

## Sex Workers' Economic Trajectories

One evening, Nga, a twenty-year-old hostess, brought her nineteen-year-old friend Yen-Nhi to Khong Sao Bar to help Yen-Nhi find work. Hanh, the head mommy, carefully looked Yen-Nhi over before asking, "Where do you live?" Yen-Nhi replied, "I just came up from Chau Doc [a village four hours from Ho Chi Minh City] a few days ago. I am staying at Nga's house to see if I can find work in the city. If it works out [vieu hop], then I will stay. If not, I will return to the village." Hanh replied, "You can try it for a few days and see if this bar is the right fit for you. Some people are lucky in here, and some people are a better match in a different bar." Yen-Nhi shyly bowed her head and thanked Hanh. Then Nga grabbed Yen-Nhi's arm and led her to the back room to get dressed. An hour later, the three of us were riding in the backseat of a black Mercedes S-Class sedan on our way to a private party. When we arrived, Yen-Nhi fumbled with the door handle as she struggled to open it, commenting under her breath that this was her first time riding in a private car.

For many of the women in this study, sex work was an opportunity to move into new social spaces. It was not uncommon to see women like Yen-Nhi go from the back of a motorbike to a Mercedes in the same day. Yet most of what we know about sex workers revolves around their day-to-day interactions with clients; few ethnographers tell a story of how women's lives are transformed through sex work or how their

trajectories of mobility may vary according to the particular niche market they occupy in a segmented industry.

In times of rapid economic change, individuals and groups may experience accelerated opportunities for mobility, moving upward or downward in status or class position in what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls "the trajectory effect, which allows for individual and collective class mobility."<sup>1</sup> Sex workers across the four bars experienced two different trajectories of social mobility in the context of Vietnam's rapidly changing economy: rapidly oscillating upward and downward mobility; and steady upward mobility.

Sex workers who catered to wealthy local Vietnamese men and Viet Kieu men experienced volatile economic mobility. Like Yen-Nhi, these women often went from poor rural areas to spaces that housed some of HCMC's most exclusive elites indulging in conspicuous consumption. Their trajectories contrasted with the slow and steady upward mobility characteristic of sex workers serving Western clients, who imposed paternalistic Western values concerning money, which involved saving money and delaying gratification.

Related to the issue of mobility is the theme of convertibility: workers converted the money they earned in the city to social status and respectability in their home villages.<sup>2</sup> During return trips to their villages, sex workers in all niches of HCMC's sex industry destigmatized sex work through outward modes of consumption and gift giving. They capitalized on new market conditions by creatively converting their access to global and local currencies into social status, and they drew heavily on their access to cash and gifts to alter family members', friends', and villagers' perceptions of sex work. In the face of rapid economic restructuring, cities like HCMC become critical sites where the First World and Third World collide, and where women in multiple niche markets straddle the boundary between First World wealth and Third World poverty.

### NEW TRAJECTORIES OF UPWARD MOBILITY IN HCMC'S GLOBAL

#### SEX INDUSTRY

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

Workers in Khong Sao Bar and Lavender often straddled First World luxury and Third World poverty as they developed new strategies for mobility. The large amount of money flowing through the high-end

niches created a situation in which women quickly gained access to large sums of cash. These sums were known locally as hot money (*tiền nóng*), the kind of money made in the illicit economy that flows out or gets spent as quickly as it comes in. Workers who generated money through sex work could not predict how much money they would generate or how quickly that money might come in. Often the money would flow out through unexpected expenses related to a sudden illness or death or a family member's sudden loss of income.<sup>3</sup>

Of the fifty women I studied in the two high-end niche markets, none had more than a high school education and most came from poor rural and urban families. Of the twenty-five women working in Khong Sao Bar, seventeen came straight from a nearby village into sex work, while only eight came from poor urban families. Those who came to the city directly from the village went straight into sex work with the help of their social networks and the mommies who had come to their villages to seek out beautiful women. As Hanh explained to me, "It is better for me to bring in young, very pretty girls from the village, because they have the look that my clients like. They look more innocent and pure. The men are rich and powerful, and sometimes they need to have a place where they can go to relax and have fun without people knowing who they are. Village girls do not know anything about the men, except that they are rich, and the men like to keep it like that."

