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# The Need for a Multidisciplinary Approach to Prostitution in the Southeast Asian Context

*Nécessité d'une approche pluridisciplinaire de la prostitution dans le contexte sud-est asiatique*

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# Introduction

## The Need for a Multidisciplinary Approach to Prostitution in the Southeast Asian Context

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The subject of prostitution, being often a sensational, but always a commercial source of rejection or of fascination, has been dealt with in very controversial ways. Prostitution is the shadowed part of societies, revealing various social awkwardness and inequalities, particularly between men and woman, in terms of power and money.

What is prostitution? A “yawning and disgusting chasm”, an “ignominious exploitation”, “the dark side of civilization”, “the biggest turpitude of capitalism”, “the oldest profession in the world”, “a necessary evil”, “a business like any other”, are some of the various ways to qualify the phenomenon of venal love. Prostitution is an ongoing subject of debate for politicians, lawyers, health professionals, sociologists and NGO activists. The analysis of the social phenomenon of prostitution differs greatly, according to the different ideological orientations of the protagonists. They focus on two essential points: the existence of a forced prostitution and a voluntary and unforced prostitution and the status that has to be accorded to this kind of prostitution. Three different juridical regimes are used by

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countries when dealing with the problem of prostitution: prohibition (prostitution is illegal and is considered to be punishable by law), regulation (prostitution has to be controlled and regulated by rules), abolition (prostitution is neither lawfully controlled, nor abolished).

Members of many different professions have shown an interest in, and have published on this topic (jurists, doctors, journalists, politicians, writers, men of faith, and prostitutes). They have taken a stand on a subject with which they are closely or distantly associated. Academics in general have been reluctant to discuss prostitution. Historians from western countries were the first to address the subject in the early 20th century. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that it was easier for them to have a distant point of view on an issue which was not considered very academic at the time. Studying prostitution became then the prerogative of genre and feminist studies whose aim was to discuss forgotten subjects that lie at the boundary lines of science. Since that time, the number of taboos has reduced and academics now feel that they can discuss the subject freely, even though, in reality, their freedom is bounded by theoretical approaches and this specific area of study still suffers from doubts about scientific correctness.

Most Asian countries have a flourishing sex sector which plays a vital economic role. Southeast Asia is often seen as one of the biggest whorehouse in the world even though prostitution is illegal in every country of the area, including Thailand. However, this Buddhist country seems to be divided concerning the question whether prostitution should be considered as a legitimate “career”, which as a consequence, would entitle sex workers to welfare services (*Asia Pacific News*, 8 January 2004).

“Westerners often associate Thailand with ‘sex-for-sale’, ‘play-for-pay’ and indeed, Southeast Asia is more generally identified with the commodification of sexuality and, by implication, the presumed low status of women” (Manderson & Jolly 1997: 17). As Louise Brown shows, prostitution in such places as Thailand:

[...] is not just about individuals but concerns entire social, political and economic systems. There is skewed economic development that leaves whole communities without access to the fruits of modern society, but at the same time, tempting them with its products. There is a social and sexual system that reduces women’s utility to sex. There is a socialisation process which conditions women to accept that they must help their families by any means possible. There are men who demand the right to buy relationships of power with women and there is an industry ready to organise and benefit from this demand. Parents and communities are only small-time traders in a much larger pattern of commerce created by vast social, sexual, economic and political forces. (Brown 2000: 55.)

We must not forget that the demand for commercial sex is mainly local, essentially destined to supply the domestic market, followed by traveling Asians and then non-Asians. Despite this fact and its resulting extent in quantitative terms, the “indigenous” or domestic sex trade is much more discreet than the one that targets foreigners and tourists.

