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## **CHAPTER 1**

# **SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF COMMERCIAL SEX WORK: IMPLICITLY SHAPING A SEXUAL CULTURE?**

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This chapter discusses the role of sex work in the social construction of sexuality, mainly in the context of Chinese culture as well as a few examples from the Vietnamese or the Korean context. In our approach to sex work, one of the main working hypotheses is the relevance of cultural constraints such as the Confucian ideas or the Taoist lore on the analysis of sexual cultures. Cogently, the aim is not to overestimate cultural factors at the expense of social and economic factors, but to identify the different factors involved in the social construction of sexuality. All these factors are closely interrelated to shape a sexual culture where sex work lies at the core of the ideological and behavioural configuration – sex work thus becoming part of an ‘unspoken’ set of sexual norms and values paralleling the ‘straight’ set (heterosexuality, connubiality, intimacy, and reproduction over pleasure). One should bear in mind that a culture undergoes a continuous process of interpretation, and is not therefore a fixed system giving a ready reference to all the beliefs and behaviour of the people in society. Indeed, at the present, sexual cultures are in transition and produced within a complex nexus of divergent forces, including traditional sexual mores, modern medical discourse, women’s movements, patriarchal imperatives, consumerism, and corporate globalization. In this context, representations of sexuality and sexual behaviours are embedded in a social world structured by and saturated with power relations of gender and class. Sexuality therefore provides a consistent site for exploring the various aspects of the social sphere. Our approach explicitly diverges from those relying perhaps too easily on the notion of ‘structure’ to define culture and comprehend tradition.

## **SEX WORK: PAST AND PRESENT IN THE CONTEXT OF CHINESE CULTURE**

A dialectical relationship bridges past and present, tradition and modernity in the context of contemporary societies. To speak of traditions and heritage

does not mean that the world was a static entity prior to the modern era, but implies that

‘tradition and past customs provide questions and characterizations that confront every generation anew’ (Gutmann 1996:15). Gutmann develops the idea of ‘contradictory consciousness’ in order to explain that people share both a ‘consciousness inherited from the past – and from the experts – that is largely and uncritically accepted, and another, implicit consciousness that unites individuals with others in the practical transformation of the world.’ This notion is useful to explain that, when contradictions, tensions between social and cultural values and norms, arise, they are negotiated rather than suppressed in specific and unpredictable ways. In the context of Chinese sexual culture, this process is always in the making as it is well known that, for instance, behaviours and ideas towards premarital sex and marriage of young people have changed but traditional values and norms confronted with these changes, always have to be negotiated by the same actors at the individual and social levels. Commercial sex work as part of the sexual culture appears less contradictory and easier to negotiate for the actors as it is part of tradition as well as part of contemporary consumerist life.

Although references to prostitution in ancient history are vague, we can trace the institution of government-run prostitution taking the form of either government-owned markets or recruited female army camp followers back to at least the Western Han dynasty (second century BC). This state institution reached its peak in the Tang (seventh-ninth century AD) and in the Song dynasties (tenth-thirteenth century AD), two historical periods known for their economic prosperity and the development of art, science, and culture in China. In the Tang dynasty, some prostitutes were connected with local governments, and their lives and business activities were almost totally controlled by local officials. A higher class of prostitutes, living in a special district of the capital and conducting their business with a relative freedom, was under the control of the Imperial government.

### *The courtesan institution*

In ancient and medieval China, most women had no opportunity to have an education and were expected to avoid formal contact with men; to fill a social gap, the category of courtesans emerged as a part of society, their role being primarily to entertain a man and be his friend. Married officials, artists, or merchants, were all accompanied in their public life by courtesans skilled in literature, dance, or music. These women’s primary role was not sexual and they eventually became famous historical figures.

Another kind of prostitution – private and commercial prostitution – developed during the Ming and Qing, the two last Chinese dynasties acknowledged for allowing the development of trade and a merchant class

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more specifically in South China. These formed a new elite either in competition or collaborating with the traditional Confucian gentry elite. The southern cities of

Guangzhou, Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou (well known for tea, and silk trade), and in the north, Nanjing, Tianjin, and Beijing, were very famous for their flourishing trade in prostitution (Ruan 1991:69–70). Significantly, these cities were all centres of economic and political power, as well as cultural development.

