

COMPETING TECHNOLOGIES OF EMBODIMENT:

Pan-Asian Modernity and Third World Dependency in Vietnam's Contemporary Sex Industry

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This article illustrates how the circulation of capital and culture in Asia produces divergent embodied gendered ideals of national belonging through the case of Vietnam's global sex industry. Introducing the concept of competing technologies of embodiment, I show how sex workers' surgical and cosmetic bodily projects represent different perceptions of an emerging nation's divergent trajectories in the global economy. In a high-end niche market that caters to local elite Vietnamese businessmen, sex workers project a new pan-Asian modernity highlighting emergent Asian ideals of beauty in a project of progress that signals the rise of Asia. Women who cater to Western men, in contrast, embody Third World dependency, portraying Vietnam as a poverty-stricken country in need of Western charity. By comparing multiple markets, I illustrate how individual agents in the developing world actively reimagine their nation's place in the global economy through their embodied practices.

Keywords: *globalization; embodiment; nationalism; sex work; Southeast Asia*

The emergence of a consolidated and autonomous East Asian economic bloc has inaugurated intra-regional flows of capital that reshape how

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less developed Asian countries imagine their path toward modern nationhood. As the second fastest developing economy in Asia, Vietnam is uniquely positioned in the global economy because of its close relations with various countries within Asia and its postcolonial orientation to the West. In Vietnam's transition to a globalized market economy, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) has become an attractive destination for foreign investors from Asia seeking to underwrite ambitious projects in land development, trade, commodity manufacturing, and banking. These economic activities rely heavily on the sex industry to facilitate relations of trust in a country where people do not have faith in legal contracts. Sex workers act as informal brokers of social capital in spaces of leisure and entertainment as they ease tensions among party officials, private entrepreneurs, and foreign investors. Therefore, HCMC's global sex industry provides a unique window to examine how new circulations of capital in Asia shapes sex workers' divergent embodied ideals, which represent their nation's shifting place in the global economy.

Much of the research on gender and nation examines how cultural transformations inform the expression of varied national ideals in non-Western contexts (Englund and Leach 2000; Ong 1999; Rofel 1999). This article illustrates how *economic* transformations inform variations in the gendered expression of national ideals within the space of HCMC's sex industry. Paying particular attention to economic and geopolitical shifts in Asia, this article builds on the work of Balogun (2012), Choo (2006), Otis (2012), and Saraswati (2010), by examining how women's embodied representations of nation vary across national time and space. Vietnamese sex workers make a conscious effort to capitalize on the varied desires projected by divergent narratives of national progress.

This article illustrates how women in different markets reflect and cater to their clients' distinct perceptions of Vietnam's place in the global imaginary by looking at Vietnam's segmented sex industry, which serves a niche market of local Vietnamese and Asian elites, alongside niche markets that cater to Western businessmen and budget travelers. Sex workers in the niche market where local Vietnamese elite men cement business relationships with their foreign Asian counterparts construct a *pan-Asian modernity* by contesting Western ideals and aspiring to Asian ideals of beauty. These aspirations explicitly represent their nation's progress toward joining the rising "Asian Tiger" economies. Women who cater to Western men embody *Third World dependency*, deliberately capitalizing on their clients' racialized imagination of Vietnam as an impoverished nation where people struggle to find the bare necessities of life, such as

adequate shelter, food, and clean water. By comparing niche markets catering to local Vietnamese and transnational Asian elites with those catering to Western businessmen and budget travelers, I illustrate how individual agents living in the developing world actively project their nations' place in the global imaginary through their embodied practices.

DECENTERING GLOBALIZATION THROUGH EMBODIED MODERNITIES

A substantial body of literature deconstructs the binaries of traditional/modern, East/West, and global/local, which were central tropes of early globalization studies (Holtzman 2004; Inda and Rosaldo 2002; Manalansan 2004; Robertson 1992; Tsing 2005). This literature highlights how multiple (Rofel 1999) or alternative modernities reflect diverse local agendas (Chu 2010). While these works question the idea of the unambiguous dominance of Western cultural, political, and economic power within the modern world system, they also make it clear that Western power is still important throughout the globe. As Kelsky (1999) states, "local" modernities opposing homogenizing global forces do not proliferate without some kind of cultural reference to the "originally" modern West. Iwabuchi (2002) further argues that no matter how strong its economy grew, Japan remained subject to multiple forms of Western cultural domination. However, multiple hierarchies emerge that simultaneously inflect the ascending power of East Asia and the simultaneous decline of Western influence.

The global economic crash of 2008 created new openings for "financescapes" (Appadurai 1990) to emerge in various parts of the developing world. Collectively, these new financescapes within Asia have begun to diminish Western countries' influence on the rest of the world. The negative effects of the financial crisis were primarily felt in the United States and Europe, while Asia became a stronghold for global capital. In 2011, for the first time in history, there were more millionaires in Asia than in Europe (Benz and Lassignardie 2011). As noted by Iwabuchi (2002) and others, nations like Japan or China cannot contest Western economic dominance alone; rather, it is the collective rise of multiple countries within pan-Asia that has destabilized Western hegemony. The economic ascendance of the Asia Pacific region produced a new global economy that is structured by multiple hierarchies in the international division of labor. Urban centers like Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong (instead of

New York, London, or Paris) now exemplify distinctive formations of modernity, projecting their collective prominence on a global stage.

