Crossing borders to buy sex: Taiwanese men negotiating gender, class and nationality in the Chinese sex industry

Mei-Hua Chen
National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan

Abstract
As a rising economic power in East Asia, Taiwan once served as a destination of sex tourism, now gradually it is becoming a country of buyers seeking sex abroad. Currently, China appears to be one of the most popular destinations. Drawing on data from in-depth interviews with 40 Taiwanese male sex buyers and ethnographic data collected by traveling with a group of five men, this article aims to explore how buying sex abroad appears to be the complicated site of power struggles where sexuality intersects with gender, nationality, and global economic hierarchy. By conceptualizing men's buying of sex abroad as sexual migration, I illustrate the ways in which men's border crossings for buying sex are complexly embedded in the gender, sexuality, and class relations in Taiwan, and how their sexual encounters with Chinese women are always contaminated by the politics of nationalism which derive from the unsettled political atmospheres across the Taiwan Strait. I argue that sexual migration is made attractive mainly because of the sexual discontent caused by the stratification of the Taiwanese sex industry and the sexual constraints and routineness of heterosexual monogamy. Buying sex abroad therefore appears as a temporary escape from this mundaneness and banality. Conceptualizing men's buying sex abroad in dynamic transnational contexts, we could illustrate how men actively negotiate sexual desires at both ends of the Taiwan Strait, and go further to analyse how sexuality serves to shape regional migration, and how it interweaves with gender, class and nationality.

Keywords
Cross-Taiwan Strait relations, masculinity, sex tourism, sexual migration, sexuality

Corresponding author:
Mei-Hua Chen, National Sun Yat-sen University, 70 Lienhai Rd., Kaohsiung 80424, Taiwan, Kaohsiung, 80424, Taiwan.
Email: mc153@mail.nsysu.edu.tw
Introduction

One can easily identify two flows of sexual subjects that run in opposite directions in the international sex trade: the First World/white men from the North come down to the South seeking women of color to purchase for sexual services. Conversely, the Third World/non-white/poor women move to the North to provide sexual services in order to seek survival or better their lives (for example, Agustin, 2007; Andrijasevic, 2003; Thorbek and Pattanaik, 2002). Both movements involve transnationalism in terms of border-crossing, living here and there, regularly moving back and forth, and as O’Connell Davidson (2001) reported, can eventually turn into long-term migration. However, the bilateral sexual movements, particularly the ones made by sex buyers have hardly been theorized in terms of transnational migration.

Attending to the bilateral sexual movement at the regional level, I find that the idea of sexual migration, widely used in queer studies (Binnie, 2004; Cantú, 2009; Rubin, 1993[1984]), is more helpful in understanding Taiwanese men’s sexual trips to China than ‘sex tourism’. The latter term is not only saturated with moral condemnation, but also hardly considers the ways transnationalism intersects with men’s sexual consumption. Moreover, as the long-term political tensions across the Taiwan Strait have been greatly shaped by the unique relations between Taiwan and China, one cannot afford to neglect the ways nationality serves to shape these men’s sexual trips in China.

Based on interview data with 40 Taiwanese men and ethnographic fieldwork with a group of men who regularly buy sex in China, I conceptualize men’s buying of sex abroad as sexual migration. I identify the ways in which transnationalism highlights Taiwanese men’s sexual consumption in China, and then reveal the social factors that facilitate their sexual migration. I argue that sexual migration is made attractive mainly because of the sexual discontent caused by the stratification of the Taiwanese sex industry as well as the routineness and restrictive sexual morality of heterosexual monogamy. Conceptualizing men’s buying of sex abroad in transnational contexts, we can illustrate how men actively negotiate sexual desires at both ends of the Taiwan Strait, and go further to analyse how sexuality interweaves with gender, class and nationality to shape men’s regional sexual migration.

Theorizing male sexual subjects on the move

The increasing scale of global sex tourism has attracted academic interest across disciplines. Sex tourism firstly refers to people who organize travel to buy sex. However, the relations between sex and tourism have become entangled and the four Ss (i.e. sun, sand, surf and sex) of tourism signify the ways in which modern tourism is sexualized (Bauer and McKercher, 2003; Cohen, 1982). O’Connell Davidson (1996: 42) introduces the term ‘situational sex tourists’ to refer to men who do not intend to buy sex at the outset, but when the opportunity arises they might ‘enter into sexually exploitative relationships with local women’. As gender
and economic inequality between sex tourists and local sex workers highlight the analysis of sex tourism, the ‘typical sex tourists’ who abuse their powers (in terms of gender, class and ‘race’ etc.) is overwhelming in the literature. Scholars who use a macro-analysis approach have consistently argued that rising global tourism, accelerated commodification of sexuality and the unequal economic hierarchy between the North and the South greatly facilitate global sex tourism (e.g. Hall, 1996 [1994]; Penttinen, 2008; Singh and Hart, 2007; Truong, 1990; Urry, 1996). This approach seems to suggest that the causal factor behind the rise of sex tourism is economic while male sexuality is assumed to be a relative constant. Male sexuality is therefore left under-theorized.

On the other hand, feminist scholars prefer to examine the ways in which sex tourism makes western men’s sexual fantasies and desires possible in the Third World. Gender regimes in both destinations and the First World, and the ways male sexual fantasies interweave with racism dating back to colonial times are the major themes of feminist theorizing on sex tourism (e.g. Brennan, 2001, 2002; O’Connell Davidson, 1996, 1998, 2001; Sanchez Taylor, 2000). Sex tourism is also considered as a form of conspicuous consumption which embodies male domination over women under the logic of consumerism and a celebration of hyper-masculinity that demands that all kinds of sexual appetites should be satisfied (Katsulis, 2010). Among some authors, sex buyers who travel around the world for sexual pleasure are also represented as people who foster global trafficking in women and girls, particularly when child prostitution is involved (for example, Beddoe, 2003; Hall, 1996 [1994]; Jeffreys, 1999; O’Connell Davidson, 2005). As Montgomery (2008: 907) argued, the moral framework of ‘evil perpetrators and innocent child victims’ surrounds the child sex tourism debate; and tourists are overwhelmingly represented either as ‘the pedophile’ or ‘situational’ users of prostitution who exploit children when the opportunity is available.

