

Dealing in Desire

Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline,
and the Hidden Currencies
of Global Sex Work

Kimberly Kay Hoang



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In loving memory of Lois Mumm

*For Richard (Men), Nancy (Ha), Jamie (Che),
Andrew (Quoc-Viet), and Lilyan (Thuy-Tien)
Hoang for the material sacrifices you made in
your lives that enabled me to find the creative
space to write*

places where Western men, through their sexual relationships with Vietnamese women, sought refuge from killing Vietnamese men.⁵²

After defeating its foreign occupiers, Vietnam used the rejection of prostitution as a symbolic weapon against Western imperialism. However, with the opening of the economy to foreign investment, the regulation of prostitution was formally used to appeal to Western and Viet Kieu visitors from Europe and the United States looking to enact feelings of superiority through nostalgia and conspicuous consumption. Finally, in the modern era, prostitution is used once again by local Vietnamese political and economic elites as a symbolic tool to oppose Western dominance—not through the abolition of prostitution but by using spaces of sex work to facilitate ties among investors in charge of directing Asian-based capital. The configurations of capital sources shifting from the West to Asia brought on new tensions as new groups of local elites in HCMC worked to reimagine a global hierarchy in which Asians reign over their own region and local elites have risen to the top of the local order.

2

The Contemporary Sex Industry

Contemporary Ho Chi Minh City is marked by a distinctive *sexscape* where multiple niche markets in different areas of the city cater to global and local men who travel in and out of HCMC for business and leisure.¹ Each market presents a unique configuration of gender and global capital that influences men's perceptions of self and nation. Taken together, these markets challenge simplistic notions of Western dominance as men assert their places in a shifting global economy in the company of hostesses.

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.² I focus on four specific bars that represent niche markets in which sex workers perform intimate labor for (a) local Vietnamese business elites working to attract foreign direct investments from their Asian business partners, (b) Viet Kieu men tied to nostalgic remittances, (c) Western men investing in small-scale businesses through benevolent remittances, and (d) Western budget travelers who still view Vietnam as a poor Third World country in need of aid or charity through benevolent remittances. In the space of each niche market, the formation of social contracts—among men and between men and women—depends on women's embodied labors designed to access distinct sources of foreign capital.

A comparison of these four markets—through an analysis of how race, class, sexuality, and nationality intersect in constructing multiple

masculinities and embodied femininities—complicates our understanding of the sex industry in “Third World” nations by challenging ideas of Western dominance. This approach has material implications for how we think about global capitalism and new differences in wealth between nations. Sex work provides a unique perspective 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 attracting transnational capital.

KHONG SAO BAR: WEALTHY LOCAL VIETNAMESE AND OTHER ASIAN BUSINESSMEN

Khong Sao Bar was hidden deep in the heart of District 1—HCMC’s vibrant business district, where wealthy local elites and tourists have easy access to some of the country’s finest restaurants, hotels, and shops.³ With no signage or street number on the outside of the building, this exclusive bar was available only to clients who had an existing relationship with the head mommy or who were introduced by a top-paying regular client. The bar catered to local elite Vietnamese businessmen who operate some of the country’s top finance, real estate, and trade companies. All the men who had access to Khong Sao were part of a privileged class embedded in a small, tight-knit network of political elites who had access to the resources and bureaucratic power crucial to brokering deals. These men typically arrived in the afternoon or late in the evening after dining with their partners at another location. Because the bar was so difficult to locate and enter, local elites escorted Asian investors to the bar as part of their entourage.

Upon the arrival of a group of clients, three to five male service workers greeted them and escorted them to a concealed door that opened into an elevator. The guests rode up several floors to a very plain reception area. There, they greeted a woman in her midfifties who always dressed as if she were hosting guests in her own home. Her primary job was to monitor the cash register for the mommies and bar owner. Behind her cash drawer, a bright neon sign with the words *karaoke luxury*, in English, hung against a wall covered by chipped white paint. Nothing about this outer space conveyed luxury; instead it was designed to disguise the scene in case unwanted guests ventured into it.

After greeting the men, the older woman summoned one of the mommies to greet them. One of the bar’s three mommies stepped out of a

private room, bowed her head to greet the men, and proceeded to guide them down a stained dark-red carpet and into one of five private VIP rooms. Each room was decorated with nonmatching wallpaper patterns and disco lights that created a dizzying effect. Sofas lined three of the walls, creating a U shape, and two coffee tables for food and drinks stood in the center; a small dance floor and a television and karaoke set were situated across from the couches.

