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Supplying Female Bodies: Labor Migration, Sex Work, and the Commoditization of Women in Colonial Indochina and Contemporary Vietnam

Women figure prominently in the historiography of modern Vietnam. Apart from the long tradition of equating women's virtues with courage and ardent patriotism dating back to the Trưng sisters, Vietnamese women have played an admirable, though often less than enviable, role in the successive international, domestic, and even internecine conflicts that punctuated Vietnam's incorporation into a globalized world. In the master narrative of the Vietnamese state, women carry the charged aura of the nation. As mothers, workers, and fighters they embody a complete array of icons around which Vietnamese can proudly and justifiably rally.

While the (re)constructions of Vietnam and its victories over much better endowed enemies (France, United States, China) was built upon the mobilization of women from all walks of life, war cannot sum up the whole history of Vietnam in modern times. War is but one part of a larger picture. Whatever the catastrophic levels of warfare and its attendant violence on ordinary people, life—everyday life, made up of choices about one's options in work, relationships, leisure, movements and so forth—went on. There were always people, including women, who were eager to live, sometimes just to survive and make the best of a situation over which they had little control. Periods

of intense fighting disrupted social and economic conditions and left many particularly vulnerable—women were among the main casualties. Yet even in peacetime, many families lived on the edge of poverty. And despite the fact that Vietnam has been free of warfare for the last three decades, underprivileged economic conditions still continue to drive many women into circuits that eventually propel them to the fore, not to fight anymore, but to supply their bodies for hard work, of which sex work is one of the most visible forms.

This special issue of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, “Commodified Women’s Bodies in Vietnam and Beyond,” presents a set of papers about female bodies at work, not at war, and about women caught in processes of circulation and commoditization of their bodies.¹ For many, if not most, these processes did not result from a free choice. Circumstances forced these women to seek income for themselves or their families through their labor as small-scale carriers cum buyers of goods, or in a variety of sex-related jobs. Willingly or not, their bodies became tools in the hands of others, mostly men, although as we shall see, women themselves also participated in the supply mechanisms that provided female bodies as commodities to be devoured.² Thus the dual question of commoditization and migration, including the disreputable mode of human trafficking for sex work, is central to the four papers of this special issue.

The notion of commoditization of the body can range broadly. It covers a wide scope of practices from fairly plain jobs in service employment to the organ trade. Yet a major domain of study devotes attention to how women’s bodies are commoditized when they are treated as interchangeable means to entice, incite, or gratify sexual desire. Female bodies can be exchanged for goods other than money, in activities ranging from advertising to pornography, from “booth babes” to stripping, and even to human trafficking and sexual slavery. While prostitution has become one of the major themes in feminist historical research, the female body per se has not received the attention it deserves, as if the body was implicitly perceived as a liability not to be touched upon due to shared assumptions of biological determinism. In more recent work, however, “bodies are theorized as sites of culturally inscribed and disputed meanings, experiences and feelings.”³ The body is read as a social construct. This is especially important in works that examine the labor market in service economies. While the case studies in this issue do not occur in

“service economies”—neither colonial Indochina nor present-day Vietnam can count as such—they do examine examples of “servicing,” and more precisely, the kind of “interactive service” in which women use their bodies to work *on* the bodies of others (customers, patrons, and so forth).⁴

Human trafficking has ranked high in media coverage, governmental work or even film production in the last decade, mostly with women as objects of a more or less overt trade. The United Nations, like its forbearer the League of Nations, has taken up the challenge to combat a phenomenon construed since the late-nineteenth century under various terms: white slavery, traffic in women and children, sexual slavery, and so forth.⁵ “White slavery” was a myth that revealed anxieties within European societies about the status of women, especially about European women being “degraded” in the hands of “native” men, or “Orientals.”⁶ The concept, however, can also be applied in a few East Asian countries where the phenomenon was prevalent, even if international and national institutions largely failed to come up with adequate solutions.⁷ Current studies of human trafficking, however, help us understand the processes that nurtured the traffic in women in East Asia before the Second World War.⁸ As Nicolas Lainez argues and demonstrates, “falling into prostitution” just does not do justice to the variety of forms of sexual encounters and arrangements that women can experience. And while current conditions cannot be transposed to earlier historical periods, there is nevertheless something to be gained from new perspectives that enrich our understanding and interpretation of the commoditization of female bodies of the past.⁹

In Vietnam, colonial records reveal that human trafficking was a widespread phenomenon. While it certainly existed prior to the French conquest, one historian argues that colonization triggered an acceleration and extension of kidnapping and abduction across the border region with China. “Cet ignoble trafic” targeted mostly women who were sold as servants, wives, and prostitutes in China. Contemporary studies of prostitution show that this process is still at work today in Vietnam.¹⁰ Yet one should not read every type of movement as “traffic.” As with all historical and social processes, place matters. Women are not offered the same opportunities; much depends on location. Border areas are places where people “cross over” and intermingle to exchange goods, money, and sometimes human beings. And while movement or migration constitutes one way to overcome the initial inequality, it

generates in itself forms of contact and vulnerability to which women are particularly exposed.¹¹ The crossing of borders, however, can be done over long distances, thanks to the infrastructures of international transportation that developed in the nineteenth century.