One way to understand the effects of this new, pan-Asian modernity is to examine how people in less developed countries within Asia—like Cambodia or Vietnam—articulate their national ideals in comparison to more developed countries within Asia and to the West. As investors from South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Japan, and Singapore enter these countries to capitalize on local development projects, Cambodia and Vietnam are setting on a path toward a distinctly “Asian” future (Nam 2011). Taking these economic transformations into account, I argue for a materially grounded pan-Asian modernity that not only is “culturally expressed” but also emerges from a real shift in the geopolitical order. This article builds on the body of literature decentering globalization by analyzing how new forms of transnational capitalism within Asia have created new narratives of a pan-Asian modernity that reshape both intra-regional relationships between East Asia and Southeast Asia and Asia’s relationship to the Western world.

In order to examine the tensions between this pan-Asian modernity and Western cultural influences, this article builds on an existing body of literature that pinpoints embodiment as a key site that project diverging ideals manifesting the tensions both within Asian nations and between global Western and local consumption styles. Otis’ (2012) study of Chinese hotel service workers demonstrates how workers who cater to Westerners and wealthy locals engage in different styles of market-embodied labor practices. Similar works set in South Korea (Choo 2006), Indonesia (Saraswati 2010), and the Philippines (Cruz 2012) highlight continuities and discontinuities both within the boundaries of nations and between nations that reflect the friction generated by the rise of Asian economies.

By paying attention to shifting fields of economic and cultural power, I analyze how changes in the political economy alter cultural constructions of modernity in everyday life. This study looks at how women’s bodies reflect and shape national hierarchies. To describe micro-level practices and interactions, I turn to theories of *body work* and *body capital* (Mauss 1992). *Body work* refers to labored modifications that individuals inflict on their own bodies or the bodies of others (Gimlin 2007); the resultant *body capital* (Wacquant 1995) describes how the bodies that are worked on become valued as a means of production in competitive consumer contexts. Drawing on Foucault (1988), this article introduces the concept of *technologies of embodiment*, which refers to the process

through which women produce, transform, or manipulate their bodies through particular kinds of body work that signify divergent imaginations of national progress. These technologies are tools existing outside of the user's body that allow her to manipulate her body or alter her embodied performance of femininity as she interacts with the world around her. Like other technologies, technologies of embodiment are rapidly evolving and quickly consumed and can swiftly respond to evolving standards of beauty to instantly reshape the user. Specific technologies include, but are not limited to, skin lightening creams or tanning lotions/bronzers, natural eye-makeup or heavy makeup, and plastic surgery to alter one's face or chest, as well as clothing that makes one look more modern and fashionable or deliberately impoverished. These technologies of embodiment do not exist in a vacuum; their development and consumption signify and are shaped by a nation's shifting place in the global economy.

Critically, by linking the micro-practices of body work to a broader narrative of modernities, this concept adds another layer to theories of how *differences* between women's embodied ideals vary within one nation (Balogun 2012), attracting different kinds of foreign capital. Foreign direct investments (FDIs) are not disembodied flows of economic capital; rather, they are embedded in interpersonal transactions. In rapidly emerging markets, competing technologies of embodiment come to represent divergent projections of an emerging nation's uneasy transition into the global economy. This is not an article about how women in different niche markets compete with each other; rather I argue that the technologies of embodiment compete with each other to establish the appropriate way to reflect the aesthetics of the nation for different audiences.

By comparing multiple niche markets of HCMC's segmented sex industry, I illustrate how sex workers reflect men clients' different projections of Vietnam's place in the global economy through two competing technologies of embodiment: pan-Asian modernity and Third World dependency. In the case of HCMC's high-end niche market, sex workers help wealthy, elite Vietnamese businessmen attract FDI from Asian investors by constructing themselves as pan-Asian modern subjects whose femininity conveys a deliberately exuberant projection of Vietnam's new position as an emerging economic player within the globalscapes. Vietnamese businessmen's ability to convey a new global configuration hinges on women's well-groomed bodies that adopt a pan-Asian aesthetic ideal as a counterpoint to representations of Western feminine ideals. In contrast, sex workers who cater to Western expatriates and tourists employ different technologies of embodiment that are deeply embedded

in discourses of Western paternalism to attract charity capital. These women project Third World dependency by embodying virtuous Third World subjects, holdovers from an era when the “sun never set” on Western dominance. These workers play into their clients’ racialized desire to imagine Vietnam as a poverty-stricken Third World country in need of Western help. Sex workers employ competing technologies of embodiment within their distinct niche markets that illustrate how male desire reflects and constructs different national formations in the global imaginary.

VIETNAM’S EMERGENCE IN THE NEW GLOBAL ECONOMY

The past 35 years have been a period of economic turbulence and transformation in Vietnam. Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, North Vietnam unified the country and expanded its Soviet-style closed command economy across the South. Unification under communism ushered in 10 years of economic stagnation, lagging productivity, and rapid inflation. In 1986, Vietnam introduced the *Doi Moi* program of economic liberalization, effectively transitioning to a market economy while maintaining a Communist Party political monopoly. These reforms opened Vietnam to foreign trade, investment, and large-scale tourism, marking the beginning of Vietnam’s prolonged and continuing period of growth and development.

