

# ALLIANCE ANTI TRAFIC

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## A Foot In and a Foot Out Sex Migration of Vietnamese Women to Singapore

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October 2011

**Research report no. 3**



## *Alliance Anti-Traffic*

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 report 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.

Opinions expressed in the report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the *Alliance Anti-Traffic*, its partners and donors.

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Cover photo: A Vietnamese entertainer stands at the entry of a hair salon in Joo Chiat Road.

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## Table of contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	vi
<b>Acronyms</b>	viii

## **1. BACKGROUND AND METHODS** **1**

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<b>1.1 Background and objectives</b>	1
<i>Alliance Anti-Traffic's</i> objective	3
Objectives of the study	4
<b>1.2 Research locations and features of the research population</b>	4
District One (HCMC, Vietnam)	5
Joo Chiat (East Coast, Singapore)	5
Geylang (East Coast, Singapore)	7
Orchard Towers (Orchard Road, Singapore)	8
General characteristics of the Vietnamese red light districts in Singapore	10
<b>1.3 Laws on prostitution and immigration in Singapore</b>	12
Laws on prostitution	13
Unwritten laws on the management of prostitution	13
Immigration policies related to foreign entertainers	15
Is prostitution a necessary evil?	16
<b>1.4 Methodology and limitations</b>	16
Sample, quantification and recruiting methods	16
Research sample	17
The ethnography of a boarding house	19
Limitations of the study	23

## **2. PROFILES, MOTIVATIONS, EARNINGS** **24**

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<b>2.1 Vietnamese migrant entertainers' profile</b>	24
<b>2.2 Reasons for going to Singapore</b>	24
Going to Singapore: higher earnings in a stronger currency	24
Repaying loans and supporting relatives financially	26
Cash needed to invest in Vietnam	28
More anonymity in Singapore than in Vietnam	29
Marital disruption and single motherhood	29
<b>2.3 Income and expenses: Is the business really profitable?</b>	29

<b>3. IMMIGRATION AND EXTENSION OF STAY</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>3.1 Departure and entrance to Singapore</b>	35
Passing through immigration in HCMC and Singapore	35
Being rejected by Singapore immigration	37
Migration broker services, expenses and risk	38
Brokerage and social relationships	40
<b>3.2 Extending the stay in Singapore</b>	42
Extension of the 30-day Social Visit Pass (“ <i>Apply</i> ”)	42
Exiting and returning to Singapore to obtain a new pass (“ <i>Going to Malaysia</i> ”)	43
Performing Artist Work Permit (“ <i>Working card</i> ”)	46
Genuine and fraudulent marriages in Singapore	48
Accumulating techniques to stay in Singapore	53
<b>3.3 Raids and expulsion from Singapore</b>	54
AVEU raids and law enforcement	54
Fear of being arrested: a reclusive life	55
<b>4. CONCLUSION</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>5. REFERENCES CITED</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>6. ANNEXES</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>6.1 Two cases studies of Vietnamese migrant entertainers in Singapore</b>	61
Case of minor prostitution and disillusion (Linh)	61
Case of deception and debt-bondage (Tuyết)	63
<b>6.2 Aid organizations addressing labor migration and prostitution in Singapore</b>	64
<b>6.3 Press clip about Vietnamese prostitution in Singapore</b>	65

## Executive summary

This study is the third in a series of three, the objective of which is to understand international mobility undertaken for the purposes of commercial sex purposes by low-skilled women from the Mekong Delta. In particular, this research addresses the migration of Vietnamese migrant entertainers to Singapore. This report is based on a five-month ethnographic investigation conducted in a boarding house of Vietnamese migrant entertainers in Singapore. It provides a unique picture of the social organization of the migration network operating between Vietnam and Singapore, and of the transient lives of Vietnamese entertainers in Singapore.

The influx of migrant entertainers increased in Singapore in the early 1980s. The regional exchange network now includes women originating from all of the Southeast Asian countries. This includes Vietnamese, who appear to be a minority compared to other nationalities such as Filipina, Chinese, Indonesian and Thai. Singaporean authorities are undoubtedly concerned about the changing composition of the foreign entertainer population, and this is a contentious and sensitive issue in Singapore. At the same time, the authorities are concerned about enforcing the law on prostitution. The legislation does not criminalize the act per se. Rather, it enforces neutralization and containment in the Designated Red-Light Areas, as well as monitoring of the sex industry to keep exploitation and the spread of STDs and HIV/AIDS in check.

Two-thirds of the Vietnamese migrant entertainers of the study were between 20 and 30 years old. A profile emerged in which slightly more than half originated from HCMC, and were lowly educated and unskilled. Family dissolution was an important feature, as nine women out of 16 were separated from their partners and four came to Singapore following a separation. These factors pushed half of the sampled migrant entertainers into prostitution in Vietnam before they decided to migrate. Their objective in coming to Singapore was to earn a substantial amount of money. Indeed, the expectation of high earnings was the chief pull factor due to the general assumption that Singapore is a rich “El Dorado” where foreign migrant entertainers can generate earnings of at least S\$ 1000 (US\$ 816) per month. This was a misconception on their part as many returned to Vietnam with less than that or empty pockets. In addition, a substantial part of the earnings – between US\$ 1057 and US\$ 1482 – was also used to cover travel and living expenses.

The recruitment process of Vietnamese migrant entertainers reveals a complex network of exchange that links the Vietnamese operators within Singapore with the migrant entertainers in Vietnam. This informal and clientelist network is composed of migration brokers and their long-standing customers who introduce and assist new customers in the transnational movement between Vietnam and Singapore. The brokers are able to expand their customer base by incorporating the networks of their previous customers, who in turn become peers of the new recruits. The network appears to be a well-organized and non-exploitative voluntary exchange system. It functions effectively because of the symbiotic relationship between the migration brokers and the migrant entertainers. One of the key findings of this research is that trafficking for sexual exploitation of Vietnamese sampled women and minors to Singapore is irrelevant.

As described in the report, three factors created transience in the life of the entertainers.

Firstly, all entertainers entered Singapore on 30-day Social Visit Passes. This scheme does not allow foreign visitors to engage in any form of employment, including prostitution. Officials from the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) routinely refuse entry and expel Vietnamese female travelers suspected of coming to Singapore to work in the prostitution

industry. Vietnamese migrant entertainers typically rely on professional migration brokers who provide services to enable their customers to slip through the net of the ICA.

Secondly, after the expiry of their 30-day Social Visit Pass, the migrant entertainers of the study faced two options: they could either return to Vietnam or extend their stay in Singapore. The majority sought to avoid raising the suspicions of the immigration authorities and returned home for a few months, before coming back to Singapore. Those wishing to extend their stay had several methods at their disposal: extending the social visit pass, exiting and returning to Singapore to obtain a new social visit pass, acquiring a Performing Artist Work Permit, or getting genuinely or fraudulently married to a Singaporean citizen or permanent resident. The decision to extend the stay depended on personal motivations and financial resources, as well as on the availability of services provided by the Vietnamese migration broker and Singaporean sponsors.

Lastly, the Anti-Vice Enforcement Unit (AVEU) relies on raids and on deportations as key mechanisms to control foreign prostitution in Singapore. Red light areas like Geylang, Joo Chiat and Orchard Towers are regularly raided, and arrested entertainers are deported to their home country at their own expense.

As a consequence of these three factors, the Vietnamese migrant entertainers of the study were constantly straddling Singapore and Vietnam. They were only allowed to stay in Singapore for 30 days at any one time and upon the expiry of the pass, they would return to Vietnam, with the intention of returning at another time. Consequently, while living in Singapore, they were either looking for ways to extend their stay, or thinking about their return to Vietnam. This was pervasive: upon arrival, they were already thinking about the return trip, and vice-versa. They lived lives of transience and evanescence. In fact, even when they were physically in one space, they were mentally in the other.



## **Acronyms**

AAT	<i>Alliance Anti-Traffic</i>
HCMC	Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon)
AVEU	Anti-Vice Enforcement Unit
ICA	Immigration and Checkpoints Authority
MOM	Ministry of Manpower
DRA	Designated Red-light Area

# 1 BACKGROUND AND METHODS

## 1.1 Background and objectives

This study is the third in a series of three, the objective of which is to understand transnational mobility undertaken for commercial sex purposes by low-skilled women from Southern Vietnam, including Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), to one of the most prosperous countries in the Southeast Asian region: Singapore.<sup>1</sup> The chief objective of this final report is to broaden the investigation undertaken in the Mekong Delta (Lainez 2001a) and in Cambodia (Lainez 2011b) by following Vietnamese migrant entertainers in their transnational movements across the Southeast Asian region. The study presents a detailed situational analysis of the causes that motivate Vietnamese entertainers to migrate to Singapore for commercial sex purposes,<sup>2</sup> and the entire migration experience including the departure from Vietnam and the arrival to Singapore.

Since scholarly and commissioned studies on this particular topic and population are nonexistent,<sup>3</sup> this descriptive work aims primarily to establish a knowledge base and stimulate further empirical research. It fills a major gap in our current knowledge about: 1) migration for commercial sex purposes to prosperous countries by a group neglected in research, in this case low-skilled Vietnamese women from Southern Vietnam; and 2) the legality surrounding immigration and prostitution policies in Singapore. Based on documentation (academic papers and online media reports) and, above all, ethnographic material collected in 2010 in Vietnam and Singapore, this empirical study reveals the strategies that Vietnamese migrant entertainers used to enter and work in the prostitution industry in Singapore, sometimes at the very limits of the law. The focus is primarily based on the informant's perspective, as no interviews were conducted with officials from the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA), the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), and the Anti-Vice Enforcement Unit (AVEU) in charge of enforcing Singapore's immigration and prostitution laws.

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<sup>1</sup> Reports, cases of sex trafficking monitored by AAT, and my own investigations in Kuala Lumpur (in the suburbs and in the Beach Club Disco near the Petronas Towers where several Vietnamese entertainers work) attest that Vietnamese women also migrate for the same purposes to Malaysia and Hong Kong.

<sup>2</sup> I will use the neutral and descriptive term “entertainer” rather than “prostitute” or “sex worker.” Indeed both terms have different connotations and imply different positions that need to be clarified. On one hand, the “prostitute” tradition in feminist discourse focuses on political and economic disadvantages that force women to choose prostitution as an economic alternative. Here the “prostitute” is often viewed as a “victim” in need of help to reenter society. On the other hand, the “sex work” tradition frequently focuses on high-class or even middle-class prostitution, and is an expressed opposition to the “prostitute” tradition above. From this perspective, those who enter prostitution without being coerced into it by a third party do so for economic reasons. Thus, prostitution is for them a form of legitimate work. Here the “sex worker” has made his or her choice, and is liberated enough to deal rationally with his or her life. I sympathize with elements on both sides of the debate, thus I prefer to use a more neutral and descriptive term to avoid being mired in the intricacies of this debate, which although interesting, is not relevant to this study. In Vietnamese, *mai dâm* is “prostitution,” and *lam mai dâm* is “to prostitute” (people also say *lam gai* which literally means, “to make the girl”). *Người bán mai dâm* is “prostitute,” but the entertainers never use this word to describe themselves. They simply say *đi lam*, for “go to work,” or *đi lam gai* for “go to make the girl.”

<sup>3</sup> The non-government organization ECPAT International recently published, in partnership with Body Shop, a research report about sex trafficking to Singapore (Yea, 2011).

The fieldwork specifically examined the patterns of transnational migration based on informal peer networks in which coercion is not involved, and the characteristics of Vietnamese prostitution in Singapore. Investigations draw on a range of interviews conducted with Vietnamese female migrant entertainers in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and in Singapore, and additionally with aid organizations from Singapore. The study promotes an innovative empirical approach, as several interviews and observations were conducted in one boarding house rented by Vietnamese migrant entertainers, located in a red light district in the Eastern part of Singapore, in which I lived and conducted fieldwork for five months. The responses of the participants provided detailed information on their socio-economic profiles, motivations and *modus operandi*. In-depth interviews and participant observation conducted in the boarding house provided the material to fully contextualize their stories, and to gain rare insights into their experiences and concerns at all stages of their migration process.

Singaporean laws on immigration and prostitution are enforced, and so are the unwritten agreements that prevail in some jurisdictions known as Designated Red Light Areas (DRAs), by the AVEU and the actors of the prostitution industry. Indeed, Vietnamese migrant entertainers must continually deal with law enforcement agencies, both at the border checkpoints as well as in and out of the DRAs. They are at constant risk of being denied entry (30-day Social Visit pass) into Singapore by ICA officials, or of being arrested by the AVEU in their workplaces for the offence of soliciting in public. The consequences for the women are the same in both cases: immediate expulsion from Singapore at their own expense. As a result, the Vietnamese migrant entertainers of this study lived in constant fear of being expelled. Another consequence was that the Vietnamese migrant entertainers were constantly straddling Singapore and Vietnam. They were only allowed to stay in Singapore for 30 days at any one time and upon the expiry of the pass, they would return to Vietnam, with the intention of traveling back to Singapore at another time. This was pervasive: upon arrival, they were already thinking about the return trip, and vice-versa. In fact, even when they were physically in one space, they were mentally in the other, so they lived lives of transience and evanescence. In their own words, they perpetually lived with a “foot in Singapore and a foot in Vietnam,” following the popular Vietnamese expression “a leg in and a leg out” (*chân trong, chân ngoài*). It is for this reason that this expression was used as the title of this report.

The report is divided into three chapters.

Chapter 1 presents the research setting, including research locations and laws on immigration and prostitution in Singapore, and describes the methodology and limitations.

Chapter 2 presents the socioeconomic profile of the informants, their motivations and their incomes and expenses in Singapore.

Chapter 3 is the bulk of the study as it shows how Vietnamese migrant entertainers enter, stay and work in Singapore. The chapter, divided into two sections, addresses the ways in which the women in the study dealt with immigration and prostitution laws. The first section presents the methods migrants used to organize their journey from Vietnam to Singapore. It focuses on the critical role of the migration brokers perceived as “mummies,” especially for organizing the travel and stay – including its extension – in Singapore. The second section deals with AVEU raids, and the consequences this policy has on the entertainer’s life. The study ends with a summary of the findings, and annexes that illustrate two cases of: 1) voluntary migration with a component of disillusion but no deception or exploitation, and 2) migration with a component of deception and exploitation. The annexes also include a brief presentation of the aid organizations addressing labor migration, prostitution and human trafficking in Singapore, and one press clip about Vietnamese prostitution in Singapore.

### *Alliance Anti-Traffic's objective*

AAT promotes and implements anti-trafficking initiatives in Vietnam as well as in trafficking transit and destination countries.<sup>4</sup> Findings from the previous research reports illustrated that migration from Southern Vietnam to poorer countries like Cambodia has dried up, and that Vietnamese migrant entertainers tend nowadays to go to wealthy destinations like Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong. This study was originally designed by AAT to verify this hypothesis, and to investigate the scale of sex trafficking within this new trend. The initial goal was to survey:

- The prevalence of cases of human trafficking and sexual exploitation among female Vietnamese migrants in Singapore working in the local sex industry;
- The causes of and risk factors surrounding sex trafficking and sexual exploitation in this migratory trend; and
- The possible involvement of domestic and international criminal syndicates in the management of transnational migration for commercial sex purposes between Vietnam and Singapore, and in the organization of the Vietnamese sex sector in Singapore.

AAT's practical objective was to identify the areas of prevention and protection intervention based on the needs of current and future Vietnamese migrant entertainers and possible trafficked victims, which could be provided in Vietnam prior to departure or in Singapore by other parties with whom partnerships could be established.

It is generally agreed that far more research on the criminal operations and the exploitative labor industries into which women are trafficked – including the brokers, human traffickers and employers – is needed. Issues of human trafficking and sexual exploitation were addressed as a priority in the field investigation in both Vietnam in Singapore, but it quickly became obvious that this is not a common pattern among Vietnamese migrant entertainers in Singapore. As the findings did not point to any other issues of sex trafficking and no cases were identified in the preliminary field investigations,<sup>5</sup> the principle focus of the research was redirected to issues of immigration and prostitution policies that shape the sojourn and work of transient Vietnamese migrant entertainers in Singapore.

Based on the findings, the practical recommendations for AAT were:

- Human trafficking for sexual exploitation is not a prevalent pattern in the mobility for commercial sex purposes from Vietnam to Singapore.
- Networks of migration are non-criminal but social and peer-based, efficient, well organized, and non-exploitative in nature.
- The vast majority of Vietnamese migrant entertainers working in Singapore's red light districts are freelancers; therefore sexually exploitation is not a major concern.

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<sup>4</sup> The definition used in this study and by AAT in general to define human trafficking is taken from the "United Nations Convention against organized cross border crime" and its Additional Protocol. Signed in Palermo in 2000, this law defines 'Trafficking in Persons' as the "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation shall be irrelevant." ([www.unodc.org/pdf/crime/a\\_res\\_55/res5525e.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/pdf/crime/a_res_55/res5525e.pdf), accessed 25 September 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Except one that took place some years ago and is presented in the annexes.

- Informants did not express the need for health services, for instance the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

Consequently AAT decided not to promote any action or recommendations with its regional and national partners in Vietnam (Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs; Ministry of Public Security; Vietnamese Women's Union). However, AAT believes that the findings and conclusions of this study provide useful information to improve the understanding of the current trends on transnational migration for commercial sex purposes across Southeast Asia. Based on that belief, AAT decided to share the report by making it available on its website and by disseminating it to stakeholders, including international and non-governmental organizations, from Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries. AAT does not plan to promote the report in Singapore as it has neither an advocacy program nor official representation or partners there.

This research report was originally designed to be an empirical and descriptive study. It only includes a few references, because the literature on the topic, in relation to Singapore, is very limited. In addition to this report, two academic papers analyzing the lives of Vietnamese migrant entertainers from an academic perspective will be written and submitted to refereed social science journals for publication. The first will focus on brokerage, and the second on the link between religious practices and anxiety borne of the management of immigration procedures and prostitution laws. Since this report does not make comparisons with other research on the topic in other Asian countries and with other migrant populations, later publications might also compare the situation of Singapore Vietnamese entertainers with that in other countries, either with Vietnamese entertainers or with foreigners in general.

### **Objectives of the study**

In summary, the initial objectives of the study were as follows:

- To broaden the ethnographic research based in Southern Vietnam (sending country) and in Cambodia (previous destination country).
- To explore the patterns of migration for commercial sex purposes from Vietnam to Singapore (destination country).
- To explore the living and working conditions for Vietnamese entertainers in Singapore.
- To evaluate the existence and prevalence of cases of human trafficking and sexual exploitation among Vietnamese migrant entertainers in Singapore.
- To identify the needs of Vietnamese migrant entertainers for social services (information about safe migration and risks of human trafficking and exploitation) and health services (STDs and HIV/AIDS medical care).

## **1.2 Research locations and features of the research population**

Although Singapore has several red light districts, it appears that Vietnamese entertainers are only found in certain locations. This is because red light areas in Singapore tend to be compartmentalized by nationalities. Thai entertainers are found in the pubs and karaoke lounges of the Golden Mile Complex on Beach Road; South Asian – mainly Indian and Bangladeshi – women operate around the Mustapha Shopping Mart in Little India (Desker Road and Flanders Square); Filipina women may be found at Orchard Towers and in the Lucky Plaza Shopping Mall on Orchard Road; and Vietnamese women are mainly located in Joo Chiat. This geographical compartmentalization is not exclusive, as women from these nationalities also work in other

parts of the city such as Geylang. Initially, this study did not attempt to survey all locations of Vietnamese prostitution in the city, so the investigations were conducted primarily in Singapore's main red light district, Geylang, and one of its satellites, Joo Chiat. Supplementary research was conducted at Orchard Towers. Preliminary investigations took place in the central district of HCMC in July 2010.

### **District One (HCMC, Vietnam)**

A preliminary field investigation was conducted in HCMC's district one. The vast majority of Vietnamese women working in Singapore's sex sector originate from the southern provinces of Vietnam, from either rural areas or HCMC. They travel from the southern capital to Singapore by airplane, generally with budget carriers. The decision was made to start the investigation in HCMC in order to gain basic knowledge about the patterns of mobility from Vietnam. The objective was to gain access to key informants who could help with introductions (snowball method), and to identify research locations in both countries. AAT Vietnam's outreach team of peer educators, who visit entertainers in red light areas and at their residences, facilitated access to research informants. They arranged interviews with one broker who sends Vietnamese women to Singapore and Hong Kong, and with six women who had worked extensively in Singapore. Some worked in both the HCMC and Singapore sex sectors at the time of the investigations.

### **Joo Chiat (East Coast, Singapore)**

In Singapore, field research was conducted in the Joo Chiat area located in the East Coast part of the city. Joo Chiat's perimeter consists of Geylang Road, Changi Road, Still Road, East Coast Road and Haig Road. This upper-middle class area boasts several Peranakan (cultural blend of Chinese, Malay and European descent) restaurants and coffee shops, preserved shop houses, and art deco buildings. In 1993, the Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority labeled Joo Chiat a conservation area in an effort to retain the heritage of key buildings and to promote tourism.

Joo Chiat hosts the main Vietnamese red light district in Singapore. It is a not a Designated Red-light Areas (DRAs) approved by the Anti-Vice Enforcement Unit (AVEU) (see next point). Most of the prostitution activities in this area take place in the notorious 'Blue Zone' ten-meter stretch (figure 2, Thuc 2009) where several bars and pubs operate next to the former Blue Lagoon Lounge, which closed in November 2010. Vietnamese women can be seen gathering around bars and karaoke lounges along the stretch in the evenings. Outside this strip, many Vietnamese entertainers work in pubs and karaoke lounges which hold licenses to operate along Joo Chiat Road. Residents and local business owners have long complained of this situation. In 2004, a group of residents, irritated by the proliferation of bars and the large number of Vietnamese women wandering around their community, formed the Save Joo Chiat Working Group. Their goal was to eradicate prostitution and to drive away the male clientele associated with it. At that time, Joo Chiat Road had 44 pubs, 38 massage parlors and eight hotels on a 1.3-kilometer strip.<sup>6</sup> The group claimed to have successfully shut down a number of pubs (from 46 in 2005 to 30 in 2008) and massage parlors (from 30 to four in the same period). In July 2011, ten pubs, 11 karaoke lounges and one massage parlor for non-sexual services remained open. Another achievement claimed by the Save Joo Chiat Group was the introduction of the ban on hourly rates in local hotels. The Singapore Hotels Licensing Board

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<sup>6</sup> The Save Joo Chiat Group fights for "A decent neighborhood where residents can raise their families in a safe, secure and clean environment." Its initial main goals were to abolish red light elements, to promote Joo Chiat heritage and cultural life, and to revitalize the community and its businesses. (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/24-Crane-Road/129294820458588?sk=wall>, accessed 1 July 2011).



imposed the full-day rate condition on 1 January 2009. The hourly rates ban was first applied to the existing hotels along Joo Chiat Road (among them six owned by the Hotel 81 Group, which has a strong presence in Singapore's red light districts), and extended to new hotels that opened in the area.

It is probable that Vietnamese prostitution in this location will decrease in the near future due to the transformation of the area into a trendy and “family friendly” district (Tay 2010). Ever since my departure in December 2010, restaurants selling “exotic” Western and Asian food, interior design shops and design studios have mushroomed. Since pubs and karaoke lounges are having to close due to the non-renewal of the operating licenses, Vietnamese migrant entertainers may be tempted to move to DRAs like Geylang, or to other areas such as the casinos where a local and foreign male clientele demands entertainment services (see press clip “Vietnamese women busted in the buff” in the footnote 43, p. 54).

