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Commodified Sexuality and Mother-Daughter Power Dynamics in the Mekong Delta

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The non-government organization *Alliance Anti-Traffic* (AAT) is based in Ho Chi Minh City and in Bangkok. It seeks to combat sexual exploitation, in particular sexual abuse, prostitution and trafficking in women and minors in Southeast Asia. AAT develops pilot projects to help and protect women and minors through field actions implemented in a holistic and regional approach.

AAT designs, manages and implements projects based on action-oriented research. The organization believes that sexual exploitation, prostitution and trafficking in women and minors 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 research paper by *Alliance Anti-Traffic* is a contribution to public understanding of the issue of cross-border mobility, human trafficking and sexual exploitation in Southeast Asia.

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Executive summary

This paper explores how one family commodifies the sexuality and emotional labor of the daughter for its interests. The case study presented illustrates the way in which commodified sexual economy occurs in the context of an indebted and economically vulnerable household in An Giang Province (Mekong Delta, southern Vietnam). In this family, transactional sex is one of the resources employed to ameliorate the debt incurred. The study shows the ways in which the mother provides, initiates and maintains the conditions for the sexual commodification of her daughter through the power situated within the mother-daughter relationship and the narrative of gratitude and duty.

Keywords: Commodification of sexuality, transactional sex, emotional labor, debt, family, filial piety, Mekong Delta, Vietnam.

I apologize to you, parents. I cannot continue living with Dũng because he creates a lot of problems for me, too many. He lies to me. He says I am only good at prostitution, and that I do not know how to make money in any other way. I feel very sad, so I want to leave. I will leave for a while. I will come back when he is not at home anymore. Dũng is a thief. I do not want to live with a thief. Living with him, I feel ashamed for you, parents. I will leave for a period of time and when I am back, I will help you repay the debt. Do not be mad at me, and do not be upset. I will miss you, but I will bear it because I suffer too much right now. I send this letter to you, my parents.¹

Xuân, the protagonist of this paper, sends this letter to her parents to express her feelings about the man she is forced to live with in the familial house. The letter unveils a set of topics—alleged prostitution, the strained relationship between a daughter and her parents, and family debt—that this article explores in detail. These few lines alone summarize the themes of the paper—the initiation and promotion of exploitative commodified sexual relationships within a family set against difficult economic circumstances.² This paper aims to explore the following key question: How does an exploitative commodified sexual economy transpire in the context of mother-daughter relations in rural southern Vietnam? This paper aims to contribute to scholarship about prostitution in contemporary Vietnam, in particular with regards to sexual economies and the family's involvement. I argue that in some cases, whether directly or indirectly, the family plays a central role in the commodification of women's sexuality. My focus concentrates on the power dynamics and conflict between the mother and the daughter, and the expressions of moral-economic responsibility that they use to rationalize their actions. This is particularly important because most scholarship on prostitution focuses on male clients and female sex providers, and little is written about the significance of the mother-daughter relationship in understanding women's narratives and sacrificial behaviors. Moreover, in studies about prostitution in general, rarely are the social actors—especially underage women involved in commercial sex—directly consulted and asked about their daily lives, motivations, and views of the abuses they have suffered (Montgomery 2001: 4, O'Connell 2005: 43). Rarely too, do these studies examine women's modes of representation or reveal their often complex, contradictory and controversial behaviors.

For this very reason, I opted for an intensive immersion-based approach or “intimate ethnography” of one family to illuminate the subtleties of an exploitative commodified sexual economy and the power dynamics between a daughter and her mother (Hoefinger 2011, Banerji & Distant: 2009). I focus on the Nguyễn family, which I observed in An Giang Province (Mekong Delta) for ten months during my doctoral fieldwork.³ My goal was to explore the daily life of households facing economic difficulties, especially aspects related to poverty and indebtedness, and to investigate underage women's involvement in street work

¹ Xuân, letter to her parents (my translation), March 11, 2009, An Giang Province. The author (Xuân) gave the letter to me. All names have been changed and the exact location of the study will not be disclosed for the purpose of anonymity.

² I use the word “commodified” in the phrases “commodified sexual relationship,” “commodified sexuality,” and “commodified sexual economy” to encompass the spectrum of relationships where there is a trade or transaction of sex and emotional labor for payment in cash or in kind. For ease of reading, I have not used the inverted commas in the text.

³ The data collected was the result of fifteen months of fieldwork conducted in An Giang Province (western part of the Mekong Delta), between June 2008 and September 2009. I collected the data using classic ethnographic methods: participant observation, informal discussion and occasional semi-structured interviews, and collection of written and other types of documents (maps, kinship genealogy, letters, news clips, law decrees, and so forth).

and commercial street sex with the purpose of alleviating their parents' economic burden. The Nguyễn case is representative of the four households I studied and of several other informants. It is impossible to determine how representative the Nguyễns are in relation to all households of a similar economic and social background. However, these households were also not the poorest in the study site—the poorest usually do not have enough collateral such as land and housing and thus have extremely limited borrowing capacity—and had in common severe indebtedness, pressure from moneylenders, and children's involvement in commercial sex.

The Commodification of Women's Sexuality Within the Family in Vietnam

There is little scholarship that directly addresses sexual economies and the family's involvement in contemporary Vietnam. The control and use of women's sexuality for the interests of the family is not a new phenomenon. Ian Walters (unpublished), whose ambitious work investigates the sex market from a multidisciplinary perspective, discusses the place of prostitution within the family, which he sees as the centerpiece to Vietnamese identity. For him, the family is a constraining patriarchal social structure that bars women's independence, imposes strong economic obligations, and restricts them to the roles of dutiful wives, mothers and daughters. Aligned with Walters' view, I argue that certain families actually promote and control the commodified sexuality of their members—using several methods including narratives of gratitude—to preserve their economic and social unity.

The drive to preserve the family's interests is so strong that even when a woman's sexuality is violated in ways that negatively impact the family, Vietnamese households deal with the situation in ways that prioritize the interests of the family over that of the woman. In her holistic study of rape in contemporary Vietnam, Nguyễn Thu Hương (2011) explores the strategies women use to cope with their experiences of rape, and how these are affected by social discourses on gender and sexuality. Since many Vietnamese believe that rape irreparably tarnishes "family honor," Nguyễn Thu Hương analyses the critical role that the family plays in dealing with the consequences of rape, and the ways raped women's needs are subsumed in family interests. In addition, Ramona Vijayarasa has shown that the language of "social evils" and the responses of the state and family have undermined the capacity of trafficked returnees to reintegrate into their communities. According to Vijayarasa, the situation has worsened because private and state service providers exacerbate stigma and victimization in a setting of shelter and rehabilitation.

A few scholars have recently studied attitudes towards and perceptions of virginity in the rapidly changing context of contemporary Vietnam (La 2005, Martin 2010, Dinh 2010). However, these authors leave aside an important aspect of virginity that this paper touches upon: commodification. I have shown elsewhere (Lainez 2011a) that among poor Vietnamese migrant communities in Phnom Penh, the virginity trade—which brings up to \$1,000 per sale—is an appealing household strategy for economic advancement. In this setting, parents who would normally preserve their daughter's chastity until marriage (emblematic of their morality and dignity), actively arrange its sale and, in some cases, encourage their daughter's further entry into commercial sex. As I also show in the case study presented here, parents pressure their daughters by using narratives of gratitude and duty (cultural norms) to override the prohibition on the commodification of virginity (sexuality norms) in order to secure income and improve the household's economic situation.

