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Finding Hope as a “Tempting Girl” in China: Sex Work, Indentured Mobility, and Cosmopolitan Individuals

Eileen Yuk-ha Tsang

Department of Applied Social Sciences, City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

This article chronicles the experiences which lead some female migrant workers in Dongguan, China, to deliberately transition from factory work to sex work. Their decisions are guided by indentured mobility as well as bounded rational choice. This article presents ethnographic data from 45 streetwalkers in Dongguan who navigated highly competitive and risky urban environments involving pimps, police, and gang members. The Chinese government hukou system puts them at an additional disadvantage. Still, life as a streetwalker became their path to economic freedom, removing them from the abject poverty of the factory sweatshop and into an individualized life in urban China.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Introduction

Do I carry the stigma of being a sex worker? Who cares? Money is king ... I am happy that I can make this choice.

Dingding, 24

Like many of the women interviewed from 2008 to 2014, Dingding—a 24-year-old streetwalker in Dongguan—migrated to the city as a member of contemporary China’s growing contingent of working girls. These women, referred to as “tempting girls”¹, shifted to work as streetwalkers after working as “factory girls”. These “tempting girls” are a subset of a larger group of rural-to-urban migration that characterizes the social and economic landscape of contemporary China. That so many of these peasant girls end up in China’s urban commercial sex market is a significant social issue. This article examines how migrant workers become sex workers within the academic discussion of agency in sex work. The transition from factory sweatshop to sex work is not only a form of indentured mobility, but also reflects a bounded rational choice. Why do streetwalkers not quit the job even they have earned more than enough from prostitution or why do they eventually treat it as a long-term employment, contrary to what many of them initially claimed or wished? Money as an instrument is important but those streetwalkers pursue something rather more meaningful in their life. They have made a deliberate choice to engage in sex work in order to enhance their future livelihoods through individualism and cosmopolitanism. Despite the deplorable and harsh conditions, these women still prefer sex work to factory. The article contextualizes the encompassing hyper-competitive neo-liberal landscape of contemporary urban China that is played out within Dongguan. For example, the factory environment marginalizes young under-educated migrant women, forcing them to reconsider their aspirations and motivations in respect to their rural–urban migratory journey. The result is their choice to engage in sex work. While Parreñas (2011a)

CONTACT Eileen Yuk-ha Tsang  tsangeileen@gmail.com  Department of Applied Social Sciences, City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong.

¹“Tempting girls” are different from factory girls (*Dagongmei*). *Dagongmei* refers to female migrant workers or laborers. “Tempting girls” in this article refers to the former *dagongmei* who shifted to work in sex industry after working as “factory girls”. Strictly speaking, *dagongmei* is not equivalent to “tempting girls”, with only part of *dagongmei* becoming sex workers.

highlighted how contractual stipulations and working under pimps constricted women working as hostesses, at least some streetwalkers seem to enjoy a more individualized self.

Dingding labored under grueling conditions in a garment factory for 2 years before making the transition to being a streetwalker. Her path from rural farm to urban factory to become one of Dongguan's streetwalkers is not unusual. Rather, Dingding's trajectory into sex work reflects the bounded rational choice that many former *dagongmei* made when leaving factories for employment in the commercial sex industry. Sex workers report a better income, greater personal freedom, and less exhaustive labor conditions.

The 45 interviewed streetwalkers were well aware of their vulnerable situation. Providing sex to clients on the street (mainly working class Chinese) is full of risks. There is occupational hazard of dealing with pimps and gangsters on the one hand and police on the other. Physical violence is as likely as arrest, and even sexual harassment is routine from both sides. There are also health risks from sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. All the informants in this article, however, asserted that being on the street was better than being in the factory. Streetwalkers are the focus of this article because they exemplify what is referred to as indentured mobility. Although they work under pimps and have to hide their occupation from family and friends, they still prefer working in the commercial sex industry. Research on the experience of the "tempting girls" becoming a sex worker remains relatively limited. The existing literature mostly mentioned pull-push factors (Ravenstein 1885; Lee 1966), psychological motivations (James and Meyerding 1977; Miller 1986), financial factors (Brown 1978; Miller 1986; James and Meyerding 1977; Laner 1974), and victims and the vulnerable who must deal with police and pimps (Choi 2011). Some mentioned those sex workers engage in sex work for a short period of time (Zheng 2009; Otis 2011; Liu 2012). However, the literatures did not cover the holistic picture to explain why the streetwalkers work with pimps and gangsters and deal with police, but they still remain committed to their job and satisfied with their lives in commercial sex industry. My data show that there remains considerable potential to contribute to this research field and topic, in particular, analyzing the streetwalkers have made an indentured mobility and bounded rationality to enhance their lives.

This article has three parts. The second section contextualizes indentured mobility and examines the notion of bounded rational choice to explain why the migrant workers engage in sex work. The third section illustrates the research method, and fourth section focuses on choice/force debates within sex work that lead women from factory work into sex work. The role of the individualized self is used to examine how migrant laborers negotiate bounded rational choice.