This setting symbolized a shift from an old bureaucratic culture to a newly entrepreneurial culture where men used relationships to broker deals. This was a comfortable space where rituals related to drinking had much to do with understanding and establishing social relationships among the men and little to do with Western conceptions of etiquette related to drinking and dining. In these simple physical surroundings, men displayed their membership in an affluent social class through their choice of expensive alcohol, the branded keys to high-end luxury cars on their key rings, their Vertu cellular phones, and expensive accessories.

Once the men were inside the private room, the mommy directed the barbacks (male service staff in the bar) to bring out the finest whiskey so she could pour a toast of welcome. Then she summoned the hostesses into the room and took a seat next to the most senior local Vietnamese man at the table while the hostesses lined up in two rows on the dance floor. It was implicitly understood that every man had to select a woman to sit with for the evening. In the event that an individual requested to sit alone, his male business partners often ridiculed him for being “gay” or unmasculine. Women in the bar also pressured men to sit with someone so they could help their friends earn tips. Each man typically sat with one or two workers, whose job was to ensure that the client enjoyed his time in the bar. The hostesses’ services for clients included pouring drinks, feeding them, serenading them, dancing with them, and initiating drinking games.

The bar was also staffed by mommies and male service workers in addition to the hostesses. Hanh, the head mommy, a woman in her late twenties, ran the bar along with Quynh and Lan-Vy, two junior mommies who helped manage the workers. These three women always wore perfectly tailored black suits accented with designer tops, belts, and accessories, or long gowns of the type one might see at a red carpet event. In addition, ten male service workers provided the bar with private security, ran errands for clients and sex workers, and worked backstage delivering supplies and fixing broken equipment when necessary.

About twenty clients regularly brought their friends and business partners to Khong Sao. They visited the bar three or four nights a week, spending an average of U.S.\$1,000–\$2,000 per night and \$15,000–\$20,000 per month. Incredibly, the bar usually generated around U.S.\$150,000 a month in revenue from alcohol sales alone. This space of leisure was crucial to local Vietnamese elite men, allowing them to establish social and personal relations of trust that enabled them to broker deals worth millions of U.S. dollars involving a broad array of projects, including land development; exports of steel, rubber, wood, textiles, and agricultural products; and commodity trading. In these spaces of leisure, men claimed their active role in a particular version of Vietnam with a vibrant economy.

Despite its high receipts, the bar did not pay any of the women or the mommies a wage for their work. Instead, their income depended on tips. At least one of the three mommies accompanied the hostesses to each table. The mommies earned U.S.\$3,000–\$4,000 per month in tips (in comparison, women with master's degrees in managerial positions made roughly U.S.\$2,000 per month in HCMC) and received a small percentage of all alcohol sales in the bar.⁴ As I discuss in greater detail in chapter 5, the mommies did not take a cut of the hostesses' earnings, did not force any of the women to have sex with clients against their will, and did not receive kickbacks from the women who engaged in paid sex. There was an unspoken rule in the bar that the women were to arrange all sexual transactions on their own. The mommies trained hostesses in how to sit, drink, sing, dance, and negotiate relations of paid sex.

During my fieldwork, roughly twenty-five women worked in the bar, along with fifteen others who cycled in and out as they accompanied men on business trips throughout Vietnam or overseas. They ranged in age from sixteen to twenty-two years old.⁵ Two-thirds of the women were recruited from poor rural villages by the mommies. The remaining third came from poor urban families. None of the women in the bar were college educated.⁶ This allowed powerful elites to maintain a degree of anonymity inside the bars, because hostesses did not move in their social circles. Workers earned roughly U.S.\$2,000 per month in tips for joining men at their tables and U.S.\$150–\$200 for each sexual encounter.⁷ They were permitted to keep all the money they earned from both tips and sex work.

Although the women's primary source of income was their hostess work in the bar, they often served as escorts, accompanying the clients to lunch, dinner, shows, clubs, and on vacations. The women earned

tips for their company and for sexual services, as well as gifts of perfume, expensive cell phones, jewelry, clothing, and accessories. The most common exchanges of sex and companionship for money were limited in duration, but a few women were provided a monthly income to service clients in longer-term relationships as *gai bao* (hired girlfriends). In the time I spent at the bar, three of the women were even able to get their clients to buy them small houses or provide them with capital to start their own businesses.

