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Extramarital relationships in the Vietnamese migrant community in Laos: reasserting patriarchal ideologies and double standards

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ABSTRACT

Undocumented migration from Central Vietnam to Laos stretches Vietnamese families and generates marital tensions and social anxieties around the extramarital relationships that migrant husbands establish with *vợ hàu* (second wives), an emic term that encompasses mistresses and more stable partners. This paper sheds light on these processes via an ethnographic study on how migration from Central Vietnam to Savannakhet – a town located in Central Laos bordering Thailand – shapes family formation, marital relationships and double standards in gender and sexuality. It argues that husbands and first and second wives manage these issues by preserving family integrity, negotiating extramarital relationships and retreating from marriage. These strategies are shaped by and constitutive of normative double standards that families refer to, reinforce and in some cases transcend to make sense of the marital challenges and disruptions caused by dislocation, translocality and the intrusion of second wives in their marriages. Overall, the study emphasises that families remain committed to a domestic division of labour and to the institutions of marriage and family, albeit with some adjustments. This argument resonates with broader discussions about migration, gender and sexuality in Vietnam.

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Introduction

The Vietnamese family has undergone important changes over the past 30 years. In 1986, the *Đổimói* or Renovation macroeconomic reforms facilitated the shift to a market-oriented economy. This shift required reconfiguring the family, in particular a revision of its productive and reproductive functions and of the Confucian-based patriarchal ideologies upon which gender and sexual norms are built (Bélanger and Barbieri 2009). Moreover, the loosening of controls over population mobility increased internal and transnational migration, which further compelled the family to adjust to new conditions of dispersal and globalisation.

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This paper sheds light on these processes via an ethnographic study on how migration from Central Vietnam to Savannakhet – a town located in Central Laos bordering Thailand – shapes family formation, marital relationships and double standards in gender and sexuality. It pays special attention to how Vietnamese transnational families cope with extramarital relationships involving married men and *vợ hầu* or 'second wives', an emic term that encompasses single, separated or divorced women acting as lovers, mistresses and more stable partners. Located between sex-for-cash and marriage arrangements in the 'continuum of sexual-economic exchange' (Tabet 2014), these relationships exhibit unique features in terms of exchange, obligation and duration, ranging from liaisons to polygynous arrangements. In short, this paper argues that transnational families steer a careful course between the maximisation of their aspirations and the observation of social expectations by preserving family integrity, negotiating extramarital relationships and retreating from marriage. These strategies are shaped by and constitutive of normative double standards that families refer to, reinforce and in some cases transcend to make sense of the marital challenges and disruptions caused by dislocation, translocality and the intrusion of second wives in their marriages. Overall, study findings reveal how families remain resolutely committed to a state-backed division of labour and to the institutions of marriage and family, albeit with some adjustments, a trend that corroborates the findings of research on migration, gender and sexuality in Vietnam.

Double standards in gender and sexuality encompass different norms for men and women that are expressed through narratives and behaviours and assessed through evaluations and sanctions. They are multidimensional 'local social constructions, made up of innumerable "fine lines", matters of ongoing negotiation and meaning making within particular social groups and settings' (Crawford and Popp 2003, 23). In Vietnam, double standards set differing expectations of sexual permissiveness for both sexes. They stem from conflicting and imbricated norms shaped by socialism, the market economy, Taoism and Confucianism. Confucianism has exerted – and still does exert – a strong influence. This Chinese doctrine promotes a patrilineal system that favours sons and traditional codes of female conduct and restraint (Rydstrøm 2003, 41–42). In (pre)colonial Vietnam, polygyny was common, sanctioned and even encouraged as a means to enhance men's ability to 'produce sons and expand the family lineage' and express 'filial piety and social status' (Nguyen, Shiu and Hardesty 2016, 1066). In contrast, women were expected to remain chaste until marriage and show submission and devotion to their husbands. During the socialist revolution, the Communist Party made polygyny illegal and promoted an egalitarian, nuclear and monogamous family model with the 1959 Marriage and Family Law, and its subsequent revisions in 1986, 2000 and 2014 (see Walsh 2011). Nowadays, sexual double standards still condone sexual freedom and promiscuity for men and condemn it for women, especially in rural areas where most of the Vietnamese migrants in Central Laos come from.

