5

ENCOUNTERING STRANGERS

Prostitution and urban life in Dongguan, China

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Introduction

Prostitution has become an important feature of theorising Chinese urbanism in recent years alongside increasing interest in bodies, gender and encounters. The development of commercial sex as a social-economic formation is an open secret in China although the sex industry is illegal. Transient encounter via commercial sex produces 'uncanny' intimacy that is romantic and repressive, and plays out in complex and heterogeneous ways in private and public space (see Chapters 2, 7 and 14, this volume). Encounters between female prostitutes and male clients effect meaning and experience of urban life, by involving commercial transactions, female chastity, and immoral bodies. Sex and love in the private sphere is of course the antithesis to commercial sex. This antagonism is aptly captured by Simmel (1950: 122) who argued that 'the nadir of human dignity is reached when what is most intimate and personal for a woman … is offered for such thoroughly impersonal, externally objective remuneration'. For female prostitutes in Chinese cities, commercial sex affects diverse moments of everyday life and these encounters have been widely ignored in academic studies.

This chapter thus responds to this research lacuna and advances theorisation of female sex workers' everyday life in Dongguan – China's so-called sin city. We use the term 'encountering strangers' to denote conditions where sex workers have transient, but intimate, encounters with their clients, their friends, and the city itself. Despite the centrality of 'strangerhood' to practices of everyday life, or what Ossewaarde (2007) calls a 'society of strangers', the making and unmaking of strangers has remained largely absent from the literature on everyday life. Here we follow Ossewaarde (2007: 368) to define a stranger as a 'nameless human being without social characteristics'. In its self-definition, 'strangerness' is an ethos of 'modern' citizenship in a highly mobile world, a way of thinking about the relationship between

individuals who are connected via transient encounters, and hence, as a way to interrogate relational identities. With this definition in mind, we look at how commercial sex turn these workers into 'strange' subjects and how workers engage with and experience 'strangerness' in their everyday life. By doing so, our analysis responds to Pratt's (2005: 1072) call for recognition of 'a body beaten beyond recognition' in order give voice to the disenfranchised in Chinese cities.

Encountering strangers in the city

Strangers have always constituted urban life. In Simmel's (1950: 402 – 403) theorisation, the stranger is an essential element of urban society and his or her position as a full-fledged member involves 'both being outside it and confronting it'. He or she intends not to stay long enough to become acquainted, or to seek to be included in local citizens' lives. Simmel (1950: 403) further argues that the stranger owns both nearness and remoteness, giving the stranger 'the character of objectivity'. In contrast, Schutz (1944: 506) argues that a stranger constructs 'a social world of pseudo-anonymity, pseudo-intimacy, and pseudo-typicality'. This 'disintegration' generates an in-between situation – remoteness and intimacy, hesitation and uncertainty – through which social relations are complicated.

Drawing on Schutz's conception, Ossewaarde (2007: 370) goes further to illustrate the key feature of a stranger where

> he or she is constantly confronted with the discrepancy between the local situation and the homely world of his or her past. Through this awareness of strangerhood, the stranger is not only a stranger for locals, but also becomes a stranger to the self.

This illustration deserves further elaboration partly because it shows a juxtaposition between 'homely worlds' and public spaces of the city (see Chapters 2, 7 and 9, this volume). To 'locals', the stranger that Schutz conceptualises is not a subject of esteem and objectivity, but a marginal person, an external intruder, who stays to make trouble and can be considered a challenge to social cohesion. Similarly, Bauman (1997: 28) highlights depictions of the stranger as hateful and feared: 'the acuity of strangerhood, and the intensity of its resentment, grow up with the relative powerlessness and diminish with the growth of relative freedom'. This point is advanced by Valentine (2008) who argues that scholars have often neglected the knotty issue of inequalities when celebrating the potential of everyday encounters in cities.

