

projected pan-Asian modernity and the exuberant rise of the local economy in order to broker social contracts between men.

In the markets catering to Viet Kieu, Western expatriates, and Western budget travelers, relationships revolved around remittance money through social contracts between men and women. The remittance money, however, took on different meanings in each market. For Viet Kieu, relationships with local women hinged on the women's ability to embrace nostalgic Vietnamese cultural ideals of femininity that allowed Viet Kieu to feel a connection to their "motherland" while also embracing the rise of local elites and Asian ascendancy through conspicuous consumption. Western men's relationships with sex workers were tied to different trappings of economic capital as men practiced "philanthropy" tied to Western capitalist notions of Third World dependency. These philanthropic remittances hinged on women's embodied labors that racialized and sexualized their dependency, thereby enabling Western men to negotiate their sense of failed masculinity abroad. Together these niche markets illustrate how transnational capital flows and intimate life are linked in a circle of performative displays of consumerist distinction, hypermasculinity, and stylized femininity.

## 3

## New Hierarchies of Global Men

It was noon, and I was sitting in the back room of Khong Sao Bar with about thirty other women. We were putting on makeup, fixing our hair, and eating a quick bowl of noodles before getting dressed. Hanh, the head mommy, walked into the dressing room and said to the women in general: "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 shurped up their noodles, wiped their faces, and finished applying their makeup.

Hanh then said to me, "Your uncle is here; go sit next to him." She was referring to Chu Xanh, a key informant who had helped me gain access to the bar. She then turned to Lan, a twenty-year-old sex worker, and said, "Chu Xanh asked to sit with you too." Lan and I walked into the room and sat next to Chu Xanh. Nine men sat at the table: five local Vietnamese men (two political elites and three wealthy business elites) and four businessmen from Korea.

Chu Xanh introduced me as a hostess and his protégé who spoke English and Lan as his girlfriend. Two minutes later, the door swung open and twenty-eight women lined up on the dance floor. One by one, each man pointed out a woman to sit at the table with him. Over the next two hours, the women sang karaoke with 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, intimate, fun, and personable to help the men to bond. The clients went through eight bottles of Johnnie Walker Blue Label at a cost of U.S.\$250 each before loosening up and laughing together. As the night came to an end, the bill came out and Chu Xanh pulled out a plastic credit card, jokingly placed it on the table, and then said, "Oh wait. These things don't work anymore. Americans broke the [global credit] system." He leaned back, grabbed his briefcase, pulled out a wad of cash, and instructed me to count out VND 42,000,000 (U.S.\$2,100). Then he pulled out another wad of cash and tipped each woman two crisp VND 500,000 bills (fifty U.S. dollars).

After leaving that night, Chu Xanh revealed to me that he and his colleagues were negotiating a U.S.\$60 million land development project to build a new commercial property that would include office space and a shopping center in HCMC. The Korean men at the table were potential investors, and the Vietnamese men were businessmen with strong ties to elites in Vietnam who could assure that the 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." The ritual of paying the bill and publicly tipping the women provided men like Chu Xanh with a symbolic vocabulary to critique the U.S. credit system and demonstrate Vietnam's ability to mobilize liquid capital to make deals in an increasingly Asian-centered economy. Chu Xanh went on to tell me that while the West was mired in the 2008 global financial crisis, Asia's economy was booming, "China is on its way to becoming the next global superpower," he said. "Vietnam is also ready to ride this economic wave."

This scene and countless others like it highlight the connections between the political economy and sex work in HCMC, the center of Vietnam's sex industry. Business deals such as this one were not merely about making money. Local Vietnamese businessmen also used them to redefine Vietnam's global economic position and its relationship to the West and East Asia. When Chu Xanh compared Vietnam to the economic powerhouse of China, he was asserting Vietnam's rise as a strong nation in the new global economy. In Vietnam's transition from a developing nation to an emerging market, HCMC has become an attractive destination for foreign investors from other parts of Asia who seek to underwrite ambitious projects in land development, trade, commodity manufacturing, and banking. These investments present Vietnamese elites with an opportunity to reconfigure their place in the global pecking order as a specifically Asian rising economic power.

While the relationship between gender and global capital in bars like Khong Sao revolved around local elites' ability to secure capital by brokering informal social relationships in hostess bars, Westerners operated at the other end of the economic spectrum in a context of relative global economic decline following the 2008 worldwide financial crisis. The next two vignettes provide some local context to situate Westerners both in the local business world and in the hostess bars. In a political economy that no longer recognized them as dominant, Western men turned to the bars to project their status anxieties onto their relationships with local sex workers.

One afternoon while playing card games in the back room with some of the sex workers, I received a phone call from Chu Hai, a Vietnamese entrepreneur who ran a local investment firm. Chu Hai's company had a diverse portfolio with investments in manufacturing, trade, and tourism, and he called to request my help as a translator in a meeting with a company I'll call Infinity Capital, a venture capital firm based in the United States. This group was interested in investing in a U.S.\$85 million project that would include shopping malls, commercial properties, residential villas, luxury condos, and public parks on an exclusive beachfront property that would transform Vietnam's southern coast.

He instructed me to go home, change into a suit, and wait for his driver to pick me up around 5:30 p.m. I rode to the meeting in a black Mercedes with Chu Hai and two other Vietnamese men. On the car ride over, Chu Hai prepped me for the meeting by saying, "Westerners are formal, and they don't do business like Asians. They think our style of doing business involves too much uncertainty and unpredictability. So they will come with lawyers, translators, and thick contracts put together by their deal teams of researchers, analysts, appraisers, and brokers in the United States. We will meet them for dinner at the Sheraton, and then after dinner we will sit down in one of the conference rooms to listen to their offer. Don't smile, talk to them, or try to invite them out afterward. Keep a straight face and say as little as possible. They like to feel like they are making smart, rational calculations about their investments, not emotional calculations, . . . so the less you say, the better."

