

# Neither “Bad” nor “Dirty”: High-end Sex Work and Intimate Relationships in Urban China

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## Abstract

The relationship between sex workers and their clients is generally characterized as being based entirely on the direct exchange of sexual favours for money. However, this received wisdom cannot account for a nation such as China which attaches significant value to “face,” social status and interpersonal dignity. This paper draws parallels with high-end sex workers elsewhere in Asia as well as globally. With a focus on the high-end sector, I examine how workers and their clients engage not only in pecuniary transactions but also in genuinely intimate and non-remunerative relationships. High-end sex workers make use of their earned economic capital to acquire cultural capital, and use online apps as marketing tools to target local elites and expats to forge longer-term intimate relationships. Male clients in more commercialized, post-industrial cities in China continue to seek diverse types of sexual experiences, with some clients seeking genuine intimacy. Furthermore, I explore how Chinese and foreign clients overcome social barriers to develop such relationships with sex workers. Building on this socio-cultural perspective, this paper analyses ethnographically both sides of the female sex worker–client relationship in high-end karaoke lounges and bars in Dongguan, southern China.

**Keywords:** sex work; cultural capital; economic capital; emotional labour; bounded authenticity; China

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A rich body of literature has emerged in recent decades documenting the relationship between China’s sex workers and their clients.<sup>1</sup> However, the main focus is typically on the sex-for-cash aspect rather than on the emotional labour and authentic intimacy that may exist in the form of boyfriend–girlfriend or even spousal-type relationships. Conventional accounts of why male clients seek sex services cover a range of motivations, from loneliness caused by being away from home, to desiring no-strings-attached sexual encounters, or even having

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1 Zheng 2003; 2008; 2009; Otis 2011; Liu 2012.

unusual sexual tastes that their spouses or partners reject.<sup>2</sup> Studies of sex worker–client relationships are rarely examined in sociological research, because the relationship is assumed to be exploitative in nature and not reciprocal. To fill this distinct gap in the literature, I argue that sex work goes beyond the mere provision of sexual satisfaction and in some instances creates different kinds of intimacy.

This paper employs a sociocultural perspective to clarify the intricacies of some particular high-end sex worker–client relationships in Dongguan 东莞, China. Before I begin with my analysis of the high-end commercial sex industry in China, I must first acknowledge that relational intimacy exists not only in the high-end market but also among middle-tier sex workers, as illustrated by Susanne Choi and Eleanor Holroyd.<sup>3</sup> However, this paper focuses on the high-end sex market because relational intimacy is more visible there than in other markets. I argue that intimacy is always relational in nature. A relational approach is crucial to understanding the social character of gender when exploring the relationship between sex workers and clients in the Chinese context.<sup>4</sup> This paper follows Kimberly Kay Hoang’s<sup>5</sup> framing by offering an organic holistic view that draws from several relevant perspectives, including Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of economic capital and cultural capital,<sup>6</sup> Arlie Hochschild’s theory of emotional labour,<sup>7</sup> and Elizabeth Bernstein’s concept of bounded authenticity.<sup>8</sup> Other important insights come from recent work on individualization proposed by Yan Yunxiang,<sup>9</sup> Andrew Kipnis,<sup>10</sup> and Mette Hansen.<sup>11</sup> This paper builds on Hoang’s work on Vietnam’s commercial sex industry.<sup>12</sup> Owing to the institutional similarities between China and Vietnam as post-socialist countries, their sex industries are comparable. Both countries suffered under the global financial crisis, and while China was the first developing country in Asia to recover, Vietnam recovered quickly as well. In this paper, I incorporate the cultural concept of “face” to undertake a critical examination of emotional labour and capital in urban China. This paper illustrates how the cultivated long-term intimate relationships between high-end sex workers and their clients are typical examples of relational intimacy in the commercial sex market.

The aim of this paper is to gain a better understanding of how high-end sex workers mobilize their economic and cultural capital to cultivate long-term, intimate relationships with their clients, and to explain how clients overcome barriers to develop such relationships with sex workers. I first contend that high-end

2 Zheng 2009.

3 Choi and Holroyd 2007.

4 Hoang 2014b.

5 Hoang 2010; 2011.

6 Bourdieu 1986; 1984.

7 Hochschild 2003[1983].

8 Bernstein 2007.

9 Yan 2009.

10 Kipnis 2012.

11 Hansen 2014.

12 Hoang 2010; 2011; 2014a; 2014b.

sex workers have an advantage over low-end sex workers in their ability to develop intimate relationships with male clients. Similar to Hoang's findings, high-end sex workers employ more resources involving economic and cultural capital and technologies of embodiment in order to provide greater emotional labour, which in turn can lead to intimacy with their clients.<sup>13</sup> However, this paper extends Hoang's findings by applying her framework to sex work and intimacy in urban China. High-end sex workers own cellular phones and are capitalizing on their ability to use online apps to chat with clients in order to reach additional clients, irrespective of their geographical locations.<sup>14</sup> Second, I contend that some male customers seek to pursue an authentic emotional and physical encounter. Both high-end sex workers and their clients are "active social agents" who seek intimacy; some of them go beyond paid intimacy to develop a genuine intimacy, which can lead to mutual emotional support, monogamous dating and even marriage.

