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The Client-Worker Relationship among Different Sectors of Saigon's Sexualized Economy

A rich body of literature has emerged in recent decades documenting the sex work industry among women across the globe, including studies done in the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines (Bales 2002; Bauer 2003; Brennan 2004). Although some scholars have addressed the sex industry in Southeast Asia, few have focused on the industry in Vietnam. This case is significant because the contemporary Southeast Asian sex industry began during the Vietnam War with the establishment of military bases that stationed servicemen in various parts of the region (Jeffreys 1999). Today, an estimated 200,000 Vietnamese women in prostitution serve a wide spectrum of clients in the local and international markets (CATW 2005).

Based on six months of field work in bars, cafes, private homes and on the streets conducted in 2006 and 2007, this paper examines the context, experiences and relative autonomy of sex workers and their clients in Ho Chi Minh City. Although several scholars have focused on the trafficking of women and children, my research studies women over the age of 18 who work as independent agents. Moreover, the larger discourse about sex workers mostly addresses only one side of the client worker relationship, that of the worker (Chapkis 1997; Kempadoo 2004). By focusing on both sides of the relationship, I examine how consumers and producers in the sex work industry view their relationships with each other. In my examination of the worker client relationship, I incorporate Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labor (2003) which focuses on the exchange and commodification of emotions between the worker and the client. Thus, I highlight intimate carework dimensions of an activity that is often framed in other terms.

In my project I compare the lives of women employed in different sectors of the sexual economy in a geographic region deeply affected by global economic restructuring. Building on Berstein's (1999) work that examines different sectors of the sexual economy in San Francisco, I explain how relationships between male clients and female sex workers vary, as a result of both the men and the women's class positioning and their embeddedness in transnational networks. In the field, I met and interviewed sex workers from a broad spectrum of the industry, including low class workers who catered to the local market, motorbike and street workers, disguised bartenders, and high class call girls who disguise themselves in different sectors of the night economy. My analysis highlights the dynamics of labor and desire in the practices and interactions of different types of workers and their clients.

The patterning of emotional labor in these relationships illuminates broader structural conditions which shape the range of choices experienced by both men and women. On the side of the female worker, I focus on ways which female sex workers commodify their emotions in an attempt to sell themselves to clients at a higher price. On the client side, I found that men were willing to pay higher prices for women whom they thought performed emotional labor while the lowest paid women engaged in a strict sexual exchange with clients in situations where little emotional effort was expended. I discuss how male clients have come to understand the sexual

economy in Ho Chi Minh City and how the men's expectations help shape the ways in which different types of female sex workers commodify their emotions.

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