Economic growth rapidly accelerated after 2006, when Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). Largely unaffected by the 2008 global economic slowdown, Vietnam’s economy has grown nearly eight percent each year since WTO accession. This growth attracted foreign direct investment, which increased dramatically such that registered and dispersed FDI jumped from US\$4 billion in 2006 to US\$11 billion in 2010—an amount nearly four times the foreign capital brought into the country before WTO membership (GSO Vietnam 2011). At the peak of the global economic crisis, committed capital to Vietnam reached US\$71 billion, making Vietnam one of the most attractive destinations for foreign investment (GSO Vietnam 2011). Before the economic crisis of 2008, Australia, Canada, and the United States were the largest providers of FDI in Vietnam. When the economic crisis severely punished Western economies, Vietnam’s FDI shifted to the East. By 2010, Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia, Japan, and Singapore were the top five investors in Vietnam’s economy (GSO Vietnam 2011).

Today, stratification in Vietnam's sex market mirrors stratification in the country's economic field. Despite the relative prestige of Western transnational businessmen elsewhere in the world, they no longer represent the most elite segment of the market for commercial sex. Rather, by 2009 the highest-paying sector of the sex industry catered mainly to Asian businessmen and wealthy local Vietnamese elites, displacing Westerners.¹ As such, women who work in these different niche markets must establish the appropriate way to reflect the competing aesthetics that reflect Vietnam's state of transition.

RESEARCH METHODS AND SETTING

In studying Vietnam's stratified sex industry, I strategically chose to focus on HCMC because it has the greatest concentration of foreign people and capital in the country. Between June 2009 and August 2010, I followed in the tradition of ethnographers such as Allison (1994), Parreñas (2011), and Zheng (2009) by working as a hostess and bartender to observe relationships among owners, madams, police, clients, and sex workers in bars and clubs. I typically worked a 12-hour shift seven days a week for two to three months in each bar, and I wrote my fieldnotes every morning before returning to the bar.

I obtained access to each bar through different routes. In Khong Sao Bar, the most exclusive high-end bar in HCMC that catered to wealthy local Vietnamese elites and their Asian business partners, I gained access by working first as a free consultant, translating company pamphlets, copy editing emails, reviewing the language in different companies' business plans, and sitting in on business meetings with a variety of clients. This networking helped me establish rapport and build social debt with wealthy local businessmen who eventually introduced me to the madams running Khong Sao Bar.² I later met Lilly, the owner of Secrets, and Tina, the owner of Naughty Girls, through connections I made with alcohol distributors. They invited me to their bars (catering to Western men) because of my ability to speak English—I am a U.S. citizen and could chat with patrons—and my willingness to work for free.

As an ethnographer, I worked as a hostess and a bartender serving drinks, sitting with clients, singing karaoke, and standing in the lineup as men chose the women to invite to their tables. I was rarely taken for a local Vietnamese woman—I was ten years older than most of the sex workers, comparatively overweight, and was less subjectively attractive

according to the dominant standards of beauty in each bar where I worked. My unattractiveness made me nonthreatening to the women, enabling my rapport with sex workers. However, I learned how to adjust my gait, serve, take orders, smile when people criticized my weight, and remain silent when men touched me inappropriately. My willingness to engage in the same kinds of submissive gendered labors as my coworkers elicited sympathy from many of the clients.

This article draws on ethnographic data and 130 informal interviews with 65 clients and 65 sex workers distributed across three niche markets of HCMC's sex industry. I prepared and memorized two interview guides, one for clients and one for sex workers. I conducted two to three interviews per night lasting anywhere from two to seven hours.³ Interviews covered basic background questions and intimate questions about their private lives, including marriage and family life, extramarital affairs, and expectations and anxieties around care and deception. The interviews with the women usually took place backstage during down times as we waited for clients to arrive or to be seated at a table. I interviewed the men in a variety of settings—bars, coffee shops, their offices, and on car rides to development project sites. The participant observation coupled with interview data allowed me to understand the multiple ways that women altered their bodies in these stratified sites.

PROGRESS AND POVERTY: DIVERGENT EMBODIED IDEALS

Projecting Pan-Asian Modernity through Sex Workers' Bodies

At Khong Sao Bar, the majority of clients were local Vietnamese and Asian businessmen. In this exclusive bar, an elite group of clients who came from some of Vietnam's top finance, real estate, and trade companies engaged in sex for business purposes (Hoang 2013). Clients usually visited the bar three or four nights a week, spending an average of US\$1,000–2,000 per night and US\$15,000–20,000 per month. Roughly 25–30 women worked in this bar. Hostesses sat, drank, sang, and danced with clients and would often leave the bar for paid sex. Women earned roughly US\$2,000 per month in tips for keeping men company at their tables and US\$150–200 for each sexual encounter. All of the hostesses in this niche market came from the same villages as the three “mommies” (the local term for “madam”). They were recruited specifically because they came from poor rural families and would not recognize the high-profile businessmen and political elites who circulated through the bars.

At a time when local Vietnamese and Asian businessmen were engaged in tremendous land speculation as the economy was rapidly restructuring (Hoang 2013), men clients in this niche market directly benefited from capital gains from foreign investments. In the milieu of the bars, these men represented Asia's ascendancy in the global economy through their command of economic and symbolic capital. Although their methods of asserting superiority contrasted with Western modes of dominance, they reflected the ideological repositioning that accompanies shifting geostrategic alignments (Ong 2011). In addition to the ways in which men wielded capital in the bars, these new configurations hinged on the symbolic etchings of modernity and progress on women's aesthetically desirable bodies (Gal and Kligman 2000; Hanser 2008).

