a table, the clients looked at a bottle menu of whisky, cognac, and vodka that cost between \$75 USD to \$200 USD per bottle. Lavender offered a sale of buy two bottles, get one free so most people ordered three bottles for the night. Each table therefore cost about \$250-\$600 USD. After the clients ordered their drinks, the service men brought a fruit platter, some dried jerky, and salted nuts to the table, and shortly after that, a mommy came by to greet the men. She poured their glasses of alcohol and then raised her glass to cheer them. Then she asked them if they would like to have company for the night. Although the bar did not require clients to sit with a hostess, most men chose to have company because it helped them feel less awkward around each other. If it was early in the night and the bar was not full, the men would scan the room and tell the mommy whom they would like to invite to their table. However, if the bar was full then the mommy would have a group of women line up in front of the table so the men could select their company for the night.

The women worked in this bar six nights a week from 4:00 pm until 2:00 am with rotating nights off. They ranged from 18 to 27 years old. Among the 25 women that I studied all were either from poor rural villages or from poor urban families. The women who came from villages had all had jobs working as a maid, receptionist in a hotel, or as a service worker in a restaurant. Most women entered sex work after seeing how much money other women earned in this line of work. Some women hoped that sex work would provide them with an opportunity to meet someone who would marry them and eventually help them migrate. However, marriage and migration was a rare occurrence in these bars because most *Viet Kieu* men selected their marital partners through friends or family members who served as matchmakers. The mommies generally earned an average of \$5000 USD per month from alcohol sales and tips, while the hostess workers earned roughly \$1000 USD a month from tips for accompanying clients in the bar plus about \$1000 USD for sex. Most women charged \$100 US for sex, but they rarely left with a client every night. They were lucky if they could get a client once every couple of nights.

Similar to Khong Sao Bar, the women in Lavender could choose whether or not they wanted to sleep with a particular man. The mommy served as a facilitator, introducing her workers to clients. However, the mommy never took a cut of the pay women earned from having sex with clients. On several occasions the mommies even stood up for women who refused to leave the bar with a client. On most occasions, women would leave the bar upon a client's request because it meant that they would make extra money; it also made them feel like desirable subjects in this space. Gaining access to this space was much easier because of my status as a *Viet Kieu* woman. However, as I describe in more detail in the methodology appendix, I had to learn how to position myself as less attractive than local women in order to allow *Viet Kieu* men to assert their masculinity in this transnational space.

Secrets: Western Expatriate Bar

From the outside Secrets looks like one of the “girly” bars located in the backpacker's area and around the five-star hotels. The outside windows were tinted so that you can barely see the inside. Pink and yellow dimly lit lights hung from the ceiling. There was a long bar with several women dressed in high heels and short tight dresses. When I first walked into Secrets, the women behind the bar intimidated me because I was the only woman I saw entering as a customer. It was clearly a space where men came to drink after work or after dinner. The bar was

roughly 10 feet wide and 20 feet long, with women standing behind and the men sitting on stools across from them. The bar was set up so that every male customer had one person serving him and providing him with her undivided attention. I met Lilly through the owner of Lavender, and we became friends while she actively recruited me to come work for her. Because I was Lilly's friend, the women in the bar eventually warmed up to me.

In describing the culture of the bar and the work ethic, Lilly said to me:

I've been through a lot in my life. I've worked in so many places and I've sold my body for money. I know what its like to be poor and so when I opened this bar I did not want the girls who work for me to feel stuck. I don't force the girls in this bar to have sex with clients and I don't force them to drink either. In my perfect world the girls would come in here, get paid at the end of the month, and make extra money for every drink that they have with clients. They wouldn't be prostitutes and have sex-for-money but they would date a lot of different men until they found the one who would take the best care of them like me.

She went on:

"I wanted a place to serve the white businessmen who live in Vietnam or who come here a lot for work. They are lonely and sometimes they just need a place to go where they can have company and someone to talk to, not necessarily someone who they just want to have sex with. It's not as easy to trick men for their money any more by saying that you are a poor prostitute and that you want to find a way out of that life. I did that already. Times have changed and you have to change with it. The men who have been working here for a long time, they know all of the tricks that we played and they played back. They are too smart for that. Now to get money out of these men you have to invest a lot of time in them."

When I asked her what she meant she said, "You don't let them think that you are a prostitute. You make them think that you are an innocent girl who will work hard to make an honest living. You make them think that you are looking for a man and a real relationship but what they don't know is that you have twenty or thirty different boyfriends."

Lilly opened Secrets in 2009 and she hired twenty women from her neighborhood and village area to come work with her. She paid each woman roughly \$100 USD per month in wages. While this figure seems exceptionally low, it was more than any of the other bar owners pay. The women also got tips from clients for their service, but the tips was generally one to two dollars per bill (the same as people would tip in restaurants). The tips were all placed in a jar and at the end of the night the women split the tips. In addition, the women earned money for every drink that they were willing to have with clients, with Lilly paying them 50% of the cost of the drink. When I asked Lilly why she generously paid the women to drink, she said to me, "I don't force the girls in here to drink. I don't want them to drink and get drunk and hurt themselves. Your body changes a lot when you drink. You get old really fast and it is hard to stay in this business. So I pay them for drinks." Between their salary, tips, and earnings from drinking with clients, the women earned, on average, \$250-300 USD per month. The women come into work everyday at 4p m and they usually ended the night around 1 am. Sometimes they went out for dinner with clients after hours. They rotated shifts and usually get one night off per week to relax

and run errands. However most of the women ended up coming to work later in the night just to hang out because they were bored at home. Roughly eighteen women worked in this bar at any given time.

The clients who spent time in this bar were mostly Western white men from the United States, Europe, or Australia. These men either lived in Vietnam or flew to Vietnam frequently on business and were regulars inside the bar. The men I studied ranged from 24 to 70 years old. The younger men were usually single while the older men were married, separated, or divorced. Clients typically entered the bar Monday – Saturday (Sundays were family days in Vietnam, which meant very slow bar nights). The clients would come in between 4:00-7:00 pm which was the bar's happy hour time and a time when men were just getting off from work. Many men also came in around 8:00 pm after they had dinner with friends or family, and they stayed until midnight or 1:00 am. The culture of this bar was very different from the high-end bar that catered to wealthy locals because the men in this bar almost always ordered beers. An average bill in the bar was about \$10 USD for 3-4 drinks. During the month that I was in the bar, only two clients ordered bottle service. One was an Australian man who saved his bottle and drank it over the course of five nights, which in the end would have cost the same if he came in and ordered 3-4 beers five nights in a row. The other man who ordered bottle service was a Taiwanese man who came in regularly after work. He would come into the bar with some of his friends, leave for dinner, and then migrate on to a bar with high-end women who offered more explicit sexual services.

Although the women earned a monthly income that enabled them to turn down many of the clients' direct sex-for-money offers, they creatively found other ways to make money from the clients. In the past women who catered to white men would create fictitious stories of crises (a dying parent, debt they owe to the mafia etc.). However, a few months after building a relationship with a client, many of them asked for gold jewelry as gifts that they could very easily resell on the black market. Owners of bars continued to pay off local police and mafia both to leave them alone and to offer protection. The "kickbacks" happened on a large scale and a small scale. Women also relied on the lack of clarity in order to make extra money. For example, the women constantly got offers from clients who wanted to take them on vacations to nearby beach towns in Bali, Phuket (Thailand), or Hong Kong. The women in the bar told the clients that they did not have a passport and that in order to get one, they would need to go back to their village to acquire their identity cards from the local police; after acquiring that paperwork they would have to go to Ho Chi Minh City and apply for a passport. That process, they explained to clients, can take up to a year unless someone paid the office workers money to expedite the process. What the clients didn't know is that the women were usually very savvy and they could usually pay off the local police at rates lower than the clients would have to pay. The women also told clients that they could find better deals on airfare. Between the passport and the airfare they usually walked away with a \$300 USD profit. In addition to travel, women made profits from running small errands for clients during the day. One of the most popular gifts that women received from clients were perfumes, often bought in the duty free shops of airports. However, there was a market where women could sell these bottles of perfume for more than what they cost. Thus, they creatively made money through small transactions.

While none of these women referred to themselves as sex workers, they talked very openly with one another about how to use the "boyfriend-girlfriend" framing as a strategy to get more money out of their clients (referred to as *khach* in Vietnamese). Women in this establishment did not engage in direct sex-for-money exchanges but they nonetheless expected to

be compensated for their services. For example, Lilly dated a man named Mark for roughly ten months. Although she was dating about 20 other men at the same time, she led Mark to believe that he was the only one. Men like Mark competed over women like Lilly; they wanted to be in a relationship that would lead to marriage because it made them feel like they somehow beat out other men out by getting her to commit. However, while I was working in the bar, Lilly caught Mark cheating on her. She ended that relationship but then she calculated a bill of \$40,000 USD for all of the dates that she went on, all of the dresses she bought during their relationship, and all of her time. She said to him, "I'm not a stupid girl; if you are going to treat me like a prostitute then you better pay me like a prostitute." When Mark refused to pay, Lilly called on a few of her friends who have police and mafia connections and threatened to kill him. Though Lilly did not intend to kill him she just wanted to scare him, but Mark did not know that. Over the course of three months he paid her \$20,000USD, which she used as a down payment on a new restaurant that opened in March of 2010. What I found most fascinating about this story was that Lilly did not want compensation for her emotional pain; she wanted to be compensated for the emotional gifts that she had given him.

Naughty Girls: Tourists and Budget Travelers in the Backpackers' Area

Naughty Girls is located in the heart of the backpackers' enclave of Ho Chi Minh City. This area is full of travel agencies, budget hotels and hostels, tour and bus companies, and restaurants that cater to foreigners. The streets are filled with street vendors and backpackers who walk up and down the street making the area feel very lively. Naughty Girls is located right in the middle of this area. It is a small bar that is roughly 30 feet long and 15 feet wide with a bar that takes up a quarter of the space inside. The bar is painted dark brown and multicolored neon lights hang from the ceiling. There are four outdoor lawn tables and bamboo chair sets outside on the front porch where clients can sit and watch those walking by. It is clearly a "girly" bar with women dressed in short shorts or jean skirts seated outside.

The women seated outside constantly invited men who walk by into the establishment. As men walked by the bar, one could hear workers say, "Come in! Come in please!" Women who walked by the bar with their husbands usually looked at the women and then turned their heads in a different direction. Tina, the twenty-seven year old owner of the bar, did not do anything to disguise this space as a regular bar that served drinks. She made it explicitly a "girly" bar that catered mainly to men by having her workers sit outside to greet and invite men into the bar.

Whenever the police drove by, the women would scramble to bring all of the lawn furniture into the bar and close the doors. Most of this was a formality, however, because Tina paid off the local police to leave her bar and the women working there alone. In the higher-end sector I had to learn how to manage a myriad of different relationships with the local police, owners of the bar, sex workers, and clients, and at the time it felt like a maze. However, once I was able to break through those barriers I felt relatively safe and in a comfortable place. In the backpackers' area, on the other hand, the local mafia was much more visible around and in the vicinity of the bar. Members of the mafia would ride around on their motorbikes selling various drugs; the owner paid them to hang out on their motorbikes along the streets and inform the women when the police cars were making their rounds. The mafia men were also seconds away in the event that there was a fight inside of the bar or sex workers needed them to put a client in his place. At first this intimidated me because it felt rough, street, and accompanied by a sense

that anything might happen. However, over time I realized that these men were not like pimps in the sense that they forced women to have sex with clients, tried to get money from the women, or even procure clients for the bar. While there are pimps who manage street workers in Vietnam, the men linked to Naughty Girls were like brothers to the women, and they got paid each time the owner or sex workers called on them to help out with a particular situation.

The owner, Tina, was a tall beautiful woman with a figure like a model. She started doing sex work at the age of sixteen and when she was able to secure herself a foreign boyfriend, he helped her open this bar. Naughty Girls had 26 workers total but only about 15 came on a regular basis. The women in the bar worked as disguised bar tenders, but without a salary. They were there to procure clients and each time they left with one, they paid the owner roughly \$12 USD dollars. The women were between the ages of 18-33. As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 6, the women in this bar were all very dark skinned, and wore heavy make-up and simple clothing to cater to their Western backpacker clients' racialized desires. Most of the women wore tank-tops, jean shorts, and high heels. Half of them were from the Mekong Delta and half from Saigon, but all of them lived in District 4, an area known for housing the local mafia and sex workers. All of the women spoke some English, which they picked up through working in the bar.

Nearly all of the interactions with the clients in the bar lasted roughly thirty minutes between when the men would come in to order a drink and then leave. Some clients came into the bar wanting to "talk" with someone without the promise of taking her home later. Whenever this happened, the women would leave the client and let him sit alone with his drink. As Thuy said, "I don't want to sit with him and talk with him if he isn't going to take me with him later." This was very different from 2006 and 2007 where women in a similar bar just down the street that I studied saw all men as men with whom they could build potential relationships. As during my earlier fieldwork in the same site, the owner did not force the women to sit and talk with these men. As long as the women served the clients drinks when they asked for them, they were fine. Women in this sector engaged in much more direct sex-for-money exchanges than the women in the other spaces because this was their main source of income. They typically charged roughly \$50 USD for sex. Like the women in the other bars, no one forced these women to have sex with any of the clients. However, workers in this sector always had the phone numbers of local men whom they could call upon in the event that a client refused to pay or was too rough with their bodies. It was not common for women to experience abuse from their clients. However, occasionally a man tried to get "free sex" by refusing to pay. When this happened the women would cause a scene on the street, embarrassing the men until they opened their wallets to pay. More often than not, women performed their part, and the men compensated them for their work. In this way, sex workers demonstrated a great deal of agency in relation to their clients. They engaged in a variety of affective labors with the help of the local mafia highlighting the fact that they were not passive victims unable to fight for themselves in relations with their clients, and also showing the shared, organized context in which they acted.

Conclusion

The commercial sex industry in Vietnam is not a new phenomenon. However, the structure of sex work, including relations with clients from other countries, has changed over time as Vietnam moved from being a colonized nation, with many years of war, and then worked to reestablish itself as an independent country within the global capitalist economy. Over the

years, the hierarchy of sex work has changed along with changes in the organization and flow of economic capital and people like *Viet Kieus*, expatriates, and tourists move in and out of the country. White men commanded the highest paying sectors of sex work during French colonialism and the Vietnam War. This is not surprising given that France spent a great deal of time and money in Vietnam, developing railways and a plantation economy to extract rubber, tobacco, indigo, tea, and coffee. During the Vietnam War the US government spent \$168 billion dollars on war efforts that in effect established a large rest and recreation spaces to cater to American soldiers in Southeast Asia. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the Vietnamese government effectively abolished the sex industry and sent women who catered to US soldiers to reeducation camps.

By 2006, nearly 20 years after *Doi Moi*, Vietnam's economy shifted again as U.S. and other foreign capital came into the country in the form of FDI and remittances from *Viet Kieu* living and working overseas. The sex industry continued to shift along with the global economic crisis of 2008 and local men's new awareness and imaginings of a shifting global order. In this chapter I have described the contemporary sex industry in the new global economy, including recent shifts as Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization and as nation states realign themselves in the context of the 2008 global economic meltdown. The daily life I observed in various sites of sex work, at two points in time, highlighted shifting relations between local Vietnamese men and women and *Viet Kieu* men, Western expatriates, and Western tourists. While Western men generally command the highest paying sectors of sex work in most developing nations, I found that in Vietnam they did not command the highest paying sector of the sex industry. In 2006, *Viet Kieu* men were dominant in the highest paying sectors of HCMC's sex industry, which aligns with the fact that *Viet Kieus* shaped Vietnam's economy through large flows of remittances. Moreover, *Viet Kieu* men often converted their First World citizenship into social status in HCMC's local economy. However, by 2009, when I returned for a second period of fieldwork, HCMC looked vastly different with new flows of foreign direct investment that dominated the market. These new flows of capital allowed local men to reconfigure global racialized and class-differentiated hierarchies and to establish themselves as moneyed men in a country that many call a rising dragon (Hayton 2010).

Paying attention to how changes in the political economy led to the restructuring of HCMC's hierarchical sex industry, this chapter has described four sectors of sex work that catered to wealthy local Vietnamese men and their Asian business partners, *Viet Kieu's*, Western expatriates, and Western budget travelers. I have described the setting and organizational structure, as well as the types of men and women who moved in and out of these different spaces. The chapters that follow examine the moral and ethnical codes that guided worker-owner/mommy relations, worker-worker relations, and worker-client relations; the ways in which men constructed their masculinities in relation to each other and in relation to their changing positions in the global economy; and how women altered their bodies to cater to the class-differentiated, racialized, and nostalgic desires of their clients. I also the workers' varying trajectories of mobility as they engaged in sex work organized through intersecting national, racialized, gendered, and class differentiated relations in a changing global economy.

In the next chapter I focus on sex work in the contemporary moment between 2006 and 2010 by examining the logic not only of the relationships between men and women but also the relations that govern the social, moral, and ethical order of these bars. The analysis highlights diverging practices in sex work *within* one industry and how workers catered to a diverse group of global and local clients.

Chapter 4

The Organization of Work: Front and Back Stage Performances

Introduction

This chapter examines the organizational structure of work inside the karaoke and hostess bars and describes the dynamic relationships that take place in the bars. Although the bars vary greatly in spatial arrangements, the class-differentiated status of the clientele, forms of payment, and the ways in which masculinity and femininity are performed (described in greater detail in Chapters 5 and 6), I found that workers in all sectors had established similar bonds and relationships with the mommies who managed the bars. This chapter focuses on the commonalities in client workers relations across all four bars. The workers in the bars I studied were also guided by a similar set of moral and ethical codes about how to treat one another with respect and care. This chapter is organized around themes that emerged in all four of the sectors of sex work that I studied.

First, contrary to studies of sex work that highlight exploitative work relations between bar owners or the madams who run the bars and the workers (Parrenas 2011; Price-Glynn 2010; Zheng 2009), I found that the owners, mommies and workers in these bars in HCMC had positive working relationships with each other. The mommies, I suggest, seemed to possess a moral compass about how to treat their workers and manage a bar, enabling workers to establish positive working relationships with the mommies. The mommies worry that forcing a woman to have sex with a man is bad karma that would result in their businesses failing. Moreover, contrary to the research on sex trafficking that highlights problematic relationships between brothel owners and pimps who *force* women to have sex with their clients (Farr 2005; Jeffreys 1999), to my knowledge, none of the women in my study were ever *forced* to have sex with a client. In fact, in all of the bars where I conducted my research the women often relied on the mommies to reassert their position on the issue with clients who were especially aggressive in their requests to take workers home with them.

Second, this chapter examines the relationships between the women in the bars through their front stage performances as well as backstage conversations among each other. Contrary to other studies on sex work, which examine the fierce rivalries (Zheng 2009) and competition (Hofmann 2011) that existed between workers competing with each other for their clients' attention, I found the women in my study developed strong bonds with each other and the mommies that helped them collectively advance while simultaneously helping each other manage their clients. Women developed strong bonds with each other that allowed these bars to operate in a peaceful manner with very rare instances of confrontation or fights between the women.

The third theme involves male clients and their performances of affect and care inside the bars. The literature on sex work and emotions focuses overwhelmingly on the emotional labor that sex workers provide for their clients as part of service sector work (Bernstein 2007; Brennan 2004; Cabezas 2009; Chapkis 1997; Frank 2002; Hoang 2010). Virtually no study has examined the perspectives of male clients the ways in which they, like the sex workers, may feign emotions of care and love inside of the bars as part of a staged play. I found evidence that male clients are fully aware that women engage in various forms of affective labor feigning love and care. In fact, men expect some kind of performance of emotional labor the minute they enter the bar.

However, men *also* feign care and emotions, albeit in a different way, because it provides them with a sense of escape into their fantasies.

Finally, I argue that the structure and moral ethos of the bars relating to workers' relationships with their clients led to varied forms of emotional intimacy. Workers who catered to local Vietnamese men, Asian Business men and *Viet Kieu* men engaged in short-term *intimate exchanges* with their clients that rarely if ever, ended in marriage. Workers who catered to Western expatriates and tourists, on the other hand, engaged in longer-term *relational exchanges* with their clients that led to enduring boyfriend-girlfriend relations and sometimes to marriage. The organization of the bars as well as their moral codes about intimacy structured different worker client ties.

By taking a look inside the bars at the organizational level, this chapter highlights how the moral and ethical codes created a set of norms within the bar that not only guided how the mommies and owners treat their workers but how the workers treated one another. As I will show, these moral codes shaped workers' front stage performances with their clients, and implicit scripts and norms guided interactions between men and women. These performances and norms around relations of emotional intimacy structured the short-term and long-term relationships that developed in the bars.

Bar Owner/Mommy-Worker Relations

Research on the organizational structure of the sex trade by in large has highlighted exploitative working relations between sex workers and the bar owners or mommies in bars in varied countries (Zheng 2009). Several studies have examined the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation through organized crime that entraps and forces women to engage in prostitution (Dickson 2003; Jeffreys 2009; O'Connell Davidson 1998; Scambler and Scambler 1997). When I initially began my research in June 2006, I expected to find women who were trafficked or forced into sex work. However, I was surprised to find that very few women were *forced* or *coerced* into sex work. In fact, every woman in my project told me that if they were taken from the streets or their bars and brought into rehabilitation centers in Vietnam, they would probably return to sex work. While I believed that none of the women I studied were physically forced into prostitution I realized that many entered sex work due to economic constraints. Moreover, I assumed that the organizational structure within the bars was conducive to highly exploitative working conditions between workers and bar owners or the mommies who managed the bars. Therefore, in 2009 I decided that I needed to work in the bar so that I could gain a deeper understanding of the backstage relations between sex workers and owners.

Located in four sectors of sex works, the bars I studied— Khong Sao Bar (serving local Vietnamese and Asian businessmen), Lavendar (a *Viet Kieu* bar), Secrets (Western expatriate bar)m and Naughty Girls (Western tourists' bar)—the mommies who managed each setting had a moral compass that guided their relationships with their workers. All of the mommies held on to a strict moral code that forbade them from forcing sex workers to go with any client. Hanh, the head mommy in Khong Sao Bar, said to me:

I do not force any of the girls in here to go with a client. It is a sin for me to force someone to have sex if they do not want to and I do not want to carry around those sins. When a client asks if they can take a girl out of the bar, I always say

that they have to ask the girl and negotiate with the girl themselves. I am just here to help the ones who are having a hard time getting clients.

While working in the bar, I watched as Hanh held firm to the principle of not forcing workers to have sex with anyone. For example, on several occasions when workers refused to leave the bar with a client, he would turn to Hanh and urge her to convince her workers to go with them. Hanh would respond to the client by smiling and saying:

All I can do is make sure that you are having a good time in the bar with the girls here. I cannot control what happens outside of the bar. If something goes wrong I don't want to be responsible for it. It is her choice. I cannot force any of them to go because I do not want to worry about them outside of this bar.

Then she would walk to the back room of the bar where all of the women who were not sitting with clients hung out, and say, "These men think that they can push me to make you go with them. I will not do it. If I do it one time, for one person, they will think that I treat some people more specially than others." Hanh stood firm in her belief that forcing women to have sex with clients was a sin, and she even defended her workers against customers who insisted on taking a woman out of the bar against her will.

Anh Nguyen, the owner of Lavender, and the two mommies, Tho and Huyen, also believed that forcing a woman to have sex with a client against her will was bad for business. Anh Nguyen said:

These girls have rough lives and most of them can fight hard if someone pushes them too far. I see them as part of my family. When they are in the bar, their job is to drink and sell alcohol but I do not make them have sex with clients for money. If I did that it will bring bad luck into my business and we will shut down fast.

Tho added to Anh Nguyen's comment saying, "People think that in this business we force women to have sex with our clients but if you ask anyone in here, they will tell you that we do not do that. We want them to bring in business not take it outside. [Because] when they are in the bar we know they are safe. We cannot control what happens outside." While Anh Nguyen addresses the issue of profitable business management, he also used a language of safety and morality in the bar, saying he wanted to avoid instances where workers were raped or forced to do anything against their will. They also did not want to have to intervene in disputes that occurred between sex workers and their clients outside of the bar.

In the bar called Secrets, Lilly made it a point to pay her workers a monthly salary, as well as nightly wages for every drink that they consumed with clients. She said:

I believe that when you are generous with your money, when you give, money will always return to you. If the girls in here get paid every month they at least know that they have a choice. They can sleep with someone if they want to but if they decide that they do not want to, they will not starve.... [Some] bars make their workers drink a lot of alcohol... that the girls go home sick every night. I pay them to drink; I don't force the girls in here to drink.... I pay them for drinks.

Lilly's model of paying her workers indeed allowed them to be much more selective in the men with whom they developed relationships. The ability to be selective empowered many of the women to continually refuse particular clients who returned night after night trying to persuade them to have sex.

Tina, the owner of Naughty Girls, also believed that forcing workers to have sex with her clients would lead to bad karma. However, because the women who worked in the sector that catered to budget travelers generated all of their income from having sex with clients rather than from tips for drinking or by earning wages from the bar, the women felt financial pressure to put themselves at risk by leaving with clients with whom they did not feel completely comfortable. In fact, while workers in all of the other sectors hardly, if ever, complained about clients who did not pay them after sex, the workers at Naughty Girls often had to deal with clients who refused to pay. As budget travelers the men who came into Naughty Girls often tried to hustle for cheap beers or would leave without paying because they knew that they were transient and once they left no one could punish them for their actions. This was one reason Tina developed strong ties with members of a local mafia who would chase down such clients and scare them until they paid. Tina said to me:

I do not like that I have to deal with them [the mafia] but I have to make sure that I have a good relationship with them because I need to know that if something happens to one of the girls, I can pick up the phone and in 5 minutes they will be here on their motorbikes ready to go. There are a lot of assholes [*ca chon*] out there who think that they can have sex for free. So we pay the mafia \$400,000VND [\$20 dollars] if they can get the money from the guys... I have to protect the girls here because if you do not protect the women in the bar who will work for you?

Although Tina did not pay her workers a wage for their time in the bar, she made it clear that she was not afraid of anybody. One night while sitting in the bar, a client forcefully grabbed the genitals of one of the workers; when she squirmed, he picked her up from her seat and tried to carry her out of the bar. Within two minutes Tina grabbed and began to twirl a thick stick, screaming and going after him as he went out and onto the street. He put the worker down and started to run while Tina yelled, "Don't come here and think you can fuck with me. You no scare me!! Come here! You want to fight? Come here!!" A few minutes later Tina called her mafia friends and in five minutes they arrived with machetes. They rode around the block several times looking to see if they could find the man, but he was nowhere to be found. These moments made it clear to me that the relationships between workers and mommies were far from exploitative. In fact these relations were much more maternalistic, with mommies sympathizing with the position of workers and making conscious efforts to help them avoid being forced into having sex.

I was also surprised to find that aside from Tina, none of the mommies took a cut of the money women earned from having sex with their clients. Hanh explained to me, as she pointed to the cross pendant on her necklace:

If you have *dao* [faith or religion] without *duc* [morals] you have nothing. You have to have both *dao* and *duc*. If you decide to have sex with someone for money outside of the bar you can. I will never take any money from what you make from

having sex it is not moral to take that money. I do not want to live with those sins when I die.

I was fascinated by how much Hanh evoked religion in explaining to me the moral compass that she used to guide her actions. She earmarked the workers' earnings from having sex with a client as a special kind of money (Zelizer 1997). While it was not a sin per se to have sex with a client for money, it was a sin for the mommies to take any of the money that women earned through those activities. Tho, Huyen, and Lilly expressed similar views and held strict rules around taking money that women earned from sex. Tina, on the other hand, took \$10 dollars from the women as a fee for using her bar as a space to solicit sex from the clients. However, Tina never forced any of her workers to sleep with a client so she could earn more money. Tina said to me, "I never have to force anyone to have sex-for-money because most of them want to do that. If they do not want to have sex, it is because they have a bad feeling about the man and they have to trust that feeling." She went on, "If something happens to them I do not want them to blame me." None of the mommies wanted to bear the burden of guilt if something happened to their workers, but beyond that, the mommies developed maternal relationships with their workers that in many ways protected the women from unwanted advances.

In my conversations with 90 female workers, every single one of them described their relationships with their mommies and bosses in a positive light. They looked to the mommies for advice about men and saw the mommies as figures who always looked out for their best interest. Duyen, a 19-year-old worker, said to me:

People think that mommies are bad people because they force you to have sex or they force you to drink. In [Khong Sao] bar you have to drink because that is part of the job but Hanh always notices when someone is not getting into tables and she will always try to bring them in so that no one gets left behind. She has a heart.

Tram an 18-year-old worker also said:

When I first came from the village, Hanh told me to come live with her. She did not charge me for the first month and she gave me some of her old clothes. After that she charges me \$100US for rent [1/20 of what she makes per month]. She does not believe in taking money from us.... She is a person with morals [*duc*].

I had several conversations with women who repeated the same sentiments that Duyen and Tram expressed. Many of the women expressed a sense of debt to Hanh for the ways in which she fostered their upward mobility and helped them transform their lives. She nurtured them without force. When I asked the women whether they felt comfortable quitting, Bi, a 20-year-old worker, said to me:

Hanh will not force anyone to work. If you want to work you have to come in everyday at the right time. If you do not come on time and follow the rules at work she will stop bringing you into tables. But if you want to quit she will let you go.... I met a man who wanted me to quit and live with him as a *gai bao* [paid girlfriend]. Hanh told me not to do it because he would get bored and leave

me with nothing after a few months. She warned that I would lose my customer base and if I were to come back to work it would be hard to start over.... I was stubborn so I quit and she was right. After two months he left me. I came crawling back here for work and it is hard. I am lucky if I get into one table per night. I used to *chay show* [run around] and sit at 3 or 4 tables per night.

When I asked the workers if they have ever had a negative experience with Hanh, the only bad thing that they had to say about her was that if she was upset with them, she would not work hard to bring them into tables. If she was not on their side, they had to work harder to get clients to select them in a line-up. I also asked them if there were any consequences for quitting, and every single worker said told me that they were free to quit whenever they chose. Most of the workers, in fact, quit on their own when they were no longer able to attract clients or bring in men.

Unlike Hanh, Tho and Duyen did not cultivate close relationships with their workers. However, none of the women working at Lavendar ever felt forced or afraid to quit if they felt uncomfortable. Chinh a 22-year-old worker said to me:

There are all of these stories about women who are trapped in brothels in Cambodia or village women who get kidnapped and sold across the border. That does not happen in this bar. No one forces anyone to work, and no one takes the money I make from sex. This job is better than a lot of other jobs because we make more money and do not have to work as hard.

Contrary to the literature on human trafficking that seems to suggest that all women living in developing countries are victims who are forced into the sex trade, these women spoke openly and frequently about the freedom that sex work afforded them compared to work in other occupations such as manufacturing or service sector work. Chapter 7 discusses patterns of mobility sex work offered these women. In this chapter, I want to highlight not only how free women were to come and go in these bars, but also the positive working relationship that workers had with their mommies and bosses.

Lilly and Tina, went to great lengths to incorporate workers into their bars by treating the women to late night food and drinks every so often and by sponsoring group trips to visit a nearby temple or the women's villages. I accompanied the women on these journeys in each sector in which I worked, and was amazed at how much they bonded on the bus ride and at the destination. I watched as the women prayed and lit incense at different temples and paid their tributes to the monks. The trips back to the villages also put many of the workers' families at ease because the parents had a relationship with Lilly and Tina. They did not have to worry that their daughters were trapped or abused by their employers. This protective relationship established a bond between the workers and the mommies that revolved around feelings of mutual respect and care. Those sorts of feelings also characterized interactions between workers, which I discuss in the next section.

Strong Bonds both Front Stage and Backstage

Relationships between mommies and workers fostered a dynamic among workers also characterized by respect and mutual reciprocity. In every bar in which I worked, the mommy made it very clear to me that workers had a shared culture of respect and responsibility towards

one another and that if a worker violated these norms, she would be fired. During my first week at work at Khong Sao Bar, while I was getting dressed at Hanh's house, she said to me, "When you go in to work, you work for yourself. Do not compete with the other girls or get jealous because they are making more money than you. If I see you competing, I will tell you to leave." At first I thought that her words were hollow and without much meaning. However, I discovered that when I started working in the bars, that rather than resent me, the women would descend upon me to help me dress properly and get into tables. That initial foray into bar life set the stage for all new workers to build relationships of mutual respect for and reciprocity with one another.

On the front stage, workers pulled each other into tables or introduced their co-workers to clients. If a woman was left behind, everyone would do everything they could to try to get her into a table or help set her up with new clients who entered at the end of the night. Workers also collectively shared responsibilities around drinking and serving the clients. Women who served clients drinks and food often did so to take some of the burden off of the women who were strong performers and could sing or dance well. In all of the bars, the workers established a shared culture around drinking. The women poured drinks evenly, and each time they raised a glass to their clients, the other women also raised a glass, drinking at an even pace. This way no worker drank more than any of the other workers. In sharing the work of drinking, the women also actively protected each other from sexually aggressive clients or clients who became belligerent after they had too much to drink.

One evening, when I was sitting at a table with a group of men who became aggressive after two hours of drinking, a client began to grab Nhung's breasts; he then sat on top of her and pressed her against the couch. Almost immediately, Tram, one of her co-workers, picked up her glass and insisted on toasting that client in order to distract him. He drank with her and then the other workers turned on loud techno music and began dancing to distract the men in his group. As everyone danced around the room, I watched as the women signaled to each other that they were going to begin drinking quickly and heavily in order to push the bar tab up so high that the men would eventually have to leave. After nearly 4 bottles of whiskey, another really aggressive client asked Nhung to go home with him. She politely refused by smiling and telling him that she had to work. The client refused to take no for an answer; the other workers chimed in and said that she had to attend her brother's birthday party later that night. He still refused to take no for an answer, so the workers called on the mommy. Hanh walked into the room, picked up a glass and began toasting the men. They all drank with her, and then she turned on the karaoke to sing a song for them. Everyone listened as Hanh sang, and when the song was over, she had the servicemen bring in the bill. The client told Hanh that he wanted Nhung to leave with him, and Hanh firmly supported Nhung's decision to remain. The client got upset and decided that he was not going to tip Nhung or Hanh. Hanh turned to him and said, "I have never had to deal with someone as aggressive as you. This is a high-class bar with respectable women. You need to treat them with respect." He turned and grabbed her breasts in front of everyone. She responded by slapping him twice. He was stunned and ashamed in front of his friends, so he tried to slap her back but his friends stopped him, apologized profusely, and then he tipped Hanh on his friends behalf before they left. This moment revealed how much solidarity workers share with each other on the front stage. They helped each other drink, preempted aggressive behavior from abrasive clients, and they helped bring workers who were struggling to make money that night in on tables. There was a sense of a shared responsibility and solidarity.

While the front stage of solidarity was somewhat unsurprising because it helped women support and protect one another in front of their clients, spreading individual risk, I anticipated

that the women would have fierce rivalries backstage where they interacted outside the view of clients. However, in all of the bars in which I worked, I was surprised to find myself in a “drama free” environment interrupted only by the occasional outbursts between women. Workers shared tips with each other about how to dress and how to accentuate their particular bodies. This mutual support arose from the belief that if more women looked attractive, the bar as a whole would attract more clients on a regular basis. They also talked quiet calmly with one another as clients moved from one worker to another. Nam, a regular client, for example, had been sitting with Diem for nearly three months, and after awhile he got bored and requested a line-up where he picked Phuong. Initially, Diem was upset, and she asked him why he chose someone else. When he ignored her she went to the back room and sat in frustration. The next day, however, I listened as Diem provided Phuong with tips about Nam. She told Diem how he liked his drinks mixed saying, “He likes to have one shot of whiskey with half a cup of soda, but he likes the soda from the bottle not the can.... He will give you a stack of bills to tip the girls at the end of the night, make sure that you do not over tip them because he will notice if one bill is missing.” Diem helped Phuong get dressed because Nam text-messaged her saying that he would be coming to the bar in an hour.

