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Book Review: Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currency of Global Sex Work

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***Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currency of Global Sex Work*, Kimberly Kay Hoang, 2015, University of California Press: Oakland. 248 pages appendix and index included. \$29.95 paperback.**

Reviewed by Lara L. Watkins¹

Through *Dealing in Desire*, readers jump onboard one of Hoang's initial motorbike taxi rides to explore the niche markets in Vietnam's sex industry and end their voyage with a more complex understanding of masculinity and femininity, and agency and structure. Hoang is a master craftsman weaving together ethnographic details from fieldwork in Vietnam's sex industry to portray a coherent picture of the global factors involved in the structuring of the lives of workers and clients involved in Vietnam's sex industry around the time of the 2008 financial crisis. Hoang takes a reader on a "journey into the richly diverse social and cultural geography of Vietnam's sex industry" (p.3). She focuses on how sex work across four niche markets reinforces desired concepts of femininity and masculinity. "[The high-end niche market sex workers] are valued not only for their beauty, but also for their ability to deploy vocabularies of consumption that ease tensions between men in an elaborate symbolic dance tailored to the requirements of individual capital deals" (p. 12). In a related way, women in the three other niche markets are similarly involved in a symbolic dance addressing perceptions of failing masculinity for Viet Kieus (members of the Vietnamese diaspora), Western businessmen, and Western budget travelers, while facilitating the flow of money into the local economy. Throughout the book, Hoang makes visible the invisible work of women; women play key roles in the local and global economy. They are rational workers that strategically invest in relationships and body work for future financial gain. "The bars of HCMC [Ho Chi Minh City] tell a story that extends far beyond intimate relations between men and women; these quotidian interactions provide a window into the racialized sexual desires, competing status claims, capitalist greed, and hope for economic mobility that drive sex workers and their clients into these bars, where shrewd deals are made to fulfill global fantasies" (p.25). The book is a "layered read". It is engaging for those new to sociology and anthropology, but it is imbued throughout with thick description and theoretical analyses relevant to a more mature social science audience interested in how global forces impact and inform societies and individual lives.

Through the introduction and appendix (as well as shorter explanations throughout the book) Hoang notes the evolution of her fieldwork. As a highly educated female American researcher of Vietnamese descent in her mid-twenties, she demonstrates researcher flexibility as well as self-reflexivity in order to engage in meaningful participant observation. The data behind the book were gathered through participant observation and 276 interviews with sex workers, male clients, mommies, and bar owners between 2006 and 2012. For those new to participant observation, Hoang highlights the strengths and challenges of gaining entry, establishing rapport, and living as a social scientist seeking to understand the lived experiences of others. However, due to a conscientious decision by Hoang, the personal experiences of the author are really bookends to the main argument of the book, appearing for the most part in the introduction and appendix. The body of the text really focuses on the lives of sex workers, their clients, and the ways in which

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bar interactions, including performed femininity and reinforced masculinity, lead to lucrative financial transactions for individuals, families, firms, and country.

Each chapter has a clear thematic focus. Chapter one focuses on the historical context of sex work in Vietnam from 1867 to 2012. This chapter provides an overview of the historical global forces impacting sex work in Vietnam across five timeframes. From 1867 to 1954, French colonialism fueled urban growth and prostitution catering to French men. The period 1962 to 1975 was dominated by United States intervention, including rest and recreation for American soldiers in South Vietnam leading to an expansion of the sex industry. From 1975 to 1986, the Communist government sought to “Recover the Fallen Sisters of Imperialism” through an effort to diminish the sex industry as a way of protecting women and waging symbolic warfare against the West, targeting the tension between “socialist values and capitalist desires”. In 1986, with Doi Moi, the government opened the economy to foreign financial interactions. Western tourists and Viet Kieu filtered money to Vietnam through recreation including recreational sex. In 2006, Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization ushering the “rise of the Asian foreign direct investment” [FDI] with Asian business partners frequenting locations, such as Khong Sao Bar bar, to build strong social ties of trust between partners in a setting embodying an ideal, modern Vietnam. “[G]lobalization fractured the Vietnamese market, opening up opportunities to cater to new financial capital from different parts of the world” (p. 178).