When we arrived at the hotel, Chu Hai introduced me to Kevin, Steven, and Howard—three American investors from the United States. As the only woman present at dinner, I sat at the corner of the table and spoke only when asked to translate as the men made small talk about

their long flight, new restaurants that had opened up in the city, places where they could purchase tailored suits, and streets that sold local custom artwork. After dinner we made our way up to one of the conference rooms, where Kevin, Steven, and Howard handed us each a two-inch portfolio filled with charts and tables analyzing the potential costs and return on investments. The folder also contained computer-generated images with a set of architectural designs for the project, an estimated cost, and a strategy to reduce risk by selling the majority of units preconstruction.

Infinity Capital proposed to bring in U.S.\$10 million (or 11 percent of the initial capital) to get the project started and promised to commit another U.S.\$35 million, which would arrive in chunks at different phases of construction. They then told Chu Hai and his partners that they wanted a local Vietnamese bank to secure U.S.\$40 million, along with a fifty-year land leasehold with a right to an extension, as part of a joint venture between a local Vietnamese entity and a foreign entity. I translated everything, moving back and forth between their PowerPoint slide presentation and my copy of the portfolio that each man held. Then I sat down and waited as the Vietnamese men sat in silence for nearly ten minutes. None of them said a word; they just sat in contemplation.

Then Chu Hai asked, "Can you bring in all \$45 million in the next year? We cannot get a land leasehold with the kind of extension you're asking for without at least 50 percent of the capital." Kevin responded, "I am happy to bring this back to my team; but you will be wasting your time, because it will be hard to convince our investors to contribute another \$25 million without a commitment from a local bank. If you want to close this deal over the next four weeks, I suggest we move forward with the contract so that we have something to show our investors."

Chu Hai and his partners sat for another ten minutes flipping through the portfolios and whispering with each other. Then he said out loud, "Thank you for coming here and pitching your deal to us. . . . But I have investors from Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore who I know will bring in a larger share of capital in the first phase. We can't take any risks. . . . If you cannot raise the money, all we will have is an empty plot of land and an empty construction site with nothing but bulldozers." Without giving Kevin a chance to respond, Chu Hai stood up, shook their hands, and walked out.

During the car ride back to the bar, I asked Chu Hai, "Do you think they will come back with an offer to bring in more capital?" He responded, "No. . . . Americans play with credit. . . . They're trying to

leverage too much out of a small investment. I brought them here knowing that I was going to turn down their offer." He paused for a moment, pointed out the window to a high-rise, and explained, "See that building? If I told you that I wanted to get that building up in six months, and that I could bring in only 10 percent of the funds, wouldn't you look at me like I was crazy? That is how Americans are. . . . They think they own the world. I want them to come here and see that Vietnam is not a poor, backward country anymore. I want them to see these buildings and feel the energy on the streets. Then, I want them to know that we don't need any of their money. They don't own us. They will feel the pain when they have to go home with no deal in their bags." I asked Chu Hai, "Why don't you build trust with Westerners in the bars? Then they'll put in higher bids, and you can make more on the deals." Chu Hai laughed and said, "Westerners don't do business in bars. They call it corruption; we call it building trust."

Vietnamese businessmen were actively engaged in a project of contesting Western dominance by making Westerners feel their declining influence even in a country as small as Vietnam. While all the Vietnamese businessmen in my study depended on Western finance capital in some capacity, two-thirds of the Vietnamese clients in my study eventually told me that they purposefully met with Western investors to reject their offers because they wanted Westerners to understand that Vietnam is redefining its place in the global economy.

After learning the importance of relationships to securing capital deals in Vietnam, I began to ask why Westerners refused to engage in the local practices of leisure and entertainment that would allow them to compete with Asian bidders.<sup>1</sup> Almost all the Western businessmen that I interviewed cited the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act—a U.S. federal law established in 1977 concerning the bribery of foreign officials—as prohibiting their involvement in practices that mixed business with leisure. In addition, the Western businessmen in Vietnam often worked with less than 2 percent of their company's investments designated for emerging markets. Thus, it was not worthwhile for them to engage in informal business practices that could be construed as corrupt, because there could be consequences, which would reverberate back to their multinational corporation, negatively affecting its United States-based investments. The perceived decline of the West, coupled with the incomparable business practices, made it exceedingly difficult for Westerners to place competitive bids, particularly on land development projects that involved a great deal of risk and potential reward.

However, although Westerners did not meet with business partners in spaces of leisure like karaoke bars, that does not mean they did not participate in the sex industry. But these men used the sex industry for very different purposes, and their relationships with women in the bars were tied to a different kind of economic capital. As Anthony, a fifty-three-year-old businessman from England, explained, “When I go to a bar with my coworkers, it’s for fun, to have a drink or two and flirt with the women, . . . to get to know the women . . . [; whereas] when Vietnamese and Asian men go to a bar, it is usually about business and building a business relationship.”

The niche markets that catered to Western men were not about establishing relations of trust among men that would lead to business deals. In these niche markets, the relationship between gender and global capital played out in the social contracts between men and women. That is, Western men engaged in relationships with local sex workers to mitigate their sense of Western decline through practices of benevolent Western patriarchy.

On a cool November evening in 2009, three men walked into Secrets and ordered a round of drinks. Business was slow that evening, and Lilly had just installed a dartboard on the back wall that a client had gifted to the bar. Lilly greeted them and then invited them to play a game of darts. She told them that none of us knew how to play and asked if they would be willing to teach us the game. The men obliged, so Lilly instructed six of us to watch. Before beginning the game, I introduced myself as an American researcher from the United States studying local bar culture. Alan, Derek, and Neil were all Americans in their midforties in Vietnam on a business trip.