Framing sex tourism as a transnational process, Brennan (2004) argues that both sex sellers’ and clients’ movements across the globe constitute the sexscape in which two groups of persons take up different social positions in the global sex industry to pursue sexual pleasures and monetary gains respectively (Penttinen, 2008). Nonetheless, female sex workers in South America show that the ambivalent boundaries between sex tourism and intimate sexual encounters also allow them to negotiate transnational marriage with foreign men (Brennan, 2004; Cabezas, 2009; Carrier-Moisan, 2015; Piscitelli, 2007).

The ways sex tourists are excluded from theories of migration, in my view, is related to their definition as having unfit, immoral, and pathological sexual desires as described earlier. The aggressive sexual image of ‘the evil sex tourists’ however only provides part of the story. As literature on prostitutes’ clients in the past two decades have shown, men who buy sex in domestic contexts are far from sexual perverts, but very much ‘ordinary’ or ‘average’ men (Høigaard and Finstad 1992; Sharpe 1998). Apart from pursuing varied individual sexual pleasures and excitement (McKeganey and Barnard, 1996), male clients invest diverse social meanings in buying sex such as male-identity making and seeking emotional comfort.
(Bernstein, 2007; Chapkis 1997; Chen, 2003; Kong, 2015a; Peng, 2007; Plumridge et al., 1997; Sanders 2008). Above all, regular clients who use high-end indoor sexual venues even deliberately seek ‘bounded intimacy’ or a ‘girlfriend experience’ with their regular sex workers (Bernstein, 2007; Huff, 2011; Kong, 2015a; Sanders 2008; Weitzer, 2009) and thus blur the boundaries between intimacy and commercial sex, between private life and public transactions.

Reviewing the literature on buying sex both in domestic and transnational contexts, one might wonder why domestic sex buyers are gradually allowed to invest various meanings in commercial sex, while transnational sex buyers are still branded with the stereotype of the ‘evil sex tourists’ as if they were another species. Moreover, authors might notice that sex tourists vary across different classes (Brennan, 2004; O’Connell Davidson, 1998; Sanchez Taylor, 2000), but the ways class shapes clients’ sexual trips in both destinations and home country are hardly scrutinized.

Locating transnational sexual movements made by sex workers and sex buyers at the regional level, we can clearly identify that there has been an ongoing bilateral sexual movement across the Taiwan Strait. Since late 1987 when Taiwan lifted martial law, every year there have been thousands of Chinese women coming to Taiwan either as marital migrants or undocumented migrants, and more recently as tourists. While they come to seek a better life, many end up seeking survival in the sex industry (Chen, 2015). On the other hand, Taiwan has gradually turned itself into a sending country for sex tourists in the past two decades. According to the Taiwan Tourism Bureau, the number of Taiwanese outbound tourists has grown dramatically in the past two decades; it was estimated at only 484,901 in 1980 but had grown more than twenty-fold to 10,239,760 in 2012 (Tourism Bureau, 2013). In 2012 more than 91.5% of the trips made by Taiwanese took place within Asia, and China unsurprisingly is the most popular destination, attracting 30.7% of total outbound tourists. Using the dataset of the East Asian Social Survey 2008, Chang and Chen (2013) revealed that 47% of Taiwanese interviewees (N = 2,067) reported that they knew their friends, relatives and colleagues engaged in sex-related activities when they travelled abroad, and that Southeast Asia and East Asia were the top two destinations for these activities. In addition, with the increasing foreign investment in China, Taiwanese businessmen working in China are actively engaging in the Chinese sex industry as well as keeping ‘second wives’ in China (Shen, 2005).

Taking the bilateral sexual movements across the Taiwan Strait seriously, the concept of sexual migration developed by queer studies seems to provide for better theorizing. It has been widely used to describe how sexual dissidents migrate to other cities or countries to avoid discrimination and violence (Binnie, 2004; Cantú, 2009; Rubin, 1993[1984]), and to analyse the ways in which national borders are shaped by gender and heteronomativity (Chen, 2015; Luibhéid, 2002). Carrillo (2004: 59) conceptualized sexual migration as:

International migration that is motivated, fully or partially, by the sexuality of those who migrate, including motivations connected to sexual desires and pleasures, the
pursuit of romantic relations with foreign partners, the exploration of new self-
definitions of sexual identity, the need to distance oneself from experiences of
discrimination or oppression caused by sexual difference, or the search for greater
sexual equality and rights.

Transnational sexual migrations made by sex workers and sex buyers driven by
the quest to avoid domestic laws and moral stigma while seeking sexual pleasures
or adventures obviously fits this definition. Nonetheless, neither of them has been
analysed in terms of sexual migration. The movements of female sex workers and
male sex buyers, indeed, have been wrongly framed as ‘trafficking in women’
(Agustin, 2007; Kempadoo, 2005) and (infamously) ‘global sex tourism’ for dec-
ades respectively. The failure of analysing the bilateral sexual movement in terms of
migration, is because we constantly criticize the growing global sex industry but fail
to unpack the multi-layered social structures (e.g. the client–sex worker relations at
the micro level, state regulations on commercial sex and social morality at the
middle-range level, and the global economic hierarchy at the macro level) that
underpin the global sex industry.