When Nam arrived, Phuong went to his room and I asked Diem, “How come you are not mad at Phuong for stealing your client?” Diem said angrily to me, “We do not work like that in this bar. That is a stupid question. If you think that you are going to come in here and compete you are in the wrong bar.” I sat in silence, completely puzzled, when Na added, “We all have to drag our legs into this bar. We are all doing the same thing. If we compete with each other over men we will have nothing. You cannot get jealous or fight with each other.” Nhi jumped in and said, “If you had to come into to work everyday and deal with a tense environment at work would you want to come? We all have to live in here.” I stayed silent as they all lectured me, the new worker, about the moral and ethical codes that guided their interactions with one another. In all of the other bars, workers frequently lost their clients to other workers but it was a normal part of the routine within the bar that occurred quite peacefully and quietly.

Backstage, I also listened in as workers gave each other advice about how to deal with their clients, advice that ranged from small things like how to respond to a text message to bigger issues like how to subtly ask for money. When new workers enter into the bar culture, the older workers would stay quiet and refrain from providing advice. If those women turned out to be competitive, the older workers would isolate them and make the workplace unpleasant. However, if the new workers were humble and non-competitive, after a few weeks they became part of a familial environment sharing stories, clothing, tips and advice.

The strong bonds that tied workers together allowed the women to create a positive working environment. Many of the workers looked forward to coming to work because the workspace provided them with a sense of community in a stigmatized profession. In fact, the women felt so closely tied to their workplaces that they came into work on their days off just to hang out backstage with the other women. The bars also became a place where women celebrated their birthdays and held their bachelorette parties before getting married. The bonds created at work went beyond the workplace as many of the women traveled together to each other’s hometowns when a family member passed away or just to get away from the city. They also trusted one other with large sums of money to purchase clothing, face creams, and perfumes. For example, one evening Nhi came into work and said, “There is a woman in my neighborhood who is selling Victoria Secret lotions because she has a family member visit from California. Does anyone want to buy some?” The bottles were selling \$20 dollars each, and every woman

wanted one. Nhi walked out with \$260 dollars that night to purchase these bottles. The next day she came back with 13 bottles of Victoria Secret lotion, and the women spent an hour sniffing each other's scents and trying out their new lotions.

The strong bonds between women both back stage and front stage made it much easier for me to gain access as a researcher. It usually took about two weeks for the women to warm up to me because they wanted to see if I could handle acting submissive to men and playing the part. However, once I showed them that I was stubborn enough to stay and flexible enough to take a submissive stance, they began to let me in to their secrets, desires, and home lives. Through these conversations, I began to realize that the bars provided the workers with a place to build bonds and a sense of community that rural migrants missed when coming to the city. As I discuss in more depth in Chapter 7, many of the rural to urban migrants began work as maids or factory workers before entering sex work, only to find that sex work provided them not only with better opportunities for upward mobility but also with a stronger sense of community and friendship. The bonds among women in these bars structured an orderly work environment where women shared the bulk of the responsibility both front stage and backstage using their own initiative. These strong bonds further created a situation where male clients understood that when they entered the bar, they entered a stage where everyone engaged in play within a set of boundaries or norms that guided interaction. The next section examines the role of male clients in these spaces.

Male Clients' Staged Play and Emotional Performances

Multiple scholars have examined the emotional labor that sex workers provide their clients as part of serviced encounters (Bernstein 2007; Brewis and Linstead 2000; Cabezas 2009; Earle and Sharp 2007; Sanders 2005; Wood 2000; Xiao 2009). While conducting ethnographic research between June 2006 and August 2007, I found that sex workers engaged in various forms of *repressive* and *expressive* emotional labors (Hoang 2010). Despite the enormous amount of research on sex workers' performance of emotional labor, very few scholars have paid particular attention to how male clients view, interpret, and respond to these acts. Studies of emotional labor highlight how sex workers feign emotions such as love and care, duping their clients into feeling sympathy and concern (Brennan 2004). Rhacel Parrenas (2011) highlights various ways in which the Filipina women she studied in Japan cultivated *emotional capital* by naturalizing flirtation in their mannerisms and actions in order to make customers feel a sense of attachment towards their workers.

By 2009, however, I found that several of the clients in my study were well aware of the multiple ways in which sex workers duped men. Through gossip networks, male clients had become fully aware that workers were not honest, and they began to see their interactions with sex workers as part of a "game" which they also played. Hai a 56-year-old local Vietnamese client who was a regular patron of Khong Sao Bar said to me:

The only way to really understand their lives is to get in there and work with them. No man who comes in here will ever know what goes on behind those doors [because] when we come in here they put on a show. They play a part and we play a part. They will make up stories and tell us things that are not true because none of them want us to know their real lives.

After working in the bar for several weeks, I saw how men also performed an act. They pretended to care for the women because the more the women knew about them, the more they seemed like regulars or seasoned clients who knew the rules of the game inside the bar. There were two reasons why men role-played in the bars. First, role-playing made local Vietnamese, Asian, and *Viet Kieu* clients look good in front of their friends. For Western expatriates and tourists role playing allowed them to escape into their fantasies. Men would ask about workers' families knowing that workers never really told the truth, but they played along because their relationships in the bars were all part of a performance, playing into their clients' desires and allowing men to escape for awhile.

Role playing inside of Khong Sao Bar was always two sided as men had pretend "wives" and female sex workers had pretend "husbands." The regulars referred to their women as their wives and would often listen when their wives asked them to drink more or slow down. They would also sing duets together as husband and wife, performing "fake" affection and love for each other that was clearly bounded by the bar. Mostly, workers had no idea what their clients really did outside of the bar, unless they were the big bosses in a company. The uncertainty surrounding their clients' status and identity enabled some clients to step into a place where these men could perform and feign care or concern for the workers in exchange for special treatment inside the bars that marked them as distinctive in the eyes of their business partners. Men also tried to feign care to see if they could coax sex workers to have sex without having to pay. Thus, the emotional boundaries for male clients were just as porous for female sex workers; both groups engaged in emotional, fantasy-laden performances within the bar.

Overseas *Viet Kieu* men also repeatedly told me that they knew sex workers played emotional games with them, and they, too, understood the rules of the game and played back. For example, Duy a twenty-six year old *Viet Kieu*, said to me:

Everyone in Saigon knows that you cannot really trust these girls. They all lie. I know that they have multiple boyfriends and that they make up stories about their lives. I would never marry one of these girls. But, it is a game, those are the rules, and that is how you have to play.... They come and flirt with you, make you feel good, you pay them a tip and you leave.

I asked him how he learned the "rules" of this game, and he said, "by watching other people, or making mistakes." He described one of his mistakes:

The first time I came to Vietnam, I think it was in 2005. I was very naive. I remember going into a bar and all these pretty girls came to drink with me. I was like 'oh shit this is cool yo!' We took them out to eat late night food and then one girl came home with me and another one with my boy. I was not sure if they were hookers or not. I couldn't tell. We did our thing you know and then in the morning she started crying, telling me how poor her family is and shit. I did not know what to do. The same thing happened to my friend and so he gave the girl money. But I did not want to give her money. So then she asked me to take her down and get her a cab, and when the cab came, she started screaming and crying on the street in front of all these people. I was embarrassed so I slipped her \$100 dollars.... So now I know, if I take a girl home from the club I need to give her

'taxi' money when she is on her way out. That way I don't have to make her ask and she does not have to embarrass me in public.

The male clients with whom I spoke often learned the "rules of the game" or the "appropriate behaviors" through the mistakes that they made with workers who sometimes corrected them in subtle ways, or as in the case of Duy described, corrected them in directly public ways. These slippages where clients made mistakes or broke from sex workers' expectations actually help to create boundaries and reinforce norms around appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in their interactions with sex workers.

Sam a white thirty-nine year-old attorney from the United States who was working for an American firm based in Vietnam said to me:

You probably think that all of the men in this bar are stupid... that we all fall for these girl's stories. They lie, Kim; it is all lies. We lie to them about our lives and they lie to us about their lives... but that is all part of it. No one is trying to get to the bottom of all of this and find out the "truth." We all play a role and as long as everyone sticks to that it is ok.

I asked Sam, "What are the rules in this bar? Or how would you know if you broke the rules?" He responded:

You come in and flirt with them. Tell them that you think that they are pretty. Ask them if they missed you and how they are doing. Sometimes you do not talk very much you just sit there and they sit there next to you. There is comfort in company. You always offer to buy them a drink and then at the end of the night you know that you have to tip them. Some bars have a standard tip and other bars it is up to you. Sometimes I bring them gifts. These girls love perfumes and chocolates that you can buy in the airports.

Sam described to me a set of norms that guided interaction around the bar that did not revolve around authentic emotions of care or love. Instead, Sam described a place where men could engage in a play with the workers. They could create a relationship inside the bar that sometimes led to relations outside of the bar. However, uncovering the truth was no longer the goal. Rather the goal was to understand the set of norms that guided their interactions within the bar so that they could play by the rules.

Some clients developed long-term relations or friendships with a few workers; those relationships also involved a certain level of play. Howard, a 39-year-old expatriate from Sweden, told me about his experience with games and play:

I have known this one worker for 3 years now and I still do not know very much about her. I know that she cares about me a lot but she does not really let me in. I like going into the bar to see her everyday because I feel comfortable there. It is predictable. I go in and have the same conversation with her every night in simple English. Someone could write a short story about this because it is the same script every single night. I come in tell her I missed her, I think she look beautiful, she

asks me about my day, and has a few drinks with me. Sometimes we have sex and that is it.

Even for men who engaged in long-term relations with workers, these relations were bound by a set of predictable scripts that allowed clients to feel comfortable. As Howard said, when he walked into a bar, he too engaged in an emotional performance by telling a woman whom he saw on a regular basis that he missed her and thought that she was beautiful.

These games became particularly apparent when new clients came in with friends who were regulars. The newer clients were always more reserved on their first or second visit where they watched to see how their friends, who were regulars in the bar, interacted with workers. Often, I listened in as men coached each other on what were appropriate and inappropriate behaviors within the bar. They informed each other of the unspoken set of rules or norms that guided interactions between workers and clients in the bar.

For example, one night while I was working behind the bar in Secrets, I listened in as Kevin, a regular client, gave his friend, Joseph, the inside scoop. Kevin said:

The girls in this bar are really nice. They are very low-key. You can talk and flirt with them with no pressure. If you like them *you* ask them to meet you afterwards for about \$100 USD. If you flirt and have fun with them, sometimes they will go for \$75 USD. It is a game. They play it and you play it. As long as you treat them with respect, everyone has fun.

The play or fun framing that Kevin uses helps both him and the workers handle the potential stigma of paid sex. In addition, conversations like the ones between Kevin and Joseph helped to reinforce the scripts that men use in their interactions with sex workers in the bar. These scripts involved the client's participation in and response to the affective labor of the workers. The performance of affect is not just one-sided. Indeed clients paid for a service from sex workers who worked as bartenders and hostesses. However, the clients responded, reacted, and engaged in their own performances in the bars.

Like the wealthy local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, *Viet Kieu* men, and Western expatriates all accepted play and the performance of care and concern as part of the understandings guiding their interactions in the bars; the clients in the backpackers sector also engaged in a performance. However, the clients in the backpackers sector also believed that after a few "fake" interactions at the beginning, they would eventually get to know the authentic side of female sex workers. Daniel a 29-year-old Australian man, said to me:

All of these girls in here are hustlers. At the end of the day they are trying to make money. So with some men they will flirt, f*** [have sex], and then you pay. With me, I actually want to get to know them. I want to understand their lives more. I can flirt, but if I show that I care more than other guys, they will show me more of their real selves. I cannot do that with money. [I ask him how he does it.] ... You know... feelings showing them that I give a damn.

For Daniel, getting to know a workers' real side meant that he had to show some of his own feelings and emotions. He had to show that he cared about them in order to move the relationship forward from a client-worker framing to one where the boundaries between sex-for-money and

sex-for-love were blurred. Thus, Daniel engaged in a performance of emotion work, but for a different purpose. Unlike, the clients in the three other sectors who were satisfied with having surface-level relationships bounded within the bars, Western expatriates and budget travelers sometimes wanted to have longer lasting relationships. The desire to have longer relationships meant that they, too, had to engage in the performance of affect and care that sometimes shape into more authentic spontaneous feelings of love and care. The clients' emotional care made some men feel that they had deeper, more authentic relations with sex workers, while it allowed other men to engage in sexual relationships where the boundaries around payment were less clear. The blurred boundaries made some men feel like they were, in effect, duping women into having sex with them without pay. I next examine different relationships of intimacy that emerged with respect to the moral codes that guided sex workers' interactions with clients, and the emotion work that men performed as part of this staged play.

Boundaries between Intimate Exchanges and Relational Exchanges

The mommies in each bar held similar moral philosophies with respect to worker-client relationship. While Rhacel Parrenas (2010) highlights the moral boundaries that hostesses workers in Japan held with respect to having sex-for-money, my focus is on the moral compass workers used to guide their relations of emotional intimacy. While the mommies cautioned their workers not to fall in love with their clients too easily, they differed in their views about the possibility of long-term relations. The table below provides an overview of the differing sexual, intimate, and relational exchanges that workers did have with their clients.

Table 4.1: Sexual, Intimate, and Relational Exchanges

<u>Relations</u>	<u>Duration</u>	<u>Clients/Sectors</u>
<i>Sexual exchange</i> (only sex and money are exchanged)	Short one-time interaction.	Local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, <i>Viet Kieu</i> men, and Western tourists on a budget
<i>Intimate exchange</i> (sex, gifts, money, and intimacy are exchanged)	Short-term intimate relationships where marriage and migration are not the end goal	Local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and <i>Viet Kieu</i> men
<i>Relational Exchange</i> (sex, gifts, and money are exchanged)	Short-term and long-term remittance <i>relationships</i> that often develop into boyfriend/girlfriend, and for some, eventually husband/wife relations	Western expatriates and Western tourists traveling on a budget

The mommies in the bars that catered to local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men all held strict rules around dating and relationships. Hanh, Tho, and Duyen, all believed that it was ok to have relationships with men outside of the bar, but workers should never devote all of their time to one man. They also warned workers that falling in love with a client would lead them down a difficult path. Hanh, for example, said:

In this business you cannot fall in love. Do not be stupid and fall in love. These men are married already and they have a responsibility to their wives and their wives' families. It is bad karma to break up a marriage. You have to respect the wife and her place by knowing your place as always second. Many men loved me and they wanted to marry me. They promised to leave their wives for me. But if I did that, I would be stuck to him. I am free now to do what I want; no one controls me.

Tho and Huyen expressed similar sentiments about falling in love. One evening while business was slow, I listened as Tho lectured the sex workers in the bar. She said:

Viet Kieu men will always flirt and have fun. They come here to play and then they will leave. They will tell you that they want to marry you so they can use you for free sex. Some will marry you but most of them will marry a girl that they met through their families. You can have fun with them but do not fall in love because you will fall hard and it will hurt.

Although workers certainly fell in love with their clients, most found themselves back in the bar within a few months. Many of the women who worked in Khong Sao Bar and Lavender often referred to their work as part of a business where they served as the mistress for many men. Thi, a twenty-year-old worker in Lavender, said to me:

Sometimes I dream about meeting the right person and falling in love, but right now I care more about money than love. The men I work for will never marry someone like me; they have wives and women who their families know and accept. If I fall in love with one person, I cannot have many men take care of me.

Thi understood her place as a mistress or a lover and never as the wife in her relations with the men in the bar. She also knew that falling in love with someone would limit her ability to generate an income, and at that time, money was more important to her than love. Like Thi, many of the workers often spoke of their quest for wealth as an active decision to hold off on love and marriage temporarily. None of these women had in mind an image or dream of what their long term futures would be like or if they would ever settle down. The moral boundaries related to emotions of love and care meant that workers in Khong Sao Bar and in Lavender had short-term exchanges with their clients that were intimate sometimes lasting several months to a year. However these relations probably will not evolve into long-term marital partnerships. Moreover, most working in Khong Sao Bar understood that the time they had with their clients was limited and that eventually the men will move on to someone else.

The structure of relationships was different for women who catered to Western men. Lilly opened what she called a "relationship bar" which was distinct from a "hooker bar" because the workers did not engage in direct sex-for-money exchanges in an explicit way. In opening the bar, Lilly hoped to target Western expatriates living and working in Vietnam on a long-term basis. On several occasions I listened as Lilly advised the women working in her bar:

I pay to you work here so you do not have to sleep with men for money. Men out there are all the same. They play and then they get bored. If you are too easy they

will say ok then play with someone else. You [should] date many men and then you fall in love later.

Lilly advised her workers to date many men and then decide later so that they could take their pick among a lot of different men. She wanted the workers to engage in long-term relations with men who were committed to them and who were willing to help them experience mobility.

I discuss the different pathways of upward mobility in greater detail in Chapter 7. However, in this chapter I want to highlight the norms in the bar that revolve not on short-term sex-for-money exchanges but rather on the long term relationships that Lilly encouraged her workers to eventually develop. While sitting in the bar late one evening she said to me [in English]:

This is a relationship bar. Smart girl will have a long time relationship with a man and get him to help her set up a business, help her family, or build a house. I don't like the dirty backpacker or the *Viet Kieu* who lie and pretend to have a lot of money.

The logic behind the investment in long-term relationships is that it allows women to relax a bit so that they will not feel as though they have to hustle to get money from their clients. Lilly, who once herself worked in a bar in the backpacker's district that catered to Western men traveling on a budget, recalls her own feelings of desperation which compelled her to have sex-for-money in order to help take care of her family. She did not want her workers to experience that desperation, and preferred that they have a base that they can always turn to in times of need—their monthly salary. That way the workers could invest in longer-term relationships for more money. Lilly pointed to a number of workers who had multiple boyfriends and spent thousands of dollars rebuilding their family's village homes. She also pointed to the number of boyfriends that helped her former workers open a small business and venture out on their own. Her eyes were set on the longer-term gains that her workers could reap by having multiple boyfriends, rather on the short-term gains from direct sex-for-money exchanges.

During my time working in Secrets, the clients talked with one other about how they “knew” that the women in the bar had “boyfriends” or relationships outside of the bar. They understood that these relationships sometimes involved direct sex-for-money exchanges while at other times involving longer-term commitments. However, the men rarely learned whom the workers did or did not have relations with. This mystery enabled workers to capitalize on the clients' anxieties by leading multiple men to believe that they were the “only” ones they loved or cared for. Workers often associated money with care. That is, if a client provided them her a comfortable standard of living and/or was willing to help out her family, he did so because he loved or cared for her. Many of the workers talked about how clients bought them small gifts, took them on trips throughout Southeast Asia, gave them small amounts of money here and there to pay for little things, and sometimes gave them lump sums of money to help their families.

All of the women told me that they wanted to hold out for the client that could take the best care of them. This meant that women had “multiple” boyfriends in the process of selecting long-term partners. During my time working in the bar, two of the women who had been working there for over a year had long-term relationships with multiple men and decided that it was time to settle down with one of their clients. I went to two bachelorette parties and attended

both of their weddings. The work culture at Secrets created a structure where workers no longer saw men as just clients but also as potential boyfriends and even husbands.

Women who catered to Western backpackers in Naughty Girls were much more direct than the workers in Secrets. The workers in this sector, serving western tourists, engaged in the most explicit direct sex-for-money exchanges with their clients. Tourists were on the move, and these fleeting encounters led sex workers to engage in direct conversations with their clients about sex-for-money rather than dealing in the round-about style used by women in the higher end sectors. Women in the tourist sector did not make a salary, so they could spend 10-12 hours a day at work without making any money. Thus they were much more likely to have sex with men whom they did not find attractive or alluring. However, women in this sector had both a short-term and a long-term strategy for acquiring money. While they certainly engaged in direct sex-for-money exchanges, the women in Naughty Girls also worked hard to develop long-term remittance relationships with their clients by using cellular phone text messaging, internet instant messaging, and email.

Like the women in Secrets, those I met in Naughty Girls worked hard to have and keep multiple “boyfriends,” who would often send them long-term remittances to help them quit sex work and find a more “respectable trade.” Women asked for money to take English classes, sewing classes, or to go to beauty school. Their clients indeed sent large amounts of money via Western Union to help pay for expenses that were part of the women’s everyday lives. I observed that clients also sent money to help pay off worker’s debts, care for an ailing family member, or to help them start a business. However, as I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 7, the men were not always easily duped for cash. Therefore, workers had to establish long-term relationships with them in order to build ties and establish trust. They needed clients to sympathize with their fate as Third World subjects caught in global poverty because clients’ empathy motivated them to send large remittances.

The moral compass the women used to establish boundaries around “love” created different structures of intimacy within the bars. Workers who catered to local Vietnamese men and their Asian Business partners in Khong Sao Bar and the workers who catered to *Viet Kieu* men in Lavender engaged in *intimate exchanges* with their clients that involved short-term encounters bounded inside of the bar. Those who became hired girlfriends did so knowing that they would have to return to the bar in a few months when their client decided to cycle to another woman. Women who catered to Western men in Secrets and in Naughty Girls engaged in *relational exchanges* that involved both short-term and longer-term committed relations.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the organizational structure of sex work and the moral codes that guided management of the bar, relations with clients, and relations among workers. Contrary to popular media accounts of human trafficking, the women in my project were not trafficked or forced into sex work. In fact, most of them entered sex work because the labor conditions in the bar were much better than the labor conditions in the factories or homes where they worked as domestic workers. Moreover, contrary to popular belief and the findings of studies done elsewhere, all 90 of the workers in my project believed in creating a working environment that was collaborative and collective. Workers shared clothing, tips on how to engage with clients, and life stories with one another, among many things, which built and sustained strong ties

among them. These bonds led workers to come into the bar on their days off where they celebrated their birthdays, engagements, and mourned the deaths of family members together.

A whole body of literature has documented the emotional labor that sex workers provide for their clients, but this perspective, informed by Marxist approaches to the labor process, has overlooked the *interactive* dimension of service work. As I have demonstrated, when men enter into the space of these bars, they, too, engage in emotion work, sometimes performing care and concern to keep a relationship going while at other times relying on the relationship to make them look good amongst their friends or in attempts to get free sex. Clients and sex workers engage in an interactive process in their performances with one other, performances that in are bounded within the bar in the higher-paying sectors. In contrast, workers who cater to Western expatriates and backpackers often engage in relational exchanges with their clients both inside and outside of the bar. The scripts that guide interaction in the bar are crucial because they provide clients with a sense of comfort and predictability, allowing men to feel as though they are partly in control of the interactions that take place inside of the bars.

Finally, this chapter has shown how the structuring of bars with different types of clients led to differing relations of emotional intimacy. Workers who catered to local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men all engaged in *intimate exchanges* that were short-term and often bound to the bar. Workers who catered to Western expats and budget travelers engaged in *relational exchanges* that involved both short-term interactions and long-term committed relationships. The next two chapters detail the gendered performances of modern masculinities and femininities, and show how they map onto changes in the global economy.

Chapter 5
Global Masculinities:
Male Clients and the Reconfiguration of Racialized and Class-differentiated Hierarchies

Introduction

In the late 1990s, R.W. Connell (1998) expanded research on masculinities by examining how processes of globalization influence configurations of gender. Connell (2000) argued that “to understand masculinities on a world scale we need to have a concept of the globalization of gender” (40). A focus on global processes analyzes how large-scale institutions like the state are gendered and how international relations, international trade, and global markets are inherently, not accidentally, arenas of gender formation (Enloe 1990). While this framework is fruitful, it does not provide us with the conceptual tools to examine how men are situated in both local and global contexts. Currently, we do not have a way of theorizing the dual-level experiences of individual men who perceive the impact of the global economy on their own positions and the practices in which they engage to assert their place as men in their imagined world order. In fact, very few studies have examined how individual men’s shifting masculinities manifest changes in the global economy (Ouzgane 2006). This chapter addresses these gaps and empirically grounds theories of masculinity in two ways. First, I examine how male clients navigate various global forces in HCMC’s sex industry to enhance their social and economic position in the global economy (Gille and Riain 2002). I argue that masculinities exist not only in gendered relations between individuals or in large-scale social structures but they also emerge through individual responses to global economic changes. This chapter illustrates how *shifting* constructions of dominant and subordinate masculinities reflect fluctuations in the global economy and postcolonial histories of racialized desires. It is crucial to include a global perspective from the ground up because geopolitical struggles, global markets, and the movements of people across borders are important lenses through which to examine shifting gendered transformations. This chapter, therefore, extends the sociology of masculinities by calling for *globally grounded masculinities* research that takes a perspective of transnationalism from below (Smith and Guarnizo 1998). This approach is premised on the idea that studies of masculinities need to empirically examine how the movement of global capital around the world affects power relations, cultural constructions, economic interactions, and more generally social organization at the level of the locality and the individual.

This chapter also explores connections of varied types of masculinity to varied positions in gendered, racialized, and class-differentiated hierarchies in the global order. Rather than constructing static typologies to describe each niche market, I examine how the men I studied collectively drew upon intersecting classed, racialized, and gendered relations in the making of masculinities across four niche markets of HCMC’s sex industry. Multiple masculinities are “constructed by global forces” and “men, in all of their diversity, are positioned” and actively position themselves in a global society (Connell 2000:33).

My approach to these themes is both theoretical and ethnographic.⁸ Examining ethnographic data from my participant observations and informal interviews with 90 clients from

⁸ There is a large population of poor local Vietnamese men who participate in HCMC’s sex industry. This paper does not examine those men because they are not embedded in global networks. For more on this group, see [Hoang, Kimberly. 2010. "Economies of Emotion,

four different sectors of sex work, I found that there was not one hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) in the particular global order that came into view in HCMC. Rather male client in each niche market draw on differing relations and discourses of social class, nation, racialized ethnicity and gender to construct themselves as dominant men in their spaces within HCMC's contemporary global economy of sex. Hostess bars provided local Vietnamese and Asian businessmen with the space to reconfigure their masculinity and assert a sense of security and dignity, protecting their uncertain positions in a rapidly shifting global economy. For *Viet Kieu* men, the sex industry allows them to engage in a transnational masculinity and convert their hard-earned Western dollars into luxury and status in Vietnam. Histories of colonialism and racialized desires figure into both white expatriates' and backpacker's racialized displays of masculinity. However, expatriates worked hard to differentiate themselves as more cosmopolitan than poor backpackers who came to Vietnam to explore a poor Third-World country. In the face of rapid economic restructuring in Vietnam's transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy men negotiate, resist, and construct multiple dominant masculinities.

Global Men in Ho Chi Minh City's Contemporary Sex Industry

The global sex industry provides an exemplary site to examine the ways in which men construct their masculinities through patterns of consumption (Ehrenreich 1983) not only in relation to female sex workers through the purchase of sex but also in relation to other men. Surprisingly, although the literature on sex work has rapidly grown over the years, very few scholars have examined the behaviors, motivations, or desires of male clients (Weitzer 2009). In the last ten years, a small group of scholars moved to deconstruct narratives of male clients as a monolithic group of men looking to exert control over women (Bernstein 2007; Monto 2000; O'Connell Davidson 2003; Perkins 1999; Prasad 1999; Sanders 2008). These researchers have written about clients as lonely men (Flowers 1998) who seek love (Brennan 2004), emotional intimacy (Sanders 2008), or a "girlfriend experience" (Bernstein 2007). Despite this recent scholarly attention to the male clientele of female sex workers, however, Suowei Xiao (2009) and Anne Allison (1994) are among the few scholars who have examined sex work as a site for the performance and production of specific masculinities in a rapidly developing economy. Moreover, studies of male clients around the world rarely employ a comparative perspective that highlights racialized, class-based, and transnational *differences among men* in different client niche markets using multiple strategies to assert themselves as men.

Theorizing Masculinities

In the mid-1980s, sociologists proposed a new sociology of masculinity that was grounded in feminist theory and examined the relations of power among men and between men and women (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985). Scholars of masculinity launched a critical study of men's behaviors, practices, values, and perspectives understood as part of a hierarchal system of gendered social relations (Whitehead and Barrett 2001). A body of literature emerged that interrogates the multiplicity of masculinities that account for the *differences among men's* varied

experiences (Connell 1995; Connell 2000). Scholars have examined dominant and subordinate forms of masculinities that are embedded in interpersonal relationships (Pyke 1996), as well as in social institutions like families (Townsend 2002), workplaces (Cooper 2000; Ray and Qayum 2010), schools (Francis and Skelton 2001; Pascoe 2007), sports (Messner 1989), and in prisons (Reich 2010). Research on masculinities has led to the construction of specific typologies: gay (Nardi 2000), Black (Ferguson 2000), Chicano (Gutmann 1996), Asian (Louie and Low 2003), working class and middle class (Pyke 1996), and transnational business (Connell 1998), to name a few. This research has focused overwhelmingly on the construction of masculinities along intersecting categories of social class, race relations, and sexual orientation.

Theorists of masculinities argue that researchers have to understand the social character of gender through a *relational approach* to differences and hierarchies among men and relations between men and women (Connell 2000). Critical studies of men take into consideration differences in beliefs and practices among men by invoking masculinities in the plural to account for how individuals *practice multiple masculinities* embedded in hierarchical *relations* with one another through diverse range of experiences (Connell 1995).

Masculinity, “as an object of knowledge, is always masculinity-in-relation” (Connell 1995: 44). That is, studying masculinity involves more than just the study of men and what men do. In her book *Dude, You’re a Fag*, CJ Pascoe (2007) asserts that scholars need to focus on the methods through which “masculinity is produced and manifested in relation to a multiplicity of bodies, spaces, and objects... through a variety of discourses and practices” (9). Scholars who study masculinity have cautioned researchers about ways in which reifying biological categories of male and female distorts the facts of human physical variation (Fausto-Sterling 1995). One cannot assume that the male body is the location of masculinity, because women can enact masculinity as well (Halberstam 1998; Pascoe 2007). Rather than focusing on gendered norms, Jennifer Carlson (2011) argues that researchers should examine masculinity as a form of subjectivity that is achieved through the ways that subjects *relate to* gendered norms. This chapter expands theories of masculinities by looking at how male clients construct themselves as masculine subjects in relation to globalizing gendered norms continually reconfigured in a multilayered context of intersecting social positions within HCMC’s local sex industry.

The field of sex work, which involves the commodification of women’s bodies for male consumption, is one of the most explicit sites of male dominance because the sale of sex is an overt mechanism that allows men to achieve masculinity through practices of consumption (Ehrenreich 1983). In light of the argument that masculinity is a *situational* accomplishment (Kersten 1996) that is negotiated implicitly and explicitly over a wide range of situations and interactions (Copes and Hochstetler 2003; Morgan 1992), I argue that male subjects shift their social location within global and local class-differentiated and racialized nation-based hierarchies through their relations with other men and women in HCMC’s sex industry. Significantly, when men fail to achieve their masculinity through classed and racialized relations, they rely on relations with women to help them achieve their desired masculinity. That is, when men cannot achieve their masculinity in relation to other men, through their displays of wealth, or their ability to consume large quantities of alcohol, they rely on their relations with female hostesses to help them achieve their masculinity.

Connell (1998) introduced the concept of *transnational business masculinity* to refer to business executives who operate in global markets. Transnational business masculinity refers mainly to the movement of men from developed countries whose passports and income allow them to move freely across the boundaries of nation states. In this chapter, I extend Connell’s

concept by providing a much more specific engagement with global and transnational macroeconomic changes (Connell 1998; Gutmann 1996; Jones 2006; Morrell and Swart 2005). The literature on global masculinities currently employs a very top-down approach, analyzing gendered dimensions of large-scale structures like nation states, multi-national corporations, and global markets. This framework obscures what I call *globally grounded masculinities*, which can be brought into view through a more nuanced analysis that attends to the unevenness of globalization in different settings and to situated interactions embodying both global and local relations. I also enrich the study of transnational masculinities by focusing on individuals who live in a developing nation and who capitalize on global economic restructuring to reconfigure intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, and class from the ground up.

Empirically, nearly all of the research on men in the global context has focused on how *marginal men* cope with shifting gendered configurations (Kimmel 2010; Pingol 2001). Such research examines how local men in developing nations cope with the outmigration of women from the global south to fill the care deficit in the global north (Hochschild 2002) as women migrate to richer countries to work as nannies or maids, or as service workers in hotels and restaurants (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Sassen 1998). Previous research, however, assumes that all men from developing nations are marginal and ignores the impact of globalization on the men who occupy economically dominant positions in developing economies.

By incorporating a transnationalism-from-below perspective (Smith and Guarnizo 1998), I argue that for the need to interrogate how dominant men in marginal countries structure their masculinity in relation to the global economic order. Chandra Mohanty (2002) argues that transnational feminist work must “be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes” (501). Mohanty (2003) draws upon Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash’s (1998) conceptualization of “One-Third World” versus “Two-Thirds World” to shift the focus away from terms like *Western and Third World* or *North* (transnational capital)/*South* (marginalized poor) and draws critical attention to the continuities as well as discontinuities between the haves and have-nots *within* boundaries of nations and between nations.

Situating contemporary studies of masculinities within a transnational feminist perspective, I show that economically powerful men in developing countries construct their masculinities differently from economically weak men from developed nations. Moreover, by moving away from binary constructions of First World and Third World, I adopt an analytical framework that distinguishes between local, regional, and global masculinities (Pease and Pringle 2001), which allows me to “recognize the importance of place without falling into a monadic world of independent cultures and discourses” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:849).

Globally Grounded Men across Class-differentiated, Racialized, and Gendered Relations

The table below provides an overview of the four sectors, which cater to the racially and economically diverse group of global and local clients that I analyze in this chapter. Male clients in each niche market compare themselves to different groups of men and highlight different classed, racialized, and gendered relations in order to construct themselves as dominant men in the context of Vietnam’s shifting position in the global economy.