The men worked for a boutique investment firm based in the United States that specialized in emerging markets. They had projects in Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore, and this was their first foray into the Vietnamese market. The other workers began a game of darts with Derek and Neil while Alan, Lilly, and I chatted about the complicated nature of doing business in Vietnam. Alan refrained from discussing their particular business ventures in Vietnam, but he vented his frustrations to Lilly and me, saying,

Launching a business here is so complicated because it’s a country with jungle laws. . . . There are so many problems with corruption, and there’s no legal infrastructure. . . . You would think a country like [Vietnam] would be jumping up and down for investors from the U.S., but they make doing busi-

ness here so difficult. It has been a nightmare trying to get land, dealing with construction permits, getting electricity, and trying to register a business. Everybody wants to get their cut [*rubbing his thumb and index finger together to signal money*]. It’s a lose-lose situation here. If you bribe people to make them move faster, you have to deal with international laws around foreign corrupt practices. If you start paying people off, everyone here thinks you’re a cash cow; and they will milk you for everything you have before you can even launch the business.

Although Lilly had no idea how to manage the world of international business ventures, she understood the local cultural style of doing business. To empathize with Alan, Lilly described her experiences with local officials in launching and maintaining her bar. Then, after allowing Alan to vent, she tried to help him de-stress by jokingly saying, “You come here to drink and forget about it. . . . Forget about business in here.” Lilly called over nineteen-year-old Lan, one of the hostesses, and introduced her to Alan. Then she grabbed Alan’s hand, placed it in Lan’s, and instructed her to walk him over to the bar for a personal bar dance. Lilly turned on the song “Empire State of Mind,” featuring Alicia Keys and Jay-Z, and turned up the music while Lan climbed onto the bar and began dancing. Neil and Derek left their game of darts and made their way to the bar to watch Lan. A few minutes later, Lilly slammed her hand down on the counter and in unison three other workers climbed onto the bar counter and began dancing. The men clapped and hooted as the women danced.

For the rest of the night the men drank, danced, played darts, and flirted with the women, dropping all talk of business. Over the next two months, Alan became a regular in the bar as he developed an intimate relationship with Lan. She became his go-to person, drinking with him after work and accompanying him on local vacations to the beach when he wanted to get away. We all referred to Alan, now a regular patron at the bar, as Lan’s boyfriend—she provided him with a temporary escape and a feeling of connectedness to Vietnam.

Despite the dissimilarities between local Vietnamese men like Chu Xanh and Western businessmen like Alan, these two groups of men were embedded in the same political economy of sex work. However, they occupied different niche markets that rarely come into contact with one another. For Western men like Alan, relations with local sex workers had remarkably different social meanings in the local context, in comparison to those built around brokering capital deals with Asian investors. Importantly, Westerners formed relationships with local sex

workers to escape from the daily stressors of their business dealings and to enact a form of Western patriarchy to negotiate their personal feelings of Western decline.

But, how exactly do different configurations of global capital structure new perceptions of self and nation in HCMC's sex industry? And how do the tensions between global imaginaries of Western dominance and of Asian ascendancy affect relations among men and between men and women in the hierarchical settings of the bars? A look at multiple performances of masculinities reveals how the spatial and symbolic boundaries of sex work in HCMC affirmed or contested Western dominance.<sup>2</sup> I draw on theories of intersectionality from the literature on postcolonial and global masculinities to unpack the processes through which men contest and affirm Western dominance.<sup>3</sup> The men in my study collectively drew upon intersecting classed, racialized, and gendered/sexualized relations to mobilize multiple masculinities hierarchically.<sup>4</sup> However, these masculinities were not simply based on men's individual subjectivity; instead, men 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.<sup>5</sup> This empirical data adds nuance to the analysis of an international hegemonic masculinity.<sup>6</sup> In HCMC's sex industry, men construct and compete within hierarchies of race, class, and nation in such a way that "Western ideals" and "pan-Asian ideals" transform our understanding of which racialized masculinities are inferior or superior.

#### "ASIA IS LIKE DISNEYLAND FOR [WESTERN] MEN":

##### BUDGET TRAVELERS AFFIRMING WESTERN SUPERIORITY

Naughty Girls served Western budget travelers by appealing to men's desire to display Western superiority by drawing distinctions between the bodies of Western men, local men, and local women. Many tourists experienced a sense of failed masculinity in relation to women back home, as well as to other men worldwide who had the means to support women in the developed world. They affirmed their masculinity by constructing figures of poor exotic women, through intersecting relations of race, class, and nation. For example, Anthony, a retired fifty-eight-year-old white man from Arizona, explained the "sex scene" in Asia to a younger backpacker in this way: "I should tell you, man, you can bargain with these girls. The going rate is about 1 million Vietnamese

dong [fifty-five U.S. dollars].<sup>7</sup> 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. You don't have to work hard or go far for sex." Men like Anthony came to bars like Naughty Girls not only for accessible women but also because they viewed Vietnam as "a retired man's playground," where men could fulfill their racialized desires for dark, thin, and cheap women. Sex workers who catered to this clientele were aware of this stereotype and strategically darkened their skin with makeup, bronzers, and an assortment of other beauty products (as described in greater detail in chapter 6).

Vietnamese male bodies were also central to clients' articulation of their racialized masculinity. Western men constructed a racialized masculinity in relation to women by describing their sexual prowess as better than Vietnamese men's. Westerners commonly asserted that women enjoyed having sex with white men more than with Vietnamese men. For example, Sam, a twenty-eight-year-old traveler from Australia, asked Thao, a nineteen-year-old sex worker: "You like having white men inside of you, don't you? We make you feel better than the tiny Asian guys, don't we?" Thao slid her finger up Sam's thigh, laughed, and jokingly said, "Show me [what's] in there." Such conversations were a nightly occurrence. Men based these assertions of white sexual superiority on the assumption that Vietnamese men had smaller penises and were sexually inhibited. By racially castrating Vietnamese men through stereotypes of penis size and libido, Western men conjured up stereotypes of racialized sexual relations between themselves and Vietnamese women, thereby asserting their masculinity.