A man's identity is tied to his physicality, potency and capacity to give free rein to his presumed greater biological needs, whereas a woman's identity depends on her chastity, restraint, ability to reproduce and subjugation to her husband's sexual expectations and extramarital sex so long as he provides (Bui and Kretchmar 2008, 197; Khuat, Le and Nguyen 2009; Rydstrøm 2006, 287; Nguyen and Simkin 2017,

613–614; Phinney 2008, 654). In urban epicentres of Vietnam, however, individualistic and pleasure-oriented attitudes brought by the market and globalisation have helped to bring about the 'increasingly assertive role of young women in "modern" sexuality and hence of gender equality in this regard' (Nguyen 2007, 309), not without generating anxieties around their morality (Hoang 2016; Nguyen Vo 2008; Rydstrøm 2006). Moreover, the market economy has facilitated the rapid expansion of the sex sector fuelled by a 'hooking economy' and new forms of hegemonic masculinity in business settings (Nguyen Vo 2008). This has accentuated women's sexual and social commodification and trivialised extramarital sex as illustrated by the large number of men who admit to having participated in it in various studies: 70%–90% out of 222 respondents (Family Health International 2006, 15), 33% out of 27 men (Phinney 2008, 652) and 43% out of 126 men (Nguyen, Shiu and Hardesty 2016, 1073).

Double standards also inform a domestic division of labour. After 1986, the state made the family the cornerstone of renovation and glorified it through familistic campaigns which promoted *gia đình hạnh phúc* or 'family happiness'. This happiness was contingent upon men's ability to produce and act as breadwinners, and women's capacity to reproduce, act as household head, endure and sacrifice for the family (Phinney 2008, 654; Rydstrøm 2006, 287). Despite state discourses that promote this division of labour, local practices differ as shown by high female labour force participation and a 69th rank (out of 154) in the Global Gender Gap Index Ranking (World Economic Forum 2017, 10). Overall, sexual and gender double standards derive from a 'contradiction between rapidly changing and fluid sexual norms, on the one hand, and the clearly defined code of marital sexual behaviour prescribed by the government, on the other' in a normative landscape marked by 'contradiction and instability' and located in 'pockets of homogeneity' (Nguyen, Shiu and Hardesty 2016, 1066, 1078). The reading and application of double standards is thus localised and context-specific.

The literature on migration and sexuality in Vietnam shows the extent to which double standards, socioeconomic factors and migration dynamics shape extramarital sex. In Taiwan, Vietnamese female domestic workers have been reported to live a life of celibacy and remain faithful to their husband. However, some women who experience marital tension or whose husband plays a weak economic role may engage in casual sex and more prolonged relationships with Vietnamese and Taiwanese men. These relationships bring them security and self-actualisation (Hoang and Yeoh 2015). Studies of internal migration within Vietnam show how double standards that remain deeply entrenched in migrants' lives regulate their lives. Social control is critical to ease anxieties about the corruptive effect of urban migrant destinations, with cities being popularly described as a social vacuum in which individualistic and hedonistic norms 'corrupt' the traditional and conservative values associated with rural areas. For instance, the sexuality of married circular migrants working in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi adapts to their pendulum circuits between the province and the city, and resists adversity, marital separation and exposure to liberal behaviours in the city. These migrants approach 'spousal separation, at best, as a boost to sexual bonds and intimacy and, at worst, as a source of sexual estrangement' (Nguyen, Hardesty and Hong 2013, 557). Other circular migrants invoke traditional village morality to resist the sexual appeal of the city in the case of women and to engage in occasional extramarital

sex to satisfy their sex drive without risking criticism in the case of men, therefore showing that the 'sexual discourses and norms of Vietnamese migrants are not easily uprooted by exposure to modern and open sexual views' (Nguyen, Hardesty and Hong 2011, 1203). Another study conducted with two groups of male migrants in Hanoi stresses the role of peer social control and socioeconomic factors in deterring or encouraging extramarital sex. Whereas men from the first group who were paid once a year and come from the same village refrained from engaging in extramarital sex to avoid being seen as extravagant, spendthrift and unable to fulfil their provider role back home due to rapidly travelling gossip, the migrants from the other group that were paid more frequently and who came from multiple villages engaged in extramarital sex because they could easily conceal sex-related expenses and avoid gossip (Bui and Kretchmar 2008). In short, with the exception of a few domestic workers in Taiwan, both internal and transnational Vietnamese migrants adhere strictly to the double standards embodied in their rural identity and adapt their gender and sexual practices to their social, economic and migratory circumstances. The case study of Vietnamese migrants in Savannakhet documented here further asserts their steadfast commitment to marriage, family and division of labour.

