

Prostitution Mobility and Representations The Case of Vietnamese Prostitutes going to Cambodia

Nicolas Lainez
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Alliance Anti-Traffic Vietnam (AAT, Vietnam)

Alliance Anti-Traffic Vietnam combats sexual exploitation, in particular sexual abuse, prostitution and trafficking in women and female minors, in Southeast Asia. *Alliance Anti-Traffic Vietnam* develops pilot projects to help and protect women and minors through field actions implemented in a holistic and regional approach.

Alliance Anti-Traffic Vietnam designs, manages and implements a project of action-oriented research. The organization believes that sexual exploitation, prostitution and trafficking in women and children deserve extensive research from a wide and interdisciplinary perspective. The project has various objectives: 1) to fill knowledge gaps; 2) to optimize current research tools; 3) to test innovative methods for data collection; 4) to foster close cooperation between academics, action-oriented researchers and policy-makers; 5) to network with key institutions from academia and the development sector, as well as government agencies in order to promote complementary efforts and synergies.

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This study by *Alliance Anti-Trafic* Vietnam and the Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia/Observatory on illicit trafficking. is a contribution to public understanding of the issue of cross-border mobility, human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Opinions expressed in the report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of *Alliance Anti-Trafic* Vietnam or of the Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia and the Observatory on illicit trafficking.

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Table of contents

Executive summary.....1

1. Introduction.....2

2. Mobility and prostitution at the turn of the 2000s.....3

- Vietnamese mobility and prostitution in Cambodia.....3
- Quantifying the phenomenon.....5

3. The Situation for mobility routes in 2010.....7

- Legal framework of mobility in ASEAN.....7
- Land and river mobility routes.....9
 - Route 1: From Châu Đốc and An Phú districts.....9
 - Route 2: From Vĩnh Xương and the Province of Đồng Tháp.....15
- Crossing the Border.....17

4. The Vietnamese perspective on mobility: causes, risks, alternatives.....18

- Representations of prostitute mobility in Cambodia.....18
- Institutionalization of the fight against human trafficking in Vietnam.....20
- Informal credit and debt.....23
- Cross-border Vs local prostitution mobility: the alternative.....25

5. Conclusion.....28

6. Bibliography.....29

Executive summary

This study is the first in a series of three, the objective of which is to understand international mobility undertaken for the purposes of prostitution and forms of commercial sex by low-skilled women and female minors from the Mekong Delta.

The first study addresses cross-border mobility for prostitution between the Vietnamese southern province of An Giang and Cambodia. Field investigation shows that this flow of mobility, which attracted a significant number of women in the 1990s, has now dried up in Vietnam, essentially because Cambodia is no longer viewed as a destination for easy money but rather a dangerous and unwelcoming country.

The initial objective of the second study was to confirm the hypothesis that Southern Vietnamese women no longer migrate to Cambodia for prostitution. Preliminary investigations in the capital rapidly confirmed that nowadays the majority of the Vietnamese women involved in commercial sex are Vietnamese who are resident in Cambodia and not new economic migrants from Southern Vietnam. The research objective was therefore redirected toward the study of legal aspects and living conditions of Vietnamese in Cambodia, and the study of two forms of transfer and selling of sexual services of minors: the sale of virginity and the sale of young children for adoption.

The third study addresses the mobility of Vietnamese women for prostitution in Singapore. The objective is to broaden the field investigation undertaken in the Mekong Delta and in Cambodia by following Vietnamese migrant prostitutes in their transnational movement to wealthy Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Singapore.

The first paper, based on 18 months' fieldwork in the Mekong Delta, addresses the issue of women's cross-border mobility for the aim of prostitution between Southern Vietnam and Cambodia. The goal is to update existing research carried out in Cambodia in the late 1990s by Western researchers commissioned by aid organizations, and to bring a Vietnamese perspective into the picture. Research had explained mobility from Vietnam in the late 1990s in terms of the easy money female migrant prostitutes could earn in Cambodia. According to our findings, the situation has changed and this paper explores why. Although illegal migration for prostitution from Vietnam to Phnom Penh remains an easy alternative, it appears less attractive than in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the context of increasing globalization and inter-connections in Asia.

First, the paper examines the situation on the ground in the late 1990s: cross-border mobility and routes in the Mekong Delta, and Vietnamese prostitution in Phnom Penh, especially in the Vietnamese enclave of Kilometer Eleven or Svay Pak. Second, the paper explores the reasons underlying the obvious change of perception by potential unskilled migrants who no longer perceive Cambodia as some sort *El Dorado* and therefore an appealing destination. Various reasons underlie explain this change, like increased awareness of the risks of deception and exploitation thanks to massive campaigns against human trafficking. Another factor is the increased availability of more attractive professional options, such as internal migration for prostitution to provinces along the Mekong Delta, to Hô Chi Minh City and its suburban provinces undergoing rapid industrialization and economic growth. This paper demonstrates that nowadays mobility from An Giang province to Cambodia is no longer relevant.

1. Introduction

This study examines the field of prostitute mobility among Vietnamese women between Vietnam and Cambodia. It leaves aside other forms of migration for economic or professional reasons, as well as the social and commercial interactions that take place along the border. Specifically, my goal is to put into perspective studies done in Cambodia at the end of the 1990s and the start of the 2000s. What has changed on the ground in the study of prostitution in this region over the last ten years? And what is the view of things on the Vietnamese side?

One of the arguments used by several studies to explain prostitute mobility from Vietnam at the turn of the millennium was the ease with which Vietnamese women could earn money in Cambodia. But things are different today, as the Vietnamese proverb popular in the southern province of An Giang suggests: “It is easy to go to Phnom Penh, but it is difficult to come back” (*Nam Vang đi dễ, khó về*). On the Vietnamese side, it is now just as easy to go to Cambodia to exercise prostitution, but the saying implies that this option appears less attractive than it was in the past.

I will first present the situation of prostitute mobility from Vietnam to Cambodia as it was at the end of the 1990s. The routes, working conditions, the varied phenomena called “human trafficking,” and systems of indebtedness will be described through studies done at the time. Next, I will retrace the actual routes of mobility from An Giang. These routes of migrations that have been progressively deserted by prostitute migrants (essentially oriented to the capital Phnom Penh) are almost always illegal in nature, since most of the individuals travel without papers. Finally, I will emphasize the Vietnamese setting in which this particular form of mobility takes or does not take place nowadays. In effect, the perception of it in Vietnam has changed because of the awareness campaigns conducted jointly by the Vietnamese government and international NGOs, and because of a consciousness of the risks of illegal migration by low-skilled women, and due to more interesting alternatives with respect to both local prostitution and internal mobility (Hô Chi Minh City and the peripheral provinces undergoing rapid industrialization), as well as international mobility for prostitution or marriage purposes to wealthy Asian countries. My study will stress the ways in which institutions have handled the fight against human trafficking, and with representations of the risks of mobility for the purposes of prostitution and debt, and with local professional alternatives.

The region targeted by the study is situated between the province of An Giang in the “West region” (*miền tây*) of the Mekong Delta and the provinces of Takeo and Kandal on the Cambodian side. I conducted fieldwork in An Giang, essentially in the district of Châu Đốc. As a complement, occasional inquiries were conducted in six other districts and sporadically in the neighboring province of Đồng Tháp. On the Cambodian side, studies were done in the provinces of Takeo and Kandal, as well as in Phnom Penh. Evidence of internal and transnational mobility flows was found in all these places (Dang Nguyên Anh 2006, Asia Foundation 2008). The following municipalities (excluding Phnom Penh) located on the frontier or on the main roads were selected:

- An Giang province: Châu Đốc (Châu Đốc district, border), Vĩnh Nguơn, Vĩnh Hội Đông, Phú Hội, Bắc Đại, Long Bình (An Phú district, all at the border), Vĩnh Xương, Tân Châu (Tân Châu district, border), Phú Mỹ, Phú Lam, Chợ Vàm (Phú Tân district), Chợ Ba Tiêm, Vĩnh Tre, Cái Dầu (Châu

Phú district), Chợ Mới (Chợ Mới district), Nhà Bàng, Đồ Cây Mít, Tịnh Biên (Tịnh Biên district, all at the border), Tri Tôn (Tri Tôn district).

- Đồng Tháp province: Thường Phước, Hồng Ngự (Hồng Ngự district, all at the border).
- Takeo Province: Preah Bat Choan Chum, Phnum Den (Kiri Vong district, all at the border).
- Kandal Province: Chrey Thoum (Sampov Lun district, border), Ka Om Samna (Ka Om Samna district, border).
- Phnom Penh: Vietnamese red light districts.