Literature on choice and force debate

There are diverse perspectives on female migrant workers becoming sex workers, including pull-push factors (Ravenstein 1885; Lee 1966), psychological motivations (James and Meyerding 1977; Miller 1986), and financial factors (Brown 1978; Miller 1986; James and Meyerding 1977; Laner 1974). Other scholars (Klinger 2003) focus on the role of agency to explain why sex workers enter the industry and then leave after earning enough money. By and large, this literature sees *choice* as the key. This scholarship argues that sex workers make independent and informed decisions about using their bodies and sexual skills for their own ends. Researchers found some women engage in sex work just long enough to make quick cash for immediate personal or family-related reasons (Zheng 2009; Otis 2011; Liu 2012). Other researchers report many sex workers in China are forced into the business and do not work for their own personal benefit (Zheng 2009). Women face numerous double standards involving moral and social codes, such as maintaining family honor via their own chasteness and meeting filial financial obligations. Sex workers must struggle with extensive sexual violence, negotiation and 'beggaring' with police (Zheng 2009; Jeffreys 2010, 2012), gang rape, and virginity selling. Liu (2012) has highlighted that the bulk of literature on sex work in China focuses on narratives of human trafficking, where sex workers are decidedly powerless and some sex work is represented as "paid rape" and "crime as work" (Lucas 2005). Due to mainstream moralistic discourses and negative societal perceptions of sex work, this literature may incorrectly frame women who

engage in sex work solely as victims or jezebels. The literature on Chinese women who were sex workers fails to acknowledge that a substantial amount of women participate in commercial sex work because it is the best of several (admittedly poor) options.

At present, there is a well-established literature on rural-to-urban migration in post-socialist China which investigates migrants' subjectivities, hardship, agency, and experiences under the state's structural constraints (Fan 2008; Jacka 2009; Lee 1998; Pun 2005, 2016; Zheng 2009) in a factory regime. Many studies also focus on the Chinese regulatory structure as an underlying factor to explain why migrant workers become sex workers. Zheng (2009) suggested that the Chinese state was complicit in expanding the sex industry, and thus contributed to the exploitation of sex workers. Choi (2011) noted the Chinese state's repressive measures against prostitution. Sex workers were portrayed in the national discourse as victimizers spreading disease, and hampering efforts to promote safe sex (Choi and Holroyd 2007; Pan 1999, 2000). The arguments against legalizing sex work are largely driven by the stigma attached to sex work and the refusal to recognize female body autonomy. This narrow focus on sex workers as victims ignores the possibility of individualized self (Bernstein 2007; Brennan 2004).

There is little published literature on the contractual stipulations of sex work, whereby the women work with pimps and gangsters and deal with police, but still remain committed to their job and satisfied with their individualized self (Rosen and Venkatesh 2008; Tsang 2017). The individualized self here means the streetwalkers have autonomy and freedom to choose their own lives. Beck and Ritter (1992) suggested a categorical shift between the relationship of the individual and society. That is, the self-radicalization of modernity has set the individual free from most of the previous all-encompassing social categories in industrial society, such as family, kinship, gender, and class, and has emerged as the reproduction unit for the social in a risk society. Beck's individualization thesis is appropriate to understand the Chinese case because it focuses on the structural changes in the individual-society-state relationship instead of any political philosophy or ideological imperative. Also, there is a dearth of literature on why sex workers have earned for their urgent needs but they eventually still stay at the commercial sex industry. This article contributes to the discussion of sex work by including the concepts of indentured mobility and bounded rational choice.

Indentured mobility

Parreñas (2011a) uses the term indentured mobility to capture the unique experience of how migrant Filipina hostesses in Japan navigate financial limitations and assert autonomy amidst harsh socio-economic working conditions and heavy exploitation. Specifically, indentured mobility identifies the "process of migration as producing economic mobility at the cost of the migrant becoming an unfree laborer" (Parreñas 2011a:328). By "unfree laborer", Parreñas refers to how these women lack control over their labor and often not compensated until the end of their contracts. Further, they are financially beholden to various middlemen who facilitate their travel and employment upon arrival in Japan (Parreñas 2011a). The means of their income are problematic; hostesses must encourage clients to spend money but such encouragement is interpreted by the customers as solicitation for paid sex. But by invoking mobility, Parreñas maintains, these women have deliberately chosen this work as a way for their (sexual) labor to give them a chance of control their choices through financial freedom (Parreñas 2011a).

Parreñas (2011a) asserts that it is critical to recognize these women's agency since it is their agency that differentiates their experience from the victims of human trafficking who labor without consent. Parreñas (2011a, 2011b) argued that migrants make the "autonomous" decision to swap a life of poverty for labor conditions of servitude. Women creatively use their bodies and flirtation skills to keep clients returning. By differentiating human trafficking from elective sex work, Parreñas (2011a) concludes that the sexual labor of migrant Filipina women must be recognized as a legitimate means of achieving upward economic mobility. This framework suggests that the

injustices these women experience are forms of labor abuse rather than a more serious criminal act of victimization.