The selling of sexual services, in all of its different forms in Southeast Asia, is far from being simple. The context that surrounds prostitution must also be taken into consideration, and the fact that prostitution is both an ancient tradition and the result of rapid economic and social upheaval must not be discarded. The development and expansion of prostitution can be easily linked with numerous economic developments; the development of land, the exploitation of natural resources, the instigation of building sites, mines, plantations, ports, military bases and large infrastructures, not forgetting an ever growing industrialization and urbanization. The economy first started to take off in the 19th century, leading to the migration of many mainly male, often single workers. This had a direct consequence on the increase in the supply of and the demand for paid sex. Other factors that have stimulated the increase of commercial sex include poverty, unemployment and the necessity of plural activities. All these factors have had direct consequences, encouraging men's and women's drift from the countryside, thus increasing the informal sector. For prostitutes and those who make money from prostitution, the advantages of migration are clear (see in this volume Hugo whose paper is entirely devoted to mobility. Hull's paper in the present volume clearly shows the connections between economic development and a rising demand for prostitutes by male migrant workers all over the Indonesian archipelago). Furthermore, marital instability, marriage failure and divorces have also had an impact on the increase of prostitution.

Furthermore social mobility can also be put forward as an explanation of prostitution. This is a factor underlined by Evelyne Micollier in her introduction to a book dedicated to the subject, entitled *Sexual Cultures in East Asia*:

[...] forms of prostitution range on a continuum from slavery to free operation by girls and free choice about engaging in the sex industry. There is a high turnover among sex workers; prostitution is not a fixed career. For a woman, involvement in sex work during a period of her life may generate a long-term stigma or an improvement in her living conditions, if she uses the money earned to develop other lucrative activities. The agency of prostitutes is an important issue to be raised in the analysis of prostitution. (Micollier 2004: xvi.)

Even the social attitude towards prostitution is changing. Evidence from Thailand and Indonesia, among other places in Southeast Asia, suggests that in poor areas a woman's experience in a "cosmopolitan" urban environment linked to her economic success, which allow her to support other family members back home, outweigh the shame she would otherwise bring to her family and community (Brown 2000: 53).

The large number of academic publications on prostitution that have appeared during the last few decades have demonstrated that scholars from different disciplinary, theoretical and methodological backgrounds—working on issues related to gender, reproductive health and sexuality—have increasingly become interested in the subject. Nevertheless, there are still many "white spots" and open questions which have either not been addressed or not been adequately answered yet.

We are therefore convinced of the urgent need for further and more detailed or specific research on prostitution if we want to fully understand its complexities and effects on the people and societies involved.

From whatever angle this subject is looked at, all these studies show that prostitution in Southeast Asia has massively increased over the last fifty years. They also have two essential questions in common: why is prostitution such a large market? Why are the supply and demand so great?

Thousands of books, academic articles, PhD thesis, official reports and conference papers have been written on the subject of prostitution around the world, and during the last twenty years or so the focus has particularly been on prostitution in Southeast Asia. This impressive production should give an idea that the topic has been approached from many different angles and yet, in our view, there have not been fully satisfactory answers to these two questions. Unfortunately we have to admit that we, too, cannot close this gap and the present volume may raise more questions than it answers. However, by presenting new data and drawing the reader's attention to so far neglected fields (historical roots and background, role of men, customers, image of the prostitute in local literature) we add some small pieces to the big puzzle that should eventually lead us to a comprehensive picture and to a better understanding of this complex phenomenon. Prostitution is forever evolving, it has many different faces. It is difficult to get a clear picture of prostitution and to fully understand its many aspects. Some authors favor economic aspects (Truong 1990, Lim 1998), others social or historical aspects (Mueke 1992, Law 2000, Ingleson 1986, Henriot 1997,<sup>1</sup> Hershatter 1997). There is also a growing interest on sanitary issues, whether it be during the STD or the AIDS period (Brummelhuis & Herdt 1995; Blanc, Husson & Micollier 2000; Milton, Bamber & Waugh 1997). Feminist analyses have opened up the debate by considering notions such as gender, class, power or domination. Kamala Kempadoo edited the book *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, which was published in 1998. The book comprises a series of papers which pay major attention to the discussion on prostitution from the prostitute's point of view. It addresses commercial sex work world-wide in a somewhat activist way. AIDS research has also revealed the multiple forms of paid sexual relations that exist in Southeast Asia.