One might argue that tourism and migration are different kinds of transnational
movements in terms of crossing space and time. However, a series of polarized
classifications regarding transnational subjects based on post-Second World War
mass labour migration (such as permanent and temporary, voluntary or forced,
economic or non-economic, legal or illegal, and tourism or migration etc.) have
gradually come to be considered as problematic in both tourism and migration
literature because contemporary forms of migration (such as seasonal workers,
second-home owners, weekly and long-distant commuting, overseas students etc.)
are increasingly complex, diverse and flexible (for example, Bell and Ward, 2000;
King, 2002; O’Reilly, 2003; Williams and Hall, 2002; Wonders, 2006). As one of the
most cited works done by Williams and Hall (2002) has shown, the boundary
between tourism and migration is far from clear, and in fact the supposedly sepa-
rate practices are frequently overlapping and interconnected. Although scholars
have been struggling to differentiate ‘permanent’ migration from ‘temporary’
migration, and distinguishing ‘migration’ from ‘tourism’ in terms of crossing
spatial boundaries and time, these efforts end up relying on arbitrary time limits
to draw the definitional lines, and these definitions are thus usually criticized
for obscuring people’s diverse living experiences. For example, O’Reilly (2003)
documented that British retirees who purchase second homes in Spain practised
a variety of very different lifestyles ranging from visiting Spain only during
the winter, constantly shuttling between Britain and Spain, to becoming entrepre-
neurial migrants who opened businesses in Spain.

The debates regarding the nexus of tourism and migration are helpful in exam-
ing the bilateral sexual movements across the Taiwan Strait. In fact, both
Taiwanese clients and Chinese sex workers were indeed shuttling back and forth
across the Taiwan Strait, sometimes living here and sometimes there. Even the
Taiwanese clients had a wide range of transnational experiences, as some of
them managed to change their status from tourists, to economic migrants, and in some cases even became permanent migrants. In other words, there are many different social relations and dynamic social processes taking place surrounding transnational commercial sex, and the already stigmatized and overloaded concept of ‘sex tourism’ is clearly inadequate to analyse the complex social processes involved. Conceptualizing buying sex abroad as sexual migration serves to highlight the ways in which transnationalism underpins men’s sexual consumption abroad, and how men’s border-crossings interweave with gender, class, sexuality and nationality. This conceptualization does not, however, entail that relations between sex buyers and sex sellers are egalitarian. Neither is the use of the term ‘sexual migration’ simply a strategy to avoid the more problematic, temporary, short-term word ‘sex tourism’, which would thus reproduce the hierarchy between permanent and temporary, between long-term and short-term sexual encounters. As Wonders (2006) precisely argued, developed countries have been tightening border controls to welcome tourists who are considered as resource owners and keep out migrants who are considered undesirable, either because they are presumed to be poor people who would depend on the social welfare system or because they are suspected to be potential terrorists in the wake of the 9/11 and subsequent attacks.

Data, methods and the field

The data presented in this article were collected between October 2010 and May 2012 through a research project investigating Taiwanese men’s sexual consumption in China. Although buying sex is well tolerated in Taiwan, it is not easy to convince men to talk about it in an interview setting. On 26 October 2006 a Taiwanese tabloid published a hilarious story ‘[W]itnessing the biggest buying sex group’ describing how Taiwanese men organized baseball teams as a disguise to go to China to buy sex (Next Magazine, 2006). I thus circulated research information in sport clubs in southern Taiwan, and then used snowball sampling to recruit interviewees. As the Collective Of Sex Workers And Supporters (COSWAS) has held a few forums on sex workers’ clients in the past decade, I also recruited interviewees through COSWAS. All participants were interviewed in face-to-face interviews that lasted between one and half and four hours. Interviews were conducted with 40 heterosexual male clients, aged between 23 and 65. Most of the men had organized or joined trips to Dongguan in Guangdong province simply for buying sex. Some were situational users as a result of business matters. Apart from four interviewees who were middle and upper class, the others were lower middle-class salary men or from working-class backgrounds. The gaps between salary structures and living costs across the Taiwan Strait, however, make it possible for them to buy sex in China.

With the help of a few famous table-tennis coaches, I managed to gain access to another coach, Mr Chen, who had organized sex trips seasonally to China with four other friends (a fireman, two night-market vendors, and a self-employed technician) since 2006. I sent the coach my earlier research on Taiwanese sex workers,
clients and pimps in the past decade to convince him that I know the sex industry very well, and then interviewed him to let him know what the study might involve to assure him that the data would be kept anonymous. Nearly six months later, the coach phoned me to tell me that my assistant and I would be allowed to join their trip to China in March 2011. As the cost of the trip is always a major concern for these men, when we joined the trip, we also helped them out by paying our share of the mini-vans, meals, and particularly the booth fees and drinks in the karaoke bar. I therefore managed to follow the same group of five men as they travelled to buy sex in Guangdong over two trips between 2011 and 2012. As I was the only woman in this group, I consciously played down my gender and sexuality with gender-neutral clothing to avoid unwanted sexual attention of the kind reported by Peng (2007). Nonetheless, fieldwork regarding commercial sex is always a site of power struggles in which gender, class and sexuality interweave with each other, and both the researched and the researcher have to negotiate the dynamic power relations (Chen, 2008). As a single female researcher, I was frequently challenged and belittled as ‘sexually inexperienced’, ‘too naïve’ and even blamed because I ‘don’t understand men at all’ by this group. However, as a university professor, they very much enjoyed to talk to me simply because ‘you’re my only friend who is a professor’.

It is claimed that a ‘nightlife economy’ of bars, dance clubs, karaoke, rave parties, and sex industry has been booming since China opened its market to the world in the 1980s (Chew, 2009; Zheng, 2009). The prosperity of the Chinese sex industry, however, depends on the huge supply of sexual labour. The majority of Chinese sex workers are migrant women or young girls, from rural areas of poor provinces, who are either desperate to escape poverty or are eager to embrace modern lifestyles (Ding and Ho, 2008; Zheng, 2009). Both buying sex and selling sex are criminalized in China and both parties face detention of up to 15 days and a fine of 5,000 RMB, but commercial sex is still prevalent in daily practice. Huang et al., (2012) identified at least seven types of Chinese female sex workers: women hired for a short period, streetwalkers, workers in factories, beauty parlour employees, massage parlour workers, mid-range karaoke bar workers, and those working in high-end hotels and VIP clubs. Moreover, women charged different prices depending on the type of sex work they were engaged in, ranging from US$3–5 for a trick in streetwalking to US$30 or higher in middle and high-end sexual venues. According to Zheng (2009), the Chinese government calls women who are paid to provide customized sexual services in karaoke bars or clubs as sanpei xiaojie (literally three-accompany little sisters; i.e. women who accompany clients to eat, drink and sleep). Sanpei services are particularly attractive to Taiwanese because the bar girls in Taiwan are not necessarily willing to sell sex.