Bounded rational choice

In contrast to indentured mobility, the notion of bounded rational choice explores the enactment and implications of choice within a context that resembles the conditions faced by sex workers in Dongguan. Similar to what Rosen and Venkatesh (2008) found regarding low-end sex workers in Chicago, Dongguan streetwalkers also fit the notion of bounded rationality. The sex workers choose to stay in streetwalkers like what Herbert Simon argued “bounded rationality” (Simon 1955, 1956). It refers that it is infeasible for human beings to make perfectly rational decision due to, among others, limited information on options; instead, they only seek satisfactory and comfortable ones. In both cities, sex work provides autonomy and personal fulfillment even as it mitigates the consequences of poverty and income instability. The interpersonal, structural, and economic circumstances that low-income individuals navigate make the options available in the formal labor market appear undesirable and even unacceptable. This sentiment resonates with Jeffrey and MacDonald’s (2006:322) study about sex workers in Canada who refuse the unsatisfactory conditions of “straight work” and engage in sex work as an act of resistance to the “disciplinary structures that attempt to control their work and render them passive, ‘cheap’ labor”. The sex workers carefully weigh their options regarding money, independence, and flexibility. Staying in the commercial sex industry becomes a preferred and feasible alternative. Likewise, the streetwalkers in my research overwhelmingly preferred sex work to low-wage sweatshop work. They made this choice despite they are being subjected to formal contractual or professional agreements with the pimps. Conversely, they are “bounded” by way of their position in the sociocultural context as an individualized self. Bounded rational choice is part of a process that is calculated and rational and carefully evaluated by the individual who is bound to the sociocultural context of China as a cosmopolitan and individualized self who desires to change their life.

Although the experiences of Chinese migrant sex workers are distinctly different from those of the Filipina, Parreñas’s (2011a) approach is useful for understanding choice in the Chinese context. Similarly, streetwalkers in Dongguan may enjoy certain financial freedoms and hope for upward mobility (Forsyth and Fournet 1987; Goldstein 1982); these low-educated migrant women must navigate highly competitive urban environments. They are often faced with limited choices within both the formal and informal labor market. The 45 streetwalkers interviewed all regularly deal with pimps, gangsters, and police. Arrests and bribes are daily occurrences, yet these sex workers say they want to stay in the sex industry. However, Parreñas’s (2011a) indentured mobility focuses more on the contractual agreements signed with the middleman while neglecting the individualized self as a bounded rational choice. In effect, bounded rational choice highlights the fact that women are “bounded” by circumstances, internal motivations, and external structures. It is a carefully considered deliberate choice to control their own lives.

Data and methods

This analysis draws on data collected from 2008 to 2014. I met with 45 streetwalkers in a neon-soaked red light district in Dongguan, near a low-end bar where my friend is the boss. He is the friend of the streetwalkers and he introduced and arranged for the streetwalkers to talk to me. We met and spoke in a nearby café. I gave cash coupons/noncash gifts (like treating informants for lunch or dinner) to the streetwalkers who talked to me. Cash coupons valued at \$200 yuan [US\$30] were used as incentives to encourage the women to participate in the in-depth interviews. Lunch or dinner was provided after the interview for those women who could attend and those who could not were given the coupons. While everyone had a different story and reasons for engaging in sex work, not one of them said they were ever forced into sex work. With the help of my friend, the streetwalkers were reassured I was not an undercover policewoman. Sometimes, I gave them money to talk which some of them refused. I visited them roughly twice a week enabling me to build rapport with them. Located around 50 kilometers south of Guangzhou (the capital of Guangdong province), Dongguan has become a hub for textile, garment,

electronics, and other goods-producing factories. Approximately 20,000 garment factories are located within the city; and like many cities wherein garment and textile industries are predominate, Dongguan relies upon a largely migrant female labor force (Jacka 2009:277).

The overrepresentation of women within this sector of factory work reinforces some widely held stereotypes regarding the superior manual dexterity of young peasant women coupled with the practice of paying female workers less than their male counterparts (Jacka 2009). Over 160 million rural women migrated from their rural households to the city making up 33–50% of China's rural migrant labor force (Chan 2012). Besides its industry, Dongguan is also notoriously famous for its commercial sex industry. During the 2008 global financial crisis, in the city, great numbers of female migrant workers were laid off from their factory jobs and many sought money-making opportunities in the commercial sex industry. It is estimated that the commercial sex industry now comprises 20–30% of the city's total service-sector output, generating profits of 40 billion yuan, or roughly 10% of Dongguan's gross domestic product (Davies 2013). Dongguan is known for "sin" and is home to a nightlife culture of countless karaoke bars, brothels, massage parlors, nightclubs, and sex hotels. Many designer clothing firms from the USA and Europe have cancelled their subcontracted orders from local factories. More than 7,000 factories closed in 2008 due to high operating costs (Lee and Shen 2009).