More and more anthropologists have chosen to listen to the voices of prostitutes. American student anthropologist, Cleo Odzer, conducted field research in Patpong for three years between 1988 and 1990 just before the AIDS epidemic was prevalent in Thailand. She rapidly succeeded in becoming very close to many figures of the Bangkok area famous to sex tourists. *Patpong Sisters. An American Woman's View of the Bangkok Sex World*, the book that she published—in 1994—from her thesis materials had much influence in subsequent scholars doing research on Thai prostitution as it presents—in a very warm and friendly approach—intelligent and independent prostitutes and more pathetic customers (Odzer 1994).

Lisa Law, for instance, had Odzer's book in hand when she first ventured in Patpong a few years later. But, the intent of her research was to compare prosti-

tution in Cebu City (Philippines), Bangkok (Thailand) and Bali (Indonesia), with a post-modernist theoretical approach giving much consideration to the place of desire, bodies, subjectivities, etc. However, conclusions are well phrased and are interesting but hardly revolutionary: official institutions and NGOs should participate in creating a space for a speaking sex worker subject who may produce counter-hegemonic discourse, and new identities (Law 2000: 127).

Studies by anthropologists such as Erik Cohen (1982, 1986, 1993), Mark Askew (1998, 1999), Chin (2013), Hoefinger (2013) and some others are precious. They add a qualitative dimension to a kind of research which has always been largely dominated by quantitative information i.e. payments, the prostitutes ages, ages when they entered the trade, number of clients, etc. But the risks could now be to underestimate the fact that prostitution is fundamentally a commercial exchange. Even if relationships with prostitutes (such as bar-girls or go-go girls) sometimes do lead to lasting ties and even to marriage, it should not be considered as a completely natural issue. Prostitution does remain the domain *par excellence* of the *How much? How long? How many?*

So this collection of ten papers is a modest contribution to the ongoing debate on prostitution, opting, due to the complexity of the subject, for a multidisciplinary approach. The contributors are historians (Le Failler, Tracol-Huynh, Poisson), a socio-demographer (Hull) who has also done historical research, social or cultural anthropologists (Bottero, Husson), geographers (Hugo, Bonnet and Husson), a sociologist (Baffie), and, finally one specialist in literature (Zaini-Lajoubert).

When looking at the articles in this volume and the geographic areas they deal with, it becomes obvious that not all countries in Southeast Asia have been equally represented. With one paper on Philippines, one on Indonesia, one on Malaysia, three on Vietnam, and two on Thailand, we can regret that Cambodia, Laos, Singapore and Burma are not taken into account. All the papers discuss female prostitution. Even though the subject of male prostitution is rarely dealt with and is still considered “taboo”, male sex workers may represent a third of all sex workers world-wide according to Davis (1993a, b)<sup>2</sup>. The “co-author of the act” or “the second man” (the first being the pimp) are roles in the prostitution system which are particularly evoked in Husson’s article. This paper shows how interesting it would be to devote a complete volume to the numerous masculine roles in prostitution: fathers, husbands, boyfriends, uncles, sons, clients, brothel owners, agents or pimps. But most of the time, the client’s steps or the pimp’s behaviour are kept hidden, and the only subject of discussion is the visible part of the iceberg: the prostitute her- or himself.

The first article discusses Southeast Asia as a whole, using syntheses and comparisons and presenting a general panoramic picture.

