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THE IRONIES OF FREEDOM

SEX, CULTURE, AND NEOLIBERAL
GOVERNANCE IN VIETNAM

Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương

Critical Dialogues in Southeast Asian Studies

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NGUYỄN-VÕ THU-HƯƠNG

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Introduction

BEFORE THE HEAT would define the day one early morning in June 2002 at the center of Ho Chi Minh City, an area still called Saigon by its residents, crowds gathered in front of the old French-built Opera House, which now has reverted to its theatrical functions after various incarnations through Vietnam's postcolonial history. Young faces of uniformed students in lethargic poses filled the ranks. Surrounding them were banners and posters in primary colors. One large poster depicted a human form shackled to the words DRUGS and AIDS. Adjacent to it was a banner exhorting the "construction of a healthy cultural environment to help push back drug addiction and other social evils." A red banner hung across an intersection promising to "sternly punish drug-related criminals to protect social order." Representatives from local Communist Party and government organs stood up to give speeches behind a podium perched on top of the steps of the Opera House and framed by its vaulting entrance. As the sun climbed, the event became a procession, announced by slogans and songs from loudspeakers and flanked by rows of motorcycle police down tree-lined boulevards. It turned out to be an "anti-social evil" rally, set to coincide with the International Day of Drug Awareness on 26 June.

The physical surroundings of this latest anti-social evil rally consisted of refurbished posh hotels, multiplex theaters, and high-end retailers carrying global brands, catering to both a tourist and a domestic clientele of newly affluent Vietnamese who make their money in the new market economy. Many now populate the various night scenes of narcotics and commercial sex, as Vietnam embarks on the marketization and globalization of its economy after its victory against French colonialism, American imperialism, and decades of socialism.

The mode of intervention in society in this new context had been

set by the government's approach to "prostitution" as a "social evil" as of the mid-1990s. The themes of the day's anti-social evil campaign—disease in medical knowledge, Vietnamese culture, and social order—were taken directly from strategies that the government has been using to fight prostitution. As with prostitution, tension exists between "knowledge of the real" and what is true in Vietnamese tradition and culture. On the one hand, the government refers to knowledge both of real social practices and of the (medical) expertise designed to address them. The Ho Chi Minh City Health Bureau since the mid-1990s has run a semipermanent exhibit with photographs that link prostitution to sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS. On the other hand, the government exhorts adherence to tradition and order. Governmental Decree 87, for example, in the late 1990s inspired similar rallies, street banners, and exhibits in which the government linked prostitution as a social evil to "poisonous cultural products." Making this linkage, the government resolved to build a healthy Vietnamese culture to fight prostitution.

The government was not the only entity interested in commercial sex. In 2003, the movie *Gái nhảy* (Bar Girls) opened in Vietnam with unprecedented box office receipts and blazed the trail for a commercially viable domestic film industry. The plot revolves around the lives of two women in the sex trade, replete with nudity, booze, heroin, violence, and death. The success of this film has been based in part on its claim to a new brand of social realism in the time of a market economy in Vietnam, a representation of "real" life that both reflects and reworks prevalent governmental representations of society and its ills.

What is it about commercial sex that makes it such a busy site of commerce, of governmental intervention, and of representation in popular culture in Vietnam at the present moment? What do the specific forms of these economic, governmental, and representational practices reveal about neoliberalism as the market takes root and Vietnam becomes integrated into the neoliberal global economy?

To answer these questions, this book combines methods and theories from the social sciences and humanities to examine (1) commercial sex as a function of government-initiated neoliberal market freedoms; (2)

the government's shaping of citizens and their desires through intense intervention in what the government represents as the empirical "social evil of prostitution" set against authentic Vietnamese tradition; and (3) the depictions of this social evil in a popular culture that currently responds to both the market and the government, as the latter sets the terms of discourse between the empirically real and the authentically true. I consider how various constructions of femininity reflect struggles over how reality should be represented as well as how the liberalizing society in Vietnam should be governed. Vietnam in the late 1980s "opened up" and joined the global economy after decades of war and socialism in the new policy of *Đổi Mới*, making it a good case study of how a former socialist government adapts to the market and to its neoliberal insistence on the freedom to choose for entrepreneurs and consumers, who may operate not just in the national context but in a transnational one as well.

Mass-mobilization rallies may still give off a familiar whiff of the all-encompassing state under the Vietnamese Communist Party, but the manner, object, and context have drastically changed. The foremost difference lies in the presence of, and reference to, a market, one that fully participates in the current global economy in both consumption and transnational production in the flexible mode of capital accumulation with all of its effects of inequality.¹

Such an economy currently relies on a kind of freedom of choice much celebrated by neoliberal champions: the freedom to make entrepreneurial and consumerist choices. What underlies both the government's approach to a social problem and the rise of a popular culture fascinated with a social phenomenon such as commercial sex is the presence of these neoliberal freedoms in the market economy.

