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### 'I'd do it for love or for money': Vietnamese women in Taiwan and the social construction of female migrant sexuality

Lan Anh Hoang<sup>a</sup> & Brenda S.A. Yeoh<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia

<sup>b</sup> Asia Research Institute and Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore

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## ‘I’d do it for love or for money’: Vietnamese women in Taiwan and the social construction of female migrant sexuality

Lan Anh Hoang<sup>a\*</sup> and Brenda S.A. Yeoh<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia; <sup>b</sup>Asia Research Institute and Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore

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Drawing on an ethnographic research in Vietnam and Taiwan, this article seeks to contribute to the global scholarship on migration and sexuality. It reveals interesting contradictions between the seemingly homogeneous stereotypes of Vietnamese women’s sexuality, on the one hand, and the multiplicity and fluidity of actual sexual practices in real-life contexts, on the other hand. First, the presence of a number of chaste migrant women in our study challenges the common stereotype of female migrants as hypersexual and promiscuous menaces on the loose. Second, we question the emphasis on women’s material greed and instrumentalism in normative discourses about Vietnamese women’s engagement in extramarital relationship. While for some women in our research, sexual liaisons outside marriage are indeed orchestrated for financial gains, for others, extramarital sex is principally sought as a form of self-actualisation or an exploration of sexual pleasure and freedom that is absent from their marriage. The article emphasises the highly contextual nature of sexual norms and practices as well as the intersectionality of race, class and gender in the social construction of female sexuality in the context of transnational labour migration.

**Keywords:** labour migrants; sexuality; women and gender; Vietnam; Taiwan

### Introduction

It was already midday in the scorching summer of 2012 when 35-year-old Nhật<sup>1</sup> saw us off at the gate of her textile factory in the western county of Miaoli, Taiwan. Casually dressed in a white T-shirt and worn-out jeans, Nhật looked tired, pale and extremely thin. We were barely able to make much headway during our one-hour conversation with Nhật within the confines of the 15-m<sup>2</sup> dormitory room she was sharing with seven other female migrant workers from Vietnam. Her roommates were bustling around in skimpy outfits getting ready for their Sunday dates and chit-chatting about their seemingly busy dating lives, while we sat and talked on the floor. The women with dyed hair, stylish clothing and heavy make-up looked completely different from Nhật, who stood out by the simple and casual way in which she was dressed, as well as her quiet and humble demeanour. Nhật appeared uncomfortable talking in the presence of her roommates and remained largely quiet throughout the conversation.

Nhật’s attitude, however, changed the moment we stepped outside the dormitory. The first words she uttered (followed by a deep sigh) were: ‘*Không ngờ sang đây nó lại loạn thế này!*’ (I didn’t think it would be such a mess before I came here!). She then grumbled about the ‘degrading and shameful life ... 98 per cent’ of her female compatriots who not

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\*Corresponding author. Email: [lahoang@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:lahoang@unimelb.edu.au)

only dated older Taiwanese men for money but also brokered sexual relationships for one another. Two options presented to them were either to be ‘*gái bao*’ (mistress) for a monthly allowance averaging NT\$10,000<sup>2</sup> or to do ‘*bóc bánh ăn tiền*’ (‘unwrap the cake and get paid’), meaning getting immediate payments of around NT\$1000 for casual sex with Taiwanese men. Nhật and her fellow workers did not get enough work from the factory to cover their living expenses and repay their migration debts and thus had to find extra sources of income during weekends. The only types of work available to them were farming or house cleaning, which did not appeal to some women. ‘Commercialised dating’ with local men emerged as a tempting alternative which was made easy by the prevailing assumption among many local Taiwanese men that poor migrant women were all ‘easy meat’. Nhật told us she was at the receiving end of ‘offers’ all the time when she worked outside the factory compound and that the Taiwanese men were very straightforward in their approach: ‘*Ngủ với tao tao cho 1000 tệ*’ (Sleep with me, I’ll give you NT\$1000).

Though struck afresh by the crude details of what appeared to be an established pricing system for intimate transactions between Vietnamese migrant workers and Taiwanese men, it was not the first time we heard about migrants’ infidelity. The stereotypes of female migrant workers as poor and desperate women who would do anything for money were woven into sensationalised media stories (see also Lan 2006), surfaced as implicit and explicit allusions during small talk with people at rail stations and marketplaces, prompted indecent propositions from men driving past us in the foreign workers’ enclaves behind Taoyuan rail station<sup>3</sup> and resulted in employment agencies imposing mobility restrictions on their workers to control the private lives of supposed ‘sexual menaces’ on the loose. These powerful discourses, however, do not necessarily reflect real-life circumstances of all migrant workers. It is our aim in this article to put discourses about migrant sexualities and actual sexual practices of migrant women in perspective. Using data collected from in-depth interviews with ‘left-behind’ husbands of migrant women in Vietnam and ethnographic research in Taiwan, we first examine the taken-for-granted relations between money and female sexuality in public discourses and then go further to explore the different choices Vietnamese migrant women make with regard to extramarital relationships as well as their social and economic underpinnings. In so doing, we seek to contribute to the growing scholarship on migration and sexuality, or more specifically, debates on love, sex and emotions at the intersection of mobility, gender, class and nationality.