The interweaving of women's commodified sexuality with the survival and well-being of their families means that cases of abuse and exploitation are not uncommon. However, empirical studies about sexual exploitation, including forced prostitution, child prostitution,

and virginity-selling in the Vietnamese context are almost nonexistent (except for Nguyễn Thu Hương's study, which covers sexual abuse). This paper aims to contribute to this body of literature by exploring forms of exploitative commodified sexualities and power dynamics between a mother and daughter in the private realm of the household. In doing so, it side-steps the usual sole focus on male clients and female sex-providers to open up an area of study that has been neglected: the dynamics between women within a family concerning commodified sex.

Transactional Sex Model Instead of Direct “Sex-for-Cash” Exchanges

We also need to consider the commodification of female sexuality in relation to commercial sex and its role in the family. In the case study I present, the different configurations of exchange relationships that involved sexual services also involved affective and “emotional labor”—wherein workers are expected to display certain emotions as part of their job (for instance in domestic service, healthcare, and forms of prostitution like escorting) (Hochschild [1983] 2003).⁴ This is the case in Kimberly Kay Hoang's (2011) work on the sex market in Hồ Chí Minh City. In exploring the grey zone of sexual economic relationships in three segments of the city's sex industry, she provides a class-based analysis of both sides of the client-worker relationship based on Arlie Russell Hochschild's theory of emotional labor.

Walters (unpublished) also discusses this concept as he reminds us of the prevalence of “temporary wives” in past and present Southeast Asia, a notion he draws from Barbara Andaya (1998) who has shown that during the early modern period, attitudes towards temporary wives throughout the region were positive and this practice was seen as acceptable.⁵ According to Andaya, this attitude changed during the 1800s due to increasing monetization, economic development and the introduction of religions from other parts of the world. As a consequence, these women began to be seen as prostitutes and their strategies came to be viewed as culturally and morally unacceptable. Walters provocatively suggests that prostitutes in present-day Vietnam are still pursuing the temporary wife model mentioned above and are trapped in the same conflictive perceptions.

In the present study, the daughter, Xuân, engages in different types of commercial sexual exchanges that are bound up in family obligations and the economic and credit system in rural southern Vietnam that obliges children to contribute to the household economy. These exchanges include the sale of her virginity, brokered by the mother (“sex-for-cash” encounter); cohabitation within the framework of a conventional marriage; cohabitation with a false husband imposed by the mother plus subsequent sporadic direct “sex-for-cash” encounters; a “sugar daddy-type” relationship monitored by the mother; and a “sugar daddy-type” affair disapproved of by the mother. It proved challenging to classify and name these separate relationships, which fuse emotional desires and economic and/or material concerns, and which cannot be labeled as “prostitution” or defined merely as a straightforward “sex-for-cash” transaction. In Western thought, it is commonly accepted that prostitution “involves a form of sexual interaction that is brief, instrumental and businesslike in character,” in which sexual services are straightforwardly exchanged for payments (O'Connell 2005: 54, Tabet

⁴ I draw the concept from Hochschild, ([1983] 2003). Her ethnography explores the performance and commodification of human emotion and feelings expressed by American flight attendants and bill collectors. Emotional labor is particularly important in professions related to domestic service, health, professional acting, and some forms of prostitution, such as escorting or the “girlfriend experience.” For a discussion about the “girlfriend experience,” see the fascinating work by Bernstein, 2007.

⁵ This concept was introduced to the historical literature on gender relations in Southeast Asia a few years before by Anthony Reid (1983, 1988).

2005: 23-4, Hoefinger 2011: 246). Instead, Paola Tabet (2005) and Julia O’Connell Davidson (2005) propose studying a set of relationships involving the provision of sexual and emotional services in exchange for payment in cash or in kind, which they locate in a “continuum of sexual economic exchange.” This spectrum is marked at “one pole by sexual encounters within which one party participates *only* because s/he is paid or forced to do so, at the other pole are those in which people genuinely exchange only love for love, or lust for lust, or obligation for obligation.” (O’Connell 2005: 54-5) “Transactional sex” is located within this continuum. This model borrowed from Mark Hunter’s (2002) ethnography in South Africa enables us to study non-marital, multiple-partnered and nuanced gift-based sexual economies.⁶ Hunter writes that, “in both cases, non-marital sexual relationships, often with multiple partners, are underscored by the giving of gifts or cash. ‘Transactional sex,’ however, differs in important ways: participants are constructed as ‘girlfriends’ and ‘boyfriends’ and not ‘prostitutes’ and ‘clients,’ and the exchange of gifts for sex is part of a broader set of obligations that might not involve a predetermined payment.” (Hunter 2002: 101) Economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer (2010) pushes this analysis one step further. She writes that economic activity is integral and essential to a wide range of intimate relations, as social ties and economic transactions always intertwine in life. The author points out that for “each meaningfully distinct category of social relations, people erect a boundary, mark the boundary by means of names and practices, establish a set of distinctive understandings and practices that operate within that boundary, designate certain sorts of economic transactions as appropriate for the relation, bar other transactions as inappropriate, and adopt certain media for reckoning and facilitating economic transactions within the relation.” (Zelizer 2010: 45) The author reminds us again of the complexity and multiplicity of relations in the world of commercial sex, in which participants carefully enforce the boundaries and negotiate the meanings of relationships that blend intimate economies, transactions, media (the form payment takes), and the involvement of third parties (Zelizer 2010: 129). Put simply, labeling all the relationships that the protagonist of this article engages in with men under the generic term “prostitution” ignores the fact that in reality, many relationships are based on some form of intimate and economic exchange, and social actors are actively engaged in constructing and reconstructing their reality through the erection of boundaries and categories.

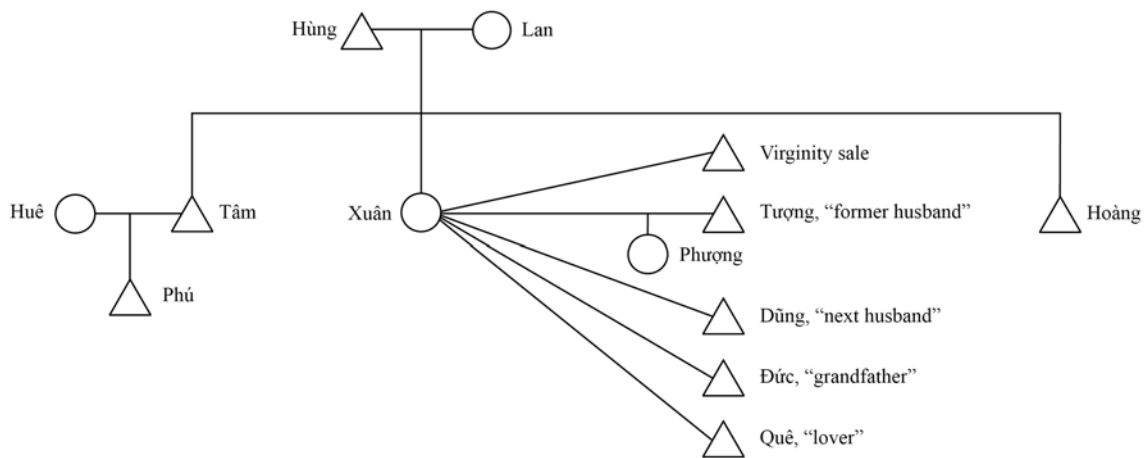
In order to understand commercial sex in contemporary Vietnam, it is important to explore how women’s sexuality *and* emotional labor are commodified as a package in the interest of the family. The following case study will show how the mother drives her daughter into multiple and overlapping commodified relationships in which intimate exchanges and economic activity are entangled. As I will demonstrate, the mother uses different ploys—obligations embedded in narratives of gratitude and duty, verbal and physical violence, and fictive kinship-based constructs—to collect the payments of her daughter’s sexual and affective activities to repay family debts and cover her gambling addiction. This asymmetrical power dynamic is a source of constant conflict, and although the mother’s power is overwhelming, the daughter continually shows resistance and succeeds in preserving her own interests in limited ways.