Context, sample and methodology

The study was conducted in Savannakhet, the second largest city of Laos with some 125,000 inhabitants, located in the central part of the country, bordering Mukdahan in Northeast Thailand. Savannakhet is connected by the East–West Economic Corridor stretching from Laos to Vietnam and Myanmar through Thailand, which drives the circulation of people, goods and ideas, but also anxieties about infectious diseases and exploitation (Doussantousse 2006; Haughton 2006). The nation's proximity to the booming economies of Thailand and Vietnam has brought about investment, trade and development and thus work opportunities for both Lao and Vietnamese workers.

The Vietnamese community has long been established in Laos. From the close of the nineteenth century onwards, French colonialists brought Vietnamese workers to labour as civil servants, miners, traders and plantation and construction workers (Duong 2014, 193–194). In present-day Savannakhet, the Vietnamese community comprises long-term residents and recent migrants who have lived in Laos for months or years and often come from Đà Nẵng, Huế, Quảng Bình and Nghệ An provinces in Central Vietnam. These migrants, who are the focus of this paper, seek opportunities in the Laotian labour market that faces a shortage of low-skilled workers. They consider Laos a better alternative than Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City where the labour market for low-skilled workers is saturated and living costs are high. In Savannakhet, men usually work as workers, mechanics and entrepreneurs in the construction, carpentry and welding sectors and women as hairdressers, seamstresses, petty traders and sex workers. Migrants enter Laos with Vietnamese passports under a visa exemption agreement that allows them to stay legally for 30 days at a time. However, many overstay and engage in employment activities that their visa status prohibits, thus becoming undocumented workers. Many Vietnamese perceive Laos as a cheap and easily accessible migration destination, but also as a developing country with poor education

and health services, and limited consumption and entertainment options. They refer to the alleged kindness and laziness of the Laotian workers to legitimise their presence. Their lack of fluency in the Lao language combined with social othering explains why, in social life, 'Lao is Lao, Viet is Viet. We do our things, we don't interfere with each other's business', as stated by Lành, a babysitter. These development differentials make Laos unsuitable for family migration and long-term integration.

Data for this paper come from an ethnographic study conducted in Savannakhet between June and August 2017. On the ground, a representative from the provincial Labour and Social Welfare Department and a Vietnamese food peddler facilitated the introduction to seven Vietnamese married male and female migrants with experience or involvement in extramarital relationships, irrespective of the time they had spent in Laos. In addition, 14 additional informants were recruited through snowball sampling using the same criteria. The sample comprises 21 Vietnamese migrants: 12 men and 9 women. Among the men, two had a wife in Vietnam but were living with a second wife in Savannakhet, two were living alone in Savannakhet after separating from their wife who stayed in Vietnam, one had separated from his wife and remarried a Vietnamese woman in Savannakhet, one had separated from his wife and re-joined her in Savannakhet, three were married but their wives were living in Vietnam, one was living with his wife in Savannakhet, one had a wife who was living with another man in Savannakhet too and one was married to a Lao woman. Regarding the women, two were separated living as second wives with a married man, one was a former second wife living alone in Savannakhet, three had quit their unfaithful husbands but re-joined them afterwards, one was living with her husband, one had become a migrant worker and sex worker after quitting her unfaithful husband and one was living with her husband and another man in Savannakhet.

Data were collected with the help of a Vietnamese research assistant through semi-structured interviews and discussions in Vietnamese, and *in situ* observations. Data collection proved at times challenging because it required approaching a hard-to-reach population to explore their socioeconomic profiles, biographies, experiences and views about migration, but also more sensitive topics like marital distress, extramarital relationships and separation. Despite spending considerable time recruiting and building trust with informants, some declined to discuss their personal lives, especially men who had been or were unfaithful to their wives. Moreover, the interview proved painful for one woman who burst into tears when she described her bitter experiences with men. These methodological challenges explain the limited size of the sample and representativeness of the findings. All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Preserving family integrity

Extramarital relationships with second wives drain resources from transnational households and pose a risk of marital disintegration. First wives address this risk by reasserting their commitment to marriage and family and their supremacy over sex workers and second wives. The stakes are high because temporary separation or divorce can leave them in a vulnerable position, especially if they remain in Savannakhet. In particular, they may struggle financially if they are heavily dependent on their husband's

income. Moreover, their resources may be negatively affected if their husband leaves with another woman without providing child support. Furthermore, women who have made their life in Laos may prefer to remain there rather than start from scratch in Vietnam. In this case, they may struggle to find a new Vietnamese partner in Laos where the Vietnamese marriage market is small in size.