The image of a stranger as a trouble-maker and as an external intruder can be explicitly applied to sex workers in China. Indeed, what characterises female sex workers as strangers in China is contested notions of (im)morality. For example, female chastity has been a prominent narrative in Chinese society for centuries and reached its climax in the Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911) where chastity could bring families 'status, social leverage, and sometimes state honors' (Theiss 2004: 13). While Maoist revolution initiated female emancipation against the customs of feudal patriarchy, sexuality and female bodies continued to be 'the bearer of sexual

and family morals' (Steinmüller and Tan 2015: 15). More recently, in post-Mao China, attitudes towards virginity and female chastity have been rapidly changing, as many young people both pursue romantic love and accept premarital sex. With the backdrop of changing attitudes female chastity has not, however, lost its symbolic value and the ideal of 'a virgin bride' still remains a key value for many in China (Steinmüller and Tan 2015). In contrast to highly prized 'virgin brides' sex workers of course are the antithesis of female chastity. Viewed as 'unruly whores' or 'fallen women' sex workers lives are infused with shame and discrimination in everyday life (Zheng 2009). Meanwhile, the Chinese state has launched numerous campaigns against prostitution under the guise of maintaining social morality. Linking prostitution and sexual servitude with morality alludes to a fundamentally Confucianism-oriented sexist position (Zheng 2009).

Bauman (1997) reminds us that all societies generate strangers, but different societies produce diverse kind of strangers. As far as sex workers in China are concerned, experiences of migration which already renders them strangers in cities are exacerbated by moral and legal conventions. Moreover, these strangers corrupt neat divisions between intimacy and unfamiliarity, between legality and illegality, and between innocence and impurity. For many in China, prostitution generates uncertainty and breeds 'the discomfort of feeling lost', while the sex industry defies the most ardent efforts made by the state to prevent or outlaw commercial sex. In other words, sex workers, as contemporary strangers in today's China, are a 'waste of the State's ordering zeal' (Bauman 1997: 18). Indeed, there have been numerous crackdowns on prostitution in Dongguan and other cities so that the Chinese state can pursue the goal of building a harmonious society.

Connections between space, place and sex work have been explored elsewhere in academic literature (Laing and Cook 2014). In particular, scholars have examined the socio-spatial exclusion and marginalisation of sex workers and the disciplinary power imposed on them (Hubbard and Prior 2013; Davidson 1998). According to Hubbard *et al.* (2008: 137), urban authorities in Europe endeavor to repress spaces of street prostitution and intervene in sex work markets to address gendered injustice, while actually reinforcing 'geographies of exception and abandonment'. However, it has also been asserted that there is a need to avoid regarding prostitution as 'one monolithic, unchanging institution' (Brents *et al.* 2010: 10), which overlooks sex workers' changing life experiences (Kempadoo 2001). To understand this diversity, we use the term 'encountering strangers' to analyse sex workers' transient, but intimate, encounters with others in their everyday life. Here encounter becomes a key feature to conceptualise urban life in Chinese cities, or as Valentine (2008) asserts, cities constitute a field of encounters with strangers. In these terms, new forms of coexistence and sociability and new sources of prejudice and tension emerge to shape the meaning of urban spaces (Wilson 2016). Indeed, in Chinese cities, sex workers constitute a key source of prejudice during their encounters with clients, residents, and local authorities. In Bauman's (1997: 30) words: 'the question is no longer how to get rid of the strangers and the stranger once and for all, or declare human variety but a momentary inconvenience, but how to live with alterity – daily and permanently'.

Being a stranger in Dongguan

Economic reform following 1978 activated a rapid pace of industrialisation in China's coastal cities, and thus induced tens of millions of rural-to-urban migrants to seek new job opportunities. The Pearl River Delta in general, and Dongguan in particular, have captured the attention of rural migrants, including young females who enter into the sex industry, giving rise to Dongguan's high profile as a sin city. In 1997, the Asian financial crisis inflicted heavy losses on Dongguan's export-driven economy. Numerous factories went bankrupt, and female workers lost their jobs. To make a living, some jobless women entered the sex industry. As many factories started to work with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) to import various international standards and enhance their products' competitiveness in the global market, the sex industry, accordingly, redefined its own services by synthesising Thai massage, Japanese adult movies, and Chinese traditional acupuncture with the so-called Dongguan ISO aiming to maximise clients' sexual satisfaction. The 2007 global financial crisis later shattered Dongguan's export-driven economies again and more factory workers were drawn into the lucrative sex industry.