I argue that the techniques of governance in Vietnam have been shifting from the former Leninist mode, in which the state monopolized power and recognized no society or realm outside itself. Certain features familiar in their use of repression now have a different object and serve a different purpose. As society in Vietnam liberalizes and integrates into the global economy, the government must now govern the newly privatized intimate desires of citizens and the kinds of "social problems" such desires

create. Governing for the neoliberal global market requires both a “realist” recognition and promotion of market freedom, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, measures of repression based on notions of “the true”—true Vietnamese traditional femininity, in this case. Such differentiated governance is class and gender specific in order to produce different kinds of producers and consumers for the market. While middle-class urban women are taught how to provide good but clean conjugal sex with new empirically based expert knowledge to guide their consumerist choices, lower-class sex workers are taught Vietnamese traditional femininity and subcontracted piecework in rehabilitation camps.

Governmental practices produce ideological effects by providing the terms that citizens use to understand themselves and their place in society. However, the production of ideology is no longer just the purview of the state. For the first time in decades, the generation of symbolic meanings for society has now also become part of the domain of a commercially viable popular culture, most notably in the new films that stake a claim on a new genre of social realism. This new social realism serves up the sensationalized dangerous undertow of excess enjoyment that drives market choices. The focus on commercial sex as the racy side of the market allows such films to pose the dangers of market freedom and simultaneously integrate it into some normative order at a symbolic level. Looking at the rise of popular culture in Vietnam allows one to say something about ideology and governance in relation to the neoliberal market: the language of commodities itself can become *the* symbolic order integrating both the enjoyment underlying market freedom and the terms of its differentiated governance.

NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION, GOVERNANCE, AND REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIETY

While the empirical materials in this book center on Vietnam, many of the theoretical themes in the book apply more broadly. Pierre Bourdieu calls attention to the “imposition on the entire world of the neo-liberal tyranny of the market.”² Similarly, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff

name today's global moment neoliberal globalization and emphasize its "fetishism of the free market," in which the "rights" of businesses and consumers are guaranteed by law to "possess, to signify, to consume, to choose."³ This diagnosis of the global spread of neoliberal freedoms raises questions in relation to government. The first asks what role a national government would play in neoliberalist globalization. The second, perhaps the more fundamental question, asks how a government would govern with these neoliberalist freedoms that Jean and John Comaroff have enumerated.

Forces of globalization have often been theorized as undermining the sovereignty of the nation-state or national government. Jürgen Habermas, for example, reiterates the specter of the "globalization of commerce and communication, of economic production and finance, of the spread of technology and weapons, and above all of ecological and military risks" as progressively undermining national sovereignty.⁴

Many scholars have theorized about, and documented the current phase of, global capitalism, which since the early 1970s has involved greater flexibility in production and distribution. Significantly, these new strategies include offshore production, outsourcing, and subcontracting to take advantage of the cheap labor that results from diverse labor disciplinary practices based on different patterns of living arrangements, authority relations, and gender constructions.⁵

What this economy entails in the area of labor use is the demand for flexibility, which translates best to the system of piecework subcontracting such as that of the electronics and garment industries in which feminine labor and space-time differentiation play a pivotal role.⁶ The result has been an international division of labor taking advantage of "traditional" femininity translated into worker attributes of docility, dexterity, and the tolerance for tedious work on the global assembly line. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has noted that tolerance for tedious work has "racial and gendered dimensions" since it draws on "stereotypes which infantilize Third-World women and initiates a nativist discourse of 'tedium' and 'tolerance' as characteristics of non-Western, primarily agricultural, premodern (Asian) cultures."⁷

Is this model of the Asian female worker solely the product of global

economic forces that transcend national boundaries and render national governments irrelevant? Despite warnings about the increasing irrelevance of the nation-state in globalization, Anthony Giddens continues to insist on certain capabilities of the nation-state like its monopolistic control over the means of violence at home and abroad and its deployment of Foucauldian disciplinary technology.⁸ Debating the literature on empire, David Harvey posits the nation-state must obey the “territorial logic” in its attempts to pull economic advantages toward its spatial domain.⁹

How would national governments do this? Coining the term “flexible citizenship,” Aihwa Ong argues that the Southeast Asian “tiger” states increasingly focus on “producing and managing populations that are attractive to global capital” through “differential deployment of state power,” subjecting populations to different zones of “political control and social regulation by state and non-state agencies.”¹⁰

Ong’s flexible citizenship argument builds on Michel Foucault’s later work on governmentality, which focuses on certain modes of Western modern governance that must seriously take into account the freedom to choose on the part of individuals who are also sovereign citizens.¹¹ Such political and social organization privileging freedom may be “overdetermined,” as Charles Taylor would say, because of a “modern understanding of moral order” centering on individuals and their agency.¹² Or perhaps the explanation lies in the Marxist analysis that capital must depend on “legally free laborers who can move and sell their labor as they see fit.”¹³ However, the larger context of colonialism through much of modern times renders both claims, Taylor’s that freedom is central to the modern West’s moral imagining and Marx’s that free labor is central to capital, paradoxical at best. Rosa Luxemburg saw that capital must also depend on unfreedom in class rule either domestically or internationally, where capital’s “predominant methods are colonial policy, an international loan system . . . and war.”¹⁴

This is reminiscent, not only of contemporary capital’s outsourcing to take advantage of laborers who do not have the freedom to move to where their labor would fetch more, but also of the less-than-free labor

produced when metropolitan nation-states racialize populations and police “illegal” immigrants within their borders. If these claims of freedom in the moral and economic realms are questionable when seen in the larger context that the West has created for itself, I now examine the Foucauldian claim that freedom is at the center of the West’s modern mode of governance.