LAVENDER BAR: VIET KIEU MEN

Situated on the third floor of a modern-style building, Lavender was an upscale bar located within five minutes' walking distance from the three five-star hotels in the heart of District 1. Unlike Khong Sao Bar, Lavender was out in the open for everyone to see. The owner had worked with an architect to construct an exterior design that would convey high-end luxury. They settled on an innovative double-glazed glass wall that allowed passers-by to hear the booming music that roared from the inside and see the flashing lights on the dance floor while providing exceptional privacy by obscuring the darkened interior.

The clientele of Lavender, primarily Viet Kieu, most commonly arrived in cabs. Every night, seven to ten male service workers dressed in all-black suits stood outside waiting to greet them. As the cabs pulled up to the curb, three service workers approached the vehicle, opened the doors for the guests to step out, and proceeded to escort the guests up to the bar. Men who had reserved table service and whose names were on the guest list were admitted directly to the bar, but a velvet rope cordoned off a queue for guests without reservations and guests whose membership in a party with a reservation had to be verified. Though the length of the queue primarily depended on capacity, it was an unspoken rule that Western men generally had to wait in the queue unless they were accompanied by a group of overseas Vietnamese or local Vietnamese men. The symbolic and systematic denial of Western men from these bars made Lavender one of the most attractive sites for Viet Kieu men, who operated in a more expensive niche market than Westerners.

After entering the bar, men were greeted by a mommy, who, along with her entourage of male barbacks, created a walkway using their bodies and flashlights to enable clients and their guests to make their way through the crowded room to VIP tables. There was a circular bar in the middle of the room, where bartenders and hostesses mixed drinks.

A large, handcrafted chandelier in the shape of a phallus hung from the ceiling above the bar and provided the room with dim white and yellow lighting. To the right of the bar was a stage where professional singers performed live or a DJ played mixes of American, Vietnamese, and Korean pop music. The circular design of the bar allowed the bar owner to maximize the number of semiprivate VIP rooms lining its perimeter.

The rooms were separated by long, thick, purple-and-white drapes that were pulled halfway open so that customers in the bar or on the dance floor could easily view the VIP customers. Each space contained plush white sofas and its own chandelier. In between the private rooms and the main bar were several round tables where non-VIP customers could stand or sit on stools. Each table had its own group of male service workers, hostess-workers, and mommies who attended to the clients. It was the service workers' job to help the mommies remember each client's name, the type of alcohol he preferred, and the hostess-workers who had previously accompanied his table.

Although the bar served a variety of mixed drinks, most men ordered "bottle service"—where a bottle of vodka, cognac, or whiskey costing between one hundred and two hundred U.S. dollars was shared among the men at the table. The vast majority of clients were Viet Kieu men visiting Vietnam to see family or their ancestral home. Roughly a third of the Viet Kieu men that I studied in these bars had set up permanent lives in Vietnam, working for foreign companies or owning small businesses such as restaurants, bars, or small IT companies. Bottle service enabled these men to differentiate themselves from Western expatriates and tourists in HCMC, who typically ordered beers or mixed drinks to avoid the markups on bottles. Lavender offered a deal—buy two bottles, get one free—so most tables ordered three bottles for the night (at two hundred to four hundred U.S. dollars).

After the clients ordered their drinks, the service workers brought a fruit platter, some dried jerky, and salted nuts to the table; and shortly after that, a mommy returned to greet the men again. She poured their glasses of alcohol and then raised her glass to salute them. Then she would ask them to invite hostesses to accompany them for the night. Although the bar did not require clients to sit with a hostess, most men chose to have company.

If it was early in the night and the bar was not full, the men would scan the room to look at the hostess-workers who stood around the perimeter of the bar and tell the mommy which woman they would like to invite to their table. However, if the bar was full, the mommy would

instruct a group of women to line up in front of the table so that the men could select their company for the night. Hostesses attended to each client's needs by making sure his glass was always full and he was well fed, and by dancing and flirting with him throughout the night. They carefully crafted ways of ensuring that their clients always felt taken care of and desired—not to support business deals, as in Khong Sao Bar, but to support their clients' feelings of having returned to a Vietnam that had triumphed over the West.

