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## Interrogating Dislocated Masculinities and HIV Vulnerabilities: A Case Study of Vietnamese Migrants Workers in Southern Laos

*Interroger les masculinités disloquées et les vulnérabilités au VIH. Le cas des travailleurs migrants vietnamiens au Sud Laos*

**Souvanxay Phetchanpheng, Pascale Hancart Petitet, Tam Nguyen and Nicolas El Haïk-Wagner**

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# Interrogating Dislocated Masculinities and HIV Vulnerabilities

## A Case Study of Vietnamese Migrants Workers in Southern Laos

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### INTRODUCTION

Since the opening of Laos to the market economy in the 1990s, migratory phenomena have taken place from the village to the city, but also from rural areas to other rural localities. These mobilities are driven by the population relocation policies carried out by the government and by the economic attractiveness of certain regions. Numerous roads construction, hydroelectric projects and the thriving agribusiness and mining sectors have attracted migrants from China and Vietnam, often at the expense of local populations. In northern Laos, and particularly in

the Economic Quadrangle, a transnational area roughly corresponding to the Golden Triangle, few villages benefit from the economic expansion of the region. The commercial market is largely dominated by Chinese entrepreneurs and local people have a minimal commercial role. Through their transnational networks, Chinese businessmen and corporations are the main beneficiaries of the economic benefits of the North-South Corridor linking Kunming (Yunnan, China) to Bangkok (Tan 2014). In the district of Tonpheung for example, the construction sites (road, casino, hotels, etc.) of the “Golden Triangle” special economic zone started in 2008 offered few jobs to Laotian people. The majority of workers on these sites are Burmese and Chinese (Tan 2014). Similarly, the vast rail construction site started in the north of the country, which will connect by 2021 China with Laos, has drained about 5,000 workers, most of whom are Vietnamese and Chinese nationals. For this scheme, part of Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative, only a small number of Lao workers, perceived as less skilled, have been employed.<sup>1</sup> The work opportunities offered to the younger Lao generation are consequently often limited to agrarian work and to occupations in the civil service. This intensification of cross-border migrations in the Great Mekong region has mostly been examined through the lens of border control and state sovereignty, but little is known about the lived experiences and trajectories of these Vietnamese and Chinese migrants (Molland 2017). These mobilities undertaken in a context of socio-economic vulnerability may create new economic opportunities, but also new marital situations for couples and families. Indeed, these situations offer renewed sexual encounters for married male migrants, while heightening vulnerabilities to infectious diseases, among which HIV. This paper analyses these issues through an ethnographic fieldwork among Vietnamese migrant workers in southern Laos, in the city of Savannakhet. We mobilise the concept of *dislocating masculinity* (Cornwall & Lindisfarne 1994) to explore within our field of research and from a broader perspective the question of embodiment, agency and the relation between masculine styles and social contexts. Increasing transnational mobilities have indeed shaped new forms of bodily, sexual or affective intimacies intrinsically tied to power, gender, race, class and structural socio-economic factors, which must be understood in their historical, social and cultural context. Intimacy, emotions and sexuality have long been neglected in migration studies because of the overwhelming paradigm of political economy whose equation of migrants with workforce left little space to the study of their affective, romantic and sexual desires and identities. Feminist, post-colonial and queer epistemologies and the increasing feminisation of migrations in the past decades have brought back these topics, pushing scholars to call for a “sexual turn” in the study of migration (Mai & King 2009).

## OUR RESEARCH

From 2016 to 2018, we conducted the project entitled “Migration, Mobilities and HIV/STI Vulnerabilities. An Interdisciplinary and Community Based Participatory Research in Lao PDR”. Our research aimed at documenting the close ties

between individual migration trajectories, processes of social change and infectious vulnerabilities. Within this project, a sub-study explored the determinants of migration and the modus operandi affecting the social integration of male Vietnamese migrant workers in the Lao community. This research questions how those men construct new modes of conjugality and nuclear family in this new social environment. In 2016-2017, Pascale Hancart Petitet conducted meetings and interviews with health stakeholders and caregivers working in the field of HIV and AIDS in Vientiane and in Savannakhet in order to get overall information about the access of foreign migrants to HIV prevention and treatment. She also met the representatives of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labour on sites in order to get the required local authorisation for implementing data collection. Then field observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in Vietnamese by a Vietnamese junior researcher, Tam Nguyen, from June to August 2017 in Savannakhet. At first, as it is usual in Laos and already described (see for example Hancart & Sychareun 2018) the implementation of this research faced various challenges. Tam had been given the authorization to conduct formal interviews at the construction site identified as the “field” by authorities, with the workers chosen and presented to her by the Lao government officer assigned for this research. She wrote in the field notes:

The officer took out a letter from the authority, talked for about 4-5 minutes, and the workers only nodded. Could they say “No” to a Lao government officer when they themselves are in such vulnerable position? Most likely not. In fact, nobody did.

Ultimately, while being settled in Savannakhet, Tam succeeded in building networks and friendships with Vietnamese men and women. Also, a provincial civil servant from the Labour and Social Welfare Department and a Vietnamese food peddler introduced her to Vietnamese male and female migrants working in Laos. She conducted in-depth interviews with 21 participants (12 men and 9 women) in some bars, nightclubs, restaurants and participants’ homes.

Data collection for this fieldwork proved challenging. We were faced with the same difficulties that Hoang and Yeoh report in their exploration of female migrants’ sexual careers in Taiwan, with a number of informants not willing to share their experience or not showing up for interviews and overall “strategies of avoidance and aversion” (Hoang & Yeoh 2014: 596). Hence, despite a significant involvement to recruit, build rapport and establish mutual trust with informants, a number of them declined the interview invitations or were reluctant to discuss in-depth the facts of their past and present intimate lives. “Everybody minds their own business” was an answer we frequently heard. A number of informants also tried to “save face” during interviews as self-image was often implicitly at stake. In the context of a relatively small community, where extramarital sexual encounters carry a high moral burden, informants were frequently pushing these stories into the background. The difficulties we experienced are also related to the specific channels through which narratives about sexuality, romantic and extramarital affairs are conveyed. Stories about migrants’ engagement in sexual

or extramarital affairs circulate through gossips and inside jokes within the Vietnamese community, especially within male homosocial circles. It therefore proved difficult to dissect the whys and wherefores of migrants' stories and to assess the veracity of facts in that context. Interviews were sometimes bypassed by relatives who kindly scolded informants for disguising the truth or for understating their involvement in extra conjugal affairs. Overall, it was easier to talk about these issues of intimacies and extramarital affairs with female informants, and we learnt a number of cases through the stories of wives or former wives of Vietnamese men. Discussing affective intimacies was also emotionally demanding for informants, as it sometimes harked them back to intricate moments of their lives and brought back feelings of guilt, shame, dishonour, despair, abandonment and loneliness; one woman we interviewed was particularly shaken when recalling and detailing her unpleasant experiences with previous husbands and men. These challenges explain the limited size of the sample and representativeness of our findings.

The paper analyses first some of the determinants of the production of health vulnerabilities among migrant populations in the Mekong region. Then it explores the genealogies of Vietnamese workers' migration paths and dissects the trajectories of advancement and the masculine culture of intense manual labour performed within workers circles. The third part questions migrants' intimate experiences of Laos, revealing their ambivalent feelings in this new social environment. The last part describes the extra conjugal sexual careers and cases of re-partnerships within the Vietnamese migrants' community of Savannakhet. It raises various issues regarding HIV risks.

## POPULATION MOBILITIES AND HIV VULNERABILITIES IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND IN LAOS

Various scholars documenting migration issues, especially in Europe and the in United States, have revealed the social, political and economic production of health vulnerabilities among migrant populations (Sargent & Larchanché, 2011). Population movement constitutes an important independent risk factor for the spread of HIV in a variety of contexts (Decosas et al. 1995; Haour-Knipe & Rector 1996; Appleyard & Wilson 1998). Skeldon highlights three main themes in his observations of the links between mobilities and HIV. First, it is not so much migration that matters than the behaviours of migrants (2000: 1-2). Second, our understanding of migration must encompass a range of population movements which extend far beyond the conventional definition of migrants, so to include tourists or short-term movers. Finally, young adults are the biggest migrant group and tends to be the most sexually active demographic groups, thereby engaging in high-risk situations. Migration may increase vulnerabilities to HIV in multiple and intersecting ways, including changes in sexual behaviour and practices, conditions of greater socio-economic vulnerability, limited political status, access to health

information and health care facilities, and different socio-cultural norms regarding sexuality (Wolffers et al. 2002).

The links between migration and HIV in South-East Asia have been increasingly explored since the 2000s, with a particular attention paid at cross-border and labour migration (Chantavanich et al. 2000; Nishigaya 2002). Although data is scarce, a recent report has highlighted alarming patterns, with HIV prevalence among migrants to Thailand from Cambodia, Myanmar, southern China and Vietnam being for instance nearly four times higher than among the general population (UNAIDS 2014). Few studies have examined the interplay between mobilities and HIV at the Thai-Lao border (Lyttleton & Amarapibal 2002; Mason 2012). While questioning how migration shapes Intimate Economies, C. Lyttleton (2014) pointed out the implicit economics of sexual services developed by young women as a way to become active players in the increasingly material culture spreading throughout Laos. Oloth Sene-Asa (2007) analysed the transition of young migrants from their work in garment factories to sex work in Laos. Yet little is known about the vulnerabilities to HIV of both domestic and external migrants in Laos. Laos has committed to several international strategies and declarations on HIV/AIDS and is one of the only countries in the Mekong region that has maintained a low prevalence in the general population since the start of the epidemic (GARPR, 2016). According to the Asian Epidemic Modelling and Spectrum Data, the HIV epidemic in Laos is classified as low prevalence but showing an increasing trend from 0.16% (2003) to 0.3% (2015) among the Lao population aged between 15 and 49. The key affected populations include men who have sex with men (1.6% prevalence) and sex workers (1.4% prevalence). Sexual activity is the primary mode of HIV transmission in Laos (UNAIDS 2016). Whilst HIV testing and counselling services have improved, insufficient demand is an issue, since most are unaware that HIV testing should be done even if they feel well. Hancart Petitet & Sychareun (2018) observed that fearing stigma and discrimination, many people in Laos do not want to be tested for HIV and many die of HIV-related diseases because they arrive at antiretroviral treatment centres too late. In addition, Laos is believed to be “in danger of an expanding epidemic” as the country transitions quickly from a landlocked country to a “land-linked one”, surrounded by countries with high rates of HIV in concentrated epidemics. (UNAIDS 2016.) The Centre for HIV/AIDS/STIs (CHAS), working under the Lao Ministry of Health in partnership with donors and international organisations has implemented various activities in this area although access to HIV testing, prevention, and care remains limited, especially in rural areas. The majority of HIV cases are found in border provinces along the Mekong River where 83.4% of HIV cumulative cases are estimated. The population of Men who have Sex with Men and Sex Workers are the highest infected group in these regions, representing the greatest cross-border activity by Lao citizens and foreign nationals (UNAIDS 2016). The rates of cross-border migration are particularly high, both for Lao citizens and external migrants in Vientiane Capital (40.5%), Savannakhet (21.1%) and Champasak (13%). According to UNAIDS, HIV prevalence among adults (15–49 years) in Vietnam is similar to Laos, 0.3% in 2018.

In 2016, a memorandum of understanding has been signed between the CHAS the Vietnam Authority on HIV/AIDS Control (VAAC) in order to improve the access of their migrant workers to HIV prevention and treatment in their respective country. The implementation of this policy faces various constraints. As explained by caregivers in Savannakhet provincial and district health hospital, language barriers tend to limit the impacts of these actions. Besides, the lack of information campaigns targeting those migrants—due to a restricted budget—, the limitation of funds dedicated to ARV drugs allocated by the Global Fund, and the lack of trained human resources were also mentioned as barriers to a full implementation of the program by one representative of the CHAS in Vientiane. He also recalls one Voluntary Testing Campaign through mobile clinics organized few years ago in order to inform and to test migrant Vietnamese workers. He told us,

What we saw for Vietnamese workers is that if they come from villages, they don't know anything about HIV, but if they were originally based in provincial cities, they have received information through the prevention program at school, then they know.

From his point of view, this prevention initiative did not meet with the expected success. Indeed, most migrants didn't want to be tested for HIV, didn't come back to get the HIV test results and didn't come to the hospital to receive the ARV treatment.

## VIETNAMESE MIGRATION IN LAOS

Vietnamese migration is not a new phenomenon in Laos. While the 2015 census recorded 10,880 Vietnamese in Laos, their presence is probably underestimated, given the high number of undocumented migrants and of workers not seeking a work permit. Estimates range between 30,000 and 50,000 Vietnamese nowadays in Laos (Hanh 2014). In the past, however, Vietnamese migration to Laos was much more extended and it has a clear connection with the country's colonial history. With the underlying objective to make the country economically productive, and to tackle Lao workers which they considered slothful and not disciplined enough, in 1880 the French colonial administration decided to build a railway which would increase the accessibility of the Lao Mekong region and pushed the migration of industrious Vietnamese farmers (Stuart-Fox 1995). Facing a lack of trained people available to serve their objectives, the French administrators encouraged the installation of Vietnamese workers to occupy jobs of civil servants and mine workers. By the 1920s, Vietnamese migrants flocked to cities such as Vientiane, Pakse, Thakhek and Savannakhet. In 1943, the Vietnamese (30,700) were twice as numerous as the Lao (15,460) in the main cities since they represented 60% of the total urban population while the Lao represented only 30% (Halpern 1961).

In Savannakhet, the city in the south of Laos where we conducted our research the Vietnamese were 4,000 against only 850 Lao in 1943 (*ibid.*). According to the national census of 2015, Savannakhet welcomed 1,624 Vietnamese over 10 years old, while the population of Vietnamese in Vientiane counted 2,327 people. Savan-



nakhet is the second-largest city in Laos, with 125,000 inhabitants, and constitutes a strategic centre, along the Mekong River, connected to the Thai and Vietnamese road networks through the East-West Economic Corridor and to Vientiane Capital through road 13. Increasing regional integration and economic cooperation, through the Greater Mekong Subregion development framework, has boosted investment in the resource sector (hydropower, mining, land grabbing) and in infrastructure development (Baird 2011; Kenney-Lazar 2012; Gironde & Senties Portilla 2015). This integration has also contributed to increasing trade market and migration flows in the province while destabilising the tradition of subsistence agriculture in surrounding rural areas (Andriessse & Phommalath 2012; Lainé 2015). Scholars noticed that the companies frequently claim that they face a shortage of the workforce or negotiate with Lao authorities and succeed in enrolling more Vietnamese workers than what is legally authorized, since a quota compelled by Lao authorities to encourage the employment of Lao people limits foreign workforce to 10% of the total number of workers employed. Networks of recruitment of Vietnamese workers are varied, although mostly informal; they include the corresponding offices of Vietnamese companies in Vietnam, Vietnamese middlemen, who are former migrant workers well integrated professionally and socially in Laos and who developed channels of recruitment in their home regions, and migrants' own extended kinship and friendship networks (Baird et al. 2019; Tappe 2019). Workers usually enter Laos with border passes or one-month tourist visas which do not allow them to work. Some workers work illegally and are rarely under state scrutiny, benefiting from a "quasi-legal status supported through geopolitics" (Baird et al. 2019: 56), although most of the migrants we interviewed reported a recent intensification of police controls and raids at the border and on construction sites. They also had to pay rising fees to receive work permits. For others, recruiters or employers take care of the whole legal and administrative procedures, from visa extensions, work permits procurement to registrations with local authorities.

In their recruitment, Vietnamese companies and entrepreneurs deliberately privilege Vietnamese workers, who are often perceived as better skilled, more reliable and hard workers, and tend to exclude Lao workers, who are given lower salaries and more dangerous positions (Baird et al. 2019). These widely shared representations are frequently internalised and voiced by Lao people and reactive colonial stereotypes opposing Lao people's laziness to the diligence of Vietnamese workers (Tappe 2019: 32). Some of the construction managers we interviewed explained that they paid Vietnamese workers about 110,000 KIP a day (about 11€) and provided accommodation and food, while they would give 80,000 KIP a day (about 8€) to Lao workers and would not cover accommodation and food for them. They explained this differential treatment by the lower average wage in Laos, their limited skills and competences and by the higher financial expectations of Vietnamese workers. Low-skilled Vietnamese workers, in turn, are attracted by the range of options offered to them in Laos and by the low costs of living in comparison to Vietnam (Srikham 2012).

## ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND TRAJECTORIES OF UPWARD MOBILITY

Laos appears a land of economic opportunities for Vietnamese migrants, although informants were quick to point that today's possibilities were less profitable than they used to be when they arrived. Most Vietnamese migrants to Savannakhet came from a precarious socio-economic background, some belonged to households which were or had been financially supported by Vietnamese authorities because they were classified as below the poverty line or had experienced situations of bankruptcy in their homeland. Informants usually had a low level of education and literacy. Most had dropped secondary school in Vietnam because they had to pursue agricultural or manual work or had not considered post-secondary education as a legitimate and rewarding option. Besides, they usually faced in their young age an important family pressure to financially support their parents and siblings, or at least to be independent, and were therefore looking for lucrative opportunities. Hence, migration to Laos to work often appeared as an evidence once they had come of age. Thuong, a forty-one-year-old builder from Hué, in Central Vietnam, went to Laos for the first time in 1994 because he was eighteen years old and correspondingly "old enough to make the paper come". As he explained, it was "natural" for him that young people from his village would move to Laos as soon as they finish school. Thuong's parents were farmers and he had been helping them raise the cattle as he grew up. He had dropped school in grade 7<sup>2</sup> to take care of the oxen and of the cows. However, the increasing automatisations of agricultural work and state-sponsored policies encouraging land grabbing at the advantage of private corporations have made agrarian labour less and less attractive and Thuong was not considering to continue farming for his living, even more so as he had five other siblings. Hence, alike most of our informants, he followed acquaintances who were moving to Laos, engraving himself in migratory trajectories and networks which had already been initiated and developed by fellow community members and some of his siblings.

For most of our informants, migration was an enterprise undertaken collectively, with other family members, friends or fellow villagers, a pattern already mentioned by Baird et al.'s study of Vietnamese construction workers operating in rubber processing plants in Champasak Province (Baird et al. 2019; Srikham 2012; Tappe 2019). This helped Vietnamese migrants to be aware of the requisite administrative formalities to enter Laos. They developed strategies such as paying tips to avoid overpaying fines and bribes to border officers, Lao and Vietnamese authority. Hoang, a forty-six-year-old migrant from Hué, thus benefited from the expertise of one of his neighbours back home to move to Laos. As he mentions:

There was a guy who used to be in the Viet army serving in Laos. After he was released, he came back to Laos, selling ice cream. After a while he switched to work for wood business people. Back then I was so poor and my kids had to go to school. I was renovating bicycles to make a living, but people sometimes didn't

pay me when their harvest did not go well. I was poor and had some debts. So I went with that guy to Laos. He's from the same village as me. He showed me how to make a passport.

Migrating with other relatives also helps migrants to benefit from connections and an established network once they come to Savannakhet. As Hoang sums up, "everyone connects everyone" and reaching with some settled acquaintances helps one to find work, especially if one does not have any previous training or experience.

Other informants migrated to Laos through channels tied to Vietnamese private companies established in Laos, which have offices or recruitment agencies in Vietnam and then do all the requisite paperwork for the migrant workers they recruit (Baird et al. 2019: 57). Beyond these administrative tasks, all the logistical requirements related to the trip are usually managed by these organisations, with no associated fees. Workers and their movements stay heavily restricted by these companies, which keep their passport throughout the journey and all over their stay in Laos, so to avoid runaways. Duong came in Laos in 1992, after he was enrolled by an agency under the auspices of the Communist Youth Party in Đà Nẵng, his hometown in Central Vietnam. At that time, he had finished high school and did not pass the entrance exam to start university in Saigon. His family was afraid he would be drawn into youth debauchery in town and too destabilised by an unsuccessful love affair, and pushed him to talk to their neighbour, who was working in Laos. A recruiting agency later organised his trip to Savannakhet, where he was then recruited by a construction company. This company kept his passport, as they were afraid workers may breach the contract and flee to start working outside. He got his passport back when the company ceased to exist, although he claims that his employer was overall flexible and easily allowed temporary visits in Vietnam, for which it arranged the transportation by bus transportation. After that, he switched to another company, and became afterwards an independent construction worker, following the most common and valued career path among migrant workers.

The discourse of Vietnamese male workers was particularly imprinted by a rhetoric of hard work and of career building not far from the ideal of the self-made man. This narrative was forged by the stories from mentors which successful neighbours, friends or uncles frequently depicted or had depicted for young migrants. Most of the workers we met came in Laos with few skills and little experience in the field of construction and building, and started to work as low-paid workers. They usually lived in large houses or shelters owned by their manager or by the company that hired them, and lived in groups of five to thirty workers for several weeks or months to work on specific projects outside of Savannakhet. During these periods, workers built temporary shelters on the site for convenience. After some years of intense training among peers, they slowly developed their skills and their professional network, with the hope to move up from *thợ* (someone who is hired to do specific manual jobs) to *thầu* (someone who receives the whole

project from client and delegate tasks to his workers). As one worker explained, “I was a very young man who found the idea of being overseas so fascinating. I had no reservation against it. And I thought working overseas would make money fast. As it turned out, the first couple of years were hard, but I gritted my teeth”. Duong followed this trajectory of upward mobility and proudly emphasised throughout the conversation that he had learnt the skills in the field and was perceiving it as a way to compensate his initial failure at a university entrance examination. As a freelance builder, he receives the whole project from his clients and then assembles workers he trusts for specific tasks. Work comes to him frequently, he developed, because he has cultivated a good network in Laos. He is now able to refuse out-of-town projects, and sometimes passes on projects to other people because he is too overwhelmed. Duong claimed that he was selecting his workers based on attitude and skills, rather than on nationality, and that he tries to find a balance between hiring long-term trustworthy workers and managing their long stays out of town in Vietnam for family issues. Similarly, the freelance builder and independent construction managers we interviewed were finding work by words of mouth. For instance, carpenters would usually get work through the welders, and would later recommend fellow workers to take care of the carpentry work.

These flourishing opportunities and this rhetoric of upward mobility forged by an intense manual work appear today threatened by economic circumstances that have significantly deteriorated, a trend which recently arrived migrants particularly suffer from. Although Laos had been in the past a space where “coping with precarity [...] [was] easier than in other translocal networks” (Tappe 2019: 37) because of a limited law enforcement and of a little competitive job market, the situation has become slightly harder as a result of the economic and political conjuncture. There was a consensus among our informants to lament how the current situation had become increasingly difficult financially speaking. As one informant succinctly stated, “in the past, people could get rich by working here. Now people can only make ends meet.” This situation finds its roots in structural economic changes, as the rapid industrialisation and economic catching up of Vietnam have contributed to increasing daily wages in large cities, while the imposition of stricter quotas has tightened the wood industry in Laos, which used to employ large numbers of Vietnamese migrant workers. The influx of Vietnamese migrants and the large workforce of available workers it has generated have contributed to decreasing wages in Laos, while creating the conditions for a generalised inflation of prices which necessarily reduces migrants’ purchasing power.

## A LESS SOCIALLY CONSTRAINED ENVIRONMENT

This masculine culture of hard work and these interrelated business connections between workers, who share comparable socio-economic conditions and a similar attachment to their Vietnamese roots, create sociabilities and solidarities between Vietnamese migrants. For instance, Duc, a construction manager who had contracted appendicitis, benefited from the financial support of fellow workers, clients

and friends to pay the costly hospitalisation and operation he urgently needed in Laos. This points more generally to the Vietnamese community which migrants have built in Savannakhet. Vietnamese migrant workers have a limited integration to the Lao society, and primarily developed ties with compatriots within the Vietnamese diaspora of the town – only one of our informants married a Lao woman and few were speaking Lao. Migrants have established Vietnamese enclaves scattered across the town, where they interact with compatriots from their hometowns, speak Vietnamese and eat Vietnamese food, and forge labour and business relations. “Lao people’s traditions are different from ours”, informants told, to justify that they were frequenting entertainment and social places only visited by fellow Vietnamese nationals. Although most migrants left their children in Vietnam to their families and relatives, those who raised their children in Savannakhet chose a Vietnamese school in the town where children are taught by Vietnamese teachers. Their interactions with Laotians also tend to be shaped by stereotypes and language barriers inevitably generate social distance. The Vietnamese migrants we interviewed perceived Laos as a developing country with poor education and health services unsuitable for their children’s schooling opportunities and for family migration and long-term integration.

Our informants’ remarks all point to the freedom they feel in Laos and to the limited sense of social and professional competition in Laos, which contrasts with their lived experiences in Vietnam. Putting an emphasis on freedom may appear puzzling in the context of an economically constrained migration (and of a politically closed environment). This does not mean that they find in Laos an anomic individualistic and hedonistic society nor that they desire to break off all ties with Vietnam, but rather that they experience in Savannakhet an enhanced financial situation and what appears a much more relaxed social environment, allowing them to enjoy the renewed social as well sexual opportunities the country offers them. Informants insisted for instance on the “here and now” mindset of Lao people, who were deemed calmer, not pushy or calculative. These characteristics were opposed to the constant pressure within the Vietnamese society to save for the future. In our conversations, Thuong, a Vietnamese freelance builder, emphasised how he found Lao people more “spontaneous” and “relaxed”, and especially less likely to fall into the hard-working Vietnamese spirit. He described this difference through a metaphor which gives a hint to the lower level of pressure and competition he experienced in Savannakhet compared to his lived experience in Vietnam. As he recounted, while in Vietnam, when someone builds a house, the neighbours will put an eye to see how big the house is and will feel compelled to make their house bigger, Lao people appear less prone to these competitive dynamics and generally tend not to bother in such cases.

This sense of relief which repeatedly came between the lines during our conversations manifested in different ways for informants. Some derived satisfaction from the more flexible schedule and lesser pressure they found in Laos. “Vietnamese are too competitive, not like here. Here, when I have work, I work. When I don’t have work, I stay at home, no problem”, Thuong said. For others, migration

to Laos had meant to some extent an escape from family responsibilities and communal obligations which can become a heavy moral and financial burden for individuals. Although their temporary visits to Vietnam usually corresponded with national and family celebrations (Vietnamese Lunar New Year, weddings, etc.), the workers we interviewed still claimed to feel relieved from the endless family or community duties they had to satisfy back home in Vietnam. Lâm, a Vietnamese migrant from Quảng Nam Province, in Central Vietnam, pointed to the heaviness of these obligations, as both his parents had passed away. As he elaborated,

I am the oldest son and the first male grandchild in my paternal family. All the communal responsibilities are on me. So if I work in Vietnam, everything I earn will be spent on these communal responsibilities—going to weddings, anniversaries, funerals and so on [...]. Now that I'm here, I can hide from all those responsibilities. It saves me lots of money that I can use for my own future investment.

Hence, like other workers we interviewed, being in Laos not only freed him from certain social obligations and conventions he had to abide by, but it also enhanced his financial situation. This was due to a slightly higher daily wage in Laos (315,000 VND per day—approximately 14 USD—, compared to 270,000 VND—approximately 12 USD—in Vietnam), but first and foremost to this avoidance of financially costly communal obligations. In turn, this allowed him, like other respondents, to repay some debts he had and to save some money, despite the remittances he was still sending to family members in Vietnam. This new environment, where male sociability usually rests on a culture of intense physical labour and of drinking, creates conditions for workers to explore their sexual freedom. We discuss here how the geographical distance from their spouses and families, the separation from family obligations, migrants' enhanced financial situation, their feelings of loneliness, the less pressurised environment they experience in Laos as well as a specific masculine culture developed among migrant circles all create a fertile ground for the development of new intimacies and extra conjugal sexual careers.

## NEW INTIMACIES, SEXUAL RISKS AND HIV VULNERABILITIES

The “sexual turn” in the study of migration has prompted the analysis of the way migration may be driven by romantic love, sexual desire or hopes of sexual freedom (Cantu, Naples, and Vidal-Ortiz 2009; Liu-Farrer 2010; Manalansan 2006). Scholars also examine how sexualities and sexual relationships are influenced by migration, as a result of new sociocultural standards, new family arrangements and of a frequent reconfiguration of gender roles in the country of destination and in the homeland (Ahmadi 2003; González-López 2005; Hirsch 2015). The men we met and interviewed usually left their wives and children in Vietnam and found themselves “situational singles” (Shen 2005) in Savannakhet. Vietnamese male migrants encourage each other to drink and “have fun” after work, which usually entails drinks in the evening and visits to karaoke shops and casinos (Lytleton

1999: 122). Most of these places are located on the east and north-east part of the town, close to the main road (9W) that serves Savannakhet and connects it with the rest of the country. The structures offering sex services are often signaled with flashing lights and gather oftentimes both Vietnamese women, mostly from the Mekong Delta, and Lao women (for an account of sex workers' lived realities and vulnerabilities in Savannakhet, see Phrasisombath et al. 2012). According to our informants, whereas in the past, when passports were harder to make, Vietnamese sex workers were smuggled in Laos by procurers and later faced a situation of complete subordination to their boss, most of them are nowadays working independently, opening hair salons or renting places to do karaoke. Vietnamese workers usually have drinks together after work, before going to karaoke venues to sing and *quây phá*, which means having fun in mischievous ways. This may entail physical and erotic contact with prostitutes within the karaoke shop (often named *karaoke ôm*, meaning "with some intimacy"), and can be prolonged with a sexual intercourse with prostitutes, which informants referred to as the "third shift". This masculine culture is particularly central to the work relations of these migrant workers, but also embedded in their economic careers and sometimes cultivated by their employers or clients. Interestingly, some of the workers we interviewed explained that they had been offered sex workers services by their superior as a reward or that they were frequenting sex workers when they had to chase business deals. As Lâm recounted:

[...] it was even offered to me by my construction boss. [...] We went to a Viet place. Three Viet girls received us. It was our client's son who took us there. [...] The client's son said he would pay for everything, we should just have fun with the girls and not worry about anything. He insisted.

The economic factor appears decisive in the sexual careers of our informants, as a number of them drew an association between their purchasing power and their ability to seek sex worker services or to afford a mistress or second wife. Some of the migrants explained that the harder economic circumstances of the days in Savannakhet made it particularly harder for construction workers to involve in commercial sex. Low-skilled migrants 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 "seeking girls". As Lôm, a carpenter from Hue, explained:

It's simple. When I get sick, I pay the doctor. When I have money to spend, I go to town and fuck women. More money, fuck more. Less money, fuck less. Sex is also how you take care of your health, right? As simple as that.

Similarly, Lâm, who had recently arrived in Savannakhet and had not known the golden age described by former generations of migrants, described how his encounters with sex workers in Savannakhet were hindered by his financial situation. He explained that he had never been to karaoké places in Savannakhet,

although he had heard about them, because he did not want to “waste” his money on commercial sex.

Both situational singles and men whose wives were absent over long periods of time (for instance, when they came back to Vietnam to deliver a child) reported having extramarital relations with mistresses (*cấp bõ*). Extramarital sexual liaisons also happened while the spouse had joined her husband and was living in Laos. As they would get older and as their children would grow up, some explained that they would renounce to these practices because of their paternal responsibilities, fearing that their children would learn about them and that they would thereupon lose their parental authority. Tien, a forty-eight-year-old Vietnamese migrant from Huế, narrated the extra conjugal affairs of her husband, after she closed the doors of her living room, to make sure her husband and his co-workers would not hear what she said. Tien’s husband moved to Laos quickly after they married in Vietnam, she was pregnant at the time and joined him a year and a half after that, with their newborn. A couple years after she had delivered their second child, Tien’s husband started to betray her. As Tien recounts, “my husband has always *ăn chơi* [spending extravagantly on activities like drinking, gambling, etc.], but that period of time, he went out with another woman. That whore stuck to him, didn’t let him go. I told him but he didn’t listen to me, so I left him here and returned to Vietnam”. Tien had been informed of this sexual liaison by friends and neighbours, and had also noticed differences in her husband’s behaviour. Later, Tien, who had learnt where the mistress was living, tried to catch them together. Tien’s younger brother ended up beating the mistress and Tien and her husband separated. Tien left for Vietnam and stayed there with their children for a couple of years. She received very limited financial help from him. They ended up getting back together six years after their separation, after the mistress had left and after Tien had put as a condition a more equal participation of her husband in housework. Throughout her story, Tien was prompt to point, as other women we met, that the mistress’s interest for her husband had been purely financial. “He sent money for child support only a few times”, Tien told us, “because most of his money went to that whore”.

Some extramarital affairs also became formalised in polygynous relations where a Vietnamese husband has two wives, usually but not inevitably one in Vietnam and one in Laos. Observing a similar phenomenon between Hong Kong business men frequently crossing the Chinese border and underprivileged Chinese female migrants in coastal cities, Lang and Smart see it as a result of the post-reform era and of a weakening of women’s status with late capitalism (2002; see also Ong [2000: 154]). In Savannakhet, although power differentials were not as high as those documented in Lang and Smart’s study, polygynous situations were closely tied to the husband’s financial situation. Men who had obtained secure jobs or who had built prosperous companies in Savannakhet were the ones most likely to be able to afford the financial requirements of such a marital arrangement which supposed providing for both spouses and families.



This reveal, as Lang and Smart had remarked, that “men’s economic success acts as an invisible yet powerful form of control over women’s sexualities” (2002: 603). Hien, a Vietnamese construction manager from Đà Nẵng, revealed in our conversation that his life happens in “two places, two houses, two families”. After we asked Hien how many children he has, he had paused for a while and said he had two daughters. After another short pause, he pointed to a boy, saying that he is his child too, with some nervous laugh. We asked which one stay here and which one stay in Vietnam. He showed some nervousness and eventually disclosed he was “one man but two houses” and explained his situation. Multiple household arrangements often come with a moral cost. Second households are usually regarded as illegitimate and threatening for household integrity, finances and honour. Our informants deal with stigma in different ways. Some husbands play with categories to “save face” and use “strategic moralities” to prevent the “loss of face”. They are tolerated although criticised if they act as responsible breadwinners towards their dependent wives and children. At some point, Hien acknowledged he was putting strong efforts to fulfil the needs of his two wives so that other people respect and admire a man like him. Hien was recurrently emphasising during our conversation the extent of the material support he was providing to both his wives, especially to the one in Vietnam, while admitting the peculiarity of his situation. “I work very hard here to provide everything for them in Vietnam”, he said.

I do that to prove the love of a father. But with my wife in Vietnam, love doesn’t exist between us anymore. However, I won’t terminate the relationship with her. [...] And if you leave your wife, what kind of life will your children have, right? [...] With the current arrangement, they still have me.

Hien described how busy he was visiting Vietnam, how often he called his family in Vietnam every day, and kept on reiterating that the reason why he has a second wife was because he could not find love with his first wife anymore. After he had built a house in Đà Nẵng for his first wife and daughters, he was building a house in Quảng Bình for his second and new wife, as well as a motel in the back of the house in Đà Nẵng to ensure a sustainable source of income for his initial wife.

Extramarital relationships other than commercial sex are generally limited to the Vietnamese community. Vietnamese migrants’ sexual careers in Savannakhet appear indeed highly racialised and segmented along national lines. Our informants were repeatedly stressing what seemed diametrically opposed differences between Lao and Vietnamese women. Hence, although they constantly reaffirmed a sense of Vietnamese superiority, Vietnamese men expressed their fear of Lao women pointed for their suspected fierceness, possessiveness, greed and conservatism, but also for the different marital and financial standards entailed by established relationship with them. Tung, the owner of a small Vietnamese eatery, remarked: “it’s only possible to meet Lao women if you have money. No money, impossible. They are not like our Vietnamese women! They eat a lot, and they eat expensive stuff like durian, and you have to pay all the time”. Similarly,

a number of informants articulated a number of anecdotes revealing their uneasiness of sexual relation with Lao women, which could turn against themselves and be legally or financially prejudicial. These fears are related to different societal and legal standards in Laos with regards to love and fidelity. In the Lao law, an unfaithful partner is not able to retrieve any asset he brought into the marriage and the bride price he paid at the wedding if his wife finds out he has extramarital affairs and files for divorce.

Opportunities to engage in extramarital sexual liaisons are particularly gendered and often favour male migrants, a structural feature of social organisation which Hirsch et al. suggests encapsulating through the concept of extramarital opportunity structures (2009: 199-205). These extramarital affairs shed light on the persisting double standards and on a deeply rooted patriarchal ideology among Vietnamese male migrants (Lainez & Nguyen 2019), although some women also engage in these dynamics. These situations frequently leave single spouses in situations of socio-economic and affective vulnerabilities. Sexual concessions granted within the household mainly depend on the economic situation of the family, but it is generally women who close an eye on the extramarital relationships of their husband. Hence, women are discouraged from divorcing as it leaves them in a vulnerable social and economic position, in emotional precarity and confronted with insisting gossips within the Vietnamese community. As a shop owner acknowledged:

Most of the time they do [know that their husbands hang out at places offering sex services or take on mistresses], but they live with it... It's too common already, almost a trend. As long as the husbands still provide for their wives and children, the wives would close an eye on it. It depends much on the men's financial capacity. As long as they can afford to provide for all the women, everyone stays in their place.

Migration to Laos was perceived by our respondents as abundant and stress-free work opportunities, but also as a release from social and community obligations in Vietnam which could be socially and financially constraining. This new environment and this separation from family responsibilities and an omnipresent social control also creates new sexual opportunities for Vietnamese men. A masculine homosocial culture revolving around drinks, visits to karaoke shops and enjoyment of sexual pleasure pushes men to develop extra conjugal liaisons with sex workers, which were sometimes intrinsically tied to the advancement of their professional careers. In the context of the HIV/aids epidemic, these data raise various concerns. Among the Vietnamese men we met three patterns related to sexual risks and conducts emerged. Although a strict typology is hard to establish, three patterns related to sexual risks and conducts may be distinguished among these Vietnamese men. Economically well-off men had settled in Savannaket for more than 10 years, usually had a permanent wife in Vietnam and one or multiple more or less stable partners in Savannaket. Freelance workers settled in Savannaket for 7-10 years or more had stable network of resources and more or less stable sources of income. They were often seeking sex workers and acquiring mistresses

in secrecy. Finally, most precarious migrants, highly mobile, freelance workers had a wife in Vietnam and were occasionally seeking sex workers or just hanging out in karaoke places without having sex. They claimed being oftentimes too poor to spend money for sex and their main concern was usually to save enough money so to leave permanently Savannakhet. Although some of the men we interviewed were using condoms, some were not and explained that they were using the withdraw method to prevent unintended pregnancies. Hidden visits of husbands to sex workers and casual sexual intercourse with mistresses increase the risks, and although most respondents had heard about HIV, usually through television programs, awareness remained limited and stigmatising attitudes were present. The head of the antiretroviral centre of Savannakhet Province confirmed that his team was having hardships reaching out to new Vietnamese migrants, although they were providing the same services to Vietnamese nationals than to Laotians. The high number of undocumented migrants from Vietnam, who fear visiting any official Lao institution, their distrust of the Lao medical system, significant language barriers, the fact that most subscribed to a Thai or Vietnamese insurance and that they were usually going back to Vietnam for health checks impede a proper follow-up of the HIV/STI vulnerabilities of these migrants. The large-scale infrastructure projects such as Golden Boten City at the border with China and the roadside shops and bars providing on-site sex which open alongside new roads have been identified as new arenas of HIV risk. These risks have also been reported at the Lao-Vietnamese border and cooperation has been established between the two countries to develop information, education and communication (IEC) programs and strengthen prevention HIV prevention activities among mobile and vulnerable populations at the border (Health Strategy and Policy Institute). Given the poor information on preventive health known by the migrants we interviewed had, such a bilateral cooperation and the continuous development of HIV programs still appear crucial to reduce risks.

## CONCLUSION

Although anthropologists have long been concerned with kinship, family and marriage, extra conjugal or extramarital sexuality has rarely been explored as a topic worth of investigation in and of itself. A consensus exists among cultural anthropologists to approach infidelity as part of systemic gender politics, rather than as a circumscribed, context-specific individual practice. Engagement in extramarital sex or conjugality has notably been documented in diverse contexts of male migration, both through commercial sex and through sexual relations with other migrants or locals (Liu-Farrer 2010; Thuy & Kretchmar 2008; Lang & Smart 2002; Shen 2005; Tsujimoto 2014). In the context of Vietnamese migrants in Taiwan, extramarital conjugality represents a source of support for intimate relationships while being “minefields” offering echo chambers to intimate gossips and rumours (Hoang & Yeoh 2014; Hoang 2016). The weight of social control within their homosocial or

ethnic migrant network may push male migrants to strive to preserve “reputation” and thus to refrain from involving in extramarital affairs, although instances of occasional casual sex may be tolerated (Hirsch et al. 2007; Thuy & Kretchmar 2008). In other cases, networks of male migrants, rather than scrutinising behaviours, may reinforce masculine privilege and legitimise extra conjugal relationships (Cohen 2015). This oscillation between an intention to “save face” and practices which are undertaken collectively within male circles was also at the heart of the sexual careers of the Vietnamese construction workers we interviewed.

Migration of Vietnamese workers to Laos is undeniably driven by economic factors and undertaken in conditions of severe socio-economic vulnerability. However, despite this severe precarity, most migrants were praising their lives in Laos, although the influx of migrants and structural macroeconomic changes have made opportunities less thriving and financially rewarding for migrants than they used to be. Inscribing oneself in migration paths already laid out by family and community members and experiencing an upward mobility sustained by an intense but rewarding manual labour and by potent male sociabilities certainly contribute to these positive migratory experiences. Beyond this rhetoric, respondents drew a dual vision of Laos which oscillated between a disdain for its infrastructures and attitudes of Lao people they regarded as too relaxed and unperturbed and a clear aspiration and attraction to what was perceived as a lenient social environment. Our informants’ sexual experiences also encompassed affairs with mistresses or durable polygynous relationships which are closely tied to migrants’ financial situation and reveal patriarchal double standards. These situations are carefully eased by unfaithful husbands to navigate the moral costs of these practices came within a context of a small Vietnamese enclave where gossips were rife. The sexuality of these Vietnamese men and their means of socialisation with sexuality also reveal fundamental aspects intrinsic to the construction of masculinity and socially constructed narratives of legitimization. While men who are not yet married or husbands may frequent prostitutes and multiply escapades, femininity tends to imply fertility (Vietnamese women do not use contraception before having demonstrated their fertility), and women are therefore expected to “belong” to a single man and to demonstrate their lack of sexual initiative

Let us examine men’s extramarital sexual relations from another lens. These relationships are hence not only the product of individual decision-making, but also both the expression and the production of the gendered part of social organisation. According to Phinney (2008), three interrelated policies implemented by the Vietnamese government as part of Doi Moi may have contributed to shaping new forms of masculinities. She argues

Doi Moi has instigated an iterative process among a global market economy that produces men’s desire for women outside the home (and supplies these women), simplifies a notion of masculinity tied to commercialise and sexualised leisure (ensuring the demand for sex workers), and generates the means to purchase these sexual “commodities”. (Ibid.: 652.)

These policies may have contributed to shaping men's possibilities for extramarital sexual relations and their wives' acceptance to such infidelities. Examining these questions through an attention at the local forms of today's global market-oriented economy may be a fruitful field of inquiry to keep on interrogating the production of these dislocated masculinities.

## Notes

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1. Source: *Vientiane Times*, 17 August 2017.
2. The seventh grade in Vietnam is the seventh school year after kindergarten. Students are usually 12-13 years old.

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**Abstract:** Vietnamese migration is not a new phenomenon in Laos, but is particularly on the rise since the 1990s. While studies have mainly examined these mobilities with regards to issues of state sovereignty, little is known about the lived experiences of Vietnamese migrant workers in Laos. Drawing on ethnographic findings collected in 2018 in Savannakhet, in southern Laos, and during several years of field research carried out in this country, this paper explores the genealogies of migration paths and the sexual careers of Vietnamese male construction workers. The migration of these migrant workers, primarily driven by economic motives, heavily relies on their extended kinship and friendship networks. In Savannakhet, they create Vietnamese enclaves while legitimising their presence drawing on colonial stereotypes about Lao people. This new environment enhances their financial situations and increases their sexual freedom, consequently reconfiguring marital situations in ways that are closely tied to their socio-economic status. In turn, our study sheds light on the construction of dislocated masculinities while raising questions about HIV and STI vulnerabilities in cross-border migration in South-East Asia.

### *Interroger les masculinités disloquées et les vulnérabilités au VIH. Le cas des travailleurs migrants vietnamiens au Sud Laos*

**Résumé:** La migration vietnamienne n'est pas un phénomène nouveau au Laos, mais elle est particulièrement en hausse depuis les années 1990. Si les études ont surtout interrogé ces mobilités sur les questions de souveraineté de l'État, on en sait peu sur les expériences vécues par les travailleurs migrants vietnamiens au Laos. S'appuyant sur des données ethnographiques recueillies en 2018 à Savannakhet, dans le sud du Laos, et durant plusieurs années de recherche de terrain effectuées dans ce pays, cet article explore les généalogies des parcours migratoires et les carrières sexuelles de travailleurs vietnamiens sur les chantiers de construction. La migration de ces travailleurs, principalement motivée par des motifs économiques, dépend fortement de leurs liens de parenté et d'amitié. À Savannakhet, ils créent des enclaves vietnamiennes tout en légitimant leur présence en s'appuyant sur les stéréotypes coloniaux concernant le peuple Lao. Notre étude met en lumière la construction de masculinités disloquées tout en soulevant des questions sur les vulnérabilités infectieuses au VIH dans la migration transfrontalière en Asie du Sud-Est.

**Keywords:** migration, masculinity, HIV vulnerabilities, Vietnam, Laos.

**Mots-clés:** masculinité, vulnérabilité au VIH, Vietnam, Laos.