The clients' desire for anonymity and privacy led the bar to hire workers from poor rural backgrounds strictly on the basis of their looks. Many of the women entered the bar through an introduction by a friend or through direct contact in the village with one of the mommies. During my months working as a hostess in each of the bars, I watched three workers enter the bar and transform in a matter of weeks. As the new women worked to adapt to the bar, I was able to collect stories about the other women's trajectories of mobility as they reflected on their own transformations. For example, Nhi, a twenty-four-year-old hostess who returned to Khong Sao Bar after being away for several months, described her experiences with rapid upward and downward mobility, saying,

Seven months ago, when I first came to work in the city, I was a different person. I was young and shy, but I knew that I was beautiful because men used to beg me to come in to their tables. So I was stuck-up [*chãnh*]. I would run around from table to table. I remember holding the first one million dong [fifty U.S. dollars] in my hands thinking that I had never held this much money in my hands before. I made that in the first hour of work on just tips.

The clients loved me. I got an iPhone, money for new clothes, and someone paid for me to get my nose fixed. I went from riding around on a motorbike to riding in nice cars. They spoiled me.

Then, I fell in love with this [local Vietnamese] man, and I thought he loved me. He [set me up] in one of his condos and told me that he wanted me to quit. He told me that he would give me two thousand U.S. dollars a month and a free house if I quit working. Everyone told me not to listen to him, but I was stuck-up and I thought I was better than even the mommies. After two months he found a new girl to play with, and he got bored with me. She took over the apartment and I had to move out. I had nothing; my hands were empty [*bat bàn tay trắng*]. I got on a motorbike taxi for the first time in three months, and I just cried because I felt like a princess who lost her riches. So here I am, back for a job. No one says anything to me, because they all know; but I feel ashamed. It is a lot harder to get back in on tables again. I have to work to build up my network of clients again.

Tears dripped down Nhi's face as she spoke of her humiliation. Though the other women tried to console her and help her get in on tables by introducing her to new clients, I watched as she fumbled to make the most of what she had. When I asked her why she decided to come back to sex work, she said to me, "I got used to the high life and to always having money in my pockets. If I quit, I will have to go back to the village, get married, and settle down. I want to try one more time and, this time, be smarter with the money I make."

Nhi's trajectory is a characteristic story of rapid upward and downward mobility after stepping into sex work in Khong Sao Bar. As young women from the village entered the hostess bar, their tastes began to change and so did their consumption patterns. As I discussed in chapter 6, women who catered to wealthy local Vietnamese men acquired a taste for global luxury items, tailored clothing, and plastic surgery. These new consumption patterns were possible only because women had access to so much more expendable income than they had had before entering sex work. Hanh, the head mommy, tried her best to teach them how to manage their money, save, and invest in small businesses back in their hometowns to protect them from hard falls like Nhi's. Vy, a twenty-three-year-old worker, said to me,

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

me later. Life is strange; when you have money you have a lot of it, but when you are poor, you are so poor you cannot even eat.

The precariousness of Vy and Nhi's economic status was common in the niche market that catered to local Vietnamese and other Asian businessmen. Women entered the bar and maintained their status because of their novelty value; over the years, they had to invest in plastic surgery to give their clients something new to look at. However, this lifestyle was never easy to maintain, because the more money they made, the more pressure they felt to invest in their bodily capital to stay in the game. And ultimately, most hostesses experience downward mobility as they age out of the sex industry, unless they carefully plan their exit by saving enough money to invest in another business.

One evening, I went with a group of sex workers from Khong Sao Bar to have dinner with a group of clients in an upscale Vietnamese restaurant. The clients shut down the restaurant for the night so they could enjoy both exclusive service and privacy in the restaurant. While the newer workers at the table fumbled with the silverware and the food, the more experienced sex workers comfortably ordered the restaurant workers around. After dinner, we all made our way back to the bar, where the workers spent the rest of the evening drinking, dancing, and singing karaoke. At the end of the night, some of the more experienced workers instructed the newer women on the importance of learning how to comfortably navigate high-end spaces of fine dining. Ngoc-Anh, a twenty-three-year-old worker, explained to Thao, an eighteen-year-old worker, "Restaurants like that are uncomfortable when you first go to them, but over time you will learn how to ask for things just like the rest of us. . . . You will learn to enjoy good food and nice restaurants because the experience is different from [what happens] inside the bars."