The group I travelled with and most of my interviewees in this study also prefer to visit sanpei xiaojie in karaoke bars rather than visiting low-end sexual venues or soliciting streetwalkers. They usually visited Dongguan and then moved around towns such as Xiachuan, Changping, Zhongshan and Zhuhai. They were keen to report the spectacular scenes from ‘guanghuajie’ (in literal terms ‘shopping a flower street’) where hundreds of women constitute the flower street. Picking up girls was
called ‘choosing concubines’ (xuan fei). The group I followed visited a mid-range karaoke bar and a high-end club in a local five star hotel. The ‘flower street’ of the karaoke bar and the club provided about 300 and 500 young girls respectively. We were told by a bar manager that most girls were ‘aged between 15 and 24’. Girls wore different uniforms to indicate their different prices in the market. The karaoke classified girls into three categories; i.e. ‘2-5-8’, ‘3-6-9’, and the model-level ‘4-8-10’ respectively; the five-star club classified girls as ‘3-6-9’, ‘4-8-10’ and ‘5-10-15’. Unlike the other venues, white men were highly visible in the five-star club. In each category, the first number refers to the price of hiring the girl to sit in a booth to accompany one to drink, eat and sing, and the second number the price of hiring her to provide one intercourse, and the third number the price of hiring her to sleep for one night. For example, picking up a girl who was labelled as ‘L2-5-8’ means she charged 200 RMB for entertaining a client in a booth, and 500 RMB for having one intercourse, and 800 RMB for staying overnight. Similarly, the most expensive category ‘5-10-15’ means the costs for accompanying a client in booth, for providing one intercourse, and staying over night for 500 RMB, 1,000RMB and 1,500RMB respectively.

Buying sex in ‘dangerous’ China

Denying Taiwan’s sovereignty, China has consistently claimed that ‘Taiwan is part of China’; on the other hand, Taiwan turned itself into a militaristic country that was prepared to ‘counterattack Mainland’ (fangongdalu) and ‘recover lost territory’ (shoufuheshan) for decades. However, since the lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987, socio-economic and political relations across the Taiwan Strait are gradually increasing. It is argued that the shared language and easy circulation of cultural commodities link China-Hong Kong-Taiwan (zhong gang tai) as a particular cultural area in which they share cultural similarities while simultaneously remaining differentiated from each other (Shih, 1998) in terms of social and political diversity and particularly national identity. The complex relations across the Taiwan Strait greatly shape Taiwanese people’s attitudes toward China and the Chinese in general. For example, the 330,000 Chinese marriage migrants in Taiwan have been widely constructed as a deviant other in terms of both nation and class, who deliberately came to Taiwan to exploit their Taiwanese husbands and depend on the welfare system (Chao, 2004), thus justifying their social exclusion at both the institutional and popular level. Hence, although cultural intimacy, regional economic hierarchy and geographic closeness serve to make China a desirable destination, the antagonistic atmosphere toward the Chinese underlines Taiwanese men’s sexual migration to China.

Taiwanese men have been actively organizing maichuntuan (literally ‘buying spring groups’) to travel to China for sex tourism since the 1990s. Detailed internet websites regarding buying sex in China have been booming in the past two decades. The most (in)famous website, ‘Go China’, claimed that it had 20,000 registered members (Next Magazine, 2006). Scrutinizing these websites about buying sex
abroad, one can easily see that men’s narratives of buying sex in China are different from their experiences in other popular destinations in Southeast Asia. The use of military terminology to make fun of their sexual trips to China is particularly notable. Buying sex in China is commonly made fun of as ‘counterattacking Mainland’. Firstly, members of these websites rarely use the stigmatized term ‘maichuntuan’ to refer to themselves, but instead use ‘jeoukuotuan’ (which literally means ‘saving the nation group’) instead. Moreover, the military rank is mobilized to differentiate experienced and inexperienced sex buyers. Men also shared updated ‘war information’ on discussion forums to see whether the Chinese government was launching raids. The group I travelled with was also familiar with this military language. They called their busy schedules of flying to China, rushing to karaoke bars upon arrival, and then moving around different sexual venues in the nearby towns as a ‘rapid march’. The fireman in the group reported that he collected ‘war trophies’ such as women’s pubic hair and their QQ (social network) accounts. Although a few interviewees claimed that the military language was simply a way to ‘link varied men together’, it nonetheless also signifies the legacy of conflict across the Taiwan Strait.

Kong (2015b) argued that buying sex is a leisure edgework in which men exercise skills to balance sexual pleasures and varied risks ranging from contracting sexual diseases to moral and legal risks. The risk management in this study is both remarkable and ambivalent. There is a widely circulated rumour in Taiwan saying that men who buy sex in China will be named and shamed by the Chinese government, but none of my interviewees reported ever being caught in China. Most interviewees nonetheless reported that ‘of course, you’d worry about it; it’s a communist country’. A-jie, a single labour union worker in his early 30s, explained how the ‘unpredictable’ Chinese government causes huge concerns among men:

The terrible thing is that you have no idea what will happen to you... You find many different situations on the Internet forums. Some people got fined, some people even paid the fine but were still put into jail for a long time... The information is rather confusing. And you’re having a vacation and you have to go back to work. That is very terrible (when you have no idea what happens next).