Table 5.0: Global and Local Clients in the Making of Multiple Masculinities

Men	Comparison Groups	Class/Status Relations	Racial and National Relations	Gendered Relations
Local Vietnamese clients and Asian Businessmen	Viet Kieu and white men	Use of liquid cash (rather than credit) to triumph over US; to show Vietnam is no longer a poor country or subordinate to the US.	The use of the former political term <i>Viet Cong</i> as implicit revenge against the colonial past and white men.	Masculinity enacted through cash and alcohol consumption; secondarily women
Viet Kieu Clients (Overseas VN who return to VN)	Viet Cong and White men	Can assert classed status against white men; but compared with <i>Viet Cong</i> they have lost status because they cannot consume the same way.	Local Victory- the idea that they are bigger in Vietnam than back at home. They want to catch the wave in “Asia” as things are growing and the US economy is failing	Women embody or represent home. Comparisons to Viet Kieu or Western women back at home who are too “feminist”
Western Expatriate Clients	Western men living back at home in the US, Europe, Canada, or Australia who embody a hegemonic masculinity	There is a silent comparison group to the younger more successful men back at home. They have failed in that playground and are looking to succeed in this playground.	Relation to women’s racialized bodies and local VN men’s racialized bodies (genital size etc)	They want to feel like they are the “desired one”. They were chosen, unlike the white backpackers who have to “pay for sex”
Western Tourists/ Budget Travelers	White men back at home who make them feel subordinate	They cannot provide for women back at home but can provide for women in Asia	In relation to women and women’s bodies	They can be the economic providers to the women in VN because of VN’s status as a third world country

***This is how the Viet Cong play!:* Wealthy Vietnamese and Asian Businessmen**

At Khong Sao Bar, the majority of clients were local Vietnamese businessmen who came with men from other provinces or Asian business partners. To reserve a room in the bar, the clients had to know one of the mommies and be part of a particular network because of the bar’s exclusivity. The clients in this sector came from some of Vietnam’s top finance, real estate, and trade companies. They usually came in three to four nights a week, spending an average of \$1000 - \$2000 USD per night and \$15,000 - \$20,000 USD per month. Hostesses sat, drank, sang,

and danced with clients and would often leave the bar for paid sex. Hostesses earned roughly \$2000 USD per month on tips for accompanying men at their tables and \$150-\$200 USD for each sexual encounter. The three mommies who ran the bar earned \$3000-\$4000 per month in tips and got a small percentage of all alcohol sales in the bar. They did not take any cuts from the hostesses' earnings.⁹

Local men who had access to capital through FDI investment projects actively worked to shift their place in global racialized and class-differentiated hierarchies. Khong Sao Bar provided them with the space to assert dominant status in relation to other Asian businessmen, *Viet Kieus*, and Westerners. Wealthy local Vietnamese men like Chu Xanh enacted their masculinity in relation to other men through male rituals (Allison 1994; Xiao 2009) comprised of three main dimensions: shame, cash, and their bodies. Local men always ordered Johnnie Walker Blue Label (a bottle of whisky worth \$250 USD) and they typically consumed four to eight bottles a night without ever asking to see the menu or inquiring about the prices. Blue Label enabled them to entertain their guests while simultaneously demonstrating that they were moneyed men. They also used cash as a medium to draw symbolic boundaries and create distinctions (Lamont and Molnar 2002), carrying around large stacks of \$500,000 VND bills, which they flashed around in the karaoke rooms in front of hostesses and Asian businessmen. Vietnamese men wanted local sex workers to understand that foreigners were passé and that locals were the clients with the money. Local Vietnamese men turned hostess workers into audiences making power distinctions among men. On several occasions, a group of clients would come into the bar and invite all 35 of the working women into their room. At the end of the night, they would have the women line up and hand each a \$500,000 VND bill saying, "*Have you ever seen white or Viet Kieu men tip like that?*" The act of passing out crisp \$500,000 VND bills provided clients with a way to enact a particular class-marked masculinity through the medium of hard cash. Masculinity in this situation was about money.

In addition, I listened almost every day to local men's comments about how they purchased cars, homes, and commercial properties in one cash payment without having to take out loans. Once when I was sitting at a table with Chu Xanh, and his business partners, he turned to me and said:

What other place in the world plays like this? We take these men around in Bentleys worth half a million US dollars paid in cash and [we] take them to high-end bars. Even in America, white men do not spend this much money on entertainment. It would be like driving a house in Little Saigon [Orange Country, CA] around on the streets of Saigon... And they don't even own their homes! The Viet Kieu years in Vietnam are over. Not it is the Viet Cong time. Asia is where all of the money is now [and the] Vietnamese have a lot of money!

⁹ The clients in the bar usually tipped the mommies double what the hostesses got tipped, or 1,000,000 VND (\$60 dollars) per table. None of the women working in the bar were ever forced or even pressured to go overnight with a client. At that time, however, I was the only hostess working in the bar who did not go with any of the clients. Most of the women would go after becoming familiar with a client or if clients were Asian businessmen brought in by trusted local Vietnamese men.

Wealthy local Vietnamese men's assertions of themselves as dominant were linked to histories of colonialism, as well as to the contemporary political economy. These men consistently referred to themselves as the *Viet Cong*, a term that in the past referred to the political organization that fought the United States and the South Vietnamese governments during the Vietnam War. While the term *Viet Cong* was once used to refer to a political group, local elites had begun to employ it to refer to their superior economic status in relation to Western and *Viet Kieu* men. *Viet Kieu*'s were coming to Vietnam in larger numbers, seeking to ride the wave of economic growth and to reassert themselves, via their patronization of the sex industry, as better than white men.

Vietnam's economy had grown nearly 8% each year since 2006, and many of the men in this sector had directly benefited from these capital gains as they secured investments and engaged in land development projects and trade. Local Vietnamese businessmen were also aware of the global economic crisis that hit the United States and Europe. Thus, while there had not been significant material shifts in the local economy vis-à-vis the West, there had been a large cultural shift in these men's local imaginary. Nearly all of the clients in my project believed that the global center was in the midst of a major shift away from the West to Asia. As Vietnam's economy continued to grow and develop in the midst of a global economic crisis, the men tried to capitalize on this global realignment and to reconfigure their masculinity as "better than" Westerners. By consuming with cash, they indirectly mocked Westerners who relied on the credit system. Local men used cash as a medium for asserting their dominance in relation to Westerners not only because they actually owned their cars and homes, but also because they had paid a 100% luxury tax on their cars. Paying *more* for alcohol, luxury goods, and women through luxury taxes became a means through which local men asserted their masculinity. Therefore, cash became the currency through which they asserted their status in front of everyone in the room. Cash enabled affluent local men to show that they possessed the most wealth, and that they could consume at levels that were sometimes unimaginable to foreign men.

When entertaining their Asian business partners, Viet Cong men often used cultural tools of shame familiar to Asian businessmen in enacting their masculinity. For example, one night after spending about two hours drinking and entertaining eight Taiwanese clients with hostesses in Khong Sao Bar, the lights went up and Chu Xanh asked Quan, the serviceman, for the bill. He said to Quan, "I paid for the bill three nights now. Give the bill to one of the Taiwanese men but do not take their money. I just want to see the shock on their face." Quan bowed and handed the bill to one of the Taiwanese men. The guest opened the bill, shuffled around nervously, and handed the bill to his Taiwanese partners. After a few words in Mandarin, they asked to split the bill. Chu Xanh turned to me and said in Vietnamese, "Tell the men that the Vietnamese do not split bills." I translated what he said with hand gestures and in broken English. The men fidgeted after my comment. Then Chu Xanh turned to me and said, "*Viet Cong troi vay do con gai*" ["This is how the Viet Cong play"]. Translate that." I translated while he picked up the bill, pulled out a wad of cash, and paid for it. Then, in front of all of the men, he pulled out a separate stack of bills and handed each woman a \$500,000 VND bill (\$30 USD). After the men left, Chu Xanh turned to me and said:

I have to show them that we are serious and that we have money. I entertain them; make sure that they have fun in Vietnam to build a relationship. In Vietnam you cannot do anything without relationships. I embarrassed them on purpose because I want them to know that Vietnam is not poor.

By having the servicemen hand over the bill to the Asian partners and forcing them to say that they did not have enough cash to cover the whole bill, local men actively employed shame to reconfigure their symbolic position in the world economy. Moreover, the affluent local men also asserted their dominance in relation to men from richer nations in the region. It was common to hear the local men refer to themselves as *Viet Cong*, a term that, only wealthy local businessmen used in the context of the bar, referring to their economic dominance rather than their political ties. While the term *Viet Cong* was a common term in 2009, I rarely heard the it while conducting research between 2006-2007. The term served as a symbolic form of revenge against Vietnam's colonial past. Combined with their use of cash, the term allowed local men to assert global economic status by linking their past political triumph over the U.S. to that country's perceived weakened position in the global economy due to the banking crisis.

Because Khong Sao was one of the most expensive bars in HCMC, not all of those who entered could engage in this type of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899:1994). Middle management men came to the bar without large amounts of cash that their bosses were able to throw around. These men, who could not use the dynamics of cash and shame to assert their masculinity in relation to other men at the table, would do so with their *bodies*: the masculinity of these middle managers was embodied in their ability to consume large quantities of alcohol without getting drunk. I watched as these men drank an assortment of medicines and ate ginger privately to prevent illness or hang overs the next day. Chu Minh said to me, "The key to drinking is to stay alert while your guests get drunk." Middle management men often had to shoulder the burden of entertaining when their bosses were tired, which helped their bosses save face in public. Anh Huy, a local banker, once said to me:

My boss is tired of entertaining so he handed the job over to me. They have been doing this for years and their stomachs are getting weak. In Vietnam, people still worry about their investments and so we have to build relationships to build trust. In Asia, that is how they have been doing business for centuries. With white men we just take them to dinner, maybe out for one or two drinks in a bar, and then they ask to go home.¹⁰

Men like Anh Huy willingly entertained because it enabled them to enact a class-differentiated masculinity not only for others, but also for their own sense of power, gratification, and entitlement. Being in these spaces made them feel as though they had special access to the ways in which moneyed men conducted business.

Those who failed at constructing their masculinity through mechanisms of shame, cash or embodiment were often ridiculed as being "gay (*be de*)," "womanlike (*giong cai*)," or "weak (*yeu ot*)."¹⁰ Male clients, who failed at enacting their masculinity in relation to other men, relied on relations with women to perform their masculinity. Sex workers were the targets of men who did

¹⁰ The local Vietnamese men whom I studied certainly engaged in business relations with Western businessmen. However, most of the business meetings took place in formal conference rooms. When I inquired why these clients did not entertain Western men in the same way, the clients all told me that Asian clients expected to be entertained in Vietnam, whereas Western men did not like to visit these bars. If they took the Western men out for leisure activity, it was typically to a bar located in one of the five star hotels.

not embody this particular Vietnamese class-marked masculinity. Guests who were uncomfortable with the high level of consumption and who did not understand the norms that guided interaction in the bar would assert their masculinity *in relation to sex workers* by grabbing the women's breasts, and trying to kiss or touch them inappropriately. As such, the act of reaching for women's bodies show cases the failure of their masculinity in relation to other men. However, the women were not impressed by such displays, and they developed strategies to dismiss the men from this space where they clearly did not belong.

Michele Lamont (1992) argues that such drawing of symbolic boundaries captures processes of relationality across a wide range of locations. Symbolic boundaries work to include and exclude certain kinds of people, and they may be drawn in opposition to a single or multiple groups. The consumption patterns of wealthy locals set a standard in the bar, erecting boundaries around socioeconomic status and the changing configurations of Vietnam's rapidly developing economy. The enactment of masculinity that took place within these spaces was constructed less in relation to women, and more in relation to other regional and global masculinities. Hostess bars provided men with the space to erect boundaries and construct themselves as *Vietnamese* men of a certain class in the midst of rapid economic restructuring. By asserting their dominance through cash, shame, and embodied practices, local men capitalize on Vietnam's shifting position in the world economy to reconfigure their place in the global order and global racial hierarchies. Thus, as Mathew Guttman (1996) argues, by framing culture "not just as a space of distinctions but as a space of difference and struggle, where the underdog masses of men are inspired by a will to an identity," one can see how rich local Vietnamese men as the global underdogs actively worked to shift the meanings of dominant masculinities.

White Men Order Beer, We Order Bottles! : Viet Kieu Clients

At the start of my research, between 2006 and 2007, transnational *Viet Kieu* clients in my study came to Vietnam with foreign capital from first world nations. They were able to *convert* their Western dollars to consume at a much higher level in Vietnam's developing economy than they could at home (Carruthers 2002; Thai 2005). Until 2006, *Viet Kieu* remittance money was greater than FDI, and the West had not experienced an economic crisis. These conditions allowed low wage men from developed nations to acquire social status and respectability in Vietnam. However, by 2009, it was common to hear *Viet Kieu's* express a sense of loss of status in the local economy. Their US dollars were not worth as much in the local economy as prices soared and worldwide luxury brands like Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Burberry, and Jimmy Choo were introduced into the market. As one client put it, "the *Viet Kieu* years are over because locals have all the money." Local newspapers published numerous articles ridiculing overseas Vietnamese laborers for converting their Western dollars to inflate their social status in Vietnam. Some *Viet Kieu* men decided to pack up their lives and move to Vietnam in order to try to ride the wave of Vietnam's economic growth. Expatriate *Viet Kie'us* would sometimes jokingly say, "I'm not *Viet Kieu*. I'm *Viet Cong*," trying to disassociate themselves from *Viet Kieu's* who had begun to be seen as less cosmopolitan than affluent locals.

While *Viet Kieu's* accepted their inferiority in relation to wealthy local *Viet Cong*, they still operated in a higher paying niche of the sex industry than Western businessmen and tourists. *Viet Kieu* men engaged in a *transnational masculinity at the intersection of* racialized, class-differentiated, national, and gendered hierarchies. Many men still had families in Vietnam who served as cultural brokers in the local economy, were part of an ongoing back-and-forth

movement between their home countries in the diaspora and Vietnam, and spoke Vietnamese fluently, making them distinctly *transnational*.

Unlike the high-end bar that catered to wealthy locals, the bars that catered to *Viet Kieu* men were much more public and easily accessible, advertising themselves in local magazines and on Internet websites. In a scenario typical of bars in this sector, five to ten servicemen dressed in black would greet clients at the door, shake their hands, and walk them to a table. Inside, women called “promotion girls” moonlighted as sex workers. Promotion girls came to the table upon invitation, poured drinks, drank with the clients, and served as table decoration. At the end of the night, clients tipped the women roughly \$10 USD (\$200K VND) and might try to take a woman home for the night for roughly \$100 USD.

In these bars *Viet Kieu* men engaged in a particular display of transnational masculinity by consuming alcohol and sex in ways they could not imagine doing back in their home countries. Son, a 28-year-old *Viet Kieu* from New Jersey, said to me:

I don't go out much back at home because it's expensive and it's not fun trying to awkwardly hit on girls in a bar. At Lavender I walk in, order table service, and without having to say anything, there are girls ready to come sit at my table. Can you imagine walking into a club in New York with beautiful “promotion girls”? It would cost thousands of dollars for a table without women.

Bottle service was one key component that enabled *Viet Kieu* men to differentiate themselves from Western expatriates and tourists in HCMC. For instance, Hiep, a 35-year-old *Viet Kieu* from Texas said to me, “White guys are nothing in Vietnam. Back at home they think they are the shit but they got nothing on us Asians.” I asked, “How?” Hiep responded, “It's simple. White guys order beer, *Viet Kieu*'s order bottles, and, well, Vietnamese they order Blue.” *Viet Kieu* men return to Vietnam to develop a sense of rising associative status based on their perception that the economy in Asia is expanding while that of the US is failing. The masculinity they attempted to achieve was distinctly transnational as they worked to reconfigure racial hierarchies across national boundaries. In Vietnam's improving market economy, they could assert a local victory over white American men, whose country was seen to be in economic decline.

While many of the clients whom I studied acknowledged that they can no longer compete with *dai gia* (wealthy locals), the bars in Vietnam provides them with spaces in which they could to reconfigure racialized, nationally inflected hierarchies and assert their dominance over white men from Western nations. Many of these men experienced feelings of discrimination in their home countries in relation to white men, and the bars in HCMC provided them with a local place where they could contest and reconfigure, albeit temporarily, global racial hierarchies. This process came into view when I spoke with Trung, the owner of a bar that refused service to Western men on busy nights. Trung explained:

It sounds backwards, doesn't it, that we don't let white men into the clubs. In the US, people would say we are discriminating. But in Vietnam it is more about the business and how I can make money. White men are cheap. They order one or two beers and they stand and talk to each other for a long time [taking] up space. I could make more money with *Viet Kieus* who will order a bottle.

On several occasions, I stood outside with a group of *Viet Kieu* clients as they were escorted past a group of white Western men into the club. Once inside, the bar servicemen went out of their way to make the *Viet Kieu*'s feel like they were receiving five star service by bowing every time they took an order, lighting cigarettes, refilling the clients' cups with ice, pouring their drinks, escorting them to the bathroom, and sending women to their tables. Nguyen, a 46-year-old man from New York, told me, "I'm on vacation and so I'm livin' it up [because] labor is cheap, service is good, and if you want you can sit with a pretty girl."

Viet Kieu men enacted their masculinities in relation to female sex workers. Sex workers, who dressed in short skirts or low cut dresses, were in the bar with the permission of the bar owner. There were typically one or two mommies who managed the women and assigned them to various tables. Workers made money only on tips, sex, and as short-term girlfriends. Typically, the women stood next to a client, danced, and talked with him in the bar. Minh, a 41-year-old *Viet Kieu* from Germany said to me:

Vietnamese girls in Vietnam are so much better looking than the white and *Viet Kieu* women back at home. The women back at home are fat and manly. They have big hips and squared bodies. Vietnamese women like the ones here have nicer bodies, dress better, and they embrace their femininity. I feel sorry for *Viet Kieu* women like you, because local women (*biet chieu chuong*) know how to accommodate and please men here.

While working behind the bar, I watched women allow men to maintain a superior status by speaking in soft tones, smiling, and working to accommodate the men's needs. They were attentive and ready to show that they were willing to serve. They asked questions about the men's lives abroad even though many of them told me that they thought that men exaggerated their status in their stories. Sex workers treated *Viet Kieu* men this way because the men could afford the service. However, when women interacted with the local Vietnamese male servicemen in the bar, they often spoke to each other as equals, joking with profane language, and ordering them around. I asked several of the women I worked with how they felt being subservient to *Viet Kieus*. Duong, a 22-year-old woman, explicitly stated:

I get paid to treat *Viet Kieu* men like men. If the guys in here (male service workers) had the money, I would treat them the same way too. Money talks. I will be as submissive as a man wants if he pays for it. *Viet Kieu* men are spoiled here because there are so many beautiful women. If you want to compete here you have to give them what they want. I am not a Western girl; I cannot expect to be treated like one.

Hostess workers enacted a particular Vietnamese femininity in a way that allowed *Viet Kieu* men to assert their masculinity. Whether women enjoyed acting submissive or not, they *chieu chuong* (accommodated) men because doing so provided them with access to US dollars and a more urban/cosmopolitan standard of living. As Huong said to me, "Vietnamese women just let men be men. We act like women so that they can act like men. If more *Viet Kieu* women knew how to do that, maybe their husbands would not have to come to Vietnam to get it."

Viet Kieu clients often drew symbolic boundaries between themselves and Western men through their patterns of consumption. For transnational *Viet Kieu* men, sex workers embody

nation-as-home (Sunindyo 1998), or a place where they could interact with women who spoke a similar language and shared similar cultural values. The sexual consumption of *Viet Kieu* men was distinct from that of Western men, who consumed women they saw as embodying nation-as-foreign and exotic as I will discuss in the next section (Massey 1994).

In short, due to the shifting global economy, *Viet Kieu* men were no longer able to construct absolute dominance in the local economy because of the obviously greater wealth of some newly moneyed Vietnamese. However, *Viet Kieus* embraced Vietnam's rising position in the global economy to enhance their status and sense of self and assert their dominance over white men, something they could not do in their home countries. At the same time, they required a particular subordinate femininity to support shifting configurations of their masculinity in HCMC's sex industry. *Viet Kieu* men could no longer purchase the goods that symbolized wealth and status in this shifting economy so they purchased the performance of symbolic services in the form of submissive femininity in expensive bars that only provided bottle service. This femininity allowed these men to construct themselves as better than white Euro-American men. Although, many *Viet Kieus* have felt their sense of manhood shift in relation to wealthy local Vietnamese men whose wealth is amassed at the highest levels through FDI, they still contribute a significant amount of money to the country's economy through remittances. This remittance money assumed importance in other class-differentiated niches because many women were still attracted to Western dollars.

Anh Nho Em Nhieu Qua! (I missed you so much!): Western Expatriates

In 2008, a new set of bars emerged in HCMC geared towards Western, mostly white, expatriates.¹¹ There were roughly eleven bars within a two-block radius that served mostly white expatriate men. Each bar employed about fifteen workers. The owner, Lilly, a 25-year-old entrepreneur and former sex worker in the backpackers' area, opened the very first bar of this kind in 2008 in an attempt to differentiate her bar from those that cater to budget tourists. She said to me:

All man the same, Kim. They all like to look at pretty girl. Have pretty girl serve them and sit and talk with them. So I opened bar for foreigner who work here. I don't like the dirty backpacker or the *Viet Kieu* who liar and pretend to have a lot of money. My client they all work for big company in Vietnam.

While Lilly, the owner, differentiated this bar from those frequented by poorer tourists, the clients often compared themselves to wealthy Vietnamese men and differentiated themselves from tourists on a budget. One client, Anthony, a 53-year-old businessman from England, said to me:

I have heard that there are places where rich locals go to drink. I don't like those places - it's a waste of money to me. I think they go with Asian businessmen to build relationships, but most Western men like me are uncomfortable in those places. When Vietnamese and Asian men go to a bar, it is usually about business

¹¹ Nearly all of the clients that I met in this sector were white. There were also a handful Asian Americans, South Asians, and Black men but they were not typical customers in this sector.

and a building a business relationship. When I go to a bar with my co-workers, it's for fun, to have a drink or two and then go home.

Local Vietnamese clients and white expatriates differed in their relation to sex and entertainment, with Vietnamese oriented to the making of business deals, and white expatriates, more to recreation. Sex workers who catered to local Vietnamese men helped them enact a class-inflected masculinity to secure business deals and push contracts forward. In contrast, women who served white businessmen helped clients engage in recreational and relational sex that was both racially and class coded.

R.W. Connell (1998; 2000) observes that with the collapse of Soviet communism, the decline of post colonial socialism, and the ascendancy of the new right in Europe and North America, world politics is increasingly organized around the needs of transnational capital and the creation of global markets. She argues that the dominant masculinity in the current world order is associated with transnational business executives who operate global markets and the political executives who interact with them. According to this framework, Connell (2000) would argue that the men in the Western-expatriate niche were enacting "transnational business masculinity," operating as "individuals with no permanent commitments except the accumulation of capital itself...with a growing tendency to commodify relations with women" (54). However, Connell's framework assumes that transnational businessmen are able to occupy dominant positions in all local economies and overlooks the ways which Western expatriates employ local cultural tools to construct themselves as men.

After I became familiar with several men in the bar oriented to Western expatriates, they opened up about how they felt about their choice to live and work in Vietnam. In these conversations, several of the men revealed feelings of inadequacy in relation to businessmen who work in global cities like New York, London, Tokyo, Hong Kong, or Shanghai. One night, while drinking heavily with six expatriates in the bar, Daniel, a client in his mid-thirties, turned to me and said:

None of the guys here will ever say this, but we all sort of know it.... The guys who are working here in Vietnam are men who for the most part couldn't make it in New York, Hong Kong, or Shanghai. We're all here hoping that we will get lucky and that this market will grow as fast as everyone is predicting.

Bernard interrupted and said:

It is easier to go from being a banker in New York to any place in Asia but it's hard to go from Asia back to London or New York. The stock market here is tiny and the fund that I manage is less than one percent of my company's total investments. Sometimes I get really depressed because I think to myself, if I can't even make it here then I will never make it in a mature market.

Moments like these in conversations with men like Daniel and Bernard revealed to me that even among transnational businessmen, there is a silent hierarchy in which they compare themselves unfavorably to younger, more successful businessmen back at home. Many of these men lost their jobs in the midst of the financial crisis and expressed a sense of failure about their work and marriageability (Thai 2005) in developed nations. Moving to Vietnam was, in part, an attempt to

reconfigure their failed masculinity across borders by capitalizing on their First World status in Vietnam's developing economy.

In their attempts to succeed in Vietnam, expatriate men often try to gain local knowledge by learning the language, culture, and engaging in relations with local women who make them feel desired or chosen. Through varied efforts, the men in this niche constructed a distinctly racialized masculinity through language in relations with women in the bar. When I first started working in the bar, I was surprised to find that my ability to speak English was useless because many of the clients preferred to speak Vietnamese. By speaking and flirting in Vietnamese, they had access to Vietnamese honorifics for asserting themselves as higher than women, referring to themselves as "*anh*" (higher) and to the women as "*em*" (lower) instead of using the English terms "*you*" and "*me*," which denote equality. They often flirted in Vietnamese saying things to the women like, "*Em khoe khong?* (How are you?); *Anh nho em qua* (I missed you so much); or, "*Hom nay em mac ao dep qua. Sexy lam!* (You look pretty today. Very Sexy.)"

Bars like this were venues where men could practice their Vietnamese and where women could practice their English. As Alex, a 39-year-old client from France, explained to me, "We call them long-haired dictionaries.... All expats need one in order to localize." While local Vietnamese clients drew on their socioeconomic status to assert a certain kind of class-inflected masculinity, white businessmen drew on the Vietnamese language to assert a racialized masculinity. The act of speaking Vietnamese allowed them to maintain their white masculinity while drawing on local language tools to reinforce a subordinated Vietnamese femininity. A few clients who knew that I was from the US and that I spoke English very well. However, even these clients refused to speak English with me. Several of the women in the bar commented that forcing me to speak Vietnamese enabled clients to put me in my place (or, in other words, to reinforce a gendered hierarchy).

Male clients in this niche also differentiated themselves from white tourists who had less money and were involved in short-term transactional sex with women. In my informal interviews in the bar, nearly all of them described the backpackers' area as a place where poorer, older tourists hung out looking for more direct sex-for-money exchanges. Calvin, an Irish man in his mid-forties, said to me:

The backpackers area is much more seedy. You cannot just go into a bar, sit down and have a drink without the women insisting that you take them home. Anyone can walk into a bar and get a girl there. You see old white men there or stingy men who still want a Third World experience in Vietnam. This is a girly bar, sure, but the women here make you work harder. [Long pause] It's like the guys in here have to compete with each other for the girls' attention.

Expatriate men constructed a class-positioned masculinity when they described themselves as men with more money or the type of men who understood that HCMC was no longer Third World. They carved out a distinct space for themselves that allowed them to differentiate themselves from backpackers and high-end Vietnamese and Asian businessmen.

The clients in this bar asserted their superiority over local men through racialized remarks about Vietnamese men's bodies. I witnessed several conversations between white men and the women working in the bar where they spoke explicitly with each other about having sex. Many of the clients would explicitly compare their penis size to local Vietnamese men, evoking images

of their own sexual prowess and superiority. For example, on one occasion, Nathan, a 29-year-old advertising executive, entered the bar dressed in a yellow t-shirt depicting an Asian woman in a rice paddy, pulling her shirt up and her bra down to reveal her breast while coyly covering her nipple. In a three-hour conversation with him over a drink in the bar, he very bluntly said to me:

Let's call a spade a spade. We come in here because we want to look at beautiful women [who] are slender. The women back at home don't take care of themselves anymore and they are just fat. I'm sorry, but none of the women back at home could even dream of competing with the women here... And I like their small eyes and long black hair. I just find them very sexually attractive.

Western expatriates' postcolonial desires for exotic, slimmer, and more sexually attractive women are distinctly tied to racialized bodies across transnational borders. White men construct themselves as dominant men at the intersection of racialized and gendered bodies by comparing themselves to local Vietnamese women who are dark, slim, and sexual. As failed men in the West, white expatriates also exerted a racialized masculinity in relations with Vietnamese women who made them feel desirable and served as "long-haired dictionaries." As one client said to me, "Vietnam is great for men like me because back at home I'm a 3 (on a scale of 1 to 10) and here I'm a 8. Beautiful women fall at my feet all of the time."

"Asia is like Disneyland for Retired Men": Budget Travelers and Racialized Masculinities

Since 2006, the backpackers' area of HCMC has experienced a decline in expatriates who frequent the bars. It has become an area run down by transient tourists traveling on a budget. There are street vendors selling food, drinks, and souvenirs alongside several mini-hotels and restaurants that serve Western foods. Between 2006-2007, there were roughly 25 mini-bars that catered to foreign tourists. However, in 2009, there were a mere 11. The clients whom I studied in these bars ranged from 18 to 74 years old, and nearly all of them were in Vietnam because they wanted to explore a Third-World country. In 2006-2007, women willing to sell sex worked in the bar as bartenders and worked to build long-term remittance relationships with the men. However, the women I studied in 2009 were engaged in more short-term direct sex-for-money exchanges.

I gathered most of the data on the dynamics of masculinity in this sector by observing men talk to each other about the sex workers and by listening to conversations between clients and sex workers. One night, while sitting in the bar next to Jack, a 29-year-old white man from California, I listened as Anthony, a retired 58-year-old white man from Arizona, explained the "sex scene" in Asia. Anthony said to Jack:

I should tell you, man, you can bargain with these girls. The going rate is about 1 million VND [\$55 USD]. The girls in Vietnam are not like the girls in Thailand. They are more expensive and there aren't as many of them. Some friends told me to go to Vietnam, they said the women were dark and pretty but thinner and had better figures. Asia is like Disneyland for retired men like me. You can get away with breaking most laws by paying off the right people, and you don't have to work hard or go far for sex.

The contemporary Southeast Asian sex industry in HCMC caters to Western men's desires for exotic and submissive Southeast Asian women (Enloe 1990; Poulin 2003). Men like Jack came to Vietnam not only for accessible exotic women, but also because, as Jack stated, Vietnam is "a retired man's playground" where men could fulfill their sexualized and racialized desires with dark, thin women. Additionally, several of the Western tourists I met told me about their visits to a famous bar in town called Apocalypse Now, a notorious bar, that a 24-year old tourist named Vincent described as "having reminisces from the Vietnam War where Western men [could] find cheap beer and prostitutes." Thus, while *Viet Cong* men capitalized on their increased access to foreign capital to assert themselves as superior men in relation to *Viet Kieu* and Western men, histories of colonialism figured into Western men's configuration of masculinity.

Clients displayed a racialized masculinity most frequently in relation to women. When clients walked into the bar, women immediately greeted them, served them drinks, handed them wet towels, wiped their faces, and provided them with shoulder massages. Clients could order a \$2 USD beer and expect to have one or two women sit with them. As in the expatriate sector, in the hundreds of conversations I observed between sex workers and clients in the backpackers' district, it was very common to hear men ask if the women have ever had sex with a white man before. Men would often ask women if having sex with a white man felt better than having sex with a local Vietnamese man because many assumed that Vietnamese men have small penises and are sexually inhibited. Sex itself was racialized and linked to specific parts of bodies. Western men invoked images of themselves as men with sexual prowess. Racialized sex conjured up different stereotypes of gender relations across national boundaries.

In 2006, I met several men who came to Vietnam looking for love. By 2010, many of the men whom I met had a different perspective on relations with women in the bar. In fact, many of the clients I studied knew and could articulate fairly well that they were engaged in a complex intimate and economic exchange. In a long conversation with Jason, a man in his mid-sixties from Montana, he told me:

Men like me probably make women like you very uncomfortable. We come here and get hooked to younger women. It looks bad... I grew up at a time in America when women stayed home and took care of the family while men worked. My wife and I were happily married for many years. When she died two years ago, my world fell apart. I didn't know how to cook, or clean, or take care of myself. I was depressed. I needed a wife... [or] someone to take care of me. In Asia... some women still hold on to those traditional values and I can afford to take care of a woman on my retirement fund.

Jason was not looking for a sexually submissive Vietnamese woman so much as a woman whom he could financially support on his retirement funds in exchange for assuming the household responsibilities. It was clear in his mind that while he could not be an economic provider for a woman back in the United States, he could successfully assert his masculinity by traveling across national borders where he could be an economic provider for a woman in Vietnam because of country's status as a Third World country. I listened as several of the workers in this bar told men like Jason stories about their dire financial situations.

The transformation of this situated economic logic of desire between 2006 and 2010 astounded me because by 2010, many of the clients whom I met in this sector knew and accepted

that some of the workers lied to them about their dire financial situations. Sex workers told their clients that they came from poor rural families, even though this was often a lie. They told clients that their families were rice farmers but that they were no longer making much money farming. Many women told clients that they migrated to the city to work in factories but quit because of the terrible working conditions. After a few weeks, I asked the women why they lied about their lives. Xuan responded,

A lot of the men here think that Vietnam is still a poor country. They want to hear that your family is poor and that you have no options so you came here to work. If you make them feel sorry for you as a poor Vietnamese village girl, they will give you a lot more money. We lie to them because it works.... We tell them that Vietnam is changing and growing so fast and that the price of food and gas has gone up and people from poor rural areas cannot afford to live off of the rice fields anymore.

The act of creating fictive stories about their “rural lives” enabled many women to procure large sums of money from clients through remittances, not because the men necessarily believed these narrative but because these scripts enabled them to act as the economic provider and in effect preserve a sense of masculinity lost back at home. These women helped men feel like superior Western men who come from strong nations and who engage in charity projects by helping poor women desperately looking to change their lives in a developing nation. Clients and sex workers both engages in a variety of practices and discourses that did not just allow “men to be men,” as Hue said, but enabled men to assume a stance of Western men from developed nations helping poor women struggling to survive in developing nations. In contrast with the wealthy local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men who purchased symbolic services that allowed them to assert their privileged social status, Western tourists consumed actual services (sex, companionship etc), and they tried to be savvy consumers looking to get the most for their money. Many tourists acknowledged their sense of failed masculinity in relation to other men in the global hierarchy, and instead of trying to assert their masculinity in relation to other men, they did so through the purchase of “poor” exotic women living in developing countries who could make them feel like men.

Conclusion

Research on global sex work focuses overwhelmingly on the movement of white men from developed nations to developing nations to purchase cheap sex from exotic women. This study advances the scholarship on masculinities and global sex work through a critical examination of *differences among* male clients using ethnographic data about 90 male clients distributed across four niche markets of HCMC’s sex industry. I have compared the dynamics of masculinity in niches catering to different clientele: wealthy local Vietnamese men and Asian businessmen, *Viet Kieu* living in the diaspora, Western expatriates, and Western tourists traveling on a budget. Though a detailed ethnographic analysis of men’s intersecting classed, racialized, and gendered relations I examine men’s varying positions in the local economy as well as their differing motivations for participating in HCMC’s global sex industry. Vietnamese men and Asian businessmen who engaged in business-related sex relied on the local sex industry to facilitate the flow of global capital into the local economy. For this super-élite, conspicuous

consumption provided both a lexicon of distinction and a means of communicating deference and hospitality to potential investors from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other East Asian countries — and, using a different symbolic vocabulary, to Western investors. For *Viet Kieu* men, HCMC's sex industry allowed them to convert their hard earned Western dollars for status and a sense of dignity in the local economy. Western expatriates and tourists engaged in recreational sex to fulfill their racialized and sexual desires. As a result, racialized desires, social status, business success, and hope for status mobility all played out in the bars of HCMC.

In my examination of these four groups of male clients, this chapter advances studies of masculinities by illustrating that there is no one dominant or hegemonic masculinity in contemporary HCMC. In each of the four niche markets, men actively *contested* and *shifted* the class-differentiated, racialized, and national hierarchies. As men differentiated themselves from other men who purchase sexual services in other niche markets, they constructed multiple forms of masculinity. The making of masculinities in HCMC's sex industry emerged through individual responses to the global economic changes taking place around the world. As Vietnam emerges into the global economy *Viet Cong*, *Viet Kieu*, Western expatriates, and Western tourists found their place at particular points in time in HCMC's hierarchical sex industry. Through ethnographic research that provides a *globally grounded study* on male consumers of sex in HCMC, I show that the experiences of men on the ground are always situated in both local and international contexts. Moreover, I demonstrate the importance of locating place as the crossroads of many axes of identity: gender, race, nation, and class. All of the male clients in this study assert their masculinity through the purchase of women. However, men's participation in HCMC's sex industry involves much more than the purchase of sex. Men are purchasing status, dignity, and working to protect their precarious positions in the global order. This chapter thus brings together the sphere of intimate relations and the global economy by exploring macro-processes as well as daily practices. As male clients and female sex workers interact, they reproduce hierarchies of desire and desirability, and multiple masculinities. This chapter illustrates how the construction of multiple masculinities do not just happen at the macro level such as nation states; rather, I argue that they occur in relations between individuals through mundane discourses and practices that shape their everyday lives. Chapter 6 takes a deeper look in the lives of women and their differing performances of femininity as they embody Vietnam's state of transition in the new global economy.