### **Relational Intimacy in Boyfriend–Girlfriend Relationships in the West and South-East Asia**

A growing body of literature on sex workers in China, the West and South-East Asia suggests that sex workers and prostitutes in post-socialist China may have some fundamental differences from those in other countries. Many researchers contend that high-end sex workers in China only work for short periods of time in order to earn enough money to resolve immediate personal and family-related needs.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, these women are subject to numerous double standards involving strict moral and social codes, the burden of maintaining family honour via their own chasteness and meeting filial financial obligations. Sex workers must navigate a sexual terrain characterized by sexual violence, negotiation and "begging" with the police,<sup>16</sup> gang rape and virginity selling.<sup>17</sup> Choi discusses the Chinese state's repressive measures against prostitution which portray sex workers in the national discourse as victimizers who spread venereal disease.<sup>18</sup> Others have noted the negative effects of state control over prostitution with regards to the way that safe sex is promoted and the spread of disease is contained.<sup>19</sup> However, research largely focuses on the "sex-for-cash" perspective, portraying sex workers as victims; there is less focus on the complexity of the relational intimacy between the parties involved.<sup>20</sup> Here, I argue that intimacy between sex workers and clients is always relational. In order to understand the intimacy between sex workers and clients in a high-end bar, it is necessary to understand the social character of gender through a relational approach that

13 Ibid.

14 Hoang 2011; 2014a.

15 Zheng 2003; 2008; 2009; Otis 2011; Liu 2012.

16 Zheng 2009; Jeffreys 2007; 2010; 2012.

17 Brown 2007.

18 Choi 2011.

19 Pan 1999; 2000.

20 Zelizer 2005.

addresses the connections and interaction between sex workers and their clients.<sup>21</sup> An understanding of the relational intimacy between workers and clients helps to provide additional insights on the multiplicity of the emotional labour that goes into the commercial sex industry.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, this exploration allows us to complicate the notion of intimacy and how it is relational. Looking at the relational intimacy between sex workers and their clients, I explore the sociocultural processes of negotiating intimacy and gain further insights on gender roles and representation.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, entrepreneurial masculinity is a highly controversial notion, as it is implausible to attribute men’s need to live up to a modern entrepreneurial masculine image as a reflection of their resistance to state socialism. In her 2009 work, Tiantian Zheng focuses only on local Chinese men in Dalian and does not examine how different relationships between clients and sex workers occur in different settings.<sup>24</sup> Her narrative of a “coarsening of masculine identity” may only apply to low-end clients in the sex industry, and her sweeping generalization about all Chinese male clients seems arbitrary at best.

The phenomenon of intimacy between sex workers and their clients is not exclusive to China; similar relationships have been identified in the West as well as in South-East Asia. Why do some males in the West, South-East Asia and in urban China develop intimacy with sex workers? Existing literature suggests that the relationship between high-end sex workers and their clients (business elites and foreigners) involves greater emotional labour and intimacy than is the case for rural Chinese male clients. In the West and South-East Asia, it may be termed the “girlfriend experience.” Here, what is sold is manufactured authenticity whereby the sex worker acts as a girlfriend to meet the client’s genuine desire for a real and reciprocal (albeit delimited sexual) connection.<sup>25</sup> The relationship between high-end sex workers and clients involves emotional authenticity, which is explicitly brought into the economic contract. In her pioneering studies of intimacy in sex work in Western societies, Bernstein observed that the relationships between lower-class streetwalkers and their clients involved direct exchanges of sex for money, whereas higher-class sex workers provided their clients with experiences of “bounded authenticity.”<sup>26</sup> Her research indicates that upscale sex work requires greater emotional labour in order to generate an “authentic” experience and that male clients in post-industrial societies seek various types of sexual exchanges.

The blurring of boundaries between commercial sex, love and open relationships among local sex workers and foreign men is not uncommon in South-East Asia.<sup>27</sup> Annette Hamilton has examined the relationships between professional girls and

21 Hoang 2014b.

22 Hoang 2010.

23 Zelizer 2005.

24 Zheng 2009.

25 Bernstein 2007, 125–130.

26 Bernstein 1999; 2007; 2008.

27 Askew 2002; Cohen 1986; Cressy 2008.

*farangs* (foreigners) who became “boyfriends” rather than “clients.”<sup>28</sup> She observed that some professional girls were able to form long-lasting emotional attachments with clients, even though they first entered the relationship wholly for financial reasons. In her studies of the Vietnamese women in high-end sectors who came from relatively well-to-do families, Hoang found that they had the economic resources and social networks necessary to adopt some of the most expensive technologies of embodiment available in Ho Chi Minh City, such as plastic surgery.<sup>29</sup> These women were looking for short- and long-term relationships with their clients, including both overseas Vietnamese men and foreigners. Heidi Hoefinger has investigated how sex workers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, used their linguistic abilities, global personas and interpersonal skills to ascend the economic ladder and find enjoyment and professional satisfaction through their work.<sup>30</sup> For example, these women used the bar subculture (which values freedom, self-motivation and pleasure) to resist stereotyping and to maintain multiple roles and identities (as sex workers, partners, girlfriends) in order to develop solidarity and secure material resources and relationships from clients. In Erik Cohen’s study of the intimacy between Thai bar girls and foreign clients, who often only stay a short time in that country, he found that all of the clients came from Anglophone countries.<sup>31</sup> By reviewing the “scribes” (letters) between the foreigners and their Thai girlfriends, Cohen discovered a connection in the relationships between “intimacy at a distance” and money. Although the foreigners were plagued by doubts over the seriousness, sincerity and faithfulness of their Thai girlfriends, their relationships could not be reduced to the simple sexual exploitation of women because some eventually developed into permanent relationships.<sup>32</sup>

This raises the question of whether there are similar intimate relationships between Chinese sex workers and their clients in China. Perhaps there is a post-industrial sex-work industry emerging in some of China’s most developed cities that enables an intermingling of emotional labour, money and intimacy to take place between sex workers and their clients. In order to have a clearer picture of the intimacy that develops between high-end sex workers and their clients, a sociocultural perspective focusing on economic and cultural capital, emotional labour and bounded authenticity will be used as the main conceptual framework.