The two mommies who ran the bar—Tho and Huyen—were in their late twenties and thirties, respectively, and worked to set the stage for Viet Kieu men looking to experience the new Vietnam with vestiges of a nostalgic past. Tho and Huyen generally earned an average of three thousand U.S. dollars per month from alcohol sales and tips. They always dressed in tight suits or long gowns that made them appear older and more distinguished than the hostesses. The mommies recruited hostess-workers for this bar through their networks of promotion girls, who promoted various alcohol brands; or women got jobs in the bar after an introduction through a worker in the bar. Hostesses earned roughly one thousand U.S. dollars a month from tips for accompanying clients in the bar, plus about one thousand U.S. dollars for sex. Most women charged one hundred U.S. dollars for sex, and they left with a client once every few nights.

As at Khong Sao Bar, the women in Lavender could choose whether they wanted to sleep with a particular man. The mommies served as facilitators, introducing their workers to clients, but never took a cut of the pay women earned from having sex with clients. On several occasions, the mommies protected women who refused to leave with clients. Most often, however, women left the bar upon the requests of clients, because it meant they would make extra money; it also made them feel desirable.

Among the twenty-five women I studied, all were from either poor rural villages or poor urban families. The women who came from villages had previously been employed as maids, hotel receptionists, or restaurant servers, chasing fantasies of global-economic upward mobility. They ranged from eighteen to twenty-seven years of age. Like the women at Khong Sao, workers supplemented their incomes by working as escorts, accompanying men to restaurants and on vacations. Most of these exchanges were limited to the evening or to the duration of a trip, except in the cases of four women who developed short-lived remittance relationships with clients. Though some women hoped that hostess work would help them meet Viet Kieu men to marry and, thus,

permit them to migrate, this was a rare occurrence, because most Viet Kieu men who married in Vietnam found wives through friends or family members who served as matchmakers.⁸

SECRETS: WESTERN EXPATRIATE BAR

From the outside, Secrets was indistinguishable from a typical “girly bar.” The windows were heavily tinted to reveal only dim pink and yellow lighting. When the front door swung open, outsiders caught a view of women dressed in short, skintight Chinese-style dresses or leather dresses. There was no exclusivity to the bar; any man could recognize the bar from the street and enter.

But Secrets was clearly a male-dominated space; as I witnessed on multiple occasions, when white foreign women opened the front door, they immediately turned away as if they had witnessed something private and quickly left the bar. Men generally went there to drink with the expectation that they would receive the exclusive company of an attractive Vietnamese hostess.

The clients who spent time in this bar were mostly Western white men from the United States, Western Europe, or Australia who either lived in Vietnam or flew there frequently on business. Clients visited the bar Monday through Saturday; Sundays were family days in Vietnam. Most clients came in between 4 P.M. and 7 P.M., which was the bar’s happy hour and a time when men were getting off from work. Many men also came in around 8 P.M., after they had had dinner with friends or family, and often stayed until midnight or 1 A.M.

The inside of the bar was roughly nine hundred square feet and rectangular shaped. To the left of the entrance was a long bar that ran the perimeter of the room. Behind the bar were mirrors that opened up the space and two flat-screen TVs on which men sometimes watched sports. To the right of the entrance was a dark-gray wall with several posters of the workers posing as models in bikinis. The women generally sat on one side of the bar and opposite their clients, or right next to them. The bar, which was roughly twenty feet long, was set up so that every male customer could sit at a stool where one hostess-worker would give him her undivided attention. Unlike Khong Sao Bar or Lavender, the men in Secrets always ordered beers or individual mixed drinks. The average bill was about fifteen U.S. dollars for three to four drinks. During the time that I worked in the bar, only two clients ordered bottle service.⁹

Lilly, the owner of Secrets, opened the very first bar of this kind, in 2008, in order to capitalize on the growing number of Western transnational businessmen who had suffered during the 2008 financial crisis and traveled to Vietnam to rebuild their professional lives. Lilly’s mother, a prostitute during the war who worked mainly for American GIs, had encouraged her daughter to develop relations with Western men that would enable her to either marry and migrate or find the capital to start her own business. Lilly’s mother had consulted with her on the drink menu, which included several mixed drinks whose names invoked wartime nostalgia, including “B-52,” “Me Love You Long Time,” and even “Cu Chi Blow Job,” named after an infamous group of underground tunnels dug out by the North Vietnamese forces during the war. When men ordered this shot for a hostess, the woman would put her mouth around the glass as it sat on the bar and throw her head back to drink the shot in an erotic performance. In this particular niche market catering to Western businessmen, the erotic conmingled with the military to invoke nostalgia for Western might.

