

## Romantic couples in Hanoi: Transgressive Visibility?

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Traditionally in Vietnam, public displays of affection is rare and stigmatized (Anh 2002; Binh 1999, Gao et al., 2012). Writers of traditional Vietnamese society often state that intimacy and sexual patterns are influenced by Confucian ideology, which sees sexuality as taboo and prescribes that intimate practices remain invisible to the public. The extent to which Confucianism shapes Vietnamese social life is highly contested (Kelley, 2006). But appeal to Confucianism in public discourse and Vietnamese scientific research is largely prominent. Our task here is not to measure whether it has a real impact on social behavior, or even to discuss what Confucianism means. Instead, we acknowledge the rhetorical appeal to Confucianism when discussing sexual behavior in the media, official reports, and public discourse more generally. In this public discourse, Confucian ideology is generally understood to prescribe the regulation of sex and intimacy by marriage, with the objective of managing births and maintaining social order. Such model celebrates the virtues of chastity (principally for women), entailing restraint in the expression of desire (Kaljee et al., 2007: 50). In the past decade, however, public displays of intimacy have become more prevalent (Center for Population Studies and Information 2003; Ghuman *et al.*, 2006). Anxiety over this increasing visibility has spurred debate in the media.

Critical literature on sexuality and urban life, or sexual geographies, emphasize how sexual dissidents (from prostitutes to homosexuals, from porn stars to perverts) are transgressing civic and public spaces (Hubbard, 2001). Who counts as sexual dissident will vary across cultural contexts. But the point of this Western literature is that transgressing social norms about appropriate sexual behavior means becoming publicly visible.<sup>1</sup> Because, “if a group does not exist in public, it is effectively invisible in the eyes of the state and ‘decent’ citizens, apparently having no rights and no needs” (Hubbard, 2001: 62). Transgression, in other words, implies visibility. Whether making sexual dissidence visible is an effective strategy to challenge exclusion is a central question of

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is written in conversation with Western conceptions of sexuality and transgression not because we believe all contexts should be positioned with regards to these conceptions. Rather, with a postcolonial sensitivity we seek to highlight “different geographies of knowledge.” But given that the literature on sexual geographies is almost exclusively Western, we feel it is important to deconstruct some of its premises to avoid making universalizing claims that do not make sense in Vietnam.

this debate. The problem, however, is that the very premises of the debate cannot help explaining tensions between visibility and invisibility, and challenges to sexual norms in Vietnam. Indeed, the starting point of this Western literature is a liberal democratic understanding of the relation between the public and the private based on notions of individual rights to privacy and to full participation in public life. This is why, following a brief overview of sexual norms in Vietnam and a presentation of our study site, we will explore the shifting relation between the public and the private in Vietnam.

We then turn to reflections on the relation between urbanity and sexual transgression. If urban conditions, with their promises of anonymity and non-committed pleasure, facilitate a sexually charged and erotically alluring social climate (Bech 1998; Young, 1990), these conditions can also engender anxiety. Based on research conducted in a public park used by newly arrived young rural migrants in Hanoi, we ask whether their public display of intimacy is linked to their recent urbanization?

In the concluding section, we discuss whether and how displays of romantic intimacy in public spaces can be considered transgressive in Hanoi. We suggest that if we are to consider this behavior transgressive, it is not because they constitute political challenges to citizenship exclusion. Instead, we wish to separate transgression from its Western understanding in terms of political claims for inclusion in the public citizenship sphere. Instead, we see transgression as the act of making visible practices that are not (yet) accepted as proper urbanity. This implies exploring class relations.

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