## Conceptual Tools

How high-end sex workers capitalize themselves depends upon their economic/cultural capital, emotional labour, and bounded authenticity. These concepts also provide the framework used to understand how some men can overcome the stigma attached to sex work and are willing to maintain a relationship with

28 Hamilton 1997.

29 Hoang 2010; 2011; 2014a.

30 Hoefinger 2011; 2013.

31 Cohen 1986.

32 Ibid.

or even marry a sex worker. Hoang uses Bourdieu’s framing of economic and cultural capital<sup>33</sup> along with Hochschild’s<sup>34</sup> concept of emotional labour to examine commercial sex work in Vietnam.<sup>35</sup> In this paper, I extend Hoang’s framework by adding the cultural concept of “face,” and apply it to examine China’s commercial sex industry. The concept of face needs to be considered by social scientists when interpreting both emotional labour and capital in urban China. Individualization and face are not the main concepts in this paper; however, the pursuit of individualization and commercialization have been embraced by a number of high-end sex workers who were never the intended targets of the government’s state-sponsored programme of individualization.

### *Economic and cultural capital*

Bourdieu defined “economic capital” as the monetary income, assets or other financial resources available for an individual to access.<sup>36</sup> Cultural capital refers to an actor’s non-economic assets that help promote his/her upward social mobility.<sup>37</sup> These assets are normally acquired via the educational system and expressed as educational credentials, skills and knowledge, manners, lifestyles and the associated consumption patterns, and bodily make-up. Both indicate an ability to acquire and manipulate a system of embodied, linguistic and economic markets that carry cultural meaning, especially within a social status hierarchy.<sup>38</sup>

### *Emotional labour*

Hochschild’s theory of emotional labour provides a foundation for comparing and understanding sex worker–client relationships in China.<sup>39</sup> According to Hochschild, emotional labour is “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” and the labour “is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value.”<sup>40</sup> Some service professions require emotional labour, whereby employees are expected to manage their feelings when dealing with their clients in order to provide a more positive experience. Having undergone training programmes provided by their employers, employees can consciously engage in evoking, shaping or suppressing their feelings by changing their thoughts, physical conditions and expressive gestures through both private superficial and deeper intrinsic acting exercises. Based upon her ethnographical study of American flight attendants and bill collectors, Hochschild understands emotional labour to be the commodification of private emotions sold for a profit

33 Bourdieu 1984; 1986.

34 Hochschild 2003[1983].

35 Hoang 2010; 2011.

36 Bourdieu 1986.

37 Bourdieu 1984.

38 Bourdieu 1977.

39 Hochschild 2003[1983].

40 Ibid., 7.

in a capitalistic economy.<sup>41</sup> She argues that emotional labour varies by gender and social class, and women have far less independent access to money, power, authority or status in society. Therefore, it is important to examine how emotional labour varies between high-end and low-end sex services. The contention of emotional labour is that sex workers' expressed emotions, as a purchasable commodity, may be estranged from their true feelings owing to the commercialization of their emotional displays. There is continuing debate as to whether intimacy between sex workers and their clients can be genuine or if it is mostly a false sense of closeness induced by emotional labour.

### *Bounded authenticity*

Bernstein's notion of bounded authenticity draws attention to the question of whether intimacy between sex workers and their clients involves genuine emotional sharing even though it is limited by time and coloured by the exchange of money.<sup>42</sup> While her work identifies more positive experiences for upscale sex workers than many other accounts, she still offers the caveat that the exchange of money can only create limited intimacy. She contends that this "bounded authenticity" differentiates streetwalkers from the predominately middle-class, indoor sex workers in post-industrial societies. By "bounded authenticity," she means that the sale and purchase of sexual services does involve genuine emotional intimacy, albeit limited by time as well as the fact that money is attached to the intimacy. She specifically notes that high-end sex workers in San Francisco, one of her field sites, demanded exclusive privacy and delivered repressive emotional labour in the form of their suppressed emotions of disgust felt towards their clients' bodies and ages. Bernstein's research indicates that there may be a transition from paid intimacy to full-fledged authentic intimacy between sex workers and their clients.

### **Dongguan, Guangdong, in the Chinese Sex Work Landscape**

Dongguan has attracted many foreigners since China's accession to the World Trade Organization in December 2001. It is an important industrial city located in the Pearl River Delta and has over 25 million residents, a significant share of the population in Guangdong province.<sup>43</sup> The global economic recession in 2007 bankrupted many factories and the city has since become notorious for "sin." Dongguan is home to countless brothels, massage parlours, nightclubs, sex

41 Hochschild 2003[1983].

42 Bernstein 2007.

43 Dongguan is also famous as a manufacturing hub. Its largest industrial sector manufactures electronics and communications equipment. International companies such as Nokia, Samsung and Coca-Cola have facilities in Dongguan. The city's manufacturing sector and tertiary industry had a total output of 501 billion yuan in 2012. For further details, see "Hello Dongguan," 2013, <http://en.hellodongguan.com>. Accessed 4 September 2014.

hotels, sauna centres and karaoke bars. The sex industry in Dongguan is estimated to employ between 500,000 and 800,000 people, which accounts for between 20 and 30 per cent of the city’s total service-sector output.<sup>44</sup> Another estimate puts the sex sector’s annual contribution at 40 billion yuan – roughly 10 per cent of Dongguan’s gross domestic product.<sup>45</sup> The local authorities launched a “sweeping yellow” crackdown on the illegal sex industry in Dongguan on 9 February 2014. Despite this, more than 3,000 entertainment venues suspected of engaging in the sex trade continued to operate in the province.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the high-end bars and hotels, whose owners have close “political” connections with the police and local governments, emerged from the campaign unscathed.