Male clients also invoked class status as they asserted their masculinities in relation to the women. The majority of the men between the ages of fifty and seventy-five expressed the desire for a traditional marriage in which men were the economic providers and women took care of the home. Many could not afford to maintain such relationships in the United States, so they hoped to create them in less-developed nations. During a long conversation, Jason, a Montanan in his mid-sixties, told me,

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 . . . to take care of me. In Asia . . . some women still hold on to those traditional values. . . . I can afford to take care of a woman on my retirement fund [here].

Jason was not necessarily looking for a sexually submissive Vietnamese woman. In fact, sex never came up in my interview with him. Instead, he spoke mostly about finding a woman whom he could financially support on his retirement funds in exchange for care and domestic responsibilities. He was clear that, while he could not provide for a woman back home, he believed he could successfully construct a traditional heteronormative marriage based on a separate-spheres ideology (wife nurturing, man providing) in Asia.<sup>8</sup>

Sex workers capitalized on such desires by taking men to fake village families and creating fictive stories of crisis to procure large sums of money from clients. I listened as several sex workers told men like Jason stories about their dire financial situations in order to make the men feel like economic providers. 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.

Such role playing speaks to the various ways that subaltern peoples can shape their presentation of self to appeal to humanitarian impulses. As scholars have noted, moments like these point to the aid industry that must wrestle with how it differentiates between the “truly” needy and imposters.<sup>9</sup> Reality tours, or trips to fictive rural homes, create narratives of non-Western misery to please charitable “rescuers.”<sup>10</sup> Of the twenty women that I studied in this sector oriented toward Western backpackers, thirteen had received benevolent remittances from clients, ranging from U.S.\$1,000 to \$50,000. These women helped their clients feel like heroes, or superior Western men. Coming from strong nations, the men perceived themselves as engaging in charity projects that helped poor, desperate women in a developing country. In doing so, narratives of nation were mobilized to consolidate men’s status as providers; while these men may not have been able to provide for a wife in the United States, in Vietnam they could not only support a partner but also save a village. This imaginary, therefore, turns not only on class but also on nation. In other words, establishing this relationship with local women allowed them to perform a class- and nation-based masculinity.

These men were not looking to contest global racial hierarchies. Rather, in line with much of the current literature on Western men, they hoped to maintain and exaggerate the status quo of normative gender roles by seeking sexual adventurism with exotic women who provided cheap intimate labor associated with a semiperipheral status in the world system.<sup>11</sup> These men tapped into a transnational market and capitalized on the cost-of-living differentials between developed and developing nations—or a world order where the West dominates global finances—to assert their masculinity. As such, clients and sex workers both engaged in a variety of practices and discourses that, as Hue, a nineteen-year-old sex worker, noted, allowed Western “men to be men” and to reaffirm Western superiority.

**“THE GUYS WORKING HERE . . . COULDN’T MAKE IT IN NEW YORK”:  
WESTERN EXPATRIATES ESCAPING THEIR FAILED MASCULINITIES  
IN GLOBAL CITIES**

Expatriate men in Secrets constructed a nation- and class-based masculinity in relation to male clients who occupied the budget traveler’s niche by describing themselves as men with more money who understood that HCMC was no longer Third World. These men’s performances of masculinity were sandwiched between their local success and global failures. Calvin, an Irish man in his midforties, described this bar in relation to others, stating, “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 here. 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.”

All twenty of the men I interviewed in this niche market had been to the backpackers’ area at least once, and they often spoke of those establishments as the “poor man’s” bars. Western businessmen avoided bars like Naughty Girls and instead went to Secrets, where hostesses helped men feel as if they had “won” the workers’ attention. The expatriate men who frequented Secrets constructed a class-positioned masculinity in relation to men who occupied the budget traveler’s niche, by describing themselves as having more money to build relationships with workers in high-end establishments. Further, they emphasized their understanding of shifts in the global economy by differentiating HCMC from



the “Third World.” For example, Michael, a thirty-eight-year-old IT consultant, stated that bars like Naughty Girls were “for men who wanted to see a poor Third World Vietnam that was static and undynamic. . . . But this is a dynamic country that is growing fast. The streets change just as fast as the people do, and those guys [backpackers] can’t keep up.”

Because world politics are increasingly organized around the needs of transnational capital and the creation of global markets, the superior masculinity in the current world order is associated with transnational business activity.<sup>12</sup> Research on global sex work often assumes that transnational businessmen are able to occupy superior positions in all local economies, overlooking the ways in which Western expatriates adapt and employ local cultural tools to construct their masculinity with varying degrees of success. In several in-depth interviews I had with Western expatriates, they revealed feelings of inadequacy in relation to peers who worked in global cities. In a conversation with six expatriates, Daniel, a client in his midthirties, 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 1 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.”

Conversations with men like Daniel and Bernard revealed the relational construction of masculinity predicated on comparisons among multiple global financiescapes, where transnational businessmen compare themselves unfavorably to younger, more successful businessmen back at home. Over half the men I interviewed had lost their jobs as a result of the 2008 financial crisis, and they expressed pessimism about their job and marriage prospects in developed nations. Jesse, a thirty-five-year-old investment banker from New York, stated,

I was working on Wall Street making oodles of money. I bought a nice apartment in lower Manhattan with my wife, and we were trying to have a baby. Then I lost my job and she was supporting us for a while. . . . I couldn’t handle it. I felt like less of a man. . . . After being unemployed for three months I started to pick fights with her and I said things that I just can’t take

back. . . . A headhunter asked me to come to Vietnam to help develop the stock market here. I took the job, and my wife filed for divorce. I lost everything: my marriage, my job, and my house.