Chapter 6

Technologies of Embodiment: The Construction of Modern and Third World Femininities

Introduction

The scholarship on women and nations argues that women's bodies represent particular nation states through various idealized femininities articulated in global and local spaces (Balogun 2010; Dewey 2008; Kaplan, Alarcon, and Moallem 1999). This chapter builds on that literature by arguing that while women's bodies come to represent specific nations, these bodies are also shaped by shifts in the contemporary political economy due to the growing mobility of capital around the world. I illustrate how Vietnam's state of transition in the global economy literally rather than figuratively enters into the *reshaping of* sex workers' bodies and figures into their performances of femininity. Moreover, women perform nation differently with respect to how they alter their bodies and perform femininity. These altered embodiments and feminine performances are sites where women actively construct multiple modernities.

In this chapter I show how local imaginations and conceptions of the *modern girl* (Weinbaum, Thomas, Ramamurthy, Poiger, Dong, and Barlow 2008) shift with respect to the sector of sex work and through the varied relationships that workers have with their clients. The chapter is divided into three sections, each of which specifically examines how women alter their bodies to look like modern subjects or to embody Third World poverty based on their clients' subjective desires. Women in HCMC's sex industry engage in various practices of bodily alteration, subjecting their bodies to an internal regime of disciplinary practice to make themselves suitable to a diverse set of clients. I will examine how women in each sector do "gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) through their embodied practices *and* in their performances of femininity as subordinate subjects in relation to particular types of clients. Although all of the women, enact similar forms of subordinate femininities in relation to their clients, these performances hinge on different interpretations of how a traditional Vietnamese woman should act. In other words, although, on the surface, the women engaged in similar performances of "traditional" Vietnamese femininity, constructions of "traditional" took on entirely different meanings in and through the relationships that workers had with their clients. In other words, just as the definition of "modern" shifted across sectors of sex work, so did definitions and the meanings of what workers and clients viewed as "traditional." My analysis came from an inductive approach to learning how the men and women in my study deployed these terms differently in each sector. Constructions of "tradition" shifted with respect to clients' different articulations of desire.

I first examine relations between local Vietnamese men, their Asian business partners, and local women. The bodies of women who catered to wealthy Vietnamese men, their Asian counterparts, and *Viet Kieu* men came to embody Vietnam's progress, development and emergence as a modern nation. Unlike other studies that measure the growth or progress of developing nations in relation to fully developed capitalist countries in the West, I studied a context in which the West no longer figures into the local imaginary as the hegemonic ideal. More specifically, I argue that not all sex workers in Vietnam turned to the West for ideal standards of beauty; instead some of them worked to emulate the figures of women living in fully developed countries within Asia, emphasizing Vietnam's regional position in relation to Hong Kong, Korea, and Japan in the construction of new standards of beauty. Sex workers who

catered to local men engaged in a variety of strategies to look like modern cosmopolitan subjects based on global and regional standards of beauty. Indeed, wealthy local Vietnamese men who entertained their Asian business partners used women's bodies to illustrate their nation's manifestation of modernization. Although women who catered to local Vietnamese men and their Asian business partners altered their bodies to look like modern subjects, they also performed deference to allow local Vietnamese men to showcase how Vietnamese women are distinct from women in other parts of the world.

I then turn to another sector of sex workers --those who cater to *Viet Kieu* men—to analyze how they construct themselves as modern subjects. Definitions of modern, for these men and women, signals Vietnam's position as a country on the rise in relation to the United States. In keeping with this imagery, women not only construct their bodies as more fashionable and more desirable than the bodies of Western women, *but also* compared to *Viet Kieu* women living in the United States. These sex workers, however, occupy a very liminal space because while their bodies are supposed to look modern, they must simultaneously engage in performances of femininity that hinge on *Viet Kieu* men's desires for the nostalgic past. Sex workers in this space seek to construct themselves as looking better than Western women while simultaneously choosing to provide overseas men with spaces where they can enact their masculinity by performing exaggerated acts of deference. In other words, women who cater to *Viet Kieu* men must consciously and strategically straddle the line between Vietnam's position as a rising country on the move and nostalgic vestiges of men's imaginary past.

The third section examines how sex workers who cater to Western men consciously alter their bodies to embody Third World poverty, thus catering to their client's racialized desires. These sex workers alter their bodies by strategically darkening their skin, applying darker shades of makeup, and making their bodies explicitly sexual in plain clothing. Although most Western men acknowledge Vietnam's rapid economic development, many seek out what they call the "authentic" Vietnam, which is untouched by processes of globalization. They describe the "real" Vietnam as rural villages where they can run around in vast rice paddies. Therefore, even though sex work provides some women with clear pathways to upward economic mobility (which I discuss at length in Chapter 7), they must hide their wealth and perform poverty to generate sympathy from their clients.

All three sections highlight how women's bodies and their performances are contested sites that reflect the tension between modern and traditional ideals in Vietnam's rapidly developing economy. By examining HCMC as an emergent international city, I argue that globalization does not create a bifurcated market between the global rich and the local poor. Instead, it is important to highlight how global processes expand transnational sex industries by creating multiple conceptions of modernity and tradition as Vietnam becomes increasingly visible in the global economy.

Modern Bodies and Subordinate Femininities

Whoever said that money can't buy love doesn't know where to shop. In Saigon, girls go under the knife... get nose jobs, boob jobs, liposuction, or whatever just so rich men will pick them in the line up [inside high-end karaoke bars].

-- Nguyen 38-year-old Vietnamese plastic surgeon

Much of my understanding of how women alter and transform their bodies is informed by the lessons I learned from other women in all of the bars about how to alter my style of dress, hair, and makeup to conform to the look of the bar. On my first day at work, I arrived at the bar in what I thought was an appropriate outfit — a low-cut v-neck dress and high-heels. However, as I walked into the room, Hanh, the head mommy, immediately said to me, “How are you going to get into any tables if you look like that? You look like a poor village girl!” She immediately placed a phone call and asked her maid to hand deliver a dress from her home for me. While we waited for the dress, she said to the women, “This is Ca Xanh’s girl. He brought her in here, and she is going to work here for as long as he wants. She is new to the business so help her get dressed.” Five women immediately descended upon me with makeup and clothing totes and immediately began to dress me. One woman started with my hair and said, “Since your hair is short, you need to pull it up and do it everyday. Leaving it down will make you look too old.” As she pulled my hair up, a 21-year-old woman, Yen-Vy, came over, handed me a mirror and said, “Look into this as I show you how to do your makeup.” I watched as she applied various layers of makeup and listened as all of the women began to chime in about what they thought she should do to my face. She said to me, “Tomorrow, you need to go to the market and buy some makeup.” She took out a piece of paper and made a list of things I needed to buy and the cost of each item so that I could bargain properly. Then she said:

Your skin is very dark so you need to buy a foundation that will make you look lighter. Apply that foundation to your whole face and neck. Then put some white baby powder on your face, neck and shoulders so that your skin looks lighter. Draw your eyebrows in thick so that they shape your face and make you look younger. A sign of an older woman is one who plucked her eyebrows too much. Men like girls who look young and natural... You are lucky because you do not need surgery. You have a high nose bridge and a double eyelid that makes you look like you are from Korea or Hong Kong. That’s what men like. They like girls who look like pop stars from Hong Kong, Japan, or Korea. To make your eyes look even bigger, you need to apply a white eye shadow around your eyelids and right below your eyebrow along the bone of your brow. Take a brush and run a light strip of that white eye shadow along your nose to make the nose bridge pop out of your face.

I looked up to see several other women compliment Yen-Vy for her makeup application skills. Since Yen-Vy had fake eyelashes permanently glued onto her eyelids, she asked to borrow a set from someone else. Khai-Thu handed her a box and said, “Take a pair from here. Make sure that you save them after today because the best eyelashes are the ones that have been used by you. They look more natural.” I closed my eyes as Yen-Vy applied a set of fake eyelashes. Then she took a small angle brush and applied black eyeliner along my eyelid to make my eyes appear large and round. Diep said, “I remember when some of us first started, we all looked like village girls. Now we look so much prettier.” She laughed and said, “You’re lucky you have a nice nose. You have a pretty face. You just need some makeup. You’re the only one in here with a real nose.”

I turned back to Yen-Vy and watched as she pulled out a blush compact. It was bright pink and filled with glitter. She said, “When you have white skin, the pink blush pops on your face more. It brings out your cheekbones. Apply a lot of blush because under the dark light in the

rooms it looks different. You want to look fresh in there, not pale.” Then she grabbed an eyelash curler, handed it to me, and said, “Curl your eyelashes then put on a layer of mascara. Do that three times. You have thick eyebrows so you need to have thick eyelashes. Put a lot of mascara on.” As I was applying the mascara, Hanh walked into the room wearing a short black tube dress and a pair of clear 6-inch high heels. I put on the dress and heels and she said to me:

You cannot wear long dresses because you are short and chubby. You need to wear short dresses and very high heels so that it makes your legs look longer. When you are short you have to remember to sit and stand up tall. Women who look expensive get tipped more. You’ll see. I’m going to bring you into every table tonight and introduce you to all of the clients. You will make at least \$150 USD. Tomorrow morning I will take you and three other girls makeup shopping at 9am. Then I will call the tailor to come and make you some dresses and bring you some shoes with the money that you make tonight. Later tonight a lady will come to do some of the girls’ nails. Tell her to do yours. I think you will be ok because you look like you are from Hong Kong.

During my first week of working in the bar, another group of women experimented with my body by bringing in dresses for me to try on and helping me try different makeup techniques that were specific to my face. It was clear to me that they had no desire to look Western because they tried to de-Westernize my body. Nhung, for example, said to me, “in the past everyone wanted to look Western but that is old [*sen*] now... the new modern [*hien dai*] is Asian.” In this bar looking “Western” was not synonymous with looking modern. In fact, the women made it clear to me that they thought Western women, including *Viet Kieus* like myself, were unattractive because they were overweight, wore clothes that looked messy [*bay hay*], and looked too masculine. When I asked what they meant by masculine, Huong said to me, “[They] look like men [with] squared bodies and saggy boobs. Asian women have smaller bones, smaller waistlines, small hips, and boobs that fit their bodies. When you are smaller, you look gentler, softer, and more feminine.” The practices of trying to emulate Korean women, in particular, highlighted how Asian models from fully developed capitalist economies had come to represent a new modern ideal structured explicitly as non-Western. The workers in Khong Sao had deep yearnings to look like the women from Hong Kong, Korea, or Japan.

Sex workers in this space conformed to international standards of beauty that proliferated within Asia. Women lightened their skin, accentuated their eyebrows, and worked to look like Korean pop stars. When business was slow, the women sent off the servicemen to purchase Korean and Japanese magazines from street vendors so that they could learn the latest styles and emulate the images. In the background, the television was always turned on to a Korean soap opera dubbed in Vietnamese, and the women regularly commented on how beautiful the soap stars were. Tailors designed short sexy dresses pictured in Korean magazines. In my conversations with workers about trying to look Korean or Japanese, many of them told me that they believed the global center was shifting away from the West and towards Asia. Blonde hair and blue eyes were desires of the past. Asian women now define what counts as beautiful as men traveled from all over the world came to Asia to seek out attractive bodies. Sex workers always pointed to the Dream Girls, a group of five famous singers from Korea, as their ideal of femininity. The irony behind this way of contrasting Asian versus Western bodies is that the Dream Girls all had reconstructive surgery to look more Western by altering their noses and

getting double eyelid surgery and lightening their skin. While scholars such as Joanne Rondilla and Paul Spickard (2007) and Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2009) argue that Asian women have plastic surgery trying to emulate Western standards of beauty, in the Vietnamese context I studied, the women believed that the global center is shifting away from the West and towards Asia; as a result, they no longer took hegemonic Western ideals markers of modernization, instead aspiring to regional standards of beauty within Asia.

Another way in which workers altered their bodies, to look more modern, involved attempts to transform their bodies from poor rural women into modern urbanites. In addition to emulating international standards of beauty, workers tried to differentiate themselves from rural women whom they viewed as poor, backwards, and unsophisticated. Several of the mommies worked hard to build a network of young beautiful village women whom they could teach to reconfigure their bodies to *look* like cosmopolitan subjects. In order to feel desirable and to *be* desired by men, workers engaged in a variety of disciplinary practices to transform themselves from village “bumpkins” into modern urbanites. For example, the women in the bar regularly subjected themselves to a variety of disciplinary practices to monitor their weight. Most of them ate only one meal a day, which usually consisted of a bowl of ramen noodles and two eggs. They consumed pills to curb their hunger, and they routinely made themselves vomit at the end of the night to purge the alcohol from their systems so that they would not gain weight. Women who were heavier than others were subtly reminded to purge at the end of the night so they could stay slim. On several occasions, the women joked about how in their villages, women used to take fat pills because having a larger figure was a sign of wealth and prosperity, but in the city, everyone wants to look slim because that is how modern urban women look on television and in magazines.

Compared to women in other sectors of sex work in HCMC, the women in Khong Sao Bar undertook the starkest and most rapid bodily transformations. The bodies of the women who made the most money had been subjected to a great deal of change both because earning more money provided them with the resources to alter their bodies and because women who altered their bodies earned more money. When women first entered the bar, they made numerous aesthetic changes to their bodies by altering their makeup, routinely rubbing whitening creams and powders on their bodies, and learning to wear appropriately sized bras and how to walk in six-inch heels. New workers turned to more established workers to see what kinds of changes they could anticipate after working in the bar and accumulating enough capital to reinvest in their bodies.

An entire economy thrived from business generated in the women’s dressing room. Over fifteen different tailors came through the bar every couple of days to measure the women’s bodies and take their orders. These tailors shopped for fabrics, sewed the clothes, and hand delivered the items to the bar. Manicurists and pedicurists hung out in the back room during the early afternoon, providing women with onsite nail services. Makeup artists came in to help women groom their eyebrows and glue on permanent eyelashes. This array of services groomed women’s bodies in such a way that over time, women began to look increasingly similar to one another. Tattoo artists came in to the bar with equipment to put permanent makeup on many of the women’s faces. Women tattooed eyebrows, permanent eyeliner, and lipliner so that they had a permanent outline on their faces and could apply their makeup without taking too much time. They could enter the bar and within a matter of minutes and be ready to greet their clients at a table.

In addition to clothing and makeup, women also spent a lot of their energy on their breasts. Big breasts were not the primary goal; rather most women worked to move their breasts so that they were positioned firmly together. One afternoon, Lien, one of the mommies, walked into the back room with a bag of new bras. They were gifts, and she instructed each of the women to pick them out and try them on. As the women were trying on the bras, Lien said:

If you walk around like you are worth a lot of money, men will treat you like you worth a lot of money and tip you well [*Nguoi co tuong sang se duoc khanh sang*]. We bring in the richest men in all of Saigon and you need to look like you are worth a lot of money. There are millions of country girls [*nha que*] - men can go anywhere to get them. They come here to be around women who *look* modern [*mo-den*] and worth a lot [*sang*].... You do not have to go out and spend a lot of money on expensive dresses all the time. It is about the little things like the bra and how you wear it.

Breast size did not differentiate rural women from modern urbanites; rather it was their knowledge of how to purchase the proper bras and how to pull their breasts up into the bra so that it had a firming effect. Additionally, women applied makeup techniques to make their cleavage look fuller. They used dark brown makeup in the middle of their cleavage to make the base look deeper, and a light glittery powder to make their breasts appear to protrude higher. Breast enhancements were subtle mechanisms that distinguished women as proper workers for a particular class of wealthy local Vietnamese men. Mommies like Lieu relied on workers' ability to portray themselves as modern subjects whose bodies were worth a lot of money because that image allowed them to maintain their status as one of the highest end bars in HCMC.

The sex workers who earned the most money in the bar were the ones who, according to Hanh, "made smart business choices by knowing when to buy new clothes or invest in plastic surgery." While sitting in the back room playing card games, I listened as Hanh advised the women:

When you are new, it's better to invest in cheaper dresses and save your money because men will bring you into their tables because you are a fresh face. After you've been here for a couple of months you need to do things to stay fresh (*tuoi*). You can buy new dresses and that will help, but you should save your money and use it only if you think that it is going to make you more money. Like with Diem, after four months she saved over \$100 million VND (\$5000 US). I told her to take \$300 dollars and get a nose job. After she got a nose job, men pulled her into all of their tables. They wanted to see her new face, her change. She went from looking like a poor village girl to looking more modern (*hien dai*). Men do not come in here to sit next to village girls - they can do that in *Kieng Giag* or *Dong Thap* (two villages nearby). They come here to sit next to women with modern styles.

Male clients played a crucial role in shaping women's bodies by giving money and attention to who had undergone cosmetic surgery. As Hanh advised the women, men come into the bar to showcase Vietnam's modern women, not the country's poor village girls.

The bar had connections with two separate plastic surgery offices that hired doctors trained in Singapore, Russia, Thailand, and the United States. These offices provided women with free consultations and significant discounts. Sundays were usually the slowest days in the bar because clients usually spent those days with their families. However, the women were still required to come into work on those days, so on Sundays we often bonded with each other over conversations, worked with tailors, got our nails done, or received consultations for plastic surgery. I became aware of the extent to which women had plastic surgeries performed on their bodies when on one Sunday afternoon, two surgeons came to the bar to provide three of the new girls with free nose consultations. During the conversation with the surgeons, I learned that the two most common procedures were rhinoplasty (nose job) for \$250 USD and double eyelid surgery, which cost \$400 USD. All of the women working with me had a rhinoplasty and roughly 80% of them had double eyelid surgery. A little over half of the women had saline breast implants and 20% of the women had had liposuction.

Anh Nguyen, one of the plastic surgeons, opened a booklet with before and after photos of all of the women with whom I worked. As I flipped through the booklet, I listened as the women talked about how much they have changed as a result of their work. As the doctor consulted with the women, he often used photos he had of surgeries he performed in the past or of famous models and singers who had their surgeries done in Korea, Japan, or Thailand. Again, as with makeup enhancing features, models of ideal bodies were taken from bodies of women in Asia. The women in this sector purchased “modern girl commodities” that literally changed how bodies were worked on and through creating new relationships to the body that enabled women to craft themselves as modern (Weinbaum et al. 2008) with a distinctive Asian appearance.

Male clients also played a very crucial role in mediating workers’ sense of self worth. Whenever a group of men entered the bar, the mommies would greet them and order the women to line up so the men could select which ones they wanted at their tables. During this line up, men regulated women’s appearance by complimenting them or critiquing their style of dress and body parts. Male clients rewarded beautiful, modern-looking women by inviting them to sit at their tables. It was not uncommon to watch men play with women’s noses or to ask questions about the various types of surgeries women had. In fact, local Vietnamese men often acted as representatives, showcasing the nation’s beautiful women to their foreign investors.

For example, while sitting at a table with Diem a few days after she recovered from her surgery, Quang a 39-year-old client pointed to her nose and asked everyone at the table, “What do you think of her nose? She doesn’t look like a poor country girl anymore does she? This face looks modern [*Mat nay nhin tay thiet!*]” Everyone laughed as he kissed her nose, raised his glass and cheered everyone at the table. Diem shyly covered her nose and looked down as the men complimented her. For these men, Diem’s nose was a sign of the nation’s progress because it demonstrated that even the poorest women from rural families were able to capitalize on the nation’s changing position in the global economy. Plastic surgery was no longer something only the rich could afford; it was something that poor rural women now working in the sex industry could afford. The attention that workers receive from men, post surgery, serve as consistent reminders to everyone else in the bar that technologically altered bodies had become status markers of the nation’s economic progress. Over time, the women began to develop and maintain a certain *look* in the bar, on which the bar’s reputation came to depend. Thus, the body came to represent a set of possibilities; that is not predetermined by some manner of interior essence,” but rather, “its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering of a specific set of historical possibilities” (Butler 1988).

Deferential Performances of Femininity

Although sex workers were made to look like modern Asian women, they also had to engage in performances that were characteristic of a “traditional” Vietnamese woman. Hanh repeatedly told the women that she felt a special affinity with rural women because she could alter their bodies and make them look modern, and they would never have a problem performing deference and showing respect to her clients. In explaining her preference for rural women, she said, “It is harder to teach women how to act like a traditional Vietnamese woman than to look modern. . . . I can tell you what to wear and how to do your makeup but I cannot always tell you how to act.” Sex workers engaged in a gender strategy of mobility, and male clients rewarded successful performances with generous tips and punished those who failed to perform their gender correctly (West and Zimmerman 1987). There were subtle rules for how to signify deference and respect that women quickly learned on the job from the mommies, in their conversations with clients, and simply by observing more experienced workers. New workers did not undergo a formal training process in workplace conduct. Instead, they were typically sent over to tables with clients from the first day, forcing them to learn how to interact on the job. Usually, if a client selected to sit next to a new worker, he took it upon himself to teach the women the rules and norms of their job. For example, I listened as Tai, a man in his mid to late 50s instruct Uyen on her first day on the job.

Just watch your big sisters and learn. Phuong has been here for a long time now and if you learn from her you will make a lot of money. You must know your place at the table. Wait until someone invites you to come sit next to them before you sit next to them. Before you sit down, bow and greet everyone at the table from eldest to youngest with a glass. Watch how you clink your glass. If you don't know where to clink your glass it is always better to go lower or watch how the man who you are sitting next to clinks his glass.

Sex workers also had to learn their place at the table. For example, only the mommies were allowed to sit next to the oldest or wealthiest men at the table (usually ones who consistently paid the bill). Women whose bodies were beginning to show the signs of age were always told to sit with the eldest man at the table and to play the role of mature big sister to the other workers at the table. Older or more experienced women bore the burden of reminding their younger sisters to refill their clients' cups, serve men food, light their cigarettes, and sing a song for their companion. More experienced women were also better at gauging men's feelings. If clients seemed bored or if it seemed as though men wanted more attention from their hostess, workers would encourage one another to get up and dance, sing a song, or ask if their companion was hungry.

Implicit rules around drinking also signified deference. First, when sitting at the table, women had to invite men to take a drink before taking a sip from their own cup. It was considered rude to drink from one's glass without first toasting one's client and the other men at the table. Second, whenever refilling a clients' drink, workers had to hand men their glasses with two hands, one placed to the side of the glass and the other placed underneath. Third, when clinking their glass against men's glasses, workers had to approximate the men's states and cheer accordingly. It was always a rule to clink their glass below the client's glass. However, they also had to pay careful attention not to clink their glass too *far below* the clients' glass. For older and

powerful men, sex workers would clink their glass towards the bottom of the man's glass, if not completely underneath it, so that the bottom of the clients' glass sat literally over the rim of the woman's glass. For middle-level management or younger men, they would clink the top of their glass in the middle of their client's glass. For clients who were particularly respected in the bar, workers were to let the bottom of the men's glass clink the top rim of their glass. Although the women were often unaware of the men's positions outside of the bar, clients would subtly inform women of the hierarchy between the men through their use of honorifics and in the positions they used when clinking each others' glasses. Men in lower positions of power would clink their glasses below the glasses of their superiors, so it was the sex workers' job to pay attention to how men clinked their glasses to figure out the hierarchy at the table.

Women also signaled deference through body language. When sitting next to a client, it was common to see a woman cross her legs, place one hand on her lap and the other over her client's thigh and lean in so that her head was below his. Women subjected their bodies to men's sexually charged gaze by diverting their eyes and looking down at the ground or by pretending not to notice when clients would subtly run their fingers across their chest. Some men would ask if the worker's breasts were real as an indirect way of asking if they could touch them. For example, while sitting at a table drinking and dancing with a group of ten clients, Son, a man in his early sixties, turned to My and asked, "Are those real?" To which she replied, "Why don't you see for yourself?" He ran his fingers between her cleavage and said, "They are soft. They feel real to me." She then grabbed his hand, folded it into hers, smiled, and picked up her glass to toast him. By allowing Son to run his finger across her chest, she subtly deferred to his request while simultaneously managing it so that he would not act overly aggressive towards her body. These subtle acts of deference communicated to men the boundaries around permissible behavior without shaming or embarrassing them in front of their friends. Women understood their place as sexualized subjects, and they deferred to their clients' desires as a traditional Vietnamese woman would.

In most post-socialist states, women's well-groomed and sexualized bodies have become as a symbol of modernity and progress (Gal and Kligman 2000). Vietnam is a "rising dragon" nation (Hayton 2010) transitioning from a Third World economy to a nation of progress, change, and modernization. In this high-end sector of HCMC sex work, however, new definitions of modern subjects hinged on both regional and local conceptualizations. At the global and regional level, women wanted to look like more Asian than Western. At the local level, women wanted to assert themselves as modern and urban in relation to the people living in their villages. Sex workers engaged in body altering strategies to embody the country's modernizing process. These procedures became ways of visibly measuring progress, change, and development. There are limits, however, to how "modern" women could be before losing their unique qualities as Vietnamese feminine subjects. The performances of a particular Vietnamese femininity hinged on the workers' abilities to assume perform "traditional" femininity by assuming their inferior positions in relation to local and global men. In short, women engaged in two simultaneous projects of embodiment and performance, which positioned them in constant tension between the modern and tradition. Women's bodies symbolized progress and change alongside tradition. The tension played out on women's bodies reflects Vietnam's state of transition as it tries to identify its place in the global order.

Modern Bodies, Nostalgic Femininity

In Vietnam almost everything is fake - clothes, CDs, DVDs, food, alcohol, boobs, noses, and even love - the only thing [that is] real is the money you spend on these items, assuming the bill you are using to pay for it is not also fake.

--Tuyen 34-year-old from New York

Women who catered to *Viet Kieu* men occupied a critical place in Vietnam's changing position in the global economy. Female sex workers who catered to *Viet Kieu* men embody Vietnam's schizophrenic attempt to emerge as a powerful country in the global economy while simultaneously striving to hold on to nostalgic cultural values and traditions that make Vietnam a distinct place in the world. I will now show how, for *Viet Kieu* men, women's physical embodiment – or their *bodies*-- came to represent *nation-as-modern* while women's *performances* of femininity simultaneously represented *nation-as-home* (Nguyen-Vo 2008). For local sex workers, modern ideals meant looking urban and *more* cosmopolitan than Western and *Viet Kieu* women. However, these women also had to embody *nation-as-home* (Sunindyo 1998) to present Vietnam as a place where overseas men could find women who spoke a similar language, shared similar cultural values, and engaged in *nostalgic performances of femininity* in Lavender Bar.

Women in Lavendar Bar, who catered to *Viet Kieu* men, typically arrived at around 4:00pm and spent two to three hours on the job applying their makeup, fixing their hair, and getting dressed. While I watched the women comment on each others' styles or looks, I noticed that, like the women who catered to local Vietnamese men, these women tried to find ways to make their bodies look like Korean or Chinese pop stars or supermodels. One evening, while we got dressed together, I listened as Van, a young 22-year-old woman, talked about the new set of facial creams that she had purchased. She pulled the bottles out of her purse and said:

I spent 2 million VND [\$110 USD] on these creams yesterday. They are supposed to make your skin whiter and softer. It is a Korean company that makes it and they are expensive but one of my friends is using it and her skin looks really good.... I think its better to buy Korean and Japanese creams because Western brands like *Estee Lauder and Lancome* do not work.

She passed the bottles around while a group of girls asked her if they could give her money to pick up a few more sets. Van promised to pick up three more sets and bring them into work the next day. Out of curiosity, I asked Van why it was so important to her to have lighter skin. I asked, "Do you want to look white?" She said, "I don't want to look like a white woman. No one thinks that white women are pretty." I asked, "So what is it then? Why do you all care so much about your skin color?" She replied:

Viet Kieu men want to be with beautiful women - they did not come here to look like they are from the rice fields. They want to be with *Vietnamese* women who look like they are worth a lot of money.... Times have changed in Vietnam. Five years ago no one cared about fashion or their looks.... But now Vietnamese women are some of the most fashionable women. We all look better. We dress better. Vietnam is not a poor country like it used to be. We have a lot more money

now and *Viet Kieu* men want to be around women who look like they are worth a lot of money [*tuong sang*]

Like the women in Khong Sao Bar, those who worked in this bar purchased whitening creams not motivated because of a desire to look Western or white; rather, this desire was related to social class. The whiter workers looked, the less rural they seemed, and they wanted to embody Asian wealth. Living in a country undergoing rapid economic restructuring, the workers were keenly observant of the changes taking place around them, and they wanted to capitalize on these changes and ride the wave of prosperity and economic progress. The purchase of skin creams allowed them to literally transform their bodies from looking like poor country girls into looking like modern women at the frontier of a globalizing economy, women whose livelihood was no longer tied to the land.

Women's bodies bore the signs of high-end modernity as they began to acquire a taste for designer clothing and handbags. However, the workers referred to these acts as attempts to become modern women. In 2006, global luxury brands like Gucci and Louis Vuitton made their debut in the Vietnamese market. By 2010 Marc Jacobs, Chole, Jimmy Choo, Burberry, and Versace, among many others, also emerged into the market while middle-range brands (like Gap, J. Crew, and H&M) that were popular elsewhere in the world had not yet entered the Vietnamese market. Thus luxury brands became part of the local imaginary defining what it meant to be global and cosmopolitan. Clothing and fashion became important markers of women's access to modern goods. Although few women in this sector could afford real luxury items, many of them paid hefty prices for high-quality fakes brought in from China and Hong Kong. These fake handbags ranged anywhere from \$100 USD - \$400 USD. The replica market was a marker of status among workers, as Thao informed me:

The cheapest purses are the Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Burberry purses. They are low quality fakes. You can tell when you look at them from far away that they are not real. With the good fakes you can put them right next to a real purse and you cannot tell the difference. They make high quality Chanel and Versace purses. Those are \$4 million – \$8 million VND [\$200USD - \$400USD].

Sex workers' knowledge of luxury items and keen attention to detail signified their newly acquired taste for and access to brands that were well known around the world. Accessories such as replica designer handbags, belts, and shoes were items that sex workers all sought to own because these accessories signified economic upward mobility, change, and progress. They allowed women to feel that they were able to take advantage of the new flows of global capital that had transformed the city landscape, with emerging high-rise buildings, luxury cars, and new tastes for leisure.

The main difference between women in the two bars was that women in Khong Sao Bar, catering to wealthy Asian men and their business partners, often compared themselves to women in other parts of Asia, while the women in who worked in Lavendar explicitly compared themselves to *Viet Kieu* women as well. In order to make themselves appealing to overseas Vietnamese men, sex workers in this sector had to contrast their bodies to Western and *Viet Kieu* women's bodies by highlighting their feminine, yet simultaneously modern, embodiment. Sex workers used their bodies as a strategy to assert themselves as more desirable and physically attractive than Western women. Most women transformed their physical bodies through a variety

of plastic surgeries. For many women, the ability to purchase modern goods was simply not sufficient enough to make them into modern subjects. Workers wanted their bodies to look modern. Among the 25 women whom I studied in this sector, all but two had nose jobs, ten had double eyelid surgery, and four had breast implants. In my conversations with the women about their choices to alter their bodies, Phuong commented:

A face is very important. When you walk around on the streets, when people look at you the first thing they see is your face. I want people to look at my face and think that I am pretty [*co duyen*]. If you are a girl in Vietnam people will judge you for your looks first. I fixed my nose [*xua mui*] in two parts. I got a nose bridge and then I made my nostrils look smaller. After I had my nose done I felt prettier. People noticed me more. When I walk around outside I do not look like a normal Vietnamese girl. I want to look like the Dream Girls [a group of Korean pop singers].

As with women working in Khong Sao Bar, noses differentiated rural women from modern urbanites. Sex workers began to associate flat noses and large nostrils with Third World rural poverty; high nose bridges and smaller nostrils became markers of economic prosperity. Women wanted to look modern, and sex workers who had cosmetic surgery that looked “natural,” or that fit their faces, were often highly sought after by male clients. Men also rewarded these women with higher tips. For example, in a conversation I had with Chuyen, a *Viet Kieu* client from Denmark, I asked him what he thought about women with plastic surgery. He replied:

I don't mind that they have had plastic surgery. If you look around the bar all of the women have fake noses. All of them do. But they look good. They also wear a lot of makeup and sometimes I joke with my friends that these women look very different during the day than what they look like in here with makeup on under these lights. It's all a show; none of it is real. That's part of the fun... Look, times have changed in Vietnam. These girls aren't poor anymore. I mean most of these girls own cell phones that cost over \$1000 dollars. They have to hustle when they get here. No one wants to stand around cheap-looking village girls.

Male clients feed into local constructions of modern beauty by complimenting women on their looks. They also take part in shaping local standards of beauty by inviting women who look like more modern urbanites to come sit with them at their tables and tipping them sometimes double what they would tip the other women.

Sex workers who cater to *Viet Kieu* men must constantly push boundaries and strive to be desirable on multiple fronts. In addition to transforming their bodies from those of rural village girls to those of cosmopolitan women, the workers in this sector also felt pressed to market themselves as *more* attractive Western or *Viet Kieu* women. Body size and weight were central to the ways in which local Vietnamese sex workers compared themselves to global *Viet Kieu* and Western women. On almost every occasion in which a *Viet Kieu* woman entered the bar with a group of *Viet Kieu* men, nearly all of the workers would comment to each other about how fat she was. For example, one evening, a group of *Viet Kieu* men brought three *Viet Kieu* women into the bar with them. The women all wore summer dresses made of linen or cotton. All of them had their hair pulled up in either a bun or a ponytail, and it was clear that they had been

walking around for awhile outside in the heat prior to entering the bar. Hang went over to serve their drinks and then walked over to the table where I was standing with Kevin, a 32-year-old *Viet Kieu* from California, and said to the two of us:

Why did those guys bring those women in here? They look so messy and they do not take care of themselves. Vietnamese women are meant to look small and slender; their frames are not built to carry around a lot of weight. Why do these women let themselves get too fat?

Kevin turned to me and said, “I can’t stand *Viet Kieu* women. They come to Vietnam and they think that they are so hot. Well I’ve got news bitches – you ain’t got nothing on girls in Asia.” I stood there in silence because as a *Viet Kieu* woman myself, I was slightly mortified. Kevin went on:

When you look at *Viet Kieu* women in Vietnam, it is like times have changed. It’s all about Asia now. This is where the money is at; the economy is growing so fast here, and the women are so much hotter than the women back at home. It’s like why would I try to get one of those fat and ugly chicks when I can come here and take my pick of all these hot girls who actually know how to treat a man and act like a woman?

Local sex workers who catered to *Viet Kieu* men altered their bodies and carefully managed their self-images to embody Vietnam’s changing position in the global economy and its emergence as a modern nation. As Tuyen so poignantly noted, “In Vietnam almost everything is fake clothes, CD’s, DVD’s, food, alcohol, boobs, noses, and even love- the only thing real is the money you spend on these items assuming the bill you are using to pay for it is not also fake.” While this quote highlights the physical changes that women go through to alter their bodies, it also brings our attention to the *gendered masquerades* and *performances* of a particular femininity that is contextually and culturally specific.