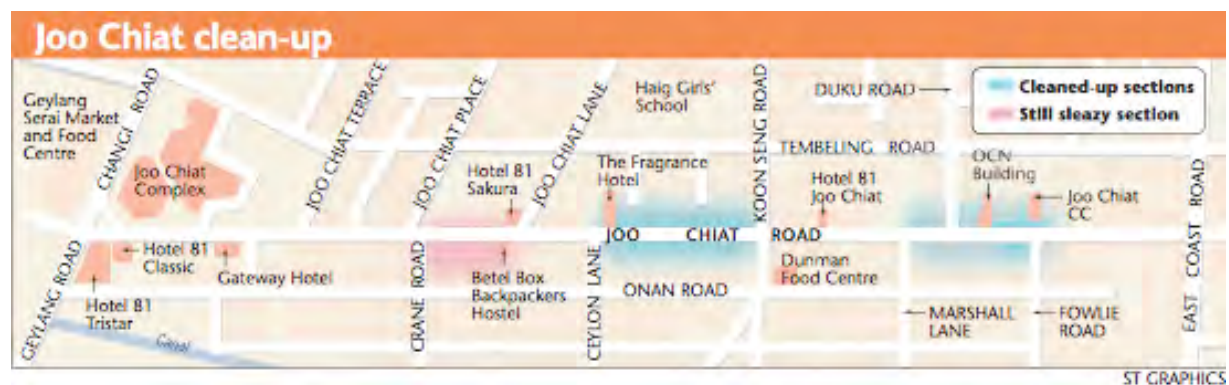


Fig. 1: Map of the “clean up” campaign conducted by the Save Joo Chiat Working Group and the community, printed in Tay (2010). The map is available here:

[http://www.straitstimes.com/STI/STIMEDIA/pdf/20101016/joochiat\\_map.pdf](http://www.straitstimes.com/STI/STIMEDIA/pdf/20101016/joochiat_map.pdf).



Fig. 2: The Blue Zone' stretch on Joo Chiat Road  
The popular Blue Lagoon closed doors late 2010



Fig. 3. Joo Chiat is an upper-middle class area.  
Here, a backstreet with private residences.



Fig. 4: The GG karaoke lounge on Joo Chiat Road.



Fig. 5: Pubs, massage parlors and karaoke lounges are being replaced by eateries, design studios and art galleries on Joo Chiat Road.

### Geylang (East Coast, Singapore)

Fieldwork research was also conducted in the Geylang area located on the East Coast, one kilometer from Joo Chiat. The three-kilometer long Geylang Road starts at the end of Kallang Road and continues over the Kallang River, running almost parallel to the east until Changi Road at the junction with Joo Chiat Road. Perpendicular alleys named *lorong* extend across the main road. They begin with *lorong* 1 and end at *lorong* 44, with odd numbers on the northern side and even numbers on the southern side. Geylang is densely packed with restaurants, coffee shops, teahouses (figure 6), hotels (figure 8), clan and labor associations, temples, mosques and churches, making it a unique area in Singapore. Partly untouched by urban projects and developments, Geylang's combination of hectic businesses, eateries, scenery and day and nightlife provides a unique aspect of the city.

Geylang is the main and most notorious red light area in Singapore. It is one of the four DRAs approved by the AVEU. Pubs, bars, brothels, massage parlors and karaoke lounges thrive along Geylang Road and in several *lorong*. The legalized designated prostitution zone is in the south (figure 7, 9). It starts from *lorong* 2 and extends all the way to *lorong* 30, although most of the licensed brothels are located mainly in *lorong* 16, 18 and 20. Legal brothels are easily identifiable by their large colored house numbers. An average of a dozen girls of Chinese and Thai origin work in these establishments. The operating hours are from mid-afternoon to 3-5am. Geylang is also the home of unlicensed brothels operating behind the scenes, generally in the *lorong*. Hundreds of women from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, China PRC, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam work in Geylang. Illegal prostitution takes place in unlicensed brothels and also along the streets between *lorong* 8 and *lorong* 22, where entertainers work grouped by nationalities.

In Geylang, Vietnamese entertainers are less obvious than in Joo Chiat, as they are part of a crowd of entertainers of several nationalities who operate both in the streets and in licensed and unlicensed venues. A few Vietnamese streetwalkers operate in *lorong* 23 next to the Highpoint Social Enterprise Ark, and in the small alleys in between *lorong* 22 and 24 around Jalan Molek, under the supervision of pimps. Vietnamese entertainers can also be found around *lorong* 42 and 44 next to the Vietnamese pubs Mask 51 and Club V2, and in other karaoke lounges and pubs along Geylang Road (see also Tan *et al.* 2008, Thuc 2009). Vietnamese women usually dislike working on the street and will try to avoid Geylang due to the higher risk of being apprehended by the police, and the protection money that has to be paid under certain



conditions and in certain areas to crime syndicates. Unfortunately, the Vietnamese research informants of this study could not provide information about criminal organizations operating in Geylang. In addition, I could not find solid studies on criminality in Singapore (including Geylang, Joo Chiat and Orchard Towers), besides media reports that typically present the actions of the police.



Fig. 6: Offerings to gods and spirits during the seventh lunar month festival (*lorong* 19).



Fig. 7: A licensed brothel in *lorong* 20.

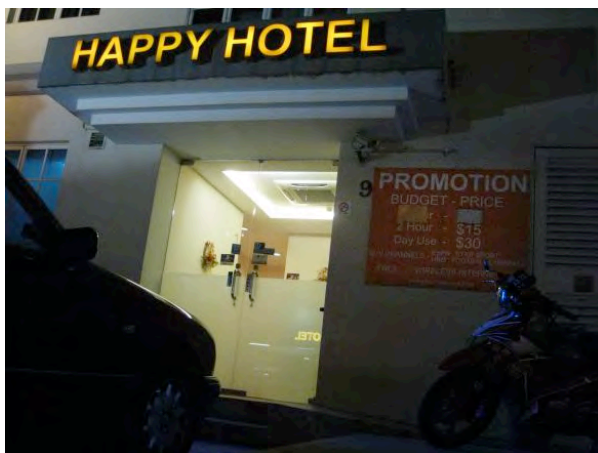


Fig. 8: The board of the hotel shows the hourly rate (2 hours: S\$ 15 = US\$ 12,3, one day: S\$ 30 = US\$ 24,6)<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 9: A licensed brothel in one *lorong* 20.

### Orchard Towers (Orchard Road, Singapore)

No formal investigation was conducted at Orchard Towers. However, informants in both HCMC and the boarding house frequently talked about this area, including one key informant from the boarding house who worked there every night. Orchard Towers is a 20-storey building located on the corner of Claymore and Orchard Road (figure 10). The first five floors are a combination of bars and retail outlets (selling electronics, telephones, cameras,

<sup>7</sup> The original prices in four currencies (S\$, US\$, Ringgit, VND) quoted by the informants have been documented. However, I have converted the amounts to US\$ to facilitate the reading and comparisons. The exchange rate which has been used throughout this is that of 4 July 2011, in which US\$ 1 = S\$ 1,22 = VND 20 560 = RM 3 (Ringgit Malaysia).

groceries, as well as eateries and tailors, see figure 11), with the remainder leased as offices. During the day, Orchard Towers functions as any normal shopping mall and office building. But at night, it becomes an entertainment complex and hub for expatriates and tourists, notoriously known as the “Four floors of whores” or the “Four floors.” Orchard Towers is not a DRA approved by the AVEU. Rather than being a conventional red light district with brothels and different types of entertainment venues as in Geylang, Orchard Towers serves as a pick-up point where clients meet with entertainers whom they take to nearby hotels. Police regularly raid the complex, as the majority of entertainers are residing in Singapore with a social visit pass and are working illegally. Women operating in Orchard Towers are primarily from Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, with a minority from Vietnam and Eastern Europe. The most notorious pubs are the Crazy Horse (figure 12), Bongo Bar, Harry’s at Orchard, Ipanema, Top 5, and the Naughty Girl (figure 13).

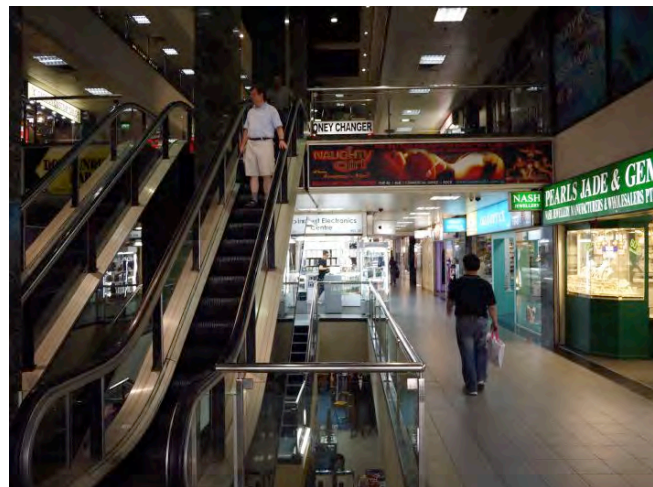


Fig. 11: The commercial gallery at Orchard Towers.

Fig. 10: The entry gate of Orchard Towers on Orchard Road.

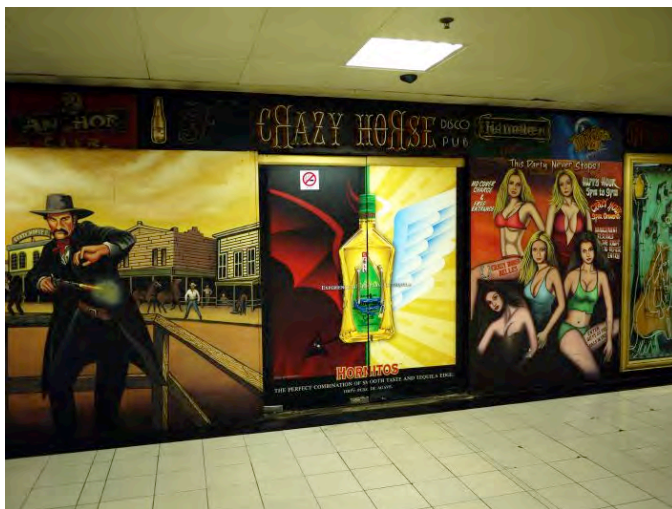


Fig. 12: The Crazy Horse pub in Orchard Towers.



Fig. 13: The Naughty Girl signboard in Orchard Towers

### General characteristics of the Vietnamese red light districts in Singapore

The following table presents some general characteristics of the three main red light districts selected for this study where Vietnamese entertainers can be found.

Location	Joo Chiat	Geylang	Orchard Towers
<b>Entertainers by nationality</b>	Vietnamese (majority)	All nationalities  Vietnamese: <i>Lorong</i> 22, 23, 24, 42, 44 + karaoke lounge + pub	Thai  Philippines  Vietnamese (minority)  Others including Caucasian (minority)
<b>Type of business that operate there</b>	No direct prostitution of Vietnamese (brothel)  Indirect prostitution of Vietnamese: Karaoke lounge, pub, street (a few entertainers around the former Blue Lagoon Lounge)	Direct prostitution, but no Vietnamese brothels  Indirect prostitution of Vietnamese: Karaoke lounge, pub, nightclub, massage  Street (Vietnamese in <i>lorong</i> 22, 24, 42, 44)	No direct prostitution (no brothels)  Indirect prostitution of Vietnamese: Pub, nightclub
<b>Management of the sex industry</b>	Not a DRA Occasional raids by the AVEU  No crime syndicate controlling Vietnamese prostitution  Vietnamese boarding house managers + migration brokers  No Vietnamese pimps and procurers (with a few exceptions)	Main DRA Strong presence of the AVEU  Pimps and crime syndicates controlling some areas (but apparently not involved in the business of Vietnamese freelancers)  Vietnamese boarding house managers + migration brokers	Not a DRA Occasional raids by the AVEU  No crime syndicate controlling Vietnamese prostitution  No Vietnamese pimps and procurers

		A few Vietnamese pimps and procurers ( <i>lorong</i> 22, 24)	
<b>Price</b> (Vietnamese entertainers only)	<p>Sitting + escorting: S\$ 10-50/tip (US\$ 8,2-41)</p> <p>Single service: ≤ S\$ 100 (US\$ 82)</p> <p>Overnight: S\$ 100-300 (US\$ 82-246)</p>	<p>Sitting + escorting: S\$ 10-50 (tip) (US\$ 8,2-41)</p> <p>Single service Street entertainers: ≤ S\$ 50 (US\$ 41)</p> <p>Karaoke lounge + pub entertainers: ≤ S\$ 100 (US\$ 82)</p> <p>Overnight: S\$ 100-200 (US\$ 82-164)</p>	<p>Sitting + escorting: S\$ 0-100 (US\$ 0-82)</p> <p>Single service: S\$ 100-300 (US\$ 82-246)</p> <p>Overnight: S\$ 200-500 (US\$ 164-410)</p>
<b>Expenses associated with the location</b> (Vietnamese entertainers only)	None	Freelancers pay no protection money to crime syndicate (this could be different in some areas, but out the scope of the study)	<p>Transportation by taxi if residence in the East Coast or elsewhere in town: S\$ 40/return (US\$ 33)</p> <p>More expensive clothing and accessories</p>
<b>Language skills</b> (Vietnamese entertainers only)	English and Chinese mandarin or dialect are a plus, but not necessary (as some clients learn Vietnamese)	English and Chinese mandarin or dialect are a plus, but not indispensable	<p>English skills are indispensable</p> <p>Well dressed and attractive for Western clientele</p>

Fig. 14: Characteristics of three red light districts in where Vietnamese entertainers operate.

Why is a woman found in one red light district as opposed to another? How do the Vietnamese entertainers choose their workplace?

The first factor to take into account, especially for voluntary newcomers who know little or nothing about Singapore, is the presence of migration brokers and peers – who generally introduced the brokers – in the non-trafficking context, which characterizes this study. Indeed, an entertainer who has just arrived in Singapore will work at the same place as the peer who



escorted her from abroad, and with whom she usually shares life and accommodation in the new country. Those who are more experienced typically introduce the newcomer to their working place. The entertainers usually work in one or two outlets in which they establish relationships with the manager, waiters, guards, peers and regular clients. They gradually learn the customer demands of the venue, prices and frequency of police raids. Familiarity with the workplace and individuals who visit it is reassuring and circumvents potential problems such as client scarcity and price negotiation.

A second factor in determining the workplace is the appearance, abilities, and personality of the entertainer. Women who work in expatriate bars in Orchard Towers must demonstrate certain qualities and resources. First, they must have a sufficient level of spoken English to hold conversations. Second, they need to dress in clothes and shoes of a certain quality to be attractive to a Western clientele, requiring a financial investment that not all entertainers can afford. Third, there is greater competition at Orchard Towers, as many entertainers of different nationalities and experience frequent it, especially on weekends. Clients in Joo Chiat and Geylang are found to be generally less demanding in terms of communication and language skills. Some even go to the effort of learning basic Vietnamese to communicate with their favorite entertainers. These customers are less demanding in terms of clothing, and above all they prefer less provocative women. In particular, they avoid physical contact which is frowned upon in public. Foreign migrant workers, some of whom live in the dormitories of Geylang, are regular clients. With limited financial means, their choice is limited to streetwalkers who sell their services for S\$ 50 (US\$ 41) or less. These clients are less demanding than Singaporeans, as they usually do not seek to engage in communication or drinks, but limit themselves to sex services in cheap hotels.

The third factor to consider in determining the choice of workplace is experience. Experienced entertainers are generally better informed about the potential working environment choices, and the situation in each area in terms of number of clients. They adapt more easily to changes, and they are more mobile and independent than their junior colleagues. When the frequency of raids increases in red light districts like Geylang and Joo Chiat, entertainers change their workplaces or become more discreet, for example by hiding in the venues and reducing their presence in the streets. While it is true that entertainers' choice of workplace depends on exogenous factors such as raids and the number of clients, they can also alternate between pubs, restaurants and the sidewalk. Nga, a 41-year-old entertainer who has worked in Singapore since 2002, explained:

“If Hyatt [the Park Hyatt Hotel, next to Orchard Towers] does not have a lot of clients, I go to Geylang or Joo Chiat. I can go to restaurants or karaoke to sit with clients and get some tips to pay for the taxi to go back home. Vietnamese, and especially young girls, usually do not like to work on the street. However, when I cannot find clients in bars, I go out to work on the street, or I go in front of the hotels to look for clients.”

### **1.3 Laws on prostitution and immigration in Singapore**

In Singapore, the act of prostitution is not criminalized, but policy is aimed at keeping prostitution out of public sight. However, prostitution-related activities, such as the management of brothels and living on the earnings of entertainers are criminalized or regulated. This will be described in this section.

After independence in 1965 (enactment of the Independence Singapore Agreement), the new government of Singapore, ruled by the People's Action Party, decided to enforce crime and vice control. The laws on prostitution were rigorously implemented, especially the provisions

relating to the management of brothels, the elimination of support organizations such as secret societies, and the minimization of women's exploitation in prostitution. The government enforced a strong raid policy in established red light districts across the city. The impact of this campaign was successful in the short-term, but not in the long-term. Indeed, brothel-operators, seeking to avoid constant persecution, relocated discreetly to other parts of the city such as residential districts, thereby causing concern to the residents in those areas. Some brothel-owners went "underground," while others sought protection from the police by associating with secret societies. Criminalization also caused greater exploitation of entertainers, who were driven into a more dependent relationship with their pimps and brothel-owners. It quickly became apparent to the authorities that strict enforcement of the criminal provisions against brothel-based prostitution had promoted the very same situation that the law was trying to prevent. This experience showed the government that the complete eradication of prostitution was unlikely to happen in Singapore (Wong Yang, 1996: 247; Ong, 1993: 161).

### **Laws on prostitution**

The Women's Charter defines prostitution as "the act of a female offering her body for promiscuous sexual intercourse for hire, whether in money or in kind," and a brothel as "any place occupied or used by any two or more women or girls whether at the same time or at different times for the purpose of prostitution."<sup>8</sup> There are no legal statutes prohibiting or criminalizing the act of prostitution per se. However, persistent soliciting in public places is an offence under the Miscellaneous Offences (Public order and nuisance) Act. In addition, the activities associated with the organizational support of prostitution are criminalized (Ong, 1993: 243).<sup>9</sup> The Women's Charter, under Offences against Women and Girls, Articles 40 (Offences relating to prostitution), 141 (Traffic in women and girls) and 142 (Importation of woman or girl by false pretences) provides provisions for the control of their being trafficked and exploited by third parties. For women under the age of 21, the Penal Code penalizes those who work in prostitution (Wong Yang, 1996: 164), and grants them the right to be sent to a shelter under the supervision of the Director of Social Services (Wong Yang, 1996: 165).

### **Unwritten laws on the management of prostitution**

The unsuccessful experience of the past revealed that a strict enforcement of the criminal provisions on the brothel-based industry worsened the problems which they were meant to solve (Wong Yang, 1996: 168). The government has thus adopted a more pragmatic approach which acknowledges that it is technically impossible to eradicate prostitution. Rather than trying to eliminate the brothel-based industry, authorities have permitted it to evolve into an organization that is more controllable (Ong, 1993: 266; Wong Yang, 1996: 168). The policy that is currently enforced opts for containment. It has three major objectives: 1) to minimize public

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<sup>8</sup> The Singaporean Parliament passed the Act of Women's Charter in 1961, designed as a complete legislative package. Its aim was to improve and protect the rights of women in Singapore, and to guarantee greater legal equality for women in legally sanctioned relationships. It provides for the institution of monogamous marriages, the rights of spouses in marriage and the basis for divorce and separation, and offences against women, especially those related to human trafficking and exploitation in prostitution. The Women's Charter is available online ([http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non\\_version/cgi-bin/cgi\\_retrieve.pl?actno=REVED-353](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?actno=REVED-353), accessed 23 July 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Article 146 (Persons living on or trading in prostitution) states that, "Any person who knowingly lives wholly or in part on the earnings of the prostitution of another person shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years and shall also be liable to a fine not exceeding S\$ 10 000." In Singapore, this is one of the most common prostitution-related provisions which is invoked by the authorities (Wong Yang, 1996: 165).

manifestations of prostitution, 2) to reduce women's exploitation, 3) to control the spread of STDs, an issue that became even more critical after the discovery of HIV/AIDS in Singapore in the late 1980s. No new legislative reforms have been introduced. However, an unwritten law and discretionary measures have been adopted in police enforcement between the AVEU and brothel-owners (Wong Yang, 1996: 169).

Under current practice, brothels are allowed to operate in Designated Red-light Areas (DRAs) where the law on prostitution that criminalizes pimping is not enforced. The four DRAs in Singapore are located in the Geylang district, Keong Saik Street, and Flanders Square and Desker Road around Little India. An informal agreement or "contract" prevails between the three parties involved: the AVEU, the brothel-owners, and their employees (Wong Yang, 1996: 170).<sup>10</sup> Entertainers working in the authorized brothels in DRAs undergo regular health checks for venereal and other diseases. Results are recorded in a "yellow card" that shows the particulars the entertainer has registered with the AVEU. AVEU officials also control the recruitment of new entertainers into the brothels. They interview aspirants to ensure that they are over the age of 18 and enter into the business of their own will. Check-ups are regularly carried out in the brothels to ensure that entertainers are not exploited by the brothel-owners. Sanctions apply against brothel-owners and entertainers who contravene the guidelines of the unwritten law (Ong, 1993: 248; Wong Yang, 1996: 170). The brothel-owners' profit is not considered a cut for sexual services, but a charge for room rental and other services provided. This subterfuge allows the brothel-owners to circumvent the law that states that living on the earnings of prostitution is an offence as stipulated in the Women's Charter (Ong, 1993: 258). This informal agreement ensures that the three parties involved benefit in the following ways: 1) unofficial legality without harassment from police for the brothel-owners, 2) permission to work under the auspices of the brothel-owner and the AVEU, and medical check-ups for the entertainers, and 3) reduction of the public exposure of prostitution for the AVEU. In addition, brothels are confined to designated areas, reducing the risk of entertainers being exploited by their brothel-owners, and more effectively controlling the spread of STDs (Wong Yang, 1996: 171-2).

The entertainers who operate outside the DRAs fall into two categories: 1) those operating in semi-permanent brothels, and 2) freelancers working on the streets or on call. The AVEU regularly clamps down on the pimps and brothels outside the DRAs, thus enacting the provision in section 146 of the Women's Charter on pimping. Freelance entertainers who solicit in public areas without the support of a pimp pose a dilemma to the authorities, as they have little choice but to find their clients in public places (Wong Yang, 1996: 172-33; Ong, 1993: 249-250). As mentioned above, public manifestation is not only an offence under the Article 19 on Soliciting in public space of the Miscellaneous Offences Act (Public order and nuisance),<sup>11</sup> but it is also exactly what constitutes the unacceptability of prostitution in Singapore. In addition, some freelance entertainers may be tempted to depend on pimps for protection and introductions, thus increasing the risks of dependency and exploitation. As in the DRAs, the main control principle that applies in this case is containment to limit public exposure. Again, a pragmatic approach consisting of territorial limitations is enforced in the field. The AVEU grants freelance

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<sup>10</sup> Nowadays, it seems that only Chinese and Thai women work in brothels based in DRAs. Women from other nationalities, including Vietnamese, work in unauthorized premises or in the streets, in or outside the DRAs.