The prostitutes working in privately owned brothels provided mainly sexual services. From the Song to the Ming dynasties, both forms of prostitution – government and privately owned – coexisted. During the seventeenth century, the early Qing dynasty (the Mandchu, non-Chinese dynasty), local and imperial government-controlled prostitution was abolished. Consequently, this activity became mainly private. Again for most of the Republican period (1912–1949) and up till now in Taiwan, both forms of prostitution coexist: State-run registered legal prostitution and illegal prostitution.

The situation in Mainland China ineluctably changed after 1949: all commercial sex activity was banned by the implementation of a whole set of repressive measures. Communism, a European Judaeo-Christian-born ideology, attributes prostitution to socio-economic factors. Applying this idea to Chinese society, the revolutionaries wanted to relieve the peasants of their debts and from the exorbitant rents and taxes that had forced them to sell their daughters into prostitution. Finally, all the repressive measures which were designed to suppress prostitution never worked, although it became quite invisible for sometime and, even though this may have been only through a tightly controlled propaganda. A recent event, which took place during the 1990s in Taiwan, is worth recalling here: Chen Suibian, the newly elected president of Taiwan, who was then the mayor of Taipei, decided to abolish registered prostitution declaring it an illegal activity in the capital city. Needless to say, businesses simply moved to the outskirts of the city where they were still allowed. The newly outlawed registered prostitutes organized street gathering standing up for their rights to work. They cogently argued that they could not change their occupation for lower paid work as most of their relatives were used to living on their high income.

This brief and rather simplistic historical overview shows that tolerance and even the official promotion of prostitution in China has a long history. Courtesans, their biographies and activities, are described in many historical sources, but one cannot say that this social phenomenon is well documented in the sense that it was considered as a very normative aspect of the male elite life. Therefore it was not very interesting to report much about it. We do have more details about a few courtesans because they had developed

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special skills, either artistic or sexual, or had a specific influence on elite circles. In contrast, almost no information is available on lower class prostitutes and their clients, as the popular daily life history of the general population has still to be written. That is why in this brief historical overview, I have tried to make it clear that most of the literature

about the institution of the courtesan refers to the life of upper classes in spaces and times characterized foremost by economic prosperity in the context of political power, expansion of trade, and the development of art.

Prostitution was a well-organized business and the female managers of some brothels had detailed manuals for the training of prostitutes. A manual used in the cities of Suzhou, Yangzhou, and Shanghai in the 1920s, registered accounts of the accumulated experiences of many prostitutes, and listed the requirements needed for a woman to be a successful prostitute (Ruan 1991:74- 5). In Beijing and Tianjin, the female managers preferred to use the *Sunu jing* (Classic of the Virgin). This book takes the form of a conversation between a virgin and *Huangdi*, the mythical Yellow Emperor and god of medicine. The implication is that the acquisition of skills in sexual techniques was more important than refined manners. This classic describes Taoist sexual practices, which include sexual positions, movements during intercourse, and breathing exercises, even though the *Sunu jing* is not classified as part of the *Daozang* (Taoist canon).

A traditional cultural feature inescapably relevant to the study of sexuality is the Taoist sexual theory. Taoism is considered to be one of the three pillars of the classical Chinese tradition, the other two being Confucianism and Buddhism. Written primary sources on Taoist ideas about sexuality and sexual techniques are numerous as are secondary Chinese sources and more recently Western literature. Sexual practice is part of the broader category of health or corporal practices including, for instance, meditation techniques, which are themselves an integral part of religious practice. Each component of the sexual lore, which is considered to be one element in a global system, is related to all the others. The key concepts organizing this system are those of *yin-yang* and *qi*, the vital dynamic element circulating in the human body as well as in the cosmos. The following categories of belief still have an influence on contemporary sexual behaviour: health, longevity and/or immortality can be reached by sexual activity. Intercourse with virgins, preferably young virgins, contributes to men's health. Youth is currently more valued than beauty, and a virgin has not yet had her Yin depleted. Multiplicity of sexual partners is recommended. The notion of *Cai Yin pu Yang* means to take the Yin to nourish the Yang, and conversely *Cai Yang pu Yin* means to take the Yang to nourish the Yin. These notions are commonly used in health practices as Qigong, Taijiquan, martial arts, various sorts of meditation, and so forth.

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The *jing* seminal essence is precious and by extension the essence of everything, an idea also used in meditation techniques for the purpose of transforming *qi* into *jing*. The seminal essence can return to the brain and nourish it. Preventing or interrupting ejaculation by pressing a vital point in the perineal area is highly valued. The best sexual satisfaction is associated with coitus without ejaculation (Ruan 1991:54–5).

