
Dealing in Desire

Patara McKeen

Abstract

This is a review of Kimberly Kay Hoang's (2015) *Dealing in Desire*. Her ethnographic study observes four different bars in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: 1) Kong Sao Bar, 2) Naught Girls, 3) Secrets, and 4) Lavender. Hoang traces different representations of the global financial sector after the 2008 financial crisis and explores the relationship between Asian ascendancy and Western decline. From the local to the international, interactions with clients and hostesses in the bars of Ho Chi Minh City demonstrate a new global trend: the rise in transactions occurring among a global financial sector undefined by traditional social structures (e.g., commercial or national banks). By moving from observer to participant, Hoang develops a deeper understanding of the capital and labour practices that these men and women engage in, highlighting how their everyday experiences demonstrate that nightlife in the city is a way for locals to move up the socio-economic ladder.

Keywords

Asian ascendancy, Western decline, global financial sector, Ho Chi Minh City

*Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline,
and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*
by Kimberly Kay Hoang, 2015,
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Flying into Vietnam and into the bars of Ho Chi Minh City, Kimberly Kay Hoang discovers shifting realities in the global financial sector by observing bar patrons and hostesses. Her book, *Dealing in Desire*, challenges the idea of Western hegemony in international transactions in Vietnam following the 2008 financial crisis. Beginning her journey, Hoang lets intuition be her guide as she explores Ho Chi Minh City on motorbike and winds up drawn to its nightlife. Here, she unearths the 'hearts and minds' of the global financial sector.

While the United States, Canada, and Europe are feeling the downturn of the 2008 crisis, nightlife in Ho Chi Minh City is booming. In fact, Vietnam is one of the fastest developing economies in the world at the time. This means lucrative business for the city, and upon further exploration, Hoang finds that many big deals are being struck in the sex industry. In the bars she visits, Kong Sao Bar, Naughty Girls, Secrets, and Lavender, Hoang discovers different representations of Asian ascendancy and Western decline, whereby she finds that the hostesses' work provides a small glance into the newly monied high-flying lives of Asian men and the subsequent desire of their white peers for a world before the recession.

Hoang does not just observe, she also participates, working as a hostess to uncover how these financial and cultural shifts are taking place. In one bar, Secrets, Western businessmen in Vietnam try to project Western dominance through their interactions with hostesses. These men reminisce for a world before the crisis and Western decline. While in another bar, Naughty Girls, Western backpackers and tourists go to experience Vietnam as a "Third World." The third bar, Kong Sao Bar, is a hotbed of local activity and Asian businessmen, and the last bar, Lavender, is frequented by overseas Vietnamese men (referred to as "Viet Kieus"). Thousands to hundreds of thousands of dollars are negotiated and exchanged between these last two bars. In all four locations, however, Hoang discovers Vietnam is actually a place where Asian men, either elites, locals, or foreign-born, are shifting the global financial landscape.

Hoang navigates very real experiences amidst her fieldwork. Observing and interviewing locals that she encounters along the way, her book moves between data and theory in a seamless, uninterrupted fashion. One interesting aspect is the role of body work the hostesses perform, as they try to meet the desires of their clients and achieve body capital. Here, the women's bodies act as the centre for economic transaction (body capital), while also allowing them to ascend to higher socio-economic positions (body work). This exemplifies the concept of "technologies of embodiment;" i.e., the ways in which women transform their bodies to meet the demands of Vietnamese society and engage in new labour opportunities.

Another interesting aspect is her narrative of the sex industry as being a place of economic ascension for Asian men and women alike. She discovers different roles, for example, that men (clients), acting as businessmen, locals, or travellers, use the Asian glamour of Ho Chi Minh City's nightlife to make deals or live out their dreams. In the desires of men and the labour of women, Hoang explores the different representations of a changing global financial sector. The bars in Vietnam become a place to observe, not sex, but capital. The movement of huge financial transactions and cross-national dealings, as well as the body capital of women to meet the desires of their men clients, illustrates the complexities of Asian ascendancy. As well, this engages with another narrative, that of a declining West. Here, some (Western) men desire for a West before the recession and to live out the false belief of a still "Third World" Vietnam. For the men clients, their desires, either to negotiate trade or to please their business partners, mirror the desires of the women hostesses, as they gain access to higher economic opportunity. These transactions involve more than money, but emotion too. Clients use their wealth to help support and uplift the hostesses, and, in doing so, enable their transition from hostess to independent businesswoman.

Overall, this book provides a strong analysis of the shifting realities of the global financial sector after the 2008 financial crisis, presenting it through a

fascinating account of Vietnam's nightlife. Through happenstance and word-of-mouth, Hoang chases the glitz and glamour of Ho Chi Minh City's nightlife to map out different areas of the city's sex industry. In the desires of men and the labour of women, Hoang explores the different representations of a changing global financial sector. The bars in Vietnam become a place to observe, not sex, but capital. The movement of huge financial transactions and cross-national dealings, as well as the body capital of women to meet the desires of their men clients, illustrates the complexities of Asian ascendancy. Further, all of this engages with another narrative, that of a declining West. Here, some (Western) men desire for a West before the crisis and to fulfil a fantasy for a still "Third World" Vietnam. Of course, this is an impossible desire, a yearning of mythical proportions, as Vietnam represents an Asia on the rise.

Author biography

Patara McKeen is a MA student in Sociology at the University of British Columbia. His research is on the far-reaching impacts of the 1907 anti-Asian riots in Vancouver, Canada. Previously, he did a Master's in Sociology of Law at the University of the Basque Country and a BA in Law at Carleton University. He is a recipient of the Canada Graduate Scholarships-Master's (CGSM).