Thao's discomfort during her first night in a restaurant highlights the displacement that new workers experienced every day as they learned to navigate new spaces of luxury, where the rules, norms, and rituals of interaction varied greatly from those in their home villages. Most of the new workers were careful to quietly observe more experienced women and men before stepping out on their own into those social spaces.

Like the women in Khong Sao Bar, workers who catered to Viet Kieu men in Lavender experienced rapid upward and downward mobility, although in a different way. Nearly all the women who worked in Lavender came from poor urban backgrounds or had migrated to the city and spent at least two years in the service sector or manufacturing occur-

ptions before entering sex work. Most of them told me that sex work was the only work they thought could bring them real economic mobility. Kieu said to me,

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

The conditions of Kieu's life before she undertook sex work propelled her into life as a bartender in a bar that catered to Viet Kieu men. Through the network of sex workers who floated in and out of the hotel at night, she learned which bars Viet Kieu men spent time in, and she went in one to ask for a job. The mommy told her that she could try it for a week to see if it was the right fit. When I asked her to describe her life since beginning work in the bar, she said to me,

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

Because of the instability of their income, women who catered to Viet Kieu men often moved between First World luxury and Third World poverty. When they were lucky enough to have a client, they could indulge in luxurious hotels, fancy motorbikes, nice dinners, and shopping sprees. Although all these women aspired to be like the mommies who had found ways to generate a stable income through multiple investments, very few had saved any money. Of the fifty women who catered to wealthy local Vietnamese men, Asian businessmen, and Viet Kieu men, only four had saved enough money to open a small business.

The other women tried, but in times of hardship they had to go through their savings to support themselves and their families. I witnessed several women enter and exit the bar during the short two-to-three-month periods in which I was employed in each of these bars. Workers who returned to the bar after a period of not working had to get to know a whole new set of coworkers and clients.

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

#### *From the Factory to the Bar: Slow Trajectories of Steady*

##### *Upward Mobility*

Sex workers who catered to Western men in Secrets and Naughty Girls experienced gradual upward mobility. They did not rise and fall as rapidly as the women who worked in Khong Sao Bar and Lavender. Roughly two-thirds of the women in both Secrets and Naughty Girls had had jobs in the manufacturing or service sectors before entering sex work. The other third of the women had not worked at all. Those women began working in the bar after seeing a friend or family member's success in this line of employment.

It was common for workers to experience rapid upward mobility during the first month of work in a bar. However, soon after their initiation they began to anticipate a steadier flow of money. For example, in a conversation with three women working in Secrets, I asked why they chose to enter the bar scene. Tam, a twenty-four-year-old sex worker who first moved to HCMC at the age of thirteen to work as a private maid, said,

I worked as a maid for three years, and then, after the kids [in the house she worked for] grew up, they did not need me anymore, so they helped me find

work in a factory. . . . I worked in a clothing factory every day for almost twelve hours a day. It was tiring, and I did not make any money. When I worked as a maid, I did not have to pay rent, and I could send 1.5 million dong [seventy-five U.S. dollars] home each month to my parents. In the factory, I made 1.6 million dong [eighty U.S. dollars] a month, but I also had to pay for rent and buy food. I could not send as much home. I would go home crying every night because I was getting paid so little. In Vietnam, most people who are poor just accept that they are poor; but when I came to Saigon, I had dreams of making more money and living a more comfortable life. I decided to take a risk and work in a bar. I make the same money sleeping with two men that I did in a whole month in the factory, and I do not have to work long hours sitting in one place.

Like most of the women I studied in the expat and backpacker bars, Tam decided to enter into sex work not only because she thought she could make more money but also because sex work offered better working conditions. In my conversations with women who went from factories to sex work, nearly all of them spoke of themselves as strong, independent, and willing to take risks. Van, for example, said to me,

People look at the work that I do and think I am stupid because I am selling my body. They think I am uneducated or I am addicted to drugs. But the stupid people are the people who work in the factories every single day making barely enough to survive. They do not even think they are making someone else rich. They will never turn their lives around. . . . The smart ones are the ones who are bold enough to step out of the factory and onto the streets. Those are the ones who are sharp. At least in this job, I can have some hope that my life will change. Some hope, to me, is better than no hope.