Data for this study comprised of recorded interviews, in situ note taking, and post-event field notes. Prior to any recorded interviews, all the interviewees were given a copy of my business card and contact information, and requested to sign consent forms. They were assured they could freely withdraw at any stage in the project. The informants were fully assured at the outset of confidentiality and anonymity. No personal information was collected, and only their ages are reported, accompanied by assigned pseudonyms. All of the verbatim cited in this article were translated into English by the investigator.

Multiple methods of data collection were employed in this ethnography (Duneir 2011). The fieldwork was supplemented by less conventional methods such as QQ/WeChat interviews. Additional qualitative data were collected by photo-elicitation during the interviews and conversing with the sex workers while walking around the low-end bar and nearby alley. The information collected during photo-elicitation and through the community walks were used to verify and amplify the data collected during the in-depth interviews. To carry out the photo-elicitation, the women were asked to use their mobile telephone photograph albums to help them describe and contrast their factory work and sex work, particularly self-perceptions, psychological feelings, and dealings with clients, police, the pimps, and gangs. The information obtained while walking with the informants supplemented and enriched the interview data.

A total of 45 streetwalkers were interviewed, and all of them were between the ages of 18 and 35. The mean monthly income for being a streetwalker was 9,000 yuan (US\$1,304). They were generally less educated and less attractive than those found in high-end bars. Around half, 23 participants, had at least one child and were either still married or divorced. The other 22 participants were single. All 45 sex workers interviewed were interprovincial migrants who came from Hunan, Hubei, Jilin, Sichuan, Anhui, and Hebei who moved to Dongguan as *dagongmei*. Many of these women had either been laid off by employers or had willingly resigned from their previous jobs. Most of the women completed primary school; a quarter completed junior high; and one participant completed high school. Most of them resided illegally in urban Guangdong for between 1 and 3 years, except for two women who had lived in Guangdong for more than 10 years.

From factory to sex work: The context

These migrant working women typically began their urban sojourns working in sweatshop factories before segueing to sex work. More than 70% of my informants were born after 1980, and are second-generation migrant workers with less obligatory economic burden than the first generation. They are characterized by their drive for a better quality of life due to their knowledge of urban life. Furthermore, they enjoy a better governmental infrastructure that protects workers' rights since the labor shortage of 2004 (Choi and Peng

2015). However, prospects for unskilled migrant workers remain bleak. Conditions have deteriorated since the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, when around 200,000 *dagongmei* were fired with almost no notice². Even today, women in low-paying factory jobs face a bleak economic outlook, exacerbated by diminishing global demand for designer clothing. Many factory workers must work an astounding 360 hours per month, which equates to 12 hours per day every day without rest. The disappointment with city life is compounded by the meager salaries and pay uncertainty. According to Lee and Shen (2009:120), only 48% of workers in garment factories received their wages on time and an estimated 54% were forced to work without remuneration for basic salaries and overtime work. Therefore, the decision to leave the factory for sex work is simple mathematics. Factory work pays an average monthly earning of 1,600 yuan (US\$235) while sex workers report an average monthly income of 8,000–10,000 yuan (US\$1,176–1,470).

Hukou system

Dagongmei differ from their better-educated rural counterparts who are employed in the city's informal service sector. The ubiquity of rural migrants with urban aspirations raises several questions regarding the social future of migrant sex workers interwoven into the fabric of China's burgeoning metropolises. Peasant-migrant workers participating in urban sex work are not entitled to *hukou* or household registrations in the city (Mallee 2003). *Hukou*, put simply, is a government-instituted household registration system prohibiting rural citizens from residing permanently in urban areas without state approval. The system was conceived to bind citizens to their birthplaces, ensuring that the individual would be dependent upon their specific rural or urban collective for employment and subsistence. However, the contemporary labor demands within China require much of the rural populace to migrate to urban areas. As a consequence, the *hukou* system disadvantages the rural poor who do not qualify for the privileges and rights accorded to individuals with the urban *hukou*. In fact, upon commencing employment in Guangdong, *dagongmei*'s precarious lifestyles are comparable to that of illegal aliens residing in a foreign country who lack the right of permanent abode. For this reason, *hukou* has been criticized as a uniquely Chinese state apparatus that spatializes inequality. Without urban registration, illegal rural workers in metropolitan China are ineligible for state insurance or welfare benefits. The 45 sex workers unanimously hate the *hukou* system because if they get sick in the city they must return to their hometown for treatment (Kong 2016). These women are denied access to public services, basic welfare, healthcare, and affordable public housing in urban China. Since their *hukou* are in rural China, they have to go back to hometown to look for medical service. Migrant women are marginalized and face a high rate of labor abuse, a culture of widespread prejudicial attitudes toward them, and socioeconomic disparities between urban and rural communities (Kong 2016). In the particular context of the 45 informants who were *dagongmei*, their prospects were pointedly bleak after the global financial crisis and diminishing global demand for designer clothing. Additionally, their labor conditions included daily experiences of flagrant sexual harassment, exhaustive working conditions, and labor violations. Many of the women affirmed that prostitution was a step up from working in the factory.