In the context of prostitution, these ideas can still explain the preference for virgins and very young girls for the acquisition of health, and the fear of wasting seminal essence through frequent ejaculations. It is worth noting that the women described in erotic novels, and in medical or philosophical treatises on sex are often courtesans.

According to Pan (2000), nowadays, prostitutes perform no special sexual techniques and are no longer trained using old Taoist manuals, as it was the case in ancient and even modern China. In this sense, a tradition is now lost. Most prostitutes surveyed are no different in their sexual behaviour and ideas from other Chinese women. Their work comes closer to international patterns of prostitution.

The works of Henriot (1997) and Hershatter (1997) account for the only extensive historical research done about prostitution in Modern China. The authors have both focused on sex work in modernizing Shanghai. Making use of the accounts of reform programmes for prostitutes in the early 1950s, Hershatter emphasizes the resistance of the sex workers to change, and their affective links to their madams and their offspring. These emotional attachments have to be connected to the Confucian family ideology, the filial piety of children towards their parents being a central value of the ideological configuration. A dutiful prostitute will show filial piety towards her madam. Her madam can be accounted a symbolic substitute for her mother, a psychological process reinforced by the fact that she has often been sold by her family, and that she is a migrant worker far away from home.

There were morally good or bad courtesans according to common stereotypes prevailing in Modern China. The bad courtesans came from low class families, from rural areas, and were lascivious; the good ones came from good or elite families who had financial problems and were forced to sell their daughter. She sent the money back to her family showing her strong filial piety. Such women acquired virtue through their display of filial piety and thus were morally good. The presumption was that they did not enjoy sex much.

Hershatter's findings tend to demonstrate the inanity of post-1949 government policies towards prostitution, of which the aim was to eradicate the phenomenon. Pertinently, recent discourses tend to hint that prostitutes are more like autonomous bread-winners than miserable victims of a social

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system: 'If the subaltern voices of prostitutes could be heard more clearly outside of detention centres, it is possible that they would give more prominence to a labour framework than the people who regulate and study them do' (Hershatter 1997:392). The author adopts a feminist perspective: the accounts she registers of pre-1949 prostitution suggest that the prostitute was essentially a victim of a gendered power society characterized by male domination; in contrast, through her reports on contemporary prostitution, sex workers seem to enjoy a certain degree of agency.

Henriot is more concerned with the question of modernity, urbanization, and sexuality in China. His main point is related to the sexualization of the services provided: he explains how in the courtesan institution, the process of seduction matters more than sexual intercourse. The transforming of the institution into commercialized sex in modernizing Shanghai supposes a change in sexual behaviour (Leung 2000:185). This may be wide of the mark. As Leung suggests, 'commercialized sex' involving popular prostitutes seems to have been as widespread as the courtesan system in urban centres since at least the Song dynasty. The modern experience of Shanghai might not be so different from earlier history. Perhaps when the old literati culture was dying out in the twentieth century, the demand for the kind of non-sexual services that courtesans provided may have decreased.

In contemporary societies, recent research carried out in Taiwan (Hwang 1996), in Korea, and in China (Pan 1999) and Vietnam (Nguyen-vo 1997), where middle-class cultures have emerged more recently, show that male political and business elites adopt a kind of behaviour reminiscent of that of the traditional literati, as they like to discuss and settle business deals in expensive *jiujia* (wine houses) seeking the services of hostesses. This attitude is part of a tacit middle-class social code involving a public re-affirmation of gender, status, and class.

The following example is cited by Leung (2000:185–6):

In Taipei, a client admits in an interview that it always takes him some time to get to know his preferred hostess well enough to have sex with her. He explains: 'If a man desire a female, he only needs to go to a brothel, and it is not expensive. But he is not interested ... Men these days have high standards ... the more (women) tantalize you, the more you desire them, and you don't want the vulgar and the cheap.' Similarly, interviewed professional *jiujia* hostesses, who reject being called 'prostitute' *jiniu*, detest men asking for sex at first encounter whom they have the right to refuse.

Such relationships are not so different from those of the nineteenth century courtesan system described by Henriot.

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In Vietnam, there is a process of commodification of sexual pleasure for domestic consumption integral to liberalizing economic practices (Nguyen- vo 1997). The buying of sexual pleasure in the business and political milieu has become an important means of facilitating clientele connections to gain access to the means of production and exchange. The activity of consuming pleasure has become the mark of this entrepreneur class. Borrowing from Butler's concept of 'performative gender' (1990), Nguyen-vo argues that the forms of consumption and commodification of pleasure constitute performances of class and nation, predicated on a gender difference. Consuming women and their bodies

allows men to construct themselves not just as men, but as Vietnamese men of a certain class.