Nostalgic Performances of Femininity

Although sex workers in this sector performed acts of deference to clients that were similar to those used by women working in Khong Sao Bar, the logic of these performances was different. Sex workers’ performances of femininity for *Viet Kieu* clients was almost always set in contrast to *Viet Kieu* women’s inability or unwillingness to assuage men’s masculinity. That is, rather than highlighting the unique qualities of a “traditional” village woman, the men and women in this sector played on *Viet Kieu* men’s desires for a Vietnam that they left behind, or a Vietnam of the past.

One night, while sitting around an empty bar with a group of sex workers we began talking about how women consciously play into men’s nostalgic desires in order to make money. Nga, Minh-Thu, Diep, Chi, and I sat around talking, and I asked them, “How does it feel to always have to defer to the men when you serve them?” Chi replied:

If I were a *Viet Kieu* woman, I would never let my husband go back to Vietnam alone because he will cheat. In Vietnam, there are so many women, so many

beautiful women who all want to change their lives by making money. We all want it. So we spoil (*chieu*) *Viet Kieu* men. We give them whatever they want. We make them feel like kings in Vietnam because we know that they cannot get that back at home. It sells.

Minh-Thu jumped in and said, “It is easy to get hurt in this business if you are not careful because you give and give a lot of yourself because you have no choice.” Diep said, “You have to spoil them, serve them, pretend like you do not know things, make them feel smart, while trying not to sound too naive or stupid. It’s a game. If you do not play by the rules some other girl will come along and give him what he wants.” Nga said, “In Vietnam, it’s a man’s world. We spoil them and give them everything. We fall in love, they cheat, and we hold it all inside.” I was silent for several minutes trying to take in everything that they were saying, when Chi turned to me and said:

When you live in Vietnam for a long time, you too will learn that things here are never what they seem. You have to learn that Vietnamese women will always look good on the outside. We take care of our bodies with makeup, clothes, and plastic surgery. It is all on the outside. But on the inside we are going crazy. We look modern, but we are still living in Vietnam so we cannot act like *Viet Kieu* or Western women because men come to Vietnam to be around *Vietnamese* women. They are looking for the *old* Vietnam.

The conversation that I had with these five women captures the tension that women experienced at a critical moment in Vietnam’s transition. In order to make money, these sex workers had to embody the new and modern, but at the same time they realized that they had to play into *Viet Kieu* men’s nostalgic desire to be around “traditional” Vietnamese women. In an attempt to understand what they meant by “traditional,” I asked the women what type of traditional woman they thought *Viet Kieu* men were seeking. Thuy-Tien said, “A lot of men come in here and they complain about Western women. They tell us that Western women forgot where they came from, and that they do not know their place in the house. *Viet Kieu* women hate us because we give men what they will not give them.” Nga jumped in and said, “We are young and better looking too. Why do you think so many *Viet Kieu* men steal money from their wives back at home and give it to us?” I asked, “Why?” She said, “because we make men feel like they are at home in Vietnam...we root them here and help them feel connected to Vietnam.” I asked, “How?” She said, “You have to learn how to flirt in Vietnamese. *Viet Kieu* men love that. It is deeper, more endearing, it is more passionate, bitter and spicy [*dang cai*].” Workers often told me that flirting was one way they engaged in nostalgic performances of femininity for their male clients.

I asked several *Viet Kieu* men what they thought about the type of flirting that goes on inside these bars. Tony, a 27-year-old man, said to me, “It is cute. It is so cute. It kind of makes your heart melt a little bit you know [laughing as he places his hand over his heart]. It is just one of those things that hits the spot.” I probed a bit more and asked him what he meant, and he said, “It is just deeper, you know, or more meaningful. It’s the language of the *motherland*. I know that the girls don’t mean it, and they probably don’t talk to their real boyfriends like this anymore. But it’s a way of just showing care.” I pushed a little harder and asked, “Care?” He said, “You know that’s the problem with Western women like you. You don’t understand that

there is a difference between showing care and being submissive. The women in here, they are not weak women; they will fight with you. But they know how to get their way while still making men feel like men.” As Tony described it, flirting allowed women to embody nation as home for a group of diasporic men looking to feel rooted in the *motherland*. Women’s performances of femininity played into men’s nostalgic sense of an old Vietnam, allowing men to hold onto vestiges of the past and import them into Vietnam’s modernizing present. Male clients wanted to be around women whose bodies looked modern but who could engage in flirtatious deferential performances of femininity, thereby allowing them to assert their dominance in a modern patriarchal order. Sex workers altered their bodies and presentation of selves so they seemed to preserve vestiges of a past when women deferred and served men while at the same time revealing trajectories for the future (Price-Glynn 2010) of Vietnam as a country on the move. Their ability to perform a nostalgic femininity allowed men to feel as though the global center was shifting away from the West and towards Asia, a place where modernization does not necessarily go hand in hand with shifting ideals around gender equality. Men were invested in gendered *difference* as key to effective masquerades in the space of sex work.

Racialized Bodies and Subjects of Third World Poverty

Here in this bar, it’s like a game. You’ve got young attractive girls behind the bar and older men vying for their attention. Everyone has a role that they play. The women pretend that all of us are interesting and attractive and we all pretend like it’s real.... It’s like a show, after awhile you become very familiar with the script. It’s the same script every single night [but] we keep coming because it’s a fun game to play.

– Alex a 32-year old man expat from England

Sex workers who catered to Western, mainly white expatriates and tourists shared embodiments similar to those of sex workers in other sectors. However, these women engaged in different *performances of femininity* for expatriates living in Vietnam and budget travelers touring Vietnam compared with the women in Khong Sao Bar and Lavender. What struck me the most about women in Secrets and Naughty Girls were the workers’ attempts to alter their bodies to cater to their clients’ implicit and sometimes explicit racial desires. While women who catered to Asian businessmen, wealthy local Vietnamese men, and *Viet Kieu men* worked hard to lighten their skin and find ways to look more modern, the women who catered to Westerners were very careful not to present themselves as modern subjects. Instead, sex workers who catered to white men capitalized on their embodiments of Third World poverty in order to get more from their clients.

Workers in this sector made no effort to lighten their skin tones, nor were they ever reprimanded for having skin that was too dark. In fact, the owners of both bars capitalized on women’s darker complexions. During my first several days at work, my co-workers rummaged through my makeup bag and told me what to keep and what to get rid of. Ly a 24-year-old worker, said to me:

Get rid of the baby powder. It is going to make your skin look too pale and under the lights in this bar you are going to look like you are sick. You do not want to look dark but you don’t want to look too light either.... You can’t use pink blush in here; it makes you look like those Japanese or Chinese play dolls. You have to

go buy a brown, orange, or darker color to use on your cheeks. It will make your face look smaller and narrower instead of round.

When I asked the women why they preferred to have darker complexions, Lilly, the owner of the bar, told me, “Men like brown skin Kim. They like it. I like it, too. Look better.” Lilly indeed was darker than all of the women in the bar. She prided herself on her skin color. In fact, she said, “Every afternoon around 2:00pm I put on my bathing suit and I go lay on the swing I tied up there to make my skin more brown. People laugh they say, ‘why you look so dark Lilly,’ but I say because I like it.” Lilly and Jenny, the two owners of the expat and tourists bars, had by far the darkest complexions. Several of the other women working in the bar had more ambivalent feelings about dark skin. Xuong a 26-year-old woman working in Kisses, the tourist bar, said to me:

The men here like darker skin and women who just came up from the village. The girls who just come up from the villages always get the most clients because they look the most innocent and fresh. Men like women with dark skin. They will always touch you and say, ‘Wow your skin is so dark and soft.’... but I like to have light skin because when I go home to the village I want to look like a city girl, not a poor village girl.

When I asked her how she managed the dilemma of wanting to look like an urban girl when she returned to the village while simultaneously wanting to look rural in the city, she said, “I try to stay out of the sun when I can and when I come to work then I put brown blush on my face.” Altering their skin color was the most notable strategy these women adopted to racialize their bodies in a way that would make them look like poor women in a Third World country. In addition, workers also applied their makeup differently than sex workers in other sectors. Sex workers who catered to wealthy local Vietnamese, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men often wore very little eye makeup because they wanted to look more “natural.” However, workers who catered to Western men were much more experimental with their eye makeup. Nearly all of them worked to produce the “smoky” eye effect. To obtain the smoky eye, they taped double eyelid stickers onto their eyelids to make a fake crease, applied a dark grey, purple, or black eye shadow in the crease above the sticker and along their eyelid, and then filled in the middle with a lighter color. This smoky eye effect highlighted their darker features, making them look more “exotic” to their clients. Those who were darker often received more attention, particularly from white men traveling on a budget.

The women who worked for Western expatriates and backpackers did not make as much money as the women who catered to the higher-end Asian businessmen, local Vietnamese, and *Viet Kieu* clients. Therefore, unlike the women who catered to higher-end markets, a smaller number of women who catered to Westerners purchased plastic surgery. Those who did have plastic surgery opted to have different types of surgical procedures than higher-end women. Sex workers who catered to Western men generally chose to have breast implants or liposuction rather than nose jobs. Among the 40 women I studied in the two bars catering to Westerners, roughly one third had breast implants, while less than 20% had nose jobs.

In my conversations with women who had plastic surgery, I asked how they prioritized their procedures. Mai-Lan, a 23 year-old worker, said to me:

I have a friend who got breast implants and she knew a doctor who could give me the surgery for cheap. I sold my motorbike to get the surgery because I know that men like bigger boobs. I thought that if I could get more clients then I could make the money back and buy a newer motorbike.

For Mai-Lan, getting breasts implants was a strategic investment in her body capital so that she could attract more clients. Breast implants, she believed made her body more sexually rather than aesthetically appealing. These technological changes had less to do with signifying Mai-Lan's upward mobility, modernization, or progress than with trying to appeal to her clients' sexualized desires.

When I asked Mai-Lan and others why they chose to have breast implants rather than nose jobs, when nose jobs were cheaper, Yen-Nhi said, "Some women get nose jobs because it makes their face look better. Some get nose jobs because it will change their luck in life. They will go from being unlucky with love to finding the right person, or they will go from having money problems to being free of money problems." I asked her, "Do you ever want to get a nose job or double eye-lid surgery to look more Western?" Mai-Lan replied, "Western men come to Vietnam because they think that Vietnamese women are beautiful, not because they want women who look Western. The girls who always get picked first in these bars are the ones who just came up from the village or who just started working." Yen-Nhi then said, "None of those women had plastic surgery. Men want a Vietnamese girl. That is what they like." This conversation that I had with Mai-Lan and Yen-Nhi highlighted the racialized desires of their male clients. According to these women, male clients desired women whose bodies looked more "authentically" Vietnamese. Looking authentically Vietnamese in this setting entailed embodying rural Third-World poverty rather than cosmopolitan urbanism.

Mai-Lan and Yen-Nhi's perceptions of their clients' racialized desires were substantiated through the conversations that I had with several expatriate Westerners. One evening, Alex, a 39-year-old ceramic exporter from France, said to me:

There are a few of us who have been in Vietnam for a couple of years now and we know all of the tricks that these girls have up their sleeve. Stay away from city girls who know how to hustle. They rip tourists off for their money all of the time. If you are an expat in Vietnam and you know better then you go for the village girls because they are the real deal... They are the real Vietnam... They are not greedy or chasing after this urban lifestyle of consuming new things.

Expats like Alex wanted to be with rural women or recent migrants to the city because they felt that rural women provided them with an authentic and honest Vietnamese experience. Alex wanted to stay away from women who had been in the city for a long time because he thought that urban women were too savvy. Moreover, as the quote suggests, Alex wanted to be around women who represented his version of an authentic Vietnam where the majority of the people were trapped in poverty.

While the majority of sex workers migrated to the city hoping to experience upward mobility and escape poverty, many of them were very strategic about when and how they displayed their access to foreign capital. All of the women had two cell phones, one that was the cheapest Nokia, worth \$20 USD, and another, more expensive phone. Several women had iPhones, which typically sold in the Vietnamese market for between \$200USD to \$1000USD,

depending on the grade of the phone. They also purchased newer dresses and urban clothing, which they rarely wore to work. Women in the expat bars were required to wear uniforms, which were often sexier versions of the traditional Vietnamese *Ao dai* (dress). This alternative uniform allowed women to embody a sexually charged authentic Vietnam. Women who catered to poor budget travelers almost always wore jean shorts, tank tops, and plastic high heels. Many of them owned nicer clothing but they chose not to wear those outfits to work to convey to their clients that they were victims of Third World poverty and in need of money.

Performances of Third World Poverty

I learned of women's strategies to perform poverty through the English lessons that I provided them in the afternoons. I arrived at Naughty Girls, the bar in the backpackers area, at 2:00 pm three days a week to provide the women with free English lessons. Many of the women were excited about the opportunity to work with someone who would help them translate some of their lies without judging them for lying or duping their clients. During these days, I helped women translate a series of emails, text messages, and key phrases that they wanted to have in their back pockets. They asked me to help them translate phrases like, "My motorbike broke down I have to walk to work. Can you help me buy new motorbike?" and "My father very sick and no one in my family help so I have to work. I am from An Giang village. You go to village before?"

During these lessons, I often asked the women why they lied to their clients or why they were careful not to display too much wealth in front of them. Diem-Hang explicitly said to me:

The men who come here like to meet poor village girls, if you show them that you have nice clothes or new phones, they will start to lecture you about how you should save your money so that you can quit working. If you do not show them what you have they will feel sorry for you, think that you are poor, and give you money.

Diem-Hang's strategic move allowed her to capitalize on Vietnam's changing position in the global economy and the widening inequalities between the local rich and the local poor. The women I studied were certainly much more financially secure than other family members who worked in the rice fields, textile or manufacturing industries, or even as service workers in HCMC.

In addition to learning phrases that would enable them to communicate a sense of urgency in their financial situations, the women often lied about their time of migration into HCMC. Many of the women I studied had migrated to the city to work in the service economy prior to entering sex work. However, in their conversations with their clients, I heard the women say that they had only recently migrated to the city. Moreover, many of the urban women relied on their connections in the bar to take clients on tours of the Mekong Delta. For example, in a conversation that I had with Thuy-Linh, she said:

I am going to Kien Giang tomorrow with one of the guys here because he wants to see my village but most of my family lives in Saigon now. We moved here about 10 years ago so I am taking him to stay with Vi's family so that he will

think that I am really poor and maybe give me money to re-build the house or help my 'family' out.

When the women in the bar first told me about their fake village families and the trips that they organized and took with their clients, I was struck by their awareness of their clients' desire to see Vietnam as a developing Third World country. They organized tours that would portray an "authentic" Vietnam removed from signs of global change, modernization, and global capitalism. These men wanted to visit villages where they could walk through rice fields, ride bicycles, and walk through street markets and bargain for cheap produce. More often than not, sex workers were happy to play into their clients' desires because doing so enabled them to ask for larger sums of money.

In conversations that I had with the clients in the bars upon their return from visiting the Mekong Delta, many of them expressed a sense of deep sadness for the conditions of poverty that many of the women came from. For example, after spending three days in the village with Nhi's family, John a man in his late 50's to early 60's, said to me:

There are so many things that we in the West take for granted. Roofs over our heads, hot water, shoes... When I was with Hue, I had to shower with buckets of cold water. It was so disgusting because I was brushing my teeth and I didn't realize that the bucket had a bunch of maggots in there. I felt these tiny worms swimming around in my mouth that I had to spit it out. I asked them how much it would cost to put in a proper shower and they said \$500 USD so I gave it to them. They were such gracious hosts to me that I wanted to give something back.

While workers certainly employed strategies to embody Third World poverty, they also engaged in performances that highlighted their poverty in relation to the economic situations of their clients. John sympathized with Nhi's life and her conditions of poverty, and he genuinely wanted to help provide her family with a new faucet. These men will never know with certainty whether they visited real families and saw the women's true conditions of poverty. Regardless of whether they were to women's true families, these visits to the village allowed workers to capitalize on their client's genuine concern, compassion, and empathy. Men provide women with money to help them escape poverty and transition from a basic standard of living to a comfortable standard of living. By allowing men to believe that they were fulfilling the provider role, workers performed a femininity that was linked to financial dependence. And the men apparently preferred to be unaware of their workers' desires to consume luxury goods and purchase items like nicer clothing, expensive cellular phones, and electronics because those items symbolized access to global capital, mobility, status, and most importantly, dignity in their work.

Conclusion

The practices and performances of sex workers illustrate how the complexity of Vietnam's contemporary political economy maps on to women's bodies and differing performances of femininity. Men and women in my study often used the language of "modern" and "tradition, albeit with varied meanings. This chapter has shown at how these meanings varied in each of the sectors of work, with different emotional investments and performances.

Women who catered to local Vietnamese men and Asian businessmen engaged in a variety of bodily practices to embody the nation's progress from an undeveloped Third World country to one that is rising as a modern nation in the global economy. Sex workers who catered to *Viet Kieu* men also altered their bodies to look like modern cosmopolitan women; in addition, they worked to cater to their clients' nostalgic desires and fantasies for a Vietnam that they or their parents left nearly 35 years ago in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Sex workers who catered to Western businessmen and tourists traveling on a budget engaged in a variety of practices to embody Third World poverty, so that they could provide their clients with an "authentic and exotic" experience in Vietnam.

In all sectors, sex workers engaged in gendered masquerades, providing their clients with varied performances that fit the culture of the different bars. Women who catered to local Vietnamese men and Asian businessmen were careful to highlight status hierarchies among the men, while simultaneously marking their subordinate status as women. Those who catered to *Viet Kieu* men engaged in nostalgic performances of femininity allowing clients to feel like they were at *home* or had found their place in the world. *Viet Kieu* men, escaping *Viet Kieu* women in the West, returned to Vietnam where they could find women whose bodies look modern but who engaged in deferential performances of femininity. Sex workers who catered to Western men provides their clients with memorable experiences in a developing country fraught with poverty. Women's bodies were fraught with the contradictions of a country undergoing rapid economic restructuring. The sex industry provides a site for examining ways in which Vietnam's uneasy emergence as a strong nation in the global economy maps onto women's bodies. Whether consciously or unconsciously, women across all sectors of sex work altered their bodies to fit their clients' racialized and classed desires because, after all, that's what sells. The next chapter examines the different pathways of economic mobility that women experienced as they participates in varied sectors of HCMC's sex trade.

Chapter 7

Mobility and Convertibility: New Economic Trajectories in Vietnam's Changing Economy

Introduction

After two weeks in Khong Sao Bar, Nga, a worker in the bar, brought Yen-Nhi, a 19-year-old woman, to Hanh (one of the mommies) and asked whether Yen-Nhi could work in the bar. Hanh looked at Yen-Nhi and asked, "Where do you live?" Yen-Nhi replied, "I just came up from Chau Doc [a village that is four hours away from HCMC] a few days ago. I am staying Nga's in house to see if I could find work in the city. If it worked out (nieu hop) then I would stay, and if not I would return to the village." Hanh looked at her and said, "You can try it for a few days and see if this bar is the right fit for you. Some people are lucky in here and some people are a better match in a different bar." I watched as Yen-Nhi shyly bowed her head and thanked Hanh. Then Nga grabbed her arm and led her to the back room where all of the women were getting dressed. An hour later, the three of us were riding in the back seat of a black S-class Mercedes as we were being escorted to a private party. Yen-Nhi fumbled with the door and then made a comment under her breath to us about how this was her first time riding in a private car.

There has been extensive research on upward mobility in fully developed capitalist economies (Featherman, Lancaster, and Hauser 1975). Scholars often look at the structure of social mobility by measuring a person's socioeconomic status (Kingsley and Moore 1945), occupational outcomes (Blau, Duncan, and Tyree 1967; Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996; Grusky 1983; Hout 1983), educational attainment (Wolfe 1985), or changes across generations (Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero 1979; Rytina 1992; Solon 2002; Sorenson 1992). In an international context scholars have quantified the impact of educational outcomes on economic and social mobility (Buchmann and Hannum 2001). Existing models in the social stratification literature, however, do not allow researchers to qualitatively examine changing patterns of mobility in a rapidly developing economy such as Vietnam. No scholar has compared the various modalities or trajectories of mobility among women across different sectors of one sex industry. This chapter intervenes in the literature on stratification through the site of sex work by looking at four different trajectories in HCMC's sex industry. For the purpose of this chapter, I use the term, *economic mobility*, to refer to a person's changing access to economic resources and their changing patterns of consumption and the term social mobility to refer to a person's mobility between spaces of First World luxury and Third World poverty.

Compared with jobs in the service economy or in factories, sex work in Ho Chi Minh City is one of the few occupations where women can experience economic and sometimes social upward mobility. In the Introduction and in Chapter 3, I provided a brief portrait of Vietnam's changing economy as I witnessed it between 2006 and 2010. I argued that rapid increases in the flow of foreign direct investment between 2006 and 2010 have dramatically altered the structure of the sex industry. In 2006 overseas Vietnamese (*Viet Kieu*) men occupied the highest paying sector of clients involved in Ho Chi Minh City's sex industry because at the time they brought more capital into Vietnam in the form of remittances than did foreign investors. In 2006, sex workers with economic, cultural and social resources made up the high-end market of the sex industry (Hoang 2010; Hoang Forthcoming 2011) by capitalizing on their relations with *Viet*

Kieu men who provided them with access to US dollars and a global cosmopolitan standard of living.

By 2009, the market in Vietnam had drastically shifted, as the country joined the World Trade Organization and attracted foreign direct investments (FDI) from around the world. In 2009 FDI made up nearly triple the amount of capital brought in through *Viet Kieu* remittances. As I detailed in Chapter 6, wealthy local Vietnamese men with access to foreign capital had, by 2009, come to predominate as clients in the highest paying sector of HCMC's sex industry. Moreover, unlike the women I met in 2006 who were educated, the sex workers I met across all four sectors in 2009 and 2010 were not highly educated, nor did they come from families with economic resources; in fact, all of them came from poor rural or urban backgrounds.

This chapter takes a closer look at how changes in Vietnam's economy have affected the lives of former and current sex workers, leading them on different trajectories of upward economic and social mobility. As processes of globalization occur, cities like Ho Chi Minh became critical sites where the First World and Third World collide and where women across all sectors often straddled between First World wealth and Third World poverty.

Contexts of rapid social change, like those occurring in HCMC, enable scholars to recognize that practices and dispositions are not frozen in time but are reproduced and altered (Hanser 2008) as people adjust to the political and economic changes happening around them. Following the work of Kamala Kempadoo (1999), who argues that the structure and significance of sex work is locally and historically specific and is determined by patterns of economic development, histories of colonialism, and normative constructions of sexuality and gender, this chapter follows 103 women along four different trajectories of economic and social mobility—former sex workers, mommies, and two groups of workers presently in the sex trade.

While I met highly educated sex workers in 2006 and 2007, by 2009 all of the women I met, regardless of the sector they worked in, came from rural and poor backgrounds. By 2009, many of the workers I had met in 2006-2007 were no longer doing sex work. Where did they go and why did they choose to quit sex work? What strategies did they adopt to keep up with Vietnam's rapidly changing economy? In follow-up work, I found that the highly educated women I met in 2006 are on a trajectory that led them out of sex work into higher paying occupations in the formal economy.

I then provide analyze the varied trajectories of eight mommies I met in 2009 who made careers in sex work. These women served as role models to all of the women who worked for them because they were living embodiments of both economic and social upward mobility. All but two of the mommies started off as young village girls and grew into shrewd entrepreneurs with multiple investments and properties. I show how sex work transformed their lives over the years, allowing them to capitalize on their social ties to wealthy local Vietnamese men, *Viet Kieu* men, and Western men in different ways in order to diversify their income-generating strategies.

In the third section, I argue for the significance of a woman's location in a particular sectors of sex work, drawing on my research with 25 who women catered to wealthy local Vietnamese men and 25 who catered to *Viet Kieu* men. This data indicates that women immersed in a world of First World wealth and new forms of conspicuous consumption, as discussed in Chapter 6, experienced volatile economic mobility with rapid upward and downward movements. As I described in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, these women often went from a motorbike to a Mercedes and back in a matter of months.

These volatile trajectories contrasted with a slow and steady trajectory of mobility characteristic of sex workers serving Western clients, as pattern I explore through informal

interviews with 20 women who catered to Western expatriates and 20 who catered to Western budget travelers. As I discuss in Chapter 6, these women were pressed embody Third World poverty to cater to their clients' racialized desires. Contrary to popular belief (Bales 2004; Farr 2005; Jeffreys 1999) none of the women I spoke with were victims of sex trafficking (Kempadoo 2005; Limoncelli 2010; Shelley 2010). Rather, they were women who started in manufacturing and service related occupations, but quit because of the perpetual low wages and minimal opportunities to experience economic upward mobility. Moreover, they were around clients who brought with them Western values about money that involved saving and delayed gratification.

Finally, I examine the theme of *convertibility*. As sex workers in all sectors of HCMC's sex industry experience upward and downward economic mobility, they also experienced an enhanced sense of social status in the face of rapid economic restructuring and under new market conditions. Drawing on data from my visits to the villages with workers in all four sectors of sex work, I analyze how some sex workers creatively converted their access to global and local currencies into social status, commanding a newfound sense of respect for their work and sometimes profoundly changing their families', friends', and local villagers' perceptions of their work. Sex workers drew heavily on their access to different currencies both in the form of hard cash and gifts in order to alter people's perception about their choice to engage in sex work. Like the *Viet Kieu* clients in Chapter 5 who converted their access to Western dollars across transnational social fields, some women returned to their villages and convert their access to urban currencies into social status in their villages. Workers across all sectors altered their patterns of consumption and returned to the village bearing gifts that allow them to command respect and dignity for their work. The act of gift giving, provided workers with a venue in which to enhance their social worth.

Changing Economic and Political Trajectories in Ho Chi Minh City

When I returned to Vietnam in June 2009, I tried to reconnect with as many of the sex workers I met in 2006 as I could before embarking on new research as a bartender and a hostess in the various bars. I started by revisiting the old bars that I used to patronize and was surprised to find very few women moonlighting as sex workers. In fact, all of the bars had bouncers out front who prohibited local women who "looked like sex workers" from entering. In order to make the environment friendlier to local women with money as well as to female expatriates, these bars now hosted ladies' nights and crowned the best-dressed woman the "queen of the night." Anh Nguyen, a bar owner with whom I had become well acquainted in 2006, told me:

A lot has changed since you were here. I remember when we had the grand opening with you [in 2007] and I was trying hard to invite all of the pretty working girls that I knew [because without them men wouldn't come to the bar]. But now the high-class girls you used to know make a lot more money than they used to so they are not 'working' [as sex workers] anymore. Lower class girls started to come into the bar. So now I have two bars. One bar that is like a club for everyone to go to. There is a ladies' night and we try to get all people men and women. There are a lot of rich women who are my main customers. The [second] bar caters mainly to *Viet Kieu* men. Over there I pay a mommy to manage the PG (promotion) girls. PG girls do what sex workers used to in the past but it is clear that they are working girls.

I asked Anh Nguyen, “What are some reasons why you think you had to make these changes?” He paused and the responded:

Times have changed. The locals have a lot more money now with all of this money coming in. There are so many more investors in Vietnam. In the past five months a new high-rise has opened each month. Local Vietnamese are the ones who have the money now. Those high-class girls do not need to chase after *Viet Kieu* money anymore. So we bring in poorer girls who are pretty but they need someone like a mommy to guide and teach them the business.

My conversations with Anh Nguyen and several other bar owners illuminated not only the ways in which bar owners adapted their businesses to the changing economy, but also how the structure of sex work had changed between 2006 and 2010. As Anh Nguyen stated, local women who used to cater to *Viet Kieu* men had gained access to more money so they no longer needed to chase after overseas dollars to maintain a global cosmopolitan standard of living (Hoang Forthcoming 2011). High-end sex workers who used to patronize these bars disguised as club-goers were no longer there. The industry had diversified into bars that catered to club-goers and bars that employed a set of “promotion girls” who provided services to *Viet Kieu* men. Bars that catered to *Viet Kieu* men went from encouraging freelance sex workers to come in and spend money and recruit clients, to creating a more formalized system with “promotion girls” who were employed and attached to a particular bar. I will later discuss workers I met in 2009 from poor rural and urban backgrounds who catered to *Viet Kieu* men. But first, what happened to the highly educated and economically well to do women I met in 2006 and 2007 (Hoang 2010; Hoang Forthcoming 2011)? To answer this question, I tried to conduct follow-up interviews with the high-end female sex workers I met during this earlier period of fieldwork.

By November 2009, I had reconnected with four out of the eleven women who I met in 2006-2007 that formerly catered to *Viet Kieu* clients in what was then the highest paying sector of sex work. At the time all eleven women had at least a trade school degree while some had Masters Degrees. All of them had high-paying jobs relative to other locals living in Vietnam. Ngoc, for example, was a 27-year-old woman was then working for Star Capital and later worked for an overseas insurance company, Kim-Ly, a 25-year-old woman was employed by her parents’ makeup company, Mai Sao, a 26-year-old woman, had become an account executive for a global advertising agency, and Lan-Vy, a 28-year-old, worked for a local Vietnamese investment company involved in projects ranging from commercial developments to exporting locally manufactured goods. While these four women did not know each other, their trajectories out of sex work and into the formal economy revolved around three key points: they earned enough money in their current to be able to consume luxury goods without needing to engage in sex work; they no longer thought of *Viet Kieu* men as men with money and status; and once they had viable opportunities to make a better living without having to engage in sex work they were afraid their colleagues would find out about their earlier sex work.

During my follow-up interviews with women, I was struck by how they were able to maintain a global cosmopolitan standard of living without engaging in sex work. When I inquired about how this was possible, Lan-Vy said:

Things have changed in Vietnam. Two years ago I was only making 12 million VND [\$800 USD]¹² so I could not afford to buy very much on that salary. *Viet Kieu* men came with US dollars. I remember really cherishing (*qui*) that bill [\$100 dollar bill] because it had a lot of value (*gia tri*). But now I work for a local rich Vietnamese man (*dai gia*) and he owns all of the stock in his company. I make 23 million VND [\$1200 USD] a month [plus] two percent commission on all of the projects that I get investments for. Now I can buy all of the things that I want without having to go to the bars at night.

Like the three other women, Lan-Vy stated that her access to a higher income led her to quit sex work. Her salary had nearly doubled, and she has been able to capitalize on the company's commission policy. Although Lan-Vy had acquired a bachelor's degree in economics and had the formal education that allowed her access to this job, I still could not understand why she quit sex work when clearly her tastes had become even more expensive. She went from coveting the most expensive motorbike to owning a Honda Civic, for which she paid \$40,000 USD after taxes and markups. Although she could not afford a Mercedes, Porsche, or BMW, the Honda Civic was a marker of her socioeconomic mobility. Moreover, she also went from purchasing Louis Vuitton handbags worth \$1200 USD to owning several Chanel handbags worth over \$3000 USD each. I later learned that, after doing some freelance consulting (translating company pamphlets into English) for her boss, Lan-Vy also received kickbacks in the form of expensive gifts and cash for some of the deals that she secured. As one of her co-workers said to me, "In Vietnam people will pay you to help them win a bid. Not like in the West, where people like her have to beg and plead for money from their investors." Another one of her co-workers told me, "People pay her to write research reports that overvalue their company so that when an investor comes in they are paying way more for this arbitrary amount based on the potential worth of the company 10 or 15 years later."

As with many of the other people who worked in for this local company, Lan-Vy had access to multiple sources of income through both formal and informal connections. She made many of these informal connections through sex work where several clients discovered that she was a skilled and savvy woman with a business mind. This access, in turn, allowed her to keep up with her changing tastes. As Lan-Vy herself stated to me, "Westerners are always looking to find a bargain or to buy things on sale. But in Asia right now and especially in Vietnam among the rich, it is not about how much you save but how much you spend." When I asked her to clarify, she said to me, "When you walk into a Louis Vuitton, Gucci, or Marc Jacobs store all of those things are marked up by at least 30%. But for people like me, we like to pay *more* for the purse in Vietnam because it shows that we have money." Pressing harder for clearer answers, I asked her, "But where does all of this money suddenly come from? You have to have money to spend money right?" She said, "You are too American. You have to understand that nothing is ever what it seems in Vietnam. How do you think someone who works for the government on a salary of \$300 US a month can afford to buy a house or a car?" I shrugged signaling that I didn't know and she said:

¹² In 2006 the conversion rate of the US dollar was 15,000 VND to 1 USD. In 2009 the conversion rate was 19,000 VND to 1 USD.

There is a back door to everything. Three years ago the backdoor was spending time with *Viet Kieu* men. Now compared to the local Vietnamese, they are broke. Now the backdoor is working for a local company like this who can get land for cheap and get investors to pay a lot of money to develop the land.

Lan-Vy paused and then said, “No one will tell you all of their secrets. Not even me.”

In this conversation with Lan-Vy, as well as the three other women with whom I was able to conduct follow-up research, it became apparent to me that they were all shrewd entrepreneurs who creatively strategized to make money not by having sex-for-money per se but by moving into other roles *through* their connections in sex industry. In 2006 and 2007, they worked to get money from *Viet Kieu* men who, as a whole, brought more money to Vietnam (in the form of remittances) than did foreign investors. As I discussed in Chapter 3, by 2009 the economy had shifted with an increase in FDI, and as a result, sex workers also altered their strategies for generating income. Women who used to work as high-end escorts quickly turned to other venues where they could capitalize on the new flows of foreign investment linked to Vietnam’s developing economy. Their connections through sex work and educational capital enabled them to move to more profitable types of work both in and outside of the sex industry.

The second reason why highly educated women with economic resources quit sex work was related to their changing perceptions of *Viet Kieu* men’s social status. All of them talked about their growing distaste for *Viet Kieu* men by using the idiom “*no nhu phao bong*,” which literally translates into “blowing up like fireworks,” a phrase used to refer to people who exaggerate their wealth and sense of self-worth. While having drinks with Kim-Ly in a new bar built into the Park Hyatt Hotel she said to me:

In the old days, I thought that I lived the high life. It was so easy to get money from *Viet Kieu* men. I had so many boyfriends it made me dizzy. I drove around on a *SH* (a \$9000 USD motorbike), ate in nice places, all of it. But then, it was harder to get money from these guys. They all complained about how the US economy was so bad and they had to watch how they spent their money.... I started making more money because I found distributors in Korea where we could get our products from for cheaper. We expanded the business and I opened three new stores.... I was traveling a lot to Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand and Taiwan and I started to feel like *Viet Kieu* guys were not good enough. I have been to more places in the world than them!

As Kim-Ly stated, “*Viet Kieu* men were not good enough.” However, being good enough was about more than just money. It had to do with a complex array of dynamics including Vietnam’s changing position in the global economy, *Viet Kieu* men’s loss of social status as a result of the US economic crisis, and Kim-Ly’s own trajectory of social mobility as she expanded her family’s business and became well-traveled within Asia. More specifically, as *Viet Kieu* men complained about how the US economy affected their lives, Kim-Ly was busy capitalizing on Vietnam’s growing economy. Her stores began to target a growing Korean expatriate population who created a small, enclave-like community in Vietnam. The convergences of these changing economic and social dynamics meant that Kim-Ly’s relations with *Viet Kieu* men were also shifting.