From retrenchment to sex work: A mobility of choice

As relevant literature and interview testimonials reveal, the grueling and harsh demands of factory labor were a critical factor driving these women to explore an alternative career as a sex worker. The decision to choose sex work over factory migrant work stems from indentured mobility to enjoy freedom, autonomy, and flexibility in the commercial sex industries.

²Phillips, 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>. Retrieved 4 September 2014.

Factory life

Qingqing (20) affirmed that exhausting conditions of factory work motivated her to pursue sex work:

Can you imagine we had to sew more than 120 pairs of jeans per hour? It is crazy but I can tolerate it. What I cannot tolerate is the complicated color and size specifications. China is in a consumer revolution and it is too bad without money. At that time, I only considered money and didn't want to remain working in that factory like a slave. I only wanted to control my life ... (Qingqing, 20)

Meifang, a 23-year-old streetwalker who previously worked in a factory, elaborated on the dismal working conditions and unrealistic demands that led her to pursue sex work. She says:

We were required to sign a contract stating that we wouldn't go to the toilet more than three times per working day and that we wouldn't spend more than ten minutes during each visit, the consequences would be severe if we breached these requirements. (Meifang, 23)

In addition to the insights provided by the participants, relevant literature similarly highlights extensive workplace injustices and abuses. The harsh realities of the factory are exacerbated by the fact that many of these "tempting girls" are not prepared to enter these working environments. Several interviewees revealed that they were initially optimistic about transitioning into factory work because the factories provided an opportunity to gain experience in urban China as well as meet potential partners and earn a waged income. However, their experiences revealed that the formal labor market often fails to provide a healthy and safe environment for its workers. As a consequence, these women, who traveled to Dongguan seeking a stable income were offered limited job options and their rights as workers were not respected.

Although the harsh and jarring conditions of factory life are not the sole determining factor in the transition to sex work, the women interviewed said they never considered sex work before they entered the factory. This is not to suggest that the women were wholly ignorant of Dongguan's sex industry. In fact, many participants were highly aware of Dongguan's reputation and heard stories of women who were able to achieve upward mobility through sex work. However, the women interviewed reflected that their decision to leave their hometowns was based primarily on the idea of getting a good job in the city. Sex work only became an alternative once they encountered the negative experience of the factory.

Remuneration

Although harsh labor conditions were discussed extensively, the issue of remuneration was the primary and most critical factor motivating women to enter sex work. This aspect is typical within similar economic contexts wherein low-wage manual labor is an integral component of the economy and culture of bourgeoning urban centers (Jacka 2009:277; Busza 2004). In my sample, factory work yielded an average monthly earning far below what could be earned working in the commercial sex industry.

Yuemiao highlights the role of remuneration in her decision to leave the factory and pursue sex work. She notes:

I remember the average monthly salary was around 1,600 yuan (US\$232). This includes the entire basic salary and overtime pay. I worked a total of 390 hours a month, working a 30 day month and an average of 13 hours a day. The monthly salary statement for an ordinary worker would be around 1,000 yuan (US\$145) for basic pay, merit pay at 50 yuan (US\$7.5); full attendance bonus at 40 yuan (US\$6) for two holidays a month); an overtime pay at a rate of five yuan (less than US\$1) per hour. The combined overtime pay can be as much as 300 yuan (US\$43) or more per month for those who work a total of 100 hours at night per month. When I fell sick and asked for leave, they deducted my salary. (Yuemiao, 23)

In the factory, we would be penalized if we left for lunch and would have our salaries deducted. I was forced to work overtime even though I could prove that I suffer from health problems. They would still deduct my salary. If I refuse to work overtime, I'd be threatened with dismissal. I even had to sign a form declaring that I wouldn't hurt myself at work and that my family wouldn't be paid compensation in the event of any injuries sustained, not even in the case of death at work. (Xiaoyue, 18)

Huahua's (23) had similar experiences in the factory. She revealed:

We were required to sign a contract stating that we wouldn't go to the toilet more than three times per working day and that we wouldn't spend more than ten minutes during each visit, the consequences would be severe if we breached these requirements. (Huahua, 23)