## Methods

Ethnographical study is a proven method for identifying new perspectives on existing social issues and generating policy recommendations for resolving them, and can facilitate an investigation into intimacy between sex workers and their clients. From September 2008 to July 2009, January 2012 to December 2013, and November 2015 to August 2016, I stayed in Dongguan at an upscale karaoke lounge and bar owned by a Hong Kong businessman. I strategically selected Dongguan as the key field site because it has the greatest concentration of foreign people and capital in the country. I followed the lead of other ethnographers such as Anne Allison,<sup>47</sup> Zheng,<sup>48</sup> Rhacel Parrenas<sup>49</sup> and Hoang<sup>50</sup> by working as a hostess to observe the relationships among owners, police, clients and sex workers. I worked 12-hour shifts at the bar or lounge seven days a week for two months. I prepared field notes, research memos and reflections after conducting the necessary fieldwork every day. I dressed modestly and avoided heavy makeup in order to project a plain appearance that would be perceived as non-threatening by the sex workers. All the interviewees signed consent forms and ethics approval was granted by my work affiliation. Before granting their consent, the respondents were given a copy of my business card and contact details. They were also reminded that they could freely withdraw without prejudice at any stage in the project. I then introduced my proposed study and myself. To safeguard the rights of any “illegal” sex workers, I assured them that I was not an undercover policewoman and showed them my picture on

44 Tam, Fiona. 2009. “Crackdown fails to scare Dongguan’s sex-trade veterans,” *South China Morning Post*, 26 November.

45 Phillips, Tom. 2013. “Inside Dongguan, China’s sin city,” *The Telegraph*, 1 May 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10030014/Inside-Dongguan-Chinas-Sin-City.html>. Accessed 4 September 2014.

46 Qiu, Quanlin. 2014. “3,000 venues linked to sex trade closed in Guangdong,” *China Daily*, 5 March. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-03/05/content\\_17325358.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-03/05/content_17325358.htm). Accessed 6 September 2014.

47 Allison 1994.

48 Zheng 2009.

49 Parrenas 2011.

50 Hoang 2010; 2011; 2014a.



my university staff identity card attached to a university-issued lanyard. Whilst some sex workers were reluctant to talk openly, several others expressed their desire to discuss their circumstances with me. These women subsequently agreed to be interviewed at a convenient time. The informants were fully assured at the outset of confidentiality and anonymity. For this reason, I only use their ages and assigned pseudonyms.

As a native speaker of Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese, I was able to communicate easily with the respondents without a translator. I used English only to interview foreigners and overseas Chinese who could not speak Chinese. None of the selected participants had been trafficked or forced into prostitution; they all referred to themselves as sex workers or bar girls who accompany customers in bars and lounges. The data comprise a mix of semi-formal interviews, some of which were recorded; informal conversations; *in situ* note taking; and post-event field notes. All the comments cited in this paper were translated into English by the author. This was a complex process of interpretation since speech in Putonghua (Mandarin) or Cantonese does not easily translate into English. The data were analysed by theme during the course of data processing and analysis.

I interviewed 30 sex workers and 30 clients, the latter including both affluent overseas and upper-class Chinese and foreigners,<sup>51</sup> five people in managerial positions, and the boss from the bar and karaoke lounge. Most of the sex workers involved in the high-end sector that I interviewed had post-secondary education and were aged between 18 and 25 years old. Most of them came from relatively well-to-do families and had the economic resources and social networks necessary to use expensive technologies of embodiment (such as plastic surgery for a nose job or breast enlargements).<sup>52</sup> Standard daily attire appeared to be tight jean shorts, shaved legs, fashionable jewellery, and bright makeup. Immersion in global consumer culture provided them not only with the resources for survival or subsistence, but also the chance to improve their self-worth and social standing.<sup>53</sup> I was allowed to follow respondents informally through the course of their day. Participant observation allowed me to note the interactions between clients and sex workers in detail to capture the subtle complexities of the relationships. Both during the sampling process and in private recorded interviews, all informants were assured of anonymity.

### Capital, Selling Emotional Labour, and Individualization

The primary focus of this research is to understand how high-end sex workers capitalize on their economic and cultural capital and use emotional labour in

51 I seldom saw working class Chinese go to the high-end bar when I conducted fieldwork in Dongguan. Working class men tend to dress and behave in recognizable ways, as observed in the low- and mid-level bars.

52 Hoang 2010; 2011; 2014a.

53 Hoefinger 2013, 250.

order to engage in long-term intimate relationships with their clients.<sup>54</sup> The women also use technology in the form of different mobile telephone apps to promote themselves and extend the scope of their business.<sup>55</sup> High-end workers often have a higher level of cultural capital than their low-end counterparts. They typically have post-secondary education, a basic level of conversational English, and the economic capital necessary to use technologies of embodiment.<sup>56</sup> As Hoang also observes, many sex workers alter their bodies to fit their clients’ particular demands because their success depends upon the complete package of sexual attractiveness.<sup>57</sup> The women acknowledge that they must hone their muscle tone and body shape as well as maintain hairstyles and makeup, facial features (full lips, long lashes, eye shape), non-verbal communication skills (emotional expressions, gestures, poses), and verbal communication – flirting – skills (i.e. playfulness and attention paid to the personal needs of their clients). In addition to these aspects of self-presentation, they have to consider how to maximize their potential body capital through means such as cosmetic surgery.