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

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

The women who left manufacturing and service-sector occupations for sex work experienced upward mobility only if they could procure clients for sex in the bars. As many of them stated, sex work provided them with the space to "hope" and "dream" about a better life. Those who were able to make it out of the factory and into sex work experienced rapid upward mobility during the first month, and after that they

earned a steady income that came directly from providing sexual services. While many of these workers certainly earned more money, their patterns of social mobility did not resemble those of women who catered to local Vietnamese men and Viet Kieu men. As I discussed in chapter 6, workers who catered to Western men did not have to alter their bodies or consumption patterns to embody their wealth, and instead they worked to look like Third World subjects. Thao, a twenty-six-year-old worker, explained to me, "I do not buy fancy clothes to wear at work. The men who come here need to think that sex workers are poor so that they will help us. If they think we have money, why would they give money to us?"

Because they dressed to display a sexualized form of poverty while at work, the sex workers in these niche markets did not spend nearly as much money on new designer handbags, tailor-made dresses, or plastic surgery as women in the higher-paying sectors. Sex workers who catered to white men indeed experienced dramatic changes in their lifestyles in terms of their changing tastes in consumption, modes of transportation, or living arrangements. But they did not move in and out of high-end spaces as often as women who catered to men in higher-tiered bars. In times when their money from clients did not flow as generously, they did not have to make significant changes to their lifestyles.

Male clients played a crucial role in easing these women into slow but steady upward mobility. Clients tried to teach workers how to manage their money by commenting on appropriate spending and explaining strategies to create savings. One night in Secrets, I listened as Kevin, a forty-seven-year-old man from Virginia, lectured Thoa, a twenty-five-year-old woman, in broken Vietnamese: "I do not understand people in Vietnam sometimes. How much was this cell phone? You buy expensive phone but you no save money for emergency. Why you need fancy phone? I buy cheap phone [pointing to his basic Nokia phone], same, same." He then turned to me and said in English, "Everyone in this country is poor, but they all have a cell phone because they do not know how to save their money." He continued: "They just live for the day and spend, spend, spend." While local Vietnamese and Viet Kieu men engaged in various forms of conspicuous consumption and encouraged workers to do the same to embody pan-Asian modernity, Western men like Kevin were often critical of women's consumption patterns. These men critiqued the effects of globalization, noting that it had created an ethos that prompted people in developing countries like Vietnam to purchase luxuries before necessities.

By 2010, many of the expatriate men who returned to Vietnam frequently on business were well aware of the ways in which women performed Third World dependency. And while they still gave the women money, they monitored their expenditures. David, a thirty-eight-year-old man from France, explained to me why he carefully monitored the construction on his girlfriend's family home in the village: "Any smart donor knows that you cannot just give money freely. You need to see a plan and be part of the whole process. I want to be part of every step, so I will pay as construction is taking place. Otherwise, she [his girlfriend] will run off and do God knows what with the money."

Expatriate clients went to great lengths to manage the money they spent on their girlfriends. One client said to me, "The market is different in the East than in the West. There is no set price for anything; you have to bargain for everything. So, sometimes, women will tell you that it costs four thousand U.S. dollars to expand the house, when it only costs two thousand. They eat up the other two thousand. So I make sure to ask around about the cost before giving them any money. The worst money spent is wasted money." The methods men used to ensure that the money they provided was used for basic necessities rather than conspicuous consumption led workers to experience slow and gradual pathways to upward mobility. Sex workers often had to prove to their clients that the large sums of money they asked for to remodel a village home or care for an ailing parent were actually spent on those needs. As a result, women earmarked their money for different purposes.<sup>4</sup> Sex workers often considered the money they earned from brief and casual encounters as their own, and they would use this money to pay for their living expenses and luxury goods and to help their parents. However, they often had to report to their clients about how they used the large sums of money they received, so they set that money aside for specific purposes.

When women asked their clients-turned-boyfriends for financial assistance to start a business, they also had to accept the men's input and advice on budgeting and investing properly. These lectures were filled with messages of delayed gratification. I sat with women on several nights as they sketched their budgets on bar receipts or napkins. They thought about opening small cafes, after-hours food stalls, spas, beauty salons, restaurants, clothing shops, and bars. While nearly all the women had dreams of opening their own businesses, very few acquired the capital necessary to get their businesses going. During the time I spent in Secrets, Thao was the only woman able to do so: she gathered from a boyfriend the U.S.\$10,000 she needed in order to become an active part-



ner, and take an equity stake, in one-third of a small bar. Her boyfriend, Steven, a fifty-eight-year-old expatriate from Australia, told me,