An Ethnographic Account of Commodified Sexual Relationships

The Nguyễn family lives in An Giang Province (western part of the Mekong Delta). Hùng and his wife Lan had three children: the eldest son, Tâm, the daughter, Xuân, and the youngest son, Hoàng. They also had a granddaughter, Phượng, and a grandson, Phú. Hùng is the

⁶ See also Kristin L. Dunkle, et al. (2004, 2007), Hoefinger (2011).

breadwinner. He worked in a state-owned company that maintained the local environment. His wife Lan used to collect recyclable materials and carry goods at the market. She stopped working in early 2000 due to health problems. She spent most of her time sitting in a cafe or at her neighbor's house playing bingo and cards. Although she did not earn any money herself, she spent a significant portion of the family budget on gambling.⁷ The eldest son, Tâm, worked as a mechanic in Hồ Chí Minh City until 2008. Following this, he went to work in the coastal area of Vũng Tàu with his wife Huê. He returned home with his wife in 2009 for the birth of their son. He then began catching fish in the paddy fields. Xuân, born in 1989, left primary school at the age of 8 (grade two), after which she began collecting plastic bags in the street with her brother and occasionally worked as a waitress in small restaurants and coffee shops. The youngest son, Hoàng, born in 1995, has been in a juvenile detention centre since 2007.



In the following sections, I present an ethnographic account of forms of commercial sexuality that the daughter engages in under the influence of her mother (except for the last case). As I describe in detail, these relationships vary in duration, setting, intimacy, payment, and public display.

Virginity Sale

In 2005, the mother decided to sell her then 16-year-old daughter's virginity for 10,000,000 VNĐ (\$625).⁸ Half of this money was used to repair the house, and the rest was used to pay the moneylender who came to the house daily to publicly harass and insult the Nguyễns. The family was not the first in the neighborhood to opt for this lucrative income-generating alternative. A neighboring family sold their daughter's virginity to pay off the parents' gambling debts. Another woman who had arranged the sale of her daughter's virginity in Hồ Chí Minh City suggested the mother, Lan, do the same. This woman provided her with a

⁷ Although the initial bet for bingo is relatively low, 2,000 VNĐ (\$0.12), a player can lose up to 150,000 VNĐ (\$9.40) in a day, a considerable sum for a rural household like the Nguyễns'. The mother also buys lottery tickets on a daily basis and likes to gamble in the illegal lottery of the "written number" [*số đề*], a game in which the player bets on the last two numbers of the first prize of the national lottery. This game is very popular because it offers better chances of winning than the state-run lottery. The mother does not consider gambling an addiction, but rather, as a business that brings income to the family.

⁸ In 2004, the exchange rate was approximately 1 USD = 15,700 VNĐ, whereas in 2009 it was 16,900 VNĐ to the dollar. I use the average rate of \$1 = 16,000 VNĐ for all the figures.

contact who helped her locate a client and negotiate the terms of the transaction. Xuân accepted her mother's proposition after three days of reflection. She feared that a potential husband would reject her if he found out about the sale, but she nonetheless accepted her mother's request "voluntarily" [*tự nguyện*], she said, as the money would be used to repay her parents' debts. The mother and daughter met with the broker in Hồ Chí Minh City. Xuân spent three days with the client and they had sexual intercourse twice each day. She reported that the sexual interaction was a painful experience and that she needed a week to recover.

The "Former Husband"

The mother promised her daughter that she would arrange for her to marry after the sale of the girl's virginity, although at that time she did not yet have a prospective groom in mind. After losing her virginity, the daughter met Trọng in the province capital and became pregnant by him. In 2006, the couple got married at home in a modest religious celebration, but the marriage was never officially registered at the communal People's Committee Household Registry Office [Phòng Hộ Tịch Ủy Ban Xã]. It is likely that the mother forced the union in an attempt to make her daughter's pregnancy socially acceptable and to save the family's reputation. Xuân gave birth to her daughter Phượng a few months after the marriage. Her husband was heavily in debt and his moneylender pressured him persistently. The young couple decided to "evade the debt" [*trốn nợ*] by going to a neighboring district. But the relationship did not last long and Trọng eventually abandoned Xuân.⁹ She then returned to her parents' house with her baby. After the separation, Xuân, her parents and their neighbors referred to Trọng as the "former husband" [*chồng trước*].¹⁰ Soon after, Xuân went to neighboring provinces (Kiên Giang, Long An, Tiền Giang) as well as Hồ Chí Minh City to work in coffee shops and restaurants as a "beer girl" for a few months. According to her parents, she had gone to the provinces to work and send remittances home.

The "Later Husband"

When I first met her in 2008, Xuân lived with a cyclo driver and drug user named Dũng in the family home. The mother had suggested that he live in the family house with them after Xuân returned from her trip to the province. In this situation, the mother forced her daughter to live as the common-law wife of a man she detested, although they were not married. Xuân used the word "husband" [*chồng*] to refer to him, and Dũng addressed her as "wife" [*vợ*]. The neighbors referred to him as the "later husband" [*chồng sau*]. The mother did her best to make the couple's shared life harmonious. She wanted Xuân's daughter Phượng to repeat to Dũng such phrases as, "I love father Dũng," "I want my father Dũng to stay at home," or "I love father Dũng more than father Trọng." She believed the child was the only bond that could keep the couple together.

Dũng gave whatever he could to mother and daughter. He gave the mother an average of 30,000 VNĐ (\$1.90) daily. To the daughter, he gave money (that the mother usually took from her) and gifts. One of these presents was a bicycle that the father appropriated. However,

⁹ The reason the "former husband" became angry with Xuân was because he wanted to sell their twelve-month-old child for 20,000,000 VNĐ (\$1,250) for adoption to pay off his debts. He tried to convince his wife that after selling their baby they could have another one. But Xuân refused by claiming that the child belonged to her, and that childbirth had been a painful experience for her, and therefore she did not want to sell it. The issue of commodification of humans, in this case child-selling for adoption, will be discussed elsewhere. A preliminary discussion has been published in Lainez (2011b).

¹⁰ Xuân's daughter refers to Trọng as father [*cha*] when she sees him in photos.

as the boundaries of this gift-based sexual economy were not clearly defined, mother and daughter subtly but persistently asked for extra payments. The young man found this embarrassing and repeatedly complained about it. In exchange, Xuân was called upon to behave as a spouse, meaning she had to provide sexual and domestic services upon Dũng's request. As part of the arrangement, the parents had to treat Dũng as a real son-in-law.