Playfulness and interpersonal dialogue are part of what makes a dating relationship appear “normal.” The women routinely serve as the “professional girlfriends” of their clients. From the interviews, it is evident that these women also earn money by acting as long-term sexual companions to wealthy and socially prestigious men. At the top-end niche market that caters to local elite Chinese businessmen and foreigners, most of the sex workers speak English well and use plastic surgery and stylish clothes to maximize their attractiveness. The highest earning sex workers are likely to have their own business and adopt a more cosmopolitan lifestyle. In the current economic climate of post-reform Chinese society, those with money receive the most respect and prestige. The following comments from interviews give an indication of motivations.

I come from a middle-class family. When I finished my degree in Guangzhou, I had no idea what kind of job I wanted. I hated office work and the civil service. I wanted to do something fun and interesting because I didn’t need to take care of my parents ... I wanted to know more foreigners and extend my *guanxi* (social capital) to know more business elites. Then I worked in a bar as a bartender and I loved meeting foreigners. I find that foreigners are interesting, funny and have a high sense of humour (Wendy, 21).

I need money to enjoy life but I can work at something that is fun like meeting people, travelling and going to different places. I don’t have financial burdens like feeding parents or paying mortgages. I follow my heart to live (Feifei, 23).

I have big eyes but I know foreigners love tiny eyes. I use some make up techniques to make my eyes look smaller. I go swimming and enjoy sunbathing to make my skin look darker (Jessica, 26).

According to Jess, 22, who comes from a well-to-do family and finished her bachelor’s degree in Guangzhou before moving to Dongguan:

54 Hoang 2010; 2011.

55 Hoang 2014a.

56 Foucault 1988.

57 Hoang 2014a.

Foreigners (*laowai* 老外) like small eyes, dark skin, and a high nose. So I will wear darker makeup like brown, grey, and orange. I got rid of all my whitening creams since foreigners prefer tanned skin. I apply makeup to look like an American-born Chinese (ABC) or overseas Chinese. I had plastic surgery to heighten my nose so that I can look more charming and cosmopolitan. I can afford to buy an iPhone and an Android phone like Samsung.

Cherry, 24, told me that she has to look modern and cosmopolitan in order to attract local businessmen and foreigners:

For fashion, I try to look more modern and cosmopolitan to let my customers know I am worth what they pay. It doesn't cost me a lot of money but I need attractive accessories so I can have the modern and cosmopolitan outlook and style.

The women who spend the most to portray a highly fashionable lifestyle desire upward mobility, and seek to secure their economic futures through individualism. Jess told me that she liked being in control and able to make decisions about her life. She could buy whatever she liked and did not need to earn the money to take care of her parents.<sup>58</sup> She enjoyed her individualism, which meant that she could control her own life by earning more money, and had the autonomy to decide what she wanted to do with her life. She neither disregarded her parents' views about respectability nor disobeyed her parent's wishes since she did not need to support her parents.

Sex workers want the capacity to develop longer-term intimate relationships with their clients. These women use their earnings to increase their choices and preserve their financial futures. Most high-end sex workers know how to increase their earnings through self-improvement. They read online newspapers on their smartphones each day. They also watch news programmes, listen to the radio, and read magazines to keep up with current affairs. They learn how to cook, and compare notes on how to understand men's emotions and personalities. This form of expressive emotional labour conquers their clients' hearts and enables them to have intimate and non-remunerative relationships with them.<sup>59</sup> Fearful that their clients will one day become bored with their beauty, the women work hard at keeping their regular customers by connecting with them and maintaining a kind of reciprocal intimacy via expressive emotional labour.<sup>60</sup> For example, they will remember a client's birthday, his favourite foods (and cook homemade meals, soups or desserts, etc.), hobbies, and interests. Sex workers also buy food or gifts for their regular clients. They win the hearts of their clients by adopting this kind of "selling sex: selling heart" strategy.<sup>61</sup> For this type of sex work, the women are not only looking for money but also emotional involvement and intimacy.<sup>62</sup>

Most of the high-end sex workers capitalized on their cultural capital to cultivate intimacy and long-term relationships, and used mobile and online apps in

58 Typically, the son or daughter must provide for parents in traditional Chinese families.

59 Hochschild 2003[1983]; Hoang 2011.

60 Hoang 2011.

61 Hochschild 2003[1983].

62 Zelizer 2005.

order to generate more business with local elites, middle-class clients or foreigners.<sup>63</sup> For example, April strips for private audiences using WeChat, QQ and Skype. Because she does not need to pay commission for her webcam performances, she can keep 100 per cent of her earnings and perform either at a karaoke lounge or from home.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Elaine has created professional accounts on WeChat, QQ, WhatsApp and Skype. She charges each of her clients (around 30 in number) a monthly subscription fee to chat with her via these accounts: 300 yuan (US\$48) for WeChat, QQ and Weibo, and 400 yuan (US\$65) for Skype. According to Elaine,

Sometimes men ask for specific photos or videos. A set of ten pictures can sell for 30 yuan [US\$4] or 40 yuan [US\$5] [in addition to the monthly fee]. But sometimes, I don't even have to be naked. As long as they are arousing, I can send photos like taking a shower, wearing a low-cut dress to show my long and sexy legs, or wearing my bikini swimsuit ... However, I would like to make it more like a friendship, because these customers coming back are more important than the money itself. If my clients like my photos, they will try to talk to me and we may go out on a date. Chatting online can give me a way to know more about the client and whether we have the potential to develop a relationship or not.