The process of establishing personal connections primarily takes the form of the offer and consumption of sexual pleasure, and usually takes place in *bia om* (literally ‘hug beer’) that provides food, drinks, and a range of semi-sexual or entertainment services such as hugging, kissing, and fondling the men, and strip-tease. Sexual intercourse could eventually occur in these places but that is not the most common service they provide.

As Leung (2000:186) pointed out, ‘first, the modernization of the economy does not necessarily wipe out the courtesan institution or reduce the courtesans to ‘simple objects’ of consumption, though it might well have modified the institution as social needs of the elites changed. Indeed they are quite a few examples of ex-hostesses being married to rich businessmen in Taiwan and other East Asian countries. Second, it was perhaps a myth that sex was only secondary in the courtesan institution. Courtesans, after all, are sexual objects that cannot simply be defined quantitatively by the frequency of sexual intercourse with their clients.’

## WOMEN’S TRADITIONAL ROLES: TENSIONS IN THE CONFUCIAN FAMILY

Confucian principles governing family relations have built up a gender hierarchy to such an extent that tensions between women in the family context have become structural. This is because any benefit for any woman has to be gained at the expense of another one. An actual adherence to Confucian rules was probably heavily dependent on social class and status of the family. Women’s lives and conditions in peasant families are virtually undocumented. Even though they were bound to hard work in difficult conditions, peasant women enjoyed a relative autonomy and had less conflicting relations with the other women (Freedman 1979). As Sievers (1999:170) explains,

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Generally speaking, the higher the status, the more Confucian the family appears as a probable hypothesis. In gentry’s families, women needed more than wisdom and assertiveness to survive; resilience, toughness, and an ability in what Margery Wolf has called ‘uterine politics’ (1972) were required. In Wolf’s analysis, women manipulated two institutions ranged against them – property and Confucian values – in a way that could bring them power and relative security in old age. By successfully tying sons to her, and assisting them in their efforts to achieve power in the family, a woman might acquire reflected authority, plus a commitment to the claims of filial piety that would bring security and respect, as she grew older. That such a woman was often brought into direct conflict with other family members, especially other women, was axiomatic. The structure of the Confucian family system guaranteed conflict among women as a constant.

The structural reasons for the endless conflicts between mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law,



and sisters-in-law were rooted in the regulations of the division of property. Property had to be shared by agnatic males who together owned it jointly as a collective person. The division of property was expected to take place after the death of a senior generation member. However, division could occur earlier for a number of reasons, for instance conflicting fraternal relationships often fostered by sisters-in-law. In such a situation, female in-laws had diverging interests in the early division of property, and they were competing fiercely for the loyalties of male relatives. In a comparative perspective, it is worth noting that in two other Confucianized countries, namely Korea and Japan, the Confucian family model did not play a major role in women's lives until the fifteenth century for Korea and the seventeenth century for Japan. Neither Japanese nor Korean traditions, previous to the import of Confucianism and Buddhism, focused on prescriptive female representations or on women's family duties. The folk religions of both Japan and Korea offered representations of powerful women, and this tendency was not really challenged by the drastic changes experienced in both societies over time (Sievers 1999:171–2).

From the family system described above, who were those daughters who ended up, or down, as concubines or prostitutes? What is the meaning of 'voluntary' sex work in a cultural context in which the pattern of individualism has not yet emerged, and may never become a dominant trend in society? In our understanding, an individualistic pattern of socialization means that an individual, a person, takes a decision for herself, and is consequently responsible for her own actions or is free, namely compelled to choose between several alternatives. In her modern history of Chinese

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prostitution, Gronewold (1982) argues that the Chinese social system in which women are considered another marketable and replaceable product is the main factor explaining the wide-spread and consensual commodification of women rather than any philosophical and/or religious tradition, whether this be Taoist, Buddhist, or Confucian. However, social systems are produced within philosophical and/or religious systems and world-views in the representational terrain. Symbolic and practical aspects are closely interrelated to create a social system regulating among other relationships – gender power and family relations in society. During times of famine and other economic hardships, the inferior status of women occasionally led to extreme measures, such as the deliberate infanticide of female babies. But even at the best of times female children were undervalued, as indicated by the folk adage 'A boy is worth ten girls.' Whereas male children were rarely sold, a general trade in women developed. They were marketed as adopted daughters, future daughters-in-law, and as servants. The traditional ideal in the Chinese family was to keep sons and daughters at home until they were of marriageable age and then to negotiate favourable unions. Sexual virtue among women was highly valued, but virtue lost its significance in difficult times when a daughter could be a liability. A family might choose among five alternatives for the future of a daughter: 'A socially accepted course