This article builds on studies that deconstruct the idea that the rest of the world seeks to emulate "white Caucasian" beauty standards, such as lighter skin and slim figures (Casanova 2004; Glenn 2008). Saraswati (2010) clarifies that the desire for "whiteness" is not the same as the desire for "Caucasian whiteness." In her analysis of the Indonesian women's magazine *Cosmo*, Saraswati (2010) links whiteness to transnational cosmopolitan mobility, with models from Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong appearing in advertisements for skin care products. Similarly, workers in Khong Sao Bar did not want to look Western. Instead, they wanted to conform to regional Asian standards of beauty by looking like popular icons in Asia. When business was slow, the women sent the bar's men workers to purchase Korean and Japanese magazines from street vendors to study the latest styles. Backstage, women watched Korean soap operas dubbed in Vietnamese on the television and regularly commented on how beautiful the actresses were. Tailors designed dresses like those depicted in the magazines, a combination of long and short gowns similar to what pop stars would wear to a red carpet event. Hostesses saw blonde hair and blue eyes as outmoded desires, believing that, as in the financial world, the global center of beauty was shifting away from the West and toward Asia. Sex workers pointed to the Wonder Girls, a popular group of five women singers from South Korea, as their ideal of femininity. Vy, a 19-year-old sex worker, pointed to a photo of the pop singers and explained, "You see that the women are light-skinned and their makeup looks natural. . . . They do not wear a lot of eye shadow, [but] they accentuate their eyebrows, thicken their eyelashes, and wear blush that highlights their cheekbones."

It is often argued that the body work performed by Asian women—building nose bridges, constructing double eyelids, and lightening their

skin—creates changes associated with Western standards of beauty (Lee 2008). Rather than looking to the West for a model of beauty, less developed countries within Asia like Vietnam look toward East Asia to represent modern cultural ideals. However, even as European body features have been integrated into the beauty ideals of Korea and Japan, the resulting beauty standard is not simply white; rather, women choose to highlight “natural” Asian ideal features (Glenn 2008). Furthermore, the meaning that these women ascribe to the resulting appearance is that it is a *modern Asian* look, not a Western look. Nhung, a hostess, explained, “In the past, everyone wanted to look Western, but that is old. Now, the new modern is Asian.” In Khong Sao Bar, looking “Western” was not synonymous with looking modern. In fact, the women made it very clear to me that they considered Western and *Viet Kieu* (overseas Vietnamese) women’s ideals of beauty unattractive, overweight, and masculine. Ha, a 21-year-old sex worker, said, “Asian women have smaller bones, smaller waistlines, small hips, and boobs that fit their bodies. When you are smaller, you look gentler, softer, more feminine.” Dai, a 19-year-old hostess, described skin lightening as an endeavor apart from merely emulating Western whiteness:

When women use skin lightening creams for the face and body, people think they want to look like white people in America or Europe, but actually, the true skin color of women in Asia is white. When a baby is born in Japan, Korea, or Vietnam, what color is their skin? It is fair and white, right? Dark skin is from going out in the sun a lot. We are just trying to bring out our natural beauty. . . . No one wants to look Western here anymore. People come to Asia for beautiful Asian women, not for women who [want to] look Western.

Dai describes a regional standard of beauty that is much more nuanced than a simple aspiration to Western ideals. Indeed, the tone of Dai’s comments illustrates how sex workers use distinctly Asian standards of beauty to resist the ideals of the West. Women’s deliberate rejection of Western standards illustrates how local, regional, and global ideals converge in their practices. Sex workers in this niche market engage in practices of bodily modifications where strictly European features are eschewed in favor of a pan-Asian ideal that includes some typically Western features—light skin, eyelid crease/shape—but also serves as a specific East Asian ideal—round face, thinness, and even, un-tanned skin tone. By claiming that skin whiteness is a “natural” Asian feature, sex workers actively contested the racial and aesthetic geographies of beauty in relation to white (Caucasian) women.

Women also focused on the appearance of their breasts. Big breasts were not the primary goal; rather, most women worked to shift their breasts so that they were positioned firmly together. One afternoon, Xinh, one of the mommies, walked into the back room with a bag of new bras. As the women tried them on, Xinh said,

We bring in the richest men in all of Saigon, and you need to look like you are worth a lot of money. There are millions of country girls [*nha que*][—]men can go anywhere to get them. They come here to be around women who *look* modern [*mo-den*] and are worth a lot [*sang*]. . . . You do not have to go out and spend a lot of money on expensive dresses all the time. It is about the little things, like the bra and how you wear it.

Breast size did not differentiate urbanites from rural women entering the bar; rather, women in the city distinguished themselves with the knowledge of how to purchase the proper bra and how to position their breasts in the bra for a firm appearance. It was more important for them to appear aesthetically appealing than sexually desirable. Mommies like Hanh relied on workers' ability to portray themselves as modern women whose bodies were worth a lot of money, because that image allowed them to maintain their status as workers at one of the highest-end bars in HCMC. Claiming such a modern subjectivity through consumptive practices displaced a linear understanding of modernity as embodied in the West. Rather, the practices of negotiating, appropriating, and challenging Western beauty ideals reflect the multiple hierarchies signaling Asia's relation to the West.