<sup>11</sup> The article states that: "Every person who in any public road or public place persistently loiters or solicits for the purpose of prostitution or for any other immoral purpose shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding S\$ 1000 and, in the case of a second or subsequent conviction, to a fine not exceeding S\$ 2000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or to both." The Miscellaneous Offences Act is available online ([http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non\\_version/cgi-bin/cgi\\_retrieve.pl?&actno=Reved-184&date=latest&method=part](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?&actno=Reved-184&date=latest&method=part), accessed 26 July 2011).

entertainers a jurisdiction within which public soliciting is tolerated. These jurisdictions exist in certain areas and venues such as bars, pubs and karaoke lounges. Freelance entertainers who solicit outside these areas are at risk of being arrested under the Minor Offenses Act. In addition, rather than trying to eradicate the prostitution business from the DRAs, AVEU drives it within the DRAs as much as possible (Wong Yang, 1996: 173; Ong 1993: 250). Age and health requirements, especially those related to STDs, are imposed on entertainers operating outside the DRAs. However, these entertainers are more difficult to monitor because they work on a more informal basis and hide from AVEU officials (Ong, 1993: 251).

### **Immigration policies related to foreign entertainers**

It is important to present the immigration laws pertaining to foreign migrants, as the majority of those currently working in and outside DRAs are foreigners residing in Singapore, generally on a 30-day Social Visit Pass. Two sections of the Singapore Immigration Act allow the authorities to block suspected foreign entertainers from entering Singapore, and to deport those arrested for persistent soliciting under the Article 19 of the Miscellaneous Offences Act (Wong Yang, 1996: 175).

Article 8 on Prohibited Immigrants, section entry into and departure from Singapore, defines the classes of immigrants that are prohibited in Singapore.<sup>12</sup> In relation to the study, prohibited immigrants are “any prostitute or any person who is living on or receiving or who, prior to entering Singapore, lived on or received the proceeds of prostitution,” “any person who procures or attempts to bring into Singapore prostitutes or women or girls for the purpose of prostitution or other immoral purpose,” and “any person who is unable to show that he has the means of supporting himself.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, women suspected of coming to Singapore for prostitution are kept at border immigration checkpoints (airport, land, sea), interviewed and eventually expelled according to Article 25 (Examination of persons arriving at authorized airport) and Article 26 (Examination of persons entering Singapore by land or at a place other than an authorized landing place or airport).<sup>14</sup> Article 31 (Removal of prohibited immigrants from Singapore) allows the authorities to expel prohibited immigrants, including entertainers arrested in Singapore for persistent soliciting, as defined in Article 8.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Article 8 on Prohibited immigrants states that, “Any person, not being a citizen of Singapore, who is a member of any of the prohibited classes as defined in subsection (3) or who, in the opinion of the Controller, is a member of any of the prohibited classes, is a prohibited immigrant.” The Immigration Act is available online. ([http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non\\_version/cgi-bin/cgi\\_retrieve.pl?&actno=reved-133&date=latest&method=part](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?&actno=reved-133&date=latest&method=part), accessed 26 July 2010).

<sup>13</sup> This is why foreign visitors entering into Singapore can be asked to show a sum of money, generally S\$ 800-1000 (US\$ 816-652) according to the Vietnamese informants, by ICA officials at the border controls. I will refer to this as “show money.” This will be further discussed in the next chapters.

<sup>14</sup> Article 25 states that: “(a) Every person arriving by air at any authorized airport in Singapore shall appear before an immigration officer at such time and place as that officer may direct. (b) The immigration officer, after such examination as he may consider necessary, shall inform any person whom he considers to be prohibited from entering Singapore under the provisions of this Act or any regulations or orders made there under of his finding, and the person shall not leave the precincts of the airport except for a place approved by that officer, and shall leave and depart from Singapore by the first available means in accordance with the instructions of that officer. (c) The captain, owner, agent or charterer of the aircraft in which the person arrived shall, if so required by the immigration officer, remove the person from Singapore by the same aircraft.” ([http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non\\_version/cgi-bin/cgi\\_retrieve.pl?&actno=reved-133&date=latest&method=part](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?&actno=reved-133&date=latest&method=part), accessed 26 July 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Article 31 states that “If during the examination of any person arriving in Singapore or after such inquiry as may be necessary that person is found to be a prohibited immigrant, the Controller shall, subject to the provisions of the regulations, prohibit him from disembarking or may, in his discretion, detain him at an immigration depot or other place designated by the Controller.”



## Is prostitution a necessary evil?

The law on prostitution and immigration is vigorously enforced in and outside the DRAs. But why do the authorities still allow foreign entertainers to enter Singapore and to work in and out DRAs? Completely barring foreign entertainers from entering in Singapore and deporting those arrested for persistent soliciting would be an effective solution to: 1) reduce public visibility of prostitution, 2) decrease the exploitation of women, and 3) control more effectively the spread of STDs. Different theories based on various assumptions have gained social acceptance. Joel Wong Yang (1996: 175-6), Ong Jin Hui (1993: 259) and Chee Ming Leng (2006: 10) argued that authorities see prostitution as a matter of supply and demand. The notion is that restricting the supply of entertainers while maintaining the demand could provoke the rise of rape and other sexual offences. According to the three authors, the authorities base this belief on the assumption that men are unable to control their sexual urges. To them, prostitution is perceived as a necessary evil that is essential to fulfill the needs of single and adulterous married men, and therefore to keep the family unit intact. Here, entertainers act as a “safety valve,” providing a service so that Singaporean men’s sexual appetites may be satisfied away from the public eye, and indirectly contributing to maintaining social order. According to the three authors mentioned, this explains why the government sees no urgent need to decrease the number of entertainers in Singapore, either locals or foreigners, as long as issues of public visibility, women’s exploitation and criminality, and spread of STDs and HIV are controlled and confined to certain jurisdictions.

## 1.4 Methodology and limitations

### Sample, quantification and recruiting methods

Issues of access to migrant entertainers who constitute hidden populations initially presented an obstacle in both HCMC and Singapore. The sensitive nature of the subject prevented large samples that are commonly used in quantitative research. Instead, a small cohort, consisting of 16 female entertainers and 12 key stakeholders involved in brokerage and the business of prostitution, proved better suited to the circumstances. In addition, informal discussions with ten other entertainers that are not sampled were conducted while I lived in the boarding house.

The issue of quantification was left aside, as this is difficult to observe statistically. The chief difficulty of the subject is the number of entertainers from Vietnam working in Singapore at any one time, and in total for a year. The absence of official figures and estimations does not allow an assessment of the prevalence of Vietnamese migrant entertainers currently working in Singapore. As a result, it is impossible to determine the ratio between Vietnamese entertainers and those of other nationalities operating in the country. It was also impossible to determine the ratio between adult and minor entertainers within the Vietnamese community. That said, observations conducted in the research sites suggest that prostitution of Vietnamese minors is marginal in Singapore.<sup>16</sup>

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([http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non\\_version/cgi-bin/cgi\\_retrieve.pl?&actno=reved-133&date=latest&method=part](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?&actno=reved-133&date=latest&method=part), accessed 26 July 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Only one minor, of 15 years old, was found among the 30 women who passed through the boarding house during the five-month observation. An anecdote also corroborates the finding that there are very few cases of Vietnamese minors selling sexual services in Singapore. A client called one of the Vietnamese migrant entertainers with whom he had spent the night asking for underage girls of ten years old to spend two or three days with. When the entertainer informed the boarding house manager about the request, she immediately became furious and declared that she would call the police if the client insisted. It could

The interlocutors were recruited through several techniques.

In HCMC:

- Introduction from peer educators from AAT Vietnam in district one.
- Snowball sampling was employed with three informants introduced by the peer educators (therefore presenting a more convincing case than from a “single start” snowball). It is a non-probability sampling technique where existing informants recruit other informants from among their acquaintances. This method is often used in hidden populations that are difficult to access, such as entertainers and drug users.

In Singapore:

- Meetings with Vietnamese migrant entertainers in a boarding house, in which I resided for a period of five months, located in one of the red light districts of Singapore’s East Coast.
- Spontaneous meetings in restaurants, pubs and bars leading to informal conversations in the red light districts of Singapore.

In the initial stage of the investigation in Singapore, interviews were conducted with the representatives of four organizations addressing issues of labor migration and prostitution: Geylang Bless God Mission, Project X, Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI), and Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME) (see annexes for a brief presentation of each of these projects and organizations). Interviews focused on the following topics: profiles of the beneficiaries supported by the project, general information about the situation of Vietnamese migration and prostitution in Singapore, known cases of Vietnamese women trafficked and/ or sexually exploited, AVEU raid frequency in Joo Chiat and Geylang, immigration and prostitution legislation in Singapore. Generally speaking, the organizations’ knowledge about the Vietnamese migrant entertainer community in Singapore was extremely limited if not nil. In addition, none of the groups – except ACMI which runs an English-teaching project dealing exclusively with Vietnamese migrant brides – works with the Vietnamese community, except in exceptional circumstances. One of the reasons stated was the lack of Vietnamese language skills.

## Research sample

The nature of the research topic prevented the selection of a large sample using random sampling methods. Instead, a qualitative approach with roots in traditional ethnographic research, based on a small and non-representative sample of 28 informants, comprised of 16 Vietnamese female migrant entertainers and 12 Vietnamese and Singaporean key stakeholders,<sup>17</sup> proved more realistic. Additionally, informal conversations were conducted with ten entertainers from the boarding house, and with Singaporean clients during the investigation. The research informants were as follows:

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be that Vietnamese minor prostitution is very discreetly available via Internet advertisements or criminal networks, however this marginal sector was left aside in this study and would require further investigation.

<sup>17</sup> At the end of the investigation, two Vietnamese male migrant entertainers arrived at the boarding house. However, no interviews were conducted with them as foreign male prostitution in Singapore is out of the scope of this study.

- 16 Vietnamese migrant entertainers, of whom five were in HCMC and 11 in Singapore
- Three Vietnamese brides in Singapore involved in occasional prostitution while married.
- One Vietnamese migration broker and peer educator from HCMC.
- One Vietnamese boarding house manager.
- The boarding house manager's helper.
- Three Singaporean service providers who facilitated extensions or renewals of working passes, and other services to Vietnamese migrant entertainers.
- One Vietnamese fortune-teller living in the boarding house and working in red light districts.
- Three Singaporean males, including two Singaporean men who lived in the boarding house for one month with female Vietnamese entertainers.
- Ten other entertainers from the boarding house.

The goal of qualitative research is to explore the behaviors, processes of social interaction, experiences and the meanings and values of individuals in their living contexts. Qualitative research methods typically include the techniques of interviewing (informal discussion, structured or semi-structured interview), observation, and document analysis. The main techniques used in this study were semi-structured interviews in HCMC, and semi-structured interviews, participant observation and informal discussions in Singapore. The latter two methods generated a vast amount of information that considerably enriched the information gathered in formal interviews.

All the discussions were conducted in Vietnamese, sometimes with the help of a female Vietnamese research assistant originating from the Mekong Delta who spent four weeks in the boarding house in Singapore. The main topics of the interviews included: bio-data and participants' background information (including parents), participants' economic situations with special focus on issues of indebtedness (including parents), reasons for migration to Singapore, social networks of mobility and financing mechanisms, immigration and social visit pass issues (arrival, departure and extension), experiences in the sex sector prior to migration, comparative data about the sex sectors in Vietnam and Singapore, issues of violence and exploitation, life and social relations in Singapore and in the boarding house, and issues of fear due to raids and expulsions. Often these topics were starting points that led to in-depth discussions on several related topics. This is why the write-up of some case studies did not exceed five pages, while others which combined data from interviews, discussions, observations, and textual materials – one informant wrote a diary of her life, another commented on news clips about Vietnamese prostitution in Singapore – went beyond 30 pages.

No material or financial gifts were offered to the informants. There is an ongoing debate in the social sciences about whether incentives count as an ethical practice, as they can be considered as a form of undue influence or coercive offer (Grant and Sagarman, 2004). I decided not to give any compensation for two reasons. First, transportation costs and meals were first provided to the informants introduced by the outreach team in HCMC. However this became problematic as one individual admitted to have entirely fabricated her story simply to enjoy a free meal and a journey to district one. Second, it would have been disruptive to the entire social and economic order of the boarding house to give incentives. For instance, this might have generated envy among the informants and might have created the perception that the researcher was a source of income, thus jeopardizing the investigation. In addition, this might have encouraged the informants to become dependent to me, particularly if they struggled to generate income while in Singapore.

For reasons of confidentiality, the informants have not been identified by name. The few names that are used in this study have been modified in order to protect the identity of interlocutors and to guarantee confidentiality. For the same reasons, the exact location of the boarding house will not be disclosed.

## The ethnography of a boarding house

Although access to informants was made possible in HCMC through AAT's outreach team, none of the aid organizations could facilitate this in Singapore. At first I tried approaching informants by myself on the streets, in restaurants and bars. However, this technique proved ineffective as the women inevitably perceived me as a client and tried to establish business relationships. Despite efforts made to overcome this constraint, it quickly became apparent that entertainers were only interested in business deals, especially during the time they were working, and that none of them was keen to tell her story to an unknown foreigner who could hardly treat them to drinks and meals, as their regular clients did. The boarding house manager clearly stated these limitations at the beginning of the fieldwork: "The ladies have to make use of every second of their time because they are on a one-month pass. Therefore they cannot spend their time with men without money." In addition, this street-based technique raised ethical questions, as the true purpose of the meeting could not be accurately related to the entertainers during the short meetings.

Since the attempt to recruit in this restrictive environment proved unsuccessful, I opted to approach migrant entertainers in their own environment. I quickly realized that I could only gain access to them if, and only if, I was an "insider." In this context, "insider" did not mean becoming Vietnamese, but rather living with the women in order to develop trust-based relationships. I thus started to look for accommodation in red light districts by means of classified advertisements and real-estate brokers. But this method proved ineffective because Singaporean brokers do not have access to the boarding houses of Vietnamese entertainers. Moreover, boarding houses managers usually do not recruit clients through Singaporean real estate brokers. In addition, the rooms that I initially visited were often located far away from the heart of the Vietnamese red light areas. I thus approached a Vietnamese woman working in a restaurant who seemed to be well connected with the Vietnamese entertainers from the area. I introduced myself as a student in the social sciences in search of accommodation in the house of a Vietnamese family or a group of migrants. The woman introduced me to a Vietnamese manager in charge of a boarding house in which rooms were rented to Vietnamese entertainers, Vietnamese occasional travelers and mixed couples (Vietnamese female entertainer and Singaporean partner). I introduced myself to her as a student who wanted to improve his Vietnamese language skills and to "understand" (*tiêm biên*) the situation of Vietnamese migrants in Singapore. She agreed to rent me a ten-square-meter unfurnished room with no windows (figure 23).

No interviews were conducted for the first two months. Instead, I got to know my new housemates through informal discussions in the house, and followed them to restaurants, pubs, casinos, churches and pagodas. Fully engaged in participant observation, my goal was to learn what life was like for them in their residence while remaining an "outsider" who took part in their life. As trust developed, I explained in detail my true intentions and asked permission to conduct formal interviews. The boarding house manager and tenants agreed.

The unit had a kitchen, a two-square-meter living room (figure 16), one tiny bathroom (figure 15), five bedrooms (figure 18, 21, 22, 23) and a large communal (formerly retail) space that would accommodate the house manager and tenants occasionally (figure 19). A Vietnamese businesswoman rented the whole house from a Singaporean landlord for business purposes. She, in turn, sublet the rooms to Vietnamese tenants and allowed the house manager to stay free of charge to collect the rent and provide cleaning and cooking services.

A boarding house is transient in nature, with different people staying for various and limited amounts of time. The turnover in the house was high as entertainers moved in and out continuously. During the investigation period of five months, an average of ten entertainers resided in the house at any given time, although the figure varied from five to 15. For instance the house suddenly became empty after four tenants returned to Vietnam together, and two

were arrested in a raid and expelled from Singapore. In addition, one Chinese and three mixed Vietnamese and Singaporean couples resided in the house for one month. Tenants usually stayed for 30 days, which is the maximum duration granted by the social visit pass for Vietnamese citizens. A few who successfully renewed their 30-day Social Visit Pass would stay longer, while a few others would go home early for personal reasons.



Fig. 15: The bathroom, the hallway and the rooms.



Fig. 16: The living, eating and clothes drying area.



Fig. 18: The storage space of photo 19 became a room that was rented out to three entertainers.



Fig. 19: An unused space which was the retail room in which the boarding house manager and visitors take a nap. The furniture storage area at the right corner became a room, as illustrated in photo 18 on the left side.

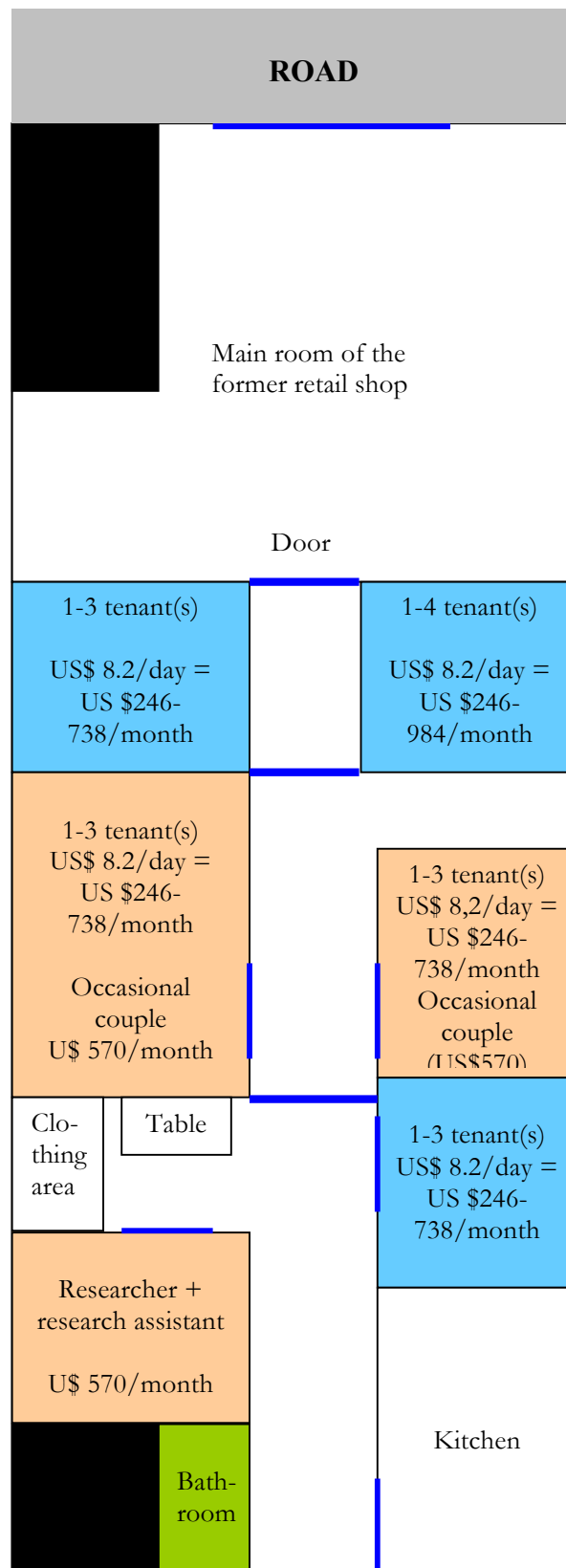


Fig. 17: Layout of the boarding house.





Fig. 20: Entertainers regularly offer fruit and incense to the Earth God (Ong Dia) and the Money God (Ong Tai) to request help in dealing with unpredictability and uncertainty.

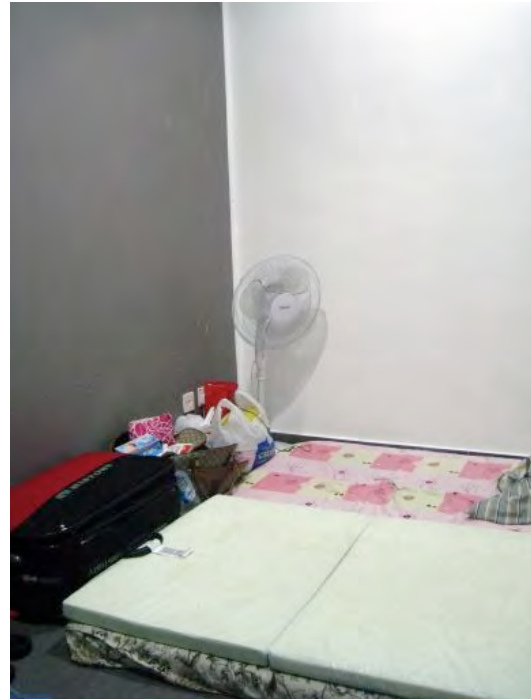


Fig. 21: The same storage area became a living space for three tenants.

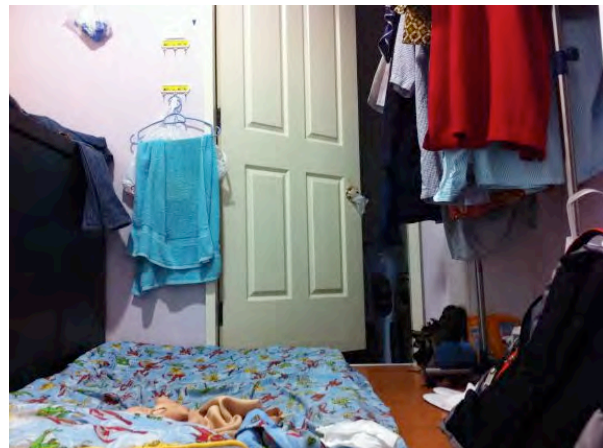


Fig. 23: The researcher's room.

Fig. 22: This is the room showed in fig. 18 after the tenants left.

Life in the house was transient in many ways. The occupied space changed constantly. Rooms could be empty one day but fully occupied the next day with a group of newly-arrived tenants. At times of high occupation, a small space in the retail room (figure 19) situated behind a wall became a bedroom (figures 18, 22). The separation wall was put up, the walls of the new space were painted white, a mirror was hung next to the door, two big mattresses were arranged on the floor and three tenants occupied the space for a rate of S\$ 10 (US\$ 8.16) a day. Rooms had no windows and no furniture except cheap mattresses, occasionally a fan and a mirror

brought by the tenants, sometimes a wardrobe, and air conditioning that was occasionally forbidden in order to save money.

The rental contract of the boarding house ended in January 2011. The space was then rented out to a Singaporean businessman who transformed it into a retail shop. The Vietnamese landlord disappeared after the transfer, the house manager relocated with two protégés to the apartment of a Singaporean friend in the same area, and the Vietnamese entertainers returned to Vietnam or moved to other boarding houses. Today, no traces of the house presented in this study and its intense social life remain.