Dũng often criticized Xuân for being unfriendly towards him and asked her not to despise him, given the fact that he provided the family with a substantial amount of money despite his modest resources. In fact, this relationship was coercive and painful for Xuân, and she persistently rejected Dũng and balked at serving him. She continually challenged his will and her mother's will by arguing that she did not love him. She often insulted and fought with him in front of her parents to make him lose face. She also complained about his frequent sexual advances and harassment. She confessed to not having any sexual pleasure with him, quite the opposite in fact. She constantly emphasized that her mother did not take into account her desires, and that her sole objective was to extort money from Dũng.

Xuân wanted to end the cohabitation with Dũng in the spring of 2009. To do so she wrote a letter (see above) and decided to move to a friend's house in another province. But her plan changed as another man she had known since childhood, Đức, re-entered her life. In the meantime, the mother asked Dũng to leave the house while she directed her daughter's attention towards Đức. Dũng continued to give presents to the Nguyễn family even though he no longer lived with them. According to him, these gifts expressed the love he still felt for Xuân. However, he admitted, he no longer wanted to share a life with her. The relationship between the two became friendly months later. One day at a coffee shop, he asked her for permission to kiss her in front of her mother. The two suddenly disappeared and the mother commented: "Xuân is out of money. She went with Dũng to get some cash."

The "Grandfather"

Đức, a retired man, was over 60-years-old. He met Xuân in a restaurant where she worked when she was younger. He became a family friend and had since paid regular visits to them. The Nguyễns' acquaintances and neighbors considered him a wealthy and respected man. Đức started to pay regular visits to the Nguyễns while Dũng was still living with Xuân. He became Dũng's economic substitute after he gave the Nguyễns money to buy a brand-new Honda motorbike, a high-status asset that was by far more valuable than the bicycle Dũng had offered. The mother decided to repudiate Dũng when she realized that she could benefit more from Đức's wealth.

Xuân and Đức had regular commercial sexual liaisons in a hotel.¹¹ The mother again influenced and guided this gift-based sex relationship. Đức was always very generous to Xuân and her family. He offered Xuân gifts, clothes, a cell phone and earrings, which the mother resold and which he replaced immediately. In addition, he helped the family repair their house and contributed to the purchase of the motorcycle. By doing so, he secured Xuân's sexual availability while obtaining the approval of her mother. The mother, who served as a middle woman, collected most of the payments either directly or indirectly by taking it from her daughter afterwards. Since the payment was not predetermined, both mother and daughter often felt free to ask for more. Not only did the mother collect material gains, the family also gained social prestige by showing off their relationship with a well-respected man, and by proudly showing off the gifts—the motorbike for instance—that he bestowed them. Unlike in the previous case, Xuân did not reject the relationship or show hostility towards Đức. Indeed

¹¹ For instance, Đức came to Xuân's house one afternoon and Xuân offered him food and hippocampus wine known for its aphrodisiac effects. They both drank a few glasses and left suddenly to go downtown. Xuân did not reappear until the evening.

it was quite the opposite and she had nothing but praise for Đức. She talked about him with pride: “He is a good person,” “He loves me tenderly,” “He is good with my family,” “He gives me money when I need it.”

The mother tried to secure Đức’s role as both her daughter’s benefactor and the family’s protector in order to secure financial contributions from him. She attempted to deceive relatives and friends about the true nature of the relationship by presenting Đức alternately as Xuân’s godfather or as a good and “generous man” [*quý nhân*] who kindly supported the family. Xuân has also called him “adoptive maternal grandfather” [*ông ngoại nuôi*] for years. The family presented Xuân as a dutiful girl who “pays gratitude” [*trả ơn*] to the family patron by offering him care and kindness. Some distant neighbors and acquaintances thought Đức was actually Xuân’s real godfather, while others thought he was a relative, or simply a family friend and benefactor. However, among close friends and relatives, the true commercial nature of the relationship was an open secret.

The “Lover”¹²

While she continued to see Đức regularly, Xuân had an affair with Quê, a family friend who was over 40-years-old. Quê covered all of the expenses when they were together: meals, hotels and accommodations, motorcycle rides in the provinces, travel to Hồ Chí Minh City, and occasional gifts and tips. Unlike the previous men, he did not give Xuân’s mother gifts or money. Quê and Xuân spent substantial amounts of time together. Xuân visibly enjoyed the emotional exchanges with Quê and expressed her affection by rubbing his back with a coin for therapeutic purposes, touching him, and caressing his thigh in front of her friends. Xuân received affection and care from him, and above all, a sense of empowerment vis-à-vis her mother who fiercely disapproved of this relationship because it was not within her control.¹³ The relationship entertained Quê, but he did not consider a serious commitment, and certainly not marriage. Quê promised to help her run away to Hồ Chí Minh City, but the relationship stopped abruptly after two months when he left for the southern capital to work. The mother categorically rejected this relationship that she referred to as “coupling” [*cặp bồ*] because it did not benefit her socially, materially or economically whatsoever. She did not try to outline it in kin-based terms as she did with the “former husband,” “later husband,” or “grandfather.”

¹² I refer to Quê as the “lover” because Xuân’s mother did not define the relationship between him and her daughter in kinship terms, and because he and Xuân seemed to enjoy the relationship.

¹³ A ploy that degenerated into serious conflict with the mother illustrates this tension. Xuân wanted to leave with Quê. To do so, she arranged a three-day trip to Hồ Chí Minh City. She asked her parents for permission to work [*đi làm*] in a coffee shop and promised to give them her full pay. Quê gently and opportunely proposed that he accompany her and that they would travel there on his motorcycle to save on transportation costs. He also offered to be her guide in town. The father gave his daughter 170,000 VNĐ (\$10.60) before she left. The couple returned home four days later. Upon her return, Xuân gave her mother 120,000 VNĐ (\$7.50), supposedly three days’ pay. She explained to her mother that she left the coffee shop because the boss mistreated her. The mother became furious and blamed her daughter for having left with Quê, for not having earned any money during those four days (and spending her father’s money on top of that), for leading a “life of debauchery” [*ăn chơi*], and for having a relationship with a family friend. She argued with her daughter in front of me: “Why did you come back? Why didn’t you stay in Sài Gòn to work? We told you not to go, but you wanted to go, and you still went. You made an excuse to go out for fun. You brought 170,000 VNĐ (\$10.60) with you, and you came back with 120,000 VNĐ (\$7.50). You left with an old man, and you return with him, so obviously people will say that you live with him? Do you want me to commit suicide right here and right now, or what?” Xuân became angry and retorted that she did not want to be insulted, and that next time she would leave for good.