2. Mobility and prostitution at the turn of the 2000s

Vietnamese mobility and prostitution in Cambodia

The bibliography on prostitute mobility from Vietnam, or on Vietnamese prostitution in Cambodia, is limited. Rare studies were produced on the Vietnamese in Cambodia (Derks 1996, Leonard 1996, Bertrand 1998, Ehrentraut 2009) but they ignored the Vietnamese viewpoint. Some reports commissioned by aid organizations touched the subject from an activist perspective (Derks 1998, Reimer 2006, Brown 2007) but most of this work was done in Cambodia and did not address the Vietnamese side. The most complete study in my opinion is that of Annuska Derks (1998), performed at a time when the trafficking in Vietnamese women and children was attracting the attention of the international community in Cambodia. With the exception of my master's thesis (Lainez 2006), a single academic study (Gironde & Nguyen, 2008) touches on the subject of prostitute mobility from An Giang. Some reports and articles on Vietnamese prostitution in Cambodia with respect to the village of Svay Pak, or “Kilometer Eleven” because it is situated 11 km from Phnom Penh, which had become the “international Mecca of pedophiles” between the middle of the 1990s and 2004 (Baker 2003, Busza 2001, Busza & Shunter 2001, Thomas & Pasnik 2003, Thomas 2005). There is also an excellent article by David Engelbert (2007) that describes from a historical perspective the illicit activities of Vietnamese and Chinese in the region of the Bassac River during the colonial period.

The poverty of the Vietnamese people was usually considered the principal cause to explain the development of human trafficking and the entry of young women either barely qualified, or not at all, into prostitution. However, Annuska Derks (1998: 7-8) shows that major poverty is an important but not determining factor. The Vietnamese economic reforms (*đổi mới* for Renovation) adopted in 1986 have favored the development of the private sector and economic exchanges at the regional and international levels. The result has been a rapid increase in the rate of economic growth as well as a general improvement in living conditions. Absolute poverty (lack of elementary needs for survival) was reduced, but relative poverty (due to new needs like TV, karaoke, motorbike, cell-phone) has increased (Gironde & Nguyen 2007: 16). In addition, the inequalities and disparities of income have increased, notably in rural areas. These upheavals have incited rural

households that are prey to economic difficulties to opt for migration to the cities or abroad.

The easy money of prostitution is one of the reasons advanced by Derks to explain the attraction that Cambodia had for migrant prostitutes from Vietnam during the 1990s. According to the author, it was easier at the time to be a prostitute in Cambodia than in Vietnam because it was more tolerated, although it was theoretically prohibited in both countries. Also, Cambodian clients perceived Vietnamese women as being more beautiful because of their light skin, and more sexually lively and imaginative than Cambodian women.

Moreover, Derks sets the trafficking in Vietnamese women within the diachronic framework of the history of cross-border migrations and interactions. She uses a distinction between women who migrate of their own initiative and those who are called “victims of trafficking,” meaning they were deceived, forced, and/or exploited. She reminds us that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish these categories due to the fact that the two extreme theoretical situations are not antithetical. In fact, a woman might migrate voluntarily and later be exploited, or vice versa, without taking into account the fact those so-called voluntary prostitutes and those who are exploited often work in the same places and in similar conditions. According to the author, the former are aware of the risks they are running and the occupation that awaits them before they depart. Their primary motivation is easy money. The latter are tricked or exploited, not by organized criminal networks but most often by informal networks that operate on a local level. These intermediaries are essentially Vietnamese, former prostitutes, specialists in recruitment, or smugglers. They mobilize various techniques to avoid border guards: lying about the reason for moving, paying or sleeping with the guards, passing as a trader or a peasant. Whether voluntary or tricked, most of these women came from the provinces of the Mekong Delta according to Derks.

Debt is the recurrent theme among Vietnamese prostitutes who worked in Cambodia over the last decade (Derks 1998, Baker 2003). At that time, the living and working conditions are determined largely by the amount of their debt. The parents of those who were tricked or trafficked received a fixed amount that was reimbursed thanks to the sexual services of their daughters. In the village of Svay Pak it was not rare for mothers to deposit their children in exchange for a loan; in other words, they “rented the services” of a labor source over which they have a monopoly in return for an advance on their salary.¹ The creditor imposed obligations and restrictions on the employee, who has become the pawn for the debt, notably a ban on leaving the establishment without authorization as long as the debt is not paid off. In return, the creditor was responsible for her survival and safety. In the village of Kilometer Eleven, indebtedness was an institutionalized economic arrangement that enabled advances on liquidity on condition of putting the debtor or one of his representatives under the creditor’s control. Among the 857 prostitutes that Baker’s team studied between May 2000 and March 2002, 90% were indebted for an average of US\$365 (the amount varied from \$30 to \$3,000). The total sum advanced depended on the family needs, but also on the capacity of the indentured girl to

¹ The owner of a brothel in Svay Pak talks about mothers who bring their daughters and police rackets: “*Most of the girls here were brought by their mothers. I give them a loan of \$500 or \$700 depending on the beauty of the girl. The girl can go back home when she has repaid the loan. In general they work for three months, but if the police come often it causes trouble and they have to work for five months.*” (Derks 1998: 33) For a deeper discussion of the forms of pawning and renting the services of persons due to debt that exists in Indochina, see Lainez (2009).

pay back the loan as a function of her beauty, her age, and her aptitude for serving a large number of clients. Bosses who had become procurers, creditors and foster parents established written or verbal agreements with the prostitutes, with their parents, or with the professional agents and recruiters who brought them in. These contracts stipulated that the employee gave 50% of her profits to the employer for food and lodging. The remaining 50% went to reducing the debt and to covering supplementary charges: electricity, water, clothing, make-up, medical care, and for corrupt authorities. The police who organized raids on a brothel and arrested the employees claimed \$1,000 or \$2,000 to release them and to authorize reopening. These bribes were systematically charged to the prostitutes, whose debts increased as a function of these random and repressive measures. The duration of the reimbursement also depended on the employer, who billed usury interest rates and deducted charges and profits as he saw fit. It was all the easier to trick the women because the calculations require a minimum level of education that was often lacking among the workers, the majority of whom did not study beyond primary school. Once the debt is paid back, the prostitutes were free to change establishment or to remain at 50/50. The employer still favored a rotation in personnel because this turnover was much appreciated by the clients.

Quantifying the phenomenon

The question of the number of Vietnamese (prostitutes or not) residing in Cambodia is subject to caution. Rare are the sources that estimate figures on this population. The official count of the Cambodian government does not give figures by ethnic groups (Viet, Cham, Chinese, hill tribe groups). Still, most people accept that the Vietnamese are the most populous ethnic minority in Cambodia. In 1995, the administration of the Ministry of the Interior estimated at 95,597 the number of Vietnamese living in Cambodia, out of a total of 9,672,000 inhabitants (Dareth 2009: 8). According to another government estimate (Farrington 2002: 15), 5 to 10% of the population of 7.8 million in 1999 were of Vietnamese origin, or 390,000 to 780,000 (which does not match the previous estimate, for the population did not contract over two years). Brown (2007: 26) settles for 5%. If this percentage is extrapolated to the present, we obtain a figure of 700,000 to 1.4 million Vietnamese for a population of 14 million overall. These estimates are used in the local press and in the reports of international organizations but with no methodological details. So up to now nobody has ever justified the estimate of 5 to 10%.

An additional problem arises from the fact that these statistics consider the Vietnamese as a homogeneous group, whereas there are four categories. The Vietnamese who have lived in Cambodia for decades form the main category. After the Lon Nol coup d'état in 1970, these long-term residents were victims of racist campaigns that caused tens of thousands of deaths and the survivors returned to Vietnam. The anti-Vietnamese policy was radicalized under the Khmer Rouges (1975-1979), with more deaths and a massive exodus. These refugees sometimes returned to Cambodia under the Vietnamese presence (1979-1989), along with new immigrants invited by the Vietnamese administration in Phnom Penh. These arrivals form the second category. The migrants from the Mekong Delta continued to flow during the 1990s, despite the occasional local outbursts of anti-Vietnamese movements. They were attracted by the economic boom and professional opportunities in sectors deserted by barely qualified Cambodians (crafts, construction,

services, trade). Individuals from this wave of emigration form the third category. The first two categories of Vietnamese, called “from Cambodia,” accused them sometimes of being thieves, gamblers, or prostitutes who took their jobs and tarnished the image of the Vietnamese community. Finally, the Khmer *krom* (*krom* stands for the “lower” part of the Mekong Delta region) form the fourth category. Some have Vietnamese nationality and speak Vietnamese and Khmer fluently. Official estimates do not take account of this typology, although it appears fundamental.

Quantifying cross-border mobility is equally subject to caution. I could not find figures on this issue from either Cambodia or Vietnamese sources. The only data we have are estimates of the number of prostitutes who have worked in Svay Pak. The majority of these women were Vietnamese from the Mekong Delta coming from the economic migration of the 1990s (the third category). This village, entirely devoted to adult, and sometimes child, prostitution became in the mid 1990s a red light district to serve domestic and international clientele. The number of prostitutes increased vertiginously after 1992 with the arrival of United Nations personnel (U.N.T.A.C. = United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia); 20,000 civilian and military personnel, mostly male, whose mission was to prepare elections and install a democracy after the Vietnamese presence (1979-1989) that followed the Khmer Rouge years (1975-79). Cuc and Flamm (1996: 112, quoted by Baker 2003: 13) counted at this time sixty brothels in which 800 women and children worked. In August 1995, fire destroyed most of these rough establishments but they were quickly rebuilt in brick with several floors.² Still, the number of women diminished, and between 2000 and 2002 Baker noted a stabilization at 20 to 25 brothels employing 300 to 400 prostitutes aged 17 to 22. My own observations from 2002 to 2004 confirm these estimates: about 25 brothels employed about ten to fifteen prostitutes each, for an approximate total of 250 to 375 workers. These figures are not representative of the community of Vietnamese prostitutes in Cambodia, but they give an idea of the powerful attraction a red light district situated on the outskirts of Phnom Penh could have for candidates for emigration originating from the Mekong Delta. The rotation of personnel – Baker’s interviewees stayed in Svay Pak ten months on average – was characteristic of the place, and one can affirm that several thousand Vietnamese migrants came through there between the middle of the 1990s and the closing of Svay Pak in August 2004. Some of these women then returned to Vietnam, sometimes infected with AIDS, while others went to the red light districts of Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Sihanoukville, or Poipet or to Thailand (Thomas 2005: 16).