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

Steven regarded the money he spent helping his girlfriend buy into a bar as honest money with long-term benefits. However, he also worried that if Thao succeeded financially, she would become too independent and leave him. Two months after Thao's bar opened, when I came by with Lilly to show support for her business, Steven said to me, "I do not want her to make too much money." When I asked why, he said, "Because she will become like Lilly over here. . . . She will have so much money and won't need me." Steven provided his girlfriend with a way of generating income that allowed her to think about a long-term future where she would not need sex with clients to earn money. However, by limiting her to merely partnership in the bar, rather than sole ownership, Steven also regulated the amount of money Thao would earn. As a result, she experienced a steady trajectory of upward mobility rather than the rapid trajectory that might have been possible had she been sole owner of a bar. The carefully monitored exchanges of money and intimacy in this kind of relationship effectively transformed sex workers into docile subjects who aligned with the Western value of frugality.

Although clients tried to manage sex workers' money, the workers still found ways to maintain cash stashes for special uses or emergencies. Rather than creating fictive crises, they offered to run errands for men like helping them purchase airfare, hotel rooms, or bus tickets through a travel agent, so that they could add to the cost and have some money to spare. The amount of money that women generated in this way was generally not enough to create a large spike in their income. While most women occasionally bought expensive cellular phones, jewelry, or new clothing, their tastes stayed relatively constant compared to those of women in the higher-tiered niches. Male clients often lectured workers on how to "save their money" with the hope of teaching them the value of hard work and delayed gratification. In this era of upward mobility through entrepreneurship, these women served as small "devel-

opment" projects for men looking to invest in the workers' futures. Rather than freely giving women money, the men acted as microloenders, financing small businesses. As a result of these factors, most women who worked in bars catering to Western men did not experience the rapid, volatile mobility of the other niches but instead had slower, steadier trajectories toward upward mobility.

#### CONVERTIBILITY: FROM THE CITY TO THE VILLAGE

At the end of my time in each bar, I accompanied a group of workers on a trip to their hometown to meet their parents and siblings and see what their lives had been like when they were growing up. These four trips, with women from the four different bars, were also going-away presents and gestures of farewell from them to me, marking the end of my time of getting to know the women and becoming friends with them. At first, I did not think of these trips as fieldwork; I saw them as vacations away from the city, during which I could get away from my work, ride my bike through rice paddies, and stay up late in the company of friends without having to perform any emotional labor. However, after all four trips to the different villages, I began to notice that issues of convertibility were salient for women across all niches.

Scholars have long documented the multiple ways in which global men convert their First World citizenship and Western dollars into social status across transnational social fields.<sup>5</sup> Global men who come to Vietnam alter their consumption patterns for a short while to earn the social respect and dignity that they struggle to obtain in their home countries. During my trips to the villages, I noticed that sex workers engaged in similar forms of conversion as they moved between rural and urban spaces. Scholars have not yet theorized this practice of domestic convertibility across urban spaces and rural villages. By working in the sex industry, some women had access to global capital that flowed through the hands of overseas men, and others to global capital that passed through the hands of wealthy local men. Regardless of the ways in which women accessed global capital, and regardless of their patterns of consumption while living in HCMC, all the workers in my study converted their urban dollars into social status in the villages.

This became clear to me while preparing for a trip to the village of Tay Ninh near the Cambodian border. Lilly, the owner of Secrets, told the women from her village that she was going to hire a private van, and anyone who wanted to accompany her was welcome. Seven of the

women from the bar asked to come along, and she gladly accepted them all. A few days before leaving, the women dragged me out at 7 A.M. to go shopping so they could purchase an array of gifts for their family members. I watched as they carefully negotiated for electronic items, including a television, a refrigerator, a karaoke machine, a rice cooker, and several small kitchen appliances. We also shopped for clothes for the young children back in the village, makeup for the adult women, and liquor for the men. I was amazed at how full the van was after we packed in all these items. During the eight-hour van ride, Tam, a twenty-three-year-old woman, received a call in which her sister told her that their mother had invited several people in the neighborhood over for dinner to celebrate Tam's homecoming. Disappointingly, several people had declined the invitation, saying that her mother was a disgrace for allowing her daughter to sell her body. One neighbor even said, "It is bad karma to be around dirty money." Tam began sobbing, and everyone in the van tried to console her. Then Lilly turned to everyone and said, "Who cares about those people and what they think? They do not know anything. They are the same stupid people whose lives will never change, because they are not savvy enough to get out there and try something different. You just have to work hard and be successful. Let them talk, who cares? Because money talks. When we get to the village with all these gifts, people will shut up. People are scared of money; and when you have it, they will defer to you. Watch and learn."