Although the notion of an ‘unpredictable China’ is commonly reported, most interviewees also know that the corruption in China is so prevalent that they could avoid the risk by visiting sexual venues recommended by trusted friends or bar managers, which would presumably have already bribed the authorities to ensure their customers’ security. A few interviewees reported they bribed customs officers with 50 to 100 RMB to bring xiaojie (sex workers) into special zones that deny entrance to migrants from other provinces. Mr Ho, a small shop owner, reported:

Even today bribery is still very common there. Just like Taiwan, the bigger the shop [i.e. sexual venue], the safer it is. Also the bar managers would give you phone numbers, so you could contact them on phones [to see whether it is safe]. And booking accommodation in more expensive hotels, where gongan [i.e. police] won’t raid.
Similarly, interviewees who could not afford expensive hotels would prefer to revisit the same towns and even the same sexual venues simply for safety. Interviewees changed their destinations mainly because those popular towns are becoming too expensive to afford or too dangerous to enjoy. Currently, some interviewees are moving to Changan and Foshan to seek more affordable sexual services. The group ‘felt forced’ to explore Vietnam in 2014 because of the serious crackdown on the sex industry in Dongguan since 2012. This trip however ended up not being enjoyable at all because they could not communicate with Vietnamese sex workers, and were unfamiliar with the local sex industry leading them to feel they were always ‘cheated by the locals’.

Most interviewees hardly worried about sexual diseases because they claimed that they ‘used condoms every time’ or ‘won’t be so unlucky’. The ‘real danger’ they warn each other is ‘our dalutongbao’ (literally mainland compatriots). Indeed, the group I travelled with constantly warned me: ‘It is very dangerous. People get robbed here. Don’t go out alone’. These fears seemed overblown to me, since compared to other metropolises around the world, Dongguan, in my view, is definitely much safer. However, in the Taiwanese imagination, ‘Chinese compatriots’, both sex workers and Chinese in general, are viewed extremely negatively; for example they are considered to be greedy, cunning and dangerous.

The sexual discontents of Taiwanese working-class men

Heterosexuality is not only about sexual attraction or the act of having sex with the opposite sex, but also entails a set of institutions, identities and varied practices (Jackson, 1999). At the institutional level, the organization of commercial sex across the Taiwan Strait, and sexual morality or social norms surrounding heterosexual marriage in Taiwan highlight Taiwanese men’s sexual migration. Although it is claimed that the low prices only partially explain western men’s sex tourism in Thailand (O’Connell Davidson, 1998; Singh and Hart, 2007), the cheap sanpei services certainly make it possible for Taiwanese working-class men to access a pleasure-selling sector which is mainly reserved for upper- and middle-class men back home. Crossing the border to buy sex in China simultaneously involves crossing multiple social boundaries, and is therefore similar to queer migrants who move to avoid repressive sexual politics rather than the social imagination of tourists as people who own resources and move around the globe simply to pursue all kinds of pleasures.

Furthermore, the sexual migration of these men is very much entangled with working-class men’s views of manhood and masculinity. Lacking economic power, many of them actually failed to present themselves as proper breadwinners in Taiwan, and a few of them even failed to enter a stable heterosexual relationship. Shuttling back and forth across the Taiwan Strait makes it possible for these working-class men to take up different subject positions and be able to perform different client masculinities (such as enjoying the feelings of ‘being a big man’ and of ‘being a big lover’), which they could not obtain back home. Crossing borders to
buy sex in China therefore is not only about crossing national borders, but also simultaneously transgresses multiple social boundaries in terms of social class, sexual morality, legal regulations across the Taiwan Strait, and the boundaries between intimacy and commercial sex.

**Classed pleasure-selling on both sides of the Taiwan Strait**

The Taiwanese sex industry can be roughly divided into a ‘body-selling’ sector that sells standardized sex explicitly (e.g. brothels and call-girl services), and ‘pleasure-selling’ that disguises itself as various urban entertainments to pander to clients’ demands (Chen, 2006). Although both sectors are well developed to cater for different clienteles, politicians and businessmen are the major consumers who use the pleasure-selling sector, in which women serve as waitresses, entertainers and prostitutes to massage men’s egos, to demonstrate their power and build up social, economic or political networks (Bedford and Hwang, 2009; Hwang, 2003). As the former is explicitly criminalized by prostitution laws it often suffers from police crackdowns. The policing of prostitution and the stratification of the sex industry thus create a sexual hierarchy among Taiwanese men in terms of social class: those who are affluent consume the expensive ‘pleasure-selling’ sector services while poor men are confined to the ‘body-selling’ sector and suffer from police raids.

Treating sex tourism as a form of conspicuous consumption (Katsulis, 2010) neglects the fact that many working-class men manage to engage in this global trend with the help of the tremendous amount of information on the internet, as well as the advice of their friends who have personally had multifarious experiences of the Chinese sex industry. Interviewees usually saved pocket money for a while to visit China or managed to apply for loans from banks collectively. As many interviewees hardly ever visited expensive pleasure-selling venues in Taiwan, buying sex in China, particularly for working-class men, signifies temporary upward mobility in terms of social class and lifestyle. Take David as an example. Working as a legal assistant, David earns $40,000 (TWD) per month, and had never visited hostess bars in Taiwan. However, he thought of himself as engaging in a ‘middle-class-style’ sexual consumption in China. His group usually visited massage parlours to buy sex in the daytime, and then visited karaoke bars to find a 369 girl to stay with overnight. Each of them usually spent 1,700 RMB (equal to TWD 8,500 or £183) a day and paid another 200 RMB (TWD 1,000 or £21) for a hotel. However, the same expenditure could only pay for 50 minutes of regular call-girl service twice in Taiwan. They frequently reported that ‘Taiwan is too expensive’ or ‘it’s impossible to play like this in Taiwan’. Da-pan, a printer in a local press, has been regularly visiting China since the mid-1990s and repeatedly mentioned the good old days when New Taiwan Dollars were ‘popular and useful’ in China:

It coulddddn’t be cheaper. [Paying] 200 or 300 RMB, [you] got a young girl to accom-
pany you all night; 500 [RMB], you could sleep with her. It couldn’t be cheaper,
seriously. Here, hiring a hostess in karaoke, they’d charge at least 2,000 [TWD] per
hour; taking her out [for sex] you have to pay another 10,000 to 15,000 [TWD]. Why bother to spend money here [Taiwan]?