was to give her into adoption whereby she became either a daughter or a future daughter-in-law for the adopting family. It was also acceptable to sell her directly into marriage for a small sum. A less desirable but more profitable alternative was to sell her into domestic service. This entailed risk for the girl because her ultimate fate rested with the purchaser, who might arrange a favourable marriage for her or might resell her to someone else, including a brothel owner. A fourth alternative was to sell her as a concubine for a household; the girl would be forced to serve as a maid for a wife and a sexual partner for an aging male. Finally, the least respectable but most lucrative option was the prostitution market' (McCaghy and Hou 1993:281). It is worth noticing that the most respectable choice is the least profitable one. Pre-1949 China has been recognized as having 'one of the largest and more comprehensive markets for exchanges of human beings in the world' (Watson 1980:223). The distinction between slavery and other forms of servitude is based on the existence of a kinship link between master and 'bought' dependent (Watson 1980:243). According to the most common estimates, there was a market involving about two million people in the 1920s: the 'mui-tsai,' or 'mooi-jai,' were mostly young girls sold by parents who surrendered all their rights to her to the buyer, including the right to rename them. Commonly labelled 'small slaves,' they fuelled brothels, were used as concubines or as farm girls. The sale of wives as slaves by their husbands was also not a rare phenomenon. Although these

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practices were considered illegitimate, by both the Imperial law (at least the Qing code, 1644–1911) and Confucian ethics, both of which sanction the idea of making profit out of relatives, they were probably deeply rooted in the Chinese tradition (Testart 2000:10).

Nowadays, when economic difficulties occur, daughters are still more likely than sons to be sacrificed to aid the family. The practice of putting daughters up for adoption symbolizes both women's social standing and supplements the supply of prostitutes. For instance, until recently in Taiwan up to forty per cent of all daughters were put up for adoptions in future in-law families through the *simpua* social institution.

Up to seventy per cent of the women arrested for prostitution in China admitted that selling their bodies was their main source of income. Many also admitted that their husbands approved of and even encouraged them to do this in order to supplement the family income. Paralleling the current increase in prostitution, bigamy and adultery have become widespread in China, and are raising tensions in family and society (*Criminal Justice International* 1989). The resurgence of prostitution has crossed the Chinese borders to expand into an international network. Vietnamese women are sold in China to become wives, concubines, or prostitutes (*Agence France Presse* 1991); Chinese women are being sold to brothels and massage parlours to work as prostitutes in Thailand (*Shijie ribao* [*World Journal*] 1992) (Xin Ren 1993: 96–7).

## *Gender and class differentiation in entertainment service activities*

A repetitive act of class differentiation is performed by the men who use a hostess service. Women's use of the sex trade for class advancement and upward social mobility does not automatically grant them a clear class identity. The distribution of the cultural signs of class therefore works differently for the men who buy and for the women who sell. Both parties are not partners in this business game, but rather actors in a well defined, hierarchized, and gender-powered social structure shared up by its inherent cultural values.

The social stratification of courtesans paralleled the gentry's model of social distinctions and the so-called 'flower-list' elections (since mid-seventeenth century) paralleled the selection of the exclusively male successful candidates in the imperial civil-service examination (Hershatter 1997:165). Courtesans were addressed with such respectable names as *xiansheng* (sir) or *laoshi* (teacher), a fact that could be interpreted as a mark of valued and recognized social status. However, these views inform us only about the representations of the gentry class about prostitutes and courtesans rather than about historical facts because, they were the ones who would write down the history and, of course, data used by historians are limited to

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these written sources. Very few data on how courtesans perceived themselves, their clients, and their role and status in society are available: courtesans' voices have quite simply been lost unfortunately, we are compelled to admit that even in contemporary sociological and anthropological studies, the voices of prostitutes still need to be heard. Most social scientists have built up their works from news clips, media voices, and official or regulatory discourses rather than by listening to voices, discourses, and experiences, or observing the work and living conditions of prostitutes. Moreover, the current context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic threat does not help by medicalizing the issue of prostitution, labelling prostitutes' activities high-risk sexual behaviour, although it has encouraged more social research on the widespread phenomenon which is unbounded by time or space.