The highest earners at Khong Sao Bar had subjected their bodies to a great deal of alteration, both because investing in body capital required financial resources and because women who altered their bodies received more attention and bigger tips from men clients. When women began working in the bar, they made aesthetic changes to their bodies by altering their makeup, rubbing whitening creams and powders on their bodies, and learning the right size of bra to purchase and how to walk in six-inch heels. New hostesses turned to more established workers to see what kinds of changes they could anticipate after working in the bar and accumulating enough capital to reinvest in their bodies. According to Hanh, the head mommy, the highest earners were women who "made smart business choices by knowing when to buy new clothes or invest in plastic surgery." As I sat in the back room playing card games, I listened as Hanh advised the women:

When you are new, it's better to invest in cheaper dresses and save your money, because men will bring you to their tables because you are a fresh face. After you've been here for a couple of months, you need to do things to stay fresh [*tuoi*]. . . . You should save your money and use it only if you think that it is going to make you more money. Like with Diem—after four months she saved over 100 million VND [5000 USD]. I told her to take 300 dollars and get a nose job. After she got a nose job, men pulled her into all of their tables. They wanted to see her new face, her change. . . . Men do not come in here to sit next to village girls—they can do that in Kieng Giag or Dong Thap (two villages nearby); they come here to sit next to women with modern styles.

Surgical alterations permanently changed how women looked and enhanced their ability to interact with the clients who came through the bar.

Compared to women in other niches of HCMC's sex industry, the women in Khong Sao Bar underwent the most rapid and pronounced bodily transformations during the course of their employment. The bar had connections with two plastic surgery offices that hired doctors trained in Singapore, Thailand, and South Korea who could perform rhinoplasties that would make the Vietnamese women look like Korean pop stars. These offices often eschewed Western and *Viet Kieu* doctors who botched nose jobs with overexaggerated bridges that looked too Western. They also provided women with free consultations and significant discounts on surgical procedures. I became aware of the extent of women's plastic surgeries one Sunday afternoon when two surgeons came to the bar to provide three of the new girls with free rhinoplasty consultations. All of the women I worked with had undergone rhinoplasty (US\$250), and roughly 80 percent of them had double eyelid surgery (US\$400)—a type of cosmetic surgery where doctors reshape the skin around the eyes to create an upper-eyelid crease. Fewer than a quarter of the women had saline breast implants, and 20 percent of the women had undergone liposuction. These modifications complicated the women's claims about natural, feminine-looking Asian bodies, as they actively worked to pursue a supposedly innate ideal.

During one of his free consultation visits to the bar, Anh Minh, one of the plastic surgeons, opened a booklet with "before and after" photos of the women who worked at Khong Sao Bar. As I flipped through the booklet, I listened as the women talked about how much they had changed as a result of their work. As the doctor consulted with the women, he often used photos of surgeries he had performed in the past, or of famous models and singers who had their surgeries done in Korea, Japan, or Thailand.

As with makeup styles, models of ideal bodies were taken from photos of women in Asia. Moreover, the women in this niche preferred Korean and Japanese skincare products over Western ones. Anh Minh told the sex workers that products from South Korea “are about 12 years ahead of the U.S. in terms of their skincare technology.” South Korea, he said, “has become the new France.” These technological developments have enabled women to craft themselves as both modern and distinctly pan-Asian.

These technologies of embodiment allowed women to use their body capital to serve as emblems of their country’s economic progress. Technologically altered bodies reflected the nation’s economic progress for elite businessmen who mediated workers’ sense of self-worth. Whenever a group of men entered the bar, the mommies would greet them and order the women to line up so the men could select those they wanted at their tables. During the lineup, men commented on the women’s appearances by complimenting them or critiquing their style of dress and parts of their body. Men clients rewarded women they found aesthetically pleasing by inviting them to sit at their tables. It was not uncommon to watch men play with women’s noses or ask questions about the various surgeries the women had had. In fact, local Vietnamese men often acted as representatives, showcasing the nation’s beautiful women to their foreign investors.

One evening, a few days after Diem returned to work after her rhinoplasty, Quang, a 39-year-old client, pointed to her nose and asked those at the table, “What do you think of her nose? She doesn’t look like a poor country girl anymore, does she? This face looks modern [*Mat nay nhìn tay thiet!*]” Everyone laughed as he kissed her nose and touched glasses with the other guests at the table. Diem shyly covered her nose and looked down as the men complimented her. For these men, Diem’s nose represented not only her own transformation but also the progress of the nation. Dong, a 60-year-old businessman, explained:

When you look from the outside in, it seems like they need our money, but we need them just as much as they need us. When you bring in businessmen from Asia, you can say, “Look, this country is growing and developing so much that even the poorest village girls can afford to get plastic surgery.” It shows them that we’re a nation that is growing very rapidly and there is a lot of potential in our market. They represent Vietnam to the most important people, our investors!

For foreign investors making large speculations in Vietnam, women’s enhanced bodies provided figurative reassurance that Vietnam was a

dynamic market where they could expect to see returns on their investments. Sex workers' altered bodies represented Vietnam as a nation on the move, where even the poorest of the poor were beginning to reap the rewards of economic development. Several clients paid for surgeries as a gift to new women with whom they enjoyed sitting. Gifting such surgeries was not purely altruistic; they enhanced the men's prestige as members of the country these women represent. These bodily modifications, which highlighted the women's malleability, mobility, and modernity, were crucial to local Vietnamese business elites because they signaled the nation's economic development.

Critically, the technologies of embodiment seen in Khong Sao Bar signify the shift in foreign direct investments from the U.S. and Europe to major Asian economic powers that are carefully mapped onto sex workers' embodied practices. The reputation of Khong Sao Bar depended on the hostess's ability to develop and maintain a certain look—one that constructed pan-Asian progress in a global market economy as an embodied ideal. Not all sex workers embodied a pan-Asian modernity, however; as I will describe, Western businessmen and tourists were more interested in imagining Vietnam as an undeveloped nation untouched by flows of global capital. The competing technologies of embodiment employed by women in these two distinct niche markets illustrate the tensions within an emerging market that shaped desire in HCMC's sex industry.