The lack of accurate figures is still a problem nowadays. Nobody knows for certain how many Vietnamese, prostitutes or not, from Vietnam or Cambodia, reside in the kingdom. The Cambodian government is not in a hurry to shed light on this shadowy zone with heavy socio-economic consequences for domestic policy. Can we envisage ourselves

² The newspaper *Phnom Penh Post* recounted the fire in Svay Pak: “About 300 houses were razed, including a clinic run by Médecins Sans Frontières for treating sexually transmitted diseases. More than 260 of the destroyed houses were owned by Vietnamese” (Heng 1995). The press followed the reconstruction of Svay Pak three months later: “Many owners have taken what advantage they could of the fire to build concrete houses with tin roofs, replacing the wooden cottages they once owned [...] Many builders are now at the Svay Pak site, working with brick and concrete. Before the fire there were only six concrete buildings in the village, and now, almost all the buildings will be concrete [...] Saron said that 300 houses were destroyed, and in their place 230 were being rebuilt to be used as coffee and karaoke shops, brothels and homes.” (Mang 1995)

quantifying cross-border mobility by counting the potential women prostitutes who circulate daily across the border? The project seems daunting because:

- Many are Vietnamese or Cambodian passengers who cross the border to go to the provinces and not to Phnom Penh.
- Many male and female Cambodian, Vietnamese or Chinese gamblers circulate across the border. Tours are even organized from Phnom Penh and Vietnam. During my visit in December 2009, over 200 gamblers, the majority Vietnamese, invaded the very popular cock-fighting ring of Chrey Thoum (Kandal province).
- Many businessmen cross the border several times a day in order to buy and sell their products in the surrounding markets. Other businessmen trade locally without ever straying over the border.
- And finally, how can you accurately determine if a Vietnamese woman is simply crossing the border or migrating for the purpose of prostitution? This is the key problem.

3. The Situation for mobility routes in 2010

Legal framework of mobility in ASEAN

According to the first article of the agreements on visa exemption signed by the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in July 2006 in Kuala Lumpur, citizens of member-states are authorized to visit without a visa the other member countries for 14 days. Some countries have signed bilateral agreements that enable extending this stay. For example, the Vietnamese are exempt from a visa in Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore for 30 days, and vice versa. This legal framework is dealing with temporary visits and not professional mobility. Vietnamese migrants who go to be prostitutes in Cambodia, Malaysia, or Singapore cannot be considered as illegal migrants if they enter and leave the country every 30 days after having had their passport stamped. On the other hand, they contravene the immigration law if they exercise a professional activity without having the rights. But the many Vietnamese prostitutes in Cambodia are not concerned with legal barriers. In effect, it has to be realized that many of these women, and today perhaps the majority, live in Cambodia where their parents live, too, because they are not new economic migrants. The majority belongs to the third category arrived in the nineties, or to the first and second. These types of prostitutes keep little or no ties to Vietnam.

Moreover, many prostitutes I met in Châu Đốc do not possess either a household registration certificate (*hộ khẩu*), an identity card nor a passport. Even if they can legally visit Cambodia under the ASEAN agreement, it is technically impossible for them to prove their citizenship or their date of entry or exit from the country. They are part of illegal immigration and are exposed to the arrests and rackets on the part of Cambodian authorities. In reality, in the field Vietnamese come and go to Cambodia as they wish. Most of them who emigrate for economic reasons (less for prostitution than for trade and business purposes nowadays) remain in the kingdom for months or years without papers, and without ever being arrested. The legal situation is similar for the Vietnamese born in Cambodia, since the right to Cambodian citizenship is refused to them (Ehrentraut 2009: 17).

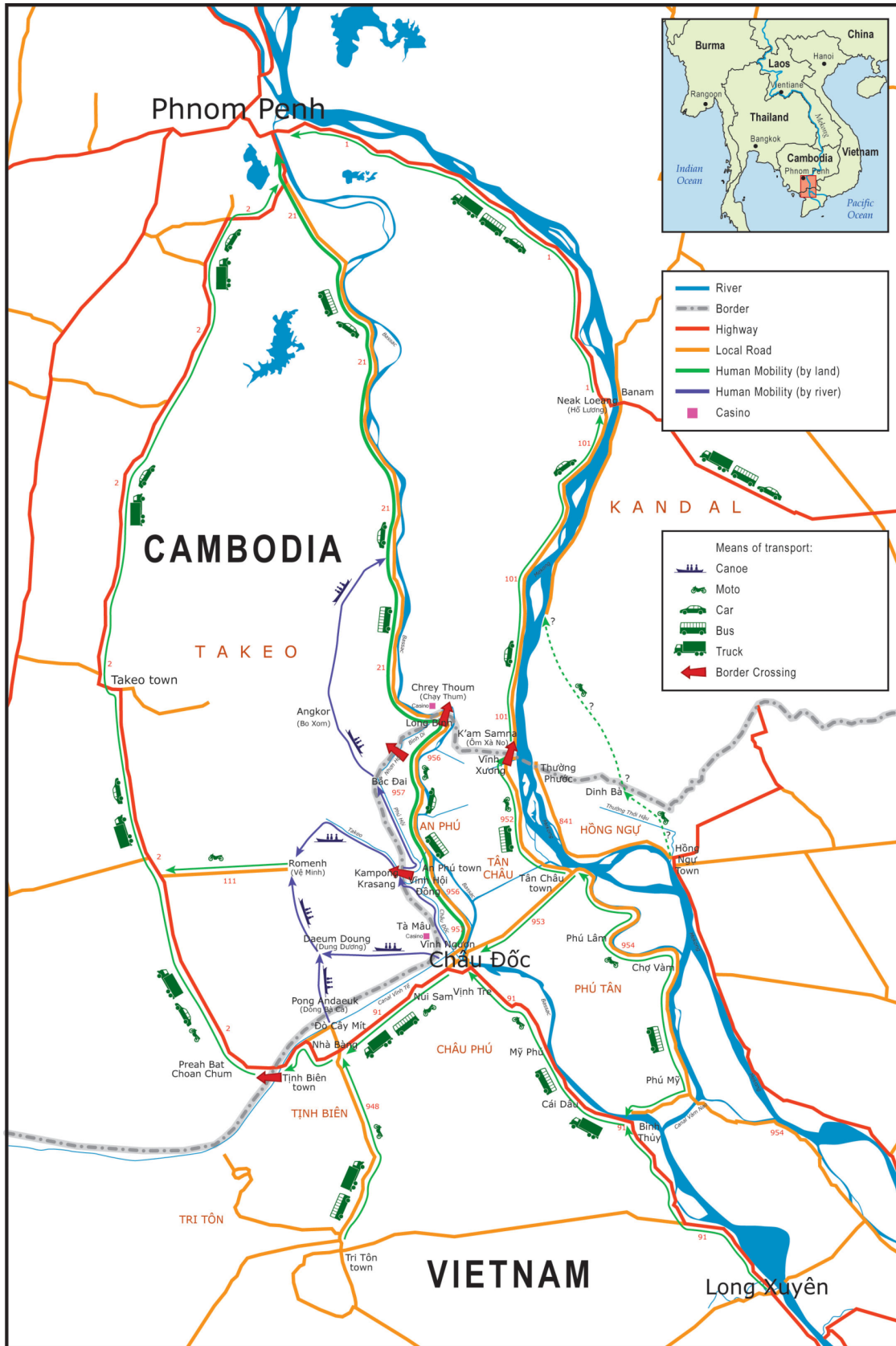


Fig. 1: Map of An Giang, Takeo and Kandal provinces showing cross-border nodes and mobility options.

Land and River Mobility Routes

The map information is useful in understanding the options and points of penetration, which are often the dynamic geographical nodes for cross-border exchanges at the disposal of Vietnamese women who desire to migrate to Cambodia these days. Even if cross-border prostitute mobility is no longer current in the remote Vietnamese districts I studied, this does not mean that the flows are completely outdated. As proof, see the proposals of procurers and smugglers transcribed below suggesting the option is still available, although field observations suggest border crossing at remote points is not longer relevant.

Route 1: From Châu Đốc and An Phú districts

Châu Đốc is a strategic crossroads for communications. The municipality is situated on the border with Cambodia at the intersection of three bodies of water: the Bassac River, the Canal of Vĩnh Tế, and the Châu Đốc River. The town is also an important center of trade exchange, traversed by highways 91 (to Tịnh Biên), the 953 (to Tân Châu), and the 956 (to Long Bình). The axis of 956/21 is unavoidable for passenger transport. Vietnamese businessmen and Khmers continually use it, while gamblers cross the Bình Di River to go to play in the casinos of Chrey Thoum. In the market of Long Bình and the quays of Chrey Thoum, hawkers sell seats on the minibus for Phnom Penh.