According to Pan's paper in this volume, sex workers involved in the sex industry in contemporary China can be classified into seven vertical layers, paralleling the social stratification. The first one is the second wife, who offers sexual services instead of the emotional, reproduction services, and co-habitation usually or ideally provided by the first wife and/or concubine. The second layer is the hired prostitute for a business trip or for a longer period but within the context of business activities. The third layer is constituted by escort girls working in three different settings (singing parlours or karaoke bars, dance halls, and restaurants-bars), who provide 'on-the-spot escort,' consisting of titillation sexual services without actual sexual intercourse, and/or 'follow you escort' including sexual intercourse. 'Chink girls' who live in their own room in a hotel on a relatively

stable basis, and solicit hotel customers by telephone, are part of the fourth layer. They offer a one-time sexual intercourse service rather than all-night sex. The fifth layer is composed of barbershop or massage girls working at barbershops, sauna centres, and feet-washing rooms: their services consist of washing hair or feet and giving massages. Streetwalkers who find customers in recreational places and offer one-time sexual intercourse service are the sixth layer. The seventh layer are the prostitutes for poor transient peasants or workers called 'women who go to, or live in a shed,' playing the role of public wife who charges for the services she provides.

While the women of the lowest layers strictly provide multiple sexual services, those of the second and third layers are involved in social relationships and lives of their clients. Second wives are involved in a more complete relationship including an eventual co-habitation. Such a typology shows how it may be difficult to draw a clear line between sexual and non- sexual services, as sexual intercourse is not a consistent criterion by which to define sex work in this cultural context. The definition of sexual service should be extended to encompass the whole range of sex workers' social

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roles and practical activities related or not to sex *stricto-sensu*. Indeed, in the same paper, Pan describes a whole range of sexual services classified in various layers.

## IDENTIFICATION OF SOCIAL FACTORS

The rate of illiteracy is high among sex workers, and partly explains why so many women from poor rural areas are willing to participate in the sex trade as a last resort to make money.

There is little doubt that sex work is regarded as a way towards upward social mobility: in my ethnographic research, I found quite a few sex workers who wished to become a concubine or a second wife. More rarely their ultimate goal was to get married, but this hope seemed too unrealistic except if one could find a foreigner, who would be more willing to be involved in a marriage transaction they thought.

Prostitution is also a result of an anomic situation in which a woman might find herself. For instance, failure in a university entrance examination, in particular in an urban, middle-class context, education being so much valued by the family and society in Chinese culture, can drive ashamed young women into prostitution and young men into delinquency. This process can be analysed in terms of a resistance to an oppressive system imposed on the youth.

The rate of female suicide in Chinese rural counties is very high and China is one of the few countries in the world where women commit suicide more frequently than men (Lee and Kleinman 2000). The main culprit was traditionally related to arranged marriage,

child marriages, adoptions and abuses by the husband's family, and still is exacerbated by the problem of the generation gap. The parents want a traditional marriage for their daughter and she resists. The suicide of women can be also analysed in terms of resistance to a traditional model, which exerts unendurable pressure on women. This pressure is now reinforced psychologically for them, because they know some women can escape from this system. Social change can mean that they find themselves in an anomic situation. Migration and eventually sex work is then seen as a way to escape from an unwanted forced marriage. Away from the coils of their family, they hope that they will be able to manage their own lives.

Sex work has an influence on mobility and vice-versa: temporary migratory movements of the population and sex work are two closely interrelated social phenomena (Liao 2000, Evans 2000, Feingold 2000, Xie 2000). In a case-study on the impact of new economic opportunities on women's status and gender relations in the border region of China and

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Vietnam, Xie (2000) admits that sex work among other activities may provide new chances for some women, and that work in the sex industry contributes to the development of both the micro- and macro-economies. From a broader regional perspective, it is now recognized that sex workers from China are involved in a trans-Asian network covering most East and Southeast Asia countries; this trend indicates that they participate in inter- regional mobility among sex workers in Asia (Zi Teng 2000:143).

#### THEORIES OF PROSTITUTION: A TRADITIONAL SEXUAL CULTURE STRUCTURED BY COMMERCIAL SEX WORK

In order to understand the roots and characteristics of prostitution in Chinese society, we must revert to the attitude of traditional Confucian philosophy regarding the role of women. A woman's duty, first and foremost, was to continue the family line – that is, to bear her husband's male children. Women were regarded as reproductive mechanisms to continue the family lineage. To maintain social harmony, it was considered necessary to inculcate in women a lack of temptation and a feeling of contamination from enjoying sex. Confucianism appears to be a relevant cultural constraint, first of all because it is an all-encompassing ideology regulating all aspects of social life.