Applying the Spectrum of Sexual Economic Exchange Model to the Case Study

To summarize, the ethnographic account of Xuân's relationships highlights the critical role that gifts play in fuelling everyday sexual relationships between the daughter and her patrons. These relationships combine sexual and emotional labor with economic and material payments. The case study confirms the suitability of the spectrum of sexual economic exchange and the "transactional sex" model described in the beginning of this paper. As the description shows, these encounters vary remarkably. In terms of duration, Xuân spent three days with the client who deflowers her, one year with the "former husband," half a year with the "later husband," several years with the "grandfather," and two months with the "lover." In terms of boundaries, the relationships overlapped as Xuân had sporadic "sex-for-cash" encounters with the "later husband" while she saw the "grandfather," and started the relationship with the "lover" while she was seeing the "grandfather." In terms of setting, the encounters took place in both rural areas and urban Hồ Chí Minh City. In terms of intimacy, Xuân demonstrated a range of feelings: love, dedication, hate, and pain, "which often lie somewhere on a continuum between genuine and feigned." (Hoefinger 2011: 246) The forms of payment also varied: direct payments, gift- and service-based economy, and social prestige. And in terms of public display, the relationships ranged from secrecy (in the virginity sale), to pretense (in the marriage and godfathership).¹⁴

Power Dynamics: Mother's Methods and Daughter's Resistance

The Nguyễn family has been heavily indebted for over a decade. They have accumulated several types of credit: high-interest loans in the informal credit sector (old, recent and renegotiated), state bank loans and loans from relatives. The average estimated debt of the Nguyễn family during the time of the fieldwork was 25,000,000 VNĐ (\$1,562). The head of the family's monthly pay of about 3,000,000 VNĐ (\$187) in 2008 did not allow him to repay the capital or the minimum monthly interest of 20 percent for "cutthroat loans" [*cho vay tiền cắt cổ*].¹⁵ Indeed, there was a huge gap between the amount of debt and the household's real capacity to repay it. Therefore, it can be assumed that all the major debts that the Nguyễns had borrowed for the last decade had never been fully paid off. At the time of the study, the household struggled to pay the monthly interest. When they were unable to do so, one of the moneylenders went to their home to hurl "insults and reprimands" [*chửi mắng*] at them and followed Hùng to the bank when he deposited his paycheck.¹⁶

¹⁴ I draw this typology of public display from Zelizer (2010: 102) and Tabet (2005: 23-4).

¹⁵ The informal credit sector strangles the debtor in the high interest rates, as reflected in the popular expression "lending money that cuts throat" [*cho vay tiền cắt cổ*]. The Nguyễns rely on a variety of credit institutions and sources: credit associations [*hội* in the north; *hụi* in the south], a private bank, relatives, and informal moneylenders. Two types of informal credit prevail in the study site for the poorest. The first is the "collected money" [*tiền góp*]. Here the debtor reimburses the loan and the interest on a daily basis for twenty-four days (lunar cycle). For a loan of 100,000 VNĐ (\$6.25), the borrower pays 5,000 VNĐ (\$0.30) daily, or 120,000 VNĐ (\$7.50). The interest is ordinarily fixed at 20 percent over twenty-four days. The second model is the "standing money" [*tiền đứng*]. Here the debtor pays the interest per day and the capital is to be reimbursed on the due date. For 100,000 VNĐ (\$6.25) borrowed, the borrower pays 5,000 VNĐ (\$0.30) in interest daily, or an average of 150,000 VNĐ (\$9.40) or 150 percent per month.

¹⁶ Before his arrival, the family used to "hide and sneak, hide and creep" [*trốn chui trốn nhủi*] (their expression) by going to a neighbor's house. The expression is sometimes used to describe a rat escaping and digging a hole to hide from danger.

Getting entangled with moneylenders generates even greater economic vulnerability for low-income households as the borrower often finds him or herself obliged to borrow from elsewhere simply to repay the cumulative interest. This encourages some parents to mobilize the entire workforce available to generate income, including their offspring. Indeed, many children and adolescents in the study site work part-time before or after school as lottery-ticket sellers, or in restaurants, coffee shops and guesthouses, with some entering forms of commercial street sex. In some cases parents know about this and play an active role in managing the commodified sexuality of their offspring, for instance by selling their daughter's virginity or compelling them into direct commercial sexual exchanges. Indeed, the four families of my study rely on their children's sexual and non-sexual activities to generate income that is allocated to loan repayment or subsistence, and occasionally to support gambling, as in the case of the Nguyễn family. This pattern was observed among several adolescents involved in street work (lottery-ticket selling, begging, and working in coffee shops) and commercial street sex. Economic vulnerability, severe indebtedness and pressure from moneylenders are significant reasons for parents to opt for actively managing and profiting from the commodified sexuality of their children, and it is not a coincidence that most of the female adolescents I encountered who were selling sexual services consistently replied that they work partly to repay their parents' debt.

As we have seen in this case study, the daughter's commodified sexual relationships primarily benefit the mother who attempts to control the profits, and secondarily the entire family that uses the money to pay off debts, repair the house and cover daily expenses. The mother deploys coercive power when commodifying her daughter's sexuality. She imposes a "sex-for-cash" relationship when she trades her daughter's virginity for cash payment. Then she forces her daughter into a relationship with the "later husband" and controls the relationship with the "grandfather." She uses her power not only to encourage commodified sexual relationships that her daughter rejects, but also to oppose those that are out of her control and that do not profit her directly. The mother also uses her power to confiscate the payments made to her daughter by playing the role of the middle woman (nameless client in Hồ Chí Minh City, "later husband," "godfather").

The question that needs to be addressed is how the mother enforces power over her daughter. The next section shows the range of methods that the mother uses to control her daughter, and to initiate and monitor her relationships with men: obligations bound up in narratives of gratitude and duty, psychological and physical violence, and the defining of relationships in fictive terms of kinship and reciprocity.

Negotiating Cultural Narratives of Gratitude and Duty

In Vietnam, Confucian filial piety is expressed in cultural narratives of gratitude and duties or social obligations. This is commonly articulated by the phrase "to pay piety" [*trả hiếu*] (Tran 1928, Dinh 1974, Do 1998, Jamieson 1995, Walters unpublished).¹⁷ Parents give life to, nurture and raise their offspring through costly sacrifice; in return, children owe them eternal gratitude that manifests through a set of duties. On the ground, research subjects do rarely articulate these prescriptions as a debt of filiation that every child owes his/her parents and that he/she must repay throughout their entire life as stated by several scholars, but rather as a set of "duties" or "obligations" [*bổn phận*] they should assume without question (Tran 1928: 17, Dinh 1974: 626, Do 1998: 234, Walters unpublished).¹⁸ The obligation to achieve these

¹⁷ Filial piety expressed through the sacrifice and selling of oneself is the central topic of the epic poem in *Kim-Vân-Kiều* (Du 1961).

¹⁸ The same narrative prevails among women and children involved in commercial sex from the region. See for instance the following quote in Montgomery (2001: 82): "The children, however, give

duties is persistent in the narratives of the women I encountered in the field study who were involved in commercial sex, and who gave a significant portion of their profits—if not all—to their parents. In the low-income households I observed, parents strongly rely on this cultural feature to appeal to their children for help and services, as encapsulated by the expression “have children rely on children, have property rely on property” [*có con nhờ con, có của nhờ của*].