Moreover, many interviewees complained that Taiwanese sex workers provided ‘bad service’. Complaints such as hostesses who refuse to be touched (‘Hey, they think they’re diamonds. No touching!’), or are ‘cold’ and ‘snobbish’ are frequently reported. Mr Lin went further to explain why flying to China is so attractive to him:

In Taiwan, if you [working-class or salary men] want to enjoy the atmosphere as in a hostess bar, you could visit agondian [literally ‘grandpa’s shop’]. It might fill you up, but you cannot always eat that kind of stuff [i.e. hostesses in agondian are old]. Sometimes you want to eat something good.

‘[S]ometimes you want to eat something good’ however shows the sexual discontent of Taiwanese working-class men who want to seek younger sex workers and better services. Buying sex in China means that they could join their middle- and upper-class counterparts back home to enjoy the feeling of being a ‘big man’ [daye].

The thrill of being a ‘big man’ was overwhelming across interviewees and during the whole trip. The group I travelled with spent a lot of time boasting of their ‘big businesses’ in Taiwan and counting a stack of notes in front of xiaojie. The experience of a ‘guanghuajie’ obviously constituted the climax of being a ‘big man’. A-jie offered a rather reflective account of being a ‘big man’ when he and his friends sat on comfortable sofas while picking out their choices among hundreds in a sauna:

I felt very, very sad. Felt guilty . . . I mean it’s a human flesh market. The point was that she was very much like a commodity. When you glance around at those women, some of them were expressionless, some were smiling, or giving you some hints that they wanted you to choose them. At that moment, I felt that the power relations between them and me were huge . . . I felt ‘wow, I’m truly like a Daye [big man] in a Stephen Chow movie. It’s sooooo surreal!’

All these performances of being a ‘big man’ are indeed gendered practices of doing class. However, the performances were rarely convincing for the xiaojie themselves, due to the fact that Taiwanese men always paid the regular price and hardly ever tipped. As a xiaojie hired by Mr Chen told me, ‘we’ve seen many men here, we are not so silly to buy into their words. Taiwanese are very stingy’. O’Connell Davidson (1998) argued that it is the presence of plentiful choices that gives clients a ‘thrill’. I want to add that the ‘thrill’ of buying sex in China indeed signifies the lack of choices in the Taiwanese sex industry and in Taiwan generally. Whereas most of the interviewees were only able to access low-end sexual establishments, some of them were even excluded from the marriage market because of their ages, looks, unstable incomes, and the general trend of young women in Taiwan delaying marriage or even refusing to get married. ‘We choose girls here, but we were the ones being chosen back there’ was constantly
reported. Actually, A-Liang, a night-market vendor with a credit card debt of TWD 2,000,000, was extremely upset when he found that the experience of ‘guanghuajie’ in the local five star hotel ended with him feeling rejected by a young girl who refused to stay overnight with him, preferring to accompany rich men in hopes of earning generous tips. The supposed ‘thrill’ of ‘guanghuajie’ in the five star hotel became an embarrassing moment which sent them back home symbolically.

**Fleeing heterosexual monogamy and sexual stigma**

In Taiwan, heterosexual monogamy secured by the family laws is the only legitimate way to organize heterosexuality. Adultery is still a criminal act. Cohabitation is increasingly tolerated, but nonetheless lacks any institutional support or moral currency. Taiwanese men are indeed privileged in heterosexual monogamy, however, once men’s non-conforming sexual practices fail to be kept under the table, they might risk loss of face and moral condemnation. Indeed, politicians have been forced to step down for having affairs, while often surviving allegations of bribery or corruption. Crossing borders to go to China indicates that men were removed from their daily lives geographically as well as free from the daily sexual surveillance imposed by laws and social norms.

Mr Wang, a middle-class man, worked as a marketing manager and earned TWD 100,000 a month. Although he was single, he talked about the ‘pressures’ of buying sex when he was a poor university student:

> In Taiwan, *piaoke* [man who buys sex from sex workers] is not stigmatized, but [you got] pressured. Damned! It’s really annoying that there were always passersby standing around [brothels] and staring at you and even laughing at you as if you’re animals… Later on, I told myself, you looked at what you looked at; I did what I did… Anyhow, I don’t need to put up with those people now.

Similarly, Jim went to Hainan, China as an executive assistant of an illicit online betting company when he was 25. He never brought sex before he visited China. Nonetheless, as commercial sex is widespread in China, he thought *[W]hile in Rome, do as the Romans do*; moreover, it was the easiest way to ‘have someone to accompany you’. Eventually he cohabited with a Chinese sex worker, however his friends back home were not sympathetic to the sexual liaison. He reported:

> When I chatted with friends and mentioned that I visited karaoke bars and had been living with a *xiaojie*, they would feel ‘Er…how come you are this kind of person?’ They think it would be easy for me to date proper girls. Why did I sleep with a *xiaojie*? (Single, 27, executive assistant)

Both Mr Wang and Jim were single, however their experiences showed that buying sex is still considered either as morally wrong or socially deviant.
It seems that everyone has the right to degrade men who buy sex. Married men doubtlessly feel more pressures from this sexual surveillance. When asked ‘what are the advantages of buying sex in China’, a common response is ‘feeling relaxed’. Married man Mr Chen provides his rationale:

Ooooh, it’s very different. You can hold her [i.e. sex worker’s] hands, cuddle her and walk with her on the street just like people who are falling in love. It’s very relaxing and you don’t need to worry [about being caught]. Who dares to do these things here [i.e. Taiwan]? (Mr. Chen, 50, married and father of two children)

A-Ming, a frozen-food salesman, reported that he had been ‘caught’ twice by his wife when buying sex in Taiwan. He reported that:

The point is that you could be tooooootally liberated in China. You do not have any pressure, because you’ve saved money for a while and decided to have fun there. Here, you have to save eeeevery coin [to visit hostess bars] and you are so afraid to be caught by your wife or your acquaintances. I once bumped into my wife’s friend in a hostess bar…She told my wife the very next day. My wife called me scum left home for a whole week.