Foucauldian formulations of governmentality have dealt most systematically with the question of freedom and governance. Partly in response to criticism directed at his preoccupation with discipline in his earlier work, and partly in response to the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s and early 1980s in the United States and the United Kingdom, Foucault started to work on the puzzle of the art of liberal government within an approach that draws attention away from theories of the state to point it toward the mentality and techniques of governance, coined “governmentality.”¹⁵

Linking the microphysics of disciplinary power to the level of governance, Foucault finally confronted the problematic of freedom. Theorists, whom Alan Hunt has labeled “neo-Foucauldian,” many writing from the United Kingdom at the end of the 1980s and through the 1990s, take this approach further in their exploration of the modes of governance and possibilities for the exercise of freedom at the height of neoliberalism in the United Kingdom.¹⁶

According to them, liberal governance persuades by positing its own limits, its non-totalizing power, in two related ways. Liberal governance asserts the inviolability of free subjects, and it acknowledges a socioeconomic realm with autonomous dynamics knowable through empiricist knowledge generation rather than through either normative or state reason. The second could be thought of as a correlate of the first. The free agency may result in sociological patterns, but it also contributes to the epistemological limits of government and forces it to rely on a mode of realist representation regarding the social realm.

Liberal government involves, as Paul Gordon writes, “the idea of a kind of power which takes freedom itself” and the conduct of the free subject as “the correlative object of its own suasive capacity.”¹⁷

In simpler terms, liberal governance persuades and controls by positing the individual subject's freedom to choose. Nikolas Rose has argued that the freedom to choose has been the problematic of Western modern governance albeit in different configurations: from early liberalist institutions organized around the notions of autonomous individuals and the free market of the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century; to the emergence of the "social" from the turn of the twentieth century to mid-century, culminating in the welfare state providing people with the social conditions necessary to exercise their freedom; to the neoliberalist recuperation since Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher of the free market to liberate economic agents from dependence on and constraints by the welfare state, bringing market logic into realms hitherto imagined as outside of the market (i.e., the corporatization of government, the school, and philanthropy).¹⁸

But current neoliberal leaders who insist on free market forces and free economic agents are also the ones implementing the use of imprisonment on a massive scale. In the United States and the United Kingdom, as the heartlands of neoliberalism since Reagan and Thatcher, more and more find themselves in prisons whose carceral logic precludes any kind of freedom of choice. In the United States, 7 percent of the male adult population remains under the control of the criminal justice system, a rate that Jonathan Simon has lamented as unprecedented in the history of societies.¹⁹

This contradiction in how freedom may be deployed in the economic sphere but suppressed in the cultural and social spheres suggests that modern governance should be understood as it is practiced in particular contexts, as contingent on political and economic appropriation and contestation, and that it not be taken for granted that there is one central concept around which Western or liberal governance may be organized. In the global economic context, perhaps it would be fruitful to see certain freedoms, namely, the currently dominant neoliberal entrepreneurial and consumerist choices, as the features with which particular governments operate, depending on their positions in the global capitalist system and other historically specific factors. Such an examination of how governments respond to these freedoms as they spread

via globalization can reveal the fissures and political nature of governance in the particular contexts of the “modern West” itself, dissolving the Orientalist/Occidental character of the theoretical discourse on modern governance.

VIETNAM AND PARADOXICAL MODES OF GOVERNING IN NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION

In response to Vietnam’s political reforms allowing for marketization to take place since 1986, scholars have studied Vietnamese politics and governance in terms of liberal factions that are reform-minded, forward-looking, and open to the global economy with its political or cultural values, versus conservative factions that are backward-looking and authoritarian, to explain “contradictions” in pronouncements and policies.²⁰ At the same time, other researchers have noted the commercialization of agencies at all levels of government during Vietnam’s marketization and the rapid establishment of global modes of production with a multileveled subcontracting system to take advantage of cheap and docile labor in Vietnam.²¹

It seems the “conservative forces” are not stopping the marketization and globalization of Vietnam. An alternative explanation is needed for the contradictory practices and pronouncements that sometimes promote global exchanges and at other times toe a conservative, inward-looking “traditional” cultural and political line, one that does not particularly correspond to the proletarian revolutionary discourse of socialist days. *I propose to look at this contradiction in governance not as a result of just historical residuals but as a paradoxical product of how this government deals with the neoliberal freedoms of a new transnational market economy.* Where history is most evident is not in the presence of conservative elements but in the continued prominence of the Vietnamese state, whose Communist Party and governmental units own the majority of big enterprises, including those involved in transnational and cultural production. Ironically, the Vietnamese socialist state is the biggest stakeholder in the market that is a part of the neoliberal global economy.

