
Review published on Saturday, August 27, 2022


Reviewed by Johanna Ransmeier (The University of Chicago) Published on H-Asia (August, 2022) Commissioned by Bradley C. Davis (Eastern Connecticut State University)

Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57083

Christina Elizabeth Firpo’s Black Market Business: Selling Sex in Northern Vietnam, 1920-1945 describes the development of the sex industry in the north Vietnamese prefecture of Tonkin alongside the colonial government’s efforts to regulate and curtail prostitution. In her introduction and conclusion, Firpo frames her investigation around the concept of “tensions” embedded in the colonial era and its strategic deployment of modernity. Another way to understand these tensions, and the accomplishment of this excellent book, is that Firpo has unveiled the unintended consequences of French colonial policies toward sex work. She does this by paying meticulous attention to the structural details that shaped the Tonkin social environment. These range from geographic constraints to the economic and political changes of this period.

In her opening chapter, “The Geography of Vice,” Firpo maps the intersections and overlapping jurisdictions that characterized the administration of Tonkin. Readers quickly learn that the colonial government’s ability to implement any policy will be highly constrained by the boundaries of its territory and limitations in the extent of its social control. This is a story in which the state may be the primary informant, but it is not necessarily the protagonist. The book adeptly narrates the perspectives of state administrators and colonial officials and exposés promulgated in the popular press. These shifting perspectives brilliantly capture the forces that shaped the lives of sex workers, even when sources in workers’ own words remain scant. Firpo writes with candor about the limitations of colonial sources, sharing her own frustration with the lack of surviving first-person accounts from sex workers. Her transparency not only builds trust with readers but also highlights the world of uncertainty and exploitation these women were forced to navigate. That we see their lives primarily through the eyes of their clientele, those who sought to discipline their bodies, officials striving to contain the rampant threat of venereal disease, and observers who described women’s predicaments for consumption in the Vietnamese media does not prevent Firpo from telling precise and intimate stories. On the contrary, in Black Market Business, readers find a stunningly thorough portrait of the perilous trajectories of women’s and girls’ struggles in Tonkin. The narrow contingencies that allow any single young girl’s story to enter the historical record—whether because she was able to escape at the border with China or the me min trafficker who deceived her made some other miscalculation, or whether a debacle at the venereal disease dispensary drew the attention of administrators—all speak eloquently to the precarious experiences of the many
thousands of women and girls who became sex workers.

The chain of causality Firpo establishes in this book links the development and expansion of the underground sex industry directly to pressures from the French colonial state to regulate prostitution. Regulations and restrictions themselves propelled creativity and an expansion into territories just beyond colonial jurisdiction, or at entertainment venues with diverse clientele. Driven underground, sex workers and the places where they worked often seemed to benefit from the cachet of illicit activity. Registered sex was just less sexy. Colonial efforts could be categorized into two realms, each of which gets sustained attention in core chapters. First, the governing regime confronted the problem of legality, and whether or not to carve out authorized spaces for registered sex work. By necessity, this decision had to take into account policies that originated in the metropole. Back in France, pressure to eliminate human trafficking and forms of slavery was high. Meanwhile, there were models for regulation across the colonial world, and closer to home, in other regions within Vietnam. Sex workers and their employers learned to balance which systems were most profitable, when and where it was worth operating either within or outside the bounds of the law. Legal registration as a sex worker soon came to require being subjected to routine medical exams.

Health was the second area of colonial administrative concern. The requirement that Tonkin’s legal sex workers undergo physical examinations for sexually transmitted infections seems to have done little to enhance either their profits or their reputations. Furthermore, Firpo shows, these required invasive exams exacerbated rivalries that already existed within the hierarchy of sex work between women who had been forced to register after being apprehended as prostitutes and those who more successfully worked in the covert margins. Firpo’s chapters on unfree labor, venereal disease, and adolescent sex work emphasize the challenges that the state faced when adjudicating the relationships and environment in which sex could be sold. It was too easy for the colonial state to view intimacy between a local woman and a French colonist as falling somewhere along a spectrum of sex work, and the challenge that this created for regulators and for those concerned with public health proved profound.

The book’s final two chapters describe distinct sites where sex workers plied their trade: the traditional Ả Đào singing house and the modern dance hall. Sometimes working in one or the other environment was, as Firpo writes, as simple as a wardrobe change. Yet the tastes of the clients differed dramatically. Comparison of these two contexts allows readers to observe the coexistence of contradictory attitudes toward the encroachment of modernity, the commercialization of pleasure, the commodification of Western fashions, and the changing appetites of new urban residents. These last two chapters to a small extent reclaim the space of consumption of sex work for not only the French colonials (who the regime sought to protect) but also Vietnamese men. The strategy of appealing to colonial subalterns—and their need for physical gratification and even comfort while far from home—was only one dimension of this industry. Engaging sex workers in the context of either traditional Ả Đào singing house venues, which emphasized indigenous culture and actively cultivated a nostalgia for a more classical Vietnamese past, or in the modern dance hall, full of shimmying taxi dancers, provided alternative ways of combining the performance of a twentieth-century cosmopolitan identity with the fulfilment of sexual desire. These spaces of urban consumption provided the perfect advertisement and the perfect cover for black market business.
This book is an essential resource for the field and is theoretically compelling in ways that stretch far beyond the region. Firpo has made an invaluable contribution to the global project of understanding the history of the sex industry, state regulation, human trafficking, colonial power relations, interactions between rural and urban communities, and the development of the modern city in Asia.


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.