Some components of the Confucian family ideology have deep implications for the social construction of sexual cultures. Marriage is conceived of as a social fusion constituting the elementary unit, the matrix of any social exchange. In the context of matrimonial exchange, sexuality and sexual life are reduced to reproductive behaviour in order to obtain sons. This idea explicitly denies erotic desire, excluding the chance of erotic

satisfaction and sexual pleasure through marriage, indeed even considering them as dangerous because they are difficult to control. Erotic desire and sexual pleasure would endanger the harmony of the family, being perceived as an unstable, changing element. Therefore they could forebode eventual disorder, which would disturb family order and consequently – social, political and cosmological orders. Indeed, Confucianism regulates all human relationships and at all levels of social organization: a family, a clan or a lineage being the elementary social unit, and produces a social and political model, a specific mode of government. Sexual appeal, desire, and pleasure are strongly related to the human emotions and feelings that had to be silenced in order to secure the reproduction and endurance of the social order. Confucian ideology implicitly admits that sexual drives and desires have to be fulfilled outside marriage. A whole social context encourages the

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development of ‘commercial sex work’ and a number of female sex worker’s roles. In Western Christian traditions, monogamy was the rule, and extra-marital affairs were considered a transgression. Prostitution was, and still is to some extent, a taboo subject; the prostitute as well as the client were considered to be behaving in a sinful way. Paradoxically, an ambiguity lies in the widely shared idea that sexual performance, seduction, and plurality of partners are criteria, which shape the social construction of male identity. If a man aims to refrain from sex, his attitude may be thought to be that of a loser. In most Asian societies, the same attitude is perceived as virtuous because the control of desires and emotions is first of all socially prescribed for social harmony, and secondly shows the path to spiritual achievement for inner-life fulfilment.

In China, any discussion about sexual pleasure was a challenge to Confucian tradition. For centuries, public talk about sex has been and continues to be a taboo in Chinese culture. A number of Ming and Qing dynasty classics, such as *The Golden Lotus* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, offer elaborated descriptions of the joys of intimacy, romance, and sex. Consequently, generations of emperors banned the works mainly because they contravened Confucian modesty.

Sexual liberation means consumerism. The dominant model for female teenagers as an object of self-identification tends more and more to be an elegant, high-class sex worker: the image of such a sex worker suggests that she is a liberated new woman and an ideal consumer. There is a tolerance towards newly claimed sexual identities through consumerism: the legal marriage (legal as the law do not specify that a marriage has to be contracted between a man and a woman) of a lesbian couple living in Beijing, whom I had the opportunity to interview, is a good example. Both women have a middle-class intellectual and artistic background.

Young, middle-class women, for instance university students, may eventually become occasional high-class sex workers for a few years before getting married without

questioning the traditional model. They will do this work to get more money and will spend that money for themselves buying expensive clothes, accessories, and the like. Their behaviour is related to a consumerist and individualist ideology. The emergence of individualism is a noticeable trend among young, educated, urban people. This pattern is already fully developed in Taiwanese and Korean society but in China, it is more surprising. In spite of a recent history offering totally different models for and images of women, images of women as sexual objects are gaining ground at an astonishing speed, so much so that as Wolf (1985) concludes 'The revolution is postponed.' The sexualized model has replaced the strong revolutionary woman in all the media, in advertising, and in the feminine press.

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Prostitution is not systematically produced by poverty and the sex worker does not always remit her income to family and relatives in her village. However, in terms of numbers, socio-economic factors still explain the involvement of many women in prostitution in China, as it is the case in most developing countries. Indeed, most prostitutes are migrant workers, have a low level of education, and usually come from poor rural areas. This pattern is dominant in provinces populated by minorities where local cultures are non-Chinese. Two combined factors – the traditional status of women and the capitalist-type exploitation of workers meaning low pay, hard work, no rest, and no respect of international labour laws – explain the choice of women to prostitute themselves.

Discourses and behaviours related to the introduction of Viagra in the context of culture should really be investigated as these have generated interesting debates in society. In Taiwan, medical professionals, politicians, traditional physicians, women and men have all taken part in the societal discussion on the Viagra craze, and debates have been concerned with redefining gender relations and the norms of sexuality. These diverging voices demonstrate at least one thing – that sexuality and gender relations are indeed socially constructed, and always in a process of being deconstructed and reconstructed: they are neither 'given phenomena' nor 'pre-cultural drives anchored inside us, beyond the reach of social influences' (Di Leonardo and Lancaster 1997:1).