For Jesse, coming to Vietnam was an attempt to reinvent his compromised masculinity by capitalizing on his First World status in Vietnam’s newly developing economy. This move was possible only because he had highly sought-after skills needed to help Vietnam establish itself as a player in the global economy. This move, however, was preceded by an unsuccessful search for a job on Wall Street. Keenan, a twenty-nine-year-old junior associate at an investment firm, described his situation to me:

I lost my job in 2008 along with about thirty-five hundred other employees at Goldman [Sachs]. We all watched as the world of investment banking crumbled. I’ll be honest: I was a first-year associate, which is near the bottom of the chain, so of course I was let go. . . . I couldn’t find a job in New York for almost six months, and I was just burning through savings, so I went to Hong Kong and Singapore for a few months. I was literally broke when I met a guy who invited me to Vietnam. My MBA and the Goldman name landed me a great job at [a local investment firm]. We’re working on some of the biggest joint ventures. . . . [in] technology and media in the country by raising money through the international bond market. It’s exciting.

For men like Keenan, moving to Vietnam was their only option to capitalize on their First World degrees, job histories, and skills that were no longer valuable in a constrained American market but which were highly sought after in Vietnam’s newly developing economy. Todd, a thirty-two-year-old former investment banker who had worked at Lehman Brothers, said, “Most of the people that I work with were brought on right after the bank’s collapse. . . . to raise funds, with the goal of listing the company on the Vietnamese stock exchange.” Dalton, a thirty-eight-year-old banker, added, “The market is not going to bounce back anytime soon. You have to move to Asia. You have to move to emerging markets, where the money is.”

The move to Vietnam required these businessmen to swallow their pride, not only because of their lack of prospects in other markets, but also because of the challenges they faced adjusting to their new jobs. Most of the men I interviewed had to accept inferior positions in Vietnamese companies that were headed by Vietnamese CEOs and managing directors. They also had to quickly acclimate to local styles of communication that were often indirect. As a result, some men spent their off time in bars, joking and flirting with local hostess-workers, who

would let them practice their Vietnamese language skills and new cultural styles of communication, in addition to giving them the chance to establish their authority as men.

Sex workers played a crucial role in helping expatriate men reinvent themselves in Vietnam. In this particular bar, women capitalized on the fact that expatriates lived and worked in Vietnam and were invested in long-term relationships. They rarely engaged in direct sex-for-money exchanges. Instead, women participated in drawn-out exchanges that made clients feel special or chosen in relation to other men in the bar. Nguyen, a twenty-one-year-old worker, explained, "Lilly [the bar owner] teaches us to be patient. The men here want to go into a bar and feel like all the girls want them. To make them feel like that, you have to play with them. You sleep with different men without telling anyone. When they ask if we have slept with their friends, . . . we lie."

While clients were well aware that women were not always honest about their sexual histories, many men described the bar as a space where they could engage in staged play. Alex, a thirty-two-year-old expatriate from England, said to me, "Here in this bar, it's like a game. You've got young attractive girls behind the bar and men vying for their attention. Everyone has a role they play. The women pretend like all of us are interesting and attractive, and we pretend like it's real. . . . It's like a show. After a while you become familiar with the script. It's the same script every night." This script allowed clients to construct a class-based masculinity in relation to men who occupied the backpackers' niche market, because it allowed them to demonstrate their ability to win women over in a context where men cannot win workers over so easily through direct sex-for-money transactions.

Like the men in *Naughty Girls*, the clients in *Secrets* also asserted their superiority over local women through racialized remarks about Vietnamese women's bodies. On one occasion, Nathan, a twenty-nine-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 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' desires for dark, slim Vietnamese women were distinctly tied to racialized notions of sexual desirability across transnational borders. White men constructed themselves as superior to local Vietnamese women by highlighting their desire for slim and exotic women. In short, whereas the backpackers thought about their masculinity in terms of their ability to be *providers*, the expatriates thought about their masculinity in terms of their *access to women*, which mobilized women in subtly different ways. As one client said to me, "Vietnam is great for men like me because, back at home, you're an 8 [on a scale of 1 to 10], I'm a 3—and here, I'm an 8 and you're a 2. Beautiful women fall at my feet all the time." Secrets provided Western businessmen with the space to recuperate a class-based masculinity in Vietnam that they had lost in relation to Western men and women at home, largely as a result of the financial crisis. Instead of contesting hierarchies of race, nation, and class in the global imaginary, these men were sandwiched between success in Vietnam and failure at home, and they used the space of sex work to situate themselves as superior Western men despite their loss in status.

#### "WHITE GUYS ORDER BEER, VIET KIEUS ORDER BOTTLES": VIET KIEUS CONTESTING WESTERN SUPERIORITY

Lavender provided overseas Vietnamese men with the space to distinguish themselves as better than Westerners through their public displays of alcohol consumption in bars that excluded Westerners. Viet Kieus often understood their consumption in bars as negotiating their superiority in relation to white men while simultaneously accepting their position of inferiority in relation to local Vietnamese elites. As Hiep, a thirty-five-year-old Viet Kieu from Texas, put it, "White guys order beer, Viet Kieus order bottles [of whiskey, cognac, or vodka], and well, Vietnamese—they order Blue [Label Johnnie Walker]!"

During the early period of my research between 2006 and 2007, transnational Viet Kieu clients in my study came to Vietnam with foreign capital from developed nations. Before 2006, Viet Kieu remittances had totaled more than foreign direct investments, and the West had yet to experience the 2008 economic crisis. These conditions allowed low- to middle-income men from developed nations to convert their Western dollars into social status and respectability in Vietnam's developing economy.<sup>13</sup> However, by 2009, many Viet Kieus had experienced a loss of status in the local economy. Their U.S. dollars no longer had the



same worth, because prices in HCMC soared and worldwide luxury brands like Gucci and Louis Vuitton were introduced into the Vietnamese market. As one client put it, “The Viet Kieu years are over in Vietnam. . . . Local [men] have all the money now.” Expatriate Viet Kieu men who decided to pack up their lives and move to Vietnam to try to “ride the wave” of Vietnam’s economic growth sometimes jokingly insisted, “I’m not Viet Kieu. I’m Viet Cong [local Vietnamese] to disassociate themselves from the image of Viet Kieus as less cosmopolitan than affluent locals.”<sup>14</sup>

Owing to Vietnam’s booming economy and the crisis in the West, Viet Kieu men were no longer able to construct a local sense of superiority because of the visibly greater wealth of newly moneyed Vietnamese. Although many Viet Kieus experienced a decline in economic status in relation to rich local Vietnamese whose wealth derived from privileged access to FDI, they still figured prominently in the national economy through their remittances. Remittance money remained attractive across several niches because of the desire for hard currency. Moreover, Viet Kieus capitalized on Vietnam’s rising position in the global economy to enhance their status and sense of self. In bars like Lavender, Viet Kieu men displayed a class-based transnational masculinity by consuming alcohol and sex in spaces that were often explicitly unavailable to white men.