To understand the evolution and the development of commercial sex in the region through the years, it is necessary to plunge into the population movements that have occurred. Its author, the geographer Graeme Hugo, gives a clear indication of the strong relationship between the development of the commercial sex sector and the mobility of populations. Several million of prostitutes are recruited

from rural areas and sent to cities, resorts, new economic activity zones, frontier areas, or transport routes either within their countries or abroad. The paper begins by outlining the large scale of migration in Southeast Asian countries in recent years and the increasing number of women involved. The patterns of migration and the composition of the flows must be taken into consideration, as well as the impact that the internal or international mobility of female sex workers had on the spread of HIV/AIDS. Both developments are very complex. There are several categories of sex workers, and the mobility of the worker as well as the incidence of HIV infection varies according to the level of involvement in the trade. Over the last twenty years, population movements have expanded rapidly and show no signs of slowing down in the near future. The paper examines some features of the migration of prostitutes in the region and concludes by addressing some political issues.

The second paper written by the geographer François-Xavier Bonnet presents a most welcome study about prostitution in the Philippines. The archipelago, like the neighbour countries, has a reputation for prostitution and sex tourism. It's a huge industry domestically with an estimated 800,000 men, women and children working in the trade. While it's illegal to sell or procure sex, the trade still operates under the guise of entertainment: sex workers are employed as singers, dancers, waitresses or "guest relations officers" in clubs and bars where they are expected to leave with any client who pays a fee. Then there's "freelancers", prostitutes that independently cruise bars looking for paying customers.

According to the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women ([www.catw-ap.org](http://www.catw-ap.org)), some fifteen thousand Australian men a year visit Angeles, north of Manila, on sex tours; plenty of Americans, Brits and Europeans join them, while Koreans, Taiwanese and Chinese have developed their own networks, usually based on karaoke bars and restaurants. Manila, Cebu City, Subic Bay and Pasay City are also major sex destinations. Through the "longue durée", Bonnet shows some cycles of development of this phenomenon based on the integration of the archipelago to international colonial capitalism, the militarization of the territory through garrisons and huge American military bases and finally on aggressive public policies for the touristic development and the promotion of work abroad since the Marcos years until the present administration. Facing this sector, the legislation has fluctuated but could not reduce the activity. The explosion of AIDS epidemics could launch a new national debate on prostitution.

The third paper is concerned with prostitution in Indonesia. Terence Hull, a demographer and sociologist, retraces the history and origins of modern prostitution in Indonesia, which goes back to the pre-colonial Javanese Kingdoms. During the Dutch colonial period, the sex industry became more organized and widespread. Thereafter prostitution continued to increase, despite the changing environment of the sex industry and the presence of foreign invaders. In 1852, a new law acknowledged the commercial sex industry and set down certain regulations. The institution of commercial sex in Indonesia differs from that in other Asian countries in both form and social setting. These differences are linked with

the country's history, legal development, culture, and systems of governance. Despite widespread disapproval of prostitution, the institutions of prostitution are greatly government owned and are also subject to regulation and taxation. This fact inevitably leads to an ambiguous and controversial situation. The author also examines the publicly condemned behaviour of prostitutes who are regarded as "women without morals", compared to the more accepted attitude of their male clients. It is suggested that discussions of prostitution should consider that it is more a cultural institution than a crime.

Then the historian Isabelle Tracol-Huynh shows that during French colonization, the world of prostitution in Tonkin evolved as the result of the numerous social and economic changes that were occurring at the time. The increasing mobility of the population led to rapid, significant urbanization. Consequently prostitution became increasingly visible. Its expansion was both quantitative and qualitative in the sense that prostitutes were no longer confined within the so-called spaces of "legal" brothels and were no longer perceived as being the only women capable of providing sexual services. In this regard, the world of prostitution is a critical vantage point which permits a far-reaching study of these global changes as well as a unique vantage point onto the complexity of colonization itself. This world was a microcosm of colonial society with its latent notions of racial hierarchy, inherent domination, and intimacy for colonization, and these all represent an intimate yet politically charged encounter. In this paper she points that mobility is a distinctive feature of the world of prostitution since prostitutes often come from various areas to work in one city. In colonial Tonkin there were Vietnamese, Chinese and even Japanese and European prostitutes. And, on the other hand, China was an important destination for Vietnamese prostitutes. This mobility, whether internal or external, was a challenge for the French colonial authorities who intended to fight against human trafficking. Focusing on the mobility of prostitutes to and from colonial Tonkin, this article puts back Vietnam within the more general context of prostitution in Southeast Asia.