Fig. 2: In front, the small river Binh Di and the wharf of Long Binh. On the right, the Bassac River. Behind, the Grand Dragon Casino at Chrey Thoum.

The 96 kilometers that separate Châu Đốc from Phnom Penh are easily traveled. By land, daily buses link the two cities. They leave from the Cồn Tiên Bridge where route 956 begins. Travelers get off at the border of Long Bình to cross the Bình Di River. There they present their papers to the Vietnamese and Khmer border guards and then get back on a minibus that drops them off an hour and a half later on the “Vietnamese Bridge” (*cầu Sài Gòn*) located in the south of Phnom Penh. The “door to door” cost of the trip is US\$17. This rate is negotiable if the passenger knows either the driver or the brokers on the bridge or at the center of Châu Đốc. If the passenger chooses to go to Long Bình by his own means via public bus or moto-taxi, he crosses the border and bargains for his place at Chrey Thoum from the Khmer brokers who sell seats for less than \$10. Finally, passengers with their papers in order can take the daily bus that links Phnom Penh and the southern province of Trà Vinh where many Khmer *krom* reside.

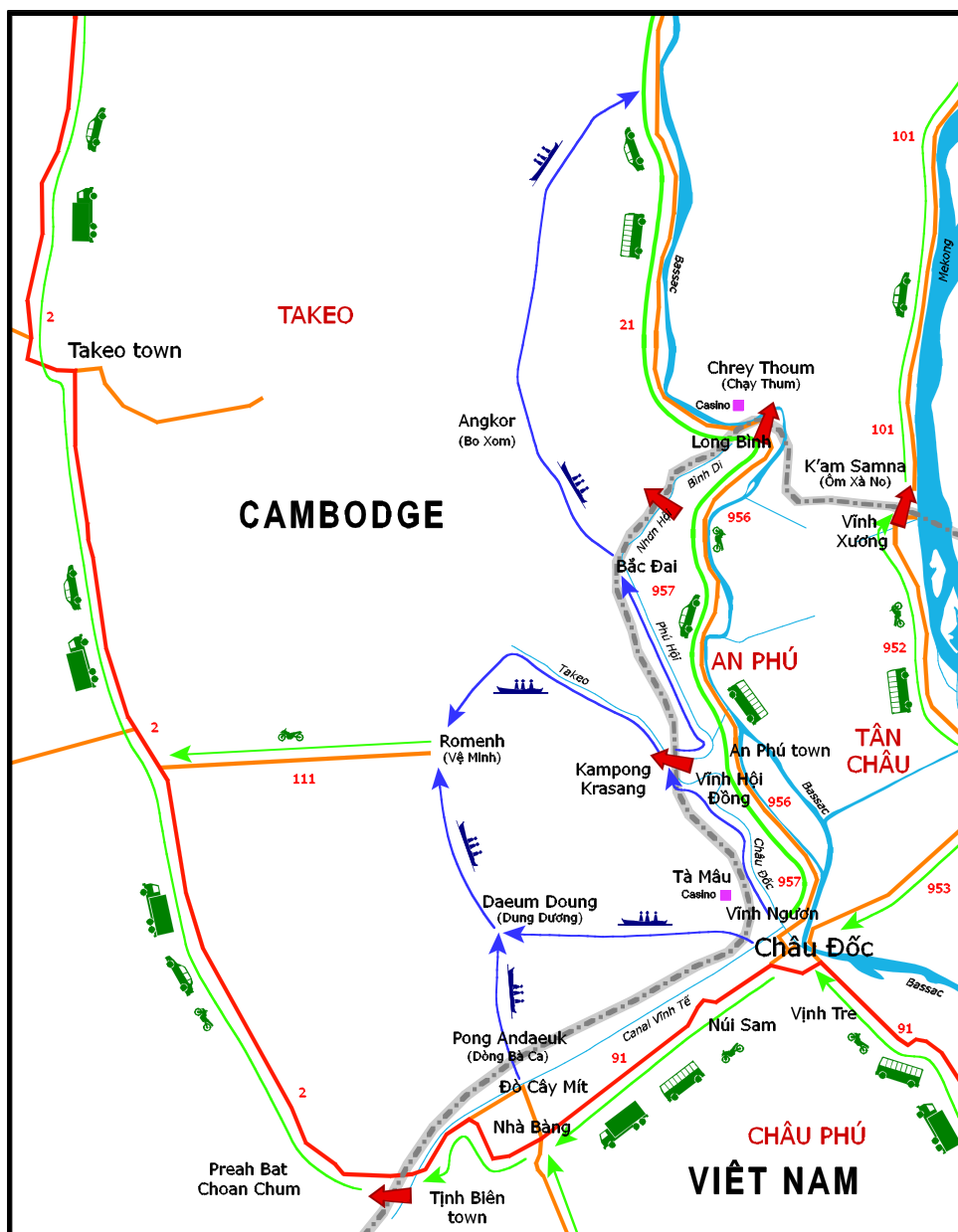


Fig. 3: Map of Châu Đốc and An Phú border districts.



Fig 4: In the foreground, Vĩnh Nguơn. Behind, the casino of Tà Mâu. A pathway facilitates the access to the casino during the dry season.



Fig. 5: Same view taken during the rainy season. The crossing goes by junk when the plains are flooded.

A casino of modest size was constructed in Tà Mâu in the middle of a rice paddy on the Cambodian side, facing Vĩnh Nguơn. The canal that links this casino with the Takeo province enables going to Romenh or Vệ Minh, but this transport option seems very marginal, given the isolation of the place. Visibly, only some small boats circulate that transport foodstuffs.

By river, the docks along the fish market of Châu Đốc or around the famous luxury Victoria Hotel bring passengers to Bắc Đại by going up the Châu Đốc River, then Phú Hội as far as Bo Xom, which we presume is the village of Angkor in the district of Angkor Borei, where several dozen Vietnamese families have long lived. From there, passengers take a vehicle in the direction of Phnom Penh.

It is also possible to go from Châu Đốc to Phnom Penh via Romenh. You just take one of the boats that transport foodstuff toward the Daeum Doung, then continue to Romenh. The trip takes three hours and costs US\$2.80. But like Tà Mâu, this option appears extremely marginal, given the length of the journey and the isolation of the places you go through. From Romenh, the traveler goes to the town of Takeo by routes 111 and 2, then to Phnom Penh. This latter trip takes four hours.

The trip from the border to Vĩnh Hội Đông, ten kilometers Northeast of Châu Đốc is taken by canal in a cross-border pirogue from Kampong Krasang, then by Takeo River canoe as far as Romenh. From there the traveler goes on to Takeo or Phnom Penh. A moto-taxi on Sam Mountain (Núi Sam) gives the following rates:

- From Châu Đốc to Vĩnh Hội Đông by moto: US\$3.
- From Vĩnh Hội Đông to Daeum Doung by canoe: US\$3.50.
- From Daeum Doung to by moto Takeo: US\$4.
- From Takeo to Phnom Penh by bus: US\$4.50.

If necessary, the help of a smuggler who facilitates crossing the Cambodian border can be had for US\$5, so the total cost of the trip from Châu Đốc to Takeo, feasible in four or five hours, has risen to \$15 without a smuggler, or \$20 with one. There is testimony about rackets by Cambodian border guards, which explains why the Vietnamese try to avoid them at all costs.

To the north, a traveler without papers can cross the river at Phú Hội, then take the road along the river as far as Chrey Thoum. He thus avoids the guards and has only to take a vehicle on the Cambodian side. According to my observations on both sides of the border, these river options are not commonly used.



Fig. 6: The Vĩnh hội Đông river. At the end is the Vietnamese/Cambodian border. A boat carries a group of women to Cambodia.



Fig. 7: Path border delimiting the province of Takeo (left) and the District of Vĩnh Hội Đông (right).

In the district of Châu Phú, moto-taxis in the market of Ba Tiệm seem to be badly informed about the possibilities of transport to Phnom Penh, referring people to the dock at Châu Đốc. The same is true of Vĩnh Trê, except that here the informants distinguish the river route that transits via Vĩnh Hội Đông from the land route that crosses by Long Bình. The information is identical in Châu Đốc.