Furthermore, long-term relationships in Taiwan are generally represented as boring, routine, and even as a deadlock that painfully binds husband and wife together. Many interviewees reported that they hardly ever had nice or intimate conversations with their wives, and sometimes reported rarely having sex with spouses. Da-pan talked about how the exciting sex in China made him lose his sexual appetite for Taiwanese women:

We’ve been married for twenty years, you know. Old married couple, hehe…My wife actually prefers to play video games [rather than making love], hahaha…Anyhow, after visiting China, I felt I lost my appetite for Taiwanese [sex workers], let alone her [i.e. his wife]…Come on, they [Chinese xiaojie] are young, beautiful and suck your whooooole body till you can’t stand it!

Similarly, A-Hsiung talked about the differences between having sex with his girlfriend and with Chinese sex workers:

At the beginning, I really liked my girlfriend, and had passion and connection with her, but six years later, everything seems routine…Somehow, your girlfriend couldn’t serve you well. There are many things your girlfriend cannot help you with; for example, sucking your ass, or putting on a condom with her mouth etc. You know what, in China if you are lucky enough to have a better girl, you would feel you’re the emperor! (A-Hsiung)
In addition, men’s anxiety about their sexual prowess and performances in a long-term relationship also makes it easier for them to buy sex in the Chinese sex industry. He reported when having sex with a xiaojie:

You don’t need to care whether you did it good or not, or whether you are tender enough, because she doesn’t care. It’s business. But, you have to worry whether your girlfriend is happy about it [sex]. Yeah, you would be worried.

Buying sex in China therefore opens up a space in which the boundaries between daily social norms and ‘deviance’, between allowed and forbidden desires, between capable and incapable sexual partners are blurred. It thus offers a possibility for men to negotiate their sexual pleasures and varied meanings of having sex.

Reconfigured intimacies in transnational sexual consumption

Recent research demonstrates that clients of indoor sexual venues deliberately seek both emotional and physical pleasures in commercial sex or in other words expect the ‘girlfriend experience’ (Bernstein, 2007; Huff, 2011; Kong, 2015a; Milrod and Weitzer, 2012; Sanders, 2008). Some have claimed that both middle-class sex workers and their clients can achieve ‘authentic emotion and physical connection’ in bounded time and space just like any workers and customers in other service work (Bernstein, 2007: 103), while others claim that clients hold varied views regarding whether their intimacy with sex workers is ‘authentic’ or just well trained to pretend to be (Milrod and Weitzer, 2012; Sanders, 2008). Theorizing the GFE (girlfriend experience) in terms of consumer research, Huff (2011: 120–121) argues that clients have to ‘give a short-term commitment of emotional and physical intimacy’ and actively engage in ‘co-creating’ the GFE. Sanders (2008: 109) also reports that heterosexual male sexual scripts, courting rituals and forms of intimate physical contact such as kissing and caressing are therefore adopted in commercial sex and thus blur the boundary between commercial sex and non-commercial sex.

In Taiwan, there is an old saying that ‘there is no true love in prostitution’, hence as research showed (Chen, 2003; Peng, 2007), sex buyers who are emotionally attached to or in love with sex workers are considered as yunchuan (literally seasick), and frequently mocked as ‘inexperienced’ clients among peers. However, it is worth noting that interviewees in this study consistently reported that they were looking to enjoy the ‘feeling of falling in love’. As many clients claimed, ‘after all, we’re not only coming for sex’. One even reported that ‘it’s not about whether men are lascivious, but that men need to be taken care of and comforted’.

As far as ‘falling in love’ is concerned, both Taiwanese men and Chinese women have to perform heterosexual ‘love’, and carry out many gendered intimate heterosexual practices. The group preferred to ‘cultivate feelings’ (peiyanggangqing) with xiaojie in a karaoke booth by singing romantic or sentimental songs to
each other as a cue for eye contact, flirtation, and intimate physical contact such as touching, hugging and kissing. Those intimate physical contacts and calling each other ‘husband’ (laogong) and ‘wife’ (laopo), as Zheng (2009: 223) claims, serves to reconfigure the commercial relationship between clients and sex workers into one of much greater intimacy. They even arranged a one-day cycling trip to a theme park on the outskirts of Dongguan. The men consciously reminded the girls ‘[D]on’t dress like a xiaojie’, because they wished to be seen as a couple going out together rather than as a sex buyer and sanpei xiaojie. Mr Chen told me that his woman (a mother in her late 20s) dressed like an ‘ordinary housewife’ when they were cycling and that made him feel as if he ‘were not buying sex at all’. Paradoxically these men flee to the Chinese sex market to seek sexual and intimate pleasures, nonetheless they attempted to pass as heterosexual couples to realize the fantasy of ‘falling in love’.

The degree of men’s ‘seasickness’ in China was varied. Some reported that it lasted for one or two days and prevented them from ‘trying out’ other women; whereas some lived together with sex workers for more than a month. In most cases of ‘seasickness’, men would revisit their laodian (i.e. regular women) whenever they visited China. Their relationships with regular women could last for several months to years and these sex workers acted just like ‘girlfriends’ who took care of men’s daily lives in China and also supported them in day-to-day practical issues (such as renting cheaper accommodation, cars and dining, etc.) during their stays in China. Transnationalism thus highlights these men’s sexual consumption and intimate relations with sex workers. Literature on migration studies shows that internet-mediated transnational communication is an important resource for migrants to communicate with their families in home countries (Kang, 2012; Wilding, 2006). Similarly, many interviewees used Social Network websites (QQ or Weibo), and smart phones to keep in contact with Chinese sex workers after returning to Taiwan. Some Taiwanese men even turned their sexual trips into entrepreneurial migration by either purchasing real estate to become landlords of xiaojie (reported by Da-pan) or by running bars in red-light areas for xiaojie and their (Taiwanese) clients; some eventually took up permanent residence in China. Xiao-Lin (currently a driver for a city government) who came from a richer family reported a similar story. He was very attracted to a Chinese xiaojie, so he visited China ‘every month’ and ‘stayed for two weeks each time’. During that period, it cost him ‘more than TWD 10,000 per month for international phone calls’. The relation with his regular woman provided him a good opportunity to know Chinese sex workers very well, and thus he started to run a beauty salon in Zhuhai with his regular woman. The business therefore provided justification for him to shuttle between Taiwan and China:

In the peak era, I stayed in China for nearly three months without returning to Taiwan. I just stayed in Zhuhai and visited karaoke bars every day and I found that their xiaojie were very lazy. Very lazy. For example, during the winter, they washed off their make-up every 3 or 4 days, not every day. Umm... maybe because it was too cold. So I invited my friend [the regular woman] to open a beauty salon on the Lienhua Road. (Xiao-Lin, a driver, married with one child)
As Lienhua Road is a famous red-light district in Zhuhai, the business attracted many sex workers and made him a small fortune. However, as he reported: ‘easy come easy go’; he ‘sent back all the money (to the xiaojie)’. Furthermore, the beauty salon business has boomed since then and they had to close the salon three years later. The relationship between them ended at almost the same time.