Philippe Le Failler, an historian too, add another more contemporaneous view of the subject. Although technically illegal, sex work is widespread in present day Vietnam. Almost inexistent from 1975 to 1986, a booming prostitution followed the opening of the country, when the social yoke was loosened inducing a freedom of movement and to a more or less successful adaptation to the market economy. Even though this phenomenon was more easily perceptible in Saigon, Hanoi did not make exception. The following lines result from notes taken on the spot, this investigation was conducted in the capital city from 1994 to 2001.

Jean Baffie, who as a sociologist has worked on Thai-language books, papers, documents and data, attempts to answer several key questions: How did prostitution come to Thai society? What are the official and local academic positions and discourses on the subject? How large is the role of this sector in the national economy? What is the actual influence of the West? In his paper, Baffie wishes to express the Thai point of view on the whole phenomenon, claiming that although sex tourism is the most visible and the most studied part of the problem, it is only



the tip of the iceberg. He provides both a sociology of the prostitutes and of their customers, but also a sociology of sex and gender relations. Through an analysis of lexicology and the controversy over the number and types of sex workers, the paper aims to show not only the importance of the phenomenon but also its complexity, and, last but not least, the local difficulty in apprehending the situation. His two main findings are, first, what he calls “the ‘widow’ (*mae mai*) hypothesis”, that is to say that women who find themselves without “husbands”—because of death, divorce, running away, marital breakdown, etc.—are induced to take a job in prostitution. Reasons for this may be an urgent need of money, being disgusted with men in general or the feeling that they have few chances to find a new “husband”, particularly when they have children. The second finding could be called “exogamic prostitution” and could be viewed as a consequence of the foregoing, i.e. Thai prostitutes are looking for foreigners as customers and especially potential husbands while Thai customers are poor and more inclined to prefer “exotic” prostitutes (Burmese, Chinese, European or hill tribe women).

Marion Bottero, as an anthropologist, analyses the fantasized image of Thai woman largely widespread in western countries. In parallel to this valorisation, more or less fantasized, of Thai woman, many of these men mention and reject the “masculine” behaviour of their fellow country women. “Independent”, “not taking care of themselves”, “in a constant competition” or “in no need of men”, they are assimilated to mutants (Dorlin 2009) because they are questioning gender borders. Constructed and fantasized in opposition to Western women, Thai women seem to allow Western men to counter this Western sexual identity crisis. The geographic and cultural displacement of these Westerners enables themselves to valorise their masculinity when they enter in contact with a local woman described as “feminine”, “docile”, “modest” and “traditional”. The expatriation in Thailand thus allows a re-empowerment of the masculinity. This process uses the local culture, even though distant and exotic, to return to more traditional values within the couple, family and social interactions. In this way, the desire of exotic enables a kind of resistance to change.

Laurence Husson, a geographer trained in anthropology, focuses on the customer who, in the prostitution business, remains the unknown, invisible, and anonymous element who may be seen as the base of the whole system. Whatever the client can be an unloved man, lonely, handicapped, “perverse”, far away from his homeland and his family, he is tacitly authorized to buy or to rent somebody for sexual services. Based on interviews with customers and prostitutes, this paper first shows the large diversity of sexual services offered in exchange for money or any other type of compensation. Such a range of choices has a direct influence on their profiles who are mainly local or Asian men and not necessarily only tourists. The paper then explores the behavior patterns of Asian clients—resident or transient—and shows that visiting a prostitute is a “normal” and almost “ritualistic” activity. Neither age nor socio-economic background is a special criterion, since any man is a potential customer for commercial sex. It appears that it is impossible to establish a profile of a “typical client”. The frequency of his visits to a prostitute