As a result, first wives fight hard to safeguard their family integrity. Their first line of defence is the use of labelling in daily conversations to demarcate legitimate and illegitimate sexual partners and relationships. Women fall into three categories. The most respected figure is the *vợ chính* or 'official wife' who embodies the proper, respectable and domesticated housewife and mother, driven by *tình nghĩa* or 'love and obligation' for the family. The *gái làm tiền* or 'girl who makes money', meaning the sex worker, is looked down upon because she makes men *ăn bánh trả tiền* or 'paying for eating the cake'. She is considered a *tệ nạn xã hội* or 'social evil' and a *lôi thôi* (promiscuous) and *lười biếng* (lazy) *con đĩ* (or 'whore'). She bears the whore stigma as expressed by Hiên, a single mother from Quảng Bình who, after leaving her unfaithful husband, worked as an undocumented factory worker in Moscow and as a sex worker in Savannakhet. Hiên was concerned about her reputation, as 'honestly, this work makes my conscience struggle a lot. That's why I'm very afraid to go outside the house and meet other Vietnamese. Right now, I have a feeling of … I just want to be alone'. The *vợ hầu* or 'second wife' is perhaps a more controversial figure, if not less reviled. She is a *sắc sảo* (sharp), *dữ* (ferocious) and *hám* (greedy) woman who deceives men, drains love and capital from families and 'goes against our moral traditions', as stated by Mạnh, a circular migrant. Interestingly, the fact that some Vietnamese women become second wives as a result of painful separation and hardship does not soften people's criticism.

This system of classification also informs first wives' pragmatic approach to extramarital sex. First wives consider their husband's casual encounters with sex workers a lesser evil than long-term relationships with second wives. For Hiên, the sex worker,

> … if men go out and buy sex, that's fine. I tell you, I'm really understanding. I told my husband all the time that casual sex is fine with me, as long as he doesn't bring any disease back home and doesn't run away with another woman. (Hiên)

Hiên is willing to provide paid sex to men, a moral transgression that comes with a cost, but unwilling to become a man's second wife because, 'I would worry about their family, I don't want to jeopardise anyone's family'. Men preach this tolerance by stressing that *gái gú* or 'seeking sex workers' is not like *mèo mỡ* or 'taking an unofficial lover' and *bỏ vợ* or 'abandoning one's wife'. As stressed by Phong, a circular migrant worker,

> … for men, sex is of course a natural need. As a wife, you will understand that when your husband is away from home, that would happen. It's not about breaking fidelity, it's just something natural about being men. Men always have friends. And with friends, you of course go to *bia ôm* [literally 'hugging beer' outlet] places and so on. Wives understand that. (Phong)

This invocation of sexual double standards, particularly of men's need to fulfil their sex drive, portrays the sex industry as a safety valve against relationships with second wives. It reinforces male sexual privilege, the distinction between 'good' first wives defined by monogamous and reproductive sexuality and 'bad' sex workers stained by

deviant commodified sexuality, who nevertheless play a critical role in preserving family cohesion against the bigger threat posed by second wives who drain love and resources from the household.

First wives' attitudes towards second wives vary. Some are unaware of their husbands' liaisons in Savannakhet, especially if left behind in Vietnam. Others turn a blind eye so long as their husband provides. This was the case of Huy living in Huế, whose husband Đức had been living with Lành – a babysitter – in Savannakhet for years. When this extramarital relationship started, Đức informed his wife because 'you have to report everything'. Huy was unhappy about this liaison and blamed fate. However, she accepted it on the condition that Đức continued to provide and visit her regularly in Vietnam. She also visited him in Savannakhet and met Lành a few times. Hence, Đức dealt with his wife and public scrutiny by endorsing the provider role, because 'as a man, if you know how to arrange things, it will all be fine. If you don't, of course there will be complaints from others'. This turns material care tied to the provider role into currency for men's extramarital freedom.