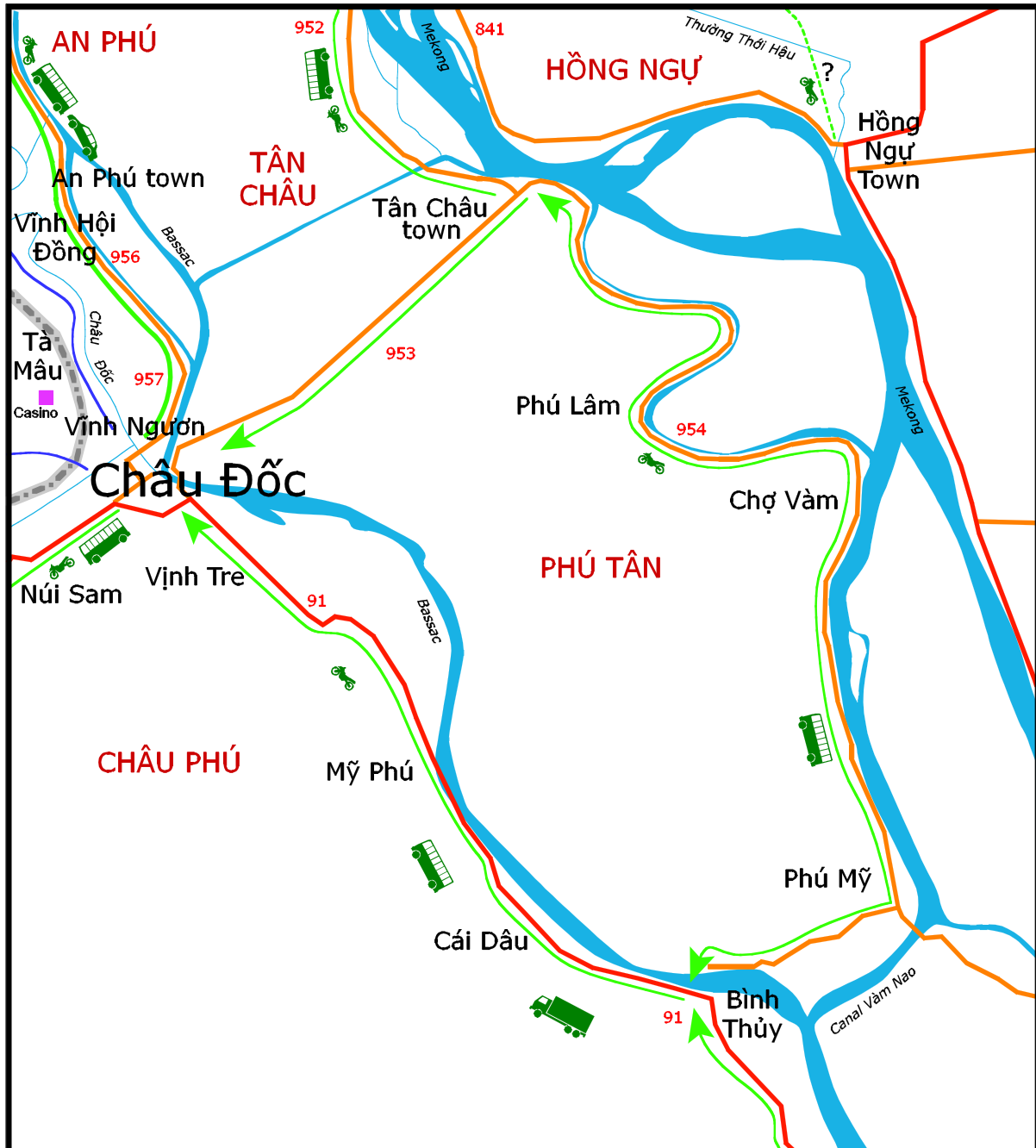


Fig. 8: Map of Châu Đốc, An Phú, Tân Châu and Phú Tân districts.

In Phú Tân, moto-taxis encountered on route 954, near the communes of Phú Lam and Chợ Vàm, advise going to Tân Châu, traveling south by bus to Châu Đốc, then continuing by route 956 to Long Bình. From Tân Châu it is also possible to go to Phnom Penh via route 101 by crossing at Vĩnh Xương or going up the Mekong River to Phnom Penh, although this latter option is rarely mentioned.

Route 2: From Vĩnh Xương and the Province of Đồng Tháp

The frontier post of Vĩnh Xương/Ka Om Samna is at the crossroads of national routes 952 and 101 in the Kandal province. Forty kilometers further on, they rejoin route 1 that links Phnom Penh and Hồ Chí Minh City via the frontier of Bavet/Mộc Bài. Travelers take this route passing through Neak Loeang to go to Phnom Penh. A moto-taxi from Đồng Tháp charges those without papers US\$28, which includes transport and border crossing. This rate is relatively high compared to those in Vĩnh Hội Đông and Long Bình. Vĩnh Xương has a bad reputation for contraband and human trafficking, as explained by a moto-driver on the border:

One who knows the good way goes all alone via Vĩnh Xương, but someone who does not know it or is taking it for the first time does not dare go that way. [...] To go to Phnom Penh the way via Long Bình is safer than the way via Vĩnh Xương. The moto-taxi drivers of Vĩnh Xương are pimps and procurers. They make money off the backs of people in a very cruel manner.

The Mekong River separates the provinces of An Giang and Đồng Tháp. Thường Phước is on the other side from Vĩnh Xương. This international frontier post is little crossed. Here National 841 from Hồng Ngự becomes a muddy and impractical track. In addition, there is no inhabited town on the Cambodian side. Travelers going to Phnom Penh prefer to take the Vĩnh Xương or Long Bình routes for obvious practical reasons.

From Hồng Ngự, a traveler reaches Dinh Bà by moto taxi. From there, he goes to Neak Loeang, then Phnom Penh by National 1. The route from Hồng Ngự to Dinh Bà costs US\$3, from there to Neak Loeang \$9, or a total of \$12. A secondary route linking Hồng Ngự and Thường Phước runs along the river Thường Thới Hậu. At this place I counted the most billboard panels warning about human trafficking. The narrow path that serves as a line of demarcation in the rice-field is only practically traversed by moto. There is no pedestrian traffic.



Fig. 9: The frontier post of Ka Om Samna/Vinh Xuong. The photo is taken from the Cambodian side.



Fig. 10: A path marking the border of Kandal province (right) and the District of Thường Phước (left). The frontier post is about fifteen kilometers away.

Crossing the Border

What techniques do the Vietnamese without papers use to fool the Cambodian guards' surveillance? The migrant can pass for a gambler going to the two casinos, Crown and Grand Dragon in Chrey Thoum opposite Long Bình. The police barely pay attention to gamblers who cross the border and come back in a day. It is also possible to take the rice-field disguised as a peasant. The plain extends to the horizon and even if the option of crossing on foot or by canoe is not practicable because of the length of the journey, it easily enables avoiding the police. Once in Cambodia, the candidate has only to go to a village linked to a main road to take a vehicle to Phnom Penh.

The season is one element to take into account in mobility. It is easier to cross the flooded plain by canoe or motorized junk between June and November (rainy season). Someone whom the guards question can always use the pretext he is going to a friend's wedding or birthday celebration.

The testimony of a former smuggler describes the "nature" of the border rackets. According to him, the Cambodian guards in the past required the sexual services of the women who pleased them, especially those who were traveling with smugglers or procurers, and for this reason the girls were advised to dress badly so as not to attract attention. It sometimes sufficed for a smuggler to "sacrifice" one girl so the others could cross freely. This precaution was indispensable, especially when the girls were virgins. Annuska Derks confirms this information in the late 1990s (1998: 19).

In conclusion, border crossers today opt for the land route, no doubt as a result of the development and improvement of the road network. Route 91/956 linking Long Xuyên and Long Bình via Châu Đốc, and further on Phnom Penh, is the most important axis for human mobility in the region studied. It is still possible to go to Phnom Penh by the river route, at least over the part going from Takeo, but this option seems abandoned and little used for mobility. River circulation is intense on the Bassac and the Mekong rivers, and on the innumerable streams and canals that criss-cross the area. But here it is commerce that dominates and not passenger transport. It is probable that trade exchanges and cross-border mobility will increase because this goal is part of government projects to develop the infrastructure of land transportation and to increase economic exchanges on the border by creating duty-free zones like in Tịnh Biên, and opening new international borders.



Fig. 11: The frontier post of Phnum Den (Takeo province)/Tịnh Biên (An Giang province) seen from the Cambodian side. On the right, a taxi brings passengers to Phnom Penh for US\$5 to \$10 per seat.

4. The Vietnamese perspective on mobility: perceptions, causes, and alternatives

Representations of prostitute mobility in Cambodia

Up there [in Phnom Penh] there are only brothels and prostitution. The Cambodians are not at all like us Vietnamese. They steal continually. I went there to cut wood, they take from you all they can. They are very nasty. You go there but sometimes you cannot get back. They bar the route for people in boats and kill them to steal the gold they are carrying. They are very violent. You cannot live with them. They deeply detest the Vietnamese like us. The girls who go to Phnom Penh are sometimes sold to a brothel. Then they never come back. It is better to work here and live in your own country. Those who say it is easy to earn money over there, by doing housework for example, are the same ones who then trick and sell the girls.

This statement from a moto-taxi driver in Phú Lam synthesizes the current ideas on Vietnamese prostitute mobility in Cambodia. He goes on: “*There [in Phnom Penh] the women can only play the whore to earn money.*” Rarely do informants mention other professional options for young women who are little or low skilled and emigrating to Cambodia. Prostitution comes up endlessly in conversations as being systematically

associated with female migration, which leads us to think that many women from An Giang have become prostitutes in Phnom Penh in the past. Cambodia is never presented as a privileged destination. On the contrary, life there would be difficult: employment opportunities and living conditions would have declined for Vietnamese prostitutes compared to the 1990s, according to informants.