puts him in one of two categories: an occasional or a regular client. Within these two categories, the author analyses the client's motivations, and through this analysis emerges a portrait of a typical sex consumer. Due to the probable increase of prostitution in Asia, there is a need for both quantitative and qualitative studies; otherwise, it is quite likely that the clients, whether natives or sex tourists from around the world, will continue to make up one huge, anonymous and undefined mass. The client always has a good excuse for his activities. Moreover, prostitutes will continue to suffer from the discrimination and stigmatization that are imposed upon them by society in the name of morality and public health.

The two last contributions deal with the local literature. Monique Zaini-Lajoubert's paper studies prostitution on the basis of a corpus of four Malaysian novels and six Malaysian short stories from the 1920th to the 1970th, written by four authors, namely A. Samad Said, Ahmad Rashid Talu, Marwilis Hj. Yusof and Hamzah Hussin. After introducing the authors and these literary works, the article analyses the different aspects of prostitution in the corpus (the prostitutes, the pimps [men or women], the clients, its legal status), which reflect to a large extent the reality. In most of these works moralistic and didactic intentions as well as the militant aspect can be perceived, seeking to awaken the conscience of the readers of the harmful effects and the root causes of prostitution and to show them how to fight to eradicate it. Emmanuel Poisson presents his own translation of a Vietnamese novelist.

## Notes

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1. Very few historians of Asia have done extensive research on prostitution. The first book that should be mentioned is *Belles de Shanghai. Prostitution et sexualité en Chine aux XIXe-XXe siècles* by Christian Henriot, first published in French in 1997. The author had first considered working on a book about prostitution in China, but with research on Shanghai he only produced a 501 pages-volume. It constitutes a model for the future historian, particularly for its use of archives and newspapers data. Also about prostitution in Shanghai and published the same year, a book by G. Hershatter gives a feminist historian's view. Hershatter neatly separated pre- and post-1949 prostitutes, the first being more victims and the second ones more independent workers (Hershatter 1997).
2. *Prostitution. An International Handbook on Trends, Problems, and Policies*, edited by Nanette J. Davis (1993), is a very different sort of encyclopedia. It includes standardized presentations of prostitution in 16 countries. Five of them concern Asia (China, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam), and were written by local sociologists, criminologists, historians, jurists, and anthropologists. A great deal of information is given on laws and various State policies regarding prostitution and it gives us a fairly good idea of the extent of literature available on prostitution in each country, but it lacks a chapter which compares the different situations and, the data given are so diverse that any attempt of comparison would be very difficult.

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**Abstract:** Much has been published already in the world about prostitution. Lawyers, politicians, doctors, journalists, academics and churchmen have written on the subject. In South-East Asia, knowledge of the subject has benefited from surveys caused by the spread of AIDS in the region in the 1990s. Despite the sum of the work already done, the complexity of the phenomenon and its various forms requires a pluridisciplinary approach, All the more so because many aspects of the phenomenon remain to be studied.

***Nécessité d'une approche pluridisciplinaire  
de la prostitution dans le contexte sud-est asiatique***

**Résumé:** Le « phénomène prostitutionnel » a fait coulé beaucoup d'encre dans le monde. Juristes, politiciens, médecins, universitaires, journalistes et hommes d'église ont écrits sur le sujet. En Asie du Sud-Est, la connaissance du sujet a bénéficié des enquêtes occasionnées par la propagation du Sida dans la région dans les années quatre-vingt-dix. Malgré la somme des travaux déjà effectués, la complexité du phénomène et ses diverses formes nécessite une approche pluridisciplinaire, d'autant de que nombreux pans du phénomène restent à défricher.

**Keywords:** Prostitution, Southeast Asia, multidisciplinary.

**Mots-clés:** Prostitution, Asie du Sud-Est, pluridisciplinarité.