When Lilly first opened Secrets, she hired twenty women from her HCMC neighborhood and the village where she grew up, paying each woman roughly one hundred U.S. dollars per month in wages. While this figure may seem low, other bar owners in the area did not pay any wages but instead expected hostesses to rely on client tips and sex work for their income. To encourage drink sales, Lilly also paid the hostesses 50 percent of the price of any drink men purchased on the women’s behalf. In addition to these wages, the women also received tips from clients, which were generally one to two U.S. dollars per bill (the same as restaurant tips). These tips were placed in a jar to be divided among the women at the end of the night.

When the workers drank with the clients, the men typically stayed longer and bought more drinks. However, unlike in Khong Sao Bar or Lavender, the workers could choose not to drink. When I asked Lilly why she paid the women to drink, she responded, “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 an average of U.S.\$250–\$300 per month. They rotated shifts to take one night off per week to relax and run errands, though many women came to work on their evenings off because they were bored at home and enjoyed their work. Roughly eighteen women worked in this bar at any given time.

Although the women earned a monthly income that enabled them to turn down many of the clients' requests for sexual services, they found other creative means to make money. Sometimes the workers charged their clients to run small errands during the day, accompanied clients to dinner after hours, and traveled with them on vacations to nearby beach towns in Bali, Phuket (Thailand), or Hong Kong. After a few months of building a relationship with a client, many of the women asked for gifts of gold jewelry or expensive perfumes bought in duty-free shops that they could easily sell on the black market. Women also asked for money to expedite a passport or to find deals on airfare, which allowed them to pocket U.S.\$300 when planning a vacation.

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 from their clients (referred to as *khbach* in Vietnamese). Women in this establishment rarely engaged in direct sex-for-money exchanges but nonetheless expected to be compensated for their services. Secrets hostesses also created fictitious stories of crises, such as a dying parent or a debt they owed to the mafia, to access gifts of large sums from their "boyfriends." Hostess-workers earned between U.S.\$300 and \$700 per month from these boyfriend-girlfriend relationships.

NAUGHTY GIRLS: TOURISTS AND BUDGET TRAVELERS IN THE BACKPACKERS' AREA

Naughty Girls was located in the heart of the backpackers' district of HCMC, a part of town that catered to budget travelers looking to explore Vietnam as a Third World country. The area was home to travel agencies, budget hotels and hostels, tour and bus companies, and restaurants catering to foreigners. The district was known for its thriving nightlife, as one of the few areas without curfew restrictions on bars. As an area of the city that never slept, the backpackers' district had a Las Vegas-like ambience, which made it easy to lose track of time there.

Located on the street, Naughty Girls had a large, warehouse-style open entrance exposed to all the street traffic and pedestrians, so that those passing by could see the entire bar from the outside. There was a front patio that bordered the sidewalk, where clients and hostesses sat and drank together or lounged in the sun. Inside, Naughty Girls was a small space, roughly thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide, with a bar

raking up about a quarter of the room. The bar was painted dark brown, and, above it, multicolored neon lights hung from the ceiling. There was a black chalkboard wall, where clients and workers sometimes played drinking games or exchanged English and Vietnamese language lessons. On the front porch of the bar were four outdoor lawn tables and bamboo chair sets, where clients could sit and watch the activity on the street.

Tina, the twenty-seven-year-old owner of the bar, did not do anything to disguise this space. She wanted to make it clear that this was a "girly bar," where female tourists were not welcome. Workers in this bar were all very dark skinned and wore heavy makeup and simple clothing to cater to their Western backpacker clients' racialized desires (described in greater detail chapter 6). Most of the women wore tank tops, jean shorts, and Lucite high heels. They often sat outside and invited male passers-by into the establishment, crying in unison, "Come in! Come in please!" Women who walked by the bar with their husbands usually turned their heads in a different direction.

Whenever the police drove by, the women scrambled to bring the lawn furniture into the bar and close the doors. This activity was a formality of local governance, because Tina paid off the local police to leave her bar and its workers alone. But in addition to navigating relationships with the police, Tina had to contend with the local mafia, whose drug activity was visible in this area. However, Tina was able to use the mafia to her advantage by paying its members to inform the women when police were making rounds and to manage bar fights or unruly clients. At first I was intimidated by the presence of the mafia, but over time I realized that although they were affiliated with criminal activity, these men did not act as pimps who forced women to have sex with clients, did not try to get money from women, and did not even procure clients for the bar. While there are pimps in Vietnam who manage street workers in Vietnam, the men linked to Naughty Girls acted both like brothers to the women and as contract employees who were paid each time the owner or sex workers called on them for help with a particular situation.