April's experiences were similar to Elaine's:

Since we chat through WeChat, we can have a better understanding of each other. Our friendship changes the relationship on both sides. It turns the client into a friend and even a short-term partner. Once our friendship is established, I'll become their girlfriend forever.

Online connections with clients were also important to Phoebe, aged 21:

This is my full-time job. I am happy I can talk to my clients online and get to know them better. I can carry on a conversation with my regular clients. Some men crave companionship, and they are the ones who tend to spend more money on me. I feel like I am searching for my boyfriend rather than just working at a job. I love this interactive relationship.

Not only do messaging apps foster deeper and potentially more lucrative relationships, they also enable the sex workers to be their own boss. They can work full time in a karaoke lounge then go directly to the client online, cutting out the middleman and earning more money. With such cultural capital in hand, they can make full use of their bargaining powers to work towards the jobs they want, stay physically attractive with the technologies of embodiment, and use mobile apps to chat with foreigners and business elites online.<sup>65</sup> These all provide a platform for them to forge intimate relationships with their clients.

As the globalized and globalizing economic shift gathered momentum throughout the 1980s and 1990s, material possessions and patterns of consumption in China displaced political symbols as the prepotent indicators of social status.<sup>66</sup> This has not only changed perceptions of the individual but has also raised

63 Hoang 2014a.

64 Some platforms like Chaturbate, for example, take about 40% commission, leaving the women with only 60% of the income. For details, see CNNMoney. 2015. 'Pornstar entrepreneurs find new homes on messaging apps,' 23 March, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/03/20/technology/snapchat-pornstar-apps/>. Accessed 4 April 2015.

65 Hoang 2014a.

66 Yan 2009, 208.

expectations for individual freedom, choice and individuality.<sup>67</sup> The individual has also become a basic social category in China, and this development has begun to permeate all areas of social, economic and political life.<sup>68</sup> Individualization and commercialization have been embraced by a number of high-end sex workers who were never the intended targets of the state-sponsored programme of individualization. Nevertheless, the desire of these sex workers to pursue freedom from hardship via individualization in the sex industry stems from the mandated, instrumentally rational individualization.<sup>69</sup> This provided the impetus for the new bourgeoisie to consume, and even borrow, at the government's behest, in order to buy more than they need.<sup>70</sup> There is a clear sense that the sex workers featured in this paper are an unintended consequence of contemporary macro-economic policy and its cultural sequelae. The high-end sex workers devote a significant percentage of their earnings to maintaining a conspicuously fashionable lifestyle, even as they seek to secure their emotional and economic futures. These sex workers have the freedom to choose their own roles and identities as they try to cultivate long-term relationships with their clients.

### **Bounded Authenticity, Intimacy, and Face**

The second focus for this paper is on how clients overcome barriers to develop such relationships with sex workers. According to Erving Goffman, both Chinese and foreigners are concerned with “face” in the sense of pride, honour and dignity.<sup>71</sup> However, owing to cultural differences in how this concern with face plays out, there are *different considerations* for Chinese and foreign men in the particular case of marrying a sex worker. It is important to note that, typically, these clients do not perceive the women to be cheap, dirty or vulgar. In Dongguan, most of the clients are foreigners, vacationers, overseas Chinese or local business elites staying either temporarily or permanently. A significant number are divorced men aged between 30 and 60. They tend to be looking for “partners” who have a sense of humour, are not “cheap,” know how to enjoy life, and who are good in bed. Reciprocity is important. Women who are willing to buy drinks for their clients will in return have drinks, cigarettes and meals purchased for them. Although many local women hope for love, they will settle for material recognition and future security, usually in the form of marriage. Some clients consort with multiple professional girls at the same time, and a girl may also serve several clients until she finds one with whom she feels she can connect. The data collected in Dongguan reveal that some foreigners and their self-described “professional cuties” eventually become husband and wife.

67 Kipnis 2012.

68 Hansen 2014.

69 Yan 2009.

70 Ibid.

71 Goffman 1972.

Goffman remarked that face is universal and people everywhere are the same through face, pride, honour and dignity.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, face cannot be seen as an exclusively Chinese phenomenon: “concern for face is not solely an ‘Asian’ phenomenon, but rather it is found in individuals from all societies and ethnic groups.”<sup>73</sup> Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson similarly suggest that the social necessity to orient oneself to a person’s public self-image or face during interactions is universal.<sup>74</sup> The insight is that individuals, irrespective of their cultural background, cannot disregard the opinions or appraisals of others in their own self-understanding.

The current study came across the example of Kim and Michael. Michael, a 45-year-old American professional, went to Dongguan in 2001 to work for one of the multinational enterprises. Kim, 24, worked in one of the bars, and in the beginning, Michael met Kim strictly for sex. They initially communicated through WeChat, but later engaged in non-transactional, non-remunerative sex, which evolved into deeper feelings of love and affection. They each continued to engage with multiple sex partners even as their commitment to one another grew. Finally, they agreed to get married. After getting married, Michael bought Kim a house and helped her to set up a business in Dongguan:

After meeting Michael, I realized that I really loved him a lot. We developed more than a client–customer relationship. He bought my services in the beginning, and we chatted through WeChat and exchanged some photos of each other. I think I was hunting for a boyfriend rather than just working in a karaoke lounge. After our souls connected, we knew we loved each other and he became my long-term partner. We are well connected and have developed some form of chemistry.