The response of a group of men of Phú Lam to the question of whether there are cases of “human trafficking” is eloquent: “*You shouldn’t even ask that question.*” In An Giang, the human trafficking is not taboo but rather a fact of society that is widely discussed and it certainly taken into account in migratory and professional choices. Informants use indifferently the word “sell” (*bán*) and “tricked” (*bị lừa gạt*) without ever alluding to organized transnational criminal networks. For them, it is a matter of informal social networks. Generally speaking, the representation of the exploitation that victimizes women in Phnom Penh is very negative. Deprived of liberty, they are scarcely allowed out of their establishments, and still less to go home. Another recurrent element of the narrative is the violence of pimps and more generally the Cambodian men. The latter strike Vietnamese women violently, disfigure them to the point of making them unrecognizable to their families. Those who flee are caught and subjected to severe punishment. The representation goes on by saying that sometimes, worried parents go to look for their daughters, but the expedition ends in failure for many of them. The testimony of a woman of the Vĩnh Hội Đông market who knows prostitutes who have worked in Cambodia says that some come back after having been “let go:” sick, exhausted, and old, since “*they are only allowed to go home when their life is over.*” All this pessimism is fed by popular sayings like “it is easy to go to Phnom Penh, but hard to come back” (*Nam Vang đi dễ, khó về*), which is often complemented by “the boy leaves, he finds a wife” (*trai đi có vợ*) but “the girl comes back, she has a child” (*gái về có con*). In other words, when men leave the family home or the native village, they make their life elsewhere, whereas when women leave, they come back alone with a child in tow.

Another important factor in the narrative about prostitute migration to Cambodia is the HIV/AIDS risk that emerges in the tales of the returnees. Despite some more or less truthful tales of personal and economic success, many prostitutes have come back sick and/or HIV-positive. I followed the case of a young woman from Châu Đốc who at age 16 left for Cambodia and Malaysia to work in the sex industry, and who came back HIV positive years later. She later went to work in the neighboring province of Kiên Giang, but soon returned again, thin and sick, to die of AIDS near her family. The positive stories of success are sometimes perfectly contradicted by observable realities: a return without savings, bodies marked by violence and years of prostitution, mixed Khmer and Western children in tow without a father figure present, illness and AIDS.

The notion of risk recurs in conversations on prostitute mobility. Informants say that a young girl who migrates alone and for the first time will have a good chance of being tricked and sold to a brothel. The danger begins with the choice of means of transport. Travelling by moto-taxi, the migrant relies on the driver’s good will, which is not the case in a bus with other passengers. The Vĩnh Xương moto-taxis are particularly feared for their ruses. It is advised to take a single means of transport for each trip. A passenger who gets off at the border, negotiates passage and changes vehicles, merely doubles the negotiations and the risks. Finally, the social network is very important. Entering a foreign land without relations is perceived as highly dangerous. Help from third parties is indispensable to guarantee the success of the migratory experience. It is essential to trust only a close friend or a blood relative, since distant relatives or neighbors might prove untrustworthy.

Technically, these persons are guides who advise on the choice of destination, who facilitate transport, present the candidate to a serious employer, assist in case of problems, facilitate money transfers, and maintain a social link with Vietnam. The absence of a social network is linked to risk, as the testimony of a woman from Vĩnh Hội Đông makes clear:

Not knowing anyone [in Phnom Penh], it is better not to go. If you know someone, this person must identify an appropriate employer and tell you the amount of the salary before organizing a presentation. The Khmers are very perverse. Sometimes, you work with them and if they do not want to pay you, they do not pay you, and that is it.

An inexperienced migrant cannot be prepared for all the perils. She might limit them by preparing her plan with someone trustworthy, and properly organizing her movements, and learning a few rudiments of the Khmer language. However, ultimate success does not depend entirely on her or on others, because “fortune and misfortune” (*hên xui*) enter into it.

Institutionalization of the fight against human trafficking in Vietnam

In An Giang the awareness of the risks of undocumented migration and human trafficking headed for Cambodia is surprising by its resonance. The narrative can be summarized like this: a young naïve woman migrates for economic if not professional reasons, sometimes after a dispute with her parents or partner. She is tricked by Cambodian or Vietnamese criminals who sell her to a brothel in Phnom Penh where she finds herself indebted and brutally exploited without ever being able to come back to Vietnam. This narrative with a strong emotive charge has proved an effective tool of dissuasion. In effect, a candidate for emigration who today informs herself about going to Phnom Penh for purposes of prostitution will hear these often terrifying stories; if she decides to go anyway, then she will be held as responsible for her choice. Whatever the case, the level of awareness about risky migration is high in An Giang. And one can emphatically state that human trafficking is a social fact that has been widely debated and relayed by local politics, attested by the many warning signs attached ubiquitously along roads and to administrative buildings, but also by the media, judging from the many articles published by the An Giang newspaper.³ Between 1996 and 1998 an average of six articles on human trafficking were published each year, while this figure climbed to 14 after 2003. Rare are those in An Giang who could honestly say that they had never heard of the trafficking and the inherent risks of prostitution mobility to Cambodia.

Where does this awareness come from? The issue gains visibility in Palermo in 2000 with the ratification by 100 countries of the U.N. Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, and its additional Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air. This was the first international agreement aimed to fight the transnational trade in human beings by means of a penal and criminal approach. In Vietnam a survey done in 2004-06 concluded that national legislation was not in accord with the Convention, which is why the government submitted a proposal to the National Assembly to ratify it, as

³ These averages are not comprehensive, because not all editions of the newspaper are available in the An Giang province library at Long Xuyên.

well as a list of recommendations that suggested a revision of the Criminal Code. Moreover, after recognizing its failings, in 2003 Vietnam joined the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking (COMMIT) under the impetus of the United Nations Inter-Agency Project Against Trafficking in the Mekong Sub-Region (UNIAP). This process encourages countries in the region to coordinate regional activities against human trafficking. To this effect, Vietnam signed a *Memorandum of Understanding* with Cambodia in 2004, one with China in 2006, and with Thailand in 2008. These accords stressed the strengthening of cooperation in applying laws and legal procedures. In addition, on 14 July 2005 Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải signed a decision that inaugurated the National Plan of Action on Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for the period up to 2010. Supervised by a piloting committee, this plan had four major components:

- Prevention, under the responsibility of the Women’s Union.
- Fighting against crime, under the Ministry of Public Security.
- Reintegration of victims, under the aegis of the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA).
- Legal aspects – revision of laws, amendments, and new legislation – under the control of the Ministry of Justice.

These measures point to a political awareness that gave rise to concrete measures. One cannot deny that international aid agencies have played a role in the social construction of human trafficking in Vietnam. The many programs from UN agencies (WTO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIFEM, PNUD, UNIAP), international organizations (IOM, Asia Foundation), and NGOs (*Alliance Anti-Traffic Vietnam* – former AFESIP Vietnam, Action Aid, Oxfam-Quebec, Save the Children UK, World Vision, ADAPT, etc.) all developed in cooperation with government agencies in charge of the Plan of Action to cover a wide range of measures of prevention, protection, prosecution and legislation. Awareness campaigns, criminal investigations and arrests, the opening of centers for rehabilitation, repatriation and social reinsertion of victims are all activities that have had real impact on the ground. However, without denying the exploitation of some Vietnamese prostitutes, the moralizing representations carried by aid agencies have allowed the Vietnamese government to modulate if not intensify its discourse on prostitution and human trafficking, by adapting on the one hand to international prerogatives and on the other to its national policies of “fight against social evils” (*phòng chống tệ nạn xã hội*). It is evident that its policies have contributed to the elaboration of attitudes and representations we have collected in the field. The image described by informants – of a naïve migrant tricked, indebted and sold – corresponds to that carried by messages of prevention and in turn refers back to the narrative of the Asian victims of human trafficking (Lainez, 2010).

Messages of a moralizing nature aiming to warn about the risks of illegal migration, human trafficking and sexual exploitation are spread across An Giang by the local governments and occasionally by NGOs. This are presented sometimes in the form of panels stuck in front of schools, on river banks, on the grill fronts of people’s committees, or on the walls of military quarters. Here are a few examples.

- “Be vigilant and expose criminal bands of traffickers in women and children.”
- “One must protect women and children at all times, in all places.”
- “Let’s fight resolutely against the trafficking of women and children.”

- “Each of us and the whole community should eliminate the trafficking in women and children.”
- “Get rid of the trade in women and children. Eliminate the plague of the trade in women and children.”



Fig. 12: Anti-trafficking preventative boards on the National 952 to Vĩnh Xương.



Fig. 13: Anti-trafficking preventative boards in the district of Thường Phước near a school, next to the river Thường Thới Hậu.

In addition, the trafficking in Vietnamese women and children was a fashionable subject in developmental milieus in Cambodia at the beginning of the 2000s, especially with respect to the village of Svay Pak. The Cambodian Ministry of Interior, encouraged by the faith-based NGO International Justice Mission forcibly closed, with great pomp and after many fruitless attempts over the years, the Kilometer Eleven establishments in August 2004, after a vast media campaign.⁴ “*This is the price for re-establishing the reputation of the country,*” said Oun Sokuntheat, director of the Office to combat human trafficking in the Ministry of Interior (Bopha 2004). Cambodia wants to avoid at all costs the tarnishing of its international image, as seen in Thailand following the discovery of the so-called phenomenon of “sexual tourism” and “child sex tourism” during the 1990s. But one of the consequences of this campaign, the goal of which is the immediate closure of brothels, is simply the redistribution of Vietnamese prostitutes, adults and children, to other sites in Cambodia, for instance Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and the Thai border as shown by Frédéric Thomas (2005: 16). The enthusiasm of the international community and subsequently then of the Cambodian government to shut down the principal Vietnamese red light district that for years attracted thousands of women and children from the Mekong Delta, as well as thousands of Asian and Western clients, including many pedophiles, has no doubt contributed to the degradation in Vietnam of the image of Cambodia as a destination where it is easy to earn money as a prostitute.