### **Limitations of the study**

These are the limitations of the study:

- The sample was not random or large, and therefore not representative of Vietnamese migrant entertainers in Singapore. The convenience sampling method that was used in Singapore led me to study informants who were easily accessible because they lived in the boarding house. This technique presents obvious limitations and ethical dilemmas, and is considered the weakest form of sampling for generating generalizations because of the risk of bias (all of the women rely on the boarding house manager and her network, and work in similar conditions and in the same locations). This choice was a direct consequence of the sensitive nature of the topic and the difficulties of recruiting informants.
- The focus is primarily based on the informant's perspective, as no interviews were conducted with officials from the ICA, the MOM and the AVEU. This is a major strength but also a weakness as important points such as the profiling of foreign visitors (including suspected entertainers) by immigration officials, and raids policy deserve more consideration.
- While situations of violence and exploitation were not found, this could be because, for reasons of safety, no research was conducted on criminal networks of sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Nevertheless, one informant from HCMC described her story of deception by a recruiter and exploitation by a pimp in Singapore (see Tuyêt's story in annexes). Although deception and exploitation did not appear to be common patterns among the informants from the sample, this does not discount the relevance of these issues in other locations in Singapore. Further investigation is required.
- There were difficulties in liaising with aid groups in Singapore. This is unfortunate since these organizations would probably have further illuminated issues relating to legislation, policy and what happens on the ground.



# 2 PROFILES, MOTIVATIONS, EARNINGS

## 2.1 Vietnamese migrant entertainers' profile

The following information relates to the 16 entertainers in the study:

- The age range was between 15 and 41, with almost two-thirds between 20 and 30.
- More than half came from HCMC (56 percent), although in some cases their parents were originally from other provinces. All originated from Southern Vietnam except one who originated from Dak Lak province in the Central Highlands.
- The majority (ten) had between one and three siblings.
- Half (53 percent) had graduated from middle school, and five women from high school.
- More than half were separated or divorced (56 percent).
- Nine had at least one child.
- Almost half (43 percent) had worked in Vietnam's sex sector prior to going to Singapore.

## 2.2 Reasons for going to Singapore

A profile emerged in which more than half of the sampled Vietnamese migrant entertainers were lowly educated and low skilled, and consequently had low paying jobs in Vietnam, for instance with previous experiences in factory work. Family dissolution was a feature of the sampled women as nine were separated from partners and four came to Singapore following a separation, with some having been left with a child for whom they were solely financially responsible. These factors pushed seven of them into prostitution before coming to Singapore for the first time.

Despite an array of personal reasons encouraging their international mobility to Singapore, the majority of entertainers claimed their key motivation was economic and that the decision to come was made for the sole objective of earning substantial income. The expectation of high earnings was the chief pull factor due to the general assumption that Singapore is a rich country where entertainers can generate considerable earnings, in any case more than what they could generate in the Vietnamese sex sector.

They reported that the income generated in Singapore was to support a range of priorities: 1) to repay parental or personal loans in Vietnam, 2) to give to parents and relatives, and 3) to save to invest in a small business venture in Vietnam. Part of the earnings was also used to cover travel and living expenses.

### Going to Singapore: higher earnings in a stronger currency

“Working in a factory with a salary of two million đồng per month [US\$ 97] is not enough for me to survive. I do not have any qualifications, so there is no way I can get a job to earn seven to eight million đồng [US\$ 340-390] per month.”

“In Vietnam, I can earn only two million đồng per month [US\$ 97]. Working in Singapore, I earn 20-30 million đồng [US\$ 973-1459]. I earn ten times more here than in Vietnam.”

This first quote from Nhu, a 41-year-old experienced entertainer from HCMC, and the second from another entertainer who lived in the boarding house, illustrate that many women compared the earnings they made by working in the Singapore sex sector with the income they could expect in the low-skilled labor sector in Vietnam, such as factory work (US\$ 100 per month on average) and prostitution (US\$ 250-500 on average). Common assumptions about migration to Singapore for the purposes of commercial sex were as follows:

- Although they recognized that prostitution is socially condemned in both Vietnam and Singapore, the entertainers insisted it was probably the most lucrative occupational choice for them.
- The sex sector in Singapore is far more lucrative than in Vietnam, represented by the expression commonly repeated by entertainers, “it is easy to earn big money by going to Singapore” (*đi Singapore dễ kiếm tiền*, which literally means “go to Singapore easy to earn money”).
- The Singapore entertainment sector welcomes anybody, no matter who the entertainer is, her age, her physical appearance, and her background and skills. Importantly, Vietnamese entertainers believe that the Singapore sex sector accepts older women, at least older than in Vietnam. This is the reason why women over 30, for instance four of the 16 sampled, decided to come to Singapore to try their luck.

It is important to recall that the women in the sample, even those who had not engaged in prostitution in Vietnam, made the decision to do so before coming to Singapore. Their purpose was exclusively financially driven. Indeed, entertainers considered the Vietnamese sex sector comparatively less rewarding from an economic perspective. By contrast, Singapore was perceived as a land of opportunity that would allow virtually any migrant entertainer to earn at least S\$ 1000 (US\$ 816) per month, excluding transportation and living expenses, an amount that is practically impossible to earn in Vietnam in the same industry and in the same period of time. Informants often stated that, “you never return home from Singapore with empty pockets.” In this idyllic picture presenting Singapore as an economic El Dorado, issues of immigration such as entry and pass extension, police raids and deportation were seen as risks worth taking, at least for the successful entertainers who returned to Vietnam with money in their pockets, and perceived the experience satisfactory enough to be repeated.

Interestingly, the entertainers compared the potential earnings and value of currency across some of the destination countries for Vietnamese migrant entertainers such as Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. They perceived the US dollar as being more valuable than the Singaporean one, the Malaysian ringgit more valuable than the Thai baht, and the Thai baht more valuable than the Vietnam đồng. Their priority was therefore to earn US and Singapore dollars over any other currency, especially Vietnam đồng, which is devalued by 20 percent annually (particularly so in the last year). Informants did a second calculation based on the standard price of a single sexual service which earns S\$ 100 (US\$ 82) in Singapore, RM 100 in Malaysia (US\$ 33), and VND 100 000 in Vietnam (US\$ 5). When comparing earnings, it was obvious to them that it is far more lucrative to work in Singapore as the same service brings 16 times more income than in Vietnam. This is of course a scale comparison, as the actual price of a single service varies according to the sector of the sex industry (street, bar, pub, karaoke, call-girl). However, these two simple calculations shaped their general assumptions and influenced their decision to come to Singapore.

## Repaying loans and supporting relatives financially

Five of the 16 informants admitted to having come to Singapore partly to repay their relatives' debts, generally parents but also husbands and siblings. These debts were often high-interest loans that are available in Vietnam to clients who do not hold administrative documents, such as a household registration card, legitimate jobs or assets that would grant them access to formal credit from the private or state sectors (Lainez, 2011a: 23). The reasons that led the informants' households to heavy indebtedness were business failure, house construction or repairs, health expenses, and the purchase of expensive goods such as motorbikes. Loans are either cutthroat loans from professional loan sharks or private loans from friends and relatives. Having traveled to Singapore more than ten times since 2008, Lan from HCMC, aged 22, is somewhat representative of the circumstances of family indebtedness and dutiful daughters helping parents to repay their loans. Most recently, however, Lan returned to Singapore to repay her own debts.

My parents were in heavy debt years ago. The debt was more than 50 million đồng [US\$ 2432]. At that time, my paternal grandmother lived with my father. She had an operation because she suffered cancer. My aunt and older sister gave my father money to take care of this. In the past, my mother was herself a moneylender. People borrowed from her, and she lent to other people. One year, during the rainy season, the business was not good and her clients had no money to pay her back. As a consequence, she had to borrow more to pay to her own moneylender. When she could not repay him, he came to our house to threaten and insult us with bitter words. The debt included "collected money" and "standing money" loans. At that time, my mother used to borrow from some people to pay the others. Although she managed to pay most of her loans, she still owed 50 million đồng that she could not manage to get. This is when I decided to come here to Singapore.

Before coming here, I was not a "girl" anymore as I had sold my virginity already. I sold it in Saigon for US\$ 1500. A middle woman told me that if I wanted to help my parents, I could sell my virginity by going to Vung Tau [coastal area of HCMC] for a week with somebody. I would then receive S\$ 1500. At that time, I already knew Thiên [the peer who brought her to Singapore], so I thought that if I did not sell my virginity at that time, I would come here to work and I would lose it anyway. The buyer was an American Vietnamese over the age of 30. He took me to Vung Tau with him. Before we left, he gave US\$ 1500 to the broker of which I received US\$ 1200. We slept together four times in four days. The first time was very painful. I almost fainted because I have a heart condition. My mother knew nothing about all this until I gave her the money. When I decided to sell my virginity and start selling sex, I did not have a boyfriend yet. I was young and I did not think about getting married. At that time, I constantly thought about debt. I thought that if I had the means to repay the debt, then I had to do it.

I knew Thiên who was a close "soldier" [*linh*] of the boarding house manager. She lived near my grandmother's house. I was excited about the idea of going to Singapore because I wanted to earn money to repay my mother's debt. I begged her to help me. She was nice because she did not charge me any money.

When I came here to work, I cried everyday because I was scared. I first worked in a karaoke bar located in Geylang *lorong* 15. When I returned home, I brought S\$ 800 [US\$ 653] with me. I gave it all to my mother and I asked her for US\$ 50 to buy things for myself and to go eat with friends. After a few trips, I paid all of my mother's debt. I came here at most twice a year to repay my mother's debt. I did not come here to make money for myself. So far I have been here

more than ten times. The money I got in the later trips, I gave it to my parents to buy things for the house. Now my parents have gotten rid of all of debts and they feel comfortable.

I could start to save for myself when I came back last July. I started a small business in Vietnam consisting of buying and selling CDs to street retailers. They were migrants from Northern Vietnam. One day they disappeared and I did not know where or how to find them. I owed money to the sellers who sold the disks to me. I did not dare to ask my mother because she does not have money. So I came here again to make money to pay my own debt. This time, I came because I am in debt of more than VND 30 000 000 [US\$ 1460]. I will also get married soon, so I need money for that.

Fig. 24: Lan's narrative about her experience.

Lan's story provides interesting insights about the deep-seated reasons that push low-skilled Vietnamese women into the sex industry. The story also sheds light on the instability that characterizes the informal credit sector in Vietnam, the interest rates of which are high partly because moneylenders are constantly at risk of losing their investment. The inability to recover loans encourages some parents to mobilize the workforce at their disposal to generate income, including their children. Most of the informants of this study agreed to work in the lucrative Singapore entertainment sector to support their parents, regardless of whether they were indebted or not. Others admitted sharing part of their earnings with them, and keeping the rest for themselves. The filial piety narrative is prevalent: the desire to live dutifully and materially support parents is persistent in the discourses of the women engaged in the entertainment industry, who remit a significant portion of their profits to their families. This was the case for the majority of the women I encountered in HCMC and in Singapore for this study.<sup>18</sup> In Vietnam, Confucian filial piety imposes a set of obligations that are acknowledged in the common phrase "to pay piety" (*tra hiếu*). Parents give life to, nurture and raise their offspring through costly sacrifice. In return, children owe them eternal gratitude – a "debt of gratitude" (*tra ơn*) – that is materialized in a set of duties. In the field, these prescriptions are perceived as a set of obligations that the children are supposed to undertake as a matter of fact. The poorer the household is, the greater the obligation is to support the parents financially, rather than simply expressing affection or sentimentality.

The image that some of the entertainers wished to present to me was of someone who sacrifices for her relatives. "I had to 'press my stomach' [endure silently and stoically] in sacrificing for my mother," said one entertainer from the boarding house when describing selling sexual services for the first time. Indeed, the informants who admitted to working to repay parental debts often presented this decision as a "sacrifice for the family" (*hy sinh cho gia đình*), or in other words an act of filial piety, according to them. Interestingly, they presented the transgression of the cultural norm that forbids promiscuity and body commodification as an altruistic act embedded in a reassuring cultural norm.<sup>19</sup> Here, the use of the word "sacrifice" allowed them to somehow purge themselves of part of the guilt. By presenting their choice to migrate to Singapore as a sacrifice – at least in the trips where the goal is supposedly to earn money to repay debts or to help the parents or relatives – it could not be condemned. Instead, presenting this choice as such appears commendable, since migration for commercial sex purposes to Singapore is undertaken for the good of the family in accordance with the obligations of gratitude and which earn social recognition, for instance praising a "child who

<sup>18</sup> This was also the case for many women I encountered in Vietnam and Cambodia in the course of the ethnographic fieldwork conducted for my doctoral research.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed description about a family's decision process to sell the virginity of its two daughters as a strategy to improve the household's financial situation, see Lainez (2011b: 18-26).

shows gratitude” (*con co hiên*). Through a discursive ploy, migration to Singapore – where the declared objective is to repay debts and assist the parents or relatives – loses its social and moral condemnation and becomes an expression of selfless gratitude towards the family.

In addition to family debts, four informants claimed to have come to Singapore to repay personal debts incurred in Vietnam. As Lan’s story illustrates, both parental and personal debts intertwine in some cases, as well as formal and informal credit loans. Entertainers can recommence migration for commercial sex purposes several times for different reasons. For instance, the same woman may come to Singapore to repay her parents’ loan, come another time to repay a personal loan, then again to pay off her parent’s new loan, then one more time to earn income to invest in a business. Lan’s case illustrates this pattern.

The remittances and debt narrative, however, should not disguise the fact that migrant entertainers do keep a substantial share of their earnings for themselves, in order to cover their travel and living expenses, both in Singapore as well as in Vietnam upon return. Indeed, migrant entertainers need a substantial sum of money to pay for their travel expenses, as well as for the cost of living in Singapore (discussed in the next section and chapter). In summary, the migrant entertainers who are less experienced, or unlucky in attracting clients, or who are arrested and deported before the end of their 30-day stay, often bring little money back home, at times not even enough to cover the initial investment for transportation and to repay debts. This encourages them to return to Singapore and try again.

### **Cash needed to invest in Vietnam**

Migration to Singapore for prostitution is a strategy for some migrant entertainers whose goal is to fund a personal business venture. The image of Singapore as El Dorado certainly played into the decision of two informants, whose migration was motivated by a desire to generate revenue that would be invested in Vietnam.

The first, aged 33, is from HCMC. She separated from her husband in 2007 and became solely responsible for their child. She worked for several years as a cook in a downtown restaurant until it closed. She then sold curtains and wallpaper in a small business in which she wished to invest. Before coming to Singapore, she began a relationship with a British man, aged 57, who was separated with two children. Dissatisfied with this relationship, she decided to come to Singapore for a change of scenery and to earn capital to invest in the company.

The second case is that of a singer called Nga, 20-years-old, from Tây Ninh province bordering Cambodia. This pretty, young woman came to Singapore with the intention to generate income to finance her musical career. She wanted to use a production company that would launch her first album and would promote it in the local market, presenting her as a supporting act for established artists. The price of this service was exorbitant: VND 500 million or US\$ 24 319! She thought she could earn a lot of money quickly in Singapore, but she soon realized that she was unable to tolerate the bars, sex with strangers, and life with peers in the boarding house. In the end, she remained in Singapore until the end of her 30-day Social Visit Pass, providing services to three clients during that time, and left disappointed, admitting though that prostitution is one of the few options available to finance her professional music career.

### **More anonymity in Singapore than in Vietnam**

“I did not want to work in Vietnam because I have family and friends over there. If somebody recognized me, my reputation and that of my family would be ruined,” said an entertainer from the boarding house. Usually, entertainers prefer to work away from home to avoid being recognized by friends or relatives. They fear unfortunate encounters that could critically tarnish their reputation. This is why they often move to another province to work and hide their occupation from their relatives and friends. The question was not posed consistently

to all study informants, but four of them expressed that the distance from home and family provided a sense of freedom, tranquility and safety while in Singapore. This factor did come into play in their decision to travel to Singapore for commercial sex purposes, because they would not have dared do so in Vietnam, at least in their hometown. This is not the strongest pull factor though, as the majority of Vietnamese entertainers simply change province when they decide to work in the sex sector, and they are not obliged to go abroad in order to gain anonymity. Anonymity was one of the reasons given by the singer Nga to justify her migration to Singapore:

“I told my friends that I came here for a month just to travel. They do not know that I came here to do ‘this’ [prostitution]. When I decided to come here to work, I thought that if my friends who get to know me were to discover that I did this job, this would ruin my reputation as a singer. But I also thought that if I came here, no one would know about my activities back in Vietnam.”

### **Marital disruption and single motherhood**

“My husband is 28. We broke up. He drinks a lot, and I do not like it. I take care of our daughter. She is four years old. I left her with my parents. My husband never sends me money to support her. He does not even ask about her. He is now in Long An.

Before coming here, I worked in an industrial zone. I sewed. My salary was more than two million [US\$ 97, a month]. I gave some money to my mother to buy milk for my daughter. I kept most of it for my own expenses though. I did not give my mother a fixed amount. If I had more, I gave more. If I had less, I gave less. My mother did not ask me for more.

This is my first time in Singapore. I feel sad about my husband so I came here.”

An important characteristic of the entertainer’s profile is marital dissolution, as illustrated by this quote of one informant from HCMC. Nine sampled migrant entertainers were separated. This issue cannot be considered a push factor in itself, but rather as a feature creating emotional and economic vulnerability. Four informants came to Singapore for the first time after an emotional breakdown, including Hiêu, 25 years of age, quoted above. The reasons cited by the four informants were marital tensions, infidelity (two cases) and alcoholism (one case). Three of these women had at least one child at the time of their separation. Two were left alone to care for their only child. The third, Ha, had two children; one of them lives with the maternal grandmother while the other lives with her father. Following her first visit to Singapore, this woman married a local man. She rarely returns to Vietnam, but regularly sends money to Vietnam for the maintenance of her children.

Investigations from this study illustrate that separation is an important factor in socio-economic vulnerability, especially for women, as most find themselves solely responsible for their children. A woman generally feels it is very difficult to remarry, particularly if she has children and is between 25 and 30 years old.

## **2.3 Income and expenses: Is the business really profitable?**

Is the statement proposing that Singapore is an economic “El Dorado” for Vietnamese migrant entertainers, really true? Is the business trip to Singapore really profitable for them? What are their income and expenses? And what is the average profit they make in 30 days? Let us commence by analyzing the different sources of income:

- **Escorting:** The entertainer sits with the customer in a pub, bar, restaurant or karaoke lounge. She keeps him company, she eats and drinks with him, she discusses and seduces while preparing for the negotiation of the sexual service. The price of the escorting service is S\$ 20 in Joo Chiat, and up to S\$ 100 in the expatriate bars of Orchard Towers. Vietnamese women call this service “sitting at the table” (*ngồi bàn*) or “entering the table” (*vào bàn*), and the money paid to them is a “tip” (*tiền boa*). Customers of Geylang and Joo Chiat like to form an acquaintance with the entertainers who “sit at their tables,” chatting with them, enjoying a drink and a plate of food before requesting sexual service. The customer pays for drinks, food, taxis and the hotel, the total cost of which may exceed that of the sexual service.
- **Sexual service:** This is the revenue base of entertainers. Freelancers in Joo Chiat, that is to say those who do not work for a pimp or procurer,<sup>20</sup> usually charge S\$ 100 (US\$ 81) for a quick service, and double that for an overnight service. The few Vietnamese streetwalkers working in Geylang charge between S\$ 50-100 (US\$ 41-82). Entertainers operating in bars around Orchard Towers charge S\$ 100-300 (US\$ 82-246) for a quick service, and double for an overnight service. Vietnamese entertainers insist that they prefer to go with “clients they know” (*khách quen*), or who are recommended by their peers to reduce the risk of violence, refusal of payment or arrest by a plainclothes policeman via entrapment, which is of particular concern for minors, such as Linh (see annexes).
- **Labor contract:** Some entertainers who work as hostesses in karaoke lounges in Geylang have been granted a Performing Artist Working Pass. As a result, they have a formal employment contract and stable income. This type of arrangement has been excluded from the study, as it was not found to be the situation for any of the Vietnamese informants except for one entertainer from the boarding house who considered applying for this scheme (discussed in the next chapter). Two other entertainers from the boarding house worked in a karaoke lounge located in Jalan Sultan near Beach Road, but they did not have a work permit and profited only from their tips and the price of their sexual services out of the premises. The same prevails for migrant entertainers working in Orchard, Geylang and Joo Chiat pubs, who are not formally employed by the venues they attend, rather they go there only as a client and manage their own business.
- **Longer term paid relationships with clients:** Migrant entertainers derive additional revenue, in the form of cash or other gifts, from regular clients with whom they engage in long term relationships. One-third of the women in the boarding house (four of the 11 sampled, three of the ten non-sampled) and four of the six HCMC informants, benefited from this type of arrangement during their stay in Singapore. Revenues are highly dependent on the nature of the relationship and expectations of the client, who becomes a lover or boyfriend. Some men only present gifts or pay for the entertainer’s purchases to compensate her for her role as a temporary girlfriend or mistress. Other clients regularly invite their lovers to meals and pay higher prices than normal for regular sexual services. Some settle a monthly payment of between S\$ 500 and S\$ 1500 (US\$ 410-1230) which entitles them to specific services negotiated on a case by case basis: regular escorting, unlimited sexual services as well as domestic services. In rare cases, some men fall in love and undertake real romantic relationships with a migrant entertainer. These

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<sup>20</sup> The boarding house manager did not take a commission from the income of her customers, but only from migration services, rental, cooking services, and extended stay arrangements.

men sometimes pay for return tickets to Vietnam,<sup>21</sup> apartment rental and language training, and offer large sums of cash to their girlfriend. This is the case of Joseph (described in the next chapter), who gave S\$ 4000 to his girlfriend Nhi after she lost all her savings at the casino.

It is difficult to accurately estimate total income for stays of 30 days, and net profits that Vietnamese migrant entertainers take home with them to Vietnam. Indeed, the total gains depend on the following parameters that they cannot always control:

- **Workplace:** As previously mentioned, streetwalkers and those working in pubs and karaoke lounges charge different prices. Similarly, the entertainers in Geylang and Joo Chiat earn less than those who frequent the Orchard Towers bars.
- **Personal considerations:** The physical appearance, experience, fluency in foreign languages and individual motivation are key elements driving an entertainer to work hard to successfully earn and save money. Some women will choose to work for long periods of time, learn basic foreign language skills, and respond day and night to clients' requests, even a 30-minute service on the other side of town (call-girl service). Less motivated and experienced entertainers, those who feel less comfortable or familiar with the prostitution business, or those who fear arrest more than others, are more likely to be less successful. These women find it more difficult to attract customers and to make the sizeable income they expected, and sometimes they barely earn enough to cover the costs of travel and daily expenses. Despite the importance of these personal features, migrant entertainers often turn to fate, using "good and bad luck" (*hen xui*) to explain the number of clients and their success in business. While some of them recruit clients almost every night, others struggle to find one a week.
- **Health conditions:** Entertainers' profits depend on their health. Some women remain in good health and work every day, but others who fall ill may not be able to work for certain periods of time. During the field investigation, a flu affected most of the entertainers in the boarding house for a week. Consequently, they all stopped working for a few days.
- **Longer term paid relationships:** These relationships are unpredictable as they are essentially dependent on the goodwill of the male clients, and to a lesser extent on the relationship management skills of the women. Some entertainers are able to maintain these relationships, so as to derive such significant revenue they may temporarily cease working in bars. Others are so keen to take as much advantage of the situation as possible that they unwittingly force the relationship's end through impatient, pushy and clumsy management, such as between Nhi and Joseph (described in the next chapter). It is difficult to estimate the average income from such arrangements because few entertainers are able to solidly establish these relations, and furthermore because donations are variable: materials or gifts, cash, and services.
- **AVEU raids and deportation:** This risk is out of the entertainers' control, as they cannot predict the timing or locations of raids. Sometimes the police turn a blind eye to prostitution outside the DRAs. But at other times, police conduct raids to "clean up" the unlicensed prostitution both in and outside DRAs. Arrested foreign entertainers are not

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<sup>21</sup> They also sponsor the extensions of social visit passes or renewals, staying for a weekend in Malaysia, for example.



charged for soliciting in public, but are deported from Singapore at their own expense. This issue is further discussed in the next chapter.

