sex, love and money in Cambodia: professional girlfriends and transactional relationships

Heidi Hoefinger, Routledge, Abingdon, 2013, 218pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-62934-8, \$145.00 (hbk).

Lyli, Trang, Chenda, Sochua and the other 'professional girlfriends' of the Party Bar in Phnom Penh are trying to negotiate connected lives in the rapidly transforming cultural, social and economic context of post-conflict and postcolonial Cambodia. They are the absolute protagonists of this fascinating intimate ethnography of their everyday lives, which unfolds between the contradictory constraints posed by the conservative gender hierarchies at work in Cambodia and the opportunities for social advancement emerging from the anarchic globalisation of the country. The Party Bar girls have a hard life, but they are not victims of the difficult situation they navigate. They exchange different kinds and degrees of intimacy for their own material benefit through transactional relationships with Western men. By framing these complex and varying intimate and economic exchanges of sex, love, money, gifts and support in terms of working as 'professional girlfriends', they escape the stigma of 'broken women' assigned to them by traditional morality, as well as the status of victim cast upon them by the Western humanitarian gaze.

The author explores the everyday lives, values and beliefs of professional girlfriends through an exemplary mix of methodological approaches, including long-term intimate ethnography, surveys, filmmaking and participatory action research. Guided by the best examples of self-reflexive ethnography, Hoefinger writes about her multiple roles of friend, researcher and fellow traveller, as well as about the way these roles unfolded within the professional girlfriend scene throughout many years of fieldwork. Inspired by Cultural Studies' insightful attention to subcultures of consumption, her intimate ethnography participates in the lifestyles, materialities and practices informing what it means to be a professional girlfriend in contemporary Cambodia. Drawing on Viviana Zelizer's work on the economic underpinnings of intimate relationships, Hoefinger explores the specific ways in which professional girlfriends attempt to connect with their (foreign and Khmer) partners, families and friends by engaging in different economic and intimate transactions. For instance, whereas 'sex-for-cash' can be seen as a practice close to prostitution, 'sex-for-fun', 'sex-for-love' and the 'sweetheart relationship' are discursively framed practices distinguishing different sexual, intimate and economic

transactions through which professional girlfriends experiment with new individualised and hedonistic ways of 'being themselves'—sexually, socially and economically.

Hoefinger does not look away from the more sinister aspects of the Cambodian sexual landscape within which professional girlfriends articulate their lifestyles and the associated subjectivities and social trajectories. She reviews and assesses existing research evidence on the prevalence of father–daughter incest, the sexual exploitation of children, the selling of underage virginity, debt bondage, gang rape and human trafficking within contemporary Cambodian society. The harrowing picture emerging does not obfuscate Hoefinger's analysis of the complex agencies of professional girlfriends, whose decisions to get involved in the sex industry could risk being reductively seen as completely determined by the convergence of patriarchy, hardship and abuse. Quite the opposite. The recognition of the influence of some of these factors in the lives of many professional girlfriends allows the author to fully apprehend, explore and describe the forms of agency they negotiate by engaging in transactional intimate opportunities to build a better life for themselves and their families. The practices and discourses shaping their professional girlfriend experiences allow them to provide for themselves and their families, while also exploring, embodying and performing new sexualities emerging within the globalisation of increasingly commodified, bounded and transactional experiences of intimacy.

Hoefinger's closeness to and long-term engagement with her professional girlfriends and fellow travellers allow her to analyse and share with readers the intricate sexual landscapes and practices where globalised patterns of consumption, sexgender roles, ethnicised and class-based hierarchies, and the search for new forms of intersubjective intimacy converge. The invention of the 'hybrid thong' is just one of the many ways in which professional girlfriends are able to straddle creatively and successfully the contradictions they meet in their everyday lives; by combining full-bottom underpants with a 'g-string' attached at the top they are able to perform their sexualized roles for tourists while adhering to local criteria of modesty and respectability. The author partakes in the difficult ethical dilemmas professional girlfriends face in their everyday lives. She shares with readers the difficult ethical predicaments emerging from having to remain 'professionally' loyal both to them and their Western partners, even when she becomes aware of realities, such as the involvement in parallel intimate partnerships in Cambodia or abroad, that could significantly alter the nature of existing relationships. The intimate and economic involvement of Western men with professional girlfriends is analysed respectfully and thoroughly. Their fear of being taken advantage of by their professional girlfriends in a context of stark socio-economic and geopolitical inequality forms the basis of new 'pseudo-egalitarian' relational practices. For instance, professional girlfriends increasingly need to 'go Dutch' and pay their half of the bill in order to perform love in ways that are credible to Western eyes and

could potentially lead to more a economically rewarding and stable intimate relationship. And this puts a lot of pressure on their emotional and economic resources.

The overall picture emerging from Hoefinger's *Sex, Love and Money in Cambodia* is an interweaving of converging socio-economic, emotional and sexual trajectories between professional girlfriends and their Western and Khmer partners. Thanks to the transactional love and sex relationships the book's protagonists were able to initiate and maintain, most have managed to improve their lives considerably. While some are still working at the Party Bar, the majority have decided and were able to leave the 'bar life' behind, form a family and live with their Western partners abroad or in Cambodia. Quite a few have abandoned the idealisation of the Western husband as the 'knight in shining armour' lifting them away from all their problems at once. At the same time, they have started new families and businesses on more egalitarian terms with understanding and caring Khmer and foreign partners alike. Overall, Hoefinger's exploration of Phnom Penh's professional girlfriends' lives provides us with a compelling picture of the heightened transformation of the ways in which both genuine and counterfeit intimacy are being negotiated for material benefits within and outside the global sex industry. This compelling and exciting book engenders a needed reflection on the ways intimacy and authenticity are being re-negotiated within the multiply commoditised norths and souths produced by the global spread of neo-liberal capitalism.

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