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Single Working-class Women and the City in Java and Vietnam

Robbie Peters

The University of Sydney

ABSTRACT

Through investigation into the lives of single migrant women who work as department store salesgirls in Surabaya and Ho Chi Minh City, this paper suggests that while commonalities exist with regard to their controlled use of beauty in the workplace, their lack of time and disposable income, and the temporary nature of their right to live in their respective cities as migrants, there are significant differences between them. These differences run contrary to conventional stereotypes of the "outspoken" Javanese woman and the "servile" Vietnamese woman, which in turn are based on stereotypes of the bilateral Southeast Asian kinship tradition and the patrilineal East Asian kinship tradition respectively. Taking into account the forces for and against conservative gender relations in both societies, this paper suggests that it is the Vietnamese working-class woman who exercises more power over how she lives in the city.

KEYWORDS

Women; Java; Vietnam; sacrifice; city; salesgirls; beauty; work; sex; Ho Chi Minh City; Surabaya

Introduction: Female Absence

After years of revolutionary struggle that drew men from the home to the front, households of 1950s Java and Vietnam were predominantly female centred. Hildred Geertz (1959, p. 229) observed at the time that the Javanese household "rarely includes more than one able-bodied man", while Ho Tai Hue-Tam (2001, p. 168) observed that the Vietnamese household was a place of "female constancy and male absence". Today, by contrast, female absence characterises the household in Java and Vietnam. The feminisation of manufacturing and services in both countries since the late 1980s has drawn women into work in distant towns and cities. For Jonathan Rigg (2013, p. 11), this has freed them from domesticity within their natal households. Yet, work migration may also redomesticate young women as housekeepers, salesgirls, hostesses, hairdressers, manicurists, masseuses and waitresses for the growing urban middle classes (Firman, 1999; Nguyen, 2012). These occupations constitute the services sector: heavily feminised, it accounts for most of the workforce in urban Vietnam and Java, yet commands the lowest wages of all sectors outside agriculture (Suryahadi, Hadiwidjaja, & Sumarto, 2012, pp. 2011–2017; World Bank, 2013, p. 35). Low waged and struggling with the inflated costs of urban living, female service sector workers rely on the support of one another and the patronage of their employers and landlords to

CONTACT Robbie Peters robbie.peters@sydney.edu.au

stay in the city (Rigg, 2013, p. 15; Luong, 2009, p. 13; Peters, 2013, pp. 203–218). If these women enjoy the freedom of being able to "do things their mothers could not", as Rigg (2013, p. 11) suggests, then much of what they do involves significant suffering and sacrifice.

Sacrifice

In Vietnam and Java, suffering and sacrifice epitomise an idealised womanhood. The foundation of this womanhood is the renunciation of desire – what the Vietnamese term *hy sinh* and the Javanese term *prihatin* (which both translate into English as sacrifice, renunciation or suffering). In reference to *hy sinh*, John Schafer (2010, p. 152) writes: "No word in Vietnamese is more closely associated with womanhood". The most defining feature of *hy sinh* is what Merav Shohet (2013) considers its outward orientation through a woman's dutiful *performance* of submission and servility. The most defining feature of *prihatin*, by contrast, is what Suzanne Brenner (1998, pp. 180–182) considers its inward orientation through a woman's strengthening of her "inner self". For Brenner (1995, p. 29), this inward orientation makes it uncommon for a Javanese woman to "adhere to codes of outward behaviour", enabling her to enjoy what Ward Keeler (1987, p. 77) considered a freer play of language and emotion. Although Javanese women seem less constrained by outward codes of conduct than Vietnamese women, both maintain the authority of the patriarch: the Javanese woman by publicly challenging him and the Vietnamese woman by publicly submitting to him. Below I question this contrast, arguing that the challenge to patriarchy is stronger among single working-class women in Vietnam than in Java.[1]

Freedom made Feminine: Vietnam

Ideally, a Vietnamese woman submits to and serves the patriarchal family, never challenging it. Anthropological investigation suggests that her submission begins as a young girl in her father's home, where she is "continually assessed", and continues as a wife in her husband's home, where she "is surrounded by judges who measure her every step and note down her every gesture" (Rydstrom, 2001, p. 405; O' Harrow, 1995, p. 170). Dutifully performed, her submission expresses her debt to her parents for the burden of raising her: a debt she must pay in the here and now before she joins her husband's family to serve it (Marr, 1981, p. 193; Rydstrom, 2001, p. 403; Lainez, 2012). Capturing her transition from the authority of her father's family to that of her husband's family, David Marr (1981, p. 192) states that her life was "divided into childhood, marriage and widowhood, and she was to obey three masters in sequence – father, husband and eldest son".