Projecting Third World Dependency through Sex Workers' Bodies

Unlike in high-end bars, most clients in Naughty Girls were budget tourists looking for cheap adventure. As a result, women practiced technologies of embodiment that were distinct from those of high-end sex workers to cater to their Western clients' desires. Roughly 20 women worked at Naughty Girls. The majority of these women had previously worked in factories or in service jobs where they made less than US\$100 per month. Workers were not paid by the bar owner; instead, they earned money from tips and from paid sex. Workers earned US\$200–700 per month from paid sex, which was supplemented with occasional cash gifts from regular clients ranging as high as US\$50,000, which went toward rebuilding a family home or launching a new business. The clients I studied in these bars were 18–74 years of age, and nearly all of them traveled to Vietnam to experience the culture of a Third World country. When clients walked into the bar, they could order a US\$2 beer and expect to have one or two women sit with them. Women immediately handed them wet towels, wiped their faces, and provided them with shoulder massages.

Secrets, a bar geared toward Western, mostly white, expatriates and businessmen, was located in the same district as Naughty Girls. The 20 women working in Secrets were migrant workers from nearby villages who came to the city to work in factories prior to entering into sex work. These workers earned roughly US\$100–200 per month in wages and tips and about US\$200–700 per month from sex work, which was also supplemented with large cash gifts and remittances from regular clients. The owner, Lilly, a 25-year-old entrepreneur and former sex worker in an area frequented by backpackers, opened Secrets in 2008 in an attempt to differentiate her bar from those frequented by budget travelers, like Naughty Girls. Although the socioeconomic class of the clientele differed between these two bars, sex workers in both Secrets and Naughty Girls shared similar embodiments that distinguished them from the women in Khong Sao Bar. These women altered their bodies to cater to their clients' implicit and explicit racial desires, a proclivity that other scholars have found among sex tourists in the Caribbean (Brennan 2004; Cabezas 2006). Unlike the workers in Khong Sao Bar, the women who catered to Westerners were careful *not* to present themselves as pan-Asian modern subjects. Instead, they capitalized on their embodiment of Third World dependency.

Workers in this niche market made no effort to lighten their skin. In fact, the owners of both bars capitalized on women's darker complexions. During my first several days at work, my coworkers rummaged through my makeup bag and told me what to keep and what to get rid of. Ly, a 24-year-old woman, advised:

Get rid of the baby powder. It is going to make your skin look too pale, and under the lights in this bar, you are going to look like you are sick. You do not want to look light. . . . You can't use pink blush in here; it makes you look like those Japanese or Chinese play dolls. You have to go buy a brown, orange, or darker color to use on your cheeks; it will make your face look narrower instead of round.

When I asked the women why they preferred to have darker complexions, Lilly told me, "Men like brown skin, Kim. They like it. I like it, too. Look better." Lilly indeed was darker than all of the women in the bar. She prided herself on her skin color, stating, "Every afternoon around 2:00 P.M., I put on my bathing suit and I go lay on the swing I tied up [on the roof] to make my skin more brown. People laugh. They say, 'Why you look so dark, Lilly? But I say, 'Because I like it.'" Lilly and Tina, the owners of the expat and tourists bars, respectively, had by far the darkest complexions of

the women I studied. While Lilly and Tina both embraced the tan aesthetic that they built their business on, several of the other women working in the bars had more ambivalent feelings about dark skin and used bronzers as part of a costume to play a role. Xuong, a 26-year-old woman working in Naughty Girls, said:

The men here like darker skin and women who just came up from the village. The girls who just come up from the villages always get the most clients because they look the most innocent and fresh. Men like women with dark skin. They will always touch you and say, "Wow, your skin is so dark and soft."

Altering their skin color was the most notable strategy these women adopted to racialize their bodies in a way that would exaggerate their appearance as poor women in a Third World country. Dark skin provided a narrative of poor, rural labor that could hide women's experiences of factory and service work in HCMC. For many of the workers, their dark complexion was achieved by using a lotion that they applied to their skin for work and then washed off when going about their lives outside of sex work.

Women who catered to Westerners also applied their makeup differently than sex workers in other niches. Sex workers at Secrets and Naughty Girls were much more ostentatious with their eye makeup, working to produce a smoky effect. To obtain a smoky eye, they used double eyelid tape to make a crease, applied dark grey, purple, or black eye shadow along the eyelid and under the brow bone, then filled in the middle with a lighter color. This highlighted their darker features, making them look more "exotic" and sexually appealing.

The women who worked for Western expatriates and backpackers did not make as much money as the women who catered to elite Asian and Vietnamese businessmen. Therefore, compared to the higher-end niche market, fewer women who catered to Westerners invested in plastic surgery. Those who did opted to have different types of surgical procedures than higher-end women, generally choosing breast implants over nose jobs. Among the 40 women I studied in the two bars catering to Westerners, roughly one third had breast implants, while fewer than 20 percent had nose jobs.

In my conversations with women who had plastic surgery, I asked how they prioritized their procedures. Thao, a 23-year-old worker, responded, "I know that men like bigger boobs. They don't notice nose jobs. It does not make them [aroused]." For Thao, getting breast implants was a

strategic investment in her body capital in order to attract more clients. Breast implants made her body not just aesthetically appealing but also sexually desirable. These alterations had less to do with signifying Thao's upward mobility, modernization, or progress than with appealing to her clients' explicitly sexual desires.