In most cases, the ‘falling in love’ drama usually ended suddenly without any notice when the ‘nature’ of the dalumei as a sexual, classed and national other came into play. Given that there are a tremendous number of choices in China’s sex industry, and the sex tourists see many women and girls in various urban entertainments who are available for commercial sex, Taiwanese men frequently sexualize modern China as a huge brothel, and they think ‘all women and girls are whores’. Chinese women are sexualized to the extent that many interviewees reported that ‘[T]oo many women are selling [sex] and they are extremely cheap’. ‘Women over there are very open [about sex]’. Therefore, many interviewees were equally amazed at the ways in which they managed to obtain commercial sex with women almost everywhere ranging from factory workers, waitresses in coffee shops, restaurants or hotels, to girls working in foot massage parlours. Nonetheless, Chinese sex workers are also constructed as classed and national others who always capitalize on their sexuality and bodies to obtain whatever they want.

As reported in other research (Kong, 2015a; Milrod and Weitzer, 2012), clients are usually warned by peers not to take the intimate relations with sex workers seriously. Similarly, I noticed the group also constantly warned each other that ‘[T]hese girls are doing business; [T]hey do whatever you want when you give them money’. Nonetheless, these warnings should be located within the complicated contexts in which Chinese sex workers are constructed on the intersection of class, sexuality and nationality. Xaio-Chang, a member of the group, had a girl accompanying him for three nights during the trip in 2011. He announced to all of us that he was really attracted to her, and wanted to take her to visit Taiwan during the first trip. Ignoring the familiar warnings from other members, he revisited her alone two months later. They had stayed in contact with each other by QQ and international phone calls between his trips. Yet later, Xaio-Chang’s girl invited him to visit her family in Sichuan, but he refused to go and didn’t arrange for her to visit Taiwan. He offered his reasoning:

She did invite me to visit her family, but I think it’s too dangerous. I’m alone, but she has a whole family and a whole village. I had a good chance of being entrapped.

The fear of ‘being entrapped’ signified the ways Chinese (sex workers) are imagined among Taiwanese men. Although many interviewees reported the experiences of seasickness, they however become ‘clear-minded’ when the issue of money comes into play. Similarly, Su is a member of a large labour union in southern Taiwan. He has been visiting both China and Vietnam to buy sex for
more than a decade. When he was asked what is the difference between buying sex in China and Vietnam, he answered that:

"Oooh, it’s very different. Chinese [women] like money very much. They play tricks to cheat you and would try everything to squeeze money from you. Vietnamese are more obedient. They are simple. They believe whatever you say. Vietnamese don’t understand our languages, either Chinese or Taiwanese, so they are more likely to be fooled. Chinese women are very calculating. Taiwanese are frequently cheated by Chinese women. So, later on, I went to Vietnam most of the time, and don’t like to go to China. (Su, 55, union member)"

Su’s comments on Chinese (sex workers) were not unusual among interviewees. This is exactly the mainstream representation of ‘dalumei’ in Taiwan: they are constructed as desirable sexual objects on the one hand, while they are simultaneously represented as ‘cunning’, ‘greedy’ and ‘dangerous’ others who would do whatever it takes to achieve their ends.

**Conclusion**

Although buying sex abroad is indeed a transnational process, the literature regarding sex tourism fails to take the dynamic transnational dimensions into account. By conceptualizing buying sex abroad as sexual migration, I examine the ways in which men’s sexual consumption intersects with migration, and becomes deeply embedded in complicated political, social and economic relations across the Taiwan Strait, and then reveal the ways in which transnationalism underlies men’s sexual consumption in China. As far as theorizing the intersection of sexuality and migration is concerned, the research suggests that the sexual discontent of Taiwanese working-class men, which derive from the ways sexuality is organized and practised in Taiwanese men’s daily life in terms of morality, social norms, and institutions such as heterosexual marriage and the sex industry, greatly shapes the sexual migration of Taiwanese men. Buying sex abroad is therefore similar to sexual minorities who cross borders to avoid sexual stigmas and seek pleasures abroad. In addition, exploiting the regional economic hierarchy between Taiwan and China to engage in sexual migration to China signifies a temporary upward mobility for these Taiwanese working-class men in terms of social status and lifestyle. Furthermore, I argue that men who cross borders to buy sex are very much like other sex buyers in domestic contexts expecting both sexual and intimate encounters with sex workers. In order to enjoy the feeling of ‘falling in love’, Taiwanese men indeed actively engage in reconfiguring their intimate relations with Chinese sex workers in complicated cross-Strait relations in which broader social structures such as gender and nationality still underpin the sexual migration.
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Note

1. Dalumei literally means ‘mainland sisters’, but it usually indicates that these Chinese women are ‘whores’.

References


Mei-Hua Chen (PhD, Centre for Women’s Studies, University of York, UK) is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, National Sun Yat-Sen University, Taiwan. Currently I teach Gender and Sexuality, Masculinities, Gender and Work. I have published articles on issues such as sex work and sexuality in well-known sociological journals in Taiwan. Recently my research focuses on migration and sexuality. Current research aims to examine the ways in which migration has an impact on Chinese migrant sex work in Taiwan, and how sexuality intersects with gender, class, nationality and global economic hierarchy in Taiwanese men’s sex tourism in China.