### **Migrant women, sexuality and stereotypes**

That sexuality is historically, culturally and socially constructed has been supported by empirical studies in different contexts (Gammeltoft 1999; Ahmadi 2003; Hirsch 2003). Identical sexual acts convey different meanings and have varying significance in different cultures over time. More importantly, sexuality intertwines questions of power and identity, agency and structure (Foucault 1990; Giddens 1992). Through their (dis)engagement in sexual activities of different nature and varying intensity, individuals uphold, contest or acquiesce in certain power norms and social hierarchies. In so doing, they craft a sense of self and construct their own social positioning in relation to others. The body, as Merleau-Ponty (1995) argues, is the source of our practical engagement with the world and it is through our bodies that we become who we are. Sexuality is therefore both subjective and intersubjective, personal and relational (Parker 1991; Gammeltoft 2002b). Gammeltoft (2002b, 483) in her anthropological research in Vietnam, for example, notes that sexual encounters experienced by youths are not just about strivings

for intimacy and pleasure; they involve questions about the moral integrity of the self and the sociopolitical shaping of intimate relations within Vietnamese society.

While influences of social structures on sexual practices are significant, it is important to acknowledge individual capacity (of varying degree) for autonomous action in intimate relationships – people in similar cultural and socio-economic circumstances choose to act differently due to the variety of ways in which they make sense of the world. Sexual experiences are thus relational processes that are ‘fluid, nuanced, changing, contextual, and contested’ (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005, 4). Sexualities become even more complex when married women are concerned since their sexuality tends to be seen in many cultures as domains of restriction, repression and danger rather than matters of personal pleasure and agency (Vance 1984, 1). Married women in Third World contexts often find themselves exercising sexual agency within patriarchal social hierarchies that emphasise their dependence on and deference to men in every aspect of life. At lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder, sexuality could serve as a critical resource consolidating women’s social status and economic security (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005).

Affect and sexuality have been recognised as important dimensions of one’s migration experience, even when it appears to be economically driven (Mai and King 2009, 297). Empirical studies provide fascinating accounts of how men’s and women’s sexual lives are transformed, more often in an enabling than constraining way, by migration, largely due to the liberty and anonymity afforded to them at destinations (Cantu 2009; Chapman et al. 2009; Gaetano 2008). In some circumstances, migration is undertaken by both men and women in the pursuit of romantic love and sexual freedom (Liu-Farrer 2010; Shah 2006). In others, sexual and romantic relationships do not motivate migration in the first place but are deliberately sought during the course of migration as a strategy to cope with situations of social exclusion at the destination (Liu-Farrer 2010, 98). Working-class migrants’ lives are characterised by urban isolation and anonymity, racial discrimination, socio-economic marginalisation and gender inequality all of which contribute to shaping the ‘immigrant cultures of sexuality’ (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005, 21; Kitiarsa 2008) that are both responsive to and reflective of the cultures of sexuality of the host society.

There seems to be a consensus in the global scholarship that migrant women’s sexuality is devalued and marginalised yet often sought after (Constable 2007; Gonzalez-Lopez 2005; Lan 2006). These paradoxes appear to be grounded in racial and class divides between the relatively more privileged populations in the host society and foreign ‘others’ coming to the former’s country to do the work that they shun. Local women view migrant women with both contempt and fear as these inferior sexualised others are believed to prey on local men, posing a threat to ‘family happiness’ (Lan 2006, 64; Yeoh and Huang 2010, 38). Their fear is based on two myths. First, sexualised stereotypes about migrant women tend to associate their inferior social status and economic deprivation with instrumentalism in sexual activities. Second, Third World women are perceived as having untamed and unsophisticated sexual needs (Lan 2006) and migration would lead to the loosening of moral restraints and encourage their pursuit of sexual adventures. This reminds us of the discourses about the links between territorial uprootedness and an ailing cultural identity in anthropological scholarship (Malkki 1992; Marrus 1985). Because roots are viewed as fixed and territorialised, territorially ‘uprooted’ people are easily seen as ‘torn loose from their culture’ (Marrus 1985, 8).

Although there is some evidence of migrant women’s practical intents in their sexual liaisons (Faier 2007; Gonzalez-Lopez 2005), research also suggests that female migrants’ sexual activities are not always clear-cut economic transactions. Liu-Farrer (2010, 113), for example, found that extramarital relationships of Chinese migrants in Japan were often

a mixture of romance, sexual desire and practical resource exchanges. In migratory circumstances, not only men but also women play the role of patrons, subsidising their (usually younger) lovers with gifts and cash in exchange for romantic feelings and/or sexual favours. It is what Cantu (2009, 19) refers to as ‘a political economy of sexuality’ that blends together economic and affective ties within the interrelationships of larger political, economic and cultural structures. Yet, affective dimensions of migrant women’s sexualities tend to be less visible to host communities than economic elements, contributing to their stigmatisation as immoral and greedy sexual beings – something that many migrant women actively contest and seek to subvert.

### **Research methods**

This article draws on a qualitative study of Vietnamese transnational families. In 2011, we conducted in-depth interviews with 44 ‘left-behind’ husbands in Thai Binh Province, Vietnam, which were followed by fieldwork in Taiwan in June–July 2012 when we interviewed 30 Vietnamese migrant women. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese by the first author, a Vietnamese national sharing some demographic characteristics with her respondents such as age range, marital status and place of origin. Although this common background allowed her to quickly establish rapport with both male and female respondents, there was little doubt that the respondents were keenly aware of class differences between them and the researcher and might have provided accounts that they thought would suit the purposes of our encounters. This is an important fact that has been taken into account in the interpretation of data.

Aiming to engage as many married couples as possible in the study, we approached only men whose wives were working in Taiwan at the time of the fieldwork. Twenty-seven of the men provided us with their wives’ phone numbers. In Taiwan we managed to reach only 15 wives of the interviewed men and decided to expand the sample to include another 15 Vietnamese migrant women.