Since this economic liberalization, commercial sex has become a fixture in Vietnamese society not just through tourism but also through transnational business practices. The government has responded in high-profile and far-reaching intervention measures while it must take into account the free market with its entrepreneurial and consumerist choice. A redefined “social evil of prostitution” allows the government to work out state-society relations as well as to shape citizens in relation to their most intimate desires in the free market.

Some recent studies draw the connection between local economic structures and acts of sex consumption, or between the global economy and commercial sex.²² Others call attention to “how public institutions use issues of intimate life to normalize particular forms of knowledge and practice and to create compliant subjects.”²³

My analysis brings together these three approaches by strengthening the link between sex and governance for the local market economy with its transnational connections. It makes clear that a government’s simultaneous use of freedom and tradition, the empirically real and the true in discourses about citizens as subjects of intimate desires, works to feed the differentiated needs of the market, whether in terms of racialized, classed, and gendered labor or in terms of an ideology of identity-based consumption. An examination of the sex trade and the Vietnamese government’s intervention measures should allow a glimpse into how freedom in the neoliberalist market context of globalization is appropriated, contained, and used by the government and the men and women it governs. I suggest that the governing of sex and desires in the Vietnamese neoliberal market does two things. First, the government’s promotion of entrepreneurial and consumerist freedoms in the market has unleashed a new nativist and masculinist sexuality fueling the sex trade. Concurrently, a new middle- and upper-class feminine sexuality is also being shaped in relation to consumption. In many ways, the government has privatized desires from their public management through surveillance by the old Leninist party–state organs. Second, through its responses to the introduction of choice in the economic realm, the government seeks to produce gender, sexuality, and

class-differentiated producers and consumers, employing simultaneously *different modes* of directing the behavior of a differentiated citizenry. On the one hand, public health intervention may rely on a “realism” based on social empiricist and medical knowledge to shape choices on the part of consumers like women of the middle and upper classes. On the other hand, policing and carceral rehabilitation will call on coercion and a “true” traditionalist culture in governing its target population of lower-class sex workers because Vietnamese “traditional” femininity has become a labor commodity in global production. Governing with the neoliberal market entails producing different kinds of producers and consumers with different levels of access to market freedoms as a site of value and meaning generation. What kinds of producers and consumers a government produces depends on historical institutions and the economic-political positions of that government at home and abroad.

The mode of governance that makes use of both choice and repression in Vietnam echoes what other scholars have noted in Asia and many other places where the neoliberal market economy has made inroads. For example, Richard Robison finds in places like Russia, Thailand, China, and Indonesia “hybrids of markets, crony relationships, and arbitrary state power” in the form of authoritarian or illiberal political systems, and he questions the “assumed functional relationships between market reforms, liberal democratic transitions, civil society, and predictable and rational systems of governance.”²⁴

Robison explains these hybrids in terms of the preference of neoliberals and their champion, the American empire, for state power in these places that could deal with the “by-products of rapid social and economic change,” thus providing security for American and neoliberal economic interests.²⁵ Empires, needless to say, always make their demands felt in the world. The current empire is reverting to cold war tactics of disciplining other states according to American security needs in the “war on terror” and American neoliberal economic interests, as other scholars point out.²⁶ However, I must insist that there is something more than just imperial security. Ong suggests that “different vec-

tors of capital construct spaces of exception—‘latitudes’—that coordinate different axes of labor regulation and of labor disciplining.”²⁷

I will be so blunt as to say that the global neoliberal economy’s requirements for various labor and consumption needs rely on governments that will deliver by promoting choice and applying repression to different segments of their populations with the corresponding modes of seeing and representing society. In turn, these governments rely on the same economy to bolster their own agendas through the use of new technologies of choice in governance as well as through the more familiar repressive ones. This is where historically specific factors must be considered beyond a generalization of the workings of global neoliberalism and the American empire. In Vietnam, familiar repressive measures like arrests and incarceration contribute to the new mix of governing technologies that serve both the differentiated needs of the neoliberal global economy and the Vietnamese government’s desire to maintain its monopoly on political power while promoting a base of support in the new ruling classes of Vietnamese society that benefit from that government and this new economy. Thus in this case there is little contradiction between the neoliberal global economy and a government that at times still appears familiar in its repression and Leninist monopoly of political power.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A purely Foucauldian take on the notion of freedom as the organizing intelligibility of liberal governance cannot explain which populations are imprisoned or governed in certain ways. Neither could it explain certain kinds of social fantasies in popular culture that depoliticize such differentiated governance. I advocate a modified Foucauldian approach to both governance and cultural representation that would bring back a materialist dimension in a situated analysis of the politics and culture of neoliberalism. Bringing together an analysis of governmental and social imaginings in modes of representation, this book bridges the divide between social scientific and humanistic methods. Much of my analysis of the sex trade and recent governmental practices relies on my