In chapter two, “thick descriptions of four types of bars illuminate the fact that gendered relations are also inflected with race and class in the clients’ competing desires to affirm Western superiority or assert Asian capitalist ascendancy” (p.39). The hostesses of Khong Sao Bar bar provide hospitality to local Vietnamese elite men so that they can establish personal relations of trust with potential business partners and broker millions in financial investments. The hostesses of Lavender cater to Viet Kieu men’s conspicuous consumption as a way of reinforcing Asian ascendancy. The hostesses of Secrets focus on cultivating “boyfriend-girlfriend” relationships to meet the needs of Western white businessmen and expatriates looking to ground themselves in the local culture, while also exerting their masculinity. The hostesses of Naughty Girls reinvent themselves to meet the racialized desires of Western backpackers interested in exploring a “Third World” country. Each of these bars is a local site for the global exchange of money.

Chapter three discusses the competing view of masculinities reinforced through interactions at each of the four bars. The intersectional identities of the male clients are highlighted throughout this chapter. The clients’ ethnicity, class, nationality, success at work, and sense of world order interact to create a certain brand of masculinity that desires a particular brand of femininity. “[M]en constructed and asserted their masculinities according to their desire for a world order modeled on older tropes of Western global power or the rising prominence of non-Western nations in East and Southeast Asia.” (p.60). Women become a vehicle through which men can assert their masculinity in opposition to the clientele of other types of bars and to women and other men in the bar of interest.

Chapter four focuses on “mommies”, women in management positions within the bars, and their key role as financial and relationship brokers. In Khong Sao Bar bar, hostesses and mommies are responsible for helping to build the trust among potential financial investors. Across the four bars, women cater to the needs of men because it is a lucrative strategy. This chapter demonstrates how a select group of mommies end up with strong social capital for current and future life. Mommies use money and the social connections of clients in order to build businesses of their own as well as support themselves and their families.

Chapter five portrays how the hostesses see their decision to engage in sex work as exactly that—decision. Hoang conveys that the vast majority of the workers see their work as empowering. These women are not victims of sex trafficking, but are workers in sex commerce. The majority of the workers in Khong Sao Bar bar came straight from rural villages, while the workers in the other three bars have more of a mixed background including many who previously worked in factories or the service industry. Those interviewed tell Hoang that they experienced worse work conditions in factories and the service industry for dramatically lesser pay. The bar management uses a maternal model of care as a way to protect their free or low pay workers, who are essential to their business. Hoang notes the different pay structures at the different bars. Hostesses at Khong Sao Bar and Lavender earn money through tips and sex work. Hostesses at Secrets earn a base wage equivalent to twice the standard factory wage so that they can focus on establishing longer term relationships. Lilly, the bar owner, developed this approach based on her earlier sex work in a backpacker bar where she experienced how desperation limits the negotiation of sex work. On the other hand, hostesses at Naughty Girls earn money only through sex work and the owner takes a small percentage of the pay. Hoang mentions that this put pressure on the women to have sex, but she does not explore these restrictions in much detail.

Chapter six focuses on how women “strategically altered their bodies to construct and reinforce ideas of Vietnam’s place in the global imaginary” (p.129). The hostesses in each of the bars change their appearance and perform femininity to match the desires of their specific male clients. Women in Khong Sao Bar bar use body work (e.g. rhinoplasty and double eyelid surgery) to project a modern pan-Asian aesthetic appeal that is rewarded through tips. These women are seen as the embodiment of Vietnam and must navigate the tension of appearing modern, while acting traditional. Hostesses in Lavender use body work, including cosmetics, plastic surgery, and clothing, to distinguish them from Viet Kieu and Western women. In primarily catering to Western and European men, the hostesses at Secrets and Naughty Girls use body work to appear rural, highlighting dark skin and minimizing displays of wealth; clients in these niche markets desire visual representations of “authentic Vietnam” with the women performing Third World poverty.