Informal credit and debt

Several authors refer to debt to explain prostitute mobility, among them Annuska Derks (1998) and Simon Baker (et al 2003). Among the causes that motivate mobility for economic reasons, indebtedness indeed occupies a prime place. The debt (*nợ*) is a recurrent theme in discussions of prostitute mobility not only in Vietnam and Cambodia. The contention that prostitutes work to pay back debts recurs frequently in literature from aid organizations, but it is rarely specified whether this is a pre-migratory debt, a debt contracted during mobility, or a post-migratory debt.

Investigations in Châu Đốc reveal the existence of an endogenous financial sector that is highly developed. Contrary to the expected effects of policies of economic openness and liberalization under the “Renovation” (*đổi mới*) voted in 1986, the financial markets appear segmented between private and commercial banks in full expansion, and microfinance (essentially poverty-reduction programs managed by the state, and an endogenous sector of archaic character that persists despite efforts aiming to eradicate it: this sector of informal credit strangles the debtor, as in the expression “lending money that cuts the throat” (*cho vay tiền cắt cổ*). Moneylenders, who lend debtors modest sums at a usury rate of interest from 20% to 150% a month, operate the informal credit sector. Some of the causes of exclusion from access to credit arise from essentially administrative reasons. In effect, the “poor household card” (*thẻ/số hộ nghèo*) given to households by the ward committees after evaluating their income, gives access to low-interest loans from the state. Institutional operators like the Women’s Union or the Bank for Social Policy manage

⁴ Among many TV reports, the most famous is certainly “Children for Sale” for *Dateline* (NBC, 2005). This report depicts “punching” raids and the persecution of pedophiles throughout the world conducted by the NGO International Justice Mission. The most recent feature film is *Holly* by Guy Moshe (2006).

these credits. Each household is supposed to keep a household certificate registration (*hộ khẩu*) to gain access to these microcredits, but this is not granted. For example, if the family does not own its lodging, if it is mobile, if the head of the family does not have a birth certificate, or for various other reasons linked to sociopolitical and administrative rearrangements after the Vietnam war. So these households are confronted with a dual constraint: administrative precariousness on one side, and weakness or instability of income on the other combine to bar access to public or private credit. Then the only recourse is informal credit. The amount and conditions of the loan differ as a function of the needs and the solvency of the debtor, the willingness of the creditor, and the role of an intermediary (when one is used). It can vary from a few dollars lent for a day to tens of dollars to be reimbursed over several months. Why do households borrow? To subsist, to pay medical or school expenses, or for an expensive purchase: tools for production, a motorbike, a tricycle or rickshaw, a cell-phone. The illegal lottery, games of chance, sporting bets, and cockfights are also common generators of debt.

Once in debt, the debtor usually borrows to repay the interest accumulated. An initial loan of some dozens of dollars can reach several hundred over a short time, enclosing the debtor in a dangerous spiral that obliges him to borrow elsewhere and under the same conditions just to pay back the interest. The initial debt therefore breaks up into several debts that generate new interests in turn. Day after day, the debtor is “smothered” under the pressure of the creditor who uses any means at his disposal – insult, threat – to recover his loan.

Over one year I observed four families from Châu Đốc caught in the trap of informal credit, due to which at least one girl prostituted herself. At first analysis, the economic debt of families is a major but not determining reason for the entry of girls into prostitution. Other elements that are being studied include fleeing an oppressive family situation, the desire to travel and live in the city, the desire to attain financial independence and the dream of finding a wealthy husband in another country.

The second form of indebtedness, the debt contracted in the course of mobility, does not seem pertinent to the Mekong Delta. The cost of the trip between these provinces and Phnom Penh is relatively modest, from US\$10 to \$20, and it was unlikely to have been paid for by a loan. The cost of the trip does become pertinent when the migrant travels farther away in Asia, or as a future wife recruited by a matrimonial agency, especially when she finds herself in the hands of private operators. The cost of transport, especially flight tickets, is sooner or later billed to the prostitute or the future couple. But the costs of movement from the provinces of the Mekong Delta to Cambodia are not very high.

On the other hand, the debt contracted at the destination is pertinent, as has been demonstrated by Annuska Derks (1998) and Simon Baker (2003). Representations collected in Vietnam, which rely on an imaginary of interethnic relations and border tensions conjugated with awareness-raising messages disseminated by NGOs and the local media with dissuasive intent, all make great reference to credit and debt-bondage. A Vĩnh Xương driver covers many of the commonly held ideas that correspond to the situations these authors describe:

They [the Cambodians] take you and sell you to a brothel for US\$1000. Then the owner of the establishment tells you he has paid \$1200. You have to work to pay it all back. Afterward, he buys beauty products and clothes that he bills you for at an

exorbitant price. Whether or not you manage to save, you work continually without ever being able to entirely reimburse the debt.

A procurer from the same town details his services. He organizes the trip to Phnom Penh via Neak Loeang for US\$33. Before departure, the candidate can borrow up to \$560 from him in the guise of payment to the parents. This sum is an advance that will have to be paid back by “*working conscientiously*,” he says. The brothel manager registers each payment of sexual services and deducts from the initial debt the share that is owed to him. The worker is invited to make her own calculations to verify that there has been no overcharge. She is allowed to leave during the day, but at night the doors are shut and all she can do is prostitute herself as long as the debt is outstanding. Only after total reimbursement is the prostitute “free” to remain or go back to Vietnam. It often happens that the pimp offers his services to transfer money with an additional tax. The girl then deposits the sum to be sent at an address in Phnom Penh and he organizes transmitting it to her parents in Vietnam. A simple phone call verifies that the money was indeed transferred. The pimp offers immediate credit while explaining clearly the conditions of reimbursement – even if he omits the crucial element of possible interest. Like a manager working with a team, he explains in detail how things operate and he offers a large range of services: transport from An Giang to Phnom Penh, getting into contact with an employer, a salary advance, and the transfer of money by secure means.

Cross-border Vs local prostitution mobility: the alternative

According to my observations in Phnom Penh and the two provinces that border Vietnam, it has to be acknowledged that the number of Vietnamese women who engage in prostitution has clearly declined compared to the situation described by Annuska Derks and Simon Baker at the end of the 1990s. Today, the old Vietnamese red light districts of Phnom Penh – Svay Pak, street 63 near the central market, the “little flower street” of Tuol Kok, the crossroads of 271 at Steung Meanchey, and street 132 along Lake Boeung Kak – which once employed hundreds of Vietnamese prostitutes, have disappeared. Modern buildings at exorbitant prices replace the ramshackle brothels on pilings, a result of the current boom in real estate speculation. Vietnamese prostitutes still work in karaoke bars, cafes and the discotheques frequented by tourists and Western and Asian expatriates. But not only is their presence considerably reduced, but (without making a generalization) all the prostitutes that I had occasion to meet are Vietnamese women from Cambodia and not new economic migrants freshly arrived from the Mekong Delta. Investigation in the province leads to the same finding. For example, the masseuses of the most important casino of Chrey Thoum, the Grand Dragon, are all Cambodians with the exception of a single Vietnamese from Châu Đốc. And there do not seem to be strictly Vietnamese establishments of direct or indirect prostitution in the border towns of Phnum Den, Chrey Thoum and Ka Om Samna.

By contrast, the prostitution supply of Vietnamese women is vast in An Giang. On the one hand there are “direct” establishments that offer sexual services only, for example, certain inns and hotels. On the other hand there are camouflaged or “indirect” establishments – karaoke bars, massage parlors, hair salons, restaurants, beer bars – that offer complementary services: music, sauna, different types of massages and entertainment

during a meal. Street prostitution comes last. The sector is marked by precariousness as a function of crackdowns.

Observation of this form of prostitution is interesting around famous Sam Mountain (Núi Sam), five kilometers southeast of Châu Đốc. This hill has a hundred pagodas and temples scattered in grottoes. At its foot is the celebrated temple of the Goddess of the Realm (Bà Chúa Xứ), where every year there is a festival after the fourth lunar month. Núi Sam then becomes the focus of a pilgrimage that welcomes hundreds of thousands of essentially Vietnamese visitors. The streets are never empty. Pilgrims flow usually from the beginning of March although the festival occurs at the end of May by the solar calendar (dates of the lunar calendar change every year). The prostitution supply explodes in Núi Sam during this period. Prostitutes solicit local and pilgrim clients, and tourists if there are any, along Highway 91 and bring them to inns outside the city. Others work “indirectly” as waitresses in the inns (there are more than 400 of them) and sleep with clients outside serving hours. Many prostitutes come from elsewhere and disappear suddenly at the end of the high season. Few come from Núi Sam and from Châu Đốc, but the majority comes from adjacent provinces. More study is necessary to find out about their exact origins, the social networks that organize their mobility, the economic profits, and their destinations after the festival of Núi Sam. However, the hypothesis of a form of seasonal mobility for prostitution that follows the calendar of local festivals is absent from both research and current policies addressing human trafficking and prostitution. While the Vietnamese government, shows a real desire to actively combat the supposed transnational trafficking flows toward Asian countries like Cambodia, it overlooks internal mobility that involves at least hundreds of women in the district of Châu Đốc.