Our interviews with hotel managers reveal that large hotels' sauna departments often attracted young female sex workers. These women receive professional training, from two weeks to one month, with a focus on expertise in 36 service programmes with the goal of becoming Dongguan ISO-qualified technicians. These high-end workers offer a wide range of services to suit clients' preferences with the cost ranging between 600 and 1000 yuan for two hours. Higher-paid technicians could be paid 1500 to 2000 yuan for two hours. Each luxury sauna organised over 100 technicians for business per night. However, while Dongguan is reputed to have around 100,000 sex workers, only a small fraction work in luxury saunas (*Beijing Youth Daily* 19 February 2014). High-end sex workers in saunas earned much more than other types of prostitution such as street workers, service girls in karaoke or massage parlours, bar hostesses, and prostitutes working in brothels.

With this diverse background in mind, we wanted to know more about the ways in which sex workers negotiate and experience 'strangerhood' in their everyday life in Dongguan. To address this question, we adopted a women-centred and lived-experience approach to understanding our respondents' everyday lives (Kong 2006). From January to September 2013, we interviewed high-end sex workers who worked for a luxury sauna affiliated with a five-star hotel in Dongguan. The interviews with sex workers in Dongguan were focused on their everyday encounters beyond their workplace. Interviews were undertaken in Mandarin and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All respondents were given a pseudonym.

Pain and intimacy in the sauna

High-end sex workers' daily lives are highly routinized. Normally, they go to work around 6 p.m. in the sauna until 3 a.m. or 4 a.m., if they do not secure a 'one night

package' client. Our respondents then often had a snack before going to sleep for seven to eight hours in their apartment either rented by themselves or their sauna manager. After a lunch around 1 p.m., our respondents usually had free time in the afternoon for shopping or spending time with friends. There was not time off at weekends or structured holidays unless permission from 'sauna mamas' was gained. Despite some reluctance to discuss social and economic interactions at the sauna, several different respondents did discuss their encounters with clients indicating their vulnerability in the process of transactions:

> At the beginning, I liked this sort of life since I felt free and happy. Now I realize I don't like it very much. Why? I met some abnormal clients. They tug my hair and beat me. Last month an old man was unable to ejaculate. I said to him: 'It is none of my business; it is yours'. Then he hit me and slashed my face. I was so scared.
>
> Protection? It is an ideal word. I don't even know how to protect myself. What I know is that the sexual encounter between myself and clients is a transaction. If some of my clients don't want to use a condom, I have no opinion. After all, I want to serve as many clients as possible. Regarding venereal diseases, how can I avoid them? Some days, I serve six to seven clients.

These quotes shed light on saunas as a working space where sex workers' encounters with unfamiliar clients are full of risk and unhappiness. As well as moments of violence, respondents discussed physical and psychological harm related to frequent unprotected sex with clients.

Some scholars have argued that commercial sex takes place in a paradoxical space that is 'imagined in order to articulate a troubled relation to the hegemonic discourses of masculinism' (Rose 1993: 159). In Dongguan, however, the sauna does not entail such a paradox, as it reifies an imagination of erotic femininity and long-established masculine cultures in China. In the sauna, vagaries around money and masculinity dissolve, simply because male clients are absolutely prioritised. Similar to night bars in Singapore (Tan 2014), luxury saunas in Dongguan encourage sexual discovery, fulfil sexual desire, and more importantly, pursue a logic of capital accumulation. However, in contrast to Tan's (2014: 42) observation that female clubbers use dancing to cultivate 'feelings of (sexual) empowerment, affect/agency, choice and intention', sauna sex workers' bodies and erotic femininity are regulated by the cultural logic of masculine dominance and the commercial objectives of profit making. Our respondents nonetheless highlighted a challenging juxtaposition – strangerhood and intimacy, nakedness and privacy, force and willingness – giving rise to an interstitial intimacy (see Chapter 7, this volume).

While our respondents were unhappy to work at saunas, they nonetheless preferred them to other workplaces such as massage parlours or karaoke halls. Local authorities in Dongguan policed and prosecuted commercial sex work, with police selectively raiding locations and venues in response to political or media attention, or in order to gain bribes from arrested sex workers and clients. Nevertheless,

luxury hotel owners and sauna managers in Dongguan usually possessed the necessary connections to protect their saunas from being harassed by the police and illegal gangs. The saunas thus provide sex workers with some sense of security to serve clients without worrying about law enforcement. Furthermore, the saunas were a location where sex workers were more able to remain anonymous, as one respondent suggested: 'I didn't want to do business in KTV as I am afraid of bumping into acquaintances. I went to the sauna, a relatively secret place. The transaction has more privacy. Of course, the money is much better than in other places'. An understanding of pain and trauma notwithstanding, for our respondents the sauna was paradoxically a space of security and privacy, and an ironic form of 'protected intimacy' (Bachelard 1964).

