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## China: Sex Work and Human Trafficking (Part 2)

### Of Human Bonds: Between Sex Work and Trafficking

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## China: Sex Work and Human Trafficking (Part 2)

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*Tiantian Zheng explores the intersection between sex work and human trafficking in post-socialist China. This is second of a three part series. Read part one [here](#) [17].*

In China, for thousands of years, the dynasties and states produced, regulated, sometimes threatened to abolish, yet at the same time profited from sex work both economically and politically. This conflict between the need for social order and the desire to maintain sex work for economic benefit grew more intense during the nationalist period, resolved in favor of abolition under Mao, and finally resumed during the post-Mao era.

Sex work in Chinese history is closely intertwined with state intervention, migration, and the entertainment industry. Prior to the Republican era, sex work was characterized by state production and management of the entertainment industry. While the dynasties were concerned

that prostitutes would corrupt society, they continued to profit from sex work through taxation. The Republican era treated sex work as a social evil and attempted to regulate the crisis through legislation and the creation of fiscal and public health systems. The Republican state power was inadequate to the task of regulating sex work, which continued to flourish. The Maoist regime was the first in Chinese history to successfully eradicate sex work, by prohibiting migration from the countryside to the city and ending the supply of prostitutes flowing from the countryside to the city.

While the Maoist regime eliminated sex work by creating a rural-urban divide, during the post-Mao era, the rural-urban boundary became blurred, and rural migrants were regarded as criminals to be severely prosecuted, regulated, and denied their due legal or human rights. While this treatment stopped the flow of sex work for a period of time, isolating peasants in the countryside and exploiting them laid the foundation for the resurgence of sex work in the 1980s and 1990s. It was the intense poverty and desperation of peasants that broke the floodgates in the 1980s and filled the cities with an estimated ten million prostitutes.

After being banned for nearly 40 years, entertainment places reemerged with the initiation of economic reforms in the late 1970s. Since 1978, the state's pro-consumption stance has opened the way for the reemergence of nightclubs and other leisure sites. These new consumption sites are entertainment places where mainly middle-aged businessmen, government officials, police officers, and foreign investors visit. Erotic services take place in various establishments