Discussions with pimps, procurers and smugglers help us understand of the offers available to prospective mobile prostitutes.

A moto-taxi from Núi Sam boasts of the seasonal employment. One of his friends, patron of an inn-restaurant, recruits waitresses in high season. The working hours are from 6 AM to 6 PM. The monthly salary including board and lodging is US\$56. The employee is free to leave with clients outside working time, preferably with Western tourists who are thought to be more generous than the Vietnamese.

The same is true in the Khmer district of Tri Tôn. A moto-taxi and pimp describes the working conditions there. Prostitutes have the choice between working in the inn or directly from home. The monthly salary is \$56. The procurer takes care of lodging her with a relative or in a rented room, and with finding clients who “pay well” – businessmen, visitors, officials – whom she services discretely at home, thus economizing on the cost of a flophouse room. This differentiates her from street prostitutes who according to this informant are “worthless.” As elsewhere, the procurer takes a percentage of the profits and reserves the right to sleep with his protégée at any time.

A Châu Phú pimp offers similar conditions. The girl works in a café at the market where she “sits down to serve clients.” She does not get a salary but tips of \$2 or \$3 per head. She is free to sleep with them. The sex is negotiated at between \$5 and \$8, to which must be added the cost of renting the room. According to this pimp, it is normal to prostitute far from home since they can then “preserve a reputation at home.” This is why some prostitutes of Tân Châu work in Châu Đốc and vice-versa.

Few pimps and smugglers offer a wider range of services. For instance, a moto-taxi driver and procurer from Hồng Ngự (Đồng Tháp province) described the services he offers to those who come to meet him. The prospective prostitute can work in the beer bar of one

of his uncles in an adjacent district of Hồng Ngự. She gets US\$1.5 for each bottle sold and \$3 for each table served. She is free to “leave with clients” (*đi khách*) who want to but only outside working hours. She can also work in the provincial town of Hồng Ngự. One of the brothers of the procurer, a local moto-taxi driver, offers lodging. In addition, she works as a prostitute in an inn where the price of sex is US\$3.5. The brother acts as a pimp and finds clients in exchange for a commission of half the price paid. In addition, he reserves the right to sleep with her when he feels like it. The candidate can also choose to live alone in a rented room for \$5 to \$10. Thus she can earn \$30 to \$35 in a working day, of which half goes to the boss or the pimp who recruits the clientele. New employees sell their services for more money because the usual customers appreciate “youth” and “novelty.”⁵ In a working day, she could make \$17 net, or \$459 a month (for 27 working days), from which must be subtracted \$75 (\$15 + \$60) for food and lodging. She would have \$384 left at the end of the month. If she stays in her room and goes out only when a client demands her, or goes to work at the inn, she risks nothing. The police inspect inns that are suspected of housing activities linked to prostitution, but workers whose papers are in order are not worried. Finally, if the prospective prostitute wishes to go to Phnom Penh, another of the procurer’s brothers could place her as a house-cleaner for a monthly salary of US\$100. Life in Phnom Penh would be “easy” according to the procurer, and the girl would be free to do what she wanted outside working hours. She could work as a prostitute for him if she wanted, but the pimp stressed that:

It is better to work here [in Vietnam] than in Phnom Penh. She can also earn money working up there, but the girl must wait several days before starting. If she lives in the house, my brother takes care of finding her clients, and he regularly finds them. But if she works here with me, she is sure to work every day.

Another alternative that needs to be further investigated is to migrate to “town” (*thành phố*), meaning Hồ Chí Minh City or to the peripheral provinces that are rapidly industrializing, such as Bình Dương. This was repeated everywhere, for the following reasons:

- Life is easier in Saigon than in Phnom Penh.
- Migrants who go to Cambodia risk being tricked.
- Vietnam is a richer and safer country than Cambodia.
- It is preferable to live in one’s own country
- There are more professional opportunities in Vietnam than in Phnom Penh.
- Salaries and working conditions are better in Vietnam.

These arguments are added to those mentioned previously and reinforce the feeling of aversion that the Vietnamese of An Giang have toward migration of prostitutes toward Cambodia. Discourses and observations at the Vietnamese border districts suggest that internal mobility for prostitution is taking over from the international, at least for Cambodia. But it is hard to quantify this tendency as previously mentioned. There is trustworthy data about international professional migrations (export of labor) or declared transnational matrimony (through brokering agencies), but data is scarce for internal mobility, especially if the migrants do not report themselves to People’s Committees,

⁵ According to the expression “The old ox like to eat young grass” (*trâu già ham gặm cỏ non*).

which is often the case when their mobility is temporary or they are renting accommodation.

5. Conclusion

How has the issue of prostitution mobility between Vietnam and Cambodia changed on the ground over the space of ten years? This study allows us to conclude that: 1) mobility is declining; 2) various factors in both Vietnam and Cambodia explain this change. According to our observations, and by all accounts, prostitution mobility from Vietnam to Cambodia is no longer current in the districts studied. However, this does not mean that the flow has totally dried up, as proved by some propositions made by pimps and procurers encountered in An Giang. Factors specific to each country explain this general change of trend.

In Cambodia, several elements have to be taken into account that need further investigation: the campaign to close Svay Pak, the real *El Dorado* of Vietnamese prostitution migrants from about 1994 to 2004, had the result of a geographical reorganization of Vietnamese prostitution. Not only has the offer become more clandestine, but now one of the main center of attraction for migrant candidates from the Delta has closed its doors, thus destroying hundreds if not thousands of professional opportunities. Another factor could be the increased competition between Vietnamese and Cambodian prostitutes in the main cities of Cambodia. The final element could be legal: the activities of Vietnamese migrants may have been made more difficult due to increased police repression of prostitution after the implementation in 2008 of the *Cambodian Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation* that criminalizes trafficking and indirectly affects prostitution.⁶ All prostitutes in Cambodia are affected by this change in policy, and Vietnamese women, more vulnerable from legal and social standpoints, are affected even more.

In Vietnam, other factors have to be considered. Cambodia is no longer viewed as a destination for easy money but rather as a dangerous and unwelcoming country from which the migrant does not return unscathed. In An Giang, there is real awareness of the risks inherent in illegal prostitute migration. The prevention campaigns organized by NGOs and international organizations, as well as the repatriation of women considered as “victims” of trafficking, have resulted in a change in the imaginary landscape of potential emigrants, who can no longer act in ignorance. Enticing stories no longer suffice to feed the image of a Cambodian *El Dorado*. Observable realities, combined with accounts of trickery, indebtedness, professional exploitation, violence and fatal diseases like AIDS, have all contributed to awareness of the risks, and to the resulting decline in the mobility flow.

⁶ This act, which criminalizes all forms of prostitution, was passed by the National Assembly of Cambodia on 20 December 2007, and was approved by the Senate on 18 January 2008. It is the object of intense controversy in Cambodia; Cambodian NGOs such as Women’s Network for Unity and international NGOs denounce police abuse of prostitutes. The increasing clandestine nature of prostitution had made it difficult for these organizations to reach the beneficiaries of their social and health programs. See Bopha (2008).

The interesting alternatives of local prostitution and local mobility have taken the upper hand over the Cambodian option. This study shows that we have to pay attention to seasonal mobility as well as to internal migration to Hô Chi Minh City and its neighboring industrializing provinces. The seasonal flux of prostitutes observed in Núi Sam during the festival season reveals a form of localized temporary mobility that is rarely mentioned. This influx drains hundreds of women from one district to another who are following a calendar still to be determined. Prostitution migration to Hô Chi Minh City and Bình Dương is on the same scale. This is a grey zone of Vietnam's economic and industrial development that is inevitably accompanied by undesirable perverse effects such as the growth in demand for entertainment in the provincial towns or areas where it did not previously exist.

Lastly, it should also be stressed that international mobility toward Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea starting from Vietnamese border districts is rarely mentioned by informants. The majority of stories deals with migration toward Cambodia and refers to the past. I found only two cases of Vietnamese prostitution in Malaysia. These kinds of flows remain exceptional on the An Giang border. In fact, none of the prostitutes met in Châu Đốc know about the procedures necessary to migrate outside the border perimeter. Yet many have gone as prostitutes to Cambodia or other Mekong provinces, which proves their taste for mobility. Currently, international marriage migration to Asian countries like Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore is localized in districts with specialized social networks. In An Giang, this is the district of Thoại Sơn for marriages with Taiwanese. Some organizations see this form of marriage mobility as trafficking. Yet the arrangements to facilitate this new kind of transnational mobility are legal and sophisticated: a valid passport, circulation under international agreements fostering free circulation of people in Asia, democratization of transportation (use of low cost companies like Air Asia or Jet Star), sophisticated means of communication (Internet, mobile phone). Henceforth, mobility appears no longer as a clandestine phenomenon localized on porous borders in a rural milieu, but rather global and often legal. In fact, nowadays it is more tempting for a candidate for emigration to marry in Taipei or Seoul or to be a prostitute in Singapore than to go to a massage parlor in Phnom Penh fleeced by the police. The trafficking paradigm of the 1990s and 2000s that presented an innocent peasant victim of a border mafia of smugglers is now obsolete.

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