However, a minority of first wives take a more aggressive approach to keeping their family, privileges and honour upon discovery of their husband's liaison. They express their agency by spying, threatening and denigrating him at times by confronting the second wife. Tiền, 49, a manicurist from Huế who followed her husband to Savannakhet after marrying in Vietnam, was preparing to give birth to her second child back in her hometown when she heard rumours that her husband Toàn – a construction manager – was *theo gái* or 'following another woman'. She followed him to 'where that whore lived',[1] caught them in bed and, instead of *đánh ghen* or 'making a scene of jealousy', she sent her brother-in-law to beat up the mistress. Soon afterwards, Toàn quit Tiền and moved into a hotel with his second wife. Tiền then moved to Ho Chi Minh City to work as a seamstress, leaving their children with her in-laws. During that time, she provided for them because Toàn's finances were drained by his 'whore who only wanted to date to dig money', as Tiền put it. In fact, she presented her separation as a strategic withdrawal because she was convinced that Toàn would return to her:

> I knew it would happen like that. If he fell for someone who had a proper job, was living a proper life … but here he went with a whore! A whore is only after money and will leave him sooner or later! (Tiền)

While waiting, Tiền presented herself as resilient and enduring by focusing on work and children, and by being sexually and emotionally loyal. Overall, first wives try to preserve the family integrity by endorsing the narrative about men's sex drives and tolerating their husband's encounters with sex workers, whom they despised. When this mechanism fails and men engage in relationships with second wives, first wives adopt different strategies that reassert gender double standards.

Negotiating polygynous arrangements

Husbands and first and second wives must show flexibility and compromise in handling extramarital relationships with second wives. Some of these relationships revive polygyny, or the union of one man to several women, a practice banished in Vietnam

that epitomises patriarchy but which has continued discreetly in cities (Bélanger 2004, 106). The husbands involved in polygynous arrangements are typically men who migrate on their own and leave their family behind so that their children may continue their education in Vietnam under their mother's care. Many of these men put down roots, obtain secure jobs and/or build affluent companies in Laos. While they may not initially intend to migrate permanently, many end up spending years in Savannakhet or straddling Vietnam and Laos. Some seek sexualised and romantic adventures away from home, a new household with a woman who provides domestic services and an enhanced status among male peers. They target Vietnamese women in a context where interethnic intimacy is limited, as they fear Laotian women for their presumed fierceness, possessiveness, greed and conservatism, and Laotian laws and customs which, in their opinion, favour women in cases of marital conflict (see Lyttleton 2000, 152–155, 215–218). Vietnamese husbands manage to keep multiple households by providing material support, communicating through the use of modern technology and making frequent visits to their wives. However, not all male migrants can afford a second wife. Low-skilled circular labourers who live in dormitories, work long hours as freelance workers and diligently save their earnings entertain themselves by drinking and going to karaoke and beer outlets without *chơi gái* or 'seeking girls'. As for the women who become second wives, they constitute a disparate group. While some are single migrants working in the service and petty trade sectors, the majority are wives who have joined their husband in Laos after months or years of separation and who have eventually separated from their spouses due to marital conflict and domestic violence. They often reject a married men's proposition to *cặp* or 'date' and become second wives if they have experienced betrayal, at least after a separation. With time, however, some attempt to rebuild their lives through polygynous arrangements.

Scholars debate whether polygyny is competitive or cooperative, knowing that wives occupy different positions in the internal household ranking and enjoy different rights (Zeitzen 2008, 125–127). The literature on Asia leans towards competition (see Lyttleton [2000, 175] on Thailand; Shen [2005] on Taiwan). In Savannakhet, Vietnamese first and second wives do compete yet also negotiate with each other. This was the case with Lành, 62, a poor single mother with two children from Huế who had previously been engaged to a married man, but who now babysits children for a living and lives with Đức, a married farmer aged 65 from Huế who works as a construction worker. Đức sends most of his earnings to his wife in Vietnam whom he visits quarterly. He covers half of Lành's rent and some basic expenses but does not support her financially, although he expects her to act as a housewife. Lành respects Đức's first wife, and even makes sure that he stays with her when she visits him in Savannakhet. However, she laments the unequal distribution of resources between them, when for her, *nhất là tiền, sau là tình*, meaning that 'money is first, then love'. This arrangement makes her unhappy: she complains about Đức's stinginess and her lack of status, bargaining power and ability to improve her situation. It seems to function as a form of cohabitation aimed at relieving loneliness and meeting practical needs rather than having a strong emotional and material base.