Chapter seven speaks to the sex worker’s economic trajectories. Hoang found two dominant trends. In Khong Sao Bar and Lavender, hostesses experienced rapidly oscillating upward and downward mobility, while in Secrets and Naughty Girls, hostesses experienced steady upward mobility. At Khong Sao Bar and Lavender, hostesses needed to convert income to public displays of consumption and modernity as the embodiment of an ascending Vietnam, whereas the women at Secrets and Naughty Girls actually needed to downplay their wealth so as to project the image of Third World poverty desired by their clients. Therefore, the women had to invest differently in accessories and body work in order to stay “relevant” in their specific niche market; the women at Khong Sao Bar and Lavender needed to financially invest more in their appearance. All women converted their wealth into social status and respect in their home villages through helping to support their families and communities. A small subset of the women used their finances to open small businesses.

The conclusion discusses the changes that Hoang noted upon her return to Vietnam in 2013. A combination of interrelated financial and political factors decreased the demand for sex commerce. There was a local banking crisis. Vietnamese investors had money locked away in assets without a market for them. There was less money to spend on recreation. The president challenged the prime minister for mismanaging the economy (p.176). Bank leaders were charged with corruption and mismanagement of bank funds. Some resigned. Some of Hoang’s contacts stepped away from informal business practices to avoid scandal. Khong Sao Bar and Lavender

closed, while *Secrets and Naughty Girls* remained open with less business. Sex work still existed, but the configuration did not match what Hoang documented just a few years earlier.

A theme arising in various parts of the book is the conflicting narratives of sex workers as victims and sex workers as rational entrepreneurs. While Hoang originally intended to include a study of trafficked women, she found that "...sex workers in HCMC [Ho Chi Minh City] act as astute entrepreneurs within existing structures of patriarchy" (p.17). The book contributes to the narrative of "sex work as empowering choice" given the context of trusted relationships with bar staff. Mommies and bar staff are supportive of their hostesses. The hostesses explicitly state to Hoang that they are not trafficked victims, but rather rational agents venturing into a potentially lucrative market. Yet, noting the constraints on women's lives, Hoang states "most of them [hostesses at Lavender's] told me that sex work was the only work that they thought could bring them real economic mobility" (p.159). Although Hoang does not engage in detailed discussion of the patriarchal systems that constrain workers choices, the limits are implied. Women are exerting agency within a limited range of options.

The book is a tour de force with weight given to hostess, mommy, and client perspectives. Only so much can be accomplished in any report of fieldwork experience; however, the reader is left wondering about the outcomes for women not successful in the sex industry. What happens to them and how do they fit into the wider economy? One bar owner notes that those that do not make it return to the village and get married or find other lines of work in the city (p.168); the voices of these women are not highlighted in the book. Additionally, there are suggestions throughout the book that there may be other subthemes embedded in the interviews with hostesses. For example, in a conversation with a group of sex workers in Lavender (p.143), one woman states "It's a game. If you do not play by the rules, some other girl will come along and give him what he wants." This serves as a counterpoint to Hoang's emphasis on the collegiality of hostesses within the bars. While the women may seek to minimize conflict within the bar, this quote suggests that there is still competition for success. Another hostess 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." So there are ephemeral threads of alternative viewpoints (e.g. sex workers do compete with each other, men constrain the choices of women, and women remain silent to their own potential detriment) throughout the book. They are implied or subtly noted, but not fully explored.

I have my undergraduates read this book and they have found the book informative and enjoyable to read. The structure makes the content accessible. At a very basic level, the length of the book (<200 pages of main text and appendix) makes it highly appropriate for undergraduate audiences, with the caveat that some vocabulary may need to be defined to ensure a clear understanding. Yet, repetitive summary statements throughout the book help to reinforce key ideas. Overall, the book is an engaging read that paints a solid ethnographic picture of the lives of both the female workers and male clients involved in the sex industry of Vietnam at one particular point in time, while also tying in broader theories of interest to a range of social scientists today.