The other women chimed in, reminding Tam that women who worked in the sex industry built the largest and most modern homes in the villages. People never look at those houses with shame, because, as Lilly said, money talks. The notion that "money talks" struck me as I realized that workers spent a great deal of their earnings, and some even went into debt, to bring modern commodities to their villages. However, the act of gift giving was not merely about providing their family members with basic necessities. Workers also gave gifts to manage the stigma attached to their work. In effect, like the Viet Kieu men I discussed in chapter 3, they converted their access to global capital to achieve a sense of dignity and status in their villages.

As the van pulled into in the village at 11 P.M., I woke up and looked outside the window to see dozens of people awaiting the women's arrival. They helped unload the van, and we went inside to eat chicken and rice porridge. I watched as family members gushed over the new electronics while neighbors looked on shyly but with envy. Three of the returning women were cousins and the other four were friends from the

same area, so all their families congregated in the same house for the evening. Two men set up a karaoke system, and people began to sing so loudly that their voices echoed down the street. The young children ran in and out, modeling their new clothes. Lilly brought out three bottles of Johnnie Walker Black Label and sat drinking with the men. Typically in the village, the women cooked and ate in the kitchen area while the men sat out front, eating and drinking with each other. However, on this night, the visiting sex workers were all invited to sit, eat, and drink with the men. Lilly, Ai, Diep, Binh, and I sat with the men while Tam, Chau, and Tuyen moved back and forth between the kitchen, where their family members were preparing food, and the front table, where the men sat, sang, drank, and ate together.

After awhile, Chu Manh, the father of one of the girls, began tearing up and drunkenly said to me, "This household would be nothing without the women and their sacrifices." We all grew silent as Lilly tried to turn the seriousness of the conversation into a joke by saying, "Why? Because you would starve to death?" We all laughed, and then Chu Manh said what I heard many times on my visits to other villages as well: "People used to think that girls were worthless because after they grew up, they would marry into someone else's family. Today girls are gold, because they sacrifice everything to take care of their families." Lilly again joked, saying, "Hold your tongue until after we are married." We laughed and continued drinking until everyone grew tired and went to bed.

The next morning at eight, Tam woke me up and asked if I would like to go with them to the market, because that was where the whole village gathered in the morning. I watched as the women put on their newest clothing, items that they had purchased in the city but saved for a special occasion. Then we climbed on motorbikes to head into the market. The women walked among the stalls with pride, purchasing food, snacks, and goodies without even bargaining for the right price. Lilly commented out loud, "Everything is so cheap here compared to Saigon," as she pulled a wad of cash from her pocket for everyone to see. People stared at us as we walked through the market; some of them snickered behind our backs, while others nicely asked how long we would be in town. I turned to Lilly and asked her, "Do you ever worry that someone will rob you when they see how much money you carry around?" She said, "Some of these people made Tam cry yesterday in the van. Money talks. You'll see; they will not say anything." I smiled at her, and she went on: "I have been doing this since I was thirteen. I have been through a lot, and I have to protect the girls who work for

me." As we walked around, Lilly was obviously the center of attention. Several people complimented her beauty, while others brought their daughters to ask if she would be willing to hire them to work in her "restaurant." Her acts of kindness to other sex workers in public spaces both demonstrated to the people in the village that Lilly was a good person and provided her with a defense against the stigma of her work.

Later that evening, the women hosted a large party, inviting people from all around to come join in the festivities. They prepared duck, chicken, fish, and an assortment of wrapped foods steamed in banana leaves. The women came out in their nicest dresses and invited a local photographer to take their pictures. Again we sang karaoke, drank, and ate until about 2 a.m. When the sun rose, I went for a morning bike ride with Lilly, and we talked about how she used to feel bad about her mother's reputation for being a prostitute during the Vietnam War. She said,

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

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

Workers across all niches of the sex industry turned to their villages as places where they could find a sense of dignity and respect, not through their occupation, but through the global capital they could spend and display. Most were not as fortunate as Lilly, but they contributed a significant amount of money to their families by supporting their parents and paying for their siblings' education. Workers built status and respect through the public displays of wealth on their bodies and in the gifts they brought home, which also enabled them to build

social debt. They were, in effect, converting their urban status to honor and respect in their rural villages despite their stigmatized occupation.