So ultimately, how much do Vietnamese entertainers earn in Singapore? In the boarding house, investigations regarding finances proved difficult to engage in, as gains were not always clearly expressed by informants. In fact, it is compounded by evidence that migrant entertainers were jealous of each other. They would also fall into debt with each other or with the boarding house manager. In addition, there was a real risk of theft in the boarding house, as entertainers rarely sent remittances to their families by private money transfer companies, which were too expensive for them. Instead, they took their savings in cash when they returned to Vietnam, usually at the end of their 30-day pass. As a consequence, revenues were often kept secret or under-reported. That said, five entertainers of the boarding house said they normally took between S\$ 1000 and 2000 (US\$ 816-1632) home to Vietnam after a 30-day stay in Singapore. This amount is an average because many entertainers returned with less than that. For example the 15-year-old disillusioned Linh (see annexes) and the 20-year-old singer Nga, both returned to Vietnam with practically nothing. However a few earned over this amount, and even fewer earned several thousand dollars a month like Nhi (see next chapter).

Despite varying revenues, basic expenses were fixed and equal for everyone. Entertainers faced three types of expenses:

- The cost of travel from Vietnam to Singapore, which depends on whether it is organized by the traveler or the migration broker who provides the migration package or other services.
- The cost of living in Singapore, predominantly rent and food expenses.
- The optional cost of extending the stay in Singapore.

Following are the expenses typically found in the boarding house, confirmed by external informants and those from HCMC (travel expenses and social visit pass extension and renewal will be described in detail in the next chapter).

	<b>Expenses</b>	<b>S\$ / US\$ (average prices)</b>
<b>Fixed living and working expenses</b>	Room rental for 30 days	30 X 10 = 300 / 244
	Lunch and light dinner provided by the house manager (price varies if meals are taken outside the house, and in other boarding houses)	30 X 5 = 150 / 122
	Miscellaneous: Snacks manicure, Taxi (optional)	200 / 163
	<b>Total</b>	<b><u>S\$ 650 / US\$ 529</u></b>

Fixed travel expenses	For those who come to Singapore for the first time and purchase a migration package	Migration package (by the migration broker)	1000 / 816
		Taxi from the boarding house to Changi airport	25 / 20
		Total	<b><u>S\$ 1025 / US\$ 836</u></b>
	For those who manage their own trip	Air ticket (return ticket)	250 / 204
		“Show money” (S\$ 1000 / US\$ 815)	100 / 82 (fee)
		Purchase of an address from Singapore citizen or permanent resident	100 / 82
		Taxi from / to Changi airport	50 / 40
		Total	<b><u>S\$ 500 / US\$ 408</u></b>
	Optional 30-Day Social Visit Pass renewal	ICA fee	40 / 33
		Sponsor fee	50 / 40
		Total	<b><u>S\$ 90 / US\$ 77</u></b>
Optional exit to Johor Bahru and re-entry to Singapore to receive a new 30-day pass	Travel expenses		200 / 164
	Sponsor		100 / 82
	Total		<b><u>S\$ 300 / US\$ 246</u></b>

Fig. 25: Entertainer's travel and living expenses in Singapore.

The table shows that the fixed costs fluctuate and are relatively high given the economic profile of migrant entertainers. A Vietnamese migrant entertainer who comes to Singapore for the first time through a migration package spends US\$ 836 on her transportation, whereas an experienced and confident one coming at her own expense will spend US\$ 408, or less than half this amount. Combined with US\$ 529 for 30 days' rent and food, the total comes to **US\$ 937-1365**. This amount excludes extras such as clothes, makeup, drugs, electronics, souvenirs, and gambling (for some),<sup>22</sup> which can significantly reduce the overall profit. The high cost of transportation – all the more for those under a migration package, accommodation and living expenses obliges migrant entertainers to earn at least a thousand US dollars during their stay in Singapore to prevent them from losing their initial investment, or worse, going into debt. A migrant entertainer from the boarding house who works in the pubs of Geylang or Joo Chiat will serve an average of 20 clients a month at S\$ 100 a service, which is S\$ 2000 (US\$ 1632), plus escort tips from each of about S\$ 20 or a total of S\$ 400 (US\$ 327), reaching a total of **US\$ 1962** (this average excludes income from longer term paid relationships). After subtracting transport, accommodation and living costs, she still has **US\$ 597** (if she buys the migration package) or **US\$ 1025** (if she organizes the trip by herself) to take home to Vietnam.

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<sup>22</sup> Entertainers considerably limited their purchases in Singapore because prices are dramatically higher than in Vietnam, as stated by an informant from the boarding house: "When you go to Singapore, buying things, it is better not to calculate prices in Vietnamese currency, or you will find it very expensive. I always think S\$ 10 [US\$ 8,2] is 10 000 VND [US 0,5]. I bought a shirt for S\$ 25 [US\$ 20], I think it is like 25 000 VND [US\$ 1,2]. If you calculate in đồng, it would be 300 000 đồng. But you cannot think like that. In Singapore, however, you can eat on the street for S\$ 2,5-4,5 per dish [US\$ 2-3,7]. If you eat Vietnamese food in the boarding house, you have to pay S\$ 12 per day [US 10, for two meals]. This is why I always ate out."

# 3 IMMIGRATION AND EXTENSION OF STAY

## 3.1 Departure and entrance to Singapore

The investigations revealed that all participants interviewed for this research entered Singapore on 30-day Social Visit Passes, while a small number of them extended their stay through various means, described in this section. The help of migration brokers and peer networks played a major role in dealing with travel arrangements and immigration procedures.

### Passing through immigration in HCMC and Singapore

The Vietnamese Immigration Department (*cục quản lý xuất nhập cảnh*) does not strictly filter Vietnamese travelers who fly to Singapore. However, the immigration officials sometimes pose trivial questions to travelers, and may also ask to see the “show money” (S\$ 1000 or US\$ 816) visitors are expected to present to Singapore immigration officials to prove financial self-sufficiency during their stay. None of the migrant entertainers in this study heading to Singapore was ever refused passage from Vietnamese immigration at the Tân Sơn Nhất Airport in HCMC, although one was asked to present her “show money.”

The passage through Singaporean immigration at Changi Airport is more problematic though, as Vietnamese female visitors are suspected of entering the country with the intention of employment in the sex sector without proper permission. According to Article 1 of the Framework agreement on visa exemption signed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on 25 July 2006 in Kuala Lumpur,<sup>23</sup> citizens of member-states are authorized to visit other member countries for up to 14 days without a visa. Some countries have signed further bilateral agreements that enable their citizens to stay longer. For example, Vietnamese citizens are exempt from requiring a visa in Singapore for up to 30 days, and vice versa. This legal framework refers to temporary visits – Singapore has labeled it a “social visit” hence the right to enter and stay being named a “Social Visit Pass” – which differs from labor migration that is regulated by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). Under the social visit framework, Vietnamese citizens who travel to Singapore cannot officially be considered illegal migrants if they enter and leave the country every 30 days. However, they contravene Article 8 of the Immigration Act if they conduct a professional activity without official permission to do so, and all the more so if this activity is unlicensed prostitution.

On the ground, Article 8 (Prohibited immigrants) and Article 31 (Removal of prohibited immigrants from Singapore) are rigorously enforced. It is common for Singaporean immigration officials to routinely refuse entry to Vietnamese women suspected of coming to Singapore to work in the prostitution sector, and to compel them to return to Vietnam without providing an

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<sup>23</sup> The Article 1 states that, “Member Countries, where applicable, shall exempt citizens of any other Member Countries holding valid national passports from visa requirement for a period of stay of up to 14 (fourteen) days from the date of entry, provided that such stay shall not be used for purposes other than visit. Citizens of Member Countries who enter another Member Countries for other purposes or for a stay exceeding the days allowed under the laws and regulations of the host countries are required to apply for appropriate visas or passes. Notwithstanding the above paragraph, Member Countries shall reserve the right to provide visa-free entry for citizens of other Member Countries for temporary visits for a period more than fourteen (14) days in accordance with their respective laws and regulations and/ or bilateral protocols and/ or arrangements.” The ASEAN Framework agreement on visa exemption is available online (<http://www.asean.org/18570.htm>, accessed 3 August 2011).

explanation. The decision to refuse entry, which is at the discretion of ICA officials, depends on certain criteria that will be discussed in this section. The experience of Vietnamese visitors at Singapore border checkpoints is given below. For migrant entertainers, most of the time this encounter takes place at Changi Airport.

1. As all requests to enter Singapore are considered separately, the visitor is invited to the counter individually. A female visitor traveling with a male friend, usually queuing a few meters away, may point him out to the immigration officer. The female visitor can present him as her legitimate companion, in order to defuse the official's potential suspicions that she is coming to Singapore to work in prostitution. The "sponsor" involved in this scenario is not officially committed to the visitor, that is to say administratively. However the female visitor fearing expulsion to Vietnam will use him to placate the suspicions of the ICA official.
2. Immigration control begins by examining the age and sex of the visitor. Women aged between 18 and 30 traveling alone arouse more suspicions of intentions to engage in prostitution. Groups of young women who travel without male company are also more highly suspected. Therefore, migration brokers recommend that their customers who travel in groups separate before arriving at the immigration counter, and to hide their connection with the other travelers if they are ever questioned.
3. The immigration official carefully examines the passport of the visitor, in particular for evidence of previous visits to Singapore, such as entry and exit stamps, as well as social visit pass extensions. Those whose passports are full of stamps are treated with additional suspicion. Some entertainers who travel frequently to Singapore believe that applying frequently for a new passport claiming the loss of the original solves this problem. However this technique is limited as immigration records, available to officials at the time of inspection, list an individual's previous visits.
4. The officer discreetly scans the appearance of the visitor. Of course, no entertainer dresses at immigration as she would to go to work at night. However, according to my observations, some clothes are more likely to arouse official' suspicions, for instance provocative clothing (low cut tops, shorts, and miniskirts), or pajamas which are popular in Vietnamese provinces and may give the impression of rural peasantry and thus poverty. For this reason, migration brokers advise their customers not to wear makeup and to dress casually in jeans and a regular shirt.
5. The immigration official examines the visitor's return ticket and "show money," which should prove financial self-sufficiency for the duration of the stay. Entertainers generally buy a 20- or 30-day return air ticket in order to be granted a 30-day Social Visit Pass. At present, it appears that immigration rarely grants passes for less than 30 days (no cases in the sample), as was the case in the past, according to the boarding house manager, who reported that entertainers were being granted passes of three to seven days, renewable only once, when she first arrived in 2003.
6. The immigration official also checks the residential address in Singapore. Visitors who report an address in a red light district – for instance Geylang, Joo Chiat and Golden Mile – are more suspect. To limit the risk of rejection, the migration brokers "buy an address" (*mua dia chi*) from a Singaporean citizen or permanent resident for S\$ 50 or 100 (US\$ 41-82) to be declared to ICA officials at the border checkpoints. Officials occasionally call the resident and sponsor to confirm the information declared.

## Being rejected by Singapore immigration

ICA officials take the traveler suspected of not being a genuine tourist to an office for an interview. After careful consideration of her/ his passport and luggage,<sup>24</sup> police ask for the reason for her/ his visit and any previous trips to Singapore. Nhu, an experienced 41-year-old entertainer explained that the officials questioned her about various trivial matters to substantiate the rejection, including her possessions (“why do you bring food if you just come here for tourism?”) and clothing (“why do you bring so many clothes if you are just coming for a few days?”). At this stage of the proceedings, she said, the officials had already made their assessment and decision, and subsequently they did not listen to her answers. Their questions simply served as a pretext to substantiate their suspicions, rather than as a real investigation of any legitimate claims she might have had to visit Singapore. In addition, most of the Vietnamese travelers suspected of engaging in prostitution are often unable to defend themselves because of the language barrier, especially if their English is basic and they require unusual words to explain or argue with immigration officials. Nhu’s description of this scenario is given below:

“I was unlucky. When I arrived at the airport, the police invited me to their office. When you are invited to their office in that way, you never know what is going to happen to you and if you will eventually be expelled out of or allowed into Singapore.

They asked me what reason brought me to Singapore. I told them that I came for tourism. They asked me why I brought with me so many cups of instant noodle and clothes if I had only come for sightseeing. They learned from my passport that I had come to Singapore many times in the past.

I did not say anything else, but then they told me to go back to Vietnam. So I had to go back. You cannot argue with them. It is a matter of good and bad luck [*ben xui*], as there is no reason to suspect me. They just randomly take some people to the office for questioning. There were many other girls who were refused entry Singapore that day. I do not know why they were so strict that time.”

The expelled travelers are requested to leave for Vietnam in the same day, at the latest within 24 hours, in which case they sleep at the airport. Immigration officials refer them to the counter of the carrier that brought them to Singapore, according to the Article 31a (Power of Controller to remove prohibited immigrants) of the Immigration Act.<sup>25</sup> Passengers generally leave with the first available flight and in these circumstances pay no penalty fee for the change of date, at least with the budget carriers Jet Star and Tiger Airways most often used by Vietnamese migrant entertainers.<sup>26</sup> This scheme is preferential not only because the budget

<sup>24</sup> I have heard stories of Vietnamese male being rejected, but this is out of the scope of the study.

<sup>25</sup> The Article states that: “(1) The Controller may, at any time, by order in writing, direct any person mentioned in subsection (2) to remove, within such period as may be specified in the order, a prohibited immigrant who has arrived in Singapore.” (2) An order under subsection (1) shall be made against and served on (a) the master of the vessel, aircraft or train which first brought the prohibited immigrant to Singapore; or (b) the master of any other vessel, aircraft or train belonging to the same owner or chartered by the same charterer of the vessel, aircraft or train mentioned in paragraph (a).”

([http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non\\_version/cgi-bin/cgi\\_retrieve.pl?&actno=reved-133&date=latest&method=part](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?&actno=reved-133&date=latest&method=part), accessed 20 July 2011).

For more information on rejections of prohibited immigrants by ICA, see Chan (2009), and online blog discussions such as “My Vietnamese GF...” (<http://www.sammyboyforum.com/archive/index.php/t-145384.html>), and “Scantily-clad Hostesses Busted in Police Raid”

(<http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/naked-hostesses-busted-police-raid-044914812.html>, both accessed 17 September 2011).

<sup>26</sup> On five occasions I saw Singaporean policemen escorting groups of Vietnamese women on to early morning budget carrier flights departing from Singapore to Ho Chi Minh City. The women were seated at



carriers usually charge expensive fees or altogether prohibit a change of date, but also because last-minute tickets booked without any notice are always more expensive. When my research assistant called the Tiger Airways office in HCMC to learn about their regulations following a passenger rejection by immigration at Changi airport, the operator was reassuring: “Girls are not rejected unless they intend to do ‘bad things’ in Singapore. So please, make sure that you bring S\$ 800 or S\$ 1000 [US\$ 653-816], a specific address and phone number in Singapore, and there will be no problem.” Indonesian budget carrier Lion Air has a slightly different policy. It charges a S\$ 300 (US\$ 245) deposit at the HCMC airport to all Vietnamese visitors traveling to Singapore for the first time or holding a new passport, and this fee is supposed to: 1) reimburse ICA for providing accommodation to visitors who are refused entry into Singapore, and 2) to book a return flight with the same carrier.<sup>27</sup> Entertainers believe that traveling with budget carriers like Jet Star, Tiger Airways and Lion Air can raise the suspicion of ICA officials who think they come for prostitution purposes. This is why some migrant entertainers, like Nhu, switch to national carriers such as Vietnam Airlines. She believes that as the fare is more expensive than that of budget carriers, it will increase her chances of passing through immigration successfully. This is of course an assumption, as traveling with national carriers does not guarantee immigration success at all.

### Migration broker services, expenses and risk

Vietnamese entertainers who come to Singapore for the first time do not know the tricks to succeed in their journey. It is difficult for them to organize their trip by themselves, to pass through immigration,<sup>28</sup> to find accommodation and to work safely in Singapore. They need assistance and this is why they rely on professional migration brokers, who facilitate the services which are necessary for the organization of mobility: obtaining a passport in Vietnam,<sup>29</sup> booking the ticket, providing “show money,” receiving them at the airport in Singapore, arranging accommodation during the stay, and renewing or extending the social visit pass by arranging an exit trip out of the country.

The boarding house manager of the study was also a migration broker. She offered a S\$ 1000 (US\$ 816) package to her new customers which included basic services. This money was called “money for guidance to get to Singapore” (*tiền dân mình đi qua Singapore*) or “money for the sponsorship” (*tiền bao lãnh*). Here are the services in the package:

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the back of the plane. The Singaporean policemen gave their passports to an airhostess, who then handed them over to a Vietnamese immigration official upon arrival. An informant told me that the officials noted their names and dates of travel, and then let them go.

<sup>27</sup> This policy makes little sense, as many entertainers travel frequently to Singapore. In addition, Lion Air policy states that tickets are neither changeable nor refundable, so expelled passengers must buy a new ticket. As for the mysterious S\$ 300 fee (US\$ 245), no other budget (Jet Star, Tiger Airways) or national (Vietnam Airlines, Singapore Airlines) carrier mentions fees paid to Singaporean immigration. ICA officials at Changi Airport strongly denied this policy. It is possible that Lion Air overcharges to buy the new last-minute ticket to rejected travelers, and informs customers that a portion of the money goes to the airport immigration authorities. In any case, when asked about this mysterious policy, Lion Air representatives in both HCMC and Singapore could provide no clear response.

<sup>28</sup> Even finding one's way around the airport can be problematic. Linh, the 15-year-old migrant entertainer who came to Singapore for the first time (see annexes), called my research assistant from the airport to ask for help to find her flight to Vietnam. She was at the wrong terminal. My assistant had to ask a security guard in English to guide her to a bus. She also sent the entertainer a text message in English, reading “Please show me the way to terminal one. My flight is at 12:05. Lion Air. Thank you very much,” to show to airport staff to get help. Later on she found some Vietnamese girls in the airport and followed them.

<sup>29</sup> The boarding house manager in the study did not offer this service, however another migration broker whom I met in HCMC offered this service in her migration package.

- Round trip ticket with a budget carrier (Jet Star, Tiger Airways, Lion Airways) from HCMC to Singapore.
- Provision of “show money” for immigration, which is handed over to the traveler in the departure hall of HCMC airport.
- An address in Singapore located away from the red light districts to provide to ICA officials.
- Reception at the airport in Singapore where the migration broker retrieves the “show money,” and taxi transfer to the boarding house.
- Provision of a bed in a room shared with other entertainers in the boarding house. The price of the rent is S\$ 10 per day (US\$ 8).
- Advice about living and working conditions in Singapore: working techniques, safe and retributive workplaces, networking with peers, precautions in relation to potential interactions with clients and police.
- Later, the customer is offered additional services on favorable conditions, particularly in terms of social visit pass extension and renewal by exiting the country.

The package price may seem high, especially given the tough economic situation of the majority of migrant entertainers who decide to try their luck in Singapore. But the formula is flexible, as the payment of the package price is made in Singapore after the migrant entertainer has started working. Ten sexual services at S\$ 100 (US\$ 82) are sufficient to repay the fee. The actual costs charged by the migration broker are as follows:

- Airfare: the ticket costs between S\$ 150 (US\$ 122) and S\$ 300 (US\$ 245) depending on the reservation date and the carrier.
- Taxi from the airport in Singapore that costs US\$ 25 (or double after midnight).
- Purchase of an address and sponsorship by a Singaporean citizen or permanent resident in Singapore who will confirm the information provided by the Vietnamese traveler to immigration at the airport, if a call is made for verification purposes. The average price for this service is S\$ 50-100 (US\$ 41-82).
- Monthly payments to the migration broker’s partner who is based in HCMC, and who advances the “show money” to the traveler prior to departure. In the case studied, this person is the ex-husband of the migration broker. He receives VND 3 million or US\$ 146 monthly, including fees.
- Provision of “show money”: either an advance can be made to the traveler, or the migration broker can transfer the sum to his partner from Singapore by paying a S\$ 30 (US\$ 25) fee. The cash-strapped migration broker can also borrow the money in Singapore or Vietnam. As witnessed in the boarding house, the house manager borrowed from the Vietnamese landlord who sublet the rooms to entertainers. The fee (*tiền phí*) or interest (*tiền lợi*) was S\$ 40 (US\$ 33). Therefore the migration broker in this study borrows and transfers the “show money” from Singapore and spends S\$ 70 (US\$ 57) all together when she does so. Theoretically, she would have access to working capital to ensure the sustainability of the system, as the money flows into her hands and those from her partner in HCMC and the traveler. But in the case studied, the migration broker had insufficient funds and the risk of loss was high.

In summary, the migration broker earned roughly between **S\$ 300 and S\$ 800 (US\$ 245-653)** for each new customer. Her profit depended on the price of the ticket and the availability of capital that allowed her to cover the “show money.” But the profit made played another vital role as it allowed her to cover two major risks. The first was the risk of losing her customer with the “show money” at the airport, most commonly in HCMC and more rarely in Singapore. Some migration brokers work with professional partners who have the means to pursue a defector,

thus reducing the risk of loss. However in the case studied, the migration broker works with a non-professional partner, her ex-husband, who is poorly equipped to conduct operations to capture and apply pressure on fraudsters. The migration broker and boarding house manager described this risk:

“My husband gave S\$ 1000 [US\$ 816] to the girls in Vietnam. But they did not check in. They pretended to go inside the airport but actually they did not pass customs. When my husband left, they went out and kept my S\$ 1000 and never returned it to me. I had no way to get the money back because I did not know where to find them, and I don’t have time to go to An Giang or Vinh Long provinces [in the Mekong delta] where the girls are from to look for them. Last year, I also rented a house like this [the boarding house], but then I lost all of the money. I had to borrow ‘mafia money’ [high interest loans] in Vietnam to repay the money I borrowed to lend to the girls.”

The second risk related to the enforcement of Articles 8 and 31 in Singapore. An expelled Vietnamese traveler is immediately returned to Vietnam, however no one can be certain when exactly this will happen as it depends on the flight schedule and availability of seats in the carrier. The migration broker studied was therefore confronted with the problem of tracing her lost customers. Indeed, it was difficult for her to predict the outcome of ICA officials’ assessments, and even more so the hypothetical return date of a rejected traveler, which can be the same day or the following. In our case, the migration broker might send her partner to HCMC airport, and he will wait patiently for the exit of the customer to retrieve the “show money.” However the outcome of this method is uncertain for obvious practical reasons. In case of fraud, the migration broker will more likely refer to the relationship of trust that was established directly (if she was the recruiter) or indirectly (if the recruiter was her partner in HCMC or one of her or customers acting as introducers) to try to recover the money. One can easily understand the seriousness of the risk, as described by the migration broker studied:

“Last time, I lent S\$ 1000 [US\$ 816] to a girl in Vietnam. I borrowed the money and sent it to Vietnam for a S\$ 30 fee [US\$ 25]. I took a taxi to go to the airport to pick her up for S\$ 30 back and forth. It means I spent S\$ 60 altogether [US\$ 50]. In the end, she was not allowed to enter Singapore. She went back to Vietnam and she spent S\$ 300 [US\$ 245] of the S\$ 1000 to pay the fine at the airport. You see, I paid S\$ 60 [US\$ 50] for nothing and then I lost S\$ 300 more [she paid S\$ 300 to Lion Air, and then the migration broker’s partner collected the rest in HCMC].”