Reflective of national flows of transnational labour migration from Vietnam, the women in our study were all low-waged workers migrating through legal channels. All were married at the time of the fieldwork and aged from 30 to 51 years. Twenty-three women were domestic workers for private households, three care workers in nursing homes, two cooks in coffee shops, one factory worker and one worked on the farm owned by her new Taiwanese husband. Their migration duration ranged from 1 to 12 years and they were scattered all over Taiwan: 19 were living in Taipei and the adjacent New Taipei City, 2 in Taichung city and the rest in rural counties of Taoyuan, Hsinchu, Miao Li, Changhua, Nantou and Yunlin. The interviewed men lived in three communes<sup>4</sup> of Thai Binh Province (Table 1). Given that most of them did not have regular incomes of their own, remittances from migrant wives were thus the most important, if not the only, source of income for many families.

### **Marriage and sexuality in Vietnam**

Sexuality norms in Vietnamese society are blendings of Confucian values that emphasise women’s passivity and obedience to men, colonial era notions of equal rights and romantic love in marriage as well as socialist principles of gender equity. The Vietnamese gendered construction of sexuality exhibits double standards (Nguyen 2007, Rydstrom 2006). The notion of masculinity is associated with physicality, independence and sexual virility (Nguyen 2009) while sexual passivity, chastity and faithfulness are of paramount importance for women. The woman is expected to bed only one man in her life – her

Table 1. Socio-economic profile of the 'left-behind' husbands.

Employment	Unemployed	4	
	Employed with regular income	6	Construction contractor (1); factory worker (1); house painter (2); carpenter (2)
	Employed with irregular income	34	Farmers + odd jobs during slack seasons (15); construction workers (8); carpenters (5); traders (6)
Number of children	4 children	1	
	3 children	3	
	2 children	34	
	1 child	6	
Marital status	Married	42	
	Divorced	2	

lawfully wedded husband who fathers her children – and failing to do so would be detrimental to her marital happiness, social status and economic security.

Although research on urban sexualities in Vietnam (Gammeltoft 2002a; Nguyen 2007) suggests that a growing emphasis is placed by younger generations on romantic love and sexual passion as well as the woman's active sexual agency, female sexuality in rural areas continues to be seen primarily in terms of serving goals of reproduction and the fulfilment of wifely duties (Ghuman 2005; Phinney 2008; Rydstrom 2006). The reduction of female sexuality to the function of biological reproduction desexualises the female body and discourages a woman's expression of her sexuality in social spaces and places (Yurval-Davis 1997). The notion of 'companionate marriage' involving companionship and mutually pleasurable marital sexuality (Hirsch 2003, 178; Phinney 2008, 654) is absent from public discourses in Vietnam. Individualistic attitudes to love and sex are socially condemned in the countryside where pluralistic belief systems and social codes value the family and community over the individual (Wolf et al. 2010). Female marital infidelity is, therefore, intolerable. A woman's moral standing and social identity are contingent on her chastity while infidelity tends to have no repercussions on a man's morals and manhood as long as he fulfils his economic provider's role (Phinney 2008; Rydstrom 2006).

Confucian philosophy is strongly present in North Vietnamese moralities and social relations (Hickey 1964; Jamieson 1993). In Confucian worldview of social harmony, women are expected to submit to and depend on their husbands in social, economic and sexual aspects of life (Rydstrom 2004; Santillán et al. 2002). The pressure to 'please' one's husband (*chiêu chồng*) in both social and sexual terms is thus considerable, turning women's sexual activities into a duty rather than something they may initiate and enjoy (Gammeltoft 1999, 162). Women and men are seen to occupy unequal positions in heterosexual intercourse where women lose and men gain – a view that is best illustrated by phrases such as '*mất cái quý nhất của đời con gái*' (losing the most precious thing of a maiden's life), '*mất cái ngàn vàng*' (losing a thousand gold coins) or '*hiến dâng tất cả*' (dedicating everything) which are commonly used to describe the loss of a girl's virginity to a man. The reduction of female sexuality to reproduction and marriage duties as well as the denial of women's sexual agency, as we demonstrate in our study, structure female migrants' attitudes to extramarital affairs.

### Money and infidelity in sexual-affective economies of migration

The difficulties we had in tracking down migrant wives in Taiwan and convincing them to participate in our study partly denote the complexities, dilemmas and ambivalences

characterising migrant lives. They were foreshadowed during the Vietnam fieldwork six months earlier when a number of husbands we approached declined to be interviewed (which was, our key informants later explained, due to friction between the men and their migrant wives), and many interviewed husbands declined to give us their wives' contact details. Our fieldwork in Taiwan required even more perseverance: not only were the migrant women hard to reach, when contacted, many potential interviewees did not want to speak to us, or even when they had agreed to an interview, did not show up.