In the field, the form in which this set of duties takes depends on the economic condition of each household. “To care” [*quan tâm*] about somebody, an expression commonly used instead of *trả hiếu*, is generally understood as expressing responsibility [*trách nhiệm*] and love or affection [*tình thương*] in tending one’s parents [*chăm sóc cho cha mẹ*]. This interpretation prevails for the middle-class families I observed in the Mekong Delta and in Hồ Chí Minh City. However, for the families in the research site facing harsh economic conditions, pressure from moneylenders or gambling problems, I noted that *quan tâm* has mostly a material connotation. One of its forms is the reliance on children to alleviate the family’s economic burden. Here, *quan tâm* is understood as the obligation for children to assist their parents materially and/or economically. Gifts in cash and kind as markers of gratitude are paramount, while the affective performance of gratitude is relegated to second place. In the Nguyễn household, the children’s obedience with respect to the mother’s demands, especially regarding the daughter’s acceptance of the commodified sexual relationships and gift remittances, overrides the affective performance she must display to her parents. Here *quan tâm* becomes a means that the mother resorts to in all circumstances to take advantage of the human resources available to her, meaning her children and particularly her daughter.

The cultural narrative of gratitude and duty to elders, and the subjective prescriptions the mother associates with it and imposes on Xuân, are deeply embodied in the daughter’s habitus (Bourdieu 1977). Xuân has been inculcated with the sensibilities and dispositions of these obligations that she sees as an inherent structure of her daily life. She never calls them into question. For her, it goes without saying that children must assist their parents by all means available to them. The daughter only rejects the way her mother compels her by using pressure, insults, threats, and physical violence. She accepts her obligation to contribute to the household economy following her mother’s guidelines, but she deplores the chronically stressful climate that prevails at home, and the fact that her mother spends part of her money on gambling. In short, Xuân does not defy the cultural and economic basis of her mother’s coercive requests but, rather, the way in which they are transmitted. Moreover, the daughter constantly correlates the duty of gratitude with labor and debt-repayment. To her, showing gratitude towards her parents means doing anything she can to generate income and to help repay the debts. The sentence quoted from her letter above reveals this association: “I will leave for a period of time and when I am back, I will help you to pay the debt.”¹⁹ Xuân has absolutely no control over the family’s economy (income, expenses, loan management, and negotiation with moneylenders), yet she does not question the lasting obligation to assist her parents in repaying debts. The mother’s use of the narrative of gratitude and duty allows her to confer both the psychological burden and the material responsibility of repaying the family debt onto her children.

very different reasons for doing what they do. They claim that they become and remain prostitutes out of duty and love to their parents, that they have a moral debt to their parents for bearing and raising them; a duty known in Thai as *bun khun*. This is the debt of gratitude that children owe to their parents, and especially to their mothers, for their existence.” See also Muecke (1992) and Kourilsky (2008).

¹⁹ Xuân, letter to her parents (my translation), March 11, 2009, An Giang Province.

Xuân describes the “sale of her virginity” [*bán trinh*] as an act of filial piety and gratitude. She uses the term “sacrifice for the family” [*hy sinh cho gia đình*], presenting the transgression of the cultural norm that values virginity and forbids its commodification as an altruistic act embedded in a reassuring cultural norm.²⁰ The use of the word “sacrifice” [*hy sinh*] allows the young woman to somehow purge herself of part of the guilt and shame. Indeed, she knows that the sale of this sexual commodity is socially condemned; however, faced with a false choice, she “voluntarily” accepts the transgression to assist her parents. She uses the narrative of gratitude and duty to rationalize her lack of choice and assuage feelings of shame. Through a discursive ploy, the commodification of virginity loses its immoral dimension and becomes a potent expression of gratitude towards the parents. The more benefit the parents receive from the sale of their daughter’s virginity, the more likely it is that the sale will be labeled as a “sacrifice for the family,” and the seller a “dutiful child” [*con có hiếu*], a “child who shows gratitude towards his/her parents” [*con biết thương cha mẹ*], or a “responsible child” [*con có trách nhiệm*]. Notions of praise for sacrificing dutiful daughters often allude to Thúy Kiều, the pretty and talented young heroine who had to sacrifice herself to save her family in the epic *Tale of Kiều* [*Truyện Kiều* or *Kim Vân Kiều*]. Written by Nguyễn Du (1961) in the early nineteenth century, the poem is regarded as the most compelling work in Vietnamese literature. To save her father and younger brother from imprisonment because of a debt, Thúy Kiều sells herself into marriage with a middle-aged man, not knowing that he is a pimp, and is forced into prostitution.

Heather Montgomery’s work on child prostitution in Thailand has shown that the children involved in commercial sex are not always guided simply by the desire to eat rather than starve, but also by the desire for social esteem and a sense of honor, or the approval of parents and significant others.²¹ In this case study, the daughter’s identity is so closely tied to that of her mother, and how her mother views her, that the mother’s threat of withdrawing approval is incentive enough to compel her into agreeing “voluntarily” to the virginity sale. The daughter’s rationalization of sacrifice can be seen as her actively making choices between the bleak alternatives presented to her—being labeled an “ungrateful” [*bất hiếu*] and bad child for not helping her family, or selling her virginity and being praised as a good child.

Childishly, the daughter expresses her agency by rebelling against her mother’s wishes, but not by changing the game or refusing to play it. She does not share with her mother all of the payments she receives from her clients. Certainly she remits a significant portion of the gifts to repay her parents’ debt, but she keeps a small share for herself to spend discreetly in leisure activities. By omitting details about her activities and revenues, she is not entirely honest with her mother either. One day she won 40,000 VNĐ (\$2.50) in the lottery, but she told her mother that she had won 20,000 VNĐ (\$1.25) to avoid paying the difference. She told her mother repeatedly that she was not having an affair with her “lover” when she went away with him.²²

In addition, Xuân plays with her patrons. Although the men in these relationships have, at first, a sphere of power granted by their access to money and resources, Xuân is able to counterbalance the initial asymmetrical power dynamic by initiating encounters and by calibrating the level of satisfaction and pleasure, and therefore, the men’s attachment. In doing so, she creates her own sphere of affective power in which she is able to manipulate, deceive and play with them, and ask for more gifts in cash and in kind. For example, she presents different stories about herself to each of them. Indeed, if she performs properly,

²⁰ For a detailed description of the decision process of one Vietnamese family from Cambodia to sell the virginity of two daughters as a strategy for household economic advancement, see Lainez (2011a).

²¹ Montgomery, *Modern Babylon*, 82–85.

²² The trip with the “lover” to Hồ Chí Minh City described in endnote 13 is a blatant lie. She claims to “go to work” [*đi làm*] while in fact she “goes to play” [*đi chơi*].

regardless of whether her narrative is accurate or fictitious, she appeals to the men and therefore their wallet. Xuân adapts skillfully to each situation and knows how to change roles quickly, or how to manage narratives that blend truths and lies. Her goal is to gain as much material and personal benefit as possible while amusing herself, or at least make life more bearable, especially in those situations that her mother imposes on her. She was certainly very unhappy about having to live with and provide sexual services to the “later husband,” but even in that stressful situation she managed to resist him, for instance by requesting services that obliged him to leave home. Moreover, she behaves according to her reputation of a woman who has men wrapped around her little finger, as she can juggle simultaneous and overlapping relationships. By doing so, she obtains payments (gifts, services, trips, and prestige) from each of them.