This practice 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 U.S., 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, [faking] up space. I could make more money with Viet Kieus, who will order a bottle.” Right outside the bar, a velvet rope kept guests standing in line, waiting for bouncers and security guards to escort them into the bar. Most of the Viet Kieus and young wealthy locals knew they would be automatically granted VIP access and easily skipped the lines to be seated at tables inside. Western men and other guests who had not preordered table service had to wait behind the rope.

On a few occasions, Western men were admitted entry as guests of the Viet Kieu clients. However, the sex workers rarely approached them or asked to sit next to them. While the women served food to and poured drinks for these clients just as they did for all the others, they made it clear that they preferred the Viet Kieu men over “white men” (*may ong tay*). Dien, a nineteen-year-old sex worker, explained, “This

business is really complicated. Serving means that you have to be lower than a man. White guys do not know how to tip. You can sit there with them for two or three hours and walk away from the table with empty hands [*tay khong*]. Viet Kieu men tip more if you make them feel more special than white men.”

That Western men were unfamiliar with the tipping rituals in spaces that catered to Viet Kieus was a reflection of the Westerners’ perceived influence in relation to women. Many commented that they did not need to tip in Western bars and were not going to participate in tipping rituals elsewhere. However, their decision not to tip provided Viet Kieu men with an opening to assert their superiority, because it made them appear, to local sex workers, to have more disposable cash. Through their comments on the desirability of Viet Kieus relative to the Western friends of the latter, sex workers helped Viet Kieu men articulate a sense of Asian ascendancy. Thus, while both Viet Kieu men and white men were responding to perceptions of Western decline, they used their local affiliations and consumptive habits to assert superiority in different ways.

In the bars, Viet Kieu men engaged in a particular display of diasporic transnational masculinity by consuming alcohol and sex in ways unavailable to them in their home countries. Son, a twenty-eight-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. In New York, [it] would cost thousands of dollars for a table without women.”

After years of living in the United States, men like Son came to accept the discrimination that often excluded them from elite spaces in the West. While Son implicitly described his perception of Western superiority in the West, he also saw Vietnam as a place where he could contest that superiority by consuming in spaces that explicitly excluded Westerners. In that same conversation, Hao, a thirty-year-old Viet Kieu from New Jersey, elaborated, “No one lets a group of Asian guys into the clubs in New York. Just to get in, we’d have to bring ten really hot girls along with us.” Son added, “In Asia it’s, like, flipped, you know? Everyone thinks white guys are cheap asses.”

In Vietnam’s growing market economy, sex workers in local hostess bars played a critical role, through their embodied performances of femininity, in helping Viet Kieu men contest global racial hierarchies across national boundaries. Women strategically altered their bodies to look thinner, more feminine, and more desirable than Western and Viet

Kieu women; they also staged performances that appealed to their clients' nostalgia for a traditional Vietnamese femininity. Clients came to this bar precisely for women they felt were physically more desirable than Western women. Minh, a forty-one-year-old Viet Kieu from Germany, said to me, "Vietnamese girls 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 [in this bar] have nicer bodies, dress better, and they embrace their femininity. I feel sorry for Viet Kieu women like you, because local women [*biệt chieu chuong*] know how to accommodate and please men here."

While working behind the bar, I watched women create an illusion of male dominance by feigning interest in the men's lives abroad, even though many believed that the men exaggerated their status in their stories. I asked several of the women I worked with how they felt about acting subservient to Viet Kieus. Duong, a twenty-two-year-old woman, 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. 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." Whether women enjoyed acting submissive or not, all twenty-five women I interviewed in this sector told me that they *chieu chuong* (accommodated) men because they provided workers with access to U.S. dollars and a more urban/cosmopolitan standard of living. Hong stated, "[We] Vietnamese women . . . 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 come to Vietnam [for] it." Thus, while the West still cast its shadow in Vietnam, the HCMC hostess bars provided spaces in which men could play out their aspiration to shift racialized, classed, and nationally inflected hierarchies in relation to white men from Western nations with stagnating economies.

#### "THIS IS HOW THE VIET CONG PLAY!"—WEALTHY VIETNAMESE MEN CONTESTING WESTERN SUPERIORITY

The privileged access of local Vietnamese elite businessmen to Khong Sao Bar signaled their superior status in the social geography in relation to Viet Kieus and Westerners. They used that superior status to cement relations with Asian businessmen that would lead to lucrative capital deals and

bringing FDI into the country. In the bars, wealthy men enacted their masculinity through male bonding rituals, drawing on and reworking intersecting relations of class and race. To this end, groups of men always ordered Johnnie Walker Blue Label, a bottle of whiskey worth U.S.\$250, and they typically consumed four to eight bottles a night without ever asking to see the menu or inquiring about the prices. The choice of Johnnie Walker Blue Label, understood throughout Asia as an expensive, elite brand, conveyed their direct access to tremendous economic resources and their ability to consume Western luxury goods during a time of Western austerity.