fieldwork in 1996, 2000, 2002, 2005, and 2006. The bulk of my fieldwork took place in Ho Chi Minh City and its vicinity and included in-depth interviews with twenty-five informants, shorter interviews with another twenty-six informants, and participant observation at selected sites of sexual commerce and governmental intervention. Eleven of the interviews were with sex workers. The rest of the interviews were with state officials involved in the antiprostitution campaign and included public health and rehabilitation officials, nonstate social and rehabilitation workers, peer-group educators, and informants on the clientele. My primary sites for participant observation and/or interviews were a sex-service café; two rehabilitation camps run for sex workers by the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs in the vicinity of Ho Chi Minh City and Vũng Tàu; a rehabilitation home in a suburb of Ho Chi Minh City operated by private charity, for comparison; the Ho Chi Minh City Health Bureau, part of the Ministry of Health; two peer education groups consisting of “reformed prostitutes” and run by the Women’s Union with funding from and under the direction of the Ho Chi Minh City Health Bureau; various program sites related to prostitution and coordinated by the Committee for the Control and Prevention of AIDS, such as an AIDS counseling café and public exhibits; and the abortion clinic at a major hospital for obstetrics and gynecology where many sex workers went for services. I also visited the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs in Hanoi; Ho Chi Minh City’s hospital for sexually transmitted diseases; related activity centers run by the Women’s Union and the Communist Youth Union; women’s study centers with projects on prostitution; and many commercial places providing sex service.

In addition, I rely on close narrative analysis of visual and textual materials collected in Vietnam between 1996 and 2006. For genealogical investigations into shifting governmental modes of managing empirical and expert knowledge, I rely on journalistic accounts and published denunciations in the press of the 1950s and 1960s, some of which were later compiled into published collections. For genealogical investigations into different modes of realism since the 1950s, I read literary and journalistic writings from the 1950s, at the moment of the consolidation of

the socialist state and from the 1980s at the start of marketization. For an investigation into the current mode of social realism, I use journalistic writings from the mid-1990s, when the market began to be more established, and the popular films of 2003 and 2004 that have blazed a new commercial path. Finally, my analysis is supplemented by sex education pamphlets and self-help books, government exhibits pertaining to “social evils,” published policy documents and political statements by leaders and officials, and other secondary sources. Unless otherwise noted, all translations herein are mine.

The methods of interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis have become popular in the past two decades because they constitute the meeting point between ethnographic methods in anthropology, cultural and literary analysis, and a post-structuralist attention to “practices.” In my analysis of interviews, observations, and texts, I do not look merely to reconstruct events, to uncover the “truth” by sifting through the “distortions of talk.”²⁸ Rather, I take what people say, write, or do on the whole as historically situated practices involving certain understandings, normative rules, and a consciousness of self and others.²⁹ My interpretations make use of, but are not reducible to, the participants’ meanings, since this leaves out the question of the effects of what these actors do. Nor are my interpretations revelations of motivations or meanings hidden from the participants.³⁰ Rather, I try to decipher the patterns that arise from the practices of persons, groups, professions, and institutions.³¹

In other words, what are the effects of what people understand, do, and communicate? Likewise, I read textual representations in relation to both intratextual/intertextual features and in the contexts of social and political practices.

The researcher in this approach analyzes the contingent formation of meanings and their effects in sets of practices, textual or otherwise. This kind of work should help “wear away certain self-evidences and commonplaces.”³² Encouraged by this possibility, yet disturbed by the dangers of complicity by implication, I want to raise certain ethical issues involved in a study of this kind. I hope, for example, that by un-

packing the aestheticization of sex buying, I am not just reproducing the aesthetic experience but am also helping to “wear away the self-evidences.” If I analyze the commodification of women as special foods to evoke a sense of place for male entrepreneurial consumers, as I do in chapter 2, I hope that eventually a reader somewhere will next utter the words “specialty dishes” in such a context, not with nostalgia or relish for the exotic, but with questions.

Likewise, the use of words such as *sex worker* and *prostitute* carries implicit moral judgment and thus political implications. One easy way out is to consistently choose *sex worker* over *prostitute* to avoid the negative connotation of the latter. But this strategy avoids what goes into the construction of these meanings in the first place. Shannon Bell has proposed destabilizing the meaning of prostitution and its connection to moral assumptions that cast the prostitute as “other.”³³ By showing what goes into the commodification and problematization of prostitutes and prostitution, I hope that readers will question meanings rather than take them for granted.

During my field research, I was amazed time and again by the sex workers’ openness to my intrusion in their lives. The women seemed glad to have a chance to tell their stories as opposed to the government’s stories or the clients’ stories. The women saw me as somehow on their side. But the contrasts in our relative positions of power were all too clear. I would be the one who benefited more from our encounters. In my talks and in my texts to advance my scholarly/career pursuits, their lives would at times appear to audiences on some level as spectacles that are horrendous, exotic, or pitiable. This issue of the exploitation of those less powerful can never be fully resolved with my claims to the Foucauldian hope for the enterprise of critique. I do not have the full answer and do not think I can come up with one—surely nonengagement helps no one. But the tension arising out of my complicity and my consciousness of it at least makes my position uncomfortable enough to force me to continue facing these issues, sometimes productively, sometimes not. It forces me to approach ethics as a category comprising complicated and contradictory, if not complicit, choices. The acknowledgment of complicity should not

however be viewed as a ritualistic confession done in the hope of gaining absolution without costs. Rather, it forces me to choose one kind of engagement over another, one mode of representation over another in specific contexts—the details in the ways we interact with those who have more, equal, or less power than ourselves.