Coming from America, Michael was not embarrassed to introduce his wife to his friends and family, nor did he feel ashamed or experience a loss of face by having a wife with a history in the sex industry. In interviews, it was clear that he tends to believe that Kim genuinely likes or loves him. By comparison, he claimed his ex-wife was fat, domineering and rude to him. He loves small eyes and long dark black hair. However, he did admit that he is plagued by doubts as to her seriousness, sincerity and faithfulness. Michael told me:

She’s not a bad or dirty girl even though she works in a bar. She is interesting and knows how to enjoy life. She knows how to run a business and she’s got a lot of social network connections in China ... I was divorced twice and I feel like I finally found a girl who can understand me. She’s beautiful and petite and someone I want to have a family with. Most important, we have chemistry, and that to me is love. I don’t hide her past from my family. It is nothing to be ashamed of.

I interviewed Bill and Huang at an expensive bar in Dongguan. Bill, a 49-year-old British national, met Huang in 2004. At the time of the interview, they were not yet married but had been together for eight years. Bill said that in the beginning he was attracted by Huang’s talents and cosmopolitan appearance. He was unhappily married at the time and quickly divorced his wife, whom

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>73</sup> Lau and Wong 2008, 52.

<sup>74</sup> Brown and Levinson 1987, 62.

he described as fat and forceful. By comparison, Bill said Huang is modern and sophisticated but really needs a man to take care of her. Huang now has her own business in Dongguan. Bill described Huang:

Huang is a sensitive, gentle soul. The type of girl perfect for someone like me. I want to take care of her and raise a family together ... To me, marriage is finding the right person to make your life complete, meaningful, and fruitful ... I honestly believe we are meant to be together.

When I asked Michael and Bill whether they lost face when they introduced their partners to their parents and friends, they responded:

Actually, I don't think I ever treated Kim like a sex worker in the beginning; I always just treated her like my girlfriend. All that bar girl stuff is past tense, especially now that she has her own business. I don't think I ever felt ashamed about her past, not with my family or my friends anyhow. When they asked where we met, I told them we hooked up at a nightclub and the whole thing was really romantic ... I was divorced before and I don't have anything to be ashamed of and neither does she. (Michael)

I think Huang is very well educated and speaks English very well. She has fun in her life. I treat working at a bar as *only* [author's emphasis] a job. She is not dirty at all and I don't think I will lose face in front of my friends and relatives. She is very cosmopolitan and modern when we meet our friends. When I told my friends and parents she was working in a bar, they were not surprised at all. Face is not an issue for me in front of my family and circle of friends. (Bill)

In the interviews, many of the foreigners described Chinese girls as cute, slim, expressive and caring. Most of the high-end girls are expressive and grateful for the attention these men give them. Their relatively small size and slight frames make the foreigners feel strong and gallant, evoking feelings of wanting to protect them. According to Michael, Kim's soft and enchanting voice will "make him dance." Michael accepts and desires the traditional gender stereotype that positions a wife as a nurturing helper and a man as the key provider.

This paper focuses on the dynamics and interchanges in the high-end hospitality sector where the clients are affluent overseas or local elite Chinese with the means to patronize such venues. Zheng, 50, is an overseas Chinese businessman in China. Originally from Zhejiang, he spent ten years in Scotland. He is a local business elite and married Sasa in 2013. At the time of interview, Sasa no longer worked in a bar and was running her own business in Dongguan. According to Zheng:

She [Sasa] is just a little unlucky girl who got stuck in Dongguan. But I am so passionate about her since she is hot, cute, talented, smart, and has lots of business skills. I was divorced, and it took me 20 years to find my true love. She has never borrowed money or cheated on me. I know it is very difficult for you to understand, but I think it is true love and chemistry.

Wang, 45, is an educated and wealthy Chinese businessman from Guangzhou. Divorced twice, he had had multiple partners before he met Ruby at an expensive bar. After they met, Ruby left the bar to work in a computer company. They had been in a long-term relationship for five years in 2013:

Before I met Ruby, I had multiple partners with some girls, single-parent women, and some married women. Everyone has a history. I don't think I am a dirty old man. You should not prejudge Ruby. She is a nice girl and I want to start a family with her. I can connect and communicate with Ruby and true love has no boundary. (Wang)

When asked if they worried about losing face when they introduced their wives to their parents and friends, the men replied:

It is not shameful at all. I don't care about face, all I care about is a life partner. It was so difficult to find a woman who can understand me. It took me ten years to find my true love and we can connect. It is not easy to find a life partner and I cherish her a lot. Her past is history. Sex worker is only a job and it deserves more respect. Sasa is well educated and she liked working in a bar. Why do I think I will lose face? (Zheng)

I will tell my parents Ruby was a bar girl but I have never said she was a sex worker. Strictly speaking, she is not a sex worker. I don't need to publicly announce her job. What I care about is whether I have chemistry with Ruby and I am glad we found each other. True love, caring, intimacy is all I care about now. We have been together for nine years and she hasn't asked me for money. (Wang)