The above simplifications ignore how Vietnamese women are "emancipating" (*thoat ly*) themselves from family by leaving home for work rather than marriage (Belanger & Pendakis, 2009, p. 281). Catherine Earl (2014, p. 172) notes that leaving home "has been a strategy for young [Vietnamese] women to evade traditional obligations and family responsibilities", while Nicolas Lainez (2012, p. 166) depicts it as the most effective way to combat the martial authority of the natal family, noting that "violence is only effective … if the daughter remains in physical proximity" to her parents. Even Helle Rydstrom (2006, p. 284), who gives the strongest examples of the socialisation of female subservience through family, admits that women who live in cities away from their families enjoy "adult free spaces … wherein they can practice their sexuality". Several scholars now recognise that

the single women who dominate migration to Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi are not just seeking work; they are also seeking autonomy through independent expressions of self that challenge rather than submit to the authority that others have traditionally exercised over them (Earl, 2014, p. 191; Gammeltoft, 2002, p. 479; Nguyen & Thomas, 2004; Nguyen, 2007, p. 287). Marriage, notes Earl (2014, p. 209), threatens this new-found independence, while no longer necessarily providing future security. The young woman's new-found independence in the city links to what Nina Hien (2012) identified as the self-beautification and self-making they pursue through the many photo portrait studios that have opened in Ho Chi Minh City since the liberal market reforms of the *doi moi* (renovation) period, and that give expression to an idea suppressed before the reforms that altering one's image alters one's destiny. Epitomising the neoliberal logic of the self-made subject, this desire to control one's destiny through portraiture forms what Hien (2012, p. 478) calls "a dramatic departure from the pre-market reform era, when the state 'owned' citizens".

Pham Thi Hoai's (1996) short story, "The Saigon Tailor Shop", captures this self-making young migrant woman. The protagonists in the story are the shop's seamstresses. Migrants from out of town whose stay depends on how well they can hold down a job in the city, these seamstresses appear to have little freedom of thought or action until they begin to playfully model the tailor shop's clothes in creative new ways that momentarily free them from the socialist and rural pasts of their mothers and the refinement of the Hanoi society around them. Their eclectic clothing combinations pay no respect to prevailing styles, producing a mock-up of style that is beautiful in its autonomy. Through its independent young seamstresses, "The Saigon Tailor Shop" captures an emerging tendency among Vietnamese youth to deliberately confuse codes of deference, and a strong tendency among Vietnamese young women to *not* defer to conventions (Sidnell & Shohet, 2013). This desire to not defer is apparent in the decision of young Vietnamese women to remain unmarried, a clear trend that Daniele Belanger (2004) reads as a direct challenge to the expectation that they can only achieve adulthood as wives and mothers.

David Marr (1981, p. 191) suggests that the Vietnamese woman's desire to escape submission has historical roots dating to the early twentieth century when it symbolised her people's desire to escape colonialism. Ho Tai (1992, p. 90) called this "the quest for freedom made feminine". Actress Le Van contemporised this quest in her autobiography, *Yeu va Song* (Loving and Living), which tells how she was forced to work hard and assume responsibility for her family because of her unreliable father. The book followed a standard critique of patriarchy captured in a scene of the 1992 film, *The Scent of Green Papaya*, in which the hard-working wife weeps as she opens the jewellery chest to find it empty, her husband having absconded with its contents, leaving her and the children in poverty. For Ho Tai (2001, p. 170), such impressions of female suffering demonstrate what she calls the "twin images of constant mother and unreliable father [that] continue to thrive in the contemporary Vietnamese imagination". By according female power to suffering, Le Van's autobiography sustained this critique of patriarchy, but went a step further by depriving it of its value as something to which women should defer. Selling out within days of its release, the book conveyed what Daniele Belanger and Katherine Pendakis (2009, p. 281) termed the young Vietnamese woman's strong desire to be "independent from one's natal family and, yet, not tied down and responsible for a husband, children and parents-in-law". Patriarchy was no longer worth the sacrifice. As a recent poem in the Vietnam daily *Tuoi Tre* (17 February 2014) portrayed, it had become repugnant – the patriarch and his

sons drunkards, whose liking for bars, cafes and brothels was destroying the family. The popularity of these critiques of patriarchy, and of the Le Van story more generally, is evidence of what Ashley Pettus (2003, p. 121) identified as a shift in power by the early 1990s from the self-sacrificing mother-in-law to the independent urban daughter-in-law, who she notes has "come to represent modernity's threat to … the inviolability of family bonds".

Untying oneself (*tu coi troi*) from family has been a rite of passage for Vietnamese women. As Ho Tai (2001, p. 169) notes, "the continuity of the male-centred lineage entailed discontinuity and rupture for women, who had to leave their natal families and were thrust into an alien and often frightening environment upon marriage". For the contemporary migrant workingwoman, however, discontinuity and rupture entail the discontinuity of the male centred lineage as she seeks to define herself through what Nguyen and Thomas (2004, p. 137) identified as new social relationships and new imaginings that challenge patriarchy. Whether through poems, bodies, personal interactions or places, Vietnamese women are creating what Stephen O' Harrow (1995, p. 170) called "spaces from patriarchy". I argue below that these are not the imaginative spaces that O' Harrow suggests women harbour in their own minds, but very public ones that they openly display.

Provocative Women: Java

In contrast to the ideal servility of the Vietnamese wife, the Javanese wife ideally gains power by challenging her husband to achieve what Suzanne Brenner (1995) called a "domestication" of his desire. Nancy Cooper (2000) offers illustration of this power through the flirtatious female singers (*waranggana*) of shadow puppet theatre (*wayang kulit*). Sitting near the male background musicians whom they attempt to provoke with sensualised bodily gestures, the *waranggana* resemble *widadari*, the temptress-goddesses of Javanese folklore, who test how worthy the hero is by how well he can control his desire for them. As Cooper (2000, p. 617) states, "[t]he goal is to test a man's ability to suppress his own emotions, whether desire, jealousy, or anger, and the prize is not the woman, but the greater goal of group preservation, unity and harmony".