These different strategies of avoidance and aversion, as it turned out, were triggered by anxieties about female migrant sexuality that had become a subject of social stigma. While restrictive norms governing married women's sexuality in Vietnam discourage their physical mobility, the market economy puts extra pressure on the rural household economy and at the same time introduces unprecedented income-generating opportunities for rural women – overseas labour migration – against the realities of declining male employment. The participation of women in the cash economy is not new in rural Vietnam (Kabeer and Tran 2000), but female transnational migration stirs up a great deal of controversy and anxiety. It not only troubles the traditional gendered division of labour (i.e. male breadwinner and female homemaker) (cf. Hoang and Yeoh 2011) but also sparks concerns about the 'corruptive' effects of migration on women's morals. Men who let their wives migrate, as Hoang (2011, 1447) observes elsewhere in Northern Vietnam, tend to be seen (by their male peers) as 'losers'. Migrant infidelity is considered inevitable. This was illustrated by various sayings 'left-behind' husbands in our study alluded to, some of which came into existence in the 1980s when Vietnam first sent female labour overseas:<sup>5</sup>

'Có vợ mà cho đi Tây

Khác nào xe đạp để ngay Bờ hồ'

[Letting your wife migrate overseas is like leaving your bicycle by Bờ hồ]

Bờ hồ, the shores of the Sword Lake in Hanoi, was a beautiful tourist spot but also had the reputation of being a place frequented by delinquent youths who would pass up no opportunity to steal a bicycle, a valuable asset during the 1980s. More intriguing was Điệp's (38-year-old father of two) use of the metaphor '*điều cày Ủy ban*' (the People's Committee office's smoking pipe) to refer to a migrant woman. The tobacco smoking pipe is a ubiquitous object in rural contexts and since the People's Committee is central to the social and political life of rural communities, anyone would be able to have a go at the office's smoking pipe. In both metaphors, the woman is viewed as a passive asset which would remain a man's property only if she stays within the four walls of his house. In short, female transnational migration renders the man a 'loser' as it strips him of control over his wife's sexuality.

The supposed fragility of migrant women's sexual purity, we argue, rests on the social construction of female sexuality as passive and devoid of desire and pleasure in rural Vietnamese contexts. Because women are thought to derive no pleasure from sex, they are either viewed as the 'used' or 'exploited' party in heterosexual relationships (Gammeltoft 2002a, 491), or expected to be participants only in return for some form of compensation. A typical line of reasoning then would be that women would seek economic benefits to make up for the loss of reputation, honour and respect caused by their involvement in sexual activities. In the context where women's transnational labour migration is largely driven by economic needs, social expectations predict that they would find it difficult to resist the temptations of urban wealth, a point that was repeatedly made by male interviewees in our study:

Women could be easily dictated by money. With money you could be in command of women. They crack when they see money. Life is hard here ... then they go there ... life is good ...

they would crack if they are not tough ... It's difficult (to have an affair) at home ... but it's so easy over there ... so easy .... (Tùng, 45 years old, construction worker)

Forty-four-year-old electrician Hùng even went as far as to conclude, 'It's (female infidelity) all down to money ... 99 per cent of those women (having affairs) are driven by money.'

The connections between female infidelity and material greed also appear to influence the 'left-behind' husbands' sexual practices. In the prolonged absence of their wives, many men in our study chose to satisfy their sexual needs with commercial sex workers who only charged them for each episode of sexual intercourse. '*Cặp bồ*' (having an affair) was, on the contrary, a high-risk practice that they would avoid, believing that women would use their bodies as a leverage to extract money from them, potentially destroying not only their marriages but also the household economy. Women, and not men, were seen as instrumentalist in their sexual relationships in a context structured by the traditional gendered division of labour that rendered women dependent on men for economic security. Our male respondents' distrust in women's ability to love in extramarital relationships somehow echoes the common perception that the notion of 'romantic love' is an exclusive property of the modern 'Western' world or upper classes, serving to demarcate them from less privileged social strata (Illouz 1998; Lipset 2004; Rebhun 1999).

The men's conviction in the instrumentalism of female infidelity is related to Vietnamese state discourses that see economic security as an essential ingredient for family happiness – a perspective that has 'considerable traction' among the people (Gammeltoft 1999, 74). The emphasis on economic security is reinforced by a rising consumerist culture in the face of stiff competition for limited resources and opportunities in a market economy. Values and aspirations concerning love and sex thus exhibit stronger and more explicit economic calculations (e.g. Nguyen 2007; Phinney 2008). Urban-ward female migration, it is believed, pushes women's instrumentalism in heterosexual relationships to a new level. The city is the 'seat of the money economy' (Simmel 1950, 420) where personal qualities tend to be judged according to their exchange value and intimate relationships are 'permeated by an economic calculus' (Gammeltoft 2002a, 482). Urban centres are thus sites of 'moral anomie and corruption' (Luong 2006, 380). This stands in contrast with the imaginary of rural life as a source of cultural purity where '*tinh cảm*' (sentiments) occupies a premium place in social life and materialism is synonymised with cultural degradation (Harms 2005). Migration not only takes women away from the social vigilance of rural village communities but also provides them with the anonymity and space to express their sexuality and transgress boundaries (see also Gonzalez-Lopez 2005; Hirsch 2003). Upon their arrival at the destination, married women become 'situational singles' (Shen 2005) whose new (and transient) life among strangers engenders new needs and desires.

Vietnamese discourses of female migrant sexuality resonate with commonly heard views of migrant women as 'promiscuous' and 'willing' to engage in part-time prostitution to make up for their meagre incomes in Taiwanese society (Lan 2006, 64, 66). In the Singaporean context, Chinese migrant women unaccompanied by male figures are seen to be 'vulnerable yet predatory and potentially dangerous' at the same time (Yeoh and Huang 2010, 39). Men are tempted by the transience of the women's migration as this offers them the prospect of fun with no strings attached. Among migrants from Southeast Asian countries, Vietnamese women are believed to pose a greater threat to the Taiwanese family because of their cultural (Confucian traits) and physical (fairer skin, slimmer figure and long hair) affinity with the Taiwanese. There is also a common perception<sup>6</sup> among

Taiwanese men that Vietnamese women are financially undemanding – ‘a phone card or NT\$ 1000 would be enough make them happy’ – and sexually ‘submissive’ and ‘adventurous’ (*chịu chơi*) – by which it is often meant that they would not be fussy about men not wearing condoms during sexual intercourse.