Friendship, alienation, and a home away from home

In Dongguan, several sex workers normally rent an apartment and live together. By dwelling with co-workers, our respondents sought to evade the ubiquitous presence of demonisation and stigmatisation in the city. They allude to 'a new home' to frame their subjectivity and to enable more 'comfortable' social relations in Dongguan. What then constitutes a new home? Various interviewees identified friendship as a key element.

> I have a very good relation with three other sisters and we live [in one apartment] together. I don't talk to others very much. So, I pretty much remain silent.
>
> I have few friends here in Dongguan. No one knows me and I don't want to know others.
>
> I know two sisters. We often gather together to talk and encourage each other. They give me much positive energy and empower me to live on. They also buy presents for my son. They sincerely communicate with me and listen to me. I feel so grateful for knowing them.

As these narratives show, attachments to friendship reduced estrangement in their everyday life and fostered a sense of home in the city through comfort and familiarity, in order to withstand alienation and strangerhood.

In addition to socialising with friends, popular activities 'at home' included playing cards and mahjong, make-overs, and discussing fashion and branded commodities (see Chapter 8, this volume). Other activities included surfing the internet and watching romantic dramas. Nevertheless, depictions of love and romance often led to uncomfortable and challenging reflections; 'I love the internet and watching movies. Nevertheless, the love stories in dramas are so impressive that when I watch them, I feel I am so miserable.' Moreover, as another respondent suggested, being a sex worker 'closed the door' to a real love relation with clients or other males in Dongguan, as she and other workers have been labelled as 'dirty', 'polluted', or 'filthy'. Indeed, several respondents shared stories of transient romances with their

clients, and that while the romances had ended they all emphasise that they felt respected by their lovers. However, in spending their leisure time online and in watching television dramas, our respondents highlighted social isolation because of being sex workers. Others discussed how gambling and alcohol were often used by sex workers to 'anaesthetise themselves' from physical and mental harm.

Consumption, economic and social power

Although enduring social stigma and isolation, sex workers nonetheless expressed the value of economic power to display 'femininity', particularly via shopping in Dongguan, and by visible signalling of luxury brands (see Chapter 8, this volume). Generally, respondents went out together to do shopping for luxury goods in high-end stores or to eat in top-quality restaurants. Indeed, several of the respondents refused to hide sex-worker identities, and would wear 'sexy outfits' and bright red lipstick when shopping; as one respondent complained, 'I didn't do anything wrong, right? I didn't steal nor rob others. Neither did I rely on my family. I earn money by myself. What is wrong? It is my job and here is my money.' Moreover, other respondents emphasised their contribution the local economy; 'Dongguan cannot develop so well if we didn't work here'; with other comments including 'my spending helps so many people, such as taxi drivers, property owners, and even sauna security guards. Without us, how can they make money?' Such comments reveal a sense of pride in contributing to developing the urban economy, and a balancing of social stigma and economic value by our respondents as they discussed their involvement in the sex industry and sought to contest stereotyped categorisations imposed on their subjectivity. This exercise of money is reminiscent of Cangiani's (2011: 182) argument that individuals can often resort to arguments relating to rational choices to maximise economic return when in market societies 'money becomes the means for day-to-day living and the medium of social relationships'.

Consumption was a key way in which sex workers embodied their subjectivities as 'urban and modern' as one respondent revealed:

> I purchase handbags, clothing, cosmetics, smartphone, computer and so on. My classmate often asks me to go shopping. She spends way more than I do. As a mistress, she has plenty of money. Being a mistress is better, isn't it? Nevertheless, I enjoy my current condition because I earn money by my labor.
>
> *(Interviewer:* Could you consider a different job?)
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> Why should I do a different job? Shall I go to a factory? No way! How can I live [with a meagre salary]? Actually, I like my current job, though sometimes I feel exhausted. But, there is no easy job in the world. Now I have money to buy whatever I want. I feel quite good. I will work hard. The more money I earn, the more branded stuff I will buy.