The book is arranged in three corresponding parts: (1) market choices as they are manifested in commercial sex, (2) the governance of such choices, and (3) their representation in writings and films. Part 1 examines the rise of commercial sex as part of the socialist government's introduction of neoliberal freedom, namely, entrepreneurial and consumerist choice as it marketizes the economy. In chapter 1, I begin with how commercial sex became integral to entrepreneurs' way of doing business in Vietnam as the government marketized the economy in the late 1980s. My analysis follows the transformation from command economy to market to implicate in the exponential growth of commercial sex an emerging class of men and their practices of using sex buying to conduct business. Chapter 2 continues to explore how commercial sex thrives on the other kind of neoliberal freedom: choice in consumption now becoming a realm of signification and expression of identity. This chapter looks into entrepreneurial men's consumption practices to analyze the processes of commodification of women and sexual access to their bodies. I examine the men's use of female subservient sexual service and the equation of women to special food offerings of particular geographical places in Vietnam to argue that buying sex is an expression of class and national identity for male clients.

Part 2 deals with the genealogy of governance in Vietnam from the 1950s, showing the shift toward the government's intervention into the newly redefined social problem of prostitution. Chapter 3 looks at governance by the Vietnamese Communist Party and its state apparatuses, which sought to curb the autonomy of knowledge and other intellectual activities while enfolded them into an encompassing party-state. This process was most evident when the state purged dissenting writers, artists, experts, academics, and intellectuals during the Nhân Văn–Giai Phẩm affair of the 1950s and the anti-revisionist campaigns of the

1960s. During marketization, the state's effort to contain knowledge shifts toward the new mode of governance organized around medical knowledge and choice. Chapter 4 examines the government's public health intervention in prostitution and the popularity of sex education self-help manuals. This governance is differentiated by both class and gender in that the clinical measures targeting sex workers are more coercive than the discourse of sex, health, and vitality aimed at men and women of the new middle or higher classes. Chapter 5 details the arrest of sex workers and their incarceration in rehabilitation camps and discusses the government's deployment of cultural authenticity in anchoring identities of citizens and directing their choices. The rehabilitation camps for sex workers teach them to be traditional Vietnamese women through subcontracted piecework, with the message that they should embody values that will make them employable in the new economy. Chapter 6 considers the implications that multiple modes of power, using both choice and repression, have for the notion of liberal governance. Together with choice and repression, differentiated governance deploys the empiricism of a social "reality" and the assertion of a true Vietnamese tradition. Governmental practices thus produce ideological visions of self and society.

With the rise of a market for cultural productions, the government is no longer the sole producer of ideological vision. Part 3 looks at cultural productions to address the problem of ideology in governing with a neoliberal market. Chapter 7 traces both state actions and dissent in literary and journalistic writings from the beginning of the socialist state in the mid-1950s to the introduction of marketization in the late 1980s. At both moments in time, the use of the feminine as the marker of the socially real had been reinforced, paving the way for the popular film *Bar Girls* (*Gái nhảy*) and its sequel, *Street Cinderella* (*Lọ lem hè phố*), examined in chapter 8. Both films, in the new genre of social realism, feature the sex trade and the lives of sex workers, setting the way for a commercially viable film industry in Vietnam after decades of socialist government subsidy.

The Foucauldian approach to liberal governmentality forecloses the question of ideology prematurely. It claims that liberal governance really

takes as its correlates the freedom of subjects to choose; therefore, freedom does not function as a Marxian false consciousness. As a result, there is not enough attention paid to fragmentation at the level of symbolic representation caused by the neoliberal economy's needs for differentiated labor and segmented access to consumption. Nor is there enough attention paid to ideological constructs in excess of freedom as a governmental notion. Looking at writing and films within the context of economy and governance can supplement an understanding of neoliberalism and the ability of the market to generate a symbolic language based on the commodity fetish to make sense of both freedom and its differentiated governance.

The book concludes with speculations on the case study's theoretical implications for neoliberalism. If governance of neoliberal freedoms is about particular political arrangements of freedom and coercion, about the search for the empirically real and the faith in the true of one kind of tradition or another, then this analysis might be useful in an attempt to understand neoliberal governance elsewhere. It probably has the greatest potential to speak to the differentiated governance in nation-states on the periphery pressured by the global economy to adopt neoliberal policies. Such states are likely to try to produce an expediently differentiated labor force through the use of simultaneous modes of governance based on both choice and repression. The need for differentiated governance does not stop at nations newly integrated into the neoliberal global economy, however. The United States as the heartland of neoliberalism must also combine neoliberalism and neoconservatism with multiple modes of power operating simultaneously to produce an unequal population differentiated by gradations in status that would best serve the needs of market production and consumption in order to maintain the position of this nation within the global economy. It is no surprise that it rallies a cry for freedom while maintaining prisons at home, Guantanamos offshore, and Abu Graibs abroad.