The issue of social worth came up several times in my conversations with Mai Sao as well. When I met Mai Sao in 2007, she was only making \$600 USD as an account manager at an advertising agency and moonlighted at night as a sex worker to supplement her income. Since then, she received her Master's Degree in Business Administration from a foreign university based in Vietnam. She then switched careers and began to work for a Singaporean company that sought out investment projects in Vietnam. When I last talked with her in 2009, Mai Sao earned nearly \$2500 USD a month. Although Mai Sao clearly had access to more economic capital than in the past, she never stated this as a reason for leaving sex work. Instead she said to me:

There are two types of *Viet Kieu* men in Vietnam now, the ones who work here and understand Vietnam, and the ones who travel here. The ones who work here will make good husbands because they understand that times have changed. But the ones who travel here looking for girls are no good. I used to love *Viet Kieus* because they came back with US dollars and could live like kings in Vietnam. But now, I cannot stand *Viet Kieu* men, especially the tourists from Orange County [California]. They come here and think that they are better than everyone when they are broke. They go into bars where there are poor village girls who will serve them, sit next to them, accommodate them, and spoil them rotten [*chieu qua hu*]. . . . Going out with those guys makes me look like a poor village girl.

What struck me most about our conversations was how her views regarding her position vis-à-vis *Viet Kieu* men had changed so much in only two years. In many ways, her relations with *Viet Kieu* men mirrored Vietnam's rapid development and the visible changes happening on the ground as women hustle to move ahead. When I met Mai Sao in 2006, she was more than happy to spend time with *Viet Kieu* men in public places. Several of the men she spent time with were indeed from Orange County. However, in 2009 she ridiculed these same men as *failed convertors*, that is, men who could no longer convert their Western citizenship or access to Western dollars into social status in Vietnam. While *Viet Kieu* men came from all around the world, all four women referred to men from Orange County when citing examples of men who epitomized failure to convert their Western dollars into social status as they had done in 2006. However, not all *Viet Kieus* were seen as failures. As Mai Sao stated, she preferred *Viet Kieu* expatriates who lived and worked in Vietnam, because, as she implied, they understood that the economy in Vietnam had changed and the locals were the ones who had money and social status. These men acknowledged their loss of social and economic status and took their appropriate place below wealthy locals.

Sex workers' enhanced access to economic capital and their changing perceptions of *Viet Kieu* men's social worth explained why they quit working for *Viet Kieu* clients. In the past, workers had fleeting relations with *Viet Kieu* men, allowing both men and women to maintain their anonymity. In my conversations with clients, they often gossiped amongst each other about how wealthy Vietnamese men paid large sums of money to sleep with singers, actresses, and models. In fact, Sang a 37 year-old man who ran a local "modeling agency" managed women who were willing to have sex for \$250 USD dollars a night, but women in those agencies did not have a regular flow of clients. If local men were now those with money, why did workers not try to pursue them? When I asked the women if they had ever considered moonlighting at night for wealthy local Vietnamese men or Asian businessmen, Ngoc said:

Saigon is still very small and people here all know each other. If one guy tells his friends everyone will know. It is not like before where the [*Viet Kieu*] men I spent time with would come and then leave. I do business here and I do not want to have to ask someone for help only to find out that I slept with him for money.

In Chapter 5, I discussed how local Vietnamese men wanted to be around young women who were not educated so that they could maintain some degree of anonymity. In the same way, Ngoc cared a great deal about her reputation and her ability to do business in Vietnam. She worked for an investment capital company and met regularly with local Vietnamese men, as well as foreign investors, whom she needed to sign contracts. In the past she chose *Viet Kieu* men as sex work clients precisely because they allowed her to maintain some degree of anonymity. However, *Viet Kieu* men no longer provided her with the same sense of self-worth or social status as they were able to do in the past, and so she quit sex work.

The stories of women like Ngoc, Kim-Ly, Mai Sao, and Lan-Vy highlight why women sometimes opted out of sex work. Unlike many of the women whom I later became acquainted with between 2009 and 2010, these women had the luxury and the privilege to choose to quit working because they were able to generate more money in the formal economy by expanding their businesses, earning higher salaries, receiving insider information on the newly developed stock market, and through receiving kickbacks. Highly educated women with economic resources moved out of sex work, leaving the industry to women who come from mostly poor rural and urban backgrounds. If that was the case, then what were the trajectories in this rapidly changing economy of sex workers who come from poor rural or urban backgrounds?

New Trajectories of Upward Mobility in Ho Chi Minh City's Global Sex Industry

The rest of this chapter will focus on the lives of 8 mommies and 90 sex workers with whom I became well acquainted in 2009 and 2010. I worked alongside all of these women as a hostess, bartender, and an English instructor. All 90 women had come from poor rural or urban backgrounds. Most of the women I met had experienced some degree of socioeconomic upward mobility in their lives as they transitioned from job to job and moved into sex work. In my conversations with them, they always referred back to moments in their pasts and sometimes the present that reminded them of extreme poverty. These moments revolved around their memories of hunger, or days in their childhood where they had to hustle selling small commodities on the street to support their families. These women had different pathways of upward mobility depending on the sectors of sex work in which they were ultimately employed. Sex workers who catered to wealthy local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men experienced both rapid upward and downward economic mobility, while those who catered to Western expatriates and tourists experienced slower and steadier pathways of upward economic mobility.

Scholars have long written about the modern world system by situating countries in the global context as being either part of the First World - as a fully developed nation - or being a part of the Third World - as a developing nation (Wallerstein 1974). Studies on sex work in the new global economy, in particular, often point to migratory *survival circuits* (Sassen 2002) of poor women in Third World economies on the periphery of the global system struggling against debt and trying to escape poverty. By dividing the global economy into two parts, rich nations of the First World and poor nations of the Third World, scholars document how poor Third World

women of color provide cheap labor and personalized services for white men and women in First World countries (Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck 2010; Hochschild 2002; Parrenas 2008).

However, Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash's (1998) conceptualization of "One-Third World" versus "Two-Thirds World" urges careful attention to *differences within* both First World and Third World economies. In other words, not all people living in developing countries are poor. For example, postsocialist market economies like Vietnam are sites with an emerging local elite who have access to wealth and luxury that is comparable and sometimes even exceeds the wealth of those living in developed nations. This wealth is juxtaposed with extremes of poverty within the same country. In my research I am trying to move away from misleading geographical and ideological binaries and to draw attention to continuities and discontinuities between the haves and have-nots within the boundaries of nations and between nations. In a city like HCMC with an emerging local elite the worlds of the haves and have-nots often merge, leading to varying trajectories of upward as well as downward mobility. How does one explain, for example, the converging lives of local Vietnamese men like Anh Dung, a 49-year-old owner of private real estate whose estimated net worth is over \$2 million USD, with those of the women he meets in Khong Sao Bar? Or what about the converging lives of global businessmen and tourists who move across transnational social fields (Glick Schiller and Fouron 1999; Goldring 1998; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Mahler and Pessar 2001; Smith and Guarnizo 1998), and form relations with local sex workers?

The women with whom I spent my time between 2009 and 2010 often straddled First World luxuries and Third World poverty as they constantly developed new strategies to be upwardly mobile. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argues that social change can create dissonance between unconscious dispositions and social circumstances. In the context of Vietnam, for example, the transition from a socialist market to full integration with the world economy has created a situation where an individual's or group's lifestyle before having access to economic capital may not be the same under the conditions of the new market economy where they have gained significant access to economic capital. In times of rapid economic change, individuals and collective groups may experience accelerated opportunities for mobility, moving upward or downward in status or class position; Bourdieu calls this the "the trajectory effect" (1984:11).

Gil Eyal (2003) provides a critical analysis of the different trajectories of postcommunist capitalist elites in the Czech Republic and Slovakia as elites fought for political representation in the transition from socialism to capitalism. While Vietnam has not made the full transition from socialism to capitalism in terms of its politics, it has made an economic transition from a socialist to a capitalist market, which allows for individual and collective class mobility. Following Amy Hanser's (2008) observations of the classed trajectories that workers in China's retail field experience, I examine how the mommies and sex workers experienced different trajectories of mobility.

Extreme Upward Mobility: The Mommies

In all five of the bars where I worked, the workers looked up to the mommies and often referred to them when talking about what they hoped to achieve. The mommies were the living embodiments of success in HCMC's sex industry. I collected data on eight women who were either mommies or bar owners in the places where I worked: three from Khong Sao (local Vietnamese and Asian businessmen bar), two from Lavender (*Viet Kieu* bar), one from Club

Gold (*Viet Kieu* bar), one from Secrets (Western expatriate bar), and one from Naughty Girls (budget traveler bar).

Only three of the mommies came from relatively wealthy urban backgrounds, and they ran bars that catered to *Viet Kieu* men. They were also former high-end sex workers who had moonlighted in various clubs and established close relations with a number of bar owners who later invited them to manage the flow of sex workers in their bars. As mommy's they no longer moonlighted as sex workers. Instead they worked closely with bar owners who depended on women to establish order amongst the sex workers and to manage the competition with other bars. Anh Nguyen, the owner of Lavender, once told me:

Running a bar in Vietnam is very complicated. A lot of people are involved because there is so much money. Last Saturday we made \$30,000 USD so you can imagine how complicated it is. The mafia guys used to send girls in here to start fights or plant drugs in the bar so that we would get caught and have to shut down for weeks. I needed to find a way to manage the girls in my bar because we need pretty girls to get men in here but we do not want trouble.... I hired Tho and Huyen to manage the girls.

Tho (35 years-old) and Huyen (29 years old) both used to work as high-end sex workers in bars that catered mainly to *Viet Kieu* men. Prior to working full time as mommies, they also worked together at a day job where they managed a group of "promotion girls" who advertised beer for a foreign distributor. The beer company sends "promotion girls" out to a number of different bars and restaurants to introduce and advertise the product to new customers. During the day Huyen and Tho worked together to teach a group of women how to manage their image, advertise the product, and implement strategies to increase sales. At night, they made their rounds amongst the various bars trying to build informal relationships with several bar owners, so that the bars would also promote their beer as a friendly favor. While making their rounds at night the women also moonlighted as sex workers, procuring mostly *Viet Kieu* clients. At the time, Tho and Huyen made, respectively, roughly \$1300 USD and \$900 USD a month through their day jobs. In addition, they each generated an unstable income through informal sex work. However, as they spent more time working between two jobs, their bodies started to break down under the pressure. Huyen said:

I was greedy. If I could make money, I would work. I just worked all of the time. I felt like I was working morning to night and night to morning. I would come home when the sun was coming out, shower, and go back to work.

Switching back and forth between her two jobs and consuming large quantities of alcohol at night began to wear on her body. However, she told me that going out at night was crucial because it allowed her to network and because nearly half of her income came from nighttime sex work.

After weeks of joking with Anh Nguyen about running his bar, after his bar had been shut down due to drug bust, Huyen decided to quit her job and come work full time with him bringing Tho on with her a few weeks later. Anh Nguyen agreed to an arrangement where she and Huyen would earn five percent of all alcohol sales and they wanted three months to get the business up and running. Tho and Huyen agreed to work seven nights a week to manage the flow of women

who entered the bar. Two weeks before the bar's "grand opening" Tho and Huyen recruited promotion girls whom they managed at the beer company. Huyen also recruited a number of her bar friends to come work. They designed sexy uniforms for the workers modeled after the uniforms that promotion girls for the beer distributor wore. Within the first ten days word spread that Lavender Bar had beautiful hostesses, and they reached full capacity. Tho and Huyen introduced their customers to the women whom they managed and encouraged their customers to tip the women. Their workers worked on tips from customers and at no cost to the bar. The mommies also earned tips from the clients that were often double the amount that workers received. Huyen said to me:

We started about seven months ago and business has been up and down. I remember the first month we were taking home about two million (\$100 USD) a night in tips alone. I watched the alcohol sales and recorded everything at the end of each night. In the first month Tho and I each made \$6000 USD. The owner likes this because he does not have to come in to work all of the time because we are here. I was so excited I went and bought this [pointing to a colorful Louis Vuitton handbag]. We went out with the girls and partied after work. It was fun.

Between tips and commissions, Tho and Huyen each made an estimated \$8000 USD in the first month. They told me that after the first month they made roughly \$5000 USD per month between alcohol sales and commission. While their earnings significantly increased after quitting their jobs as promoters to becoming mommies, Huyen and Tho were already from the city so their trajectory of upward mobility was much more steady because they did not have to deal with the added costs of rural to urban migration. However, they were able to capitalize on their social networks to expand and diversify their income generating strategies. Tho combined her resources with a family member and together they opened a seafood restaurant in Ho Chi Minh City's District 6 that caters mainly to local Vietnamese men and women. Huyen opened a clothing shop selling clothes purchased from Hong Kong. Both Huyen and Tho saved their earnings to reinvest in other business ventures. Through the networks established among the various bar owners, they received a great deal of business advice on how to start small before growing big. Moreover, when they were ready to take on new projects, they had the support of relatives who already resided in the city. When I asked them what they planned to do in the next five years they both said that they would like to have multiple businesses. Huyen said:

Vietnam is changing so fast. There are so many people who come here and I think in ten years Saigon will look like Hong Kong or Singapore. I want to open more businesses and try. It is a risk, but I think I can do something big. I am lucky because my family has a nice house, and they do not need my help so I do not have to worry about taking care of them. They help and give me ideas about what kinds of things to [invest] in.

The sex industry provided women like Huyen and Tho with a venue in which to explore other entrepreneurial opportunities. They expanded their businesses and sought ways to generate more capital, experiencing economic upward mobility by generating a higher income and taking advantage of other investment opportunities. However, their trajectories were steady and cushioned by the support and proximity of their family members. The other five mommies and

bar owners were also able to maintain their upwardly mobile trajectories; however, their pathways were much more dramatic since they all came from poor rural backgrounds.

At the age of twenty-nine, Hanh the top mommy of Khong Sao Bar, was highly sought after by HCMC's most affluent men. Everyone referred to her as one of the best-networked women in the world of underground sex. She had established strong ties with some of the country's richest businessmen, as well as the most powerful political officials. She carried herself with poise and she had clearly invested a considerable amount of money on plastic surgery, clothing, and accessories in order to maintain her image. One afternoon while rummaging through her clothes for hand-me-down dresses to give to me, she told me about how she entered into sex work. As she looked at herself in the mirror, she said:

Looking at me [now] you would never know that I was a poor village girl. I started working in a karaoke bar in my village when I was 16. A group of men came in for drinks. I knew that they were from Saigon but not much else about them. They liked my voice and they kept coming back to the bar. Then Chu Thach asked me if I would be willing to move to Saigon to work in his bar. I was scared so I kept refusing. He was stubborn and he kept coming to the bar for six months so that I would trust him. He told me that I could bring my mother with me to the city, try it out, and if it did not work he would put me on a bus back to my village. I was really shy and it was hard because I did not know anything. He kept saying that he has been looking for someone like me and that he knows that I will one day run a bar that serves the richest most powerful men. Looking back I was also very lucky. When I moved to the city I did not know anything but for some reason I got called into every single table and I was making a lot of money and I did not know how or why. At first the mommies were mean to me and they made me drink a lot because when I made money they made money. But because the customers kept asking for me, the mommies eventually had to be nice to me because they needed me to bring in business. I met a lot of different men who treated me well and tipped me well. I even fell in love with some of them and had my heart broken. But I always say that I have been lucky. Sometimes at night I would lay there thinking is this really happening to me? When I turned 18, Chu Thach told me that he was opening a new bar and he wanted me to be the mommy there. I did not know this at the time but he was watching me and training me to run a bar that catered to very powerful men. I started small with local officials and small businessmen that Chi Thach worked with on business projects and then it grew and grew. For almost four years I had no idea who he was. But he comes from a very powerful political family, and they knew that they would eventually move into power. It had been planned for a long time. He set up the bar so that he could bring his customers here and feel like it was a safe place. No one would know them. Now [ten years later] I am around men whose names are on buildings, high-level [party] officials, and overseas Asians. I know who they are and some of them rely on me to help connect them. I owe a lot to Chu Thach because they worked with me for ten years now making me into the mommy I am now. They taught me how to save my money and invest it so that I would have something to fall back on when I am too old for this business.

Hanh's story is one of extreme economic and social upward mobility. She started working in a small bar in her village at the age of 16 and by chance she met a man who groomed her to become one of the most popular and well-connected mommies in HCMC's sex industry. What struck me most about my conversations with her was how much she trusted them and indeed how "lucky" she was to have never been forced to have sex with anyone. While her story indeed is one where many women could be victims of trickery and trafficking, that was not Hanh's story. Chu Thach identified Hanh nearly eight years before he knew that he would be involved in several big business deals. While he was the right hand man for a local level official, he knew that his boss's family would move into a higher position of power over the next eight years. In order to prepare themselves for the various types of development projects that they would be involved in, he needed to groom someone like Hanh to help provide an entertainment venue that the men could frequent in private. Chu Thach said to me in one of the most explicit statements about the importance of the mommies for Vietnamese industry:

When I met Hanh I knew that she was the one. I spent a long time looking for [someone like] her. I never told her that we were training her to work with powerful men because I was not sure that she could handle all of the money that would come to her. A lot of women get into gambling, drugs, or addicted to money.... I did not know if the family was really going to move into that position. Nothing is ever for sure. Sometimes you have to rely on fate to bring the right people together at the right time.... We knew that we were going to need a place to entertain because we would have access to a lot more projects, land, and investors [both local and foreign].

Both Hanh and Chu Thach told me that over the years she slowly learned how to save and invest her money. Chu Thach told me, "It is hard to last a long time in this business. I did not want her to fall hard, so I taught her how to save and invest so that she could have something else to work on when the family stepped down from power." Hanh capitalized on her social networks established in the bars in order to maintain her new standard of living. She relied on clients' advice on how to save and where to invest her money and now had two homes in Ho Chi Minh City's newly built complexes. She owned a condo in a high-rise located in District 4, a house in District 2, which was further out and about an hour commute to work, but she bought it because she still had an attachment to owning land. She also owned two vacation homes in Da Lat (mountainous region) and Da Nang (beach town), as well as three restaurants. The three restaurants had full time managers who used to work for her in the bars, but had to quit because they were either too old or decided to get married and settle down. Hanh's story of upward mobility is compelling because she defies the common perception that those who enter sex work are thinking about acquiring fast cash in the short term and do not have long term career plans. Although she herself may not have had plans to stay in this business for a long time, she also defies common images brought forth by scholars of prostitution who write about women as in prostitution as eternal victims trapped in a world that they cannot escape through debt bondage or human trafficking (Bales 2004; Jeffreys 1999; Limoncelli 2010; Shelley 2010). Hanh made a career in the sex industry by creating a network of powerful men who come to her bar, similar to the ways that men and women must network in other occupations. By carefully developing and managing a strong network of political elites and businessmen in an informal economy she was able to experience social mobility. Although her clients could never acknowledge her in the

spaces of the formal economy, they relied on her to provide emotional care and help make important introductions within her network of men in exchange for money and business advice. In effect, she became a key figure responsible for building relationships of trust between men that facilitates the flow of capital into and around Ho Chi Minh City.

While Chu Thach had groomed Hanh for nearly eight years to move into a position as Saigon's top mommy, the other mommies who I worked for experienced upward mobility through other pathways. Lilly, the owner of Secrets, was 24 years old when I met her. At the time she owned four bars and had a net income of roughly \$16,000 USD per month from all four of her investments. One day while spending time with her at the construction site of a new bar she was working to open, I asked her about her life and was again surprised by her pathway towards extreme upward mobility. I learned that her mother was a sex worker during the Vietnam War and that her mother provided services mostly to American GIs. However, after the war, her family lost everything with the communist take over, and for nearly ten years, they suffered from extreme poverty. She said to me:

You do not know, Kim. I used to be so, so poor. I remember when I was a kid saving potatoes to put in our soup because we could not afford to buy rice. I remember that my stomach used to hurt so much because we did not have enough food and I used to cry dreaming of a bowl of soup with some meat. I wanted to take care of my parents so when I was thirteen years old I went to Saigon to work as a maid. I did that for two years but I was not making very much money to send home so I started to sneak out of the house at night to find work in a bar like my mom. So I worked in a hooker bar in the backpacker area because a girl in the neighborhood told me that is where all of the white men go. After a few months I fell in love with an old man who started to give me money and support me so I could move out and live on my own. But after awhile he got bored with me so I went back to a different bar. I was sixteen and shy but for some reason the men really liked me so I made a lot of money as a working girl [sex worker]. So many men asked me to marry them but I kept saying no because I was afraid that over time they would get bored. Then one day this man named Charlie came in. He told me that he was married and would not leave his wife but that he was doing business in Vietnam and he wanted to have a local girlfriend. He was very sweet. He stuck money in my purse all of the time and he was ok with me working. He paid to put a toilet and shower in my parent's house out in the village. Then when he found out how cheap it was, he paid to renovate the whole house. A year later, he bought a house in Saigon under my name and paid to move my parents into it. He lives upstairs on the top floor and my family lives on the other floors. Two years ago I asked him if I could borrow \$16,000 USD to open a bar. He gave me the money and I opened this small bar for Western expats. I wanted men to have a bar they could go to that was not all about sex. I made the money back in 3 months. When I tried to pay Charlie back he told me to take that money and do something else with it. It was all happening so fast. Six months after opening my first bar I opened a second one around the corner from here.

Between December 2010 and August 2011, I watched as Lilly launched a new restaurant selling Western food and a fourth bar. Between these four businesses, she had over 60 employees.

Unlike Hanh, who relied on a local network of men to help build her career and investments, Lilly relied on the help of one Westerner, Charlie, who loaned her money and helped to support her family so that she could launch her first business. Like Hanh, Lilly invested in multiple businesses; as she explained to me, “People in Vietnam lived through a war so they know how to hustle. If one business idea does not work then you have to be ready to try something new because nothing is for sure.” Lilly’s ability to take on multiple projects, design a Western style restaurant based on internet photos, train a staff, and execute these projects allowed her to take advantage of other business opportunities outside of sex work. On several occasions she spoke reflexively about her own mobility and was always generous with street children who sold flowers, gum, and lottery tickets on the streets. One night, while we sat on the street eating Vietnamese style escargot one night, Lilly said, “Some nights I climb on my rooftop and lie on a swing looking up at the sky thinking about how lucky I am to have this life. I think of the girl who used to eat potatoes instead of rice and I tell myself that I will never go to bed hungry.”

Lilly is clearly an anomaly, since few women in sex work were able to achieve what she has by her age. While she herself referred to her success as a streak of luck, it is clear that her family history and her social networks helped shape this trajectory of extreme upward mobility, such that she would never again have to endure the sight of potatoes.

Tina, a 22 year old owner of a bar located in Ho Chi Minh City’s backpacker district, is the last mommy whose trajectory I explored. Tina migrated to the city when she was 14 and worked in a variety of service sector jobs as a maid, manicurist, hairdresser, and factory worker. When I asked about how she became a bar owner, she laughed and said to me:

Fate. I quit my job at the shoe factory where I was working 12 hours a day for \$80 USD a month. I could not find work so I got desperate and went to a fortune-teller. The woman told me that I would be rich and have a lot of money in the next year. She told me I needed to go into sex work because I will meet a man who will change my life. Some of my friends were working in a bar and I asked them to help me get a job. The owner said that I could work but I would only make money from sex. She would not pay me but I had to follow her rules: come to work on time, ask for days off, try to get men to buy drinks in her bar. I was not allowed to have sex with a client for less than \$1,000,000 VND [less than \$50 USD] because that would ruin the price for everyone else. I had to pay her \$200,000 VND [\$10 USD] for every client I left the bar with and \$200,000[\$10 USD] if I wanted a day off. I only had to sleep with three men to make what would take me a month to make [at the shoe factory]. I met this man from Switzerland who told me he was a photographer and he asked if he could take some photos of me. He paid me \$200 [USD] dollars for a whole day of taking photos with my clothes on. Then we had sex and he paid me another \$200 USD. He left and I did not hear from him for seven months. When he returned we dated like boyfriend and girlfriend and he told me that he wanted to help me get out of the bar life. I told him I wanted to open my own bar and he told me to show him a business plan. I wrote it out on paper with a pen like a child. He asked me to find the place, I did and then he paid for things every step of the way because he was afraid that I would run away with \$10,000 USD.

Tina opened a bar in the backpackers' area, and it took her five months to break even. After rent and utility bills each month she made about \$1000 USD on alcohol sales and \$2000 USD from the kickbacks that her workers gave to her after sex with a client. While Tina had not set out on other entrepreneurial ventures, she was able to date multiple men who had renovated her parents' village home into the largest mansion in the village; she also purchased a small flat in Ho Chi Minh City. During the months in which I conducted research in Tina's bar, we spent a significant amount of time looking at a number of different cars that she was looking to purchase. We looked at Hondas and Toyotas because those two cars were within her price range. One afternoon after looking at a number of different Toyotas, I said to her, "I cannot imagine buying a car in Vietnam because you have to pay 100% tax and in cash." She said:

My father used to pedal the *cyclo* bikes (three wheel taxi bikes) now I am buying a car. Vietnam is not the same anymore. Before you saw motorbikes slowly replacing *cyclos*. [Now] the only *cyclos* on the streets are the ones for tourists. Now there are a lot more cars on the streets. I want a car because now only the rich can afford them, but later they are going to start making cars cheaper and then everyone will have one. I want to be the first.

Tina's desire to purchase a car symbolized her extreme upward mobility because it was a status marker that helped her feel that she, too, belonged in the category of Saigon's wealthy elite.

All eight of the mommies in my study had experienced some form of upward mobility at the time of my research. While Tho and Huyen came from urban backgrounds, had families with economic resources, Hanh, Lilly, and Tina all experienced extreme upward mobility. The sex industry has transformed their lives allowing them not only to escape poverty but also explore multiple entrepreneurial projects. The upward mobility trajectories of these mommies working in the sex industry maps onto the dynamic changes occurring in Vietnam as they capitalize on Ho Chi Minh City's transformation into a global cosmopolitan city.

From a Motorbike to a Mercedes and Back: Rapid Upward and Downward Mobility

Sex workers in HCMC's sex industry experienced different trajectories of mobility based on the niche market in which they were employed. Stories of rapid upward and downward mobility seemed to occur more often in the higher paying sectors that catered to wealthy local Vietnamese men, Asian business men, and *Viet Kieu* men than in the lower paying sectors catering to Westerners. The sheer amount of money flowing through the higher-end sectors created a situation where women gained access to fast cash whereas women who catered to Western men gained access to slower and more steady forms of capital. Of the 50 women I studied in these two sectors (25 from in Khong Sao Bar and 25 in Lavender and Gold Bar) none had more than a high school education, and most came from poor rural and urban families. In the sector that catered to local Vietnamese men and Asian businessmen, 17 came straight from a nearby village into sex work while only eight came from poor, urban families. Those who came to the city directly from the village went straight into sex work with the help of their social networks and the mommies who had returned to their villages to seek out beautiful women. As Hanh explained to me:

It is better for me to bring in young very pretty girls from the village because they have the look that my clients like. They look more innocent and pure. The men are rich and powerful and sometimes they need to have a place where they can go to relax and have fun without people knowing who they are. Village girls do not know anything about the men except that they are rich, and the men like to keep it like that.

The clients' desire for anonymity and privacy led the bar to hire workers from poor rural backgrounds strictly on the basis of their looks. Many entered the bar through a friend or through direct contact with one of the mommies in their villages. During my months working as a hostess in each of the bars I watched three workers enter the bar and transform in a matter of weeks. Through their transformations, I was able to ask the other women questions and hear stories as they all reflected on their mobility. Nhi, a twenty-four year old woman who returned to the bar after leaving for several months, described her experiences with rapid upward and downward mobility, saying to me:

Seven months ago when I first came to work in the city I was [a] different [person]. I was young and shy but I knew that I was beautiful because men used to beg me to come in to their tables so I was stuck-up [*chanh*]. I would run around from table to table. I remember holding the first million VND (\$50 USD) in my hands thinking that I have never held this much money in my hands before. I made that in the first hour of work on just tips. The clients loved me. I got an iPhone, money for new clothes, and someone paid for me to get my nose fixed. I went from riding around on a motorbike to riding in nice cars. They spoiled me. Then I fell in love with this [local Vietnamese] man and I thought he loved me. He took me to a condo and told me that he wanted me to quit. He told me that he would give me \$2000 USD a month and a free house if I quit working. Everyone told me not to listen to him but I was stuck-up and I thought I was better than even the mommies. After two months he found a new girl to play with and he got bored of me. She took over the apartment and I had to move out. I had nothing; my hands were empty [*hai ban tay trang*]. I got on a motorbike taxi for the first time in three months and I just cried because I felt like a princess who lost her riches. So here I am back for a job. No one says anything to me because they all know, but I feel ashamed. It is a lot harder to get back in on tables again. I have to work to build up my network of clients again.

Tears dripped down Nhi's face as she spoke of this moment of humiliation. While the other women tried to console her and help her get into tables by introducing her to new clients, I watched as she fumbled around to make the most of what she had. When I asked her why she decided to come back to sex work, she said to me, "I got used to the high life and to always having money in my pockets. If I quit I will have to go back to the village, get married, and settle down. I want to try one more time and this time be smarter with the money that I make." Nhi's is a characteristic story of rapid upward and downward mobility. She went from being a poor girl in the village riding around on a motorbike to working in a bar where she made more money than she knew how to spend. She fell in love with a man who set her up in a luxury condo, allowed her to use his personal driver, and provided her with a monthly stipend that was nearly twenty

times the amount she made in her village. However, she also experienced extreme downward mobility as his attraction for her dwindled, and she had to get on a motorbike to return to hostess work in the bar.

As young women from the village entered the hostess bar, their tastes begin to change and so too do their consumption patterns. As I have discussed in Chapter 6, women who catered to wealthy local Vietnamese men began to acquire a taste for global luxury items, tailored clothing, and plastic surgery. These new consumption patterns were only possible in this sector because women had access to so much more expendable income than they had prior to sex work. They earned roughly \$2000 - \$3000 USD through tips and sex alone, and clients often provided them with luxury gifts ranging from bottles of perfume to designer shoes worth \$600 USD. Hanh, the mommy, often warned the women, and tried her best to teach them how to manage their money, save, and invest in a small businesses back in their hometowns, so that they would not experience such a hard fall. Vy a twenty-three year old worker said to me:

I wish that I were as lucky as Hanh. She makes a lot of money and has different businesses. I try to save money, but it is hard because now I am taking care of too many people. I am paying for my older brother's college and my older sister to go to beauty school. I send money to my parents. When I get depressed about money I spend it on clothes because I need something to relieve the pressure that I have. I know that I am getting too old to work here, and I will have nothing to show for it if my siblings do not take care of me later. Life is strange, when you have money you have a lot of it, but when you are poor you are so poor you cannot even eat.

The precariousness of Vy and Nhi's economic status was common in the sector that catered to local Vietnamese and Asian businessmen. Women entered the bar and maintained their status based on their novelty value; over the years they had to invest in plastic surgery to give their clients something new to look at. However the ride from the motorbike to the Mercedes and back again was too often their shared trajectory.

Workers who catered to *Viet Kieu* men experienced rapid upward and downward mobility, although in a different way. Nearly all of the women who worked in Lavender and Gold Bar servicing *Viet Kieu* men came from poor urban backgrounds or had migrated to the city and spent at least two years in the service sector or manufacturing occupations prior to entering sex work. Most of them told me that sex work was the only place where they thought they could achieve real economic mobility. Kieu said to me:

My first job in Saigon was when I was 16. I worked in the kitchen of a restaurant cooking. Then a year later I worked as a receptionist at a hotel [making \$150 USD per month]. But over the years the price of food and gas has gone up. Everything is so expensive and I was barely surviving, always borrowing money from friends. I kept seeing these girls come into the hotel with *Viet Kieu* men. At first I looked down on them, but later I saw them walking in with nicer things [and] I got jealous. So I started working. When I realized that I could make more money having sex with one man than I could make a whole month at the hotel I decided that I have to close my eyes and jump. I was scared but I knew that it was the only way I could turn my life around.

The conditions of Kieu's life prior to sex work propelled her into life working as a bartender in a bar that catered to *Viet Kieu* men. She knew the bars where *Viet Kieu* men spent time through the network of sex workers that floated in and out of the hotel at night, and she went in to ask for a job. The mommy told her that she could try it for a week and see if it was the right fit. When I asked her to describe her life since working in the bar she said to me:

Sometimes I wish that I never stepped into this bar. My life goes up and down, up and down. I just crave stability. Some months I make a lot of money and some months I am broke. It is all up to fate [*Cai gi cung cua troi cho thoi*]. With *Viet Kieu* men sometimes you are lucky and you meet someone who treats you well, and then some months you can't make any money. This one guy bought me a new motorbike and gave me a lot of money, but then when he went back to the US and I never heard from him again. I had to go back to the bar and start over.... It is hard because every time I go back to the bar I feel nervous because I do not know who I will meet or who will fall for me.... One minute I am staying in a nice hotel, another minute I am in a dirty hotel. It is day by day. [*Ngay nao hay ngay do*].

Because of the instability of income, women who catered to *Viet Kieu* men often moved between first world luxury and third world poverty. When they were lucky enough to have a client, they could indulge in luxurious hotels, fancy motorbikes, nice dinners, and shopping sprees. Clients often came with gifts like cellular phones and household electronics, symbolizing their gift of modernity (Thai 2003; Wilson 2004). However, once the men left them, sex workers returned to a life of poverty and had to start all over again in their search for clients. Although all of these women aspired to be like the mommies who had found ways to generate a stable income through multiple investments, very few women had saved any money. Of the 50 women who catered to wealthy local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men, only four had saved enough money to open a small business. The other women did try, but in times of hardship they had to go through their savings in order to support themselves and their families. I witnessed several women enter and exit the bar in the short two to three months that I was employed in each of these bars. Workers who returned to the bar after a period of not working had to get to know a whole new set of co-workers and clients.

The novelty of the clients created a structure where workers experienced periods of both great economic success and failure. Having experienced rapid upward and downward economic and social mobility, moving from poor rural and urban spaces to high-end luxury spaces where they lived in luxury apartments and acquired distinctive tastes for luxury goods, these women had to learn how to feel comfortable in *both spaces* and in social circles. Some sex workers had been around long enough that they learned to anticipate the trials and triumphs of sex work. The movement between elite and common social spaces felt most poignant to me when women would sit out on the streets eating late night bowls of *pho* and *hu tieu* (noodles) for fifty-cents after dancing in a club where the client had spent between \$150-\$500 USD on alcohol for the night.

From the Factory into the Bar: Steady, Slow Trajectories of Upward and Downward Mobility

Sex workers who catered to Western men, in Secrets (the expatriate bar) and in Naughty Girls (the backpackers' bar) experienced gradual upward and downward mobility. They did not rise and fall as rapidly as did the women who worked in Khong Sao Bar, Lavender, and Gold Club. Like the women in the other sectors, nearly all of them came from poor rural or urban backgrounds. However, roughly two thirds of the women in both Secrets and Naughty Girls had jobs in the manufacturing or service sectors prior to entering sex work. The other one-third of the women began working in the bar after seeing a friend or family member's success in this line of employment.