One day, as I was chatting with Yen-Nhi and Mai-Lan in Secrets, I asked why women chose to have breast implants when nose jobs were less expensive. Yen-Nhi replied, "Some women get nose jobs because it makes their face look better . . . [or] change[s] their luck in life. But men always like boobs . . . they like to run their fingers down our chest." I then asked, "Do you ever want to get a nose job, double eyelid surgery, or breast implants to look more Western?" Mai-Lan replied, "Western men come to Vietnam because they think that Vietnamese women are beautiful, not because they want women who look Western. The girls who always get picked first in these bars are the ones who just came up from the village or who just started working." This conversation highlighted the racialized and sexualized desires of the clients who frequented Secrets. Both women believed that men would reward them if they could successfully embody a dark aesthetic that conveyed rural authenticity.

Mai-Lan's perceptions of their clients' racialized desires were substantiated during my conversations with several expatriate Westerners. One evening, Alex, a 39-year-old ceramic exporter from France, remarked:

Stay away from city girls who know how to hustle. If you are an expat in Vietnam and you know better, then you go for the village girls because they are the real deal. . . . They are the real Vietnam. . . . They are not greedy or chasing after this urban lifestyle of consuming new things.

Expats like Alex wanted to be with recent migrants to the city because they felt that rural women provided them with an authentic experience of Vietnam. As his comments suggest, rather than acknowledging that the upwardly mobile urbanite is also authentically Vietnamese, Alex preferred women who represented his vision of a Vietnam where most people were trapped in Third World poverty.

Although most sex workers migrated to the city to experience upward mobility, they were strategic about when and how they displayed their access to foreign capital. All of the women had two cell phones, a cheap Nokia, worth US\$20, and another, more expensive phone. Several women had iPhones, which typically sold in the Vietnamese market for US\$200–1000, depending on the version. They also purchased fashionable urban clothing that they rarely wore to work. Women who worked in Secrets

were required to wear sexier versions of the traditional Vietnamese *Ao dai* [dress], allowing them to embody an ethnically authentic Vietnam. Naughty Girls did not have a dress code, but the women almost always wore jean shorts, tank tops, and plastic high heels to highlight their sexual appeal. Many of these women owned nicer clothing, but they chose outfits that would convey to their clients both overt sexuality and their status as victims of Third World poverty.

I learned of women's strategies to embody Third World poverty through the English lessons I provided at Naughty Girls three afternoons a week. Many of the women were excited about the opportunity to work with someone who would help them translate the stories they used to elicit cash gifts from clients without judging them for duping the men. During the lessons, I helped women translate a series of stock emails, text messages, and phrases that they could use with their clients. I translated phrases in broken English, like "My motorbike broke down. I have to walk to work. Can you help me buy new motorbike?" and "My father very sick and no one in my family help so I have to work. I am from An Giang village. You go to village before?"

I often asked the women why they lied to their clients or why they were careful not to display too much wealth. Diem-Hang explained:

The men like to meet poor village girls. If you show them that you have nice clothes or new phones, they will start to lecture you about how you should save your money so that you can quit working. If you do not show them what you have, they will feel sorry for you, think that you are poor, and give you money.

Even though the women were more financially secure than family members who worked in the rice fields, in manufacturing, or even as service workers in HCMC, they could not display their new wealth to their clients. Many of the clients thought sex work was acceptable only if the women were flat broke and had no other options. This was very different from the appreciation Vietnamese men had for sex workers in Khong Sao Bar. In the higher-end niche market, clients recognized that women deserved some degree of respect for their skill in attracting foreign capital into the country. In the niche market catering to Westerners, however, women proved their respectability by portraying Vietnam as an impoverished Third World nation, inferior to the wealthy West, and by presenting themselves as innocent victims of that poverty.

To portray an authentically Third World Vietnam, women not only altered their bodies by choosing cheap or traditional clothing and darkening

their skin and eyes, they also used trips to villages in the Mekong Delta to provide clients with a visceral experience of Third World poverty and appeal to their generosity as relatively wealthy Westerners. On these trips, women would introduce men to their “families” to tie their own self-presentation to the poverty they witnessed. Often, however, these families were fake. Thuy-Linh explained:

I am going to Kien Giang tomorrow with one of the guys here because he wants to see my village, but most of my family lives in Saigon now. . . . I am taking him to stay with Vi’s family so that he will think that I am really poor and maybe give me money to rebuild the house or help my “family” out.

When the women in the bar first told me about their fake village families and the trips they organized with clients, I was struck by their awareness of their clients’ desire to see Vietnam as a developing Third World country rather than as an emerging hotbed of global investment. They organized tours that would portray an “authentic” Vietnam removed from signs of global change, modernization, and capitalism. These men wanted to visit villages where they could walk through rice fields, ride bicycles, and bargain in street markets. More often than not, sex workers were happy to play into their clients’ desires because doing so enabled them to ask for large sums of money. Like the women in Frank’s (2002) study on strippers in the United States, the women in *Naughty Girls and Secrets* played on their clients’ sympathy for the material inequalities and constraints that might shape a woman’s decision to engage in sex work.

Upon their return from these trips to the Mekong Delta, many of the clients explained how they were moved to altruism by the conditions of poverty they had seen. For example, after spending three days in the village with Nhi’s family, John, a man in his late 50s to early 60s, commented:

There are so many things that we in the West take for granted: roofs over our heads, hot water, shoes. . . . When I was with Nhi, I had to shower with buckets of cold water. It was so disgusting because I was brushing my teeth and I didn’t realize that the bucket had a bunch of maggots in there. I felt these tiny worms swimming around in my mouth and I had to spit it out.