PART I

SEX FOR SALE

Entrepreneurial and Consumerist Freedom

The Hooking Economy

Entrepreneurial Choice and Commercial Sex in the Liberalizing Economy

COMMERCIAL SEX BECAME INTEGRAL to the Vietnamese economy in the first decade of marketization despite governmental rhetoric about how prostitution was a “social evil.” With the arrival at the new market and its neoliberal freedom to make entrepreneurial choices, Vietnam opened to the global economy. This marketization of course brought with it the global economy of sex tourism. However, the rise and spread of the sex trade in Vietnam primarily depended on male entrepreneurs who turned the use of women for sexual services into routine practices that remain so today. During marketization, the state, which includes the Communist Party and government, endowed a class of men with certain state-owned capital and freed them to make entrepreneurial choices in an economy that now included private entrepreneurs and foreign capital. Entrepreneurial men used sex buying to establish personal ties facilitating their access to the means of production and exchange in an economy that was moving from central command to one that depended on decisions by entrepreneurs. My analysis follows this transformation to implicate in the exponential growth of commercial sex an emerging class of Vietnamese men and their economic practices.

PROSTITUTION SINCE THE WAR

After the end of the war in 1975 and the unification of the country in 1976 resulted in the application of socialism over all of Vietnam, the state defined prostitution as a problem with its causes in the past. As with the expulsion of the French colonial presence earlier, prostitution at the end

of the Vietnam War was said to be no more than a vestige of the imperialist American presence and the southern puppet regime. The Leninist party and government had often said during and after the war that South Vietnam had been one sprawling whorehouse for American soldiers. As the puppet regime was a whore to American imperialism, Vietnamese women were turned into whores for the occupying army.¹ The revolutionary society after the Vietnam War therefore had to conquer the social evils left by American neocolonialism: To lead those fallen sisters back to a happy future life, the state and the Women's Union organized schools for the "Recovery of Human Dignity," to cure diseases, provide vocational training, teach culture, and educate these sisters so that they could clearly see they needed to get on the path of honest work, of building a happy life, and of becoming true and legitimate workers.²

According to the official line, what needed to be done was the implementation of a new and healthy socialist way of life. The state found prostitutes to be stripped of human dignity. The forced performance of labor was to make proletarian subjects of these sex workers, thus enabling them to recover their humanity.³ As a vestige of the inglorious past, it was unimaginable that prostitution continue in the new society. The state's rehabilitation of existing prostitutes at the end of the war should have been the end of it. Instances of sex buying and selling were decidedly fewer and went underground.⁴ The official literature narrated the absence of signs of these practices in the decade following the war as evidence of the overall success of the new regime. It took a few years of economic liberalization before conspicuous practices of sex buying and selling reappeared.

The current volume of sexual commerce in Vietnam is difficult to estimate. One reason is that this activity is illegal, and therefore there are few ways to quantify it. One estimate puts it at VND144 billion (Vietnam Dong; roughly US\$10 million) annually.⁵ Another method of quantification reveals a target population bias in its focus on the number of women involved in commercial sex. These estimates vary, and most reporters and scholars in Vietnam avoid giving numbers that they have no way of confirming. Most observers, however, seem to agree that these numbers have been growing. One researcher from the Center for the

Scientific Study of Family and Women in Hanoi cites a tenfold increase, from ten thousand “prostitutes” in 1988 at the start of *Đổi Mới*, to one hundred thousand four years later in 1992, to two hundred thousand in 1996.⁶ At this rate projections for 2006 would put the figure at roughly half a million women involved in the sex trade.

Beyond their unreliability and the preoccupation with quantities problematically conceptualized, these numbers indicate the prominent presence of a sex market after Vietnam opened its doors to both the market economy and the world. From high-class hotels, dance halls, and bars, to “hugging” karaoke places, “hugging” beer halls, and myriad forms of “hugging” cafes in the city centers and small towns as well as along the roads connecting them, commercial sex in different degrees and forms is readily available in Vietnam today. Where the government looked at prostitution at the end of the war in 1975 as a vestige of the *ancien régime*, it no longer could do so in the post-*Đổi Mới* era. It seems more promising to seek an understanding of this phenomenon in the market economy.

I begin this chapter by exploring the ways in which the practices of buying and selling sex undermined the simple story about prostitution as the social product of prerevolutionary regimes, a vestige destined to disappear. So visible to commoners and officials alike, these new practices with regard to commercial sex simply broke the confines of the old narrative and rendered it incredulous. I argue that the growth of the sex industry was intricately tied to the particular ways in which the Vietnamese economy had been liberalized. This state-led liberalization of the economy had preserved the privileged positions of past and present state officials and managers, who are given the freedom to make entrepreneurial choices. I consider the literature on economic liberalization in Vietnam (which mirrors the larger literature on economic liberalization from a command economy), rejecting theories based on neo-classical assumptions of an ideal-type market in which political power guarantees the necessary functioning of the market such as the private ownership of the means of production, among other things. Instead, I opt for approaches that are based on the observation of actual economic practices, especially at the firm level. Such an approach reveals that a mar-