In other cases, affluent men reduce wives' rivalry by sharing resources equitably. This was the case for Cường, a successful construction manager aged 45 whose

separated wife lived in Vietnam with their two daughters. He lives with Hoa, a separated hairdresser aged 43 whose two sons are schooled in Vietnam. Cường describes himself as a *có nhiều vợ* or 'polygamous' man who has *hai cuộc đời, hai người vợ* or 'two lives, two wives', but stresses that,

> … with my wife in Vietnam, love doesn't exist between us any more. However, I won't terminate the relationship with her. As a man, I believe you should never abandon your wife, because you chose your wife in the first place. You can get more wives, but not abandon anyone. (Cường)

As a result, he supports his two families equally. In our discussions, he proudly describes the house he has built for his first wife in Đà Nẵng, the hair salon he has established for Hoa in Savannakhet and the house he is planning to build for her in Quảng Bình. Hoa appreciates Cường's material support and love for both herself and for her sons, who are both 'fond of him and love him like a father'. She wishes to reciprocate by having a son with him. She weighs up the pros and cons of her situation, the fact that she lives happily with a man who is still married to another woman, that she is fully supported but cannot lay claims to Cường's wealth in case of separation unless he divorces and marries her, and that their household status is illegitimate but constitutes a blended family to everyone's advantage. Despite their differences, the examples of Lành and Hoa stress the sensitivity of resource allocation between first and second wives in polygynous arrangements, the structuring of material and affective economies around a division of labour in which men are breadwinners and providers and women the recipients of men's support even though both Lành and Hoa work, and the concessions second wives must make regarding marital rights and social scrutiny.

An important aspect of polygynous arrangements is that they generate moral anxiety; in particular, second households are regarded as illegitimate and threatening. Husbands and wives negotiate acceptability and stigma in different ways, especially when any of them fall into illegitimate categories. Both husbands and wives play with labelling to *giữ mặt mũi* or 'save face'. Hoang (2016, 906) posits that Vietnamese domestic workers in Taiwan limit the damage that migration inflicts on them by 'playing along with the notion of a sacrificing and enduring mother, presenting themselves as victims, because that is what society expects of them, and their complicity in the reproduction and essentialisation of female subordination would be rewarded'. This applies to Lành who cohabits with Đức, as she deploys her subjugation to mitigate the stigma attached to her status as a second wife and to present herself as *đàng hoàng* or a 'proper' woman. She demarcates herself from 'bad' second wives who, in her opinion, threaten *gia đình công khai* or 'official families' by emphasising the lack of support from Đức:

> I don't take anything from him, 'she' [the first wife] has no reason to hate me. All the money he makes here, he gives to her. I feed myself … There's no reason for the people to gossip about me. They even feel sympathy for me because of my situation. Only if you become someone's second wife, and you dig money from the guy, then people would gossip about you. (Lành)

Husbands may also use 'strategic moralities' (Hoang 2016, 902) to preserve face. They are criticised – but tolerated – if they act as responsible breadwinners towards their

dependent wives and children. Cường, whose parents reject his 'two wives, two lives' philosophy, manages his insecurities by emphasising his generosity and role as provider:

> I often have a conversation with my conscience that whatever I do, I must make sure I don't feel ashamed of myself. It is impossible to be one who does no wrong … At some point, I must do all these things for both wives so that other people respect and admire a man like me. (Cường)

Đức on the other hand cannot use this trope because he provides limited support to Lành. Instead, he presents himself as a victim of his first wife's selfishness and greed to justify his lack of responsibility towards Lành. The need for husbands with multiple wives to emphasise their (in)ability to provide reinforces the domestic division of labour instilled in the happy family ideology. In sum, polygynous arrangements generate rivalry between wives and anxieties that men and women manage by negotiating and calibrating their expectations and constraints, but also by referring to and restating patriarchal ideologies.