Following the customs of Vietnamese and other East and Southeast Asian countries, sex workers in Khong Sao Bar learned to signal the implicit hierarchies among their male clients and assume subordinate positions in relation to all men at the table.<sup>15</sup> For example, only the mummies were allowed to sit next to the oldest or wealthiest men at the table (usually ones who consistently paid the bill). Implicit rules related to drinking also signified deference. First, when sitting at the table, a woman had to invite the men to take a drink before taking a sip from her 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, when refilling a client's 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 and most important, when clinking her glass against a man's glass, the worker had to cheer according to the man's status relative to other men at the table. It was always a rule that she had to clink her glass below the client's glass. For clients who were particularly respected in the bar, a sex worker would clink her glass toward the bottom of the man's glass, if not completely underneath it so that the bottom of the client's glass sat literally on the rim of the woman's glass. Although the women were often unaware of the men's positions outside the bar, clients would subtly inform women of the hierarchy between them through their use of honorifics and through the positions they used when clinking the 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 figure out the hierarchy at the table by paying attention to how men clinked their glasses. These gestures were critical to helping foreign investors understand who had the most money or political connections. Vietnamese clients rewarded hostess-workers for acting out these subtle gestures that not only buttressed their sense of superiority in relation to their business partners but also helped to establish interpersonal hierarchies among the men in the bar.

When entertaining their Asian partners, local Vietnamese men often used cultural shaming techniques familiar among Asian businessmen to assert Vietnam's place in the global economy. For example, one night after Chu Xanh had spent about two hours drinking and entertaining eight Taiwanese clients in Khong Sao Bar, the lights went up and he asked Quan, the service worker, for the bill. He told Quan, "I paid 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 faces." Quan bowed and handed the bill to one of the Taiwanese men. The guest opened the bill and shuffled nervously in his seat because he did not have enough cash to cover the bill and the bar did not accept credit cards. After exchanging a few words in Mandarin, the Taiwanese clients 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. In this space, women knew that it was their role to stay silent unless spoken to and orient their faces downward while looking upward to subtly embarrass the foreign men. By providing a female audience for shaming foreign businessmen, hostesses were critical to the Vietnamese men's displays of a classed-based masculinity.

Indeed, as the Taiwanese guests fidgeted at my comment and the women's subtle facial expressions, 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 settled the tab. Then, in front of all the men, he produced a second stack of bills and handed each woman a VND 500,000 banknote (thirty U.S. dollars), for a total of U.S.\$1,100 in tips. The women bowed and thanked him before leaving the room. 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 [because,] in Vietnam, you cannot do anything without relationships. I embarrassed them on purpose because I want them to know that Vietnam is not poor."

The backdrop for this scene was the global and local political economy. Vietnam's dynamism in an Asian-centered economy depended heavily on South-to-South (in this case Taiwan-to-Vietnam) investment relations. These dramatic performances in the bars alluded to men's economic performance in the new global economy. Further, just as the clients of Khong Sao displayed their wealth to their present Asian business partners through cash tips, they also used the tipping ritual to demonstrate Asian ascendancy in comparison to the absent, inferior figures of Western and Viet Kieu men. At the end of the night, when the women

lined up to receive their tips, it was not uncommon for the man handing out the bills to comment, "Have you ever seen white or Viet Kieu men tip like that?" Vietnamese men wanted local sex workers to understand both that foreigners were passé and that locals were the clients with the money.<sup>16</sup> Hostess-workers bowed their heads and thanked the men as they each took their bills. In front of the clients, Hanh, the head mommy, would always tell the women, "You see, Vietnamese men know how to take care of their women. They know how to tip. If you work in a bar with stingy [keo] white men, you would be lucky if they gave you a hundred thousand dong [six U.S. dollars]."

By consuming with cash, local Vietnamese men implicitly mocked Westerners who relied on the credit system. One night while I sat at a table with Chu Xanh and his Korean partners, he turned and said to me,

What other place in the world plays like this? We take these men around in Bentleys worth half a million U.S. dollars paid in cash, and 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 County, California] around on the streets of Saigon. And they don't even own their homes! The Viet Kieu years in Vietnam are over. Now it's the Viet Cong time. Asia is where all the money is now. . . . Vietnamese have a lot of money!

The 2008 global economic crisis in the United States and Europe provoked a major cultural shift in these men's imaginaries in relation to the West. All the men that I studied directly linked success in the capitalist economy to their own masculinity. They bragged that they owned their cars and homes outright, and that they paid a 100 percent luxury tax on their cars. Paying *more* for alcohol and consumer goods through luxury taxes became a means through which local men asserted a classed masculinity that trumped previous national and racial hierarchies.<sup>17</sup> Through conspicuous consumption with hard cash and at levels unavailable to foreign men, Vietnamese men contested dominant Western masculinities.

Sex workers also carefully worked to buttress their clients' class-based masculinity by talking openly about the many gifts they received from specific men.<sup>18</sup> For example, one night, a Malaysian businessman in his midforties, Agil, pointed to hostess Yen-Nhi's iPhone (a cellular phone that cost U.S.\$700 in the local market) and asked her where she purchased it. She responded in English: "My Anh Hai [eldest brother/Vietnamese client] give to me. Vietnamese [men are] rich, they buy me a lot of present. All my sister have phone [pointing to the other women at the table]. All gift from Vietnamese customer." Agil looked over at

Xin, his Vietnamese business partner and said, "These girls [are] rich, yeah?" Xin winked at Yen-Nhi and said to the client, "Girls get bored. They play [with] this toy and want a new one all the time." Xin's comment insinuated that Vietnam's economy was doing so well that even sex workers had constant access to new commodities.

With the help of women workers, Vietnamese men used cash and conspicuous consumption to cement their relationships with business partners and to establish their superiority in relation to Western men. This work was possible in the gendered space of the bar because masculinity is not always performed in relation to femininity.<sup>19</sup> Rather, men also achieve their masculinity in relation to other men, in this case, through displays of wealth. Hostess bars provided their clients with the space necessary to engage in male rituals that constructed them as Vietnamese men of a certain class who were succeeding in the midst of rapid economic restructuring and a turbulent global economy.