ket need not conform to an ideal type; rather, it needs certain market choices, in other words, neoliberalist freedoms. Adam Fforde and Stefan de Vylder offer a revealing analysis of “micro-adaptation” by state-agents-turned-entrepreneurs at the firm level as state enterprises became commercialized.⁷ This micro-adaptation at the enterprise level exhibited clientelistic features as observed by David Wank in the Chinese liberalizing economy, not as a vestige of a centralized Communist system, but as the process of marketization itself. Wank and other writers on clientelism focus on the patron-client relationships between private operators and state bureaucrats. Here, I rely on Wank’s notion that patron-client ties drive marketization by “reducing uncertainty and facilitating market links.”⁸ In my usage, these ties point primarily to links between and among private and state entrepreneurs. It was a market just as dynamic as any ideal neoclassical market, evident in the phenomenal growth rates boasted by both Vietnam and China in the past decade. However, this was a market in which the flow of materials, capital, and information about the market had to be actively accessed through more personal channels, the personal “hooking up” (*móc nối*) of economic operators. I build on these analyses to argue that these personal connections in Vietnam provided access links among state and private entrepreneurs (foreign and domestic) with the state sector in the pivotal position. It was all about entrepreneurial *access* to the procurement of information, capital, contracts, and materials. Finally, I note that this practice of business hooking primarily took the form of buying sexual pleasure for the facilitators of business by entrepreneurs who sought such access. Illustrations of liberalizing economic practices in personal connections and the place of the consumption of pleasure come from the mid-1990s, when the market had begun to be established after a decade of reforms.

Two points need clarification. One, I am not trying to explain the “cause” of prostitution, be it the “culture,” “male biological needs,” or something else. In looking for the causes, Vietnamese studies of prostitution center on the women in the trade.⁹ Instead, I am trying to see how prostitution as a set of practices had become integral to economic practices in Vietnam during economic liberalization. Two, *economic lib-*

eralization is a common term used in the literature. I use it to denote the adoption of market mechanisms, which started out as the commercialization of state enterprises.

THE SOCIALIST ECONOMY

The economic model that was implemented in the North (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam) from the mid-1950s and nationwide for a decade after the end of the war in 1975 sought to “construct socialism.” This meant replacing private property with public ownership of the means of production in the Soviet-style central planning of industrialization; controlling “prices, money, interest, and exchange rates”; and detaching the “domestic market from the world market.”¹⁰ This economy recognized solely the state sector, ignored an informal sector, and stayed inaccessible to nations not participating in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (among socialist countries). The state determined quantities, prices, purchasing, and marketing. It supplied funds to the state enterprises, collected profits, and absorbed losses. A two-tier price system emerged as the state fixed prices and rationed goods for state wage earners in what was called the “coupon regime” (*chế độ tem phiếu*).

The years preceding reforms in Vietnam saw factories working at half their capacity as well as persistent food shortages.¹¹ Inflation was running at 774.7 percent in 1986.¹² Forty percent of the population was under the age of fourteen and retained no memory of the glory of the Communist Party–led victories against the French and the Americans. After the disastrous results of one last-ditch attempt at command economics with the currency conversion of 1985, and encouraged by successes with the limited system of contracting out land use (*khoán*) since the early 1980s to farming families, the party decided to embrace reforms. The slogan “Reform or Die” at the Sixth Party Congress in December 1986 heralded the beginning of a new era marked by *tư duy mới* (new thinking) and *đổi mới cơ chế quản lý kinh tế* (reforms in economic management).

Reforms in economic management became the code phrase for the

recognition of market mechanisms in the economy. It meant first and foremost incentives to improve performance and productivity tied to the decentralization of economic decision making. Next, it meant the diversification of forms of ownership, giving rise to an officially recognized private sector. This move had the effect of a double opening. Not only did Vietnam open up to the capitalist world economy through foreign direct investment and foreign trade, but it also opened up its state-owned enterprises to competition in the market, which now included private companies.

Most analysts agree that by 1989 Vietnam had some sort of a market economy, although they disagree on the exact nature of this process and its future direction. Fforde and Vyllder note that the “two-price” system had been dismantled, as was the “system of central planning based on state allocations of inputs and obligatory production targets for the individual enterprises.”¹³

VIETNAM'S LIBERALIZING ECONOMY: THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE STATE

The literature on Vietnam's “economic transition” offers two basic assessments, both based on neoclassical premises. The first is an economic approach, which generally views the Vietnamese liberalizing economic experience as a success. It attributes this success to the fact that Vietnam had made a break with the bureaucratized and centralized Soviet system of the past. Along this line is the assessment that Vietnam's economic success was the result of shock therapy in the form of big-bang microeconomic liberalization and macroeconomic stabilization, which was International Monetary Fund orthodoxy.¹⁴ The second assessment starts from analyses of the Vietnamese political structure and arrives at a more pessimistic conclusion of inertia that resulted from “bureaucratic centralism,” which allowed economic liberalization to take place only with the generational transfer of power in the mid-1980s.¹⁵

Both lines of assessment are based on the assumption that the Vietnamese political organization prior to liberalization was incompatible with a market economy. This kind of an assumption is referred