Retreating from marriage

In an attempt to negotiate norms and expectations, some women retreat temporarily or permanently from marriage and embrace the roles of breadwinner, mother and household head. They live a life of singlehood with a strong focus on work and children. Celibacy is for them an alternative to failed (extra)marital relationships, marital conflict and domestic violence inflicted by 'evil' men who *chơi gái* or 'follow women' and *ăn chơi* or 'spend extravagantly' on activities like drinking and gambling, as stated by Tiền. This pessimistic perception informed the choice that Bảo, a manicurist aged 24 who arrived as a child in Savannakhet, made after years of failed relationships. She had three children from three men. The first was a boyfriend she planned to marry after an accidental pregnancy. He left her because his family wanted him to stay in Vietnam. She then met an older man. They married after two years, had a daughter and split a year and a half later. While recovering, she met another man who hid his marriage, behaved violently and used her meagre income to drink. They separated soon after having a child. In the end, Bảo raises her three children who have no birth certificates or supporting fathers. She has no money to send them to school. She is deeply disappointed with men and blamed her karma: 'I guess it's also my fault. I trusted people too much … I guess it's just my fate'. Like other women who struggle to find a suitable partner and rebuild their lives after one or various failed relationships, Bảo has lost faith in all men, but also in marriage as the cornerstone of family happiness. Instead, she places her and her children's happiness above everything else, emancipates herself from men's dependency and regains autonomy amid precarity and marginalisation.

This retreat from marriage does not necessarily imply sexual abstinence. In the case of Bảo, it leads to sexual commodification, as she occasionally provides sexual services to make ends meet. For other women, however, the retreat from marriage comes with sexual restraint. Bích, a food peddler who left her unfaithful husband after having endured domestic violence for years, decided to stay away from men because 'I'm scared to my bone of men already. I had an opportunity to remarry two or three years ago, but I'm already too scared of men now'. Whether sexually active or not,

these women add to the pool of Vietnamese single women who reject wifehood but re-assert motherhood and labour. A parallel between female migrants in Savannakhet and women who *không có con* or are 'childless' and are *ế chồng* or 'too old to marry' in Hanoi can be made. In Vietnam, these childless and unmarried women are criticised for not having secured a marriage in a timely manner and for their presumed egoism and bad temper. However, Danièle Bélanger (2004) shows that they ignore criticism and claim the right to free sexuality and to re-negotiate their femininity outside the bounds of marriage. They do so by embracing roles akin to those of wives and mothers, notably by becoming second wives and acting as surrogate mothers and caring daughters. What differentiates these single women in Vietnam and migrant women in Laos is that the former remain unmarried and become second wives whereas the latter are married and wish to withdraw from (extra)marital relationships. Their commonality is that they both reassert the centrality of the family outside marriage and attempt to build and sustain a meaningful life centred around motherly and productive roles. By doing so, they stress the importance of the family but contest existing norms and expectations about women's identity entrenched in double standards.

While the majority of affairs and polygynous arrangements involve married men and single or separated women, some involved married women and single, married or separated men. This practice has been noted for Vietnamese female domestic workers in Taiwan (Hoang and Yeoh 2015), but not in cases where migrant couples live together. In this study, two husbands retreated from marriage after a conflict with their unfaithful wife. Hoàng, 43, was a construction worker and occasional ice-cream seller from Huế. After a period of marital tension during which 'we quarrelled and smashed everything in the house', his wife started a relationship with a Thai man which eventually led to their separation. Since 2013, Hoàng lives by himself in Savannakhet and sends money to support his children in Vietnam. Regarding marriage,

> I have no interest in remarrying. Seeing sex workers is better. When I have money, I go see them. When I don't have money, I stay at home. Easy as that. I don't have to care about anything else. Women are like double edge swords. (Hoàng)

Paid sex allows Hoàng to fulfil his sexual needs, because 'it's like this … I'm a man, and I don't have a woman, so of course I lack something'. Vinh, a motorbike repairman who went through a similar process, made the same choice, but instead of visiting sex workers he has become addicted to online pornography. Both these men struggle to articulate their wives' decision to *có người khác* or 'be with someone else', particularly Vinh, who insists that his wife is still with him when in fact she has moved in with another man. Overall, their wives' actions tarnish their identity, which they compensate for by reasserting their role as breadwinner and care-provider for their left-behind children, and by claiming masculine sexual privileges such as paid sex and, alternatively, pornography. Like Bảo and Bích, they commit to the family and to their gender roles outside the bounds of marriage.