Like the workers in Secrets and Naughty Girls, the workers in Khong Sao Bar and Lavender also invited me to accompany them on their trips to their villages. One evening, I sat down with Chu Xanh and Hanh to tell them that I would like to end my time working in Khong Sao Bar. I had gathered enough data and wanted to spend time working in a lower-tiered bar. Chu Xanh instructed me to take a week off to allow my body to rest from the months of daily alcohol consumption. He suggested that I get away from the city and accompany Yen-Nhi, the girl whose introduction to the bar opened this chapter, on a trip to her village to visit her ailing father. He explained to me,

Yen-Nhi's father is dying; that's why she is working here. You would never know that by looking at her face, but Hanh and I knew it from the first day she came to work here. I sent one of my *linh* [underlings; *linh* translates into "soldiers" in English] to visit her father with a doctor to get an update on his status. His liver has failed and he is dying. There is nothing we can do about it, so I flew in a doctor from Singapore to come visit with him and give him enough medicine so that he can at least die the least painful death possible.

Chu Xanh informed me that he felt an obligation to take care of some of the workers' family members because the women were making huge sacrifices not merely for their own families but also for the nation. He went on: "These poor girls leave everything behind to come to the city to take care of their families, [but] they are the ones who really move money into this country in a way that no one sees. We have to do the right thing and take care of their families."

As we prepared for our departure to the village, I watched as Hanh and the two junior mommies sent the male workers in the bar out to purchase alcohol, food, and an assortment of herbal medications and teas for Yen-Nhi to bring home to her family as a token of respect. Two days later, the doctor from Singapore flew in, and Chu Xanh instructed one of his underlings to hire a private van and accompany us on the trip. The next day the doctor, Yen-Nhi, Vy-Van, Sang (the driver), Hai (Chu Xanh's underling), and I got into the van and made the four-hour journey to Can Tho. When the van pulled up to the house, Bac Tan, Yen-Nhi's father, was scared right outside the house in a wheelchair dressed in a suit. It was clear that he had been sitting there in anticipation of our arrival for some time, because his clothes were dripping in sweat from the heat. His face lit up as he embraced his daughter with tears in his eyes. We all bowed to greet him and offered our gifts. Bac



Dinh, Yen-Nhi's mother, invited us into the living room, where she poured us some tea before heading back to the kitchen to put the final touches on the food she had prepared. Yen-Nhi and I both joined her the kitchen while the doctor examined Bac Tan with the help of Hai.

In the kitchen, Yen-Nhi's mother told us that her husband recently had been drinking a lot to both numb the pain and speed up the process of his death. She said that he did not want to die a slow death. Then she told Yen-Nhi that she could not stand the thought of living alone in the village and began pressuring her to come home, get married, and settle down with someone from the village area. She jokingly brought up the names of a couple of eligible bachelors who had recently returned from Malaysia and Japan after spending several years away as construction workers. In fact, she announced, some of the single men from the village would be joining us for a dinner party at the house the following night. Yen-Nhi shifted uncomfortably and, without responding to her mother's announcement, began to take the food out to the living room.

We sat in a circle on straw mats placed on the floor, where we ate a simple Vietnamese meal—a sweet-and-sour fish soup, fried fish, caramelized braised pork and eggs, and sautéed vegetables. We all made small talk about life in Saigon, my life and family in the United States, and local gossip among neighbors in the village. As the meal wound down, Hai told Bac Tan that Chu Xanh would like to talk with him over the phone. Hai picked up the phone and called Chu Xanh and then placed him on speakerphone so that Bac Tan could hear him. Chu Xanh asked Bac Tan how he was faring. He then went on to assure Bac Tan that he would cover all costs of the Singaporean doctor and not to hesitate to ask for more medication if he needed it. Then, as he wrapped up the phone call, Chu Xanh said, “I want you to know that we are taking care of your daughter in Saigon. We will always take care of her and make sure that she is safe.” He then instructed Hai to pull out a gift that Chu Xanh wanted to give to Bac Tan. Hai brought out a brand new iPhone and powered it on. Then he instructed Hai to try FaceTime (a video calling feature) so that Bac Tan could see Chu Xanh. Over the FaceTime chat, Chu Xanh said, “Hai will show you and Bac Dinh how to use this phone so that you can see your daughter every day.” All of us watched as Bac Tan and Bac Dinh marveled over the phone and its video calling capabilities.