A set of sexual norms underlies current discourses, namely heterosexuality, connubiality, and the primacy of intimacy over pleasure. These 'straight' norms are subtly reaffirmed and naturalized even when the object of criticism is the masculinity narrative that most commonly animates them – to wit, men are innately promiscuous, male sexuality is inherently profuse and proceeds from men's bodies and physiology, and women desire love more than sex.

My own fieldwork conversations and Festa's (2000:22–3) case-study focused on the Viagra craze in Taiwan indicate that extramarital sex is the preferred context in which non-impotent men use Viagra, challenging the dominant discourses about the impact of Viagra use in the marital sexual context. Ning (1999) and Zhang (1999) suggest that

extramarital sex is regularly pursued by most men in Taiwan with some of them being involved in long-term affairs. Moreover, in her study of popular discourse on extramarital affairs Chang (1999:70) notes that the media have labelled affairs a 'new epidemic.' She also provides new data for the study of sexual culture that is – that even wives are increasingly engaged in affairs, leading to the speculation that more Taiwanese women 'construe sexual activity as part of lifestyle and identity rather than an enactment of familial and marital commitments' (Chang 1999:69–72). She shows how extramarital affairs

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dialectically engage issues of cultural inheritance, modernization, body representations, gender relations, and sexuality. According to both Chang (1999) and Ning (1999), sexual performance is often the paramount concern of extramarital affairs.

Host bars targeting a female clientele are documented in Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. There is evidence that sexual tourism designed for Japanese women is increasing with Indonesia as a common destination. I have myself done fieldwork in a few host bars in Taipei, Seoul, and Kwangju (Southeast Korea) designed for the entertainment of women. The clientele was composed mainly of three categories of women, namely young prostitutes, middle-aged career women, and middle-class housewives. Their motives in seeking male entertainers may also differ from those of men who are looking for female entertainers. A major difference may be that female escort and accompaniment are regarded as a mark of social distinction and status for men, and frequenting prostitutes is seen as an important factor in the social construction of male sexuality and is consequently highly valued in society. Unfortunately, the motives of women who frequent male hosts and the perception of their attitude by different social categories in society are not yet documented as I cannot draw more general lines from my own limited fieldwork data. Further research about these settings will eventually shed a new light on East Asian sexual cultures in transition and on the culturally bound transformation of gender relations. However, the fieldwork data I could gather lead me to speculate about a 'normative' sexual culture developing in the context of pleasure settings designed for men as well as for women. The result is that gender relations or marital rules are reproduced and a social order mainly based on traditional values is preserved in spite of noticeable social changes. Meanwhile, a sexual culture shaped by commercial sex is reinforced by the development of a sex market designed for women. The current trend is in fact to create a both gender model instead of an exclusively male model. If these working hypotheses are confirmed, I will argue that the traditional male model reproduces itself once again along the lines of gender differentiation by adjustment to a social change, which allows women to take a small share in the market economy. Indeed, some middle-class women nowadays have a high level of education, make a career, can become quite wealthy, and can afford to spend money in pleasure settings.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Subversions of social and familial ‘explicit’ norms, such as extramarital affairs, betray the tensions at the core of mainstream society and intervene

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in the shaping of an ‘implicit’ sexual culture. Most of those affairs take place in the context of prostitution. Creating a sexual culture for both sexes in which commercial sex work plays a major role is a way to negotiate these tensions, creating – because it is far from being a marginal solution to solve the contradictions – a ‘normative’ implicit sexual culture in which commercial sex work is at the core of the ideological and behavioural configuration. All kinds of extramarital affairs are thus becoming less subversive, tending to be included in a set of unspoken or unspeakable social norms. The sex industry is currently built upon at least two overlapping conceptual and behavioural models – the traditional one and the international ‘globalizing’ one. These interacting models may explain some of the tensions and contradictions in societies confronted by social change: research on sex work is an original way to shed light on the process of social change through a so-called globalization. I will conclude with a comment by Pan who makes an overall analysis of prostitution in China in terms of the labour market (cited by Hershatter 1996:224): ‘A family of three were talking about prostitution. The husband said “One act of prostitute on X city is worth three years of my salary”. The wife immediately reacted “Then, never visit a prostitute”. The daughter unexpectedly said “I should do this job”.’

NOTES 1 See for a list of written sources, Ruan (1991:52–4).

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