### Infidelity as a choice

Migrants’ sexualities, like their material lives, are regimented by ‘global hierarchical intersections of race, faith, gender and class’ (Mai and King 2009, 302) which unfold in migrant physical and virtual dating scenes in Taiwan. The most common dating scenes for Vietnamese migrants are central train stations which hibernate during the week but come alive at weekends when migrant workers congregate on their day off. Ethnic discotheques, coffee shops and parks around the stations offer spaces for migrants’ social and intimate activities. A room in one of the lovers’ hotels around stations costs from NT\$250 to NT\$390 per block of three hours or NT\$600 per night, although long queues on Saturdays could be daunting. Couples who patronise lovers’ hotels can be broadly divided into two main categories: older Taiwanese men with (often younger) Vietnamese female migrant workers and Vietnamese male migrant workers with Vietnamese female marriage migrants<sup>7</sup>. The relationships were described by our informants as ‘fair transactions’ (*sòng phăng có đi có lại*) between those with economic means looking for sexual pleasure and romantic moments on the one hand and those doing emotion work (cf. Hochschild 1979) in exchange for economic rewards on the other hand.

Although a large number of couples we saw at lovers’ hotels might indeed engage in transactional intimacies, migrants’ extramarital relationships were not always clear-cut economic transactions. Forty-one-year-old Trâm was an example. Trâm, a married woman with two grown-up sons, was a tall, attractive and fearless woman from a fishing village in Ha Tinh – a coastal province in Central Vietnam. Her first contract as a domestic worker ended prematurely in 2003 when she was caught using her mobile phone which was banned by both the female employer and the Taiwanese agency managing her. Finding their over-reactions unacceptable, she requested the agency to send her back to Vietnam only to return to Taiwan in 2004. Trâm ran away as soon as she arrived at the Taoyuan International Airport and secured a domestic worker job through her personal networks. Two years later, deteriorating health forced her to give herself in to local authorities who deported her after collecting a fine of NT\$18,000. Having no regular and decent incomes in Vietnam, Trâm used a relative’s passport to remigrate to Taiwan in 2008 at the cost of US\$6000. Arduous work and long working hours at a nursing home<sup>8</sup> compelled her to ‘run-away’<sup>9</sup> for the second time. At the time of our meeting, Trâm was hired to take care of an elderly woman in Taipei and living in the same apartment with her and her 55-year-old divorced son.

Trâm found it hard to define the boundaries between emotions and practicality in her encounters with Vietnamese and Taiwanese men in Taiwan. The most serious relationship she had was with a Vietnamese factory worker, which lasted a year until her lover was arrested and deported after ‘running away’ from his job. Flirtations started via the mobile phone and soon developed into a sexual relationship. Even though Trâm initially emphasised that the relationship was purely sexual (*mình ở đây đến với nhau thì cũng chỉ vì tình dục*) and any sweet words exchanged during intercourse were ‘lies’ (*lời giả dối*) she later hinted that emotions were involved:

The relationship was more romantic and passionate (than with my husband). The husband belongs to you and is always there for you ... in moral terms ... lovers might love each other dearly.

Even though Trâm's sexual needs remained strong, she had not engaged in sexual activities with anyone else after her lover was deported. She was very strategic with the Taiwanese men who had been approaching her. According to Trâm, unlike Vietnamese men who were more *'tình cảm'* (sentimental) and could thus be dated without any economic returns, Taiwanese men just wanted to use migrant women's bodies so she would sleep with them only if they could first show her how generous they were, which unfortunately had not happened:

If a woman is wise, she would be able to extract money from (Taiwanese) men ... It's not much though ... only a couple of phone cards or some clothes. Some could be very smart ... they could extract thousands of wan<sup>10</sup> from them. The man doesn't have to be rich. It all depends on the woman's ability to extract money from him. One could even get enough money from a man to buy land.

Trâm said that all her friends were involved in extramarital relationships, some with a few men at the same time. Each category of men could cater for a specific set of needs – Vietnamese men had no money but were culturally and emotionally close to the women while Taiwanese men were emotionally distant but able to provide for them financially. Trâm also had feelings for her employer but could not spell out what kind of feelings they were:

I really have feelings for him because he is a very gentle, honest and poor man. That's how I feel. But it's not really sexual. Could be compassion ... but I've no idea how he feels. Sometimes I wear sexy outfits or touch him deliberately but he keeps a distance ... this is rare. Even a paralysed man a few doors away once said 'Let me feel it I'll give you 500' or 'Let me see it I'll give you money'. But my employer is totally different.

Trâm's story exemplified the complexities and ambivalences that characterised sexual and love lives of many Vietnamese migrant women we met in Taiwan. Migration introduced them to a brand-new world of romance and sexual passion where for the first time many women had the liberty to decide when, where, how and with whom they would have sexual intercourse. In 'immigrant cultures of sexuality', therefore, sex was not only about pleasure and/or economic rewards. Sex was also liberating and transformative. Through their extramarital affairs, migrant women reworked their conception of self as autonomous sexual beings taking full control of their bodies. Yet, this is not to say that women always made choices with confidence. The strong sense of moral anomie in urban life as well as distinctive class and ethnic divides between them and local men bred distrust, doubt and suspicion among migrant women. Like Trâm, many women treated extramarital relationships as temporary solutions to satisfy immediate needs even when feelings were strong and real. Having low expectations from an extramarital relationship was a strategy to protect themselves from the potential pain inflicted by male partners' betrayal or separation.

