



Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work

By Kimberly Kay Hoang

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This captivating ethnography explores Vietnam's sex industry as the country ascends the global and regional stage. Over the course of five years, author Kimberly Kay Hoang worked at four exclusive Saigon hostess bars catering to diverse clientele: wealthy local Vietnamese and Asian businessmen, Viet Kieus (ethnic Vietnamese living abroad), Western businessmen, and Western budget-tourists. *Dealing in Desire* takes an in-depth and often personal look at both the sex workers and their clients to show how Vietnamese high finance and benevolent giving are connected to the intimate spheres of the informal economy. For the domestic super-elite who use the levers of political power to channel foreign capital into real estate and manufacturing projects, conspicuous consumption is a means of projecting an image of Asian ascendancy to potential investors. For Viet Kieus and Westerners who bring remittances into the local economy, personal relationships with local sex workers reinforce their ideas of Asia's rise and Western decline, while simultaneously bolstering their diminished masculinity. *Dealing in Desire* illuminates Ho Chi Minh City's sex industry as not just a microcosm of the global economy, but a critical space where dreams and deals are traded.

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Editorial Review

Review

"The topic of *Dealing in Desire* is arresting and the book is destined to gain a wide readership. Furthermore, not only is the fieldwork impressive, but the arguments are provocative and well substantiated."

(Erik Harms *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 2015-06-01)

"A valuable contribution to our understanding of the sex industry . . . The praise that Hoang's research has received is well deserved, and *Dealing in Desire* is a must-read."

(Jack David Eller *Anthropology Review Database* 2015-10-02)

"This book is ethnographically rich and is an intriguing and gripping read."

(*American Journal of Sociology* 2016-03-01)

From the Inside Flap

"This extraordinary work is pathbreaking, substantively, theoretically, and methodologically. It powerfully explores the socially co-constitutive and critical cultural role of Vietnam's multi-tiered sex industry in its burgeoning global economic sector. Hoang simultaneously dissects competing hierarchies of race, gender, and nation in the pursuit of multinational deals and masculine desires. It upends traditional trafficking studies of Asian sex workers as victims, presenting them instead as shrewd entrepreneurs and creative agents of their own lives. A methodological tour de force. Malinowskian in scope, depth, daring, and technical virtuosity, this will remain the standard by which sociological fieldwork in other societies will be judged for years to come."—Orlando Patterson, John Cowles Professor of Sociology, Harvard University, and coeditor of *The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth*

"Eye-opening and ground-breaking. Kimberly Kay Hoang's tour-de-force ethnography inhabits and crosses multiple domains of desire-making to showcase the mutual construction of masculinities, financial deal-making, and transnational political-economic identities. Through the innovative frame of desire as a force of production, this work dismantles the problematic analytic binaries of "culture" and "economy." Specifically, by viscerally analyzing the role of confidence, the production of hierarchical status, and the buttressing of failure – which are all premised on particular performances of feminine submission –in creating the conditions of possibility for investment (and individual) potentials, Hoang delivers what many works have only promised. That is, that embodiment, inequality, and intimacy construct social economies. Differential masculinities and women's roles in brokering these differences while making space for their own life projects are the currencies of market development and action. Rarely ever has the relationship between desire, work, capital, and national identity been so viscerally articulated. Truly an intrepid, captivating ethnography."— Karen Ho, author of *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*

"Boldly linking global political and economic transformations to intimate transactions, Hoang's *Dealing in Desire* offers a transformative account and novel analysis of sex work. A welcome contribution to gender studies and the economy of intimacy, the book will interest a wide audience."—Viviana A. Zelizer, Lloyd Cotsen '50 Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, and author of *The Purchase of Intimacy and Economic Lives*

“In *Dealing in Desire*, Hoang shows us how to look at the micro to learn about the macro. Her rich ethnographic account of the sexual industries in Vietnam situates our understanding of sex work in a larger political economy as it illustrates how race, nation, and class produce multiple masculinities and femininities.”—Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, author of *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work*

“*Dealing in Desire* is obviously an exceptionally courageous book given the challenging fieldwork Hoang engaged in. But equally importantly, it is a very astute book that connects different modes of presentation of the body by Vietnamese karaoke girls to specific organizational contexts and to macro structural transformations in East Asia. The book stands out as a signal contribution to the new sociology of transnationalism.”—Michele Lamont, Director, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, and author of *The Dignity of Working Men*

“*Dealing in Desire* is a stunning book – an exemplar of what global ethnography should be. It knits together global finance, colonial fantasy, and national identity in its exploration of the stratified sex work industry of Ho Chi Minh City. Bridging macro and micro processes, it shows us that sex work is about far more than sex. It is about desire for status, anxieties about masculinity and downward mobility, and economic competition. Through this remarkable ethnography we are able to see sex work as a dense site where both clients and workers navigate and negotiate hierarchies of race, class, and gender to enhance their position in the global political economy.”—Raka Ray, Professor and Chair of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley and author of *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity and Class in India*

“*Dealing in Desire* is easily the most deeply researched and rigorously argued book ever written about the Vietnamese sex industry and it is surely one of the most authoritative studies currently available on the sociological dynamics of sex work in the current era of accelerated globalization. For a piece of serious academic scholarship, it is also a remarkably gripping read.”—Peter Zinoman, Professor of History and Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley

“*Dealing in Desire* is the most extraordinary ethnography I have read in years. At a time when ethnographers in sociology seem inclined to write sensationalist accounts designed for mass appeal, Hoang represents the relationship between sexual and economic relations in Vietnam with exceptional thoughtfulness, methodological self-reflection, and theoretical sophistication. The book beautifully examines the relationships among masculinity, femininity, power, sexuality, and financial transactions among Western and Vietnamese women and men, making clear the many ways that sex workers and their clients or patrons manipulate their relations to meet complex personal and economic needs. Hoang’s approach is masterful. She respects her subjects enough to avoid feeding two most common tropes in common representations of Asian sex workers, the exotic doll and the helpless victim. And she respects her readers enough to challenge us with a complex yet consistently engaging narrative. *Dealing in Desire* is a triumph.”—Mario Luis Small, Grafstein Family Professor, Harvard University, and author of *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life*

About the Author

Kimberly Kay Hoang is Assistant Professor of Sociology and the College at the University of Chicago.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Darrell Fowler:

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Pauline Mueller:

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