When harmony (*rukun*) is not preserved, such challenge takes the negative form of seductive single women and divorcees who entice men away from their families. An example of this negative female power – and the saddest of all the biographies that Walter Williams (1991) compiled of Javanese people who had grown up after independence – was one such seductive single woman, "the singer". Unsuccessful in marriage, distrusted as a divorcee and left destitute without children, she explained her plight:

> …being a divorcee had created big problems for me. People used to gossip about me. They accused me of being a woman who liked to chase young men or entice away somebody's husband. My profession as a singer has a reputation of being cheap. (Williams, 1991, p. 115)

Stories of the forsaken divorcee are common in Java. One of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's (1976 [1952]) earliest writings, *Inem*, tells such a story. Inem, the main character, begins life as an *anak angkat*, a child whose parents give it to the care of a better-off couple. When Inem becomes a teenager, her biological parents return to claim the right to marry her to a man of their choosing, against her will and despite the protests of her adopted mother. Inem soon divorces her husband and returns to her adoptive mother, who cannot accept her back into the house because young men now board there. The social stigma of Inem living in the

same house as those men proved more powerful than the morality of accepting her back, leaving her without a family and making her outcast, even to the woman who raised her.

Twenty-five years after Pramoedya wrote *Inem*, the Indonesian feminist, Nurhayati Dini (2003), wrote *Janda Muda* (The Young Divorcee), a similar tale with a similar end. However, Dini's story was a much bolder and more controversial one than Pramoedya's because it was written and published in the wake of the Marriage Law of 1974. The law made divorce difficult for women, causing a sharp drop in its incidence and transforming the serial divorcer of Old Order village society either into a forsaken woman or into the modest and homely wife of New Order state discourse (Geertz, 1961; Peacock, 1968, p. 145; Robinson, 2009, p. 127; O'Shaughnessy, 2009).

The forsaken woman finds contemporary representation through the sensual, hip-gyrating *dangdut*[2] singer, who forsakes men and is forsaken by them. The lyrics and titles of songs by Melinda, a popular *dangdut* singer, capture this sense of forsaking and being forsaken. Her first hit, "One Night Love" (*Cinta satu malam*), about a one night stand, and her second hit, "Tired" (*Capek deh*), about her tiredness of both her boyfriend and her own loneliness, represent a young woman who does without strong social relationships. Reflecting on the female *dangdut* performers who sang and danced to his band's music each night in a Surabaya bar, a guitarist explained what he saw as the contending representations of seduction and loneliness in the persona of the *dangdut* performer:

> Her hip gyrating dance style seems like she's mimicking riding a penis. It could be that she's mimicking the sex that she desires but doesn't get because she's alone as a single girl in the city. Or maybe she's mimicking the sex that men only get by paying her for it … as when the audience member flicks money to her in exchange for a dance. I think it carries both meanings. But as you see of the fan base, it's mostly single, migrant working-girls of the factories and malls. They seem to identify with the *dangdut* performer.

Dangdut carries no clear meanings; instead it does what Paul Ricoeur (1967, p. 348) describes as "gives rise to thought". Celebrity Iman, Ainun Nadjib (2007, p. 12), said much the same when he referred to the posterior of controversial *dangdut* singer, Inul Daratista, as the face of all Indonesians in their struggle for control over women's bodies. Unlike the uniting body of Marianne of the French Revolution, which focused attention on her nurturing breasts, the divisive body of Inul focused attention on her enticing hips, buttocks and thighs: a lower stratum of female body parts that reflected society's lower stratum of women. The women of this lower stratum were prostitutes, domestic servants, salesgirls and factory workers: *dangdut*'s primary fan base and those Saskia Wieringa (2009, p. 22) aptly defined as "seen as deviant or abjected" (Robinson, 2009, p. 96; Weintraub, 2008, p. 367).

Like Inem, one could be either a wife, who worked to support a family, or a single woman, who threatened it by arousing its men. One was nurturing, the other enticing: two contrasting forms of femininity that were its only forms for lower-class Javanese women. Through her posterior, Inul represented the enticing form: weakening rather than strengthening men, it reflected what Barbara Hatley (1990, p. 188) saw as a new style of female lead in *ketoprak* theatre through the figure of a woman who is "glamorous and vivacious, direct and assertive of speech". Contemporary Indonesian cinema portrays a similar figure that Adrian Vickers (2012) terms monstrous because her glamour and self-assertion are threatening to men and destructive of social relationships.

Prescribed Beauty

The above examples point to an extramarital agency that challenges the family in Vietnam and threatens it in Java. In Vietnam, such agency is a positive and just form of power that challenges the inharmonious patriarchal family, whereas in Java it is a negative and unjust form that threatens familial harmony. For the single salesgirl of both places, however, such agency is limited by employer control of her beauty at work and the limited time she has to use her beauty in her own way outside work.

My interviews with salesgirls and their supervisors in Ho Chi Minh City and Surabaya suggest that these women are employed to attract customers through their beauty and that this beauty is heavily prescribed. A woman who supervises salesgirls in department stores in Jakarta and Surabaya explains:

> Marketers tell us during meetings that the sales data show that women sell more. This supports the philosophy we call *tarik* (attract). You attract customers and commission through *tarik*. But this attraction depends very much on beauty. At our annual general meeting in Singapore we learned that there is stagnation in malls because of a mall oversupply. This makes *tarik* even more important, because sales are more difficult to make now.
>
> We require that our salesgirls have at least a high school certificate and that they are attractive... They must glitter like a diamond. They must not, however, wear too much make-up or have shoes that are too high. They must have the right balance of beauty.