Though hostesses typically played a supporting role to buttress men's performances of superiority in relation to other men, women occasionally became the uncomfortable object of a man's attempt to perform masculinity. Because Khong Sao was one of the most expensive bars in HCMC, not all who entered could engage in conspicuous consumption. Middle managers who came to the bar without the large sums of cash that their bosses threw around relied on relations with women to perform their masculinity. Rather than through economic transactions, these individuals asserted their masculinities in relation to sex workers by trying to kiss them, grab their breasts, or otherwise touch them inappropriately. For example, one night while Vietnamese clients were showcasing their Vertu cellular phones (worth U.S.\$10,000 to \$20,000), Tin, a twenty-six-year-old local Vietnamese man without anything to show off, grabbed a sex worker's breasts and, in front of everyone, proclaimed that he had two rocks of gold (*hai cuc vang*). In another instance, Dao, a thirty-two-year-old local Vietnamese man who had trouble drinking large quantities of alcohol, grabbed a woman under her skirt and pinched her until she squealed, thus diverting attention away from his drinking habits and onto the worker's body.

Four middle managers I interviewed over a late-night snack spoke openly about how they did not enjoy work after hours because they had to endure public ridicule. Hung, a thirty-six-year-old man, explained, "If you don't have money and you can't drink, everyone will call you weak [*yeu oi*] or gay [*be del*]. When bosses push me down, I grab onto women to get back up. That's their job." Backstage, workers often warned each

other to be careful around men who did not have as much disposable cash, because those men were much more prone to be aggressive with women's bodies. The women were not impressed by such displays. They developed strategies to dismiss these men from the bar. They would, for example, drink at a faster rate to get the men so intoxicated that they either passed out or went home. Nonetheless, these clients' actions served as an affront to the class-marked masculinity deemed appropriate in this context. When they reached for women's bodies, they attempted to compensate for their otherwise emasculated status in relation to the other men.

By asserting their superiority through cash, shame, and embodied practices, local elite men capitalized on Vietnam's rising economy to assert a new place in the global order. Writing about capitalism in a postideological world, Slavoj Žižek suggests that "when individuals use money, they know very well there is nothing magical about it—that money, in its materiality, is simply an expression of social relations."<sup>20</sup> In Khong Sao Bar, however, men's use of money was not simply an expression of social relations in their current state. It was an expression of what they imagined and aspired social relations to be and a tool by which they enacted those social relations. That is, while conspicuous consumption—especially paid for in cash—allowed very wealthy local Vietnamese men to display their superior status by showing that they could consume at levels unavailable to foreign men, the wealthiest Americans were still significantly wealthier than the wealthiest Vietnamese.<sup>21</sup>

Despite this reality, HCMC hostess bars like Khong Sao gave local Vietnamese men a space to assert, and possibly even realize, Vietnam's potential as a new international force. The global imaginary shared by men and buttressed by women filtered very real political and economic processes of rise and decline through aspirations, fears, and desires about men's masculine identities. Local elite men's masculinity and their desire for Asian ascendancy were inextricably linked, making these bars central to the (re)production of masculinities in a dynamic global context. Thus, as Matthew Gutmann argues, by framing culture not simply as a space of distinctions but as a space of difference and struggle, where the masses of men who are underdogs are inspired by a will to form a certain identity, one can see how the rich local Vietnamese men as global underdogs actively worked to contest the meanings of superior masculinities.<sup>22</sup>

The dynamic global political and economic context has created new elites and new status inequalities in Vietnam. These shifts were reflected

in the world of investment banking and finance and in the gendered relations and cultural practices of sex work. Across the four bars, powerful Vietnamese local elites, Viet Kieu from the diaspora, Western business executives, and marginal Western tourists were uneasily poised between globalized cultures. All men drew on intersecting relations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation to construct their masculinities in relation to other men and to women, but their particular strategies reflected their positions in the contemporary geopolitical moment. Thus, whereas Western budget travelers and expat businessmen worked to *reaffirm* Western superiority, Viet Kieus and local elite Vietnamese businessmen mobilized new hierarchies to *contest* Western power through styles of consumption that expressed Asian ascendancy. Importantly, men relied heavily on the bodies and labor of women to help them achieve their desired masculinity. This was especially the case when they perceived that their performances of masculinity in relation to other men, through classed and racialized relations, had failed. In the two highest tiers of sex work, Viet Kieu and wealthy local Vietnamese men contested existing hierarchies of race and nation by engaging in acts of conspicuous consumption that displayed a financial dominance tied to conceptions of Asian ascendancy.<sup>23</sup> With the help of local sex workers, Viet Kieu men articulated a transnational masculinity by converting their Western dollars into luxury, social status, and dignity. For local Vietnamese elites, conspicuous consumption demonstrated distinction to potential investors from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other East Asian countries.

In contrast, Western budget travelers and Western businessmen worked to affirm the status quo by affirming their superiority as white men. Western budget travelers enacted a classed and racialized masculinity in relation to women through benevolent forms of patriarchy. However, both groups of men also experienced status anxieties linked to the financial crisis and their sense of Western decline, and they negotiated these anxieties through sex workers' bodies and labor. Thus, despite previous research that highlights the superiority of transnational Western businessmen, transnational businessmen compared themselves unfavorably, in the context of HCMC's sex industry, to more successful investment bankers in global cities and used the space of sex work to reinvent themselves locally rather than asserting their universal, global superiority. Together, these four niche markets of HCMC's sex industry show that as the source of foreign capital being directed into Vietnam shifted from the West to Asia, men on the ground constructed new symbolic positions.

Importantly, although the global context is such that wealth is still concentrated in the United States, local elites seized upon this shift in global relations to show that they no longer depended on the West. The increase in Asian FDI provided these men with the opportunity to disentangle themselves from Western-based capital and the historical legacy of colonialism and Western intervention that came with it. In this new political-economic landscape, men's participation in HCMC's sex industry involved much more than the purchase of sex. Men purchased status, dignity, and protection for their precarious positions in the global order.