Sex workers purchase of branded commodities allowed participation in consumer culture Purchase of expensive cosmetics, high-heeled shoes, fashionable clothes, smartphones, and gym membership, allowed sex workers to emulate professional women (see Chapter 8, this volume). Through consumption, our respondents transformed themselves from 'rural country girls into sexy, modern and urban women' (Ding and Ho 2013: 43). Such thinking resonates with Ding's (2012: 172) view that consumption enables sex workers in Dongguan to improve 'self esteem, and a form of self expression that may bring positive and pleasant feelings'. Respondents' ability to engage in consumer culture did not however negate the hatred and fear bound up in local residents' response to their presence. Some residents expressed overt hatred against sex workers 'as fallen women' and reprimanded them for corrupting their husband or partner because of their 'erotic femininity and sex skills'.

By focusing on the everyday life of sex workers, we have found that strangerhood and intimacy are paradoxically enmeshed in spaces of the sauna, 'home', the street, shopping mall and so on. Our research reveals complex webs of power that integrate respondents into the sex industry for economic profit, but entrench social and spatial barriers which are exclusionary and marginalising. Specifically, the sauna enables economic freedoms, and separates both sex workers and clients from a normative home life, representing a condition 'without duration' (Bhabha 1994: 204). Sex workers' bodies become public, for sale – and despite economic power enabling consumption as 'the source of pleasurable experience and aesthetic satisfaction' (Bauman 1997: 34) this intermeshing of intimacy and strangerhood, separateness and connection ensured 'an embodiment of difference' (Shields 1992: 189). In the workplace and 'at home' however, sex workers found friendship and mutual support – a sense of comfort – where 'the sensory experience of feeling at home … defies the insecurity and uncertainty that can come when confronted with difference' (Butcher 2010: 34).

Being a stranger forever?

Some sex workers chose to quit the profession and return to their hometown or a nearby town to enable a different life. To end this chapter, we briefly reflect on sex workers' experiences of such home-making. It is perhaps not surprising that there were mixed stories of the successfulness of social and spatial transitions. For some, their 'cover stories' of working in Dongguan, as well-paid nannies to rich families, had remained intact for many years, and return to hometowns or provinces led to a move away from prostitution, happy family lives and successful employment or business ventures. Others had been less successful in maintaining such 'cover stories' when working in Dongguan, had become estranged from family and friends and were subject to suspicion and malicious gossip when trying to forge a new life away from prostitution. Such stories highlight the challenges of living in the shadows of commercial sex and female chastity, and the sophisticated strategies that our respondents developed to 'in-between identities' or 'double lives' (Bhabha 1994: 26) or in response to encounters that don't take place in 'a space free from history,

material conditions, and power' (Valentine 2008: 333). Personal, social and cultural geographies of Dongguan's sex industry continue to impact on everyday life often long after our respondents had stopped working as prostitutes. However, as research on sex workers in Dalian, a city in northern China, Zheng (2009: 157) highlights, a return to 'home', cities or provinces can be 'a place of refuge both physically and emotionally'.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have presented research that investigates the everyday lives of sex workers in Dongguan – China's sex city. Departing from tendencies to romanticise urban encounters and to uncritically celebrate social difference in cities, we have offered theoretical and empirical insights into inequalities and power relations bound up with spatial and temporal intersections of gender, masculinity, femininity, sex and sexuality, consumption, economic exploitation, employment and so on. By developing understanding of how prostitutes in Dongguan are defined in relation to 'strangerhood' we have thus highlighted 'a collective experience of powerlessness, manifested in feelings of personal meaninglessness, loneliness, mistrust, insecurity and anxiety' (Ossewaarde 2007: 385). However, in returning to Valentine's (2008) challenge to critically interrogate the socio-spatial inequalities that people 'at the margins' experience in their everyday lives, the respondents in our study nonetheless clearly highlight how they develop their own 'critical urbanisms', which to differing degrees and in diverse and sophisticated ways, seek to respond to and overcome the inequalities, challenges and insecurities of their current and future lives.