During the first month of work in a bar, sex workers often experienced rapid upward mobility; after that they began to anticipate a steadier flow of money. The women who catered to Western men did not experience rapid downward mobility. For example, in a conversation with three women working in Secrets, I asked why they chose to enter into the bar scene. Tam, who first moved to HCMC at the age of thirteen to work as a private maid, said to me:

I worked as a maid for three years and then after the kids grew up they did not need me anymore so they helped me find work in a factory.... I worked in a clothing factory every day for almost 12 hours a day. It was tiring and I did not make any money. When I worked as a maid I did not have to pay rent and I could send 1.5 million VND [\$75 USD] home each month to my parents. In the factory, I made 1.6 million VND [\$80 USD] a month but I also had to pay for rent and buy food. I could not send as much home. I would go home crying every night because I was getting paid so little. In Vietnam most people who are poor just accept that they are poor, but when I came to Saigon I had dreams of making more money and living a more comfortable life. I decided to take a risk and work in a bar. Business in the bar is up and down. Sometimes there are a lot of customers, sometimes no one comes in.... I make the same money sleeping with two men than I do in a whole month in the factory, and I do not have to work long hours sitting in one place.

Like nearly two-thirds of all the women whom I studied in the expat and backpacker bars, Tam decided to enter into sex work not only because she thought that she could make more money, but also because sex work offered her better working conditions. I heard stories similar to Tam's in nearly every conversation that I had with women about why they entered into sex work. In my conversations with women who went from the factory into sex work, nearly all of the women spoke of themselves as strong, independent and willing to take risks. Van, for example, said to me:

People look at the work that I do and think that I am stupid because I am selling my body. They think I am uneducated or I am addicted to drugs. But the stupid people are the people who work in the factories every single day making barely enough to survive. They do not even think that they are making someone else rich. They will never turn their lives around.... The smart ones are the ones who

are bold enough to step out of the factory and onto the streets. Those are the ones who are fast (*lan loi*). At least in this job I can have some hope that my life will change. Some hope to me is better than no hope.

In that same conversation, Chau, a twenty-one year old woman from the village of Chau Doc, added:

In [sex work] it is all about luck. If you get lucky and meet the right person then your life can change. The gods give some people the chance to change their lives. I have a friend who married a white guy, and she just stays at home with the kids. She does not have to work. Her life is easy [*cuoc doi suong lam*]. Not everyone will be lucky enough to have that life but here the girls who are willing to roll out on the street and take risks have a chance to transform their lives [whereas] in the factory there is no chance.

The sex workers who left manufacturing and service sector occupations experienced upward mobility only if they could procure clients for sex in the bars. As many of them stated, they could make more money by sleeping with two clients than they could working 12-hour days for a month in a factory. Those who were able to make it out of the factory and into sex work experienced rapid upward mobility during the first month. However, after that they all spoke of a steady income that came directly from providing sexual services. While many of the workers certainly earned more money, their patterns of social mobility did not resemble those of women who catered to local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men. As I discuss in Chapter 5, workers who catered to Western men did not have to alter their bodies or consumption patterns to embody their wealth, but rather worked to look like Third-World subjects. Thao, a 26 year-old worker, explained to me:

I do not buy fancy clothes to wear at work. The men who come here need to think that sex workers are poor so that they will help us. If they think we have money why would they give money to us?

In addition to not altering their bodies, women whom I worked with in this sector did not dress as extravagantly as the women in the higher-end sectors. While they dressed differently at work, they did not spend nearly as much money on new designer handbags, tailor-made dresses, or plastic surgery. However, sex workers who catered to white men did experience dramatic changes in their lifestyles in terms of their changing tastes in consumption, modes of transportation, and/or living arrangements. But they did not move in and out of high-end spaces as often as women who catered to men in higher tiered bars. During times when their money from clients did not flow as generously, they did not have to make significant changes to their lifestyles.

Male clients played a crucial role in easing these women into steady upward mobility. By 2009 and 2010, most of the clients I met were well aware of the various strategies and tricks that women engaged in to dupe them for money. I watched as clients tried to “teach” workers how to manage their money by commenting on what was appropriate to spend their money on and explaining what it meant to save in order to find stability in their lives. One night, I listened as Kevin, a 47-year old man from Virginia, lectured to Thoa, a 25 year-old woman:

I do not understand people in Vietnam sometimes. How much was this cell phone? You buy expensive phone but you no save money for emergency. Why you need fancy phone? I buy cheap phone [pointing to his basic nokia phone], same, same.

He then turned to me and said, “everyone in this country is poor but they all have a cell phone because they do not know how to save their money.” He continued, “They just live for the day and spend, spend, spend.” While local Vietnamese and *Viet Kieu* men also engaged in various forms of conspicuous consumption and encouraged workers to do so in order to embody modernity, Western men like Kevin were often critical of women’s consumption patterns and in their critiques of globalization noting particularly that it had created an ethos in developing countries like Vietnam where people purchased luxuries before their necessities. During my first phase of research between 2006 and 2007, I saw several women create fictive stories of crisis such as a death in the family in order to generate large sums of cash from men. But by 2010, many of the expatriate men I studied were aware of these tricks and while they still gave the women money, they monitored their expenditure. David a 38 year-old man from France, said to me:

These girls all lie. They are in the business of lying. They say, ‘Oh, my father is sick or my mother died.’ No, no, I know better than that. I will help them but first they have to take me to their village and show me how much it will cost to pay for the house. I will pay as construction is taking place. Otherwise she [his girlfriend] will run off and do god knows what with the money.

Expatriate clients went to great lengths to manage the money that they spent on their girlfriends, over the course of several months, I watched men try to find ways to confirm the cost of things before giving their girlfriends any money. One client said to me:

The market is different in the East than in the West. There is no set price for anything you have to bargain for everything. So sometimes women will tell you that it costs \$4000 USD to expand the house when it only costs \$2000 USD. They eat up the other \$2000 USD. So I make sure to ask around about the cost before giving them any money. The worst money spent is wasted money.

The various ways in which men worked to ensure that the money they provided for basic necessities rather than conspicuous consumption led workers to experience slow and gradual pathways to mobility. Sex workers often had to prove to their clients that the large sums of the money that they asked for to remodel a village home or care for an ailing parent were actually spent on those needs. As a result, women also earmarked or differentiated their money in different ways (Zelizer 1997). Sex workers often allocated the money they earned in brief and casual encounters as their own, which they would use to send to their parents and to pay for their living expenses and luxury goods. However, they often had to report the large sums of money that they received, thereby earmarking that money as money for specific purposes.

When women asked their clients-turned-boyfriends to help them start a small business so that they could find a way out of the bars, their boyfriends would often ask them to come up with a concrete business plan. I sat with women on several nights as they sketched their budgets on

bar receipts or napkins. They thought about opening small cafes, after-hour food stalls on the streets, spas, beauty salons, restaurants, clothing shops and some even wanted to open a bar. While nearly all of the women had dreams of opening their own business, very few were able to acquire the capital necessary to get their business going. During the time that I was there, Thao was the only woman able to gather \$10,000 USD from a boyfriend, so that she could become an active partner and take an equity stake in one-third of a small bar. Her boyfriend, Steven, a 58 year-old expatriate from Australia told me:

I am always wary of partnerships in countries like Vietnam because someone can take your money and run [away] with it. But I see this as an investment so that she can learn the business rather than jumping the gun and doing something on her own. I did not want her to be a sole owner because I worried that she would not know how to manage a large amount of money. So far the business has been under, but I am hoping it will pick up in the next few months.... At least she is working towards something long term instead of trying to get it from sex.

Steven regarded the money that he spent helping his girlfriend buy into a bar as honest money with long term benefits. Indeed, Steven worried that Thao would become too independent and would leave him. Two months after Thao's bar opened, when I came by with Lilly to show support for her business, Stephen said to me: "I do not want her to make too much money." When I asked why, he said, "Because she will become like Lilly over here.... She will have so much money and won't need me." Steven provided his girlfriend with a way of generating income that allowed her to think about her long-term future without having to sleep with clients for money. However, by enabling her to take part as a partner in the bar, rather than being the sole owner, Steven also regulated the amount of money that Thao would earn. As a result, Thao experienced a steady trajectory of upward mobility rather than a rapid trajectory that he thought might be possible if she was the sole owner of a bar.

Although clients tried to manage sex workers' money, the workers still found ways to maintain a variety of "cash stashes" for special uses or emergencies. Rather than creating fictive crisis, they offered to run errands for men like helping to purchase airfare, hotels rooms, or bus tickets through a travel agent, so that they could add to the cost and have some money to spare. The amount of money that women generated in this way was generally not enough for them to see a large spike in their income. While most women bought expensive cellular phones, jewelry or new clothing, their tastes stayed relatively constant compared to those of women in the higher-tiered sectors. Male clients often lectured workers on how to "save their money" with the hope of teaching women the values of hard work and delayed gratification. In this era of upward mobility through entrepreneurship, these women served as small "development" projects for men looking to invest in the workers futures. Rather than freely giving women money, the men acted as mini banks financing small businesses. As a result of all of these factors, women who worked in bars that catered to Western men did not experience rapid upward and downward economic mobility but rather slower more steady pathways of upward mobility.

Convertibility: From the City to the Village

At the end of my time in each bar, I accompanied a group of workers on a trip to their hometowns so that I could meet their parents, siblings, and see what their lives had been like

when they were growing up. This trip was also a going-away present and a gesture of farewell from them to me, marking the end of my time of getting to know the women and becoming friends with them. At first, I never thought of these trips as sites to conduct research; I saw them as a vacation away from the city where I could get away from my work, ride my bike through rice paddies, and stay up late in the company of my friends without having to perform any emotional labor. However, after several trips to the different villages, I began to notice that issues of convertibility were salient for women across all sectors.

Scholars have long documented the multiple ways in which global men convert their first world citizenship and Western dollars into social status across transnational social fields (Carruthers 2002; Levitt 2001; Thai 2005). Global men who come to Vietnam alter their consumption patterns for a short while in order to earn social respect and dignity (Lamont 1992) that they often struggled to obtain in their home countries. During my trips to the villages, I noticed that sex workers engaged in similar forms of conversion as they moved between rural and urban spaces. Scholars have not yet theorized the practice of *domestic convertibility* across urban spaces and rural villages. How might convertibility work *within* a nation rather than across national borders? By working in the sex industry, some women had access to global capital that flowed through the hands of overseas men, and others, global capital that passed through the hands of wealthy local men. Regardless of the ways in which women accessed global capital and the different patterns of consumption in which they engaged while living in HCMC, all of the workers in my study converted their urban dollars into social status in the village.

This became really clear to me while preparing for a trip to the village of Tay Ninh near the Cambodian border. Lilly, the owner of Secrets, told the women from her village that she was going to hire a private van and anyone who wanted to accompany her was welcome. Seven of the women from the bar asked to come along, and she gladly accepted them all. Days before leaving, the women dragged me out at 7am to go shopping so that they could purchase an array of gifts for their family members. I watched as they carefully negotiated for various electronic items including a television, a refrigerator, a karaoke machine, a rice cooker, and several small kitchen appliances. We also shopped for clothes for the young children back in the village, makeup for the adult women, and liquor for the men. I was amazed at how full the van was as we packed in all of these items to take with us to the village. During the eight-hour van ride, Tam, a 23 year old woman received a call on the phone in which her sister told her that their mother had invited several people in the neighborhood over for dinner to celebrate Tam's homecoming, but several people had declined the invitation saying that her mother was a disgrace for allowing her daughter to sell her body. One neighbor even said, "It is bad karma to be around dirty money." Tam started sobbing really hard in the van and everyone tried to console her. Then Lilly turned to everyone and said:

Who cares about those people and what they think. They do not know anything. They are the same stupid people whose lives will never change because they are not savvy enough to get out there and try something different. You just have to work hard and be successful. Let them talk. Shit, who cares because money talks. When we get to the village with all these gifts, people will shut-up. People are scared of money and when you have it they will defer to you. Watch and learn.

The other women jumped in, reminding her that women who worked in the sex industry built the mansions in the villages. People never look at those houses with shame because, as Lilly

said, money talks. The notion that “money talks” struck me as I realized that workers spent a great deal of their earnings and some even went into debt in order to bring modern commodities to their villages. However, the act of gift giving was not just about providing their family members with basic necessities. Workers gave gifts as a way to manage the stigma attached to their work. In effect, like the *Viet Kieu* men I discuss in Chapter 5, they too converted their access to global capital in order to achieve a sense of dignity and status in their villages.

As the van pulled up at 11:00pm, I woke up and looked outside the window to see dozens of people awaiting the women’s arrival. They helped to unload the van, and we went inside to have some chicken and rice porridge. I watched as family members gushed over the new electronics while neighbors looked on shyly, but with envy. Three of the women were cousins and the other four were friends from the same area. However, all of the families were congregated in the same house for the night as two men set up a karaoke system, and people began to sing so loudly that it echoed down the street. The young children ran around trying on their new clothes. Lilly brought out three bottles of Johnnie Walker Black Label, and I watched as she sat drinking with the men. Typically in the village the women cook and ate in the kitchen area while the men sat out front eating and drinking with each other. However, on this night the visiting sex workers were all invited to sit, eat, and drink with the men. Therefore, Lilly, Ai, Diep, Binh, and I sat with the men while Tam, Chau, and Tuyen sat in the back with their family members. I listened as the men and women sang, drank, and ate together. After awhile Chu Manh, the father of one of the girls, began tearing up and drunkenly said to me, “This household would be nothing without the women and their sacrifices.” We all grew silent as Lilly tried to turn the seriousness of the conversation into a joke by saying, “Why because you would starve to death.” We all laughed, and then Chu Manh said what I heard many times on my other visits to villages, “People used to think that girls were worthless because after they grew up they would marry into someone else’s family. Today girls are gold because they sacrifice everything to take care of their families.” Lilly again joked and said, “Hold your tongue until after we are married.” We laughed and continued drinking until everyone grew tired and went to bed.

The next morning at 8am Tam woke me up and asked if I would like to go with them to the market since that was where the whole village gathers in the morning. I watched as the women put on their newest clothing, items that they had purchased in the city but saved for a special occasion. Then we climbed on the motorbikes to head into the market. They walked with pride, purchasing foods, snacks and goodies without even bargaining for the right price. Lilly commented out loud, “everything is so cheap here compared to Saigon,” as she pulled out a wad of cash from her pockets for everyone to stare at. People stared at us as we walked through the market, some snickered behind us while others nicely asked how long we would be in town. I turned to Lilly and asked her, “Do you ever worry that someone will rob you when they see how much money you carry around?” She said, “Some of these people made Tam cry yesterday in the van. Money talks. You see they will not say anything.” I smiled at her, and she went on, “I have been doing this since I was 13. I have been through a lot, and I have to protect the girls who work for me.” As we walked around, Lilly was obviously the center of attention. Several people complimented her beauty while others brought their daughters to her asking if she would be willing to hire their daughters to work in her “restaurant.” The act of kindness to other sex workers in public spaces provides Lilly with a defense against the stigma of her work demonstrating to the people in the village that she is a good person.

Later that evening the women hosted a large party inviting people from all around to come join in the festivities. They prepared duck, chicken, fish, and an assortment of wrapped

goods steamed in banana leaves. The women came out in their nicest dresses and invited a local photographer to take pictures of them. Again we sang karaoke, drank and ate until about 2am. As the sun rose, I went for a morning bike ride with Lilly, and we talked about how she used to feel bad about her mother's reputation for being a prostitute during the Vietnam War. She said:

No one would marry my mother because they all knew that she was a prostitute for the Americans. People were afraid of being associated with anything American when the communists took over. So my mother married a Cambodian man and my sister and I came out with dark skin. People used to make fun of how dark and skinny I was.... I was embarrassed to wear skirts because I hated how small my legs were.... [But] my dark skin has made me successful. I started out as a sex worker and now I own four businesses. No one can talk down to me or my family.... I want the girls who work for me to feel good about what they are doing because they we all drag our legs out to work hoping that we might get lucky.

I asked Lilly, "What about the ones who are unlucky? What about the ones who do not make a lot of money spreading their legs or finding a boyfriend to build them a mansion?" She said, "They either come back to the village, get married, and settle down, or they stay in the city and work doing something else." I said to her, "It must be hard to come back if you have not made it." She said, "That is the risk you take. Either you are lucky or you are unlucky. That is for the gods to decide."

Workers across all sectors of the sex industry turned to their villages as a place where they could find a sense of dignity and respect, not through their occupation but through the global capital that they could spend and display. Indeed most were not as fortunate as Lilly, but they contributed a significant amount of money to their families as they supported their parents and often paid for their siblings' education. Workers built status and respect both through the public displays of their wealth on their bodies and in the gifts that they brought home, which also enables them to build social debt. They were, in effect, converting their urban status across rural and urban social fields to acquire honor and respect despite their stigmatized occupation.

Conclusion

How have women's lives changed as a result of their entering sex work? In this chapter I have addressed that questions by addressing the themes of mobility and convertibility in the context of Vietnam's rapidly changing economy. The flow of foreign direct investment into Vietnam has dramatically altered the sex industry and the types of women who enter sex work. In 2006 most of the women who catered to overseas *Viet Kieu* men came from economically privileged backgrounds and had daytime jobs coveted by many others. However, in 2009 each sector of the sex industry had a set of mommies and bar owners who organized and regulated the traffic of women into their bars. By 2009, nearly all of the women in my study came from poor rural and urban backgrounds leaving their jobs in the factories, manufacturing, and service sector occupations with the hope of experiencing upward mobility. This chapter has addressed question, "How are women's lives changed by entering into sex work?"

I have argued that women experienced differing trajectories of mobility based on the sector of sex work in which women worked. High-end sex workers whom I met in 2006

transitioned out of sex work and into more lucrative “mainstream” occupations by 2009. Their ability to transform their educational capital, social networks, and economic resources allowed them to adapt to the new flows of capital entering Vietnam through the form of FDI. In addition, their changing perceptions of *Viet Kieu* men’s loss of status in Vietnam motivated them to quit sex work altogether. Like the women whom I met in 2006, the mommies who catered to *Viet Kieu* men were from urban families with access to economic resources and a network of bar owners. The three mommies who catered to *Viet Kieu* men effectively transformed the sex industry, making it much more organized while simultaneously capitalizing on these changes. The five mommies experienced rapid economic and social upward mobility. Their lives have been transformed as they move in and out of spaces with First World luxuries and villages marked by Third World poverty. All five women have been able to secure steady flows of capital by saving their money and diversifying their investments.

Workers in higher end sectors often occupied a precarious position as they straddled a peculiar position between First World wealth and Third World poverty. Women who catered to wealthy local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men often experienced rapid upward and downward economic mobility in short periods. Moving between luxury and poverty became part of the norm in these sectors as they literally went from riding around on a motorcycle into a Mercedes Benz, then back to the motorcycle. Sex workers who catered to Western men, however, operated with a different ethic around money. Western clients tried to teach the workers how to value money in different ways, emphasizing the necessity for hard work and the idea that one needs to save. Workers who catered to Western expatriates and backpackers experienced upward mobility that was rapid at first, and then steady because they were not immersed in a world that promoted conspicuous consumption of luxury items. Across all sectors sex workers engaged in processes of convertibility across rural and urban social fields.

Across all sectors of sex work, the women whom I met turned to the village as a place where they could acquire a sense of honor and respect through their public displays of their money and in the process of gift giving. They effectively transformed what once was a very stigmatized profession to one that is at least palatable to some members of their families and villages. As Vietnam has emerged as a rising dragon in the new global economy, women working in the sex industry have felt the ups and downs of the global economy, and have their families in the villages who have become dependent on their daughters to build them their mansions. As Chu Manh stated in so many words, “girls are the new gold” in Vietnam’s globalizing economy.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

In August 2010, after 15 months of living in Vietnam, I moved back to Berkeley to write the dissertation. In the 48 hours between leaving Vietnam and landing in San Francisco, I felt as if I had moved through two worlds that had suddenly changed places. The Johnnie Walker distributors hosted a going away party for me in HCMC, which I agreed to have as a way to acknowledge and thank those who had helped me in my fieldwork, and to say goodbye to the many people who had helped me along the way. The farewell party began with a nice dinner at the Park Hyatt with some close friends, followed by a larger party at Secrets hosted by Johnnie Walker where I could drink with the Westerners and expatriates.

Around 11:00pm, I returned to the Park Hyatt where I drank publicly with a few of the local Vietnamese men who had played a formative role in my project. While at the Park Hyatt, Viet, a local Vietnamese man said to me, “Are you excited about moving back to the Third World (referring to the US)?” I was taken aback by his comment, so he continued, “This five star party that you had tonight, you think you can have that back in the US?” I laughed and said, “Probably not.” Viet then said, “Well, you have one last night to live it up!” He handed me a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label and said, “You will miss the smell of this.” I picked up the bottle and filled his glass and mine with one shot each, and we drank to celebrate. Viet went on to say, “If you have a hard time finding a job in the US, you should just come back and start a new life in Vietnam. Many *Viet Kieu*’s are finding their way back home. You should too.” I laughed and said, “I thought you hated *Viet Kieu*’s.” He said, “Not all of them are bad. They just need to remember it’s *Viet Cong* time.” I smiled and thought about Vietnam’s changing political economy in the context of the global economic crisis. Indeed HCMC was a lively and dynamic city that was constantly changing. Alongside rapid industrialization and economic growth, new kinds of affective economies have emerged, providing men and women with new spaces to assert and reconfigure new masculinities and femininities that draw on distinctly non-Western ideals.

Several hours later I returned home to pack my bags so that I could catch a 6:00 am flight to San Francisco. As I walked out of the San Francisco airport and rode home, I could sense how much the US economy had been affected by the global economic crisis. Entire store fronts had been boarded up, roads that were under construction prior to my departure in 2009 had been left unfinished because there were no funds to complete the construction. I remember walking down Market Street in San Francisco in shock at the many vacant storefronts with for lease signs posted on the doors, and restaurants were mostly empty. At UC Berkeley, students and union workers were protesting budget cuts, planning walkouts and strikes. It suddenly felt as if I had traveled from First World luxuries to Third World poverty. The dynamism and energy in the bay area paled in comparison to HCMC.

A few weeks later, Viet called and told me that he would be in the Bay Area on a business trip; he asked if I would be willing to help him run some errands because he did not speak English very well. We spent the entire day shopping in Union Square in downtown San Francisco. He wanted to purchase several items for himself, his family, and his friends. In over six hours, we walked into several designer stores from Gucci and Channel to Hermes where I watched him spend nearly \$30,000 USD dollars on suits, dresses, purses, belts, wallets, and handbags. While shopping he said to me, “Shopping in Singapore or Hong Kong is better than shopping in San Francisco. These stores do not have very much.” In nearly every store, they did not have the right size, color, or style in stock. Many places had to call to place orders, but the

items would not arrive in time. At one point he said to me, “Americans know nothing about service.” Even though I understood what he meant, I wanted him to be more explicit, so I asked, “What do you mean?” He said, “When I go shopping in Asia the workers will do everything they can to serve you. They will make sure that you leave the store with the things you came to buy. In the US, these people are so rude. They are workers in a store, and they act like they own the store!” I laughed and said to him, “Maybe it is because you do not live here and you are not a regular, so they do not know who you are.” He said, “You saw it. In Vietnam I could call the Louis Vuitton store, and they would bring their merchandise to me. Asia has five star service and America has rude service.” Even though I laughed, it became clear to me over the course of the day that he also was trying to make a point to me on this shopping trip. He wanted me to see that he was not just a big player in Asia, but he had the capacity to play on a global scale.

As my life in the US collided with my experiences in Vietnam, I thought about men like Viet’s orientation towards money and work. This was a man who was well connected in Vietnam, and who had accumulated a great deal of wealth by accumulating land and serving as a rentier to foreign investors. He is one of the few individuals who have profited a great deal from income derived from real estate speculation. While this form of capitalism differs greatly from the Protestant ethic of capitalism touted by many of the Western expatriates or budget travelers living in Vietnam, Viet was trying to portray himself as a global cosmopolitan man who could consume luxury anywhere in the world. Viet’s comment that Vietnam provides men like him with five star services while in the US he receives “rude” service is loaded with a great deal of contradictions. He is a man with First World wealth living in a developing country with luxuries unimaginable to most Americans and the many impoverished individuals living in Vietnam. However, when shopping in the US, he was met with the same kinds of racism faced by most Vietnamese Americans. His inability to speak English and his flashy style made him seem like someone who does not possess true wealth, when in fact he is a billionaire trying to make a point about Vietnam’s position in the global economy vis-à-vis the West. The act of consuming in this way made workers pay much more attention to him. When we walked into Hermes carrying a handful of bags from other designer stores, sure enough, the workers provided us with much better service. Certainly there are rich men and women all over the world who can consume this way. However, it is important to recognize that Viet is a rich Vietnamese man in America, with all of the postcolonial desires to trump the US’s hegemony that has pervaded his life for so long. The comparison of HCMC’s dynamism to the dispirited streets of San Francisco allowed him to convey to me that his share of Vietnam was on a high while Union Square was not.

The movement of global capital through financial internationalization has allowed men like Viet to traverse the globe and consume luxury in nearly every country he visits. However, Doreen Massey’s (1994) concept of space, place, and gender, which frames space as constituted out of social relations that are inherently dynamic, opens insight into ways in which the movement of people and capital around the world shapes and reshapes gendered and classed relations. In places like Vietnam, men like Viet can move in and out of spaces of First World luxury with great ease. Everyone knows his name, and he can expect to receive VIP treatment nearly everywhere he goes. This preferential treatment, however, is largely based his ability to engage in forms of conspicuous consumption valued locally in and around the spaces of HCMC. However, these same forms of conspicuous consumption become embedded with other meanings as he moves into spaces of luxury in first world nations. While Viet certainly had the economic capital to move in and out of spaces offering First World luxuries he was not always met with the same kinds of service or treatment outside of HCMC. Moreover, while he touted Asia as a space

of world-class service and the US as a space where people provide “rude” services, he was aware of his precarious position as a global underdog actively working to contest these hierarchies across multiple spaces in Vietnam and abroad.

Thus, the spatiality of globalization involves the stretching and deepening of social relations and institutions across space and time. Globalization, as David Held et al (1999) argue, is a “process which embodies transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions— assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity, and impact—generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power” (16). In this way, day-to-day activities are increasingly influenced by events happening on the other side of the globe while the practices and decisions of local groups can have significant global reverberations (Held 1995).

Women who engage in sex-work in these spaces also try to actively contest hierarchies by holding up different ideal feminine embodiments that conform to international standards of beauty that are distinctly non-Western. Vietnam is, of course, not the only place where individuals actively contest global hierarchies and their nation’s place within them. Several scholars have witnessed similar patterns and changes in China, India, and other parts of Asia (Friedman 2005; Levien 2011; Mahbubani 2008; Studwell 2008).

Affective Economies and New Hierarchies in Sex Work

As men like Viet attempt to position themselves as dominant men in both HCMC’s local economy and in global spaces around the world, they rely on service work and affective economies to help them assert their place in the world order. Moreover, as men work to reconfigure racial and classed hierarchies in the global imaginary, they are heavily dependent on sex workers to help facilitate the flow of global capital into Vietnam. Tracing capital flows around the world reveals changing class-differentiated, racialized, and gendered relations in different global spaces. While people commonly think of the sex industry as a place where men assert their masculinity in relation to women or where white, European and American men can play out their racialized desires in developing countries, this dissertation emphasized the dialectical link between sex work and the political economy.

In Chapter 2, I provided an imaginative reconstruction of Vietnam’s sex industry during the French and American colonial periods. During that time Western men commanded the highest and lowest paying sectors of the sex industry. This is no surprise because the US had injected nearly \$168 million dollars of foreign aid into the country. However, nearly 35 years after the war, Vietnam’s local economy had undergone rapid shifts, it has become an attractive destination for foreign direct investment. As Western nations became mired in the global economic crisis that spread around the world in 2008, Vietnam’s economy grew nearly 8% each year. While the economic crisis certainly affected Vietnam as global remittances declined and as the United States and other Western nations became much more conservative with their investments abroad, Vietnam strategically turned to Asian nations to sustain its economic growth. Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, Japan, and Singapore buffered Vietnam’s economy, thereby shifting local imaginaries of the global center away from the West and towards Asia.

As described in Chapter 5 and Chapter 7, affective economies have played a critical role in facilitating the flow of foreign direct investment into Vietnam, generating cultural struggles around emergent conceptualizations of non-Western modernities. HCMC’s sex industry has provided local Vietnamese and Asian businessmen with space to enact their dominance in the

new global order as they engage in *business related sex*. Local Vietnamese men who believed that they were going to move into positions of power worked to groom local women like Hanh to help provide the men with safe high-class spaces in which to entertain their business partners. Simultaneously, HCMC's sex industry has provided Western men with ways to engage in *recreational sex* and helped integrate them into the local economy with sex workers serving as cultural brokers as they taught men how to speak Vietnamese and understand the local culture. In this way the *emotional, bodily, and sexual labors* that sex workers provide affect the political economy of Vietnam in two ways: They facilitate the flow of capital into the country and also provide women with varied pathways towards upward mobility.

Different relations of intimacy can be seen in the relationships between sex workers and clients, and between sex workers across sectors. In Chapter 4, I described the moral codes that guided women's relations with one another as well as the norms and scripts by which male clients play in these spaces. Contrary to popular belief, sex workers across all sectors of HCMC's sex industry developed strong bonds with each other and the mommies who ran the bar. These bonds allowed women to maintain an equilibrium of exchange and reciprocity with one another that helped maintain flows of capital into these affective economies. Moreover, differences within sex work led to a range of exchanges, from *economic* exchanges that involve direct sex-for-money exchanges to *intimate* and *relational* exchanges that involve short-term and long-term relations where clients and sex workers forge connected lives (Zelizer 2005).

Vietnam's changing political economy also maps onto women's bodies. In Chapter 6, I showed how sex worker's different technologies of embodiment emerged through their relations with male clients. In order to gain clients, sex workers who catered to wealthy local Vietnamese men and Asian businessmen had to construct themselves as distinctly non-Western modern subjects, while women who catered to Western men had to construct themselves as Third-World subjects catering to clients' racialized desires. These differing embodiments symbolize Vietnam's changing economy as it pushes to emerge as a rising dragon (Hayton 2010) in a new era that embraces capitalism and a free market economy. The practices in the sex industry reflect a central motif in Vietnam's success – that its ability to make itself an attractive destination for foreign trade and investment depends in its adoption of both “Asian” and “Western” business practices.

These changes in Vietnam's economy have indeed generated gendered inequalities since men have much more direct access to the large flows of capital, it has also re-centered affective economies through which women provide men with emotional and sexual services in newly emergent affective economies. Notably however, none of the women whom I studied in HCMC's sex industry saw themselves as passive victims forced into the sex trade. In fact, nearly all of the women who catered to *Viet Kieu* clients, Western expatriates, and Western budget travelers had worked as wage workers in factories producing textiles, wood, steel, and various food products. They worked in these factories for one to three years before realizing that factory work did not provide them with an imaginable possibility for upward mobility. Therefore, the women who stepped out of factory work and into sex work saw themselves as fearless entrepreneurs

Migration out of industrial types of work into affective economies allowed women to find ways to make a much more profitable living. Women like Lilly who, at the age of twenty-four, ran three bars and a restaurant making over \$16,000 USD per month, represent opportunities for change and economic mobility in Vietnam's dynamic economy. Of course, not all sex workers are fortunate as Lilly, and, in fact, women who cater to wealthy local Vietnamese men

experienced rapid upward and downward mobility. However, as Vietnam's economy continues to grow, many are hoping to ride the wave of economic development. As uneven as that development may be for men like Viet and women like Lilly as they move about in different spatial locations, affective economies provide women with more hope for the possibility of change than does factory work.

Beyond Global-Local Dichotomies

In an era where finance capital is undergoing a new phase of internationalization, this dissertation provides an empirical account of what Doreen Massey (1994) calls *power geometry* of time-space compression. Massey (1994) observes that different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to time-space flows and interconnections. She argues that it is important to think about power *in relation to* the flows and movement since "different social groups have distinct relationships to this differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it" (Massey 1994: 149).

My study of *hierarchies* within HCMC's sex industry highlights different relations that men like Viet, women like Lilly, and the many clients and sex workers across all four sectors of sex work have not only with each other, but with different local places and global spaces. My research is informed by Massey's concept of *spatial*, which pays particular attention to the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, from the global reach of finance capital, through the geography of political power in Vietnam's representation of itself to the rest of the world, to the social relations within the workplaces of the bars and relations between individual men and women in the mundane discourse and practices that drive their interactions.

Taking Massey (1994) further, my analysis focuses not only on the ways in which men and women have uneven access or claims to global capital, but also women's central role in Vietnam's transition to becoming a modern nation. Moving beyond global and local dichotomies, I show how men and women move simultaneously in and out of spaces within developing countries that are marked by first world luxuries and third-world poverty. In today's global sex-work circuit, men and women from around the world enter into relations with each other across national borders, profoundly changing the social structure of commercial sex. Studies of sex work in the new global economy point to migratory *survival circuits* (Sassen 2002) poor women in Third World economies on the periphery of the global system struggling against debt and trying to escape poverty.

By dividing the global economy into two parts, rich nations of the First World and poor nations of the Third World, scholars have documented how the bifurcated global economy is highly racialized and unequal. Poor Third World women of color provide cheap labor and personalized services for white men, while women of color, and some white women, in First World nations serve as domestic workers, service workers, and sex workers (Bretners, Jackson, and Hausbeck 2010; Hochschild 2002; Parrenas 2008). Research on global sex work focuses overwhelmingly on the movement of white men from Western nations to developing nations where they can purchase cheap sex from exotic women. This dissertation has complicated the literature on global sex work by analyzing a sex industry in a developing economy where not all women are poor or exploited, where white men do not always command the highest paying

sector of sex work, and where there are slippages and contradictions in our common sense understandings of the First and Third Worlds.

Turning to Vietnam's emergent international city, this dissertation has illustrated how men and women capitalized on HCMC's position in the global political economy in different ways. Men like Viet are not the only ones working to shift global hierarchies across borders. A small number of sex workers in my study who married Western men had also migrated abroad. Unlike Viet, who has the economic resources to move around in spaces of luxury all around the world, women like Tram have not been as fortunate. Continuing with my analysis of the movement of HCMC's clients and sex workers around the world, this dissertation ends with an anecdotal story about Hanh, a sex worker whom I met in 2006 that eventually married William, one of her clients, and migrated to Canada. The story of their migration illustrates some of the global contradictions that this dissertation has raised.

I met Tram and William in June 2006 and continued to establish ties with them through June 2009 after they had migrated to Canada. Tram and William spent two years unsuccessfully trying to secure the paperwork and visas for her to migrate to the United States. After several failed attempts William decided to use his Canadian citizenship status, hoping that the couple would have an easier time securing a visa to migrate abroad. In December of 2009, Tram received the official paperwork and visa to migrate to Canada.

In June 2009, I flew to Canada to visit Tram and William. When I arrived at the airport, the whole family, Tram, William and their three children Vy, Oanh, and Jessica, were there to greet me. William told me that they lived in a small town three hours outside of Montréal in the countryside. In the car ride, Tram described the arduous process that they went through in trying to migrate to the US. She said, "I went in for the interviews at the US embassy and I kept failing. Each time it was a disappointment. It was hard because I am married with two kids and we were trying to get the kids to go too. People thought it was a fake marriage." She went on, "William went crazy, so he dragged me to Thailand and Singapore hoping that we would get nicer embassy workers. We finally got through to the Canadian embassy in Singapore and got the paperwork to go." I asked her, "How do you like your life in Canada?" She started to tear up and said, "It is cold and lonely." We were silent for a minute, and then she said, "When you get to the house you will see. I saw snow for the first time and I am not used to this weather." William interjected and asked me, "Do you speak French?" I said, "No." He said, "Well in the town where we are living, everyone speaks French." I asked him, "Why did you move there?" He said, "My brother lives there in an old property my mother purchased a long time ago. There are two homes on the property, so my brother and his wife live in one and we live in the other one." I turned to Tram and asked, "So you're learning French?" She said, "Yeah, it has been hard. William does not speak Vietnamese, and I only speak a little bit of English. We are both learning French to talk to each other." Puzzled I asked her, "So do you talk a lot?" She said, "No it has been lonely. He watches T.V. all of the time, and I just keep to myself." I asked her, "How has it been learning French?" She said:

I like going to school, but my life is so different in Canada. People are like machines that live by the clock. I wake up everyday at 5:00am to shower and get the kids ready for school. Then I go to [language] school until 3:00. The kids come home. I make dinner. We go to bed and it's the same thing the next day. I miss Saigon and the street life. There is so much more to do.