To sum up, Xuân is certainly constrained by the power of her mother who confines her in the cultural narrative of gratitude and duty; however, she resists and expresses agency in the arena circumscribed by both her mother and her patrons. By doing so, she shows her “entrepreneurialism, determination and creativity.” (Hoefinger 2011: 245) This aspect is beautifully expressed by Tabet: “Human plasticity appears constantly in the ability to extract something good for yourself, even in unbearable situations, to resist in one way or another to the oppression, to use the cards available to play with and to have fun.” (Tabet 2005: 67)

Psychological and Physical Violence

The use of violence is frequent among the families in the study sample, especially within households in which parents rely heavily on their children to generate income. It is rather common to hear parents use a mix of vulgar language and insults uttered in an authoritarian way when addressing their children. Indeed, when the daughter’s revolt against maternal power degenerates into open conflict, the mother quickly puts aside the narrative of gratitude and duty that proves ineffective in this situation, and resorts to psychological and physical violence. Violence is only effective in the short term, and only if the daughter remains in physical proximity to her mother. As soon as she runs away, to the province with the “lover” for instance, the mother loses her hold over the daughter.

Violence is at first verbal. The mother swears at and harasses her daughter by using the (unintentionally self-directed) expression “fuck your mother” [*đụ mẹ mày; đụ má mày*], with several variations including paternal and maternal grandparents; “dog whore” [*con đĩ chó*]; and “horny pussy” [*níng lồn*]. These swear words express the violence that often prevails in the relationship between the mother and daughter from the sample. Obviously the meaning cannot be taken literally; the mother calls her daughter a “whore” so as to insult her, when in fact she monitors and benefits from her daughter’s commodified sexuality. The mother continually harasses her daughter on the slightest pretext: violating an order, missing a payment, hiding and/or not sharing a gift, escaping to the provinces or to Hồ Chí Minh City with the “lover.”

When psychological violence proves ineffective, the mother resorts to physical violence. The daughter describes the punishment her mother has inflicted on her since early childhood—pinching with pliers and beatings with a bamboo stick, cane, plastic pipe, and electric cables. In addition, she displays the self-inflicted slash scars on her forearms to me. According to her, these mutilations are a way to show her “life experience” [*trải đời*] to other people. The mother occasionally whips her daughter as well as her two-year-old granddaughter in front of me. She severely reprimands the latter when she disobeys and often threatens physical violence. One day, she attacked her daughter who then pretended to attempt suicide by swallowing ten tablets of antibiotics. She did not die, but she did become seriously ill. The daughter recounts that when she was much younger, she ran away for a

month after her mother meted out severe punishment. She went to another district after crossing the paddy fields barefoot, lived on the streets without money and slept on benches for several weeks.

The tension between the mother and daughter is palpable in the Nguyễns' daily life. Tenderness alternates with violence, sadness with happiness, storm with sunshine. Mother and daughter constantly fight with each other to impose their wills and desires on each other in a tumultuous and asymmetrical power dynamic. The daughter's agency constantly challenges the social norms that prescribe the relationship between mothers and daughters. Although the daughter cheats and lies to evade her mother's control, she remains under her influence as long as she is at home. This is why Xuân is always keen to leave her hometown. The issue of attachment and dependency between mother and daughter is critical. The love-hate aspect is the foundation of their relationship, and it is central to understanding the power dynamic. The daughter frequently displays disdain for her mother, but paradoxically, she also displays the opposite response to emotionally-charged situations. The following account describes a scene that illustrates these kinds of unexpected turnarounds as well as the deep attachment the daughter feels for her mother, all of which may be expressed publicly and in dramatic fashion. I organized a farewell lunch in a restaurant to thank the informants for participating in my fieldwork. While some guests drank rice wine and ate hot pot, others started to scream and dance. The mother dropped a bowl of boiling broth that shattered and splashed onto her leg, inflicting minor burns. The mother fainted, or pretended to do so, and panicked the guests. Her friends and relatives rushed to help her. Her daughter Xuân rose immediately and burst into tears. She became hysterical and lamented the misfortune that had just befallen her mother. She screamed the love she felt for mother, and her deep fear of losing her. As the mother began to wake up and recover, the daughter fainted and fell violently to the ground. She immediately became the subject of all the attention that had just been lavished onto her mother. Mother and daughter recovered half an hour later without physiological consequences and continued drinking and partying as if nothing had happened.

Fictive Kinship and Webs of Obligations

The mother relies on a third method of managing some of her daughter's commercial sexual relationships with men and of accessorially benefiting from non-sexual relationships that the Nguyễns establish with outsiders. On two occasions, the mother outlines her daughter's relationships with patrons in fictive kinship terms ("later husband" and "grandfather"). This has the dual advantage of enabling her to commodify both the sexual and emotional labor of her daughter in kin-based relationships and obligations, and to fend off public suspicions of direct "sex-for-cash" arrangements.²³

The first fictive kinship is the "later husband," whom the mother assigns as her daughter's new husband after the departure of the "former husband." Designated as such, the "later husband" is expected to support his wife, and by extension her whole family, since they live in the family house. This ensures that the mother has access to a steady and regular flow of gifts and monetary contributions. This ploy works as he actually provides cash and gifts on a regular basis.

²³ Heather Montgomery (2011: 88) notes the same pattern among families whose children engage in commercial sex in Thailand: "It is also obvious that by constructing prostitution as a form of reciprocity, the children can see prostitution as something other than the anonymous and obscene selling of sex. As a consequence of this, prostitution no longer has to be seen as the shameful public vice that so many outside their community see it as: it can be explained away in terms of reciprocal arrangements."

Đức, the “grandfather,” becomes the material and symbolic benefactor not only of the daughter but also of the family, given the central position of the mother as middle woman in making arrangements. In practice, both mother and daughter at times displayed the “sugar daddy-type” relationship between Xuân and her “grandfather” as godfathership. The women use both reverent attitudes and kinship terms to shape this impression. Xuân uses the pair of terms “adoptive maternal grandfather-grandchild/niece from maternal line” [*ông ngoại nuôi-cháu ngoại*] to address her “grandfather” and refer to herself.²⁴ Moreover, the mother asks her granddaughter to call Đức “great grandfather” [*ông cố*]. In Vietnamese, a young person addresses an old man or his/her grandfather using the pronoun *ông* [grandfather]. This use does not create an obligation unless the grandparents are the biological ones. So far, there is nothing atypical in using the pronoun *ông ngoại*. However, Xuân adds the suffix *nuôi* [nurture/adoptive], as in “*ông ngoại nuôi*,” suggesting the ideas of supporting, feeding, and educating. The old man sometimes uses the pronoun “father” [*tía*] when talking to her, but rarely does he use the pronoun “grandfather” [*ông*] to refer to himself. He refuses to play the Nguyễns’ game although he often acts as real kin towards the daughter and her mother. The strategy of the mother (and indirectly of the daughter) is to give the impression that this relationship is not transactional and sexually oriented, but rather, a genuine and benevolent bond between a “generous man” [*quý nhân*] and his granddaughter. This strategy is doubly advantageous. On the one hand, mother and daughter receive regular and generous donations from him. On the other hand, they obfuscate perceptions of the true nature of this relationship. Indeed, distant acquaintances think that Đức is effectively Xuân’s real grandfather or godfather while close neighbors and friends know full well that the relationship is not biological. It is therefore an open secret among them.