To improve the plight of the migrant workers, new laws have been enacted to help them. Labor contracts have been compulsory nationwide since 1995 for almost all forms of employment. Rising employment disputes have led to better regulations on labor dispute resolution since 1993 (China Statistical Yearbook 2005). However, these two statutes are neither supervised nor properly enforced anywhere in China. During the drafting stage of these three statutes, the Chinese government was perceived as adopting a pro-labor stance. That changed when a number of multinational companies and chambers of commerce threatened to pull out of China if these laws were seriously enforced. Straight economics (therefore tax revenue) is perhaps the ultimate reason why local authorities tolerate highly polluting industries in their localities. Half the national tax base is in the state sector. In 2004, the private economy made up 60% of the national economy and employed 75% of the national workforce (China Statistical Yearbook 2005). This explains why the migrant workers were the losers during the global supply chain and globalization era. Therefore, the limited enforcement of these and other pieces of legislation continues to punish and marginalize migrant workers. The evolution of the global supply chain sets off more complicated job specifications. Wages remain low or below subsistence levels. The financial crisis is driving employers toward even more ruthless cost-cutting. Workers made jobless cannot or would not return to their hometowns because of similar dreadful working conditions. In their hometowns, the wages are even lower. Therefore, they prefer to remain in metropolitan areas. Yet, with meager savings and no educational credentials or skills, migrant peasants are less employable than their more sophisticated urban peers. Of course, their desire is to earn enough money so that they can run a business or change their jobs to the service industry. But they are simply not well educated enough to get a better job. Taking into account the day-to-day conditions of factory life and the limited pay that these women receive from such demanding work, the decision to partake in sex work is an embodiment of their agency under conditions where their options were highly limited. Moreover, in contrast to the conventional perception of rural woman being exploited powerless victims of the global economy, the interviewees were fully conscious of their marginalization in post-reform Chinese society. They recognized the need to mobilize their resources to overcome their economic stagnancy. Making significantly more money is the deciding factor in pursuing sex work. While labor abuses and low pay are key motivators to leave factory life, many of the interviewees mentioned these factors as affecting their individualized self as well.

Making sense of *dagongmei*: From retrenchment to sex work?

Clients routinely treat sex workers badly. The women endure verbal abuse as well as health risks of sexually transmitted diseases from clients who refuse to wear condoms. Xiaolin (23) said they tolerate these conditions because of the money:

In the factory, I was exploited with such a disgraceful salary. Here in the nightclub, the pimps are exploiting me but it's not that bad as I can earn far higher wages. (Xiaolin, 23)

The streetwalkers are vulnerable to client-perpetrated violence and some sex workers received different forms of sexual abuse from clients. The 45 interviewees work under different pimps. Pimps guard them on the streets and introduce clients to them, then charge them commissions. They have to split the profits with the pimps, who usually take 60% while the streetwalkers keep the other 40%. Furthermore, streetwalkers are harassed by triad (gang) members who demand protection fees. Most of the streetwalkers did not want to work with a pimp, but it is the easiest way to increase businesses and therefore, profit. Even if they did not work for the pimps, they would still have to deal with the triads for protection fees as they work in alley and street. Also, if their pimps have a bad relationship

with the police, they have to bribe both the police and the triad society because sex work is illegal in China. Despite these conditions, most of them did not want to return to factory work. For example, Huiling (20) said her pimp once raped her after she attempted to leave, but she still wants to stay in Dongguan as a streetwalker:

Even if the factory I worked in before didn't close, I'd still have chosen to be a prostitute. At that time, I only considered money and didn't want to remain working in that factory like a slave. I only wanted a happy and comfortable life when I made the decision to pursue sex work at that time. (Huiling, 20)

Haoyin (23), Masha (26), Xiangren (21), Keyi (23), and Yanglin (28) also reported unpleasant experiences with their clients as streetwalkers, but all said they want to stay in the sex industry.

I met one client before. He liked pulling my blouse up and my bra down, exposing my breast and forcing me to coyly cover the nipple. Some clients put fruit on my breast—like cherries or grapes—and pretend to eat the fruit until he ends up kissing my nipple. Still another game my client plays is to put his mobile phone in vibrate mode and place it on my breasts. When he calls his phone, the vibrating phone will make me squeal which makes him laugh ... (Haoyin, 23)

I've been tied up and some clients would nip a cigarette bud on my breasts or my back ... (Masha, 26)

One client was so vigorous and macho to control me. He poked holes in condom and had sex with me. I think it was all about the desire—the desire to be 'bestialized'. After that, I discovered that I was pregnant and of course, I went for abortion ... but I still want to stay in sex industry to enjoy the freedom and flexibility ... (Xiangren, 21)

Some clients have special requests like asking me to pee in front of them or strip dance. Some clients like objects so they like to kiss my underwear. The more excretion the panty has the happier they are. There are also some clients that like to smell my feet ... some like S&M and foot jobs ... Those are not easy jobs but I would rather stay in sex industry instead of going back to factory ... (Keyi, 23)

I met a client before and he said he loved me a lot. I was naïve and let him stay with me. Finally, he showed his true color and beat me up when he had sex with me. It caused rib fractures. The injury is linked with the heart valve. After several months seeing a Chinese doctor, I feel much better. Even with this horrible experience, I still want to stay in sex work industry ... (Yanglin, 35)

Xinxi (20)—who I met in a dilapidated dimly lit hotel room—sneered at the thought of developing intimacy with a client. Although Xinxi worried about contracting sexual diseases, she often inserted a small sponge so she could charge more money. She said sex work is too good to pass up:

I use animal blood to pretend to be a virgin. I am threatened by police harassment. But I prefer to stay in this industry rather than going back to the factory and hometown ... (Xinxi, 20)