Tram's life had transformed dramatically from her life in Vietnam. She was not prepared for life in a cold part of the country, nor was she prepared for the routines that would structure her everyday life. Isolated, she felt deeply depressed. However, when I asked her if she would consider returning to Vietnam, she told me that she wanted to stay because she believed that her children would receive a better education in Canada and would have better futures. She also told me that she was too ashamed to return to Vietnam because people would laugh at her if she returned without any money to help her family. Shame and the possibility of upward mobility for her children kept Tram in Canada where she felt lonely and socially isolated.

Beyond social isolation, Tram also experienced upward economic mobility alongside downward social mobility across transnational social fields. This became apparent when we arrived at their home. As the car pulled up to this home on the countryside, I looked out at the sheep that were on their farm and the rows of clothes that hung from outdoor clotheslines. Tram turned and said to me, "This is not what I thought my life would be like. I thought I would live in Los Angeles or New York, a big city like in the movies... Instead I went from Saigon to Montreal." From Tram's standpoint, she moved from a living a very comfortable urban life in a developing nation to a rural village in the developed world. This transition was fraught with contradictions with respect to Tram's social mobility. In Vietnam she lived with William in a luxury condo where she had two full time housecleaners and nannies. She had the money to go out with her friends, shop, and consume without worrying too much about her expenses. Her life in Canada is vastly different. She does not have access to maids or nannies to clean her house or look after her children. Moreover, she cannot go out or consume in spaces that allow her to feel as if she is socially mobile. In her migration from a major city in the Third World to a rural village of the First World, Tram traded her social status in Vietnam for longer-term economic security in Canada. She gave up First World luxuries in Vietnam to live a much simpler life in Canada.

As an emergent international city, HCMC provides marginal men like William from strong nations with a place where they can expand their relational possibilities across transnational spaces and serve as economic providers to women like Tram from poor nations. At the same time, Western visions of Vietnamese women as struggling mightily to overcome Third World *poverty* allowed mid-tier sex workers to extract regular payments from white patrons in Australia, Europe, and the United States. Ironically, however, Vietnam's recent economic *growth* defined the dynamics of the high-end sex-work sector. As Vietnam emerges as a "rising-dragon" economy (Hayton 2010), *Viet Kieus* have returned in droves, chasing not only jobs and investment opportunities, but also social status, nostalgia, and the company of sophisticated women.

HCMC's sex industry provides wealthy local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men with public spaces where they can achieve a sense of dignity and actively contest global racial hierarchies through their distinctive patterns of consumption. By paying particular attention to the hierarchical complexities and the differences *within* one industry, I provide a more nuanced understanding of sex work that moves beyond a First World and Third World dichotomy. As clients and sex workers negotiate the transactional and intimate spheres of their relationships in Vietnam's globalizing economy of sex, the purchase of intimacy involves the sale of more than just sex, for a wide range of payments that go beyond money. As Vietnam tries to assert itself as a modern nation in the new global economy, men and women on the ground actively contest global hierarchies, creating new ideal types of modern men and modern women

measured in relation to new Asian ideals and standards that are distinctly non-Western. As Viet succinctly put it, “Asia is the new West now.”

Appendix A: Working with Sex Workers, Clients, Bar Owners, and the Mommies

In this appendix I reflect upon what it means to do ethnography in the field of sex work of HCMC. I conducted 22 months of ethnographic research for this project in two phases in 2006-2007 and 2009-2010. In the first phase, between 2006 and 2007, I did seven months of field research, focusing on 26 clients in three sectors of sex work, catering to *Viet Kieu* men, Western tourists in the backpackers' area, and poor local Vietnamese men (Hoang 2010). I met clients and workers by making a conscious effort to go into bars alone so that I could strike up a conversation with some men over a drink or a cigarette and eventually get to some of the women as well.

In June 2009, I returned to Vietnam to conduct another 15 months of ethnography. In this second phase, I incorporated two new groups of clients: wealthy Vietnamese men /Asian businessmen and Western expatriates. Following Michael Burawoy's (2003) approach of reflexive ethnography I also revisited the spaces that catered to *Viet Kieu*, Western tourists, and poor local Vietnamese men to examine how the sex industry had changed three years after Vietnam's integration into the World Trade Organization. These return visits enabled me to examine the changing contours of sex in HCMC as newly moneyed local Vietnamese men struggled to assert their place as the top players in the global economy and local sex industry in relation to *Viet Kieu* and Western men.

Seven Months of Ethnography Between June 2006 and August 2007

With the approval of Stanford University's human subjects review committee in 2006 and a similar review committee at the University of California in 2007, I carried out seven months of ethnographic field research in three intervals between June 2006 and August 2007 in HCMC. The Stanford and UC Berkeley review committees required that I obtain verbal consent from participants in order to protect both workers' and clients' identities. I conducted participant observation in local bars, cafes, sex workers' homes, malls, restaurants, and on the streets. All of the sex workers I studied were women over the age of 18 who *chose* to enter sex work as independent agents. None of my participants were trafficked or forced into prostitution (Bernstein 1999). Although all of the sex workers in my project disguised their labor in barbershops or bars, or by framing their relations with clients as boyfriend-girlfriend relationships, all of the women in this study referred themselves as "*gai di khach*" (girls who accompany customers) at some point in their conversations with me.¹³ I chose these sectors because together, they represent a large portion of the sex work industry in HCMC, and because the relations between clients and sex workers in these sectors are largely public and therefore easier to observe.

When I returned to Vietnam for 15 months between 2009-2010, I examined sex work relationships within more private spaces, including enclosed karaoke bars catering to wealthy

¹³ I learned very quickly in the course of my fieldwork that the women never explicitly referred to themselves as "*gai ma dam*" (prostitutes or sex workers). They referred to themselves as "*gai di khach*" (girls who accompany customers) because sex work was not only stigmatized but also illegal in Vietnam.

Vietnamese entrepreneurs and Asian businessmen. When I began this project in 2006, I set out to conduct both participant observation and formal interviews. Although I did a total of 13 formal interviews, with seven clients and six sex workers, interviewing methods were ultimately ineffective for several reasons. Sex workers generally, and understandably, refused to sit down for a formal interview. However, they were frequently receptive to my following them more informally as they went around their daily lives. Moreover, many of the men and women in my study were not always truthful about their motivations for entering sex work or the nature of their relationships. Women in the high-end sector, for example, often claimed that they entered into sex work because of poverty, but as I followed them to their homes and into shopping centers, I quickly learned that they came from fairly well-to-do families by local standards, and some of them led lives that were much more luxurious than people I knew in the U.S. Finally, participant observation allowed me to take careful notes on *interactions* that took place between clients and sex workers, enabling me to examine the complexities of their relationships.

My research began with time spent in local bars and on the streets to meet and develop rapport with various sex workers, clients, and bar owners before asking the women to participate in my project. The second phase of the research process involved intensive participant observation and informal interviews with individual sex workers who agreed to participate. Three wealthy Vietnamese men and two sex workers refused to participate in my study. The three men refused because they felt that I was too open about the fact that I was a researcher studying sex work. They were afraid that if people saw them with me in public that they would automatically be tied to the sex industry. The two women who refused to participate in my project never told my why. Being an overseas Vietnamese woman helped me gain access to female sex workers because many of them suspected that local Vietnamese men who asked them questions were undercover police. Although all of the women knew that I was a researcher from the U.S., who would eventually write about their lives with their names changed. They knew about, but didn't seem to find my research important; they cared more about my family history and my life overseas, wanting to situate me in their mental universe.

In my attempt to expand the literature on sex work, I also incorporated male clients into my analysis. All of the clients knew that I was a researcher from the U.S. Overseas white backpackers and *Viet Kieu* clients in my study were much more open with me than local Vietnamese men. White backpackers and *Viet Kieu* could converse with me in English and relate to me about the context of their lives overseas and the dynamics of their relations in HCMC. For example, one client said,

It's so nice to talk to someone who speaks English fluently and who isn't going to judge me. I've been dying to talk to someone about this but I can't talk to anyone back at home because you know they have all of these stereotypes about Asia and people here [in Vietnam] all speak broken English so it's hard to talk deeply about these things.

Between my research periods in HCMC, I conducted extensive online correspondence with informants via e-mail and chat-room conversations. While in the field, I also spent time in internet cafes helping sex workers read emails and conduct instant-message conversations with their overseas "boyfriends." I helped these women find remittance centers and went with them to pick up remittances from their overseas partners. Through this online and offline fieldwork, I

learned that sex workers and their clients often told lies to each other about various aspects of their relationships—lies that I kept confidential between both parties.

During the course of the week, in the initial seven months of fieldwork, I spent three days conducting field research and three days writing field notes. On a typical research day, I spent the mornings in the barbershops that doubled as brothels where women in the low-end sector worked; afternoons having lunch or coffee and shopping with clients and sex workers; and evenings in bars with mid-tier and high-end sex workers. I spoke mostly in Vietnamese with clients and sex workers in the low-end sector and a mixture of English and Vietnamese with men and women in the mid-tier and high-end sectors. I wrote all of my field notes in English, while highlighting key phrases in Vietnamese. I used pseudonyms in my field notes to ensure confidentiality in the event that local authorities asked to look through my computer. During this first phase, I studied 12 workers and four clients in low-end sector, 31 workers and 15 clients in the mid-tier sector, and 11 workers and seven clients in the high-end sector.

Fifteen Months of Participant Observation Between June 2009 and August 2010

Between June 2009 and May 2010, with permission from the University of Social Sciences at Vietnam National University, The Southern Institute of Sustainable Development in HCMC, and the Board of Human Subjects at UC Berkeley, I decided to follow and build on Anne Allison's (1994) and Titian Zheng's (2009) methodological approaches by working as a hostess to observe relationships among owners, mommies, police, clients and sex workers in different bars. In order to help me gain behind-the-scenes access to a variety of spaces, a professor at the University of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City introduced me to a local police officer, who served as a key informant. This police officer provided me with documentation that legitimated me as a researcher in the event that I was arrested during a police sweep.

Getting access to each of these bars at the beginning was an arduous process because I had to learn how to manage a myriad relationships among the sex workers, local police, bar owners, patrons of the bar, and the mommies. The bar structures and clientele were all quite different, which meant that I had to try on different hats, play with my embodiment in different ways, and manage a whole new set of relations in each space. However, my social position as a Vietnamese American woman educated at Stanford and UC Berkeley helped me gain access to the high-end bars that catered to wealthy local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men. My ability to speak English also provided me with access to the bars that catered to Western men. While many of the local researchers in Vietnam have conducted research on street level sex work between poor local Vietnamese men and local Vietnamese sex workers, virtually no one had previously gained access to high-end spaces that catered to foreign clients. Thus, the university officials and the researchers who oversaw my research project at Vietnam National University and the Southern Institute of Sustainable Development could not advise me on how to conduct my research or gain access to these bars. As a result, they provided me with much more freedom and space to conduct research on my own with minimal surveillance. While I reported to both the University and the Institute each month because the government required this, I also organized ethnographic research methods workshops, and presented preliminary findings at the end of my research stay, I had a great deal of freedom in the research process. They did not force me to hire a local research assistant or assign an official to accompany me in my fieldwork because they felt that it would infringe on my ability to gain access to these research sites.

I spent two to three months between June 2009 and February 2010 working as a hostess or bartender in four different bars: one that catered to wealthy locals, two that catered to *Viet Kieu* clients, and one that catered to Western expatriates. To get access to the bar that catered to wealthy Vietnamese and Asian businessmen, I drew upon my social networks and was able to meet CEOs of private and publically listed companies. As someone with degrees from institutions that the clients recognized and respected, I offered to work as a free consultant translating from English to Vietnamese, copy-editing company reports and brochures, and helping to entertain potential investors in exchange for access to the bars. I sat in on several business meetings as local businessmen and their foreign investors negotiated over a variety of different land development projects.

Many of the bar owners and mommies felt socially indebted to the clients in my project for frequenting their bars and spending so much money in them. I depended on these clients to draw on these unpaid social obligations and ask the mommies and bar owners not only to allow me to work in the bar but to ensure my safety and help me successfully fit into the space. Because I worked with a small network of very powerful men, I did worry about my safety. I was advised by the university, the police officer assigned to me, one of my main informants, and the bar owner, to work semi-undercover. Only 25 of the male clients in the bar knew that I was a researcher. However, there were many times when, as a bar hostess, I sat in on tables with men who did not know that I was a researcher. I have not included those men in my study nor have I written about them, which was a promise I made to the mommy and the bar owners as well as in keeping with the ethics of informed consent.

The mommies and bar owners welcomed me into their space and taught me how to navigate my relations with clients and other sex workers in the bar. They did this, in part, to pay back the social debts that they had accumulated with the clients. The mommies taught me how to employ and embody a *Vietnamese femininity*, which many of the men saw as something of a novelty coming from a Western-raised woman. I learned to lower my head, clink my glass below theirs, serve food, and pay careful attention to the hierarchies among men and between men and women. As I successfully found a place in the bars, the clients often asked me to work more directly with their investors, helping to entertain them outside of the bar over dinner, allowing me to deeper insight into the types of business projects on which they worked. I typically worked from 12:00 in the afternoon until 2:00 am. I worked seven days a week and spent my mornings writing field notes. I worked here for two months from September to October 2009.

In all of the other bars that catered to *Viet Kieu* men, Western expatriates and Western backpackers, I was explicit about the fact that I was a researcher. In the bars that catered to *Viet Kieu* clients, I worked from 4 pm until 1am, seven days a week, and spent my mornings writing. I worked there for two and a half months from June through August 2009. I met the owner of this bar through a wealthy local Vietnamese man whose company distributed beer to local bars. Many of the clients were shocked and put off seeing a *Viet Kieu* woman working in the bars.. At first some refused to talk to me knowing that I was studying “sex work.” However, I served them just like everyone else, bowed my head, and placed myself in an explicitly subordinate position, and over time I began to blend into the space and was able to develop rapport to informally interview them in the bar. As one *Viet Kieu* put it “because you are willing to get down and do the dirty work, you blend in, and people see you as local.”

While working in the bar that catered to *Viet Kieu* men, I met Lilly, the owner of four different bars that cater edto Western expatriates. I became friends with her and spent several nights talking over dinner and drinks before she invited me to come work in her bar. She

introduced me to all of the clients in her bar and provided me with background information on the regulars. I worked in this bar from 4 pm until 1 am seven days a week for three months from November 2009 through February 2010.¹⁴ I wrote my field notes in the mornings.

I spent three months between March and May 2010 studying Western men traveling through Vietnam on a budget. In this sector, I conducted fieldwork three to four nights a week as a patron of a bar rather than working in the bar. I spent my afternoons from 12 pm-4 pm in the bar teaching the women English. Then, in the evenings, I spent time in the bar meeting and getting to know some of the clients.

Between June 2009 and May 2010 I got to know hundreds of sex workers and clients across five sectors of HCMC's sex industry. I decided to narrow my project to 20-25 clients and sex workers in each sector. Each night while at work I focused my time on two to three people whom I would informally interview using a set of questions that I had in my head. I took notes on my mobile phone and then wrote up and expanded the details from memory the next day. I informally interviewed 190 participants and took extensive field notes on each of them over several days. Most of my informal conversations with clients took place inside the bar, over coffee and meals, and in the car on long drives to examine development projects. These interviews were semi-structured, informal, not tape-recorded, and lasted anywhere from one to five hours. I spoke a mixture of English and Vietnamese with clients in all sectors. This dissertation is based on conversations with 90 clients, 90 sex workers, 8 mommies, and 5 bar owners who consented to being apart of my study.

Reflections from the Field

I spent 12 months working in five different bars as a hostess, bar tender, and English teacher. In an attempt to study the stratification of sex work in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam I decided that I would try to study four sectors of HCMC's sex industry that catered to wealthy Vietnamese men and Asian businessmen, *Viet Kieu* (overseas Vietnamese men), Western expatriates, and Western backpackers. I was committed to this project and to learning about the different relational dynamics that take place in these class-differentiated spaces. Doing this research meant that I had to put on different hats, adjust my body and embodiment in different ways, and work really hard to charm my way into these spaces.

I started out working in a bar that catered to *Viet Kieu* men, which was owned by a *Viet Kieu* whom I will call Dung. Dung welcomed me into his bar, unsure of how his customers would respond to me and unsure of how I would fit into the space. I remember meeting Dung and telling him about my project. He said, "Ok come work see how you feel." Dung took me under his wing as his little sister, introducing me to a range of different bar owners, alcohol distributors, men in the mafia, and a network of people who all know about each other in the bar world and taught me about the business. He explained to me:

When you open a bar in Vietnam, it is complicated because so much money is involved. You want to make money but not too much because when you fly under the radar people don't notice and they will leave you alone. When I first opened this bar, there was a group of ten men who came in dressed in suits. They started a

¹⁴ I took one month off between mid-December and mid-January to return to Berkeley and meet with my dissertation committee.

fight in the bar and the police came and shut the place down. They didn't have to say anything but I knew that they wanted me to pay them off. I never did and eventually they realized that I wasn't making much money so they left me alone."

Dung later went on to tell me:

When you are here long enough you start to make friends who teach you how to deal with these situations. Anytime you set up a business in a different country you need to have locals with insider knowledge to teach you these things.

I remember my first night of work at the bar. I had no idea what to wear so I wore a pink dress and high heels. I didn't know how to dress or put on makeup so Dung, one of my co-workers, did my makeup that night. My hair was a mess, and I remember feeling completely and utterly vulnerable behind the bar. The transition as a researcher from the position of customer to that of a server was difficult because all of the sudden I found myself taking orders from men and being silent as they treated me as a stupid bar girl. Those who didn't know that I was a *Viet Kieu woman* had no problem ordering me around, talking down to me, or yelling at me across the bar. However, once they learned that I was, in fact, a PhD student studying bar life, their whole orientation towards me shifted. Christopher, a *Viet Kieu* from Washington, said to me, "It's weird seeing you behind the bar. You seem so vulnerable all of the sudden. It's like I can see fear in your eyes and I think men will take advantage of that." I didn't know how to respond to him so I ignored the comment and went on to serve other men in the bar, but his statement pointed both the comfort some men had in speaking with me because I was a PhD student, and accurately gauged an emotion I did not know I had revealed. No one taught me how to serve, mix drinks or interact with the men. No rules guided the bar. I was just thrown into the mix and I had to watch and follow. Over the course of two months, I learned how to mix drinks, dress properly, and treat men with a certain level of deference. I learned how to serve, and once I assumed that role I began to blend into the bar, and the women started to warm up to me.

I worked in two different bars that catered to *Viet Kieu* men. These bars were very public and HCMC is a small enough town that I became known as the woman studying prostitution in the area. Some men outside of the bar avoided me like the plague because they did not want to be associated with someone in this underground world. They were afraid that if people saw them with me, others would know that they were men who frequented sex workers. I often felt overly exposed as well and vulnerable. Men who I had never met would approach me and say things like, "I've heard about you and your research project. I know about you and what you are doing in Vietnam." While some men allowed me to enter into their private lives, others were guarded, and it took nearly a year of working in various bars before they were able to be comfortable around me.

The women working in the bars that catered to *Viet Kieu* men were much more abrasive with me. They wanted me have a real taste of what it was like to be in their shoes and so at the beginning they let me fall down a few times. For example, they watched as clients humiliated me in front of everyone by yelling at me for not knowing my place behind the bar, and as men told me that I was unattractive and that I did not know how to dress.

While working in these bars, I met a local Vietnamese man, who warned me that I was putting myself in danger by working in such a public place. He offered me instead the chance to work in the highest end bar in town. At first I did not believe him because he could well have

been one of the many clients who inflated themselves to me, talking about social networks that they didn't really have, or money that they weren't really making. In Vietnam at this stage in its development, when you meet someone, you never really know who they are. There are times when I was having a very casual conversation with a billionaire and didn't even know it. I learned this the hard way when I met Chu Xanh a local Vietnamese man who later became one key informant, showing me the ropes of the high-end sector of sex work in HCMC.

After I had described my project to him, Chu Xanh made an appointment to bring me into the bar. I entered the bar with him, and he ordered all three mommies into the room. TTV, his nephew, invited a few of his friends, and the mommies brought the women in to sit with each man. I sat alone, overwhelmed and a bit nervous. Chu Xanh ordered two bottles of blue label Johnnie Walker, and we ate, sang songs and danced. Then at the end of the night, Chu Xanh told the mommies, "This is my niece and protégé. She is a *Viet Kieu* from Cambodia whose family is poor and struggling. I want you to take her in and show her the ropes." Initially, I felt uncomfortable with the fact that I was going in "undercover" but at the end of the fieldwork, I learned that no one in the bar believed my story. They knew that I was a researcher because Chu Xanh told the owner and the head mommy. However, all of them went along with it because Chu Xanh was one of their highest paying clients and it was important not to question him or his motives. He knew what he was doing, and he would never do anything that would expose the bar because he would also have to bear the consequences that might come. For two months I went into the bar everyday at 12 in the afternoon and left every night around 2 am. On my first night I remember walking in and having the girls all take one look at me and wonder what I was doing in the bar. Fortunately, they were nice girls who taught me how to do my makeup and where to buy dresses. During my first week there, I remember thinking to myself that these women were all incredibly strong women who were not victims to any man. They stood their ground, cussed like sailors, smoked, and were financially independent. Many of them had stacks of 500K (the largest VND worth 25 dollars) in their wallets.

Even though I had a Master's degree, was an American citizen, and had a research budget to live off, none of those things mattered in these social spaces. In their world, I was a country bumpkin who did not know to dress, act, or talk. During the first three nights at work, the mommies and girls took turns doing my makeup, providing me with dresses, shoes, and hair accessories. I remember coming home at the end of the night and staring at myself in the mirror for a long time. Who was this girl looking back at me? Was it possible to look into the mirror and recognize nothing but my two eyeballs? I looked like an Asian geisha. My skin was bright white, I wore bright pink blush, and the eyebrows drawn on my face were thick and sharp (see photos). Vy a twenty-two year old worker, taught me how to brush a white shadow along my nose to highlight and accentuate my nose bridge so that I wouldn't feel pressured to get a rhinoplasty later on. I was told that I was fat, old, unattractive but attractive enough to work in the bar for maybe one year. Time was running out for me and men would find me less and less attractive. For better or for worse, I was not highly sought after by the clients in the bar. So I spent a lot of time in the back room getting to know the workers, talking to the other women who also felt unattractive or who were unable to "get in on tables."

As an ethnographer, the only way that I felt I could learn more about the lives of these women was to put my body and myself on the line, as indeed do many ethnographers. I knew I had to work in the bars in order to really understand what went on behind the scenes because this was a stigmatized social space where people inevitably lied or where getting an "authentic" side of someone took time. I wanted to understand both sides of the relationship—the clients' side

and the workers' side, and I knew that this could not be done through interviews. What I did not anticipate, however, was how I would change or be affected by throwing myself in there. Suddenly I was immersed in a world where I felt like I had to learn how to survive. No one was going to teach me the rules of the game, I just had to get in there, watch, learn, and manage.

Outside of the bar, I felt like I had to be hyper-vigilant as I worked to manage my relationships with university officials, people at the Institute of Social Sciences who approved of my research, the local police, members of the mafia, and powerful clients who had the money, power, and connections to take me down or push me out of Vietnam. I grew anxious and paranoid because I constantly felt like I had to manage a complex field of relationships inside and outside of the bar. I was well aware of the fact that the only reason I even had a job in the bar was because a powerful client helped me get access. However, those same clients also made me fully aware that I needed to walk cautiously and carefully manage all of my relationships. One client said to me, "If something happens to you and it gets all over the news, none of us will be there to catch you because there would be too much at stake for us. We can only take you so far. You have to be the one to take your research and your work the rest of the way." Another client reminded me, "Know who you are and where you are. In this country, if you piss off the wrong person accidentally someone can 'accidentally' knock you over on your motorbike and you can disappear just like that." For the first two weeks, I came home from work nervous, exhausted, and drained. While it sounds strange as I sit here in my office in the Sociology Department, there were nights where I would cry myself to sleep realizing how if this were truly real life for me, if I had to do this to actually make a living, I would not survive. There was no way I could make it in this world because I didn't have the looks, charm, charisma, or ability.

I had to find a way to stay there long enough to get inside the structure of this place. So I did what many Western feminists would probably find problematic. I decided to try to charm my way into this space. Everyone knew that I was a *Viet Kieu* woman and the 25 clients that I studied all knew that I was a researcher from UC Berkeley working on a PhD. What none of them ever expected was to see me "act like a *local Vietnamese woman*." They never expected me to really play the role and try to get it down right. I quickly learned how to alter my embodiment so that I leaned in next to the men rather than meeting them face on. I learned to avert my eyes so I looked down instead of into their eyes. I learned how to pay attention to everyone at the table and refill empty glasses, serve food, and sometimes even feed the men with whom I was sitting. I learned to clink my glass below theirs to demonstrate that I was below them, and I learned how to help men with weak stomachs drink.

For the most part, I was brought into tables to sit next to the oldest man in the room. In Khong Sao Bar, I embodied a wife-like figure or a mother. In fact one client brought his four-year-old son into the bar several times, and it was my role to play mommy to him by feeding him, playing with him, and even getting into a cab to take him toy shopping while the men drank and talked business. While engaging in these acts, I started to think about the conflation of "submission" with "care". The Western educated academic side of me would have described all of these acts as gestures of submission—the typical Vietnamese hostess worker being submissive in order to make men feel more masculine. However, upon deeper reflection, I don't think that any of these women would see themselves as submissive. In fact, many of them fought off clients who touched them inappropriately; sometimes they got up and walked out of a room if they were unhappy with how a client treated them. To them, submissive gestures were acts of "care" that men paid for, and men sometimes reciprocated these forms of care. Men who wanted

to show that they cared would pick up a bowl, fill it with food, and hand it to the woman next to them. Some even peeled the skin off of grapes and fed them to women at the table.

In these spaces, the male gaze was all powerful. Men looked at women's bodies and explicitly judged them. Every time a client came into the bar, the women would have to line up in front of them. Attractive women "got in on tables" and the less attractive ones had to depend on friends a set of regular customers to help get them in or. In this way clients defined beauty, and I watched as women adjusted their bodies to fit a particular look. In this high-end bar, the men wanted women who were light skinned, thin, not necessarily tall but lengthy looking. They wanted women who didn't wear a lot of heavy makeup. So eyebrows, eyelashes, and blush were the three essential components to one's face with respect to local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and *Viet Kieu* men; while large breasts and dark skin were essential components to Western men.

Every time I sat down next to a client, I felt them sizing me up and judging me based on my looks. I watched as men sat back and looked in a sexual way at the women dancing on the tabletops. Our bodies were always spectacles to be looked at and gazed upon, but we were never allowed to look at the men's bodies with the same level of scrutiny. Women's bodies were subjected to more than just the male gaze. When I first started working, I had to learn how to drink. One of the job requirements was that you had to drink a lot of alcohol. The mommies never forced anyone to drink, but everyone had to drink evenly at the tables so that one woman was not drinking more than another woman. It was about carrying your own weight and if you couldn't carry it, you should quit. At first, the drinking was fun. It helped me loosen up in a space where I was nervous, guarded, and terrified half of the time. However, after drinking for three weeks straight, my body eventually gave in, and I ended up with an ear infection and bronchitis that kept me in bed for nearly 4 days. I learned then, like the other working girls, how to drink in order to survive the work.

As discussed in Chapter 4, there are ethical codes or moral codes guide interaction in these bars. The women rarely fought with each other. Not all of them got along or liked each other but they never left each other alone for the most part. Many of them lived together in apartments and took cabs to and from work together. They passed dresses around to new girls and helped each other get in on tables when business was slow. At the same time, I realized that I was now immersed in a social world where all of the men cheated on their wives and it was just accepted. This was a world in which were money literally buys everything, including love. One client poignantly said to me, "In Vietnam almost everything is fake - clothes, CDs, DVDs, food, alcohol and even love - the only thing real is the money you spend on these items, assuming the bill you are using to pay isn't also fake." Other people would say things to me like, "Whoever the fuck says money can't buy happiness *clearly* does not know where to shop."

The affluent men who frequented the bars spent between fifteen and twenty thousand US dollars a month on alcohol and women alone in this bar. They drove around in cars that were sometimes worth half a million US dollars, and they had so much money that they often did not know how to spend it. It was common to see men pull out stacks of cash from their pockets or workbags. I watched as women gravitated towards that. There was something alluring about the power of money and what that money meant as it was transferred through from the men's hands to the women's hands. I watched this money literally transform women's bodies as clients offered to pay for their nose jobs, boob jobs, and skin treatments.

After working in the high-end bar for a few months I had several conversations with several of my client's wives about how they knew that their husbands were sleeping with other

women. One wife said to me, “I know my husband cheats on me all of the time. I put condoms in his wallet and say to him. Have fun honey just don’t bring any diseases home to me.” She went on, “In Vietnam marriage isn’t always about love. He comes from a wealthy family and I come from a family that is politically connected. Our relationship brings together the two sides. So that together we can be more powerful.” This was a typical conversation that I had with the wives. They, in effect, gave up emotional intimacy in exchange for money and they did so consciously. These were the same women whom I knew might spend 30,000USD on a dining room table or fly first class to go shopping for designer clothing in Hong Kong, and who I knew felt lonely.

After being around these women, their husbands, their husband’s girlfriends, and a world where capitalism has in effect gone amok. I started to lose my grounding. Nothing shocked me anymore. I accepted that men cheat and that women were lonely. I accepted the extreme anxieties that I saw on the faces of other women and that I began to feel myself. Vietnam was a strange place to be because while the country rapidly modernized, women (especially women my age) felt pressured to marry men who would provide them with a certain lifestyle or social status. And while this is not a pressure I relate to in my life in the US, I found myself struggling with these thoughts as I conducted this research. Analytically, I learned that altering my embodiment and immersing myself in a particular ethical world were critical components for me to gain a deeper understanding of the relations in the various bars. However, I also had to learn how to pull myself out of these embodied modalities and ethnical worlds when I returned to the field, yet without going through these embodied transformations my analysis would not have had richness, depth, or the degree of accuracy that it has.

After doing research for four months in the bars that catered to *Viet Kieu* and Vietnamese/Asian men, I met a woman named Lilly, who invited me to come work in her bar that catered to white expatriates. She told me that her bar was low key, most of the men ordered beer, and that her bar was different from the bar in the backpackers’ area because she never forced the women to have sex with a client for money. She was excited to have me in her bar because I spoke English, and she thought that I could serve as a translator for her clients and some of the girls in the bar.

Although this bar was much more crass than the other two in which I worked, I felt more at home and less guarded because none of the men were in positions of discreet power. They worked as executives for companies that I recognized and were not involved in land development projects. Most of them owned small export businesses or worked in advertising agencies, real estate appraisal companies, investment firms, and law firms. What made me uncomfortable in this bar were its racial dynamics at the intersection of social class. Working *behind* the bar taught a great deal about the interactions that occurred between clients and workers in these spaces. The bar counter served as a physical barrier between the men and women. Those who worked behind the bar played certain roles while those who were customers sitting on the other side of the bar could expect a particular service.

It was incredibly hard for me to be submissive to white men in this bar. Many of them were condescending and some even asked me to come work for them, knowing my level of education and English speaking abilities. One client offered to take me in as his assistant making \$300 a month. I remember feeling an overwhelming desire to punch him in the face, but instead I smiled, bowed my head, and thanked him for the job offer. I realized that it was easier for me to be submissive to the Vietnamese and Asian men in the high-end bar because I was raised in a family where hierarchal structures are embedded in language and interaction. I could easily draw on my family history to put myself below the men both physically and through language.

Being submissive to the white men in the bars was far more difficult. I was far more educated than many of them, and found it more difficult, politically, to engage in acts of submission with them. I think that some of the men could tell that I looked down on them by the way that I treated them, sometimes refusing to get their drinks or shooting them dirty looks. What I found most fascinating was how they tried to put me in my place by speaking to me in Vietnamese, thus forcing me to use honorifics denoting “higher” and “lower”. They referred to themselves as “anh” (male higher) and to me as “em” (female lower). Some of the men would compare my body to those of the other women. One man said to me, “In America you would be like an 8 but here compared to these girls you’re like a 4.... In America I would be like a 4 but in Vietnam I’m a ten. That’s just how it works here.”

It took me nearly a month of learning how to reconfigure my body and my language to blend into this place; only then did I get good data on these men’s private lives. I knew I was securely embedded in the social scene when clients began to talk to me about how all men cheat on their wives. One client said to me, “There are many ways that a man can be a good husband. It’s not all about fidelity. My wife knows that I cheat on her in Vietnam, but I’m a good husband and I provide for her and my kids so she just leaves it alone. There are some things that you just accept.”

Being an ethnographer always involves a certain deep acting and therefore comes with costs. After doing ethnography in the field of sex work in Vietnam for 15 months, it began to wear away at me. It was humbling to feel invisible in a world where women were younger than I and more attractive. It was humbling to have men completely devalue my level of education. All the achievements I had up to this point celebrated in my life, I had to learn to downplay in order to work in the bars and to get men to talk to me. At the same time I also experienced the joys of working in such a cohesive space in all of the bars and laughed my heart out the first time a worker taught me how to spit in a mans drink. In hindsight, by immersing myself into the bars as a worker, allowed me to develop rapport with both workers and clients as they shared with me some of their most intimate feelings and secrets.

The process of field research forced me to step into a new space and find ways to adapt to a completely different environment compared with life in Berkeley. I learned the power of humility because the people who I least expected provided me with the most access and help. A lot of men who spoke a great deal about their access to high-end spaces and their connections to powerful businessmen and government officials, but those men often took advantage of my free consulting services without ever introducing me to the men who could help provide me with access to these spaces. I am deeply indebted to Curly, TTV, TinTin, and Anh Cua Ti (self-given pseudonyms) who not only provided me with access to these spaces, but were key informants who taught me a great deal about how to carry myself in these spaces, manage my relationships to different people, and who drew on their own social debts to help me gain access to bars where I felt safe. Without them and their connections, this project would have never been possible. I am also grateful to Lilly who also took me under her wing and helped me feel comfortable in spaces that catered to Western men. In addition, this project would not be the same without the 90 men and 90 women who taught me how to dress, drink, serve, and find ways to meld into the background. By the end of my time in each bar, I became accepted as an ordinary presence. However, I was highly dependent on these women and men not only to share their most intimate secrets but as companions who later became some of my good friends in the field. I realize that my authorship of this dissertation, drafted in the comfort and safety of my home in the Bay Area, has given me the power to reframe and reconstruct the many conversations and interactions that I

witnessed and in which I took part. I can only hope that I have done justice in my writing about the complex and dynamic relations that take place in these spaces, as they do elsewhere in social life.

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