It is important to note that the women did not buy into the story of Vietnam’s inferiority; instead they capitalized on their clients’ desires for First World dominance by deliberately placing buckets of maggots in the

outdoor shower. Such visceral experiences with poverty allowed workers to ask their clients for a large sum of money. Indeed, John sympathized with Nhi's conditions of poverty, and he gave her family \$500 to install a new faucet. Regardless of whether they were real or staged, these visits allowed workers to capitalize on Vietnam's shifting position in the global economy in order to attract charitable gifts from their clients. Men provide women with money to help them escape poverty and improve their standard of living from basic to comfortable. Consequently, even though sex work allowed some women to purchase nicer clothing and expensive cellular phones, they had to hide their wealth and perform poverty because those items symbolized increased access to global capital, mobility, status, and, most importantly, dignity in their work.

CONCLUSION

This study has important implications for how we understand and theorize the important relationship between new transnational economic flows and intimate life. By linking sex workers' micro-embodied practices to macro-shifts in the global economy in the context of East Asia's recent economic ascendancy, I challenge representations that only highlight poverty over the Global South and its oppressed position in relation to the West. As such, this article is as much about sex work as it is about shifting configurations of global capital. At an empirical level, this article examined how the complexity of Vietnam's contemporary political economy maps onto sex workers' competing technologies of embodiment and performances of femininity. HCMC's sex industry shaped and was shaped by broader economic forces, such as rapid local development, the global growth of "frontier markets," and the emergence of a homegrown super-elite enmeshed in the international political economy. For Vietnamese sex workers, satisfying the needs of their Asian clientele helped cement the growing status of the region. In striving towards new pan-Asian and Third World beauty ideals, which were both distinctly non-Western, women embodied the increasing recognition of previously marginalized countries in the global arena.

The growth of divergent embodied ideals fueled new configurations of modernity wherein sex workers in Vietnam did not perceive their standards of beauty as Western. Instead, they worked to emulate women in more developed Asian countries, emphasizing Vietnam's regional position in relation to Hong Kong, Korea, and Japan. In the high-end niche market,

sex workers and clients worked *together* to signify a new embodied ideal of pan-Asian modernity that hinged on regional and non-Western standards of beauty. Indeed, wealthy local Vietnamese men who entertained their Asian business partners used women's bodies to represent their nation's modernization.

The comparison of multiple markets reveals another layer of complexity in sex workers' competing technologies of embodiment. In contrast to previous studies that focus primarily on Western men, I complicate our understanding of the sex industry in "Third World" nations by looking at different markets, and importantly, by looking at both consumers and workers. Sex workers who catered to Western men consciously embodied Third World dependency, playing on their client's racialized desires and imaginations of Vietnam as a poverty-stricken country. These women were conscious of globalized racial discourses and strategically consumed and reproduced representations of Vietnamese women as the needy, exotic other. Although most Western men acknowledged Vietnam's rapid economic development, many sought what they called the "authentic" Vietnam, which was untouched by processes of globalization. They imagined the "real" Vietnam as poor, rural villages situated among verdant rice paddies with memorable experiences of Third World poverty.

This article highlights how global economic changes map onto women's bodies. Economic change is deeply intertwined with bodywork, racialized discourses, shifting realms of femininity, and complicated terrains of agency. In all three bars discussed in this article, the workers are striving to bring foreign money into the country. High-end workers in Khong Sao Bar work to help attract FDI, while workers in Secrets and Naughty Girls work to attract charity capital. I show how sex workers' competing technologies of embodiment came to represent the changing dynamics of race and nation under globalization. Sex workers' pan-Asian bodies were molded by technologies that reflected Vietnam's striving to emerge as another "rising tiger." However, not all women could secure a foothold in the rapidly developing sectors of the economy, and these women turned to other niche markets and other technologies of embodiment that would appeal to Western men's desires for virtuous Third World dependency. Women across all niches of sex work altered their bodies to fit clients' particular racialized and classed desires, but their divergent technologies of embodiment reflected tensions within Vietnam's gendered landscape. Thus, while men can pay for women's performances of dependency in Secrets and Naughty Girls, the true dependency of the nation on the West is slowly diminishing. Therefore, in this historical

moment, Vietnam is rejecting its colonial past and the dependency that comes with it to embrace a vision of the future of global capitalism, with East Asia as a new financial center.

The insights from this study generate new questions for future research. How is the West imagined in developed countries within Asia—South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong—where many of these pan-Asian ideals began to emerge? What competing technologies of embodiment emerge in other rapidly developing nations around the world, such as China, India, and Brazil, based on both their histories and their current places in the shifting global economy? Finally, in an increasingly neoliberal world of deregulation and capital flight, how does the neoliberal citizen calculate her choices within multiple spheres (Lee 2008)—economic, political, social, and cultural—through her embodied practices?

NOTES

1. The different strata of Vietnam's sex market are defined by the client's financial expenditures in the bar and for paid sex, the women's pay, and the cultural prestige that the women and men gain from participating in that niche market.

2. The names of the bars and research subjects are all pseudonyms.

3. I did not tape record interviews because it would compromise my research subjects' anonymity if the government were to seize my recordings. I took notes on my phone and then wrote detailed fieldnotes the next morning.

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