Furthermore, those streetwalkers have to provide free sex to the police since their pimps have to give "face" to the police in order to avoid arrest. Liaoyang (22) says:

Most policemen like rough sex, sometimes they'd show up around my neighborhood and I'd give them free sexual services so they won't pester me. They like S&M or anything that's 'extreme'. One of them pushed a cigarette butt on my breasts and spine. But I want to survive so I did everything they asked for. That's the rule of China. This is China ... (Liaoyang, 22)

Most of the sex workers complained about splitting the profits with the pimps. Over 80% of my informants informed me that they also have to provide free sex service to the pimps. Most of the streetwalkers didn't have an intimate relationship with their clients. They always have uninvited touching and kissing, where they'll pull off their clothes and insult the woman's body. Over time, the accumulation of such bad experiences can deflate their self-esteem and result in job burnout.

From my conversations with the streetwalkers, all of them feel some shame and cannot let their parents and family know they are sex workers. Consequently, family members are alienated as they are seen to de-personalize and objectify their daughters as commodities. Sex work is "living off immoral earnings" in Chinese culture. For example, the husband of Wuchu (35) told her sister she is a streetwalker, and her sister threatened to cut ties and disown her from the family. Still, Wuchu tries to keep contact with her family since her parents help her to take care of her son in her hometown. Over 40 out of 45 streetwalkers capitalize on

money as a tool which mingles with Confucian values so they can fulfill their role as a filial piety daughter, as a mother, and an individualized self. This also exposed the dilemmas facing breadwinning peasant sex workers who must hide how they earned their income. They regularly experience moral qualms, guilt, and shame. But these negative feelings are offset by the autonomy, freedom, and individualized self-attained through the tangible reward of adequate remuneration. Over 95% of the streetwalkers who remain in sex work expressed ideas reflecting the consumerist allure of the city.

The allures of sex work in the global city: Cosmopolitan individuals

Remaining in the commercial sex industry is not a perfect choice; however, their significantly higher income allows them to refashion and reorient their identities. This is valuable since the “personal” reflects a post-reform state discourse on developing the neo-liberal “personal” identity, which stands in stark contrast to Mao-era conceptualizations of the “collective”. I argue that the significance of the “personal” is not only perpetuated by way of a culture of neo-liberalism, but also propagated vis-a-vis by the state discourse of individualized self. Arguably, the migration process and eventual participation in sex work are the first instances where migrant women are offered the opportunity to explore a distinct identity outside of their family. It gives them recreational time, disposable income, and the particular freedoms that come when leaving home. In effect, both migration and their newly acquired economic freedoms allow these women to experience and recognize themselves as a “modern subject”. The transition from rural farm girl to city factory worker then to financially secure sex worker is important to understand how these women see themselves within the context of a hyper-competitive labor market. In line with Parreñas’s (2011a, 2011b) findings, these women recognize that their transition to relative financial security and upward economic mobility was made possible through sex work. Therefore, while sex work poses some distinct hardships, it nevertheless offers these migrant women the possibility of achieving upward mobility and “personal growth” that would not otherwise be possible.

Migrant sex workers devote a percentage of their earnings to the consumption of fashionable lifestyles even as they seek to secure their economic futures. When asked what she enjoyed doing with her earnings, Meixia (22) says,

My friend from Hong Kong invited me to dinner. I was so excited. We went to a Western restaurant and I was completely ignorant of restaurants, let alone the etiquette. I didn’t know how to use a knife and fork. Even worse, I don’t know how to order because the dishes shown on the menu were new to me ... After this experience, I learned how to surf the internet whenever I’m free. That was how I learned to eat with a knife and fork. I’m now more civilized and modern. It’s hard to believe that life here in the city can be so much more meaningful even if it means that I have to work as a prostitute to enjoy eating in a restaurant. (Meixia, 22)

Most of the streetwalkers said they are happy to have choice and control their own life. Meihua (22) highlights how her salary allows her to reframe and understand her “self” in a manner that would not have been possible if she continued working at the factory:

I try to look more modern and cosmopolitan; then, my customers believe that I’m worth what they paid for. I can buy cosmetic products, stylish clothes, and attractive accessories to make me look more modern and cosmopolitan ... With money, I can hire a dermatologist to cure my skin allergy and I look more confident ... (Meihua 22)

I stay in sex industry because I can enjoy freedom and autonomy. I only work 22 days per month, but I can earn more than 9,000 yuan [US\$1,304] per month ... I can take leave whenever I want. Unlike working in factory 7 days per week, and 30 days per month, I could only receive less than 2,000 yuan [US\$435] ... (Shenman, 34)

Xinmei (24) also says:

I bought an apartment in Dongguan in 2008 ... The property market is good and I enjoy the profits a lot. I like my job as I can spend ... Sex work brings me happiness, dignity, status, and friendship. I have developed friendship with other sisters [streetwalkers]. When clients refuse to pay and become rude, my sister will call the

pimps and we can help each other out ... If I feel lonely and sad, my sisters comfort me ... My life has meaning again ... (Xinmei, 24)