The use of attractive salesgirls follows a similar logic in Vietnam, as Khuat Thu Hong (2004, p. 126) explains:

> Since *doi moi*, most shops are privately owned and competition is intense. Shop owners believe that to increase sales, products must be marketed attractively to lure customers, which means hiring attractive, young sales attendants. Job advertisements for such positions often specify that applicants should be "attractive, friendly and between 18-25".

The salesgirl's beauty must have particular dimensions, as Thuong, a Shiseido salesgirl in Ho Chi Minh City, explains:

> The heels on our shoes must be no more than 5 centimetres. We must wear make-up, but not too much. Our teeth must be clean, our breath fresh; we must smile and we must not wear too much jewellery. What is important is that we must not be overdone. Everything must be exact.

Through prescribed beauty, salesgirls suppress rather than express themselves. Thuong, the Shiseido salesgirl quoted above, captured this idea of beauty as suppression when she explained that the tight uniform, carefully applied make-up and polite, attentive posture that she must put on for work every day was like "one of those big dragonheads of Vietnamese new year celebrations" that, although eye catching, weighed down its bearers, exhausting them. Thuong's experience echoed that of the "promotion girl" in Gerald Sages' (2013) recent portrait of work and life in Vietnam. Challenging the popular impression of a woman empowered by her ability to attract through her appearance, the promotion girl explains:

> Everybody thinks that being a promotion girl is so simple: just stand there and make the product look good. But it's not like that at all. For example even when the weather's cold like this, we have to stand there in our cold little outfits and our ten centimetre heels with the air conditioners blasting out cold air. After a while your legs are killing you! And no matter how tired you get you can't show it, you still have to smile for the customers... (Sages, 2013, p. 145)

Yet, as the promotion girl stressed, "appearance is only a small part of it; you've got to be clever and persuasive" (Sages, 2013, p. 143). Making the same point, Thuong, the Shiseido

salesgirl, emphasised that an essential ingredient of effective sales work was the skill to communicate, or *ky nang*. She defined this skill as being attentive, soft in voice and honest to customers, and contrasted it with the attempt to cajole (*du do*) of market women, who Ann Marie Leshkowich (2011, p. 283), in her study of them, describes as "talking nonsense" (*noi xao*). Despite attesting that *ky nang* has benefited her by turning her from a shy to a confident woman, Thuong also attests that it has burdened her by forcing her to feign patience and devotion and suppress the "take it or leave it" approach to selling that she considered her innate trait as a lower-class woman who had grown up in and around the cut and thrust of Vietnam's traditional markets.

Conveying a similar sense of sales work as suppression, a young woman from Sogo department store in Surabaya explained what it felt like to "glitter like a diamond":

> As a supervisor in Jakarta told you, we should glitter like a diamond to customers so as to attract them to us and then to the product. But glittering is hard work. It demands that you suppress your tiredness and ugliness with a mask of attentiveness and beauty. That mask is heavy to bear.

Salesgirls in Vietnam and Java attest to being weighed down by the prescribed beauty of sales work. Yet despite the limitations that beauty imposes on them in the workplace, they manage to take some control over it and to serve themselves rather than their employers with it. In Surabaya, for example, while seemingly conducting a sale, Sogo salesgirls would allow themselves to be wooed by supposedly wealthy male customers, who after spending a significant amount on jeans to demonstrate their wealth, would sweet-talk the girls into exchanging telephone numbers with them and agreeing to meet. The salesgirl's tendency to blur the line between beauty as service and beauty as self-gain was not unique to Indonesia. The Vietnamese promotion girl in Sages' book (2013, p. 146), for example, explained: "In this line of work it's really easy to meet 'powerful men'... And I know some girls will even provide additional 'services'". Thuong, who worked in a Shiseido store in Ho Chi Minh City's CBD, made similar observations, adding that salesgirls often formed serious relationships with such men and even married them. This convergence in the Javanese and Vietnamese salesgirls' use of beauty tends to diverge outside the workplace, where the Vietnamese salesgirl enjoys a more outgoing relationship with the city.

Single in the City: Vietnam

Vietnamese women enjoyed a rather open attitude to sex and premarital relationships, as Thuong attested through the following playful discussion she had with her Shiseido workmates:

> All the girls I work with have boyfriends. I started at Shiseido with about ten other girls. We all received training together. We got to know each other and joked around. On one occasion we were all standing around and someone said, "OK, who has had sex, you're not allowed to lie. OK you; have you had sex?" "Yes," replied the girl. They all replied "yes", except me. I was the only virgin among them. Another time we got a bag with a hole in the top and someone said, "OK, each one try to put your head through the hole. If you can't, you are not a virgin, if you can you're still a virgin". My head didn't go through. Another girl's head didn't go through but she denied being a virgin. "I've had sex; I have a boyfriend!" she said.

Thuong also showed me photos of herself in a rented room that she shared with four other young women. In a series of these photos, seven girls and three young men sit on the floor, talking, joking and eating. Four of the girls drink beer. Thuong explained that she and her

friends spent most of their time at home like this, but on occasion rode their motorbikes to parks, cafes or cheap restaurants, where they would congregate with each other or with male friends until late into the night. In photos of their night-time outings they dress in tight, revealing clothes and rub side by side with their friends and boyfriends, while in their stories of the night – whether of the ride home from work or the time out with friends – they note the cuddling and smooching love-makers that they see in the city's parks. Such experiences and impressions of the city express Thuong's familiarity with new norms of sexual maturity that Nguyen and Thomas (2004, p. 141) call the "emerging focus on bodily pleasure rather than bodily discipline", and Tine Gammeltoft (2002, p. 479) calls the "intimate erotic encounters [that] are routine features of daily public life" in the city for young women and their boyfriends.

Opportunities for such engagement with the city were limited, however, by the demands of sales work. The promotion girl cited above highlighted the reason why, stating: "I'm super busy with school and work... I can feel my friendships fading away because I've got no time to hang out with my friends anymore" (Sages, 2013, p. 145). In my account elsewhere of the life of Thuong, the above-mentioned Ho Chi Minh City salesgirl, I made similar observations, noting how low pay, long shifts and a long commute left her little time or money for leisure, friends or family (Peters, 2012, p. 562). Cases such as these suggest that the young Vietnamese woman's new-found profile as single and independent may be imposed on her by the demands of work and life in the city rather than simply being a desired state that she seeks from patriarchy.

Thuong explained to me more recently how her long hours of work, low pay and the high cost of urban living limited the time and money she could give to her family:

> There was no way I could help my family, especially in the first few years when I struggled to find rooms to share or stable work, or when I worked in quiet stores where sales were low... If the [customer base] is strong, then maybe women can send money home. But I never knew of many Shiseido salesgirls sending money home, even when business was good. Most of the girls had begun their own serious relationships, leading perhaps to marriage, for which they were saving, making it unlikely that they'd be able to support distant parents. Aside from having to save for marriage, salesgirls have to pay for food, rent and motorbike [running costs], which keep going up [in price] due to the rapid inflation [in food, fuel and housing costs] over the past couple of years.

As Pettus (2003, p. 121) notes, "[l]eft behind in the village, many aging mothers (and fathers) have become an economic and moral burden for their upwardly mobile, urbanised children". Thuong gives an example of how this burden affected her on her return home for New Year celebrations during her first year of work:

> On the first day back for New Year 2006 I finished all my money [on contributions to parents and relatives' children], leaving me stranded at home with no money to do anything. After that experience, my older sister agreed with me that returning home was a [financial] burden on me and that I should only return when I wanted... After that I did not return for New Year and [instead] returned about every two months [her family home was a 3-hour motorbike ride away], offering my father about US$10–15 each time.

Thuong's stated bimonthly contribution to her father was from an average monthly salary of around US$150 and by far the smallest of her costs: dwarfed by the $30 she spent on rent, $50 on food, $25 on motorbike running costs, $50 on English classes, $25 on clothes and shoes [mostly for work] and $10–15 on recreation with friends at food stalls each month. This small contribution contrasts with the 50–80 per cent that Taiwanese daughters contributed

of their salaries during their country's industrialisation, and which Diane Wolf (1988, p. 97) saw as setting them apart from Javanese women, who contributed far less if any money to their parents. For Thuong and her workmates and roommates, they were neither willing nor capable of following this Taiwanese or apparently more East Asian model of filial piety through great financial contribution to one's parents.

As a migrant, Thuong not only had limited contact with or obligation to her parents in the countryside, but also had limited contact with or obligation to those around her in her neighbourhood. The only obligations of her residence in the city were to give her landlord rent and provide copies of her identity for surrender to the police for their records. This did not make her a formal resident of the city. To be such, her landlord would have had to include her in his family registration book of those who lived under his roof: a costly and time-consuming process that would also make her more difficult to evict (Luong, 2009, p. 14). Like most migrants to Ho Chi Minh City, Thuong remained without a residency permit for the city (Rigg, 2013, pp. 15–16). Seen by the neighbourhood's permanent residents as one of the many anonymous migrant workingwomen who returned late at night to their rented rooms, Thuong was unknown to organisations such as the Vietnam Women's Union, a conservative state-sponsored body that tried to instil virtues of motherhood and sacrifice in women through community events. As Pettus (2003, p. 103) noted of such events in central Hanoi, "they have largely been confined to the leisured elderly. Younger women have neither the time nor the inclination to participate". Such was the case for Thuong. However, she was not only without the time or inclination to participate; she was also without the residential status to enable her to participate or make her known to local Women's Union organisers.

According to Steven O' Harrow (1995, p. 171), Vietnamese women now ask the pointed question, "Who is there to suckle us?" Yet, unlike the estranged young men of South Africa that James Ferguson (2013) saw as desperately seeking paternalism to protect them from the insecurity of the free market, Shiseido salesgirls were sceptical of paternalism. For these salesgirls, paternalism took the form of what Ara Wilson (2004, p. 190) called capitalism's "intimate realm" of malls run as family businesses that care for their workers as parents care for their children. As with the first British department stores, the intimate realm collapsed when the "paternalistic promise" that held it together was broken (Lancaster, 1995, pp. 146–147). The fragility of the intimate realm was exposed in early 2012 when Shiseido salesgirls in Ho Chi Minh City staged demonstrations against their employer for owing them two months' pay (DTI News, 28 March 2012).

Le Hoai Anh, the Vietnamese woman who owned and ran Shiseido's Ho Chi Minh City stores through her Thuy Loc Company, was the target of the protests. A salesgirl employee explained Le Hoai Anh's paternalistic methods of managing staff:

> For New Year or her birthday she would put on company parties where staff would mingle with her and her brother. When it came to payment of our salaries, however, she was not so generous: often she paid our salaries days or even weeks late and/or not in full. Often she or her family members would come in for free massages and cosmetic treatment; often she or her brother would come in gesticulating and upset, probably because the store was in debt, and demand that we work harder; other times she would make us pay for any lost or damaged stock or [unaccounted for] money. Now all that has changed as the Japanese have resumed control of the stores. They pay us on time, demand nothing free from us and provide us with more training.

In their ensuing protests, Shiseido salesgirls targeted the paternal contract, which they personified through representations of Le Hoai Anh's face, body shape and personality as bloated and pig-like. Demonstrating the power of ridicule, Shiseido salesgirls distributed to the public caricatures of Le Hoai Anh against a background of luxury and photos of her company's male managers huddled together in consultation about how to deal with the protestors. In other photos, a young protesting salesgirl presents to the camera the bowl of cheap instant noodles she is eating while another girl does the same with a yeast bun and another pretends to cry as she displays a sign that refers to Le Hoai Anh using the word "cheat". A fellow protestor explained that these gestures intended to show that the company's gluttonous and conspiring managers had forced meagre diets onto the salesgirls by withholding their salaries and their rights. On the street outside their workplaces, the salesgirls were more explicit, holding banners that read: "Le Hoai Anh used and abandoned her employees"; "pay us our salaries"; and "we're not the slaves of Le Hoai Anh". Rather than target Shiseido Japan for threatening to shut the stores, the protestors targeted Le Hoai Anh and her managers. For these protesting salesgirls, the paternalism of Le Hoai Anh's intimate realm had failed them and failed her.

Single in the City: Java

Javanese salesgirls seem to enjoy less freedom outside work than their Vietnamese counterparts, as the following account by Anita, a 22 year-old salesgirl in a Sogo department store in Surabaya, suggests:

> Me and my female friends usually only get together in each other's rooming houses... Sometimes we'll leave the city on the weekend and ride our motorbikes out of town... If we have a boyfriend he'll be an old school friend or a work mate. You see them waiting outside the malls each night to take us home. But they never enter our rooming house and we never enter theirs. We might go to a movie with our boyfriend or walk together in a mall, but not for long. If you see us with men on long outings, they'll be family members or work mates on work excursions funded by the company. There is really nowhere in the city – not in our rooming houses, nor on the street – to be with men. Maybe that's why we leave the city for recreation.

In Surabaya's inner urban neighbourhood of Dinoyo, Anita shared a room in a rooming house with three other girls. Box-like and dingy without any windows, her room was typical of those in the more than 40 rooming houses that had been built over the past 10 years in her neighbourhood of about a thousand people. Anita's cramped room was the main gathering point for herself and her roommates, who did not stay out in the alley throughout the night like the neighbourhood's men or during the day like the mothers who cared for their children instead of working, or the grandmothers who were too frail for work. These mothers and grandmothers were sometimes part of the Family Welfare Program, or *Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga* (PKK), established under the New Order in 1974 to promote birth control, hygiene and domestic education programs in the kampungs. Considered by the early 1980s by women in the Jakarta kampung studied by Allison Murray (1991, p. 78) and in the central Javanese kampung studied by Diane Wolf (1992, p. 71) to be the monopoly of an arrogant minority of mostly older women intent on securing positions of influence within the official neighbourhood administration, the PKK was by the late 1990s, in the Surabaya kampung of Dinoyo in which Anita lived, little more than a small group of old women whose rotating credit groups, prayer meetings and advice to young mothers had become

unnecessary official duplications of activities other women already conducted (Peters, 2007, pp. 258–260). Given its marginality to the lives of kampung women, it is unsurprising that Anita was not involved in the PKK.

Anita was a migrant without permanent residence in Surabaya who had to surrender her identity details to the neighbourhood official for him to record and then present to the police when they conducted identity checks on the neighbourhood's rooming house residents. She was also a low-paid workingwoman without the money or time to engage in the kampung. With a monthly salary of around A$200, most of which was spent on rent, food, toiletries and motorbike running costs, Anita had little to put aside, noting that she usually had to borrow money from friends or pawn a belonging to meet the sudden expense of repairing her old motorbike when it broke down or paying a medical bill when she got sick. Anita's lack of time or money to spend on herself in the city also extended to her family in the countryside, who received no remittances from her and benefited only by way of what Diane Wolf (1988, p. 96) considered the indirect contribution of her being able to take care of her own cash needs. While Anita's salary enabled her to be financially independent of her family, it was insufficient to enable her much of a life outside work. Like the Javanese migrant factory worker interviewed by Johan Lindquist (2009, p. 53) who was "[un]able to buy the commodities she makes", Anita was unable to buy the commodities she sells. Whether producing or appearing in the commodities she desires, the Javanese workingwoman was as restricted outside work by the meagre wage it provided as she was inside work by the discipline of the shop floor or factory. As Lindquist (2009, p. 52) noted, the restrictions outside work bothered these women more because they denied them the freedoms that they hoped work migration would bring.

Apart from a lack of time, money and permanence in the city, another reason for the salesgirl's limited engagement with the city might be explained by what Siti Aisyah and Lyn Parker (2014, p. 211) have recently described as the Islamic belief that "sex, before, outside or after marriage is a major sin (*zina*)". Despite being Muslims, albeit of the nominal variety, Anita and her friends did not consider such sex to be a sin. Yet, they did feel constrained by what they considered such views in the wider society. When coupled with the 1974 Marriage Law and increased gender conservatism under the New Order, such conservatism contributed to what Aisyah and Parker (2014, p. 218) best describe as a social and discursive environment in which the "category of single, adult woman does not really exist in Indonesian society". Lacking acceptable social categories or spaces through which to explore sex before marriage, young single working-class women such as Anita were forced to conceal it through what Linda Bennett (2005) considered the secrecy of back alley love affairs that take place in the shadowy recesses of alleyways in Indonesia's smaller towns or the fringe areas of its larger cities, where young couples retreat to hold hands, hug and kiss.

Such liaisons are not the only forms of sexual contact between young couples in Indonesia. Joko, a go-between who introduces his many single female friends to interested men, emphasised the naivety of assumptions of Javanese sexual conservatism. Over 20 years of living in the rooming houses of Surabaya's inner city kampungs has provided him with a rich knowledge of the ways men and women can sexually engage, as he explained:

> If you think that men and women are not as sexually active because they don't display it as openly as in other countries, then you're naïve. There are many ways people can engage in sex, even though they cannot formally cohabit or mingle in rooming houses. Firstly, as you remember of the many rooming houses in which I have lived, the landlord's oversight is lax

> and it is easy for people of the opposite sex to enter. Secondly, men and women have developed ways of having sex in public places that would be frowned upon in the West or other more "open" Southeast Asian countries. For example [producing an internet image of a hijab-clad woman having sex on a motorbike], women can sit discretely like this on motorbikes in public and be [sexually] penetrated by their boyfriends. In similar ways, they can lie with their boyfriends under bridges on riverbanks, such as the one behind Delta mall, and be penetrated. Aside from the roaring trade that hotels make from couples – and that, as you know, any taxi driver or hotel security guard or receptionist can tell you about – there are sugar-cane fields and forested areas in the hinterlands that people use to have sex. In fact, then, there are more ways to have sex in Indonesia than elsewhere.

Joko's point here is strong: that concealment does not mean non-existence and that apparent sexual conservatism spawns very intimate public sexual encounters. As Lindquist (2009, p. 60) has argued, conservatism can act as a cloak for sexual agency. Such agency, however, does not challenge social norms as it does in Vietnam: relying on concealment, the sexual agency of Javanese women preserves rather than challenges those norms.

As the above-mentioned song titles by *dangdut* singer Melinda suggest, the independence thrust on single working-class women does not bring a desire for paternalism, or a challenge to it: instead it brings a deep ambivalence about it. This ambivalence contrasts the popular discourse on female struggle in Indonesia epitomised by the vocal protests of female factory workers, the highly publicised struggles of female domestic servants and the public rallying cries of middle-class women against sexually conservative fatwas (Ford, 2003; Robinson, 2009). Regina, who worked as a salesgirl in Sogo department stores in Surabaya and Jakarta, represented ambivalence through *dangdut* music. For her, *dangdut* had nothing to do with the freedom of expression that women called for in demonstrations against conservative fatwas (Weintraub, 2008, p. 381; Robinson, 2009, p. 119). As she stated, "dangdut was about abandonment: where is the freedom in that?" *Dangdut* expressed abandonment through what Sandra Bader (2011, p. 352) called "flow": the point where dancer and audience member draw together and then pull away. A fleeting moment of attraction and rejection, it requires the protagonists to "let go" of themselves and one another. Regina explained that this process of letting go reflected a severing of relationships and a feeling of what young Indonesians call *galau*, or "disorientated and lonely due to an emptiness of heart [that comes] from being without the relationships of sharing that fill one with comfort, security and warmth".

Galau expresses the fear of nothingness that is brought about by the severing of relationships. Goenawan Mohamad (1994 [1991], pp. 10–11) captured this fear through his short story, "Family", which points to how the weakening of filial bonds is part of a movement towards greater freedom from authoritarianism. Yet, as he states:

> The movement contains a certain fear, and this fear brings a demand for protection. And so people create a series of symbols.
>
> In this giving of symbols we call our country a "family". At the head is the "father" (*bapak*), usually the king or the head of state. It is as though we are able in this way to replace something that is lost when we "separate" and become our own selves.
>
> …
>
> The end of a system based on kinship can therefore open the door to a new dawn, where people do their duty, die, are cursed or praised because of themselves. Family and group are only a trace.

For Mohamad, this fear of nothingness occurs during periods of political transition as people move from the certainties of authoritarian rule to the uncertainties of freedom from that rule. Prominent Muslim figurehead and opponent of New Order authoritarianism, Abdurrahman Wahid, alluded to this fear during the violent transition to democracy in late 1998 when he urged the Indonesian people to "move forward, and not tremble" (*Surabaya Post Online*, 18 October 1998). Moving without fear into the unknown was difficult for many women who had experienced the violent coming to power of General Suharto in 1965/66. As an old woman recalled of the massacres that brought him to power, "our [women's] lips were sealed by that violence" (Pohlman, in press). The suddenness of women's silence was startling: from the thousands strong demonstration led by Gerwani (Indonesian Women's Movement) in the centre of Surabaya on 27 September 1965 to the exodus of women from the organisation after it was implicated in the supposedly communist-backed murder and castration of six generals and a lieutenant on 1 October 1965, the women's movement had gone from vanguard to villain, never recovering an organised political voice (*Surabaya Post,* 29 September 1965; 28 September 1965; 1 October 1965; 18 October 1965). The sudden and violent elimination of the communists that resulted, in the words of John Roosa (2006, p. 23), "restored women to submissiveness in Indonesian society", giving rise to what Aisyah and Parker (2014) consider the discursively non-existent single woman in Indonesian society (Wieringa, 2002; Vickers, 2012; Robinson, 2009).

In his compilation of the life stories of people who grew into adulthood or old age under the New Order, Walter Williams (1991, p. 74) suggests that "[t]he three constants for nonelite Javanese women are marriage, motherhood and work". The salesgirl disrupted these constants with another: the single woman. Based on the female work migrants he studied on Indonesia's Batam island, Lindquist (2009, p. 7) identified an ontology of the single woman as one pervaded with strong feelings of "not yet": not yet modern (*liar*), not yet settled (*merantau*) and not yet up to the conservative standards of home (*malu*). Joshua Barker and Johan Lindquist (2009, p. 55) identified a similar experience for the overseas Indonesian maid as someone "caught somewhere between … [the] extreme possibilities that revolve around her". Martin Heidegger (1977, p. 105, p. 106) termed this somewhere between "the nothing of anxiety". He states: "The nothing does not merely serve as the counterpoint of beings … [but] belongs to their essential unfolding as such". The salesgirl demonstrates that feelings of loss and ambivalence fill this world between and that her anxiety stems not from her essential unfolding or becoming, as Heidegger would have it, but from what she becomes. Her anxiety is a fear of becoming the independent single woman she already is. Faced with biographies such as that described above by Williams (1991) of the once attractive singer who is now a destitute old lady, the salesgirl had the courage to be but not to become a single woman: it was this fear of becoming that produced her anxiety and ambivalence.

Facing these anxieties with what philosopher Paul Tillich (1952) called "the courage to be", a group of mostly single young women from Surabaya formed a walking club that they hoped would introduce them to the city and the city to them. The club's founders noted that their reasons for starting the club stemmed from their dismay at the bifurcation of the city along class lines – which they saw as epitomised by the development of West Surabaya as a wealthy zone of its own outside the rest of the city – and its bifurcation along gendered lines – which they saw through women's underutilisation of the city's streets and parks.

Subversion (2013), a short book they put together on walking Surabaya's streets, outlined how gender and class determined one's freedom to navigate the city. Comparing Royal Plaza, where "a lot of people dress modestly and unassumingly" (027), and Galaxy mall, where people wear "clothes like … [hotpants] to look sexy", they note:

> …[at] Galaxy we see more skin displayed, which might not be comfortably displayed in some other places in Surabaya. Perhaps this has to do with security in the malls, because Galaxy is one of the stricter malls in Surabaya regarding entry-exit control… To some extent this precludes certain classes from entering Galaxy mall, and thus gave the impression of "safety" to some of the visitors. No need to worry about being groped or wolf-whistled here because, after all, so many others are wearing similar clothing (031).

It seemed the only way women could escape Surabaya's more gendered spaces was to exit the city by entering Galaxy mall, which was located in a wealthy and guarded space unspoiled by the gendered strictures of the wider city. Walking club members wanted to prove that they could engage public space without the need for such isolation and security: a feat they seemed to achieve. Yet, as one of the club's founders suggested:

> While all I can complain about is a wolf-whistle now and then, walking the city is uncommon for women. It can be common though. That it is not, I suppose, is a problem. The same can be said for women sitting in street-side cafes and dressing as they like in public. It is uncommon.

Walking club members had partially claimed what David Harvey (2008, p. 23) called the "freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves". Yet since it was limited to a small group of members, their claim was partial because, as Harvey notes, such freedom to remake is only achievable when it is "a common rather than an individual right … [that] depends upon the exercise of a collective power". As walking club members attest, their approach to the city was uncommon and, thereby, a problem.

Conclusion

There are three commonalities to the Vietnamese and Javanese salesgirl experience: firstly, their beauty is a prerequisite for work that mostly limits their agency; secondly, their low wages, high urban living costs, busy work schedules and temporary residential status limit their engagement with the city; and thirdly, their struggle to support themselves in the city restricts the time and money they can give to their families in the countryside, weakening family ties and increasing their independence. Why then does the Vietnamese salesgirl, given these similar experiences, emerge as the one who occupies a greater space from patriarchy – despite also being a member of apparently more patriarchal societal and kinship structures that restrict young women, as well as a member of an authoritarian state that exercises more control over its citizens than democratic Indonesia does? This paper attempts to answer this question with the suggestion that the patriarchal family is being challenged in Vietnam by the appearance of increasingly independent women, opening the door to "freedom as feminine", an old Vietnamese concept that reappears in the present. In Java, by contrast, the decline of the authoritarian state has brought to the female experience a sense of ambivalence: a sense that unlike her Vietnamese counterpart, she cannot yet transform herself and her society with the challenging independence she experiences.

Notes

1. This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork of five months in Jakarta and Surabaya and five months in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) between January 2010 and October 2014. The fieldwork was conducted in and around the living and workspaces of saleswomen. These spaces were the dormitories around Pondok Indah in Jakarta and the lower-income neighbourhoods of Dinoyo and Kaliasin in Surabaya, and Tan Binh in HCMC. The workplaces were the Pondok Indah mall of Jakarta, the Tunjungan, Delta and Galaxy malls in Surabaya and the Tax Centre plaza, Maximark plaza and several Shiseido stores in HCMC. Most of the women in the Indonesian case study worked for the Sogo international department store chain in Surabaya, while the women in the Vietnamese case study worked for the Shiseido Japanese cosmetics chain in HCMC. The primary methods of investigation were participant observation in the neighbourhoods, informal interviews and observations of women's work in the department stores.
2. Played by men and popularised in the 1970s by the heavy rhythmical beat of the *gendang* drum and the whining sound of the *suling* flute and electric guitar, *dangdut* mixes Arabic, Malay, Indian and popular musical forms and often includes an erotic female dancer/singer in the foreground.

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