The mother uses kinship terms in another context in attempts to generate moral obligations in relationships that do not necessarily involve commodified sex. I was very close to the granddaughter, Phượng, during the fieldwork period, and Xuân’s mother suggested that she call me “adoptive father” [*cha nuôi*] when she should actually call me “maternal uncle” or “paternal uncle” [*cậu* or *bác*]. Both the parents and their daughter hoped that I would be more involved in her care, that is, that I would commit to supporting her by bringing clothes, food and medicine when she was sick, or better still, that I would become a real adoptive father by taking her to Europe with me. They made this request several times but always in a casual tone, almost jokingly, as if the mother wanted to study my reaction. The Nguyễns used the same strategy with a European tourist who, during a trip to their hometown years ago, met the son Tâm when he was an adolescent. The man felt affection for the child and gave his mother a stipend to cover the boy’s expenses. The mother then started to consider him her son’s “adoptive father” [*cha nuôi*]. The Nguyễns have kept in touch with this individual for years by sending affectionate letters with updates, delicately describing their economic difficulties to provoke sympathy and compassion in the hopes of obtaining a remittance. These letters are subtly written; no request is ever made directly.²⁵ On his side, the European tourist keeps an

²⁴ It is likely that the daughter uses the pronoun *ông ngoại* [grandfather from the maternal line] because her mother establishes this relationship; therefore the pronoun refers to her “maternal” side [*ngoại*].

²⁵ Here is an excerpt from a letter signed by Tâm but written by the mother and sent to the man in early 2009: “Presently I work hard to save money to help my parents [...] The money I earn here every day is immediately spent to help my family. My parents are old and sick, and they can hardly work. Since I am the eldest son of the family, I have to take care of everything. Here are just a few words about my family, so you know how they are and how things are going [...] I would be very happy if I could see you this year when you will come back to Vietnam, and I would be even happier if you would visit my family” (my translation). The subtlety of similar correspondence between foreign

amicable relationship with the family but nothing more. He often promises to come to visit them but he never does. What matters most for the mother is that he never sends any money.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how one family commodifies the sexuality and emotional labor of the daughter for the interests of the family. The case study presented above illustrates the way in which commodified sexual economy occurs in the context of an indebted and economically vulnerable household. In this family, sex is one of the resources employed to ameliorate the debt incurred. The study shows the ways in which the mother provides, initiates and maintains the conditions for the sexual commodification of her daughter through the power situated within the mother-daughter relationship and the cultural narrative of gratitude and duty. Further, this case study discusses the various types of relationships that the daughter is involved in, demonstrating that the analysis focused solely on direct “sex-for-cash” exchanges cannot fully capture these complex configurations. Thus, it makes more sense to use the “transactional sex” model that takes into account both sexual and emotional labor. In accepting this framework, it becomes clear that public perceptions and the self-perceptions of the women involved must be reconsidered. This framework also has implications for how campaigners and representatives of social services frame “prostitution,” and “sexual exploitation,” and their consequent programs for intervening in the lives of the women involved in such activities.

Firstly, both mother and daughter reject labeling their activities as “prostitution” [*mại dâm*] or direct “sex-for-cash” transactions. The daughter does not view herself as a “prostitute” [*người bán dâm*], and the mother does not see herself as a broker or “pimp” [*ma cô*]. There exist hierarchies of power and prestige among sex providers in the study site and the position that mother and daughter maintain fits within these structures.²⁶ On one hand, the Nguyễns’ close neighbors and family acquaintances at times criticize the daughter’s promiscuity. On the other hand, the daughter’s friends who sell sex on the streets perceive her as someone who has a higher status because she does not have to resort to street sex. She is able to simultaneously handle multiple relationships with men in her hometown or in the province who provide gifts and services in return. These tangible markers of status are a source of admiration and envy rather than condemnation. Rather than being a source of criticism, her promiscuity grants her prestige and demarcates her from her friends who work as “true” prostitutes. Xuân does not identify with these “low women,” and conversely, they do not identify with her. As in the case of prostituted children in Thailand studied by Montgomery, “in their classificatory system, there is a distinction between those who have no power to refuse or negotiate and those who do.” (Montgomery 2001: 91) Xuân claims some sense of control over the men and over their world, something that, in her view, street prostitutes lack.

Secondly, popular views about children and childhood inform perceptions about “forced” child prostitution. The conventional view is that children are vulnerable, dependent and susceptible to manipulation by adults.²⁷ In this argument, children would not choose

visitors and “bar-girls” has been studied in the context of sex tourism in Thailand. See, for instance, Cohen (1986) and Walker & Ehrlich (1992).

²⁶ Several authors have pointed out hierarchies among commercial sex providers. For differentiations among children involved in commercial sex in Thailand, see Montgomery (2001: 85) and Bernstein (2007).

²⁷ Several works deal with the issue of prostituted children constructed as object/victims or subjects. See for instance Montgomery (2001), O’Connell (2005) and Lainez (2010).

prostitution. Instead, an adult must have forced them into it. O’Connell Davidson argues that this has led to “extremely simplistic ideas about the nature of the problem and appropriate policy responses to it.” As a consequence, the attention is turned towards the individual morality of those who force children to prostitute, namely “the world’s best-beloved folk devils—pedophiles, perverts, homosexuals, pimps, mafia thugs, human traffickers, heartless and greedy parents.” (O’Connell 2005: 43) In the field notes presented in this paper, the mother appears to be the scheming and greedy parent who forces her daughter to sell her virginity and to engage in commodified sexual relationships in order to reap the material benefits for her household and herself (although Xuân was at that time standing at the disputed boundary of childhood and adulthood). This paper has focused on the turbulent relationship between the mother and the daughter, simply because in all four families of the sample, the father’s management of child-related issues was nonexistent. For the Nguyễn family, the father’s involvement in household affairs is undoubtedly dominant from an economic perspective as he is the sole breadwinner. But he appears completely—and enigmatically—absent when it comes to managing issues related to his children, for instance his daughter’s commercial sexual activities and his wife’s direct or indirect appropriation of their daughter’s profits.

The crux of the matter is that because international campaigners against commercial sexual exploitation of children and sex trafficking and the Vietnamese state have framed prostitution and sexual exploitation in a particular way, they find themselves unable to adequately deal with the messy ambiguities that I have highlighted in this case study. Under current state policy vis-à-vis prostitution in Vietnam, the daughter would be labeled a “prostitute” (a sub-category of “social evils” [*tệ nạn xã hội*]), or as a “victim of sexual exploitation” [*nạn nhân bị bóc lột tình dục*]. If her case were to be identified as such by the local authorities, she could either be arrested and sent to a government-sponsored shelter for moral and social reeducation, or sent to an internationally-sponsored shelter if her case were to be considered sexual exploitation. Campaigners would undoubtedly consider her to be exploited by her mother, who sold her virginity while she was still underage and who has initiated and monitored her relationships with men to collect profit. From that perspective, the daughter is irrevocably a “victim of sexual exploitation.” However, the study shows that the daughter has rationalized her own actions and those of her mother based on the acceptance that the family’s interests should come before her own. Her acts of resistance are directed against being in relationships with men that her mother chooses and having to give all her income to her mother to support the family and cover her gambling addiction. These acts are not directly against commodified sexual relationships or the commodification of her body, as she willingly engages in sexual liaisons with other men. At the same time, she manipulates the relationships she has with men for her own interests. In addition, Xuân refuses to find a stable job and to be a real mother to her daughter, who is in fact being looked after by Xuân’s parents. On the one hand, she struggles against her mother’s power over her. On the other hand, she gives into the temptation of earning an income through engaging in commodified sexual relationships. It is clear that the simplistic argument that she is a “victim of sexual exploitation” does not hold.

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