### Brokerage and social relationships

The value of the deal between the migration broker and boarding house manager, and her customer is beyond a simple market exchange. In fact, a personal and ambiguous bond is created between the migration broker “mother” (*me*) and her customers’ “girls” (*dao*) or “soldiers” (*linh*) that goes beyond the transaction price.<sup>30</sup> Beginning with a seemingly simple service transaction, the relationship becomes that of a patron-client, when the “mother” asks her “daughters” to work for her as a recruiter. This rapport between a boss or “mother” and customer or “daughter” is necessarily hierarchical, which is recognized by personal pronouns used in Vietnamese to identify a relationship.<sup>31</sup> In some cases, it illustrates ties of affection and love.

<sup>30</sup> In the house, entertainers address the migration broker and boarding house manager as “mother” (*me*) and adopt the pronoun “child” (*con*) for themselves when talking to her.

<sup>31</sup> In Vietnamese, a speaker does not say “I” when speaking of him/ herself, although the “I” or *tôi* exists, but it is generally reserved for rare situations inducing equality between the two speakers. The person

The migration broker and house manager of the study typically recruited travelers within her own network or the wider network of her “daughters.” Consequently she significantly expanded her customer base by incorporating the networks of her previous customers. During the investigation period, two entertainers arrived in Singapore under these conditions, and two others came under similar conditions but with another broker, a “daughter” of the boarding house manager who had become herself a migration broker. For each new customer or traveler recruited, a “daughter” received a tip (*tiền cafe*, which literally means “coffee money”) from her “mother” or patron. She did not organize any services, as her role was strictly limited to that of an intermediary.

Generally speaking, migration brokers may also recruit through more or less professional associates. A migrant entertainer met in HCMC explained how she was originally recruited and taken to Singapore by a recruiter who worked for a boarding house manager and procurer:

“When I worked for a nail shop, there was a client who asked me if I wanted to sell sex in Singapore. She used to come to my shop to take care of her nails. I agreed.

Before I got on the plane, she taught me for free 100 English sentences in one week. She also took me to the office to get my passport. I paid VND 200 000 [US\$ 10] for it. She bought me the ticket, but I had to find VND 3,5 million [US\$ 170] to pay for it. She also lent me S\$ 1000 [US\$ 816] for “show money.”

When I arrived at the airport, she gave me the ticket. She, another girl, and I went to Singapore together. She ordered us not to talk to each other, so that the police would not know that we knew each other. Otherwise, we were told, they could ask us a lot of questions and it would be more difficult to get through immigration. Actually, the police questioned me and I replied that I came just for holiday. And they let me pass without even checking my money. When I arrived in Singapore, I paid her S\$ 1100 [US\$ 898]. She also introduced me to her relative in Singapore, the person in charge of the house where I would stay.

She was paid S\$ 100 [US\$ 82] for introducing me to them, so she earned S\$ 200 [US\$ 164] all together, 100 from the show money and 100 for introducing me to that person.”

Experienced entertainers organize their own travel to Singapore to limit costs, but not all services are accessible to them. For example, they can buy tickets directly through the airline or by contacting a travel agent.<sup>32</sup> An experienced entertainer can also arrive in Singapore and find accommodation by herself, provided she has a residential address, usually the boarding house where she once lived. At this point, migrant entertainers no longer need to be supported by the migration broker, not only because they know the ropes, as well as local prices and workplaces in Singapore, but also because they have their own peer and client networks to support them. Migrant entertainers wishing to save the money of the migration package may be forced however to buy two critical services. The first is the purchase of an address, which limits the risk of rejection at Changi airport. The second is the provision of the “show money” which usually costs S\$ 100 (US\$ 82), that is to say ten percent of the sum. When this service is provided, the lender usually waits for his customer at the exit gate of Changi airport to retrieve the “show money.” The migration broker and boarding house manager of the study provided these services to her customers when they returned to Singapore, as their relationship continued despite the spatial and temporal distance. By contrast, she rarely advanced funds to a new customer with

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always speaks of him/ herself in third person singular pronouns. For example, an entertainer will say to her client: “Little sister [*em*] asks big brother [*anh*] to invite her to drink a beer with him.” She will say to her madam, “Child [*con*] seeks advice from mother [*mẹ*].” This usage leads to a hierarchical distinction between the speakers, and determines conduct.

<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, the migration broker and boarding house manager in the study was also a reseller of a budget carrier air tickets.

whom she did not have an existing relationship, unless she had a strong commitment with one of her existing customers, or she was provided some sort of guarantee.

### 3.2 Extending the stay in Singapore

Entertainers entering Singapore on a 30-day Social Visit Pass are faced with two options after its expiry: return to Vietnam or extend their stay in Singapore. The majority of women I met sought to avoid raising suspicion with immigration and returned to Vietnam for a few weeks or months, before coming back to Singapore and beginning a new 30-day stay. This practice was common for the informants of the study. Conversely, those wishing to extend their stay while remaining in Singapore had several methods at their disposal. Only few entertainers who wished to extend their stay used the options presented in this chapter though.<sup>33</sup> The option of acquiring a Performing Artist Working Permit was only considered in the early stages of a deal, but never applied. Another option, fraudulent marriage to obtain a long-term stay pass, was not employed but was described by three informants. As for the pass of the boarding house manager, she first managed to stay in Singapore by traveling back and forth from Vietnam. Then, she obtained a Long-Term Stay Social Visit Pass to accompany and look after her daughter studying who was in Singapore on a Student's Pass, which falls under a special pass scheme.

#### Extension of the 30-day Social Visit Pass (“*Apply*”)

Thirty-day Social Visit Pass holders are allowed to stay in Singapore for 30 days, and the pass is extendable once for another 30 days. The applicant, in our case the migrant entertainer, must submit her Extension of Short Term Visit Pass (e-XTEND) application online, or in person at an automatic terminal at the Visitor Services Centre located on the fourth storey of the ICA building. The Vietnamese refer to this method as “*áp lai*” from the English word “apply.” The procedure is relatively simple: the applicant enters basic details such as her full name, date of birth, sex, nationality, travel document number and details from the embarkation card, purpose of the visit and valid residential address in Singapore. All procedures are made in English, which is inconvenient for the majority of Vietnamese entertainers who find it difficult to read and write foreign languages, including English. The application is free and a response, which is only available online, is granted within 24 hours (the applicant enters his passport number and embarkation card to check the status on the ICA website). Once approved, a S\$ 40 (US\$ 33) administrative fee, which can only be paid by credit card or Internet Banking, is charged. The majority of migrant entertainers cannot pay using these methods. When the application is approved and the payment is settled, the applicant is given an In-Principle Approval letter, which states the new expiry date of the extension, that he/ she must present to the immigration official on the day of departure. The procedure is simple, yet difficult for the majority of Vietnamese migrant entertainers. Indeed, the failure rate appeared extremely high for those who tried this method during the period of investigation.

Vietnamese migrant entertainers who wish to improve their chances of a successful extension seek a sponsor to help them. The sponsor must be at least 21 years old, hold Singaporean citizenship or permanent residence with a valid address in Singapore, and a credit card for the payment. The application can be made online (the sponsor needs a Singapore Personal Access number or Singpass used to transact with Government online services) or at the

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<sup>33</sup> Two Vietnamese migrant entertainers among the 11 sampled in the boarding house used the described options to extend their stay. Two others were arrested by the police and expelled before the end of the 30-day pass. The sample is therefore nine and the percentage of women extending their stays is 18 percent.

ICA counter with the presence of the local sponsor. The documents required are one completed application form, the applicant's passport, a return ticket, the embarkation card; as well as the sponsor's identity card, address (preferably away from red light districts) and a telephone number. ICA occasionally verifies the relationship between the two parties by requesting an interview or by calling the sponsor. Migration brokers, boarding house managers and procurers tend to seek professional facilitators, who understand the ICA procedures and potential investigation, to increase the chances of the application being approved. Sponsors usually charge between S\$ 50 and 100 (US\$ 41-82) for the service, although the price can be much higher. Entertainers can also engage with a sponsor they know personally to save on having to pay a commission. The more experienced entertainers, who are familiar with the administrative procedures and who have regular customers who are willing to vouch for them, will avoid contracting professional sponsors who charge a fee.

The response is always communicated via the Internet. The ICA does not offer applicants reasons for rejecting an application, and the online pages of the agency's website detailing the procedures to submit an Extension of Short Term Visit Pass do not list reasons for rejection either. Applications supported by Singaporean sponsors are certainly more likely to be approved. However, this is by no means guaranteed. The ICA's response is unpredictable, so entertainers refer again to "good or bad luck" (*ben xun*) to explain the cryptic and seemingly inconsistent policy for extension of visit passes. In addition, entertainers worry about having an electronic record of the rejected pass extension application. Therefore, they seldom employ this option, especially without a sponsor.

### Exiting and returning to Singapore to obtain a new pass ("Going to Malaysia")

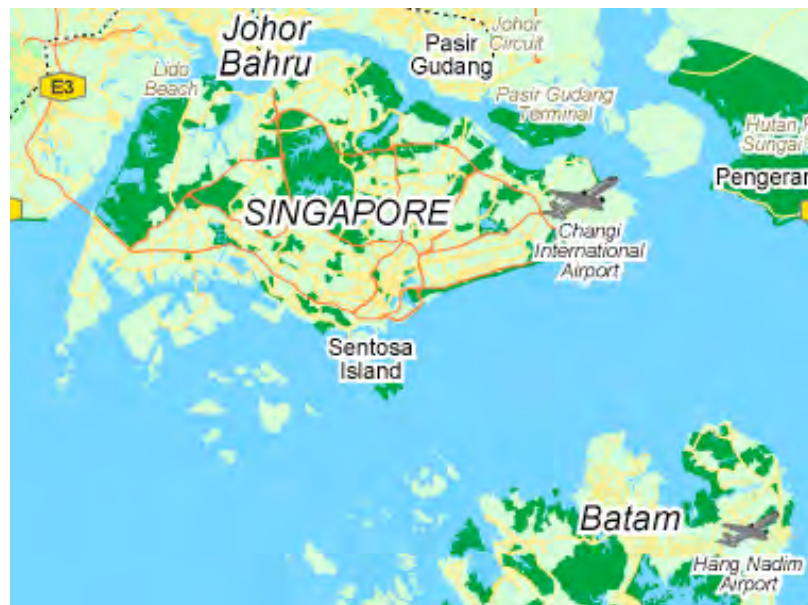


Fig. 26: Singapore, Johor Bahru (Malaysia) and Batam island (Indonesia), source: <http://www.streetdirectory.com/malaysia/johor/>, accessed 1 October 2011

The second option to extend one's stay in Singapore is to leave the country and return a few hours or days later. The border at Johor Bahru in Malaysia, located 45 minutes by taxi from the East Coast of Singapore, is commonly frequented for this purpose. This option, of "going to Malaysia" (*dī qua Malay*) as the Vietnamese migrant entertainers call it, seems to have been popular in the past among entertainers of all nationalities who were working in the unlicensed sex sector with social visit passes in Singapore. However today, according to the informants, immigration controls have been tightened and passports are meticulously verified, especially in



cases of women re-entering Singapore. Migrant entertainers who are denied the right to enter find themselves trapped in Malaysia,<sup>34</sup> with little choice but to engage in the local prostitution sector while waiting to retry to re-enter Singapore. According to the informants, this option is unattractive for several reasons. Firstly, the migrant entertainers are cut off from their networks of peers, boarding house managers and service providers. Secondly, Vietnamese entertainers believe it is more dangerous to work in Malaysia than in Singapore. According to them, not only do they have to pay bribes to the Malaysian police, which is not the case in Singapore, they are also at risk of being sexually and physically abused by Malaysian clients who are considered more violent than Singaporeans. Thirdly, prostitution pays less in Malaysia than in Singapore, as discussed in the previous chapter. The boarding house manager summarized the general assumptions about working in Johor Bahru:

“As for the Vietnamese women working in Johor Bahru, it is more complicated in Malaysia than in Singapore. Security is not as good as in Singapore. The security of foreigners is actually awful over there. Sometimes, the girls work in brothels and the boss takes all of their money. The girls only work over there when they cannot come back to Singapore.”

Brokers recommend hiring a sponsor to return from Malaysia to Singapore. The male sponsor escorts his customer to Johor Bahru for a few hours or days. Then, the couple travels back together to Singapore by private taxi. The goal is to create the impression of a genuine couple for the benefit of Singaporean ICA officials. In order to increase the chances of approval, the female can also carry purchases from Johor Bahru to make it seem like it was a shopping trip to Malaysia. If questions are raised about the legitimacy of the couple, they may be required to attend an interview in which the police will ask each individual to provide details about the other, to be cross-referenced. Details include full legal names, dates of birth, the woman's date of entry to Singapore, the man's address in Singapore, the length of their relationship, the circumstances in which they met, etc. According to one informant, the police sometimes write the name of the sponsor on the suspected entertainer's embarkation card, therefore recording his identity and his relationship to the female traveler.

Since this is now a re-entry into Singapore, a foreign traveler must again have both the “show money” and a return ticket to Vietnam. For example, an entertainer who arrives for the first time in Singapore on June 1 must show a ticket dated no later than June 30 to be granted a 30-day Social Visit Pass. If she goes to Johor Bahru on June 27 to extend her stay and returns to Singapore on June 28, she must produce an air ticket for July, preferably a few days after the re-entry date to avoid suspicion (e.g. a ticket for July 7, only one week from the original return date of June 30). Immigration will normally grant a new 30-day Social Visit Pass (valid until July 28) in the example).

If she were to return to Vietnam on the declared return date (7 July), she would miss out on the opportunity to work during the three remaining weeks (from 7 to 28 July in the example) on the new 30-day pass. As a consequence, she will forgo the second return flight (7 July) and purchase a third ticket (July 28) to take advantage of the entire period granted by the new pass.

As the declared date of departure (July 7) is sometimes written in pen on the embarkation card, the entertainers run the risk of being questioned by ICA officials about their decision to stay beyond their declared return date.

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<sup>34</sup> According to a taxi driver who traveled between the two countries daily, it is frequent that the Singapore immigration officials reject migrant entertainers, so they employ this option only if a Singaporean sponsor or a foreigner with a working pass or permanent residence accompanies them. He feared that the police might note his license plate if he frequently transported “suspect” cases and was stopped by immigration for doing so.

Boarding house managers, Singaporean professional sponsors and taxi drivers occasionally transporting migrant entertainers between Singapore and Johor Bahru strongly advise them against accumulating pass renewals in Malaysia. Indeed, entertainers must be cautious about the number of times they attempt renewals in this fashion, as those with passports saturated with entry and exit stamps of the two countries risk being refused entry not only to Singapore but to Malaysia as well. The entertainers believe that the success of this method again depends on fate and good luck (*ben xun*). The cost of the operation is as follows.

	Unit	Price per unit in S\$ / US\$	Total in S\$ / US\$
Taxi from the East Coast to Bugis Station for two people	1	10 / 8	10 / 8
Taxi from Bugis Station to Johor Bahru taxi stand in a taxi shared with others	2	10 / 8	20 / 16
Empty taxi from Johor Bahru to Bugis Station for two people	1	50 / 41	50 / 41
Taxi from Bugis Station to the East Coast	2	10 / 8	20 / 16
Sponsor's fee	1	200 / 163	200 / 163
Total			<b><u>S\$ 300 / US\$ 243</u></b>
<b>Options in Johor Bahru</b>			
Purchases	Shoes, clothes...	50 / 41	50 / 41
Accommodation in for two people, one day	1 day / 1 person	30 / 24	60 / 48
Meals for two people	1 day / 1 person	20 / 16	40 / 32

“Show money”	1	100 / 82	100 / 82
Total			<b><u>S\$ 250 / 203</u></b>
Total			<b><u>From US\$ 243 – 446</u></b>

Fig. 27: Cost of going to Johor Bahru to obtain a new 30-day pass.

Going to Johor Bahru is a quick but risky and expensive method of extending one's stay in Singapore compared to the 30-day Social Visit Pass extension. Entertainers can also go to Thailand or Indonesia, for instance the island of Batam in Indonesia's Riau Archipelago, which is only one hour by ferry and S\$ 35 (US\$ 29) for a round-trip ticket. What has been said for Johor Bahru in relation to issues of crossing the border and passing Singaporean immigration prevails for re-entry from Batam. Despite this, for the duration of the study none of the informants traveled to Indonesia, preferring to go to Johor Bahru instead.<sup>35</sup> However one entertainer, Nhi aged 32, did go on a cruise in Thailand for a week, stating it is easier to return to Singapore by sea because “coming by boat, they have to let the girls in, the girls cannot go back. Where could they go back if they were rejected? To the sea? They have to let the girls enter Singapore.”

The boarding house manager described a final scenario to facilitate re-entry to Singapore. Here, the Singaporean sponsor can be sent to Vietnam, to then return with the entertainer to Singapore together, again creating the impression of a legitimate couple at Changi airport. This case has not been observed in the investigation, however, following my return to HCMC post investigations, I was asked twice by an entertainer from the boarding house to escort her from Vietnam back to Singapore. If a sponsor is willing both in Vietnam or Singapore, and if the migrant entertainer has the means to pay for transportation and fees, this option is worth consideration.

### Performing Artist Work Permit (“*Working card*”)

A third way to extend the stay in Singapore is to apply for a Performing Artist Work Permit. Vietnamese entertainers call this method the “working card” (*thẻ làm việc*). The MOM states on its website that; “Since 2008, this visa is required by foreigners who wish to take up a short-term professional assignment in Singapore as an artist performing at nightclubs, lounges, pubs, karaoke clubs or other similar entertainment outlets. The maximum duration of this work permit is six months. Sponsoring companies must have a valid Public Entertainment License, and the application follows the standard procedures of work permits.”<sup>36</sup> None of the informants in the study worked within this legal framework, however this finding cannot be generalized to all Vietnamese entertainers working in Singapore, as systematic surveys were not conducted in Joo Chiat, Geylang and Jalan Sultan karaoke lounges employing formally or informally

<sup>35</sup> However, when I was leaving for a weekend with a European friend visiting the island of Batam, the boarding house manager insisted that we traveled with two of his “daughters,” our housemates, at their expense. She wanted us to “sponsor” their re-entry or to behave like couples with the entertainers at the immigration border checkpoints at the Singapore Cruise Center. I refused the proposition, but this again shows that the option is viable if a sponsor is easily available.

<sup>36</sup> Quote from MOM website (<http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/work-permit-artiste/before-you-apply/Pages/default.aspx#requirements>, accessed 20 July 2011).

Vietnamese hostesses.<sup>37</sup> The excessive cost of the operation, particularly the hefty commissions of brokers, did indeed pose problems for applicants. The following case study in the boarding house is symptomatic of the difficulties faced by migrant entertainers who intend to obtain this working pass.

Nhi used to work as middle woman at a beer bar in HCMC. She has traveled to Singapore several times and she usually works in bars in Orchard Towers. According to her, she earned between S\$ 5000 and 9000 (US\$ 4080-7344) per month,<sup>38</sup> far more than her peers who frequented the pubs in Geylang and Joo Chiat. She sought help from the boarding house manager to obtain a Performing Artist Work Permit. Nhi's goal was to stay in Singapore for as long as possible without having to continually renew her 30-day Social Visit Pass, a source of stress and considerable expense. The boarding house manager contacted a broker whose job was to identify potential hostesses and present them to karaoke managers for employment consideration. In this business configuration of four individuals, the broker and the boarding house manager defended their interests and those of their respective customers, that is to say the karaoke employer and the migrant entertainer (Nhi). In exchange for the work permit and a labor contract, the broker initially proposed the following terms to the boarding house manager and Nhi:

- 6 days of service per week.
- Working hours from 7pm to 1am.
- Monthly salary of S\$ 500 plus tips (US\$ 408).
- Commissions of up to 50 percent on alcoholic drinks ordered by customers.
- The employee is allowed to leave with clients outside working hours. The management's policy is "what the employee does outside the premises, is her own business."

At this stage however, the price of the work permit (in other words, the broker and the house manager's fees) was not clearly mentioned. These are normal conditions in a mid-range karaoke lounge, in which tips, commissions on alcohol, and outside services compensate for the hostesses' low wage. However this arrangement did not fully suit Nhi who wished to obtain a working pass without the associated constraints of having to work. When the price of the work permit was first mentioned soon after this early proposal, the operation became much less attractive for Nhi. The boarding house manager proposed providing Nhi with the work permit for S\$ 6000 (US\$ 4896). In paying this considerable amount, the house manager thought Nhi would receive the working pass, and most importantly, that she would be exempted from working in the karaoke lounge. But the broker quickly corrected these naïve assumptions and made it clear that the entertainer had to work as stated in the labor contract, and that the conditions were non-negotiable. Following these misunderstandings and confusing negotiations, the deal ended abruptly as Nhi withdrew from the proposal, mainly because the broker did not communicate with her for the next few days, during which time she found a sponsor to go to Johor Bahru to extend her stay in Singapore for another 30 days. In addition, Nhi eventually decided that she did not want to quit her lucrative business, especially during the peak evening hours, in the expatriate bars of Orchard Towers, where she could easily earn over US\$ 5000 per month.

What conclusions can be drawn from this case? Little more can be said of the case per se, as I could only speak with the Singaporean broker once and for a short period of time (he only

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<sup>37</sup> In the boarding house, however, I met two entertainers who worked as hostesses in the entertainment district of Jalan Sultan, near Beach Road and the Golden Mile Complex. Neither had a labor contract, but both had a 30-day Social Visit Pass. They returned to Vietnam at the end of the 30 days.

<sup>38</sup> She charged between S\$ 100 and 1000 (US\$ 82-816) for a service, as well as receiving regular payments from regular clients and lovers.

met with the boarding house manager twice). More research into the brokerage and karaoke industries would be required to better understand the economics involved in the recruitment of cheap and administratively vulnerable labor who enter Singapore with social visit passes. What is clear is that each player defended his interests by demanding as much as possible in the first instance (the house manager's share is unknown though), and negotiating the terms thereafter. Indeed, the boarding house manager tried to take advantage of the deal by obfuscating the terms, therefore making herself essential throughout the dealings. As proof of her commitment to the arrangement, she requested an advance of S\$ 500 (US\$ 408) from Nhi after starting to negotiate the deal. However, as Nhi changed her mind while the boarding house manager and the broker were still in discussions, the deposit was not returned to her. The S\$ 500 therefore became the subject of an intense dispute in the ensuing days, with the boarding house manager arguing that Nhi withdrew from the proposal first. The house manager always presented herself as pivotal in transactions with Singaporean brokers and sponsors; therefore she legitimized the fees that were requested for the entertainers, by blaming them for constantly changing their minds and commitments (a claim which, by the way, is true, as I observed this in the boarding house). The boarding house manager described the situation:

“You know, for many girls, their words do not amount to anything. Sometimes, they ask me to look for people to help. I then call my friends to ask them for help. They take a day off to come and visit the girls and me. Then the girl changes her mind and finds someone else who charges less money for the same service. Then she immediately refuses to go with the one that she first agreed with. That is not nice because they have already agreed to come and to pay. Because of money they change their minds like that at the last minute.”

