Heidi Hoefinger


Anthropologist Hoefinger’s provocative and in-depth monograph is a welcome contribution to the field of sexuality studies in Southeast Asia. Based on her doctoral dissertation, the book explores the multi-faceted, fluid and gift-based relationships between Cambodian bargirls and foreigners in the tourist bar scene of Cambodia’s capital, Phnom Penh. These relationships intertwine sexuality, feelings, interest and multiple forms of compensation. Hoefinger places the Cambodian women at the core of her research, showing that they act with ingenuity and resilience, take informed decisions and skilfully negotiate both structural constraints (gender, culture, family, economy) and their relationships with Western and Asian men. By highlighting their representations, strategies and manoeuvres, the author shows that they are in control of their lives.

A major goal of the book is to challenge feminist views that portray bargirls in an essentialist way—“as anything other than ‘prostitutes,’ and ‘prostitutes’ as anything other than ‘poor victims’, ‘greedy thieves’ or ‘bad girls’” (p. 6). Contrary to the abundant victim-narrative research on prostitution and sex tourism in the global South, the book offers an empirically-based, nuanced and refreshing view on the topic. To better escape the framework and language of prostitution, Hoefinger bases her analysis on two original concepts. That of “professional girlfriend” emphasises that women “do rely in the formation of these relationships as a means of livelihood and their motivations are initially materially based,” “engage in multiple overlapping transactional relationships, usually unbeknownst to their other partners,” and includes a “performance of intimacy, whereby the professed feelings of love and dedication lie somewhere on a continuum between genuine and feigned” (p. 4). Borrowed from the ethnography in South Africa, the second concept of “transactional sex” refers to women whose initial motivations consist of “obtaining something from the intimate interactions, such as gifts, drinks, money or even houses and visas” (p. 3).

Hoefinger conducts intimate ethnography in three areas of the city where tourist bars are located: (1) the Lakeside with numerous backpackers, guest-houses and bars on the Boeung Kak Lake; (2) the Strip, a busy street near the central market known for its nightlife; and (3) the Riverside area on the edge of the Tonle Sap River, with numerous bars located on parallel and intersecting roads. The author conducted 189 conversations/interviews, mainly in English, for over seven years. The sample includes 281 participants, including 115 women, 124 men and 42 representatives from aid organisations, government
institutions and Cambodian academia. Hoefinger combines ethnography and three “methodological explorations.” These include the “Relationship and Intimacy Survey” about relations and intimacy filled in by 164 respondents, a “Film Project” about an art photographer, and the “Global Girls: Autobiography and E-Literacy Project” aimed at empowering female informants through improving writing skills in English. All three projects signal the author’s desire to engage in research and activism. Hoefinger addresses her positionality during the field investigation over a significant number of pages: ethnographic and personal relationships with the respondents, power relations, reflexivity, self-presentation, the role-playing involved in sustaining multiple identities, ethical and moral considerations regarding confidentiality, loyalty, emotional investment, and feelings of betrayal and abandonment. At a theoretical level, the author utilises a wide range of references on the fields of multiple identities, the intersection of sexuality and identity, patron-client relations and sexuality and gender in Cambodia.

The book presents many fascinating findings. Hoefinger examines the issue of hierarchy among Cambodian women involved in sexual commerce from an emic perspective, although Cambodian society relegates all of them to the stigmatised categories of the “prostitute” or the “broken” woman (srei kouc). Professional girlfriends demarcate themselves from the taxi-girls who engage in sex-for-cash arrangements, and from Vietnamese sex workers, on which Cambodian men project a fantasised sexuality, but who are socially and professionally discriminated against because of their ethnic origin.

Professional girlfriends form alternative kinship groups in which solidarity, mutual support and feelings of sisterhood prevail. In addition, they produce a “bar girl subculture” that prevails in the bars, as well as in the market and salons they frequent. This subculture encapsulates the tension between Cambodian norms on gender and family on the one hand, and global consumption standards on the other. Professional girlfriends constantly juggle between tradition, deviance and modernity.

Hoefinger examines the topic of celebrity and prestige. The self-presentation, style and display of wealth, the mastering of foreign languages and the proximity to Westerners enhance their prestige within the group, and their reputation among male foreigners at the bars. In addition, the family-care economy allows them to gain prestige among relatives, despite the risk of being labelled as “broken” women.

Research on sex tourism typically examines the issue of misunderstanding, and Hoefinger responds to that. Professional girlfriends construct stereotyped images of foreign men in opposition to Cambodian ones. The former are perceived as more tolerant, liberal, educated and egalitarian than the latter; they