After 2006, the backpackers' area of HCMC experienced a decline in bar clientele because of the economic downturn. Between 2006 and 2007, there were roughly twenty-five small bars that catered to foreign tourists. However, by 2009, this number had declined to eleven. The backpackers' area had become run down, with transient tourists looking to explore Vietnam as cheaply as possible. The clients I studied in

these bars wanted to explore a "Third World" country as tourists who typically did not plan to return again. On any given night, they could walk into the bar and order a cheap beer that cost roughly two U.S. dollars while enjoying the company of one or two women at their table. The workers did not earn any money in tips or in wages from the bar owner. Instead, paid sex was the most common way workers earned money at Naughty Girls. These workers earned fifty to seventy U.S. dollars for paid sex and gave Tina a cut amounting to ten to twelve U.S. dollars, per sexual encounter, for using her bar as a space in which to procure clients. Some women also built longer-term relationships with clients to secure remittances after the backpackers had returned to their home countries. All the women in this niche market were factory workers and service workers before entering sex work.

The bar owner, Tina, was a tall, beautiful woman with a slim figure like a model. She started doing sex work at the age of sixteen and was able to open Naughty Girls with the help of a foreign boyfriend. The bar had a total of twenty-six workers, but only about fifteen worked there on a regular basis. The women were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-three. Half were from the Mekong Delta and half from HCMC, but all of them lived in District 4, an area known for housing the local mafia and sex workers. All the women spoke some English, which they picked up through working in the bar.

Nearly all interactions with the clients in the bar lasted roughly thirty minutes, during which time the men would consume one or two drinks before leaving with a worker for paid sex. The owner did not force the women to sit and talk with these men. However, because it was their main source of income, women in this niche market engaged in many more direct sex-for-money exchanges than the women in the other spaces. As in the other bars, no one forced the women to have sex with clients. In addition, these workers had the phone numbers of local men in the mafia whom they could call on to hunt down a client if he refused to pay or was too rough with their bodies, even though it was uncommon for women to experience abuse from their clients. On the rare occasions when a man tried to get away with "free sex" by refusing to pay, the women would cause a scene on the street, embarrassing the men until they opened their wallets. More often than not, women performed their part, and the men compensated them for their work.

Globalizing cities like HCMC are strategic sites where brokers of global capital and poor migrant women come into direct contact to both

TABLE 1 THE COCONSTITUTIVE RELATIONSHIP OF GENDER AND GLOBAL CAPITAL

	Local Vietnamese and Asian Men	Viet Kieus	Western Expatriates	Westerners Budget Travelers
Capital involved	Asian foreign direct investment capital	Remittances through conspicuous consumption	Remittances as philanthropy	Remittances as philanthropy
Woman's labor	Embracing par-Asian ideals	Celebrating Vietnam's trajectory	Sexualizing Third World dependency	Exaggerating Third World poverty
Social contracts	Between men	Between men and women	Between men and women	Between men and women
Perceptions of Asian ascendancy and Western decline	Capitalizing on Asian ascendancy and Western decline	Claiming Asian ascendancy; contesting Western dominance	Recuperation of Western patriarchy to negotiate Western decline	Recuperation of Western patriarchy to negotiate Western decline

reproduce and contest hierarchies of desire and desirability. In Vietnam, inter-Asian circuits of capital from more developed regions to less developed regions have altered local perceptions of Asian ascendancy and Western decline. These broader political and economic transformations occurring in the globalized economy have become transparent in the (re)stratification of HCMC's contemporary sex industry.

While most studies of the global sex industry focus on individual niche markets catering either to Western men on romance tours or to local men, new capital flows in HCMC have fractured the Vietnamese sex industry into multiple niche markets that cater to demographically diverse consumers. In these spaces of leisure, powerful local elites, Viet Kieus from the diaspora, business executives, and marginal tourists enter into niche markets that never overlap. Instead, each niche market operates with a unique logic of desire that has important implications for how we think about the place of sex work in the global economy.

Table 1 outlines the four markets, along with their relationships to global capital involved, women's labor, social contracts, and perceptions of Asian ascendancy and Western decline. This frame explains how gendered relations and different forms of global capital converged to produce new forms of masculine privilege and performances of femininity. Local Vietnamese and other Asian businessmen were tied to Asian-based FDI, and elites depended on workers' embodied labors that

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