Xiaofang (27) also says:

I was lucky. I bought an apartment in Wuhan in 2009. It cost me only 300,000 yuan (US\$50,000) and I rent it out to support my parents' expenses in Wuhan ... It is a high-rise building, neither mud nor brick houses. My parents have never seen a skyscraper before. I enjoy saving and investing in property. I have a dream, I want to become a businesswoman and I still have hope to find a future husband ... (Xiaofang, 30)

The consumption of Western food, knowing how to eat with a knife and fork, and even surfing the Internet are products of modernity that are forging the streetwalker's reflexive individuality. The pursuit of fashion and style are illustrative of how a peasant woman's acquisition of money through sex work provides them with the means to reconstruct themselves "as a reflexive and inward-directed source of valuation" (Sassatelli 2000:215–216), untrammelled by collective bonds in the countryside that can no longer provide for her financial well-being. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the peasant sex workers' intention is to treat their money as intermediaries of potential (Deflem 2003), allowing them to widen their spheres of choice and underwrite their financial futures. At a grander scale, the financial success of the sex workers fuels the fragmentation and ongoing de-collectivization of rural China. In effect, money and economic mobility offer the opportunity to become a "better" self. For most of the streetwalkers, money allows them to make consumer choices, which position themselves as "modern". Rather than simple farm girls, these women can present themselves as successful cosmopolites, able to purchase items such as magazines, skincare products, and fashionable clothing. Sex work allows migrant women to be situated in the middle or "center" of the dominant urban social milieu in a manner previously unattainable (Hsu 2005:553).

Many of the women also explained how moving to the city allowed them to end situations of domestic abuse they experienced from their husbands. Some women described their home lives as an oppressive dictatorship under their husband. They felt they had to endure physical and verbal abuse due to financial dependence upon their male partners. In moving away from the village and into the city, most of these women left their children with their parents to ensure a safe and stable environment. This enabled these women to re-negotiate their social positions in order to improve their financial future. As such, even before these women came to Dongguan, the demands of family life and heteronormative expectations are critical structures that impact migrant women's decision-making processes. Segueing to sex work in Guangdong province has therefore proven to be the most financially viable option for the streetwalkers who have resisted returning to their rural milieu.

Conclusion

This article contextualized how *dagongmei*-turned sex workers negotiate their lives within the constraints of contemporary China. In order to survive without the support of recognized institutional bodies (formal labor market, government-instituted services) and meet the expectations placed upon them through social dictates (individualized self, freedom, and autonomy), the significance of the income earned through sex work cannot be overstated. In effect, similar to the Parreñas's model (2011a), these women may not be beholden to the dictates of exploitative contracts but rather are *bounded* to societal expectations and limited forms of social and material support. This situation places women within a framework wherein sex work is one of the few platforms that enables them to overcome their socioeconomic environment to attain upward economic mobility. In this context, engaging in sex work is a rational and acceptable response. These material and social structures and situational contexts frame the sex worker's choice as "bounded", insofar as their choices are not made in a vacuum or where possibilities are plentiful. Simply because choice is limited and fraught with complex socioeconomic context, one cannot discount that these choices are deliberate. By understanding the material conditions of migrant labor and how the social forces of individualized

self become underlying motivators that lead women into sex work, this article unearths the complex subjective discourses and political and economic realities that frame how these decisions are made.

Officially sanctioned labor unions and political elites of China remain unwilling to fight for the rights of these poor women. Labor law protection remains inadequate. The Chinese government gives some concessions to multinational corporations, but is less concerned about the well-being of migrant workers. Therefore, the limited enforcement of these and other pieces of legislation has exacerbated the marginalization of these migrant sex workers. The women interviewed candidly admitted that they could do little about these irrefragable circumstances regarding class and economic identities. But they remained determined to continue in sex work until they have amassed sufficient funds to retire and return to their village to start a business or pursue other options through individualization. There is nevertheless a challenge that needs to be addressed. Most *dagongmei* saw prostitution as a nonpermanent work arrangement and vowed to withdraw when they have saved enough money. In fact, however, most will probably continue to work until circumstances dictate they must stop.

Furthermore, regardless of whether these women participate in the formal or informal sector, without urban *hukou* these women received limited support and recognition from local governments, and were denied access to public services, basic welfare, healthcare, and affordable public housing. They recognize there is little support for them from recognized institutions such as the formal labor market and the government. But by and large, streetwalkers were satisfied with being bounded by their material, social, and cultural demands to achieve their goals. Despite being embedded in a labor market that failed to provide them with adequate employment or opportunity, they found a way to have hope. Through sex work they see themselves as upwardly mobile, independent, and free.

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Notes on contributor

EILEEN YUK-HA TSANG (tsangeileen@gmail.com) teaches in the Department of Applied Social Sciences, City University of Hong Kong. Her research interests focus upon sociology of gender and sexualities, crime, gender, human trafficking, China Studies, and the Chinese new middle class.

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