As the day wound down, Yen-Nhi took me on a motorbike tour of her village, and we spent some time alone driving down dirt roads. We stopped at a nearby river and sat on a wooden deck to watch a group of

kids play in the water. As we sat there I said, “This is great; you can video call your dad every day.” She then began to reflect on her life:

My father used to drink so much. One time I got so upset with him that I told him I would let him die alone if he died from drinking too much. He got so mad that he didn't talk to me for a week. But I said that because I loved him so much. When we were kids, we were so poor, and my dad would pretend that he wasn't hungry so that my siblings could eat more food. We never said anything, because we were all so scared of him, but we knew that he was hungry because he worked all day without eating much. . . . The only thing that keeps me working in the bars is that, in my heart, I know my dad will die a less painful death. Chu Xanh has brought doctors from other countries to see my dad several times. People in the village, they see that, and they respect me for it. I have sent home enough money for my mom to keep so that, when the time comes, she will be able to pay for him to have a proper funeral.

Yen-Nhi's decision to stay in the city and work while her ailing father spent his last days in the village with her mother, her siblings, and other relatives nearby was motivated by her desire to safeguard her father's respectability. She wanted for her father to die a respectable death, even if that meant the money she earned came from work in some of the least respectable places in the city. In doing so, she effectively transformed what once was a highly stigmatized profession into one that was at least palatable to some members of her family and village. During our visit, Chu Manh, one of her uncles, echoed the words of Tam's father, stating, “Girls are the new gold” in Vietnam's globalizing economy. Indeed, Yen-Nhi turned dust into “gold” as she capitalized on new opportunities in urban areas to remit money home, not only to help her ailing father die a less painful death, but also to enable him to leave this world with a sense of dignity and respect.

Women experienced different trajectories of mobility based on their particular niche of sex work. Workers in higher-tiered bars like Khong Sao Bar and Lavender occupied a precarious position as they straddled First World luxury and Third World poverty. Relations with wealthy local Vietnamese men and Viet Kieu men often led women to experience rapid oscillations between upward and downward economic mobility. Sex workers who catered to Western men, however, operated with a different ethic in relation to money. Western clients controlled the workers by emphasizing the necessity for hard work and the importance of saving. Workers who catered to Western expatriates and backpackers experienced upward mobility that was rapid at first, but which

then reached a slow but steady pace of growth because the women were not immersed in a world that promoted conspicuous consumption of luxury items.

Across all niche markets, sex workers engaged in processes of convertibility in both rural and urban social fields. The women I met turned to the village as a place where they could acquire a sense of honor and respect through public displays of their money and in the process of gift giving. As sex workers returned home, they realized their desires to achieve economic upward mobility in an industry straddling two imaginaries of Vietnam—as a nation on the move and as a country untouched by globalization. Return visits to their villages served as visceral reminders of the precariousness of their social mobility, both in the city and in their hometowns, as they sacrificed sacred time with their families to gamble on a future with long-term economic stability.

## Conclusion

### Faltering Ascent

In the summer of 2013, I returned to Vietnam to find a much less vibrant economy. Only three years after my departure, foreign investors seeking returns found their money locked up in delayed projects. While some foreigners and local businessmen made out very well, others lost a great deal of money in a faltering economy. Although foreign direct investments remained stable, averaging roughly U.S.\$11 billion in disbursed capital for 2011 to 2013, the country was not brokering nearly as many capital deals, nor was it growing at the rapid rate it had experienced in the years following the 2008 global financial crisis.<sup>1</sup> The real estate bubble had burst, and many of the Vietnamese elites in my study found their capital tied up in assets they could not sell. New political tensions, coupled with the stagnating economy, had reverberating effects on the different niche markets of the sex industry where I conducted my research.

### REBIRTH AND TRANSFORMATIONS

By 2013, Khong Sao Bar had shut down. Hanh, the head mommy, said to me, “There is a Vietnamese proverb that I learned to live by: *Sinh—lao—bệnh—tu*. It means that a person experiences four periods in life—birth, old age, sickness, and death, before a rebirth.” She continued: “That is the cycle of this business. We are reborn into a new life through the bars and all the money that comes in it; we age and get sick [from drinking], and