Conclusion

Numerous studies highlight the tension between tradition and change that characterises gender, sexuality and family formation in post-reform Vietnam. This tension is

visible in the urban epicentres of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City where the market economy has favoured women's emancipation and the spread of individualistic and pleasure-oriented norms and practices (Nguyen 2007; Nguyen Vo 2008; Rydstrøm 2006). However, contrary to popular discourses that portray the city as a social vacuum, the literature on migration and sexuality shows that the city does not easily uproot the gender and sexual ideologies held by rural migrants. Instead, internal migrants exhibit somewhat conventional behaviours, commit resolutely to marriage and family and reassert double standards that assign women to the role of chaste, dutiful and sacrificing wife and mother, and men to that of potent sexual being, breadwinner and provider (see Bui and Kretchmar 2008; Nguyen, Hardesty and Hong 2011, 2013). Studies on transnational migration equally highlight how patriarchal ideologies govern the lives of Vietnamese undocumented workers in Bangkok who 'look inward to find the sense of belonging that is crucial to them' and 'adhere to norms of "moral conduct" embodied in their rural identity' (Nguyen, Thanh and Resurreccion 2008, 377). For Vietnamese domestic workers in Taiwan, these norms transcend 'national borders to continue to regulate women's lives beyond the "bamboo groves" of their villages' (Hoang 2016, 995), except for a minority who transcend them by engaging in a vibrant sexual economy with lovers and patrons (Hoang and Yeoh 2015).

Our study about Vietnamese husbands and first and second wives in Savannakhet corroborates these findings. It shows that members of this community adhere to and reaffirm the double standards that inform marriage and family, two institutions they steadfastly commit to in a context of dispersal, except when failed (extra)marital relationships drive them towards a retreat from marriage. One important finding is that Vietnamese men and women establish polygynous arrangements, a practice that was common in (pre)colonial Vietnam and exemplifies gender inequality. It is impossible to determine the scale of these arrangements in Laos due to sample limitations and their specificity in relation to other migration flows within and beyond Vietnam. With the exception of the study of Vietnamese domestic workers in Taiwan (Hoang and Yeoh 2015), the literature on migration and sexuality in Vietnam addresses extramarital sex without disaggregating casual encounters with sex workers from more diffuse and lasting relationships with mistresses and second wives, which are also common in urban migration destinations in Vietnam according to my informants. Further research could shed light on this understudied topic based on the findings from this study.

Our research also addresses the anxieties raised by popular perceptions of cities as social vacuums and hotbeds for change, deviance and health risks. Like other border towns in Southeast Asia, Savannakhet is considered a hotspot of sexual exploitation and the transmission of HIV (Doussantousse 2006; Haughton 2006). Lyttleton and Amarapibal (2002) show that nightclubs, drink shops and roadside stalls in Savannakhet attract Thai sex clients in search of new and safe forms of paid sex at a time when the sex industry – especially brothel-based – is devalued in Thailand due to HIV. In other words, the border offers practical and symbolic opportunities to Thai men who wish to forge new forms of paid sex with exotic women outside of normative constraints (Lyttleton and Amarapibal 2002, 513). Our study reveals that Savannakhet is not a potent catalyst that overturns or liberates gender and sexual ideologies for Vietnamese migrants. Instead, This city is for them a rather small town –

as opposed to the giant epicentres of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City – where they congregate in specific 'localities' (Duong 2014, 208) scattered across town which comprise Vietnamese eateries, cafés, grocery shops, hairdressers, entertainment outlets and banks. In these settings, migrants reproduce Vietnamese life, socialities and modes of social control by interacting and forging labour and business bonds with compatriots from their *quê* or 'hometowns', speaking Vietnamese and eating Vietnamese food and engaging in casual sexual encounters and more diffuse liaisons with Vietnamese women exclusively. These localities serve as a safeguard against normative change and interethnic intimacy, but also as a signifier for reproducing gender and sexual ideologies.

Note

1. Tiên uses the vulgar and pejorative term *con đĩ* or 'whore' to express her contempt for and humiliation of the mistress, as an equivalent of 'bitch' in English.

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