The women's behaviour and strategies in extramarital relationships reflect the Vietnamese conception of female infidelity as a losing battle. Trâm, like all the women in our study, was keenly aware of their inferior status and the social discrimination against them in Taiwanese society. As Lan (2006, 111) notes, migrant women are seen by Taiwanese as 'uncultivated' and 'backward'. 'My taste is not that low' is a phrase commonly used by Taiwanese husbands to mitigate their wives' worry about their interests in migrant women. For this reason, Trâm did not trust the love expressions and promises from her Taiwanese suitors and declined their sexual advances even though she longed for sex and had to resort to porn movies and masturbation on a daily basis. If she were not to experience the romance and passion that she had with her Vietnamese lover, then relationships with Taiwanese men had to bring her economic benefits. Positioning

themselves as the ‘used’ party, migrant women deployed their sexuality as an economic resource in order to make up for the damages to their moral selves, irrespective of whether they enjoyed the sexual activities.

### **Infidelity as a strategy**

Research on urban sexualities emphasises the anonymity of city life as a conducive factor for more liberal sexual practices (Bech 1998; Gammeltoft 2002a). Anonymity and non-committedness, Bech (1998) suggests, breed a special excitement which is further augmented by the ability to freely express female beauty and sexuality through modern dressing styles. The Vietnamese women in our study came from a context where female sexuality was discussed mainly in the language of reproduction and duties. References to personal choices and desire were mostly absent from narratives about marital sex. With only one exception, all the women we interviewed in Taiwan reported no intimacy with men including their future husbands prior to marriage. ‘Looking sexy’, like what Rydstrom (2006, 291) observed in a Northern Vietnamese village, was a violation of women’s codes of conduct. City life in Taiwan, nevertheless, breathed life into the most private and intimate recesses of their world. For the first time in their lives, many migrant women could don sexy outfits showing off their curves, wear make-up and dye their hair without fears of social criticisms. The sense of being desirable sexual beings rather than just a mother and wife was novel, exciting and empowering. Nhung, a 51-year-old domestic worker, beamed with pride when showing us erotic text messages from her Taiwanese suitor. Although Nhung said that she had no intention of having sexual intercourse with the man despite his persistent propositions via text messages, she clearly enjoyed the man’s flirtations, sexual fantasies and occasional gifts which were totally absent from her pre-migration life. She maintained an ambivalent attitude to the men’s sexual advances, sending flirtatious messages in response to his erotic messages to maintain his infatuation with her while finding excuses to avoid physical intimacies with him at the same time. Migration, it seems, has awakened the sexual self in migrant women like Nhung. She tactically deployed her sexuality to achieve a sense of empowerment in her relationships with sexual others while staying ‘faithful’ to her husband back home in Vietnam.

While infidelity served to spice up the otherwise dull life of live-in domestic workers like Nhung, it was an essential and inevitable part of the survival strategy for many irregular migrant workers. The majority of women in our study had never travelled outside their home province, not to mention Vietnam, before migrating to Taiwan. The sense of insecurity and alienation living among strangers for the first time was overwhelming, particularly for those who had ‘run away’ from their contracted jobs. Sexual and intimate relationships took on new meanings when migrant women, haunted by the fear of being caught, jailed and deported as well as employment uncertainty and abuse, sought male protection and support. The precariousness of their fugitive life rendered restrictive norms about female sexuality irrelevant. The blend of pragmatic considerations and fulfilment of love and sexual desires in heterosexual relationships has also been observed in other migrant groups such as the ‘live-out’ Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon (Smith 2010) or the Chinese in Japan (Liu-Farrer 2010).

Tuyết – a 35-year-old mother of two – co-habited with a Taiwanese man after running away from her legally contracted domestic work. In our very first phone conversation, Tuyết blurted out a confession which could have been scandalous in a different context but was apparently deemed acceptable by herself given her circumstances: ‘*Đứa nào sang đây cũng có người yêu hết em à. Toàn đang làm thủ tục bỏ chồng để lấy chồng Đài Loan*’ (We

all got lovers after arriving in Taiwan. Many are trying to divorce their husbands so that they can marry their Taiwanese lovers). Although Tuyết's statement would be an exaggeration if we were to take all Vietnamese migrant women into account, it was true for at least her circle of close friends whose families we had visited prior to the Taiwan fieldwork. Tâm and Thuận – Tuyết's best friends – had divorced their Vietnamese husbands and were living with their Taiwanese husbands at the time of our fieldwork. The women started off as regular migrant workers but subsequently ran away from their abusive employers. Their choices of Taiwanese, and not Vietnamese, partners were strategic. The men had access to local networks that helped them find jobs and shielded them from police surveillance and public scrutiny at the same time. Taiwanese partners served as a camouflage as much as the Taiwanese-like clothing and hairstyles the women acquired to keep themselves safe.