### **Genuine and fraudulent marriages in Singapore**

The fourth method to extend the stay in Singapore is to marry a Singaporean citizen or a permanent resident of Singapore. Vietnamese migrant entertainers can negotiate a fraudulent marriage through a broker, or marry a genuine lover or boyfriend. No informants from the sample stayed in Singapore by fraudulent marriage though. However, two who originally came to work as entertainers subsequently married Singaporeans. A third, aged 22, who came for the first time during the investigation period, got pregnant by a Singaporean client in the spring 2011, and then married him. Before exploring these methods of residing in Singapore, let us first examine the local administration procedures regarding international marriages.

After both the groom (Singaporean citizen or permanent resident in this case) and the bride (Vietnamese citizen in this case) agree to marry, the spouses have to follow several steps to legally register the marriage. Firstly, they must complete an online notice of marriage. Secondly, they must go to the Registry of Marriages to have official documents verified and sign a statutory declaration.<sup>39</sup> Thirdly, they confirm the marriage in the presence of a licensed marriage officer and two witnesses. Fourthly, the marriage needs to be officially registered by the Registrar in a Certificate of Marriage. The foreign spouse must then apply for a long-term Visit Pass at ICA, as this pass is not granted automatically after marriage registration. If the wife entered Singapore with a 30-day Social Visit Pass, she can apply for either a six-month or one-year Long-Term Visit Pass sponsored by her husband (five-years can be granted in exceptional circumstances). ICA decisions can range from the following:

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<sup>39</sup> From the Registry of Marriages website (<http://app.rom.gov.sg/internet/index.asp>, accessed 15 August 2011).

- ICA approves the application and grants the period requested.
- ICA grants a shorter duration than applied, e.g. the spouse applies for a six-month pass but only gets three months.
- ICA rejects the application.

The normal processing time is about four weeks, or less than two weeks for a renewal. If the application is approved, the wife receives an In-Principle Approval letter valid for two months. She can travel freely between Vietnam and Singapore after receiving both this letter and the Long-Term Visit Pass. It is important to note that the Long-Term Visit Pass remains a Social Visit Pass; therefore foreign spouses are not allowed to work in Singapore under this scheme, as only permanent residents are allowed to do so. After securing the six-month or one-year pass, the couple can apply for the wife's permanent residency. Approval, the duration of passes and success rate depend on factors such as the husband's income and his ability to financially support the foreign spouse, and the educational background of the foreign spouse. In reality, the requirements for approving foreign spouses' long-term visit passes or permanent residency applications remain unclear, and certainly not all the applications are approved.<sup>40</sup> Regardless, applicants usually ignore the risks of being rejected and proceed with their application, although wealthier and more educated couples have greater chances of having their application approved.

### Fraudulent marriage

The fraudulent or "fake marriage" (*kết hôn giả*) is certainly a scam. Three informants including the boarding house manager described this method, although none of the migrant entertainers resided in Singapore under this framework. The brokered procedure is similar to the work permit method. A Singaporean broker or "introducer" (*người giới thiệu*) presents the migrant entertainer to the Singaporean citizen or permanent resident in Singapore, negotiates the terms of engagement and arranges the necessary paperwork in exchange for a commission. The informants stated that husbands are usually unemployed or from the working class, and either single or divorced.

All three informants agreed that the annual rate charged for this marriage service was between S\$ 7000 and 8000 (US\$ 5712-6528). Payment is made after the marriage registration and reception of the In-Principle Approval letter, which ensures the Long-Term Visit Pass. The transaction takes place in two possible ways. In the first scenario, the wife pays the husband S\$ 600 each month (US\$ 490). In the second scenario, the wife deposits the total amount into an account that the husband can access once the Long-Term Visit Pass has been granted to his wife. According to the three Vietnamese informants, brokers claim of routine police investigations into mixed couples to detect fraud (this information could not be verified and seems wrong). This is why they advise couples to live together following the marriage in case of inspection. It is possible to extend the agreement by renewing the Long-Term Visit Pass, which is dependent on the goodwill of the ICA. This method to extend the stay in Singapore is cheaper than the Performing Artist Work Permit, but it is more restrictive for the following reasons:

- The spouses must prove they are single in order to register the marriage. Nine out of 16 entertainers in the sample were separated but not necessarily divorced, as separation without divorce is common in Vietnam.
- Spouses must submit paperwork to register the marriage, such as a marriage certificate, educational certificates, and children's birth certificates if any. Migrant entertainers coming for short periods of time to Singapore often do not have this paperwork to hand.

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<sup>40</sup> For a discussion about ICA's policy to grant or reject pass applications for foreign spouses, see Leong (2010a, 2010b).



- The spouses can only divorce three years after marriage, which imposes more costs. The informants were, however, unaware of the financial implications of divorce.
- Cohabitation may be difficult because entertainers' schedules are staggered. They usually rest in the morning and have intense activity in the late afternoon and at night. Cohabitation also disconnects the migrant entertainer from her peer networks which provide precious help and advice.
- Finally, a dishonest husband may blackmail his wife by threatening to reveal her prostitution activities to the police. The potential of this situation occurring does not encourage women to proceed with a fraudulent marriage.

In conclusion, extending one's stay by fraudulent marriage is an expensive method and comparatively binding, which probably explains the absence noted in the study sample.

### Genuine marriage

Marriages between Singaporean men and Vietnamese women are more common. This operation is not illegal because the entertainer persuades a Singaporean citizen or permanent resident customer into marriage, into which he willingly enters. Matchmaking agencies operating in the shopping mall of the Golden Mile Complex on Beach Road, near Geylang, offer Vietnamese brides in person or in a catalog. Matchmakers who work for Singaporean brokers usually recruit these brides in Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> Women usually come to Singapore with a 30-day Social Visit Pass to meet the groom. Their stay is entirely controlled by the matchmaker who prevents them from entering into prostitution there. Findings from the investigations show that the two worlds – that of marriage migration arranged by professional matchmaking agencies, and that of migration for commercial sex purposes organized by migration brokers and peer networks – are seemingly autonomous. The entertainers of the study were indeed vaguely aware that Vietnamese matchmaking agencies were operating in the Golden Mile, but none were connected to that circle.

By contrast, it is more common for Vietnamese migrant entertainers to try to marry one of their regular clients or lovers. In general, the interlocutors described a variety of relationships in which men pay a lump sum in exchange for sexual and emotional availability. Some of these men require only discreet sexual availability. Others develop feelings for their mistress without marrying them. Others fall in love and marry them, sometimes after a pregnancy occurs. Many entertainers sought this type of relationship, which usually lasted a few weeks or months and provided a stable income and therefore a temporary cessation of prostitution. The terms "prostitution" and "marriage" are inadequate to describe the variety of relationships observed in the field. Paola Tabet (2005) argues that the uncertainty of researchers in trying to classify these types of relationships produced a proliferation of imperfect definitions to accurately describe the realities observed in the field: "prostitution that is not entirely commercial," "affairs with lovers that are not entirely commercial or sentimental," and "prostitution with marital aspects" (Tabet, 2005: 17). I will limit myself here to describing the strategies that some entertainers apply with their regular clients or lovers to marry quickly, in order to obtain a Long-Term Visit Pass and to continue to engage in prostitution without having to continually renew their passes and pay fees to migration brokers and local sponsors.

I observed three mixed Singaporean and Vietnamese couples that rented rooms in the boarding house, each for a month. In all three cases, the Vietnamese women were migrant entertainers who continued to sell sex services when they had a stable partner.

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<sup>41</sup> See Mirabelle Ang's entertaining documentary film *Match Made* (<http://mirabelleang.com/works.html>, <http://www.cultureunplugged.com/play/5413/Match-Made>, accessed 15 July 2011) about the brokered marriage industry between Vietnam and Singapore.

In the first case, the entertainer, a former procurer and broker, had worked in several countries and often returned to Vietnam to visit her child. Marriage in Singapore was not a major issue for her, particularly as her partner occasionally visited her in HCMC.

The second couple was discreet and rarely engaged in conversation with the housemates, including my research assistant and me.

The third couple was the most interesting. Nhi (the entertainer who traveled to Thailand to renew her stay in Singapore and who considered applying for the Performing Artist Working Permit) is an experienced entertainer who has considerable skill in wrapping men around her finger. Her boyfriend Joseph, in his twenties, was of Singaporean origin. The couple lived together for a month in the room next to mine before they broke up. The success of these relationships, in which women are usually more in need of cash and help to extend their stay than the man, depends on personal considerations, but also on the experience of the partners. They also depend on the skill with which the entertainer manages the relationship. Some women are discrete and make efforts to learn English and Mandarin, and build the relationship with patience and strategy. Others get pregnant to secure the relationship. But other women like Nhi are impatient and clumsy which precipitates separation. The excerpt below from two conversations between Nhi and Joseph over a week illustrates the act performed by some entertainers to apply pressure and use emotional blackmail and lies to obtain money and marriage. For instance, Nhi constantly told Joseph that she was “forced” to work to support her family and her seven-year-old son, to ensure his financial support. In reality she already supported herself very comfortably through her earnings at Orchard Towers, to the point that she even lost her S\$ 4000 (US\$ 3264) of savings at the casino in one night. This kind of staging leads to the common assumption by many Singaporean clients that Vietnamese entertainers are untrustworthy and thieves. The following excerpt from two separate discussions also illustrates the naiveté of some Singaporean clients in need of affection and care, and who are apparently inexperienced with entertainers who manipulate them.

**Nhi:** I want to get married to you so that I can stay in Singapore for a long time. You can rent a house and I will take care of it. I will stay at home and I will not go to work anymore [to Orchard Towers].

**Joseph:** We have just met for a week. We need to get to know each other more before we can go further in the relationship.

**Nhi:** If you do not want me to go to work, you must do otherwise, or else how can I make money for my family?

**Joseph:** I understand that you have to support your family. But we need some time to understand each other before we talk about marriage.

**Nhi:** I love you too, so I want to stay at home and not go to work anymore, but I need to have something else to make money.

**Joseph:** Marriage is very important. I do not want to do that in a rush because if there is something wrong, we will regret it.

[one week later]

**Nhi:** If you do not marry me in two months, we will break up because my parents asked me to go home to get married. I am old now. Do not you see that I am good enough for you?

**Joseph:** Marriage is not an easy feat. What do we know about each other after less than two weeks? Financially, I am not stable yet. We have not met each other's parents. I hope you understand. In my opinion, getting married is not just to get a marriage certificate. Marriage is a lifetime commitment, involving many factors, some of which I mentioned already.

**Joseph:** For your information, my father died in June this year. Basically, I am the sole breadwinner in the family. That is why I do two jobs to make ends meet.

**Nhi:** I understand all of the things you said. But I cannot wait anymore because my parents want me to get married. If you love me truly, in two months, you come with me to Vietnam to meet my parents and we will get married. Then we will do together all of things that you are concerned about.

**Joseph:** Did I not tell you that I would ask for annual leave to come with you to Vietnam?

Fig. 27: Excerpts from two discussions between Nhi and Joseph.

In these relations commonly marked by volatility, each partner often has conflicting goals and timelines. The women are in an economically and administratively precarious situation, while the men are usually seeking sex, affection, companionship or even the possibility of marriage. The course of both of their lives is also different, and together these factors can produce palpable tension that may ultimately break the relationship, as in the case of Joseph and Nhi. On one hand, Joseph naively believed in the viability of a relationship with an entertainer he had just met, and who continued to ask for money and services, even proposing to begin legal marriage procedures. On the other hand, Nhi tried her luck with a man she handled with ease and with whom she had nothing to lose. Guided by assumptions about foreign countries, Vietnamese and foreign men including Northeast Asians and Singaporeans, wages and currency values, Nhi stated her goals clearly: 1) to earn as much money as possible, 2) to expand relationships with lovers to increase revenue, and 3) to marry to gain residency status in Singapore, a nationality that will allow easy travel throughout the world, she thought. These goals and calculations are highly pragmatic. For her, men are not an end in themselves, but rather the means to achieve personal goals, including financial security and freedom to travel across countries. Below are her assumptions about foreigners, citizenship and currency values.

“If you get married to a foreigner, your husband must be rich of course. Is there any foreigner who makes US\$ 5-10 000? No, they make at least US\$ 20 000 per month. You see? That is what girls dream about. Me too, I also dream of that. They like to marry men from Korea, Taiwan, Singapore... any foreigner as long as he is not Vietnamese, because it is very difficult to go to other countries with Vietnamese citizenship. Vietnam is not good. Vietnamese husbands are not good.

Here in Singapore, S\$ 1000 is S\$ 1000, right [US\$ 816]? In Vietnam, VND 1000 is also 1000, but VND 1000 [US\$ 0,05] is less than S\$ 0,50 cents.”

Another case study usefully illustrated the strategy of marrying a local to secure one's stay in Singapore. Ha, 36, was from HCMC. She was the oldest of five sisters. Her two youngest sisters were not married, and the other two married in Taiwan in 2000, and consequently supported their parents. Ha married a motorbike taxi driver at the age of 19. She has two daughters aged 15 and 17. She came to Singapore in 2006 after separating from her husband. They did not divorce, as they did not officially register their marriage. Her older daughter lived

with her mother, and the younger lived with her ex-husband in his parents' home. She regularly sent money to Vietnam for her children through her ex-husband.

Ha's case demonstrated the different types of relationships many entertainers from the sample engage in with men. Ha first married and divorced a Vietnamese man, then became an entertainer in Singapore, then she engaged in courtships with Singaporean men who paid her monthly allowances of up to S\$ 1500 (US\$ 1224). Then she married a Singaporean man with the goal of securing long-term stay in Singapore and obtaining permanent residence. At the same time, she maintained a relationship with a lover in Singapore who financially supported her and contributed to her savings. This is how she presented her story:

"I met my husband in a bar too. He told me that I looked like his former wife. He was divorced and had two sons. I went to the hotel with him. The first time he paid me S\$ 200 [US\$ 163]. At first, I did not dare to go with him because he looked like a policeman. But actually he was not. We talked to each other about our families. He is 35 years old, tall and handsome. We were friends for some time and he expressed feelings for me.

He became a boyfriend [different from a "lover who pays" as she implied] because he did not have money. I also did not need his money at that time. He proposed the relationship to me. He asked me to move in with him.

I decided to marry him because I wanted to be a permanent resident of Singapore. I did not love him yet. I was tired of traveling back and forth to Vietnam. It was not the first time I seriously committed to a man. I only cared about getting papers to stay and work here. I knew that he would never try to control me. Although I married him, I was sure I could still work. If I had thought that he wanted to control me, then I would not have married him.

He did not give me money at all. At that time I had my own savings of more than S\$ 10 000 [US\$ 8160]. I wanted to save to stop working. My husband is a car dealer and his monthly salary is S\$ 500 [US\$ 408] plus commissions. Before he married me, he had an affair with a girl. But he finally chose me.

I have been married here in Singapore for ten months now. In addition to my husband, I also have a lover who gives me money. I told my lover that I am married, but just for the papers."

### **Accumulating techniques to stay in Singapore**

Entertainers act differently in relation to renewing or extending their stay in Singapore. The final decision depends on their motivations, financial resources and availability of migration (and labor) brokers, and local sponsors. Those who do not earn much money or do not like Singapore, or those who came with a specific goal such as saving a certain amount of money, do not usually extend their stay. They prefer to return to Vietnam and make a return trip to Singapore after several months, so as not to raise the suspicions of the ICA officials. Those renewing their stay often have solid reasons to do so: urgent need for money like Lan (loan repayment), high earnings such as Nhi, or a serious relationship with a lover or regular customer. Only two entertainers from the 11 sampled in the boarding house tried to extend their stay, and only one, Nhi, employed various techniques to stay for several months in Singapore.

- She originally entered Singapore on a 30-day Social Visit Pass.
- She considered applying for the Performing Artist Working Pass with the help of a broker and the boarding house manager, but eventually abandoned the project.
- She renewed her 30-day Social Visit Pass in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, with a local sponsor.
- She began a relationship with a Singaporean citizen, Joseph, and tried to convince him to marry her. The relationship ended after a month.

- She renewed her 30-day Social Visit Pass for a second time following a one-week cruise in Thailand.<sup>42</sup>
- At the conclusion of the fieldwork, she was planning to return to Vietnam, and then travel to Malaysia where she would take a tourist bus to Singapore from Kuala Lumpur.

### 3.3 Raids and expulsion from Singapore

#### AVEU raids and law enforcement

As mentioned above, the AVEU enforces Article 19 on Soliciting in public spaces of the Miscellaneous Offences Act (Public order and nuisance), Article 8 on Prohibited immigrants of the Immigration Act, and Article 31 (Removal of prohibited immigrants from Singapore) of the Immigration Act. The AVEU relies on raids that are conducted in and outside the DRAs, and on deportations as key mechanisms to control foreign prostitutes in Singapore. Red light areas like Geylang, Joo Chiat and Orchard Towers are regularly raided, and the migrant entertainers working in the unlicensed jurisdictions in the DRAs and outside the DRAs, are regularly deported. The boarding house manager observed that there is a contradiction in the way that these raids are carried out. In her opinion, the police should operate in hotels and venues where sexual services are provided, and not in public areas such as pubs where it is impossible to prove that an entertainer is persistently soliciting. She is unaware of the underlying purpose of these raids, which is to make sure that prostitution does not appear to be too obvious in public, rather than actually proving that the entertainers are soliciting.

The intensity and regularity of these raids depends on factors that could not be identified during the fieldwork. During the investigation period, it was noted that raids were more frequent during major international events, for example the Youth Olympic Games and the Formula 1 Singapore Grand Prix that were held in September 2010, or following the publication of the Trafficking in Persons Report by the United States Department of State, which put Singapore in the Tier 2-watch in June 2010, and Tier 2 in June 2011.<sup>43</sup>

The raid procedure is always the same. AVEU vans arrive suddenly in the red light district, sometimes accompanied by officials from the Central Narcotics Bureau and the ICA. The targeted area is contained quickly to prevent entertainers from escaping. All the women on site suspected of prostitution are arrested and tied together in pairs at the wrists using plastic ties. They are then herded into vans and taken to the police station where officials examine their passports, including the validity of their 30-day Social Visit Pass. Sometimes the police take fingerprints and pose questions about their place of residence and their pimps. Entertainers usually spend the night in a cell before being released the following morning without their passport. In exchange, the AVEU officials give a notice and explain to them that they are required to leave Singapore. They must purchase an air ticket at their own expense. Once the ticket has been obtained and presented to the AVEU officials, the police send the entertainer's passports to the immigration department at the airport on the day of their departure. This is the

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<sup>42</sup> Upon her return to Singapore, she showed her Marina Bay casino membership card because she believed it would substantiate her alleged status as a legitimate tourist in Singapore who was coming for gambling purposes.

<sup>43</sup> See for instance "Vietnamese Women Busted in the Buff in Singapore", *The New Paper*, 26 June 2011; "Biggest Vice Raid So Far", *news.insing.com*, 3 July 2011; "Joo Chiat Hookers Caught Without Underwear", *Shin Min Daily News*, 26 June 2011; "Vietnamese Hostesses Arrested by Police", *Lianhe Wanbao*, 23 June 2011. All three papers are available here: <http://forums.vr-zone.com/chit-chatting/1469282-police-arrested-144-prostitutes-gangsters-singapore-biggest-vice-raid-so-far.html> (accessed 15 July 2011).

normal procedure for the deportation of foreign entertainers arrested under the charge of public soliciting.

The stay in Singapore for the unlucky Vietnamese entertainers who are arrested ends here, unless they decide to continue working for a few days or weeks without passport, which puts them at risk of further legal action by the AVEU and ICA if discovered. Migrant entertainers who are deported are prohibited from entering Singapore for the next six months, according to the informants (this information could not be verified, and the actual duration could be longer). Only those who specifically violate immigration law, by overstaying their 30-day Social Visit Pass, face criminal charges and prison. During the investigation, two entertainers from the boarding house were arrested during a raid which took place one evening in front of the house. Scores of AVEU officials, most of whom were dressed in civilian clothing, suddenly arrived in six vans and arrested around twenty Vietnamese entertainers in two adjacent pubs. The two entertainers returned to the boarding house early the following morning. One of them immediately purchased a ticket to Vietnam through the boarding house manager. She immediately reported her return date to the police and left the next day. The second continued prostitution work for a week in the same red light district in which she was arrested, before eventually returning to Vietnam.

Entertainers emphasized several important points about raids. First, the AVEU officials treat them professionally and do not beat them. Second, officials will sometimes ask questions about their place of residence and about their pimps and procurers, and as interviewees are always careful to say little so as not to admit anything, the officials will not insist or try to force them for information. Third, the women insisted that it is impossible to bribe the AVEU officials in Singapore, unlike according to them, the police in other countries like Malaysia. One of the entertainers reported that the price of bail in Malaysia was US\$ 1000, a sum that is often sponsored by the pimp and becomes a debt.

### **Fear of being arrested: a reclusive life**

Entertainers were generally unfamiliar with Singapore's immigration and prostitution legislation, having an entirely practical knowledge about it. Specifically, they were limited to implementing a set of methods, transmitted by the migration brokers, boarding house managers and experienced peers, to help them slip through the net. That said, potential AVEU repression and the fear of being publicly arrested like common criminals were sources of anxiety and fear for the majority of Vietnamese migrant entertainers during of their stay in Singapore. This fundamentally affected their social lives. Many of the women were frightened of going out in public because they feared being arrested. They constantly evaded police officials and would never interact with them even when they were in need. They were also afraid to talk to unknown customers whom they suspected of being plainclothes policemen trying to entrap them, and to work in venues that were unfamiliar or had recently been raided. Linh, a 15-year-old entertainer (see annexes), was terrified each time she saw a police official, either on foot or in a patrol car, even from afar. One evening at a restaurant, she saw a police car that had stopped in front of the food court where she was eating dinner. She panicked: "Over there, look at the police... God, they have stopped. I'm running to the toilet right now." The car suddenly disappeared, and she thought she had just avoided arrest and deportation. She added, "I like it better in Vietnam. I do not have to be scared of everything. Here, I am scared of the police. I am scared of the police even when I walk along the street." Another entertainer from the house summarized this phobia:

"When I go out, I am always scared of the police. Although I carry my passport, I am always scared that the police will catch me and put me in a van. Everybody in the street would look at me, and this would be very embarrassing. It is boring to stay at home all of the time. But if I go out and something bad happens, no one would help me."



The fear of arrest was the chief reason for the Vietnamese entertainers of the study living reclusively in Singapore. Indeed, they rarely left their homes before and after their work shift. They hid and lived quietly, relying on the boarding house manager to take care of food and miscellaneous necessities. They seldom ventured downtown, to the tourist sites or shopping malls, not only because of the fear of police, but also because they did not know how to use public transportation and always traveled in taxis, thus increasing costs. They did not speak to Singaporeans except for their customers in bars, and they did not create social ties outside the red light district, except relationships with a few regular customers who rarely took them out of these areas.