According to both Wang and Zheng, there was little shame in marrying a former high-end sex worker. A form of intimacy and bounded authenticity are established between the sex workers and their partners. Most of the high-end sex workers are attractive and fashionable, knowledgeable about current affairs, and have some means or *guanxi* to do business in China. Working in a bar is perceived to be a normal job and has little stigma attached to it. The sale and purchase of sexual services involves genuine emotional intimacy, as suggested by Bernstein.<sup>75</sup> The enactment of friendship, mutual trust and romance by many of these clients stands in stark contrast to the commonly cited image of sex work as “paid rape.”<sup>76</sup> Within this particular context, sex workers and clients find some measure of intimacy, care, authenticity and chemistry to create long-term and even marital relationships. Teela Sanders also finds that male customers did not view sex workers “simply as bodies” or as “targets of sexual conquest” but instead as a meaningful, personal connection.<sup>77</sup> Bernstein describes this as “authentic (if fleeting) libidinal and emotional ties with clients, endowing them with a sense of desirability, esteem, or even love.”<sup>78</sup> In exchange, sex workers not only receive considerable material and financial rewards but may also achieve socio-economic advancement and find enjoyment in their lives.

The affluent overseas and upper-class Chinese men and foreigners alike are concerned with face, but the cultural differences in how this plays out leads to different considerations for Chinese and foreign men in marrying women who were employed as sex workers. Both foreigners and affluent Chinese men developed a high sense of bounded authenticity, relational relationship and intimacy with the sex workers. The foreigners generally seek and construct a gender-normative marriage (i.e. wife as the nurturing helper and man as the key provider). They believe that these Chinese women hold these traditional values about marriage roles. With their attentive listening skills, appreciative laughter and comments of affirmation, regardless of their authenticity, the sex workers perform expressive forms of emotion, which help the men to feel respected, admired and masculine. The Chinese

<sup>75</sup> Bernstein 2007.

<sup>76</sup> Sanders 2008.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>78</sup> Bernstein 2007, 103.



men focus on the bounded authenticity, intimacy and chemistry that are generated through their relationship with the high-end sex workers.<sup>79</sup> The relationship is more natural and does not involve acting, lies or cheating.

## Conclusion

This paper examines the expectations and roles of high-end sex workers in southern China and how relationships evolve with some of their clients. It focuses on two research questions. The first examines how high-end sex workers mobilize their economic and cultural capital to seek long-term intimate relationships with their clients. Similar to Hoang's findings, I found that high-end sex workers make the most of their economic capital, cultural capital and emotional labour to engage with more affluent clients.<sup>80</sup> The sex workers provide emotional labour, which is the commodification of private emotions intended to be sold for a profit in a capitalist economy.<sup>81</sup> High-end sex workers also take advantage of technologies of embodiment to transform or manipulate their bodies through particular kinds of body-related work in order to maximize their physical beauty and attractiveness.<sup>82</sup> It is also clear that high-end sex workers and their clients routinely engage in both pecuniary transactions and genuinely intimate and non-remunerative exchanges. The second focus of this paper examines how clients overcome social stigmas to develop such relationships with sex workers. Through interviews, I found that these self-described "professional cuties" and "sweethearts" make their own choices and negotiate structural inequalities with fortitude and ingenuity, finding satisfaction in both their work and daily life. Both Chinese and foreign men have some concerns with face or reputation regarding having a committed relationship with a sex worker, but they both develop a high sense of bounded authenticity, relational relationship and intimacy. The foreigners generally construct and obtain a gender-normative marriage, while the overseas and affluent Chinese men focus more on a bounded authenticity and non-remunerative relationship with the sex workers.

This paper provides unprecedented insight into how the commodification of expressive forms of emotional labour are transformed into intimacy as sex workers induce feelings of comfort, fantasy and desire in their clients. The sex workers are able to cultivate these feelings in the clients of their choosing, typically local business elites or foreign executives. There is still a significant stigma attached to sex work in China. This paper aims to de-pathologize women's emotional labour, intimacy, authenticity and cultural capital to challenge the status quo of sex-work literature. The key to these new approaches is to remove the social stigma attached to sex work involving consenting adults, and to follow parts of Europe in treating sex work as a lawful, respectable profession. The government

79 Ibid.

80 Hoang 2010; 2011.

81 Bernstein 2007.

82 Hoang 2014a.

should consider ways to educate the public about sex work in a more value-neutral way, rather than treating it as a sin or a crime. Furthermore, it should focus on improving knowledge about sex work; governing the industry properly; and rooting out exploitation, sexual violence and the coercion of sex workers. Further research should continue to examine how policymakers in China can de-pathologize sex work in post-reform China in order to improve conditions for hundreds of thousands of women struggling for a better life.

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## Biographical note

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**摘要:** 般大众对性工作者与客人关系的认知, 是建基於性与金钱的交换。是次研究旨在探究性工作者与客人的关系会否超越金钱交易, 从而产生亲密关系。中国社会着重面子, 地位和尊严, 这与其他国家文化有所不同。本文将会探究中国高级性工作者与亚洲或世界各地高级性工作者的异同。本文的研究重点是中国的高级性工作者与她们客人之间的关系, 本文发现高级性工作者与客人投放了真实的亲密情感以及超越金钱的关系。高级性工作者会利用赚取的经济资本去获得更多文化资本, 以及利用美貌作为营销工具, 从而建立长期亲密关系 (Hoang 2010; 2011)。同时, 男性客人亦开始在较商业化及後工业化的中国城市, 追求不同类型的性经验。本文亦探究中国和外国客人怎麽排除万难的与性工作者一起建立更加复杂的亲密情感关系。本文透过社会文化学的视野, 以民族志方法来分析中国现代性工作者与她们客人之间的亲密情感关系。

**关键词:** 性工作; 文化资本; 经济资本; 情绪劳动; 有界真实性; 中国

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