### Reluctant fidelity

Contrary to the widely circulated anecdotes about female migrants' promiscuity, most women in our study led a celibate life throughout their overseas migration. Even though our sample tends to be self-selective (i.e. women with 'clean' sexual records were more likely to agree to participate in the study), the presence of a number of women with no extramarital relationships contradicts the generalised view of migrant sexualities as loose and opportunistic. Reasons for some women's sexual abstinence included menopause, side effects of sterilisation and fears of sexually transmitted diseases. For others, strong relationships with their husbands in Vietnam maintained by trust in financial matters (i.e. pooling of resources) and frequent communication including erotic conversations at night gave them the motivation and strength to reject sexual advances from men in Taiwan. Most interesting was, however, what we call 'reluctant fidelity' where migrants engaged in romantic relationships without having to compromise their bodies – a coping strategy in the face of financial and mobility constraints. This was made possible by extensive phone networks among Vietnamese workers in Taiwan. The importance of the mobile phone in the transnational life of low-waged contract workers has been discussed in various studies (Hoang and Yeoh 2012; Lan 2006; Thomas and Lim 2011). The mobile phone allows them to temporarily escape psychological numbness resulting from the physically demanding work and social exclusion in usually isolated working and living environments. Unlike the Filipinas described in Lan's (2006) and Constable's (2007) studies, only 1 of 23 Vietnamese domestic workers in our study had regular paid days off (two Sundays per month), a few had one day off per year (to celebrate the Lunar New Year) and the rest had none. Mobile phone connections, therefore, served as the most important, if not the only, conduits of romance among migrant workers.

Phone dating received a major boost in early 2012 when a short-term promotion campaign of Taiwan Da Ge Da (Taiwan Mobile) – the largest GSM mobile phone operator in Taiwan – allowed one subscriber to invite five others to a phone conference free of charge. Phone conferences were highlights of the day for many migrants in our study, most of whom had very limited mobility due to their large workload, employer's mobility restrictions or the physical isolation of their work and living places. People sang and read poems to one another, exchanged news, gossiped, told one another's fortunes and, of course, flirted. Many relationships were developed from these phone conferences, the best account of which was provided by Tuyết – a 41-year-old married man working in an isolated factory in Shalu district, 60 km west of Taichung city. Although Tuyết rarely travelled outside his factory compound due to long working hours and resource constraint,

he stunned us with stories about dozens of Vietnamese migrants across Taiwan, their life circumstances and even intimate details about their bodies. Women in Tuyên's phone networks were easily charmed by his charismatic and flirty character and fell for his gallantry and ability to listen – the qualities that, according to Tuyên, were absent from most rural Vietnamese husbands whose definitions of masculinity were often associated with toughness, aggression and the ability to hold emotions in check.

Although Tuyên and the migrant women spent hours chatting on the mobile phone each time, confiding to each other about virtually everything that was happening in their life, their phone relationships rarely turned physical. Extramarital sex was a costly adventure for everyone involved. Factory workers like Tuyên typically put aside NT \$6000–8000 a month if they led a frugal lifestyle and most, if not all, of their savings were remitted to Vietnam. Despite their financial constraints, men were often expected to play the role of male provider in extramarital relationships, paying for food and accommodation on dates with migrant lovers. This is illustrated by the narrative provided by Thảo – a 43-year-old irregular female migrant:

We (women) fear that they (men) would exploit us, financially. It is not easy to make money here. We don't want to waste money. Take me as an example, I would never live with or date a man and pay for all the expenses. We can't blame them though (for using women). They paid US\$7000–8000 to come here to work and put aside NT\$4000–5000 a month if they are lucky. When will they be able to pay off the debt?

As such, mobile phone communication provided workers with limited economic means and restricted mobility with a temporary escape from solitude, an outlet for everyday frustration, as well as an imaginary world of romance. While migrant women tended to be prudent in physical encounters with men, they were more open and less choosy in 'phone relationships' that were purely platonic in nature. The mutual empathy between people caught in the same situation of social exclusion and material deprivation formed a special emotional bond that, according to Tuyên, could be much stronger than ties with their spouses in their homeland who could become emotionally distant over time.

## Conclusion

Through the discussion of Vietnamese migrant women's sexualities in this article, we seek to provide an alternative view of women's agency that has somehow been obscured by activists' discourses of vulnerability and victimisation (cf. Yea 2005). As our evidence demonstrates, migrant women are autonomous agents who are conscious of the structural constraints and social stigma imposed on their lives and actively seek to subvert or renegotiate them. We should, nevertheless, be mindful of the selectivity of female transnational labour migration. The prospect of upward economic mobility for the family down the road requires immediate downward social mobility on the part of the migrant woman for whom breadwinning is traditionally not a primary duty (see also Hirsch 2003; Hoang and Yeoh 2011). As such, only certain women in certain circumstances are prepared to take on that challenge (Hoang 2011, 1448).

Our study also reveals interesting power dynamics embedded in the links between masculinity and female sexuality. Female transnational labour migration tends to take place in the context of marital disruptions or when the man fails to fulfil his economic provider's role – a pattern exemplified by our research. Strains in marital relations and/or men's weaker economic role, it seems, provide many migrant women with a rationale to engage in extramarital affairs, be it an economic strategy or a form of self-actualisation.

Nhật, who was mentioned in the introduction, had reasons not to put her marriage at risk by engaging in extramarital relationships. Her husband was the most economically successful man among the ‘left-behind’ husbands in our study, earning substantial incomes from his construction contractor’s job. Nhật’s highly contested migration was, therefore, explained by her husband as a way to ‘*khẳng định mình*’ (prove one’s self-worth). It was not a coincidence that Nhật’s husband had the most active sexual life in his wife’s absence – he maintained concurrent sexual relationships with four women prior to and during Nhật’s migration – and, unlike many men, had no intention to hide it from us. Nhật’s story suggests that men’s economic success acts as an invisible yet powerful form of control over women’s sexualities.