## 4 CONCLUSION

This research report fills a gap in our current inexistent knowledge about Vietnamese migration for commercial sex purposes to Singapore. The study promotes an original empirical approach, as it is based on a five-month ethnographic investigation conducted in a Vietnamese migrant entertainers' boarding house in Singapore. This fieldwork produced a vast amount of data that captured their daily experiences and concerns, which are presented from the entertainer's perspective. More importantly, this report has provided a unique picture of the social organization of the migration network of Vietnamese migrant entertainers. It also describes the transient life of these entertainers and the sense of isolation that they felt in Singapore.

The influx of migrant entertainers increased in Singapore in the early 1980s. The regional exchange network now includes women originating from all of the South and Southeast Asian countries. This includes Vietnamese, who appear to be a minority compared to other nationalities such as Filipina, Indonesian, Mainland Chinese and Thai. Singaporean authorities are undoubtedly concerned about the changing composition of the foreign entertainer population, and this is a sensitive issue Singapore. At the same time, the authorities are concerned about enforcing the law on prostitution. The legislation does not criminalize the act per se. Rather, it enforces neutralization and containment in the DRAs, as well as the monitoring of the sex industry to keep exploitation and the spread of STDs (including HIV) in check. Although the legislation on immigration and prostitution is rigorously enforced at the border checkpoints and in the red light areas (designated and undesignated), foreign entertainers continue arriving in Singapore and slipping through ICA and AVEU's net. This foreign influx is tolerated as the general consensus is that entertainers act as "safety valves" who fulfill the needs of men, who are believed to be unable to control their sexual urges.

The recruitment process of Vietnamese migrant entertainers reveals a complex network of exchange that links the operators within Singapore with the migrant entertainers in Vietnam. This informal and clientelist network is composed of migration brokers and their long-standing customers who introduce and assist new customers in the transnational movement across Vietnam and Singapore. The brokers are able to expand their customer base by incorporating the networks of their previous customers, who in turn become peers of the new recruits. The network appears to be a well-organized and non-exploitative voluntary exchange system. It functions effectively because of the symbiotic relationship between the migration brokers and their customers, the migrant entertainers.

One of the key findings of this research is that trafficking for sexual exploitation of Vietnamese women and minors to Singapore is anecdotal. Among the 16 migrant entertainers of the study, only one (Tuyêt, see annexes) claimed to have been deceived and sexually exploited in Singapore in the past. A second (Linh, see annexes), aged 15, who claimed to have come to Singapore voluntarily, was disillusioned by the work and overwhelmed by the constant fear of being arrested. The other 14 Vietnamese entertainers reported that they had come to Singapore voluntarily with the help of a migration broker or peer, and that they had consented to working in the prostitution sector of Singapore. The package price charged by the migration broker was typically repaid within a few days, as were the loans provided for the "show money." These advances and fees did not create situations of debt-bondage leading to vulnerability and exploitation.

The expectation of high earnings was the chief pull factor due to the general assumption that Singapore is an “El Dorado” where migrant entertainers can generate earnings of at least S\$ 1000 (US\$ 816) per month. This was a misconception on their part as many returned to Vietnam with little money or empty-pockets. Informants reported that the income generated in Singapore supported a range of priorities such as repaying parental or personal loans in Vietnam, gifts to parents and relatives, and savings to invest in a small business venture in Vietnam. A substantial part of the earnings – between US\$ 937 and US\$ 1365 – was also used to cover travel and living expenses.

As described in the report, three factors created transience in the life of the entertainers.

Firstly, all of them entered Singapore on 30-day Social Visit Passes. This scheme does not allow foreign visitors to engage in any form of employment, including prostitution. ICA officials routinely refuse entry and expel Vietnamese female travelers suspected of coming to Singapore to work in the prostitution industry. Migrant entertainers typically rely on professional migration brokers who provide services to enable their customers to slip through the ICA’s net.

After the expiry of their 30-day Social Visit Pass, the Vietnamese entertainers of the study faced two options: they could either return to Vietnam or extend their stay in Singapore. The majority sought to avoid raising suspicion with ICA officials and returned home for a few weeks or months, before coming back to Singapore. Those wishing to extend their stay had several methods at their disposal: extending the social visit pass, exiting and returning to Singapore to obtain a new 30-day Social Visit Pass, acquiring a Performing Artist Work Permit, or getting genuinely or fraudulently married to a Singaporean man.

The AVEU relies on raids and on deportations as key mechanisms to control foreign prostitution in Singapore. Red light areas like Geylang, Joo Chiat and Orchard Towers are regularly raided, and arrested entertainers are deported to their home country at their own expense.

As a consequence of these three factors, the Vietnamese migrant entertainers of the study were constantly straddling Singapore and Vietnam. They were only allowed to stay in Singapore for 30 days at any one time and upon the expiry of the pass, they would return to Vietnam, with the intention of returning at another time. Consequently, while living in Singapore, they were either looking for ways to extend their stay, or thinking about their return to Vietnam. This was pervasive: upon arrival, they were already thinking about the return trip, and vice-versa. They lived lives of transience and evanescence. In fact, even when they were physically in one space, they were mentally in the other. In their own words, they perpetually lived with a “foot in Singapore and a foot in Vietnam”.

# 5

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# 6 ANNEXES

## 6.1 Two cases studies of Vietnamese migrant entertainers in Singapore

### Case of minor prostitution and disillusion (Linh)

Linh was born in 1995. She is from Bac Liêu province in southern Vietnam. She dropped out of middle school at the age of 12. Her father had two sons and two daughters with his first wife. Her mother, 46, also had two sons and two daughters with her first husband. Linh's parents had her and a son, who was arrested for drug use and delinquency. Both parents were addicted to gambling and heavily indebted.

Talking about her migration experience, Linh told her friends that she was going to HCMC, when she actually intended to go to Singapore. "Everybody would be amazed to know that I went [to Singapore] to work as a prostitute," she said. Her mother helped Linh to obtain a passport, and knew that she went to Singapore but she knew nothing about her daughter's occupation. Her father thought she went to HCMC to learn hairdressing. Several factors pushed Linh to migrate to Singapore. Firstly, she wanted to earn money independently. Secondly, she did not want to learn hairdressing in Vietnam, but instead wanted to explore modern countries like Singapore. Thirdly, she wanted to sell sex services in a place where nobody could recognize her. Although she thinks that prostitution is a "social evil" (her words) and hence a "bad thing" (her words) as condemned by the Vietnamese government, to her it is an acceptable choice from an economic standpoint. Her initial plan was to return to Vietnam with at least S\$ 1000 (US\$ 816) to repay the travel loan, to support her parents, and to cover her expenses and possibly open a small business. Working in the Singapore sex sector was, for her, a temporary activity that would allow her to generate substantial income in a short period of time.

Linh's stepsister suggested they go to Singapore together with a friend from HCMC. A childhood friend from the province lent her money for transportation and "show money" for Singaporean immigration. The three girls left together and in Singapore the friend and Linh were granted a 30-day Social Visit Pass, but the stepsister was rejected and returned to Vietnam. Luckily, the friend had the contact details of the boarding house manager, and they eventually ended up staying in the boarding house.

Linh did not enjoy working in Singapore. In the first few days she slept with a client who did not want to pay her. She threatened him by arguing that she was underage and she would report sexual assault to the police. Although she did eventually get paid, she kept fearing that this situation might happen again in the future. She also realized that she did not like commercial sex. She often felt sad when sleeping with clients, to the point that she cried. This is why she would always try to finish the service quickly so as to grab the money and run away. She also complained about her poor English skills which considerably affected her ability to recruit clients. Most of the time, she could only sit, eat and drink with men without being able to communicate. She served an exclusively Asian clientele, mostly Singaporean, preferably "young" and "quick" rather than "old" and "slow" men (her words). She avoided Westerners because she thought their penises are excessively "big" and "hurtful" (her words). She always used condoms and charged S\$ 100-200 (US\$ 81-163) for a short service. She always refused overnight shifts. She believed that clients disliked her because she did not let them kiss her or touch her body, especially when the clients were making the decision to buy her services. Also, she never tried to please them to secure their loyalty. Rather, she often looked sad, as this is how she felt according to her, hence repelling the men even more.

Sadness and disappointment marked her experience in Singapore. Although she admitted to having slept with men for money twice in Vietnam prior to her first migration experience, she thought that life in Singapore would be easy and pleasant, as described by her stepsister and the friend. She added that, “as soon as I came here, I realized that life would not be what I initially thought in Vietnam. Things are complicated here.”

Firstly, she was told that she would simply escort clients at the bar for tips without having to provide sexual services. However, she quickly realized that she would earn very little by only doing that. Her stepsister and the friend also did not warn her about the consequences of language limitations – she spoke no English at all – in terms of client recruitment. They did not tell her the serious risks she would endure by being an underage entertainer, an offence that is punished severely in Singapore. “Before coming here, I did not think about the risks that I might have to face. No one told me about that. I did not think that deep,” she said.

Secondly, she was disoriented after her stepsister was rejected at Changi airport. Unexpectedly, she found herself alone and without the precious support of an elder relative. She missed her constantly during her stay in Singapore, as well as her parents, friends, and boyfriend. She fully relied on the peers from the boarding house who guided her in the prostitution business during the first weeks.

Thirdly, she expected Singapore to be a “beautiful city” (her words) which she could enjoy during her free time, but she was again disenchanted because not only did the city “very much resemble HCMC, with the main difference that streets are cleaner here,” but also because she never went beyond the red light district due to fears of becoming lost and possibly arrested.

In fact, her main fear was her age. Linh could easily manage suspicious clients by lying about her age – if questioned, she would always reply she was over 18 – but dealing with random police identity checks in the red light district was a different story. In addition, the boarding house manager and the other roommates were constantly afraid to lodge and help a minor, as they could have been accused of complicity in minor prostitution. As a consequence, Linh became perpetually anxious and paranoid. She would frequently suspect potential clients of being plainclothes policemen when they enquired about her, therefore exacerbating her recruitment problems. She often ate large quantities of candies and chocolate to relieve sadness and anxiety.

This case cannot be considered human trafficking, although there is a component of deception as Linh’s stepsister and the friend hid critical information from her that might have changed her decision to come to Singapore. From a legal perspective, she cannot be considered a trafficking victim because she was not coerced into prostitution, and also because the motivation of her stepsister and friend was not to profit from her. If she were arrested, almost certainly she would not press charges against them. According to Singaporean Law, Linh contravene the Article 19 of the Miscellaneous Offences Act, and the Article 8 on Prohibited Immigrants. But her male clients were also committing an offence because of her underage status, according to the Article 376a (Sexual penetration of minor under 16) of the Penal code.<sup>44</sup> From her perspective, she does not consider herself a trafficking victim although she complains about her

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<sup>44</sup> The article states that: “Any person (A) who: (a) penetrates, with A’s penis, the vagina, anus or mouth, as the case may be, of a person under 16 years of age (B); (b) sexually penetrates, with a part of A’s body (other than A’s penis) or anything else, the vagina or anus, as the case may be, of a person under 16 years of age (B); (c) causes a man under 16 years of age (B) to penetrate, with B’s penis, the vagina, anus or mouth, as the case may be, of another person including A; or (d) causes a person under 16 years of age (B) to sexually penetrate, with a part of B’s body (other than B’s penis) or anything else, the vagina or anus, as the case may be, of any person including A or B, with or without B’s consent, shall be guilty of an offence. (2) Subject to subsection (3), a person who is guilty of an offence under this section shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to ten years, or with fine, or with both.” ([http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non\\_version/cgi-bin/cgi\\_retrieve.pl?actno=REVED-224](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?actno=REVED-224), accessed 1 September 2011).



stepsister and friend. To her, only women who have been pushed or forced by their parents into prostitution, and those exploited by pimps and migration brokers can be considered “victims” (her words).

### **Case of deception and debt-bondage (Tuyết)**

Tuyết was born in 1984. She is from Long An, an industrial province located in the suburbs of HCMC. Suffering domestic violence, her mother left her father and moved to HCMC with her. When her mother died Tuyết was sent to live with her uncle, who in turn sent her to an orphanage at the age of 12. Tuyết then started to live on the streets. She generated income by selling chewing gum and cigarettes or by doing small jobs like cleaning. At 15, she had a child with a drug dealer who disappeared from her life after he was arrested. She explained that at that time, she was so poor that she escaped from the hospital where she had just delivered her baby without paying the bill. Tuyết had managed to learn some English while living on the streets, which led to her starting a relationship with a British man who taught foreign languages in HCMC. Despite complaining that this man earned little money and was always drunk, they lived together for four years and she traveled twice with him to the United Kingdom. She fell pregnant during the second trip, but lost her baby one night when they both fell off a bicycle.

At that time, Tuyết was 22. She was left to care for her eight-year-old child on her own, and she had no resources and nobody to take care of her. Then a woman approached her and offered a job opportunity in Singapore. She promised a well-paid job in a restaurant in which she could earn US\$ 2000 a month. The woman did not mention prostitution. Tuyết saw this as a great opportunity to earn big money. The woman charged Tuyết US\$ 2000; a sum that immediately became her debt. This cost allegedly covered Tuyết's flight as well as a new passport, as her existing passport held two visas for the United Kingdom, which, according to the woman, could have caused problems at Singaporean immigration. The broker accompanied Tuyết to the HCMC airport, and left her alone with the ticket and US\$ 600 to show to Singaporean immigration. The woman explained that somebody would pick her up in Singapore. For her first trip, Tuyết was given a 30-day Social Visit Pass.

Tuyết said she knew she had been deceived as soon as she arrived in Singapore. A Singaporean pimp and his Vietnamese wife were waiting for her at the exit gate. The job in the restaurant was never mentioned to her. Instead, she was asked to apply makeup and dress nicely to start work immediately in a bar in a red light district. The Vietnamese woman kept her passport during the day but gave it back to her during working hours in case the police sought to check her identity. The couple covered food, accommodation, transportation to the bar and one drink, but took all of her earnings, supposedly to repay the US\$ 2000 debt and expenses. At that time, Tuyết charged US\$ 120-160 for a quick service and US\$ 240-320 for an overnight shift. She explained that she was extremely sad and she cried often because she missed her child. She repaid her debt in a month and returned to HCMC.

This was Tuyết's first trip to Singapore. In fact, it was the first in a series of many trips over the next five years. Although undeniably tragic, this bad experience propelled Tuyết into a life of transnational mobility and prostitution in Singapore that she would never have thought she would become involved in. Although exploitative, this experience gave Tuyết the knowledge and skills necessary to independently arrange her own trips and employment in the Singapore entertainment sector for the next five years.

## 6.2 Aid organizations addressing labor migration and prostitution in Singapore

I met with representatives of the following projects and organizations addressing the issues faced by low-wage migrants and entertainers in Singapore:

- **Geylang Bless God Mission**: Christians of different denominations gather in a center located at the heart of Geylang (*lorong* 1). Every Wednesday, the believers conduct a group prayer meeting and spend the night befriending streetwalkers, their pimps and the customers who frequent the brothels and places of entertainment. Through food and gift distribution, they provide a presence and they develop trust with the women. They invite them to English classes and to consider alternative lifestyles.
- **Project X**: Project X is a social awareness project on the issue of prostitution undertaken by the Student Christian Movement of Singapore. It aims to reach the entertainers working in Geylang to provide them with social and health outreach assistance. The volunteers of Project X walk around the red light district and distribute essentials such as biscuits, drinks and condoms to the women, as well as medical subsidies to those in need. One of the goals is to understand the realities of prostitution in Singapore and to reduce the stigma and discrimination that migrant entertainers face in Singapore.
- **Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI)**: Appointed by the Catholic Archbishop of Singapore, ACMI's objective is to give migrants a sense of belonging and security such as befriending, hospital visits, providing food and shelter, skills training, legal aid, information, and referrals. ACMI's beneficiaries are mostly foreign domestic workers, construction workers and migrant spouses, among them Vietnamese brides who attend weekly English classes.
- **Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME)**: This organization responds to the needs of migrant communities in Singapore. It is involved in case work and legal advocacy for foreign workers who are abused, exploited and denied their salaries. HOME facilitates the rescue of migrants who are in dire employment circumstances, and works with government agencies to support and enforce the law related to the employment of foreign nationals.

### 6.3 Press clip on Vietnamese prostitution in Singapore

**2 hot**

thesundaytimes October 17, 2010

# Joo Chiat facelift

## PROPERTY DEVELOPER

Company director Tan Chin Hoon, 67, knows Joo Chiat Road better than most. He spent more than half his life living there before moving out in 1980. Home then was a 2,400 sq ft single-storey bungalow. At one time, there were 20 people across four generations living under the same roof, including his four children.

The 10,110 sq ft property, which his father, Mr Tan Koh Beng, bought for \$60,000 in 1968, also housed a warehouse for his construction business and a carpentry workshop.

Mr Tan moved to Kenilworth when he wanted a home of his own. His five siblings also moved when they started their own families.

The bungalow became an office for the family-run business, Shining Development, a boutique property developer and construction firm. The company moved to Changi in 1999 because of a shortage of space and the house was left empty.

In 2001, Mr Tan decided to tear down his family home and redevelop the land. "It made more economic sense, even though it had sentimental value for me," he says.

In its place, he constructed a four-storey building called The Modules, a \$11-million development with 48 office and residential units. They were put on sale in 2006 and within 18 months, 70 per cent of the units were sold for an average price of \$950 psf. He kept the remaining units for investment and moved his office back here.

The units went on sale when Joo Chiat Road still had its sleazy reputation, but he was confident they would sell. A few bars surrounded the bungalow when it was still around.

Eldest son, Alex, 41, who is a director in the company, says: "Even when we were kids, we never thought the area was unsafe. The activities were contained within the pubs."

Today, there are a handful of bars near The Modules, but he says the residents are not bothered by them.

The younger Mr Tan is confident that with the opening of the former Katong Mall in the third quarter of next year, things in Joo Chiat Road will pick up. The mall is currently undergoing a \$60 million facelift and will have tenants such as Golden Village Multiplex, Market Place by Cold Storage and the BreadTalk Group.

"The pubs may find it hard to survive as Joo Chiat becomes a more upmarket area," he adds.



"The pubs may find it hard to survive as Joo Chiat becomes a more upmarket area."

MR ALEX TAN (right, with his father Tan Chin Hoon) at The Modules, which their company built on the site of their family bungalow

ST PHOTOS: KEVIN LIM

Fig. 28: Tay Suan Chiang, "Joo Chiat Facelift", *The Sunday Times (The Straits Times)*, 17 October 2010 (2 pages).



## Shops, restaurants and other businesses are moving into Joo Chiat Road now that the sleaze has been relatively cleaned up



Tay Suan Chiang

**T**ake a walk down Joo Chiat Road on a weekend afternoon and you are in for a surprise. The sleaze has got the squeeze.

Instead, you are likely to see families and young people out dining at the many food outlets. Eateries such as Teochew Traditional Seafood Steamboat and Yummy Claypot and bakery shops such as Gobi Cakes and Home's Favourites are recent additions to the 1.3km strip that was once a simmering hotpot of sex.

Apart from the eateries, it is also hard to miss the increasing number of interior design firms that have popped up. In the last year alone, lifestyle showrooms such as Summit Design Studio and Tree Affair Design & Build have opened there.

Welcome to the new Joo Chiat Road, where eateries and interior design firms have taken the place of pubs, massage parlours, karaoke lounges and hotels with rooms by the hour common six years ago.

"Joo Chiat Road is definitely more family-friendly now," says resident Molly Tan, a 39-year-old housewife.

Back in the bad old days, it was not uncommon to see scantily dressed women loitering along the five-foot ways soliciting male passers-by, car drivers cruising the road looking to pick up foreign women, brawls breaking out and patrons relieving themselves in the back lanes.

One resident who declined to be named says: "A few times, I looked out of my back-room window and saw couples having sex in the back lanes."

Another resident, Ms Alice Choo, 29, recalls the men hanging around the pubs "would mistake me for a streetwalker and ask me how much I charged".

Joo Chiat Road then was notorious for its sleazy reputation. It housed 44 pubs, 38 massage parlours and eight hotels in 2005.

Today, the situation has improved. There are now about 26 pubs, three massage parlours and six hotels. The number of women arrested for vice there has dropped from about 400 a year in 2007 to 40 last year.

The new Joo Chiat Road came about after residents, together with their Member of Parliament, Mr Chan Soo Sen, worked with the authorities to clean up the neighbourhood.

In 2004, residents banded together to form the Save Joo Chiat Working Group. Its spokesman is 61-year-old retiree Colin Chee, who spent his childhood years in the area and moved back to Joo Chiat in 2004, to "retire there".

But he was shocked to find the heritage area

known for its Peranakan and Eurasian cultures being overrun by sleaze.

He and 10 other residents formed the group, which now has a membership of about 200 residents.

Group members patrolled the area regularly, doing "intelligence gathering", he says.

This involved jotting down instances of fights, soliciting, littering, urinating, noise and drunkenness. "When we began, we held weekly meetings to consolidate all the observations," he adds.

Grassroots leaders in the Joo Chiat Community Safety and Security Programme also worked together with the group on ground visits and area patrols.

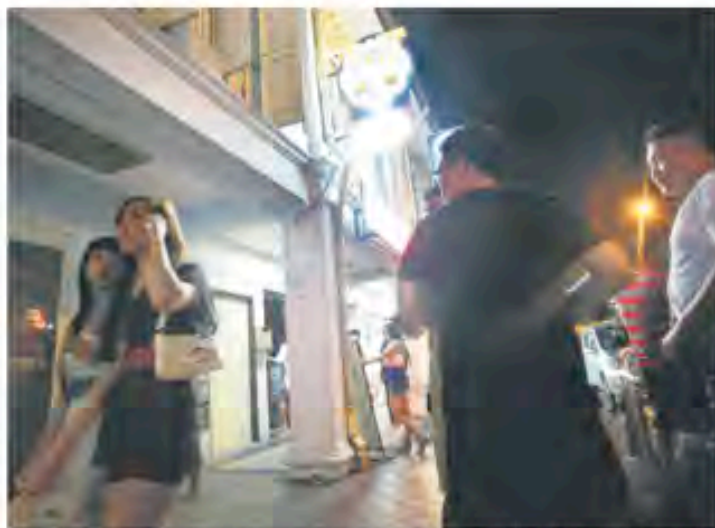
Their MP, Mr Chan, gave his residents his personal e-mail address so they could send their complaints directly to him.

Meetings are now held once a month to gather feedback from the residents and there are discussions with representatives from government agencies such as the police, Urban Redevelopment Authority, National Environment Agency and Land Transport Authority on what improvements can be made.

Such sessions have proven to be successful.

Several other measures have also played their part in this victory over vice.

Starting in 2005, Mr Chan received policy approval for a moratorium on new public entertainment licences in Joo Chiat Road. So, if a pub loses its licence after accumulating demerit points, such as for overcrowding and excessive noise, its licence is revoked.



There is still a 50m stretch between Joo Chiat Lane and Joo Chiat Place where men eyeball foreign girls who loiter and spill out from the bars.

"This mechanism leads to the reduction of public entertainment licences," he says.

And in 2008, he obtained policy approval for a ban on hourly rates for hotels operating in the Joo Chiat Road area. "Without hourly rates, Joo Chiat Road is certainly not a red-light area, as some have alleged," he adds.

Indeed, most of Joo Chiat Road has cleaned up, although there are still some pubs that dot the road. Occasionally, one or two scantily-clad girls stand outside the pubs and sometimes, off-key singing can be heard from inside.

But there remains a short stretch of Joo Chiat Road that is still distinctly sleazy. A 50m stretch between Joo Chiat Lane and Joo Chiat Place is where most of the "action" is.

**More stories >>5**