Japanese women were among the first “pioneer” migrants that moved to and settled in various South, East, and Southeast Asian countries.¹² The hotly debated issue of “comfort women,” a particular case of “body supply” through state-sanctioned channels, has overshadowed the phenomenon of Japanese prostitution in the various harbor cities of East and Southeast Asia before the Second World War.¹³ Frédéric Roustan’s paper takes a fresh look at the case of migrant Japanese prostitutes by examining the image, perceptions, and realities of Japanese-run brothels in Indochina. His paper highlights the varied sources and interlocking networks of trafficking in Japanese women, whose trip from the home country often included various stops on their way to Indochina. Yet Indochinese cities were not necessarily the last station in the cycle of commoditization of their bodies. Quite clearly, the networks that supported and promoted the circulation of Japanese women for the purpose of prostitution in Asia were well in place shortly after the opening of Japan in the nineteenth century. This preexisting “infrastructure” offered a ready-made instrument upon which the Japanese army grafted its own requisites during the war.

In colonial Indochina, women involved in prostitution came under the severe, though inefficient, system of registration and control by the authorities. The French colonizers basically implemented the same system throughout their possessions, albeit with minor local adaptations.¹⁴ In her essay, Isabelle Tracol-Huynh uses the colonial archives to explore the experience of Hà Nội prostitutes. The bodies of prostitutes were a central and permanent concern of the authorities, not for the sake of their well-being, but to monitor and contain the risk of venereal diseases, and hence, of impairing the life forces of French troops and residents. Prostitutes came from various regions around Hà Nội within a radius of up to one-hundred and twenty kilometers, providing one instance of migration from one’s native place for the sake of making a better living in a large city. Once they entered the system of prostitution, however, they became objects over which men (pimps and patrons), women (brothel owners) and an unforgiving administration (police, medical services) had a

stake and imposed their rules. While prostitutes cannot be reduced to “contested bodies,” their loss of individuality is nowhere as explicit as in the plain administrative record of their death as “prostitute no. x.”

Sex work in various guises also figures prominently in Caroline Grillot’s work. Her paper offers a broad panoramic view of the movement of Vietnamese women across the border to a particular Chinese city, Hekou. She examines the current views and perceptions held by Chinese men about Vietnamese men and women. These perceptions are formed in a kind of distorted mirror in which Chinese men view and judge Vietnamese men via ambivalent perceptions and appreciation of Vietnamese women. Vietnamese women goods-carriers and buyers seem to impress with their toughness and hard work, and at the same time, they come to be viewed like beasts of burden that Chinese traders avoid helping. Vietnamese women also enter into marriage or quasi-marriage relationships with local men, which also reveal the relative social fluidity of a border region. Nevertheless, like the hard-working Vietnamese buyers who carry mountains of goods on their bicycles, money is the fundamental rationale for the great majority of the women in movements across the border. As can be expected, “otherness” also becomes a factor in the Chinese perception of Vietnamese women available in the southern Chinese sex market. In Hekou, Chinese men can experience a sense of exoticism and eroticism while “at home.” One wonders, however, how the sex market operates in such a place, whether, as in colonial Indochina, the consumed bodies are not merely marked as female, but sold as commodities of higher or lesser value based on national origin.

Prostitution or sex work are broad categories that do not reflect the variety of situations through which women end up using their bodies to cater to the sexual desires or needs of men. Nicolas Lainez’s paper offers a stimulating perspective as it highlights a continuum of sexual configurations that a woman—in this case a woman under duress and pressure by her own mother—can adopt to obtain different kinds of material advantages (money, gifts, travel, food, and so forth) from the men with whom she establishes much more complex relationships than straightforward “sex for money.” While poverty is certainly primordial, what is also intriguing here is the fine analysis of other factors pushing a woman into sex work. Family environment, moving to a

larger city and losing one's personal network of kin and friends, or connections made with strangers or acquaintances may play as great a role as poverty in a chain of events leading to outright prostitution. By selling her daughter's virginity, Lainez argues, the mother opened the way for her daughter to think of, and at least use, her body as a commodity through which to make a living. Indeed, Lainez shows that some women, despite the cards they have been dealt, still retain or regain a limited degree of agency.¹⁵

The choice of approaching one seedy aspect of gender relations from the perspective of supplying bodies through the commoditization of women is a welcome contribution to a little touched upon topic in historical and anthropological studies of Vietnam.¹⁶

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Notes

1. I am aware of the commoditization/commodification distinction. Both apply here as women's bodies undoubtedly were commoditized very early on with changes over time in the ways/modes (commoditization) and values/meanings (commodification) attached to this process. For the sake of clarity, I shall adopt the most commonly used term by anthropologists. See Amalia L. Cabezas, *Economies of Desire: Sex and Tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).
2. One can even argue that women found a space of autonomy in the management of brothel houses. See Elizabeth Sinn, "Women at Work: Chinese Brothel Keepers in Nineteenth-Century Hong Kong," *Journal of Women's History* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 87–111.
3. Linda McDowell, *Working Bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2009), 12.
4. I borrowed this notion from McDowell, *Working Bodies*.
5. Katarina Leppänen, "Movement of Women: Trafficking in the Interwar Era," *Women's Studies International Forum* 30, no. 6 (November–December 2007): 523–533; Thomas Fischer, "Der Weg Nach Buenos Aires - Frauenhandel und

- Prostitution in den 1920er Jahren” [The Way to Buenos Aires - Trafficking in Women and Prostitution in the 1920s], *Comparativ: Leipziger Beiträge zur Universalgeschichte und Vergleichenden Gesellschaftsforschung* [Comparativ: Leipzig’s Contributions to World History and Comparative Research on Societies] 13, no. 4 (2003): 138–154.
6. Jean-Michel Chaumont, *Le mythe de la traite des blanches: enquête sur la fabrication d’un fléau* [The Myth of the White Slave Trade: A Survey of Manufacturing a Scourge] (Paris: La Découverte, 2009); Harald Fischertine, “White Women Degrading Themselves to the Lowest Depths’: European Networks of Prostitution and Colonial Anxieties in British India and Ceylon ca. 1880–1914,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40, no. 2 (June 2003): 163–190; Philippa Levine, “‘A Multitude of Unchaste Women’: Prostitution in the British Empire,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 4 (winter 2004): 159–163.
 7. On the Chinese case, see Christian Henriot, *Prostitution in Shanghai. A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chapter 13.
 8. See the remarkable UNICRI report, *Trafficking of Nigerian Girls in Italy. The Data, the Stories, the Social Services* (Roma: UNICRI, 2010). On similar issues, see Achebe Nwando, “The Road to Italy: Nigerian Sex Workers at Home and Abroad,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 15, no. 4 (winter 2004): 178–185; Katarina Leppänen, “International Reorganisation and Traffic in Women: Venues of Vulnerability and Resistance,” *Lychnos* [Lamp (biblical word)] (January 2006): 110–134; Francesca Mascellini, “La forza delle illusioni: donne migranti e traffico di esseri umani” [The Power of Illusions: Women Migrants and Human Trafficking], *Studi Emigrazione* [Emigration Studies] 52, no. 159 (2005): 519–545; Yasuko Fujikura, “Borders and Boundaries in the Era of Aids: Trafficking in Women and Prostitution in Nepal,” *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 8, no. 1 (June 2003): 1–35; Monique Hennink and Simkhada Padam, “Sex Trafficking in Nepal: Context and Process,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 13, no. 3 (2004): 305–338.
 9. See the special issue of the *Journal of Women’s History* on “Sex Work and Women’s Labor around the World,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 4 (Winter 2004).
 10. Micheline Lessard, “‘Cet ignoble trafic’: The Kidnapping and Sale of Vietnamese Women and Children in French Colonial Indochina, 1873–1935,” *French Colonial History* 10 (2009): 6.
 11. On the diversity of paths among women migrants from four major regions (China, Africa, Maghreb, and Central Europe) to France, see Laurence Roulleau-Berger, *Migrer au féminin* [Migrate to the Feminine] (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010).

12. Joshua Fogel, "Prostitutes and Painters: Early Japanese Migrants to Shanghai," in *Migration in History: Human Migration in Comparative Perspective*, eds. Marc S. Rodriguez and Anthony Grafton (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 89–117; Stephen Legg, "Governing Prostitution in Colonial Delhi: From Cantonment Regulations to International Hygiene (1864–1939)," *Social History* 34, no. 4 (November 2009): 447–467.
13. Aside from the list of scholarly papers below, no less than eleven books have been published on this topic in English. See Anne-Katrein Becker, "Koreanische Zwangsprostituierte im Zweiten Weltkrieg" [Korean Forced Prostitution during the Second World War], *Asien Afrika Latinamerika* [Asia, Africa, Latin America] 26, no. 3 (1998): 347–358; Young-Joo Byun and H el ene Cixous, "A propos de l'affaire des 'femmes de r econfort' de l'arm ee japonaise" [About the Matter of 'Comfort Women' of the Japanese Army], *Clio: Histoire, Femmes et Soci et es* [Clio: History, Women and Societies] 17 (2003): 187–202; Chin Sung Chung, "The Origin and Development of the Military Sexual Slavery Problem in Imperial Japan," *Positions* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 219–255; Hayashi Hirofumi, "Disputes in Japan over the Japanese Military 'Comfort Women' System and Its Perception in History," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617, no. 1 (May 2008): 123–132; Hayashi Hirofumi, "Japanese Comfort Women in Southeast Asia," *Japan Forum* 10, no. 2 (1998): 211–219; Hayashi Hirofumi, "The Japanese Movement to Protest Wartime Sexual Violence," *Critical Asian Studies* 33, no. 4 (December 2001): 572–580; Hyunah Yang, "Revisiting the Issue of Korean 'Military Comfort Women': The Question of Truth and Positionality," *Positions* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 51–72; Hyun Sook Kim, "History and Memory: The 'Comfort Women' Controversy," *Positions* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 73–108; Mar a Lourdes Mart inez, "Zwangsprostitution und Entsch adigung: Zur Diskussion  uber die 'Trostrfrauen' in Japan" [Forced Prostitution and Compensation: To Talk about the 'Comfort Women' in Japan], *Periplus: Jahrbuch fur Aussereuropaische Geschichte* [Periplus: Yearbook for Extra-European History] 11 (2001): 26–42; Michiko Nakahara, "'Comfort Women' in Malaysia," *Critical Asian Studies* 33, no. 4 (December 2001): 581–589; Won Soon Park, "Japanese Reparations Policies and the 'Comfort Women' Question," *Positions* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 107–136; Nicola Piper, "War and Memory: Victim Identity and the Struggle for Compensation in Japan," *War and Society* 19, no. 1 (May 2001): 131–148; Gwi-bun Schibel-Yang and Wolfgang Schibel, "Zwangsprostitution im Asien-Pazifik-Krieg" [Forced Prostitution in the Asia-Pacific War], *Zeitschrift fur Sozialgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* [Journal of Social History of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century] 11, no. 4 (1996): 15–45; Phili Seaton, "Reporting the 'Comfort Women' Issue, 1991–1992: Japan's Contested War

- Memories in the National Press,” *Japanese Studies* 26, no. 1 (May 2006): 99–112; C.S. Soh, “From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the ‘Comfort Women,’” *Social Science Japan Journal* 3, no. 1 (April 2000); Yuki Tanaka, “The ‘Comfort Woman’ System: Enslaving Women in World War II,” *East* 30, no. 3 (1994): 38–44; Chizuko Ueno, “The Japanese Responsibility for Military Rape during World War II,” *Asian Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (1993): 102–107; Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, “Comfort Women: Beyond Litigious Feminism,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 58, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 223–258; Kazuko Watanabe, “Militarism, Colonialism, and The Trafficking of Women: ‘Comfort Women’ Forced into Sexual Labor for Japanese Soldiers,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 26, no. 4 (October–December 1994): 3–17; Kazuko Watanabe, “Trafficking in Women’s Bodies, Then and Now: The Issue of Military ‘Comfort Women,’” *Peace and Change* 20, no. 4 (October 1995): 501–514; Yoshiaki Yoshimi and Suzanne O’Brien, “Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II,” in *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II*, eds., Yoshiaki Yoshimi and Suzanne O’Brien (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 1.
14. On the North African case, see Christelle Taraud, “Jouer avec la marginalité: le cas des filles soumises ‘indigènes’ au Maghreb à l’époque coloniale” [Playing with Marginality: The Case of ‘Indigenous’ Subjected Girls in North Africa during the Colonial Era], *Clio: Histoire, Femmes et Sociétés* 17 (2003): 65–86; Christelle Taraud, “Urbanisme, hygiénisme et prostitution à Casablanca dans les années 1920” [Urban, Hygienic and Prostitution in Casablanca in the 1920s], *French Colonial History* 7 (2006): 97–108. For the French experience in Shanghai, see Christian Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History, 1849–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
 15. With far less anthropological detail, but equally illuminating analysis, see Nina Kushner, “Procuring Mothers, Sacrificed Daughters and ‘Helpful’ Policemen: The Elite Prostitute as Family Breadwinner in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 29 (January 2001): 11–20.
 16. Evelyne Phi Vân Nguyễn and Christophe Gironde, “Negotiating (In) dependency: Social Journeys of Vietnamese Women to Cambodia,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38, no. 6 (2010): 933–947; David Koh, “Negotiating the Socialist State in Vietnam through Local Administrators: The Case of Karaoke Shops,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 16, no. 2 (October 2001): 279–305.