That working-class migrants, especially women, deploy their sexuality strategically for economic betterment has been discussed in the migration scholarship in Mexico (Cantu 2009; Gonzalez-Lopez 2005; Hirsch 2003). While sexuality is celebrated when passion, desire and romantic love are involved, transactional sexuality tends to be held in contempt. Money, Karl Marx (2005, 379) asserts, ‘corrupts, by displacing *being* with *having*’. Expressions of romantic love and sexual passion are about who we are while money focuses our life on ‘*having*’, thereby distorting human relationships and our ability to create social bonds (Hardt 2011, 679). Yet, our study challenges the conception of love/sexuality versus money as a dichotomous either–or situation. It is not always possible to demarcate pragmatism from desire in the sexual lives of the Vietnamese migrant women in Taiwan. Neither it is possible to assert that love is entirely ethical or that material greed always immoral (Berlant 2011). Hirsch (2003, 272), for example, suggests that all sexuality could be strategic in one way or another. People use their bodies to seek economic benefits, social mobility, acceptance, power, love, pleasure or as a form of self-actualisation. In other words, sexual relations are relations of exchange involving some form or reciprocity. Sexuality is thus about both having and being. It is a site of ambivalences where love and sexual passion are not exclusively upper classes’ properties as much as transactional sexuality is not strictly a working class attribute.

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### Notes

1. Names of the research participants have been changed to protect their privacy.
2. The exchange rate at the time of the fieldwork in July 2012 was US\$1 = NT\$30.
3. Taoyuan County, 40 km southwest of Taipei, has a high concentration of industrial parks. Taoyuan rail station is a major meeting place for foreign migrant workers at weekends, which has led to the mushrooming of ethnic businesses and ‘lovers’ hotels around the station.
4. Commune – the lowest administrative unit in Vietnam – is often divided into villages.
5. Vietnam began to export labour in the early 1980s to socialist allies in Eastern Europe which ended with the collapse of European communist regimes in 1990.

6. Source: Informal conversations with staffs of the Vietnamese-language Department of Radio Taiwan International, 13 July 2012
7. Vietnam is among the top four countries sending marriage migrants to Taiwan.
8. According to our interviews with care workers and visits to three private nursing homes in Taipei, a private nursing home in Taiwan typically houses 20–30 elderly people, a large number of whom are bedridden, and hires three care workers. Usually two care workers work in the day shift and the third – night shift. Each shift lasts 12 h and the care workers are not entitled to days off or any annual leave.
9. Migrant workers in Taiwan cannot change employers at will and those leaving their legally contracted jobs to work in the informal labour market are referred to as ‘run-aways’ (*lao động bỏ trốn*).
10. One wan is NT\$10,000.

### Notes on contributors

Lan Anh Hoang is Lecturer in Development Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Her scholarship on migration, family and gender in Vietnam and Southeast Asia has been published in various international peer-reviewed journals. She has recently completed a qualitative study on migration, gender and sexuality in Vietnam and Taiwan and is embarking on a new research project on Vietnamese irregular migrants in Russia.

Brenda S.A. Yeoh is Professor (Provost’s Chair), Department of Geography, as well as Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore. She is also the Research Leader of the Asian Migration Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, NUS, and coordinates the Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis. Her research interests include the politics of space in colonial and post-colonial cities; and gender, migration and transnational communities.

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## ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS

### **"Lo haría por amor o por dinero": mujeres vietnamitas en Taiwán y la construcción social de la sexualidad migrante**

Basándose en una investigación etnográfica en Vietnam y Taiwán, este artículo intenta contribuir a la investigación global sobre migración y sexualidad. Revela interesantes contradicciones entre los aparentemente homogéneos estereotipos de la sexualidad de las mujeres vietnamitas, por un lado, y la multiplicidad y fluidez de las prácticas sexuales reales en los contextos de la vida real por el otro. Primero, la presencia de varias mujeres migrantes castas en nuestro estudio desafía el estereotipo común de ver a las mujeres migrantes como amenazas sueltas hipersexuales y promiscuas. En segundo lugar, cuestionamos el énfasis sobre la codicia material y el instrumentalismo de las mujeres en los discursos normativos sobre la participación de las mujeres vietnamitas en las relaciones extramaritales. Si bien para algunas mujeres en nuestra investigación los lazos sexuales fuera del matrimonio están por cierto orquestados para obtener una ganancia económica, para otras, el sexo extramarital es principalmente visto como una forma de autoactualización o una exploración de placer y libertad sexual que está ausente en su matrimonio. El artículo enfatiza la naturaleza altamente contextual de las normas y prácticas sexuales así como la interseccionalidad de la raza, la clase y el género en la construcción social de la sexualidad femenina en el contexto de la migración laboral transnacional.

**Palabras claves:** migrantes laborales; sexualidad; mujeres y género; Vietnam; Taiwán

### “我会为了爱还是为了钱这么做？”在台湾的越南女性，以及移民女性性欲的社会建构

本文运用在越南及台湾的民族志研究，旨在对于移民和性欲的全球学术研究做出贡献。本文揭露一方面看似同质的越南女性性欲的刻板印象，以及另一方面在现实生活脉络中多重且流动的真实性欲实践之间的有趣矛盾。首先，在我们的研究中为数众多的贞洁越南女性，挑战了视女性移民为高度性感、放荡不羁且具有威胁性的刻板印象。再者，我们质疑对于越南女性涉入婚外关系的规范性论述中所强调的女性对物质的贪婪与功利主义。在我们的研究中，虽然有些女性在婚姻关系之外从事私通，的确是受到经济利益所驱动，但对另外一些人而言，婚外性行为主要是做为自我实现的形式，或是探索婚姻中缺乏的性愉悦和自由。本文强调性规范与实践的高度脉络化本质，以及在跨国劳动移民脉络下，女性性欲社会建构中的种族、阶级与性别的多元交织。

**关键词：**劳动移民；性欲；女性与性别；越南；台湾