18

Homosexuality and transgenderism in Vietnam

Natalie Newton

Introduction

Xuân Diệu (1916–85) is perhaps one of the most prolific and well-respected authors in modern Vietnamese literature, authoring over 450 poems and short stories. Hoài Thanh, a fellow poet and founder of the Vietnamese New Poetry movement in the 1930s, once called Xuân Diệu 'the prince of love poems (*ông hoàng của thơ tình*)'. With subtle eloquence, Xuân Diệu's poem 'Love of Men' also blatantly showcases the homoerotic themes that course through a number of his poems: 'Never mind an old story retold for a latter day, / oblivious to the sight of rouged lips and gaudy garbs, / and with nary a bargain they loved one another / in utter disregard of heaven or hell' [Kê chi chuyện trước với ngày sau/ Quên gió môi son với áo màu / Thây kệ thiên đường và địa ngục / Không hề mặc cả, họ yêu nhau] (Diệu 1938). Nguyễn Quốc Vinh (1998) argues that Xuân Diệu and several of his contemporaries wrote about male homoerotic desire indirectly through sublimated metaphor, allegory, or literary autobiography. Nguyễn traces what he calls a 'pattern of displacement' in representations of male homoeroticism in the writing of acclaimed authors. Huy Cận (1919–2005) was Xuân Diệu's life-partner and fellow writer in the New Poetry Movement. Trần Huy Liệu (1901–69) wrote about his homoerotic experiences during Vietnamese communist revolutionary struggles in a posthumous prison memoir *Love in a dark jail* [Tình trong ngục tối] (1950). Nguyễn Đức Chính, one of the leaders of the Vietnam National Party during French anticolonial resistance, displaces homoerotic desire for his fellow inmate named 'Thọ' and poet Trần Huy Liệu in the docu-novel *Letters from Poulo Condore* [Thư Côn Lôn] (1937). Tô Hoài (1920–) writes about his homosexual encounters with Xuân Diệu during the French colonial resistance in his memoir *Dusty Sand on Somebody's Footsteps* [Cát bùi chân ai] (1991). Hồ Trường An (1938–) is openly gay and writes about his homoerotic desire toward his childhood friend Khương Hữu Vi in his memoir *A Blue-Moon Realm of Memories* [Cõi ký ức trăng xanh] (1991). The bleeding-heart romanticism of these authors' writing echoes across decades to the everyday choices that Vietnamese homosexual, bisexual, and transgender men and women face today. Many have begun to publicly advocate for LGBT rights for the first time in Vietnam, 'in utter disregard of heaven or hell' (thấy kệ thiên đồng và địa ngục), as in Xuân Diệu's poem.

In summer 2012, Vietnam caught the eye of the international media as talk circulated that it might become 'the first Asian nation to legalize gay marriage' (Ghosh 2012), but the actual

picture is much more complex, as we shall see below. The spotlight on Vietnam under the international LGBT rainbow shocked many who associated the communist party-led nation with religious and human rights abuses after the American War ended in 1975. Xuân Diệu's homoerotic displacement and coded language is now overshadowed by online photographs of happily 'married' Vietnamese gay men (locally termed *gay*) and women (*les*) who model upstanding citizenship and cry out for equal rights.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of five central themes. First, I provide historical perspectives on Vietnamese same-sex sexuality and gender crossing. Second, I examine the socialist Vietnamese State's treatment of homosexuality and transgenderism more contemporaneously. Third, I look at homophobia in contemporary Vietnamese society across social, cultural, and medical institutions. Fourth, I briefly overview *gay* and *les* responses to homophobia in terms of subjectivity and identity formation and community organising. Finally, I contextualise Vietnamese non-governmental organisations' (VNGO) work around LGBT human rights in the last few years. I piece together a narrative from secondary sources, as well as my ethnographic research on Vietnamese female homosexual community formation in Saigon in the years 2006–10 (Newton 2012).

The most common term in formal written and spoken Vietnamese for homosexuality' is *đồng tính luyến ái* ('same-sex love'). This noun first appeared in Đạo Duy Anh's pioneering *French Vietnamese Dictionary* (*Pháp Việt Từ Điển*) in 1936. This Vietnamese term's linguistic predecessor is the Chinese term, *tongxing lian'ai* (同性戀愛), which has a neutral connotation or is sometimes used as a 'medical term denoting sickness and pathology' (Zhou 2000: 2). Fran Martin and Larissa Heinrich argue that Chinese categories 'like woman (*nuxing/nuren*), man (*nanxing/nanren*), homosexual (*tongxing'ai/tongxinglian*), and heterosexual (*yixing'ai/yixinglian*) trace their genesis back to the indigenisation of Japanese and western sexology and gender concepts during the Republican period' (Martin and Heinrich 2006: 8). In Chinese and Vietnamese, the term refers to same-sex eroticism, as opposed to homosexual identity. Huashan Zhou explains that *tongxinglian'ai* is a 'pervasive vulgarization' (2000: 3) that continues to be used to describe same-sex homoeroticism as a pathology, moral offense, and sociopolitical symptom of the degenerative effects of globalisation. The Vietnamese parallel term *đồng tính luyến ái* is sometimes used in the context of the Vietnamese Communist State's indirect regulation of homosexuality as a kind of 'social evil' (*tệ nạn xã hội*). In both languages, subsequent modifications of the term refer to various gender/sex identities, for example, *người đồng tính* (homosexual), *người đồng tính nam* (homosexual male), and *người đồng tính nữ* (homosexual female), *người lưỡng tính* or *người song tính* (bisexual person), *người chuyển đổi giới tính* (transgender person), and *người dị tính* (heterosexual person).

Contemporary Vietnamese derogatory slang reflects a stigmatisation of gender ambiguity or non-heterosexual sexuality: *ái nam ái nữ* ('half man, half woman' referring to cross-dressing spiritual shamans), *xăng pha nhớt* ('petrol mixed with oil' referring to homosexuality of two genders that are not supposed to mix, like when mixing petrol and motor oil), or *hi fi* ('hi-fi cassette tapes' that have two sides to denote a bisexual who 'flips' in attraction toward men and women). The most common derogatory slang term for homosexual is *pê-đê* (often pronounced *bê-đê*), derived from the French term *pédé*, meaning a person who engages in pederasty (adult male homosexual relations with pubescent boys). Likewise, the Vietnamese slang term for lesbian is also derogatory, *ô-môi*, which denotes a carao or pink shower plant (Latin: *cassia grandis*). Gina Masequesmay explains that carao fruit consumption resembles cunnilingus (2003: 124, 133, note 8). In order to combat some of these negative slang terms, Vietnamese NGOs have also proliferated translations of international LGBT terminology, such as 'LGBT' (used in English in Vietnamese media), 'sexual orientation' (*xu hướng tình dục*), and 'gender identity' (bản

dạng giới). These translated and borrowed terms are not necessarily shared by Vietnamese *gay* and *les*, or the Vietnamese diaspora. Considering the historical abundance of derogatory terms to describe homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism, it is perhaps ever-more significant to recognise the proliferation of terms used by self-identified *gay*, *les*, *bi*, and transgender (*người chuyện đổi giới tính*) individuals in Vietnam.

Historical perspectives on homosexuality in Vietnam

Contemporary Vietnamese vernacular terms for homosexuality (*pê-đê* and *đồng tính luyến ái*) may have first emerged during French colonialism (1854–1954). Vietnamese same-sex homoerotic and socially sanctioned forms of gender transgression, however, have existed across multiple sectors of society, including in spiritual shamanism and in domestic histories of the legal treatment of sodomy dating back to the longest-ruling Lê Dynasty (1428–1788). This complex history challenges the stability of gender itself in Vietnam, as well as homosexuality or transgenderism as subjectivities or 'identities' that are stable across time. Emerging scholarship challenges notions of 'gender' and sexuality in Vietnam, especially analysing the French colonial period when sexological terms such as 'homosexual' first appeared in Europe and North America (Proschan 2002; Trần 2011). This complex history of Vietnamese gender and sexual subjectivity must be considered in order to contextualise today's political debates around LGBT human rights in Vietnam.

A spectrum of same-sex homoerotic behaviour and gender crossing existed in Vietnam's highest courts. Vietnamese rulers kept men and sometimes pubescent boys as concubines in their palaces, as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, similar to such practices in Chinese imperial courts (Pastoetter 2001). The seventeenth and penultimate emperor of Vietnam, Khải Định (1916–25) is widely reported as a 'homosexual' (*người đồng tính*), consistent with formal terms for homosexuality, and a cross-dresser. Khải Định had twelve wives and concubines, legally marrying only two women, and fathering only one child with a concubine (Lê 2012). Vietnamese news media sensationalise his life, stating, for example, that '[i]n his entire ten years as emperor, Khải Định never slept with any of his wives' ([s]uốt mười năm làm vua, Khải Định không có ăn nằm với bà vợ nào), instead favouring the nightly company of his male palace servant (viên thị vệ), Nguyễn Đắc Vọng ('Chẩn đoán bệnh' 2011). In the digital library of the National University of Ho Chi Minh City, it states that Khải Định 'wore eccentric clothing, different to the traditional garb worn by emperors. He wore golden traditional head wraps, wore hats, and wore women's diamonds (ăn mặc quần áo rất lòe loẹt, không tuân theo y phục hoàng bào truyền thống của các vua chúa. Chít khăn vàng, đội nón, đeo hạt xoàn của phụ nữ)' (Khải Định 2013). Emperor Khải Định presented a coherent and consistent gender and sexual subjectivity outside the norms of masculinity for men in French colonial Vietnam. Further research is necessary, though, in order to truly understand what contemporary analysts mean by 'homosexual identity' in Vietnam, prior to the proliferation of terms like homosexual (*người đồng tính*). It is unclear if words such as *người đồng tính* were used to describe Khải Định in his own time, before it first appeared in Đao Duy Anh's comprehensive Vietnamese dictionary in 1936.

Nhung Tuyết Trần (2004), in her analysis of gender and society in the early modern Đại Việt period (1054–1804), details a handful of significant statutes peripherally related to gender crossing, alterations to genital or physical bodies in order to align with one's self-expression of gender, and same-sex sexuality. In her study of Vietnamese, Chinese, and Hán Việt (Sino-Vietnamese) written documents of Vietnamese legal histories during this period, Trần writes, '[t]he only statute that proscribed trans-gendered activity is article 305 of the Lê Code, which prohibited commoner men from castrating themselves (*tự yếm*) and punished those who violated

the regulation with life in exile' (2004: 137). The Lê Code (1428–1788) instituted important differentiations between Vietnamese legal structures and the Chinese colonial T'ang Code. Scholars often use the Lê Code as a litmus test for the parameters of Chinese cultural influence on Vietnam and Vietnamese colonial resistance. Vietnamese and Chinese eunuchs were castrated within the context of their servitude in imperial courts. Article 305 prohibits commoner men from accessing this stratum of society through self-mutilation. Article 640 of the Lê Code also introduces a prohibition against 'men who wear weird or sorceress garments' (Nguyễn and Ta 1987). The broader implication of these two Lê Codes is that male-bodied commoners who wished to self-castrate to become women, not necessarily to become eunuchs, were subject to legal disciplining for the act of transgressing social status boundaries. This kind of gender crossing could be indirectly punished through this law in the name of maintaining a classed and imperial social order.

Trần also discusses perhaps the first Vietnamese law that regulates same-sex relations as a matter of contamination of the patrilineal rule of the family. The *Book of Good Government of the Hong Duc Era* (Hồng Đức Thiện Chính) is a compendium of laws, proclamations, and edicts which outline Confucian expectations for Vietnamese personal conduct in the 1540s. One statute prohibits sexual relations between family members, which included household servants. Trần argues that 'a close reading of the language used suggests that it proscribed a male servant from sodomising the son of a household', a crime punishable by decapitation.

> Adopted sons (*nghĩa nam*) and designated successors (*tự nam*) who fornicate (*gian*) with their adopted mothers [shall be punished] the same as (*đồng*) *male* household servants [*cự công nhân*] who fornicate (*gian*) with the son[s] of the head of the household (*gia trưởng nam*). They shall be decapitated (*trảm*) (Nguyễn 1959: 63 [cited in Trần 2004: 138]).

Trần argues that 'fornication' (*gian*) specifically referred to anal or vaginal penetration within the context of a sexual hierarchy of domination and subordination. The penetration of the son of the head of the household was a kind of 'violation of boundaries and the potential pollution of the agnatic line. … Having been penetrated by a person of mean social standing, the son of the head of the household could no longer play the role of a proper male, but was somehow rendered female and subordinate to the male servant' (Trần 2004: 139). Thus, this Vietnamese provision against sodomy effectively punished the violation of patriarchal continuity and the classed social order, rather than the act of sodomy as a sexual act alone. Like many other statutes in the *Hong Duc* documents, it is unclear how widely this punishment was enforced. Outside of this statute, however, there are no other documented forms of direct legal intervention against male same-sex sexual activity in Vietnamese legal history.

Homosexuality, transgenderism, and the contemporary Vietnamese State

Despite Trần's findings in the *Hong Duc* compendium, many claim that there are currently no laws against homosexuality in Vietnam, or in earlier periods of Vietnam's history. This assertion has been made by researchers in Vietnam (Khuất et al. 2009), Anglophone researchers (Pastoetter 2001), international legal and human rights organisations (AsylumLaw 2009; ILGA 2012; IGLHRC 2012), gay tourism websites (UtopiaAsia 2013; Vietnam-Gay 2013), and a plethora of Vietnamese and English language news media online and in print. There are no laws against sodomy in the current Vietnamese civil code, but there are a number of discriminatory regulations against homosexual lifestyles and transgenderism, which are articulated in various proclamations, or indirectly enforced through nationalistic campaigns on proper citizenship. Any present

consideration about the Vietnamese State's treatment of homosexuality must be contextualised within this legal environment.

Perhaps the most prominent contemporary legal issue with respect to sexuality concerns same-sex marriage. The most recent Vietnamese Marriage and Family Law states that 'marriage is forbidden' in five circumstances, including 'between people of the same sex' (Article 10, No. 22/2000/QH10 2000): Sensational news stories that Vietnam might legalise same-sex marriage somewhat misinform readers about the Vietnamese legal treatment of homosexuality and campaigns for reform. Headlines project an image of improving human rights in Vietnam, with potentially significant implications for foreign investment, international diplomacy, and LGBT human rights advocacy (Newton 2012: 12–14, 369–73). Other Vietnamese-language news articles report that VNGOs proposed that the Vietnamese National Assembly consider a 2013 proposition that would allow two non-related adults to legally register their co-habitation, which also entails shared medical and financial responsibility over one another (see Diệu 2012; Trước 2012). Full marriage equality is not the immediate goal of these 2013 campaigns. VNGOs and other *gay* and *les* activists carefully tread a line of non-confrontation with the Vietnamese State through proposing an amendment that does not contradict the existing prohibition of same-sex marriage. In the broader context of Vietnamese gender and sexual rights, it was only in 2007 that VNGOs and women's rights advocates won a 10-year long battle to criminalise marital rape (Resolution No. 51/2001/QH10). Although the Vietnamese government does not yet recognise same-sex marriages, Resolution No 110/2013/110/2013/N&272;-CP on 12 November 2013 removed the provision in the Marriage and Family Law that explicitly prohibited same-sex marriage (TienPhong Online 2013).

Transgendered persons do not fare well under the current Vietnamese civil code. Currently, transgender-identified individuals cannot legally change their sex on official paperwork, unless a medical doctor identifies them as intersexed also. In 2008, Municipal Ordinance 158/2005/NĐ-CP allowed intersex individuals to register sex changes, but only 'in situations in which this person has a congenital defect which renders this person's sex undeterminable, which requires the diagnosis of a medical expert'.

Transgendered persons, however, are not necessarily intersex. Contemporary transgenderism entails identification with a gender that does not coincide with one's sex-differentiated body. This does not entail any biological 'abnormalities' of the sex organs or sex chromosomes, as is the case with intersex. Furthermore, the Vietnamese government goes so far as to exclude transgenders in such cultural practices as beauty pageants. Decision 87/2008/QĐ of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism enacted on December 30, 2008 states that, '[t]ransgender people cannot compete in beauty pageants'. This level of regulation is significant for understanding the broader legal environment which determines whether new LGBT rights can be introduced in Vietnam.

The socialist Vietnamese state has regulated non-normative gender and sexuality indirectly through campaigns against social evils since the 1950s. 'Social evils' (*tệ nạn xã hội*) is a loose legal category of social behaviour in Vietnam that has included homosexuality. The government controls representations of homosexuality in news media, which has been tightly controlled by the socialist and prior Vietnamese governments. Social evils were introduced to the Vietnamese civil code in Hồ Chí Minh's public declaration of the new Vietnamese constitution in 1953 (Decree 141/SL 1953). Social evils, however, are not defined explicitly, except that local authorities are empowered to act against social evils in society. Elsewhere, I have investigated the direct lineage between Vietnam's framing of 'social evils' (*tệ nạn xã hội*), the Republic of China's 'hooliganism' (*liumang*), and the former Soviet Union's 'hooliganism" (*khuliganstvo*) (Newton 2012: 121–32). For all three socialist governments, social evils or hooliganism were

catch-all descriptions for behaviours outside of social or legal norms, from premarital sex in the former Soviet Union to dancing in karaoke bars in contemporary Vietnam. It was not until 1994 that the Vietnamese government defined social evils as the unholy trinity of prostitution, drug use and gambling, specifically in response to anxieties around global capitalism and the world HIV/AIDS pandemic. After Vietnam instituted the 1986 *đổi mới* policies of economic and administrative reform, police would raid bars or nightclubs in order to indirectly regulate homosexuality, in the name of 'social indecency' or 'social evils'. Similar forms of local police regulation continue today. In 2009, the largest Vietnamese *gay* web forum hosted a drag contest in Saigon, which was raided and shut down by police, according to the founder of the web forum. This event was otherwise private, did not violate any legal restrictions of Vietnamese bar establishments, and was only publicised through the *gay* web forum.

The Vietnamese government currently oversees all local media and the reporting of social issues is often an indirect means of sociocultural control. Recently, there has been demonisation of 'trendy *les*' (les *phong trào*) in the media, which is one way in which the Vietnamese government works out its anxieties over changing norms of gender and sexuality for modern women (Newton 2012: 111–73). 'Trendy *les*' are portrayed as gold-diggers, exploiting a supposedly fashionable youth trend of lesbianism so that they can engage in a hyper-consumer lifestyle and avoid heterosexual marriage, at the expense of their female sexual and romantic partner. One article's title succinctly exemplifies the state's social judgment and the moral dilemma concerning the existence of the 'trendy *les*': 'Love women for love or for money?' [Yêu les vì tình hay tiền?] (Yêu 2009). The media imaginary of the trendy *les* figure is one of feminine sexuality gone wild in hyper-consuming, non-reproductive, and reckless sexuality, with lesbians seen to be evading the responsibilities of proper and filial womanhood within a heteronormative family. Trendy *les* are portrayed as acting out their deviant homosexuality in bars, nightclubs, or karaoke bars, along with other characters in social evil campaigns including prostitutes, gamblers, and drug users. Homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, and Vietnamese social evils have a complex intertwined history, echoing the triangulated connections made between opium dens, pederasty, and syphilis in the French colonial period, as discussed below.

Social, cultural, and medical forms of homophobia

Vietnamese laws and State media campaigns aside, the everyday lives of *gay*, *les*, *bi*, and transgender people (*người chuyển đổi giới tính*) are perhaps more affected by the environments of homophobia and heterosexism across institutions such as the family, the 'science' of sexuality in medicine and psychology, and nationalism and racialised identity formation. Across cultures, heterosexuality is instrumental in the maintenance of patriarchy and the heternormative family in reproducing the 'race' and 'nation'. Within this construct, homosexuality and transgenderism undermine the family power structure in terms of gender crossing, disturbing male dominance and female subordination, and perpetuating non-reproductive sexuality and non-heterosexuality. Recent research discusses the ways in which lesbophobia is intertwined with gender role expectations around biological reproduction and gender double-standards around sex (Khuất et al. 2009: 255–306). Homophobic responses include so-called corrective rape of lesbians to 'turn' them heterosexual; forced heterosexual marriage of young women (Bùi et al. 2010: 11–15), and house arrest and isolation of young lesbians as a way to 're-domesticate' them (Nguyễn et al. 2010). Confucian expectations for patriarchal order also limit the range of men's norms of masculinity, sexuality, and gender roles. These sociocultural expectations for men and women are central in the maintenance of a broader culture of homophobia and heterosexism in Vietnamese society.

Vietnamese newspaper advice columns have also featured the opinions of medical doctors and psychologists who have written about homosexuality as a disease of the body, a genetic disorder, hormonal imbalance, or mental illness. Vietnamese medical and psychological professionals do not currently incorporate the World Health Organisation's ICD-10 protocol on homosexuality, which removed it as a mental illness in 1990. One of the most outspoken medical doctors who has written on homosexuality is Dr. Trần Bồng Sơn, who has authored numerous sex educational books, pamphlets, and online news articles. In his advice column 'Knowing who to ask' (Thắc mắc biết hỏi ai), Dr. Sơn writes this about homosexuality:

> Homosexuality belongs to a class of deviant behavior (instead of man-woman, woman-man, we have man-man, woman-woman) and it can be categorised along with other 'philias', rare ones, such as: gerontophilia, pedophilia, zoophilia ... Because of this, in [South Vietnam] before 1975, this phenomenon [homosexuality] was called 'homo-philia', not 'love' or anything like that. (Trần 2000)

Vietnamese popular press, sex educational material, and current Vietnamese medical text books consider homosexuality a disease (*bệnh hoạn*), unnatural (*trái tự nhiên*), or a sexual/gender inversion (*sai lệch*), or as Dr. Sơn writes above, a kind of sexual deviance comparable to other sexual 'philias', including non-consensual sex with minors. A medicalised perspective of homosexuality frames it as devoid of emotional affinity, moral consideration for social behaviour, and certainly not an identity.

Homosexuality is also stigmatised as a 'Western disease' in popular consciousness, as well as in political debates about Vietnamese nationalism. Ironically, however, it was Europeans who first said that homosexuality was a Vietnamese disease, specifically during the colonial period. Frank Proschan (2002) details claims by French colonial officials, medical doctors, travellers, and missionaries during the late 1800s that Vietnamese opium dens in Saigon were 'infecting' Frenchmen with syphilis through pederasty and prostitution. The French claimed that Vietnamese women were so ugly with blackened teeth from betel nut chewing that this 'forced' colonials into engaging in homosexuality under the influence of opium. A French surgeon with the pseudonym Jacobus X recorded the most detailed compendium of Vietnamese gender and sexuality on record during the French colonial period, where he claimed that pederasty and sodomy 'became part of the manners of the Annamite people long before the conquest by the French' (Proschan 2002: 618–19). Homosexuality is seen as a racialised threat in contradictory ways, on the one hand by the French, who tried to conquer and divide the Vietnamese people through their medicalised homophobia and treatment of syphilis in opium dens, and by Vietnamese, who cling falsely to an idea of the heterosexual purity of the 'race'.

Gay and les subjectivities and community organising

Despite multiple sources of homophobia and lesbophobia across Vietnamese society, *gay* and *les* social networks, subjectivities, and communities still thrive, historically and contemporaneously. *Bi* and transgender individuals do participate in *gay* and *les* networks, but they are tightly intertwined with the dominant gender-segregated communities of *gay* and *les*. *Bi* women do not necessarily collaborate collectively with *bi* men; likewise, transgender men and women primarily associate with separate homosexual communities, or in some cases, completely pass in the heterosexual mainstream. Medical doctors Elliot Heiman and Cao Văn Lê (1975) published early research on the 'transsexual syndrome' of one individual in the Vietnamese countryside who was male-bodied, non-homosexual, and lived and worked as a woman in her village.

Heiman and Lê specifically differentiate between their transsexual subject and Vietnamese spiritual shamans in the Mother Goddess religion (đạo Mẫu), called *đồng cô*, who are popularly understood as homosexual men who traverse gender in attire and personification during religious healing rituals (*lên đồng*) (Nguyễn 2007). Several scholars debate the necessarily homosexual or transgender identifications of *đồng cô* male spiritual leaders on the grounds that feminine attire is essential for males in rituals which honour maternal figures and goddesses featured in the religion (Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2011: 137). Ritual participants are tacitly aware of the homosexuality of most *đồng cô*, but view sexual orientation as unconnected to the divine calling to mediumship or ritual practice (Norton 2006: 72), or that *lên đồng* rituals offer a complex way to fulfil filial and social obligations when a male medium has presumably socially unacceptably high levels of feminine spiritual energy within the Mother Goddess cosmology (Endres 2006: 89). By contrast, Vietnamese popular music singers like Cindy Thái Tài and Cát Tuyền publicly disclose their histories as male-to-female transsexuals, complicating the nationalistic discourses around 'good womanhood' in Vietnam. Very little is written about female-to-male transgenders, whom I have found to primarily associate in *les* and women's circles, not among transgender women or *gay* men. More research is necessary on *bi* men and women, gender-traversing spiritual mediums, and transgender communities in Vietnam.

Few scholars have explicitly written about contemporary Vietnamese *gay* subcultures. Heiman and Lê briefly discuss a luxury restaurant in downtown Saigon which gay men frequented in the 1960s (1975: 90). Marie-Eve Blanc (2005) argues that homosexual men suffered a loss of social status in Vietnamese society in the twentieth century, especially exacerbated by the AIDS epidemic. Blanc tracks an elaborate lexicon of terms in the *gay* male communities in Hanoi which describe gender expression, sexual behaviour, and levels of disclosure. *Bóng kín* ('closed shadow') is a slang term that refers to homosexual men who may pass as heterosexual due to their masculine gender, also implying their relative secrecy about their sexuality. *Bóng lộ* ('open shadow') or *bóng lại cái* ('feminine shadow') refer to effeminate men whose gender expression implies openness about their homosexuality. Nguyễn Quốc Vinh discusses how the modern slang term *bóng* ('shadow') for gay men originated in relation to gender-crossing spiritual mediums, whose 'shadowy spirit' allowed them special access to cosmic channels (1998). In Saigon, weekly drag shows, Sunday brunch gatherings, charity events in various provinces across the Vietnamese countryside, and an abundance of other social gatherings bring together hundreds of men, across all sectors of society.

In contrast, women's homosexual networks are fewer, although perhaps as complex in terms of gender and sexual subjectivity. Few scholars have written about Vietnamese female homosexuality, none in a sustained historical analysis. VNGO reports primarily focus on narratives of contemporary lesbian victimisation and isolation (Khuất et al. 2009; Nguyễn et al. 2010; Bùi et al. 2010). I have studied how *les* appropriate Saigon city space to do community organising that is often 'hidden in plain sight' (Newton 2012: 211–45). I argue that the form and the content of *les* social organising on *les* webforums and in urban space are intimately intertwined with the ways that leaders promote community values and form identities across these social domains. The differences between *les* community organising and other VNGO work demonstrate some of the challenges and fundamental political hierarchies that the global LGBT human rights movements perpetuate when these global human rights movements incorporate the developing world into their NGO structures, political rhetorics, and financial structures of sustainability. *Les* across all sectors of society, including a few in government offices and several couples who were raising children together, lived with varying degrees of disclosure about their lesbianism in their circles of work, family, and friends. Transnational networks among Vietnamese diasporics who participate in *les* web forums provide some funding for projects and social connections in

Vietnam. However, the vast majority of *les* social organising is led and implemented by *les* in Vietnam.

Central to the social complexity of the *les* community today is the evolution of subcultural gender subjectivities around a kind of 'butch-femme' system. Butch-femme is a complex lesbian gender system where women align themselves along masculine or feminine gender identities within a same-sex erotic partnership. Butch-femme does not simply imitate heteronormative gender, but reconfigures elements of normative masculinity and femininity within any particular society in an explicitly lesbian context. In recent years, the innovation of Vietnamese *les* is a three-gender system, not just a gender binary. The Vietnamese *les* gender identities *B, SB,* and *fem* were transliterations of the English 'butch', 'soft-butch', and 'femme'. These genders proliferated beginning in the late 1990s, when the Internet first appeared in Vietnam (Newton 2012: 192–7). *SB,* however, is understood as a third, in-between gender, not necessarily an outgrowth of 'butch'. Vietnamese *les* also differentiate between 'hard *SB*' (*SB cứng*) and 'soft *SB*' (*SB mềm*), among a plethora of other modifications of the three root genders. Older *les* in my research shared stories about a two-gender masculine/feminine system in the 1980s and 1990s, prior to *B, SB,* and *fem* (Newton 2012: 195, 191–201). *Les* gender diversification points to a complex community relationship with the three identities as distinct, especially in relation to a triangulation of gender and sexual desires across partnerships.

Vietnamese NGO work on LGBT human rights

The subcultural gender identities and communities that *gay* and *les* have created across the decades are now interfacing with emerging VNGO work around LGBT human rights. In 2008, VNGOs began to bring together the resources of long-standing foreign aid and Vietnamese *gay* and *les* volunteers to publicly advocate for LGBT human rights domestically and globally. Four VNGOs based in Hanoi led entirely by Vietnamese researchers began LGBT projects over the course of a few years, most significantly in campaigns for same-sex marriage in 2012. These VNGO projects have garnered significant financial support from United States, Swedish, and Canadian international development agencies. These VNGO projects deliberately use a 'human rights' framework in their advocacy to garner international development aid, moving away from a longer history of HIV/AIDS advocacy or a US-influenced 'civil rights' framework. VNGO LGBT projects include organised collaboration with Vietnamese news reporters to create more positive and accurate media representation of homosexuality, social networking spaces for parents of *gay* and *les* and, most recently, same-sex marriage equality. These Vietnamese LGBT human rights projects use social scientific research and strategically deployed psychomedical expertise in the media to change public perceptions about homosexuality and transgenderism. This VNGO work co-exists with and draws on the social capital of *gay, les,* and transgender community members and leadership in order to advance internationally recognised LGBT human rights work.

These VNGOs have introduced new language around gender and sexuality in the interest of LGBT human rights advocacy. The global LGBT human rights movement consists of international organisations, such as the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, international documents which articulate LGBT human rights on a global scale, such as the Yogyakarta Principles and the United Nation's statement concerning rights around sexual orientation and gender identity (see Sanders in this volume), and the proliferation of what is becoming a global aesthetic of LGBT rights, such as the rainbow flag, pride parades, and international conferences. Vietnam is one among many developing countries which are partaking of this global movement's resources, political language, and global aesthetic. Two key political constructs that animate the

global LGBT human rights movement are 'sexual orientation' and 'gender identity;' and advocates argue that all have universal rights with respect to freedom in sexual orientation and gender identity. These two constructs have become universalised, packaged, and circulated in the acronym 'SOGI' in recent years. VNGO researchers actively educate Vietnamese news media on homosexuality using translations of terms such as 'sexual orientation' (*xu hướng tình dục*) and 'gender identity' (*bản dạng giới*). This work is strategic, political, and aims to redefine cultural norms around gender and sexuality in Vietnam, using the momentum and clout of the global LGBT movement.

In the early years of these VNGO projects, Vietnamese news reporters attended large and staged events, such as conferences and art exhibitions, in order to report on LGBT organising in major cities across Vietnam. Their reporting pushes back against the homophobic tone that otherwise dominates Vietnamese media reports on sexuality. At these events, VNGO researchers, LGBT activists from overseas, and other Vietnamese celebrities and prominent figures present information about 'SOGI' or global LGBT human rights. Some *gay* and *les* web forum leaders also present major accomplishments or events in their respective communities. News reporters go on to report about these events, distributing new and positive representations of LGBTs in Vietnam. VNGOs have also developed a social networking group for parents of LGBTs, the first gay pride parades in Vietnam in 2012, an LGBT flashmob, and several conferences around safer sex. VNGO projects focus on combating social stigma in the mainstream, as opposed to providing social services for LGBTs or otherwise reaching *gay* and *les* for internal community support (Newton 2012: 246–303).

Some of the challenges that VNGOs face in conducting LGBT human rights work point to the problem of the global political and economic disparities which already exist in development work and human rights projects around the world. The global LGBT human rights movement has not adequately examined the efficacy of the universalisation and globalisation of 'SOGI' in representing 'human rights' around the world. I found ideological clashes between Vietnamese translations of the Western term 'SOGI' in recent years and the existing Vietnamese gender/sex construct *giới tính* (Newton 2012: 174–210). My analysis of interviews, news articles, and other media showed that *giới tính* had four uses: biological sex or social gender (man/woman), sexuality generally as in the case of 'sex education' [*giáo dục giới tính*], sexual orientation (heterosexual/homosexual/bisexual), and in the *les* community, *les* gender (*B, SB,* and *fem*). I argue that 'LGBT' is also a fundamentally sexist political construct, insofar as it forces under one umbrella the protection of sexual rights of a multiplicity of genders at the expense of a framework which recognises women's subordination within patriarchy in collaboration with homophobia. VNGOs have struggled to recruit and garner the support of *les* since the work began in 2008. Some of this difficulty arises from a longer history of VNGO work around HIV/AIDS and men who have sex with men (MSM), which facilitated greater community trust with *gay* men. However, the political agenda of 'LGBT' work in Vietnam has yet to create true coalitions with the longer standing women's rights projects. In this way, *les* easily fall through the cracks of both LGBT and women's rights development work. The NGO structure of international development work and the political universalisation of constructs like 'SOGI' lie at the heart of many global political hierarchies that the LGBT human rights movement perpetuates.

Conclusion

From the Lê Code prohibitions of sodomy and self-castration in the 1400s, to Xuân Diệu's homoerotic poetry in the 1930s, to same-sex marriage debates in 2012, the histories of homoeroticism in Vietnam are continually being transformed. Secondary resources on Vietnamese

histories of homoeroticism showcase a complexity of individuals who transgressed sexual and gender boundaries, and laws that reveal much about how gender and sexuality were constructed in relation to a patriarchal and classed social order. Analyses of the Vietnamese state show the complex way in which criticism of homosexuality and nationalistic campaigns intertwine to indirectly create an environment of political homophobia. Homophobia is also demonstrable in Vietnamese institutions of the family, psychomedical expertise, and popular discourse around homosexuality as a 'Western disease'. Despite multiple sources of homophobia, *gay* and *les* communities thrive, organising socially and politically. Recent Vietnamese NGOs face complex problems, however, in attempting to incorporate these existing *gay* and *les* community networks in the global LGBT human rights movement.

Future cultural studies or discourse analysis of homosexuality in Vietnamese popular culture could enhance the academic research highlighted in this essay, especially analysis of the growing body of fiction on the lives of Vietnamese *gay* and *les*. It is neither my claim nor the claim of the historical analyses cited here that homosexual or transgender identities as we understand them today have necessarily always existed in Vietnamese society. However, the impetus to organise debate around what is considered 'normal' gender, sexuality, or erotic life in Vietnam has been apparent in most historical periods. Individual and community gender and sexual crossings in Vietnam's history are a part of a universal human imperative to social life, especially in terms of the interconnection between human beings, in the perpetuation of any civilisation.

Further reading

Newton, Natalie (2012) 'A queer political economy of 'community': Gender, space, and the transnational politics of community for Vietnamese lesbians (les) in Saigon'. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Irvine.

Proschan, Frank (2002) '"Syphillis, opiomania, and pederasty": Colonial constructions of Vietnamese (and French) social diseases', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. 11(4): 610–36.

References

Blanc, Marie (2005) *Social construction of male homosexualities in Vietnam. Some keys to understanding discrimination and implications for HIV prevention strategy*, Oxford: UNESCO and Blackwell.

Bùi, Thị Thanh Hà, Vũ Ánh Tuyết, Nguyễn Vân Anh, and Lê Hồng Giang (2010) *Real Life, True Happiness / Hạnh Phúc là Sống Thật*. Hanoi: Thời Đại Publishing House.

'Chẩn đoàn bệnh "bất lực" của vua Khải Định' [A diagnosis of Emperor Khải Định's 'impotence'] (2011) *VietNam.net*. Available at: http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/tin-nhanh/24717/chan-doan-benh-bat-luc-cua-vua-khai-dinh.html (accessed 11 Jan 2013).

Diệu, L. (2012) 'Đề xuất công nhận chung sống có đăng ký' [Proposal to allow registered co-habitation], *DanViet.Vn*, available at: http://danviet.vn/115386p1c24/de-xuat-cong-nhan-chung-song-co-dang-ky-cho-nguoi-dong-tinh.htm (accessed 12 Dec 2012).

Đạo, Duy Anh (1994 [1936]) *Hán Việt Từ Điển* [Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary], Ho Chi Minh City: Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh.

Endres, Kirsten W. (2006) 'Spirit performance and the ritual construction of personal identity in modern Vietnam', in Karen Fjelstad and Thi Hien Nguyễn (eds) *Possessed by the Spirits: Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications.

Fjelstad, Karen and Nguyễn Thi Hien (2011) *Spirits without borders: Vietnamese spirit mediums in a transnational age*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

'Frank' (2000) 'On the legality of homosexuality in Vietnam', *Utopia-Asia.com*, available at: www.utopia-asia.com/vietlaw.htm (The VN-GBLF E-mail forum) (accessed 7 Jan 2012).

Ghosh, Palash (2012) 'Will Vietnam become first Asian nation to legalize gay marriage?' *International Business Times Online*. Available at: www.ibtimes.com/will-Vietnam-become-first-asian-nation-legalize-gay-marriage-734367 (accessed 15 November 2012).

Heiman, Elliot M. and Van Lê, Cao (1975) 'Transsexualism in Vietnam', *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. 4(1): 89–95.

'Khải Định (Nguyễn Bửu Đảo) 1916–25' (2013) *LichSuVietnam.VN*. National University of Ho Chi Minh City, available at: www.lichsuvietnam.vn/home.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1676&Itemid=34 (accessed 15 January 2013).

Khuất, Thu Hồng, Lê Bạch Dương and Nguyễn Ngọc Hồng (2009) *Sexuality in Contemporary Vietnam: Easy to Joke About But Hard to Talk About*. Hanoi: Knowledge Publishing House.

Lê, Thái Dũng (2012) 'Chuyện hôn nhân trong con mắt vua Khải Định (I)' [Marriage stories in the eye of emperor Khải Định Part I]. *Phụ Nữ Today*, available at: http://phunutoday.vn/blognguoinoitieng/201201/Chuyen-hon-nhan-trong-con-mat-vua-Khai-dinh-i-2127827/ (accessed 20 January 2013).

Martin, Fran and Heinrich, Larissa (2006) *Embodied modernities: Corporeality, representation, and Chinese cultures*. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press.

Masequesmay, Gina (2003) 'Emergence of Queer Vietnamese America', *Amerasia Journal*. 29 (1): 117–34.

Newton, Natalie (2012) 'A queer political economy of 'community': Gender, space, and the transnational politics of community for Vietnamese lesbians (*les*) in Saigon'. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Irvine.

Nguyễn, Thi Trinh (2007) *Ái nam, ái nữ* [Love man, love woman], Hanoi.

Nguyễn, Quếc Vinh (1998) 'Deviant bodies and dynamics of displacement of homoerotic desire in Vietnamese literature from and about the French colonial period'. *Talawas.org*, available at: www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=1056&rb=0503 (accessed 5 January 2013).

Nguyễn, Ngọc Huy and Ta, Vân Tái (1987) *Le Code: Law in traditional Vietnam: A comparative Sino-Vietnamese legal study with historical-juridical analysis and annotations*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.

Nguyen, Quỳnh Trang, Nguyen, Thị Thu Nam, Lê Nguyễn, Thu Thủy, Lê Quang, Bình (2010) 'Sống trong một xã hội dị tính: Câu chuyện từ 40 người nữ yêu nữ' [Living in a Straight Society: 40 Stories from Women who Love Women], Hanoi: Institute for Studies of Society, Environment, and Economy.

Norton, Barley (2006) '"Hot-tempered" women and "effeminate" men: The performance of music and gender in vietnamese mediumship." In Karen Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thi Hien b(eds) *Possessed by the Spirits: Mediumship in contemporary Vietnamese communities*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, pp. 55-76.

TienPhong Online (2013) 11/13/2013. 'CHÍNH THỨC CHO PHÉP HÔN NHÂN ĐỒNG TÍNH TẠI VIỆT NAM' [The Government Allows Same-Sex Marriage in Vietnam] (13 November), available at: http://tienphongonline.vn/chinh-thuc-cho-phep-hon-nhan-dong-tinh-tai-viet-nam.html (accessed 1 December 2013).

Trần, B.S. (2000) 'Thắc mắc biết hỏi ai (phần 20): Đồng tính luyến ái' [Don't know who to ask: Homosexuality]. *YkhoaNet.com*. Available at: www.ykhoanet.com/tinhduc_gioitinh/thacmacbiethoiai/phan20.htm (accessed 8 June 2011).

Trần, Nhung Tuyết (2004) 'Vietnamese women at the crossroads: Gender and society in early modern Đại Việt', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.

Pastoetter, Jakob (2001) 'Vietnam'. In Robert Francoeur (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of Sexuality Online*, available at: www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/IES/vietnam.html (accessed 5 February 2005).

Proschan, Frank (2002) '"Syphillis, opiomania, and pederasty": Colonial constructions of Vietnamese (and French) social diseases', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. 11(4): 610–36.

Trần, Richard (2011) 'From Red Lights to Red Flags: A History of Gender in Colonial and Contemporary Vietnam', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

Trước, Phong (2012) 'Đang nghiên cứu về hôn nhân đồng tính' [Doing research on gay marriage]. *TiềnPhong.vn*, available at: www.tienphong.vn/xa-hoi/585854/dangnghien-cuu-ve-hon-nhan-dong-tinh-tpov.html (accessed 24 July 2011).

Vietnam-Gay (2013) 'Vietnamese gay and lesbian scene guide' (2013) *Vietnam-gay.com*, available at: www.vietnam-gay.com (accessed 9 January 2013.)

Vietnam Marriage and Family Law (2000) *The National Assembly, Socialist Republic of Vietnam*. June 9. Instruction No. 22/2000/QH10.

Vietnam Declaration to Establish the Police Subcommittee as Appointed by the President [Sắc lệnh về việc thành lập Thứ Bộ Công an do Chủ tịch nước ban hành] (1953) *National Assembly, Socialist Republic of Vietnam*. February 16. Decree No. 141/SL.

Vietnam population and housing census (2009) *General Statistics Office of Vietnam*. April 1.

Vietnam Amendments and Supplements to 1992 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2001) *December 25. Instruction No. 51/2001/QH10.*

Vietnam Regulations for the Organizing of Beauty Pageants, Runners-up, and Models [Quy chế tô chức thi hoa hậu, hoa khôi, người đẹp]. Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2008) *Instruction No. 87/2008/QĐ-BVHTTDL.*

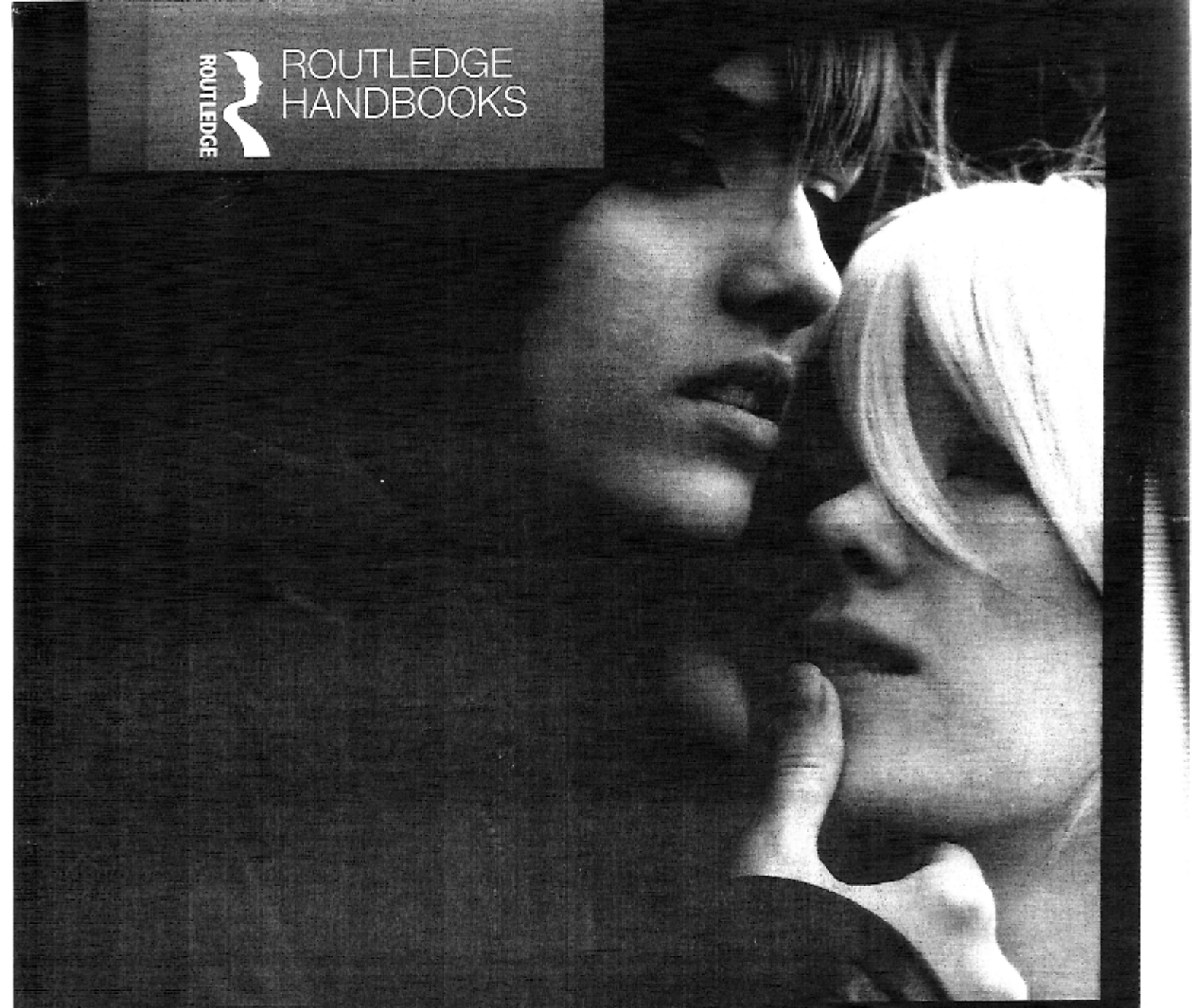
Vietnam Resolution Regarding Registration and Management of Legal Identificatory Information [Nghị Định về đăng ký và quản lý hộ tích] (2005) *The National Assembly, Socialist Republic of Vietnam. December 17.* Instruction No. 158/2005/NĐ-CP.

Xuân, Diệu (1980[1938]) *Thơ thơ* [Poems]. Glendale, CA: Đại Nam.

'Yêu les vì tình hay tiền?' [Love les for love or money?] (2009) *24h.com.vn*. available at: http://us.24h.com.vn/ban-tre-cuoc-song/yeu-les-vi-tinh-hay-tien-c64a227720.html (accessed 29 August 2009).

Zhou, Huashan (2000) *Tongzhi: Politics of same-sex eroticism in Chinese societies*. New York: Haworth Press.

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOKS



Routledge Handbook of Sexuality Studies in East Asia

Edited by Mark McLelland and Vera Mackie

First published 2015
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Routledge handbook of sexuality studies in East Asia / edited by Mark McLelland and Vera Mackie.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Sex--East Asia--Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. McLelland, Mark J., 1966- editor of compilation.
HQ21.R876 2014
306.7095--dc 3
2014002179

ISBN: 978-0-415-63948-4 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-77487-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Taylor & Francis Books

Printed and bound in the United States of America by Publishers Graphics, LLC on sustainably sourced paper.

Contents

gender, and same-sex sexuality. In her study of Vietnamese, Ch
Vietnamese) written documents of Vietnamese legal histories during
only statute that proscribed trans-gendered activity is article 305
hibited commoner men from castrating themselves (*tự yếm*) and

dạng giới). These translated and borrowed terms are not necessarily shared by Vietnar and *les*, or the Vietnamese diaspora. Considering the historical abundance of derogato to describe homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism, it is perhaps ever-more signi recognise the proliferation of terms used by self-identified *gay*, *les*, *bi*, and transgende *dhuyện đồi giới tính*) individuals in Vietnam.

Historical perspectives on homosexuality in Vietnam

Contemporary Vietnamese vernacular terms for homosexuality (*pê-đê* and *đồng tính luyến* have first emerged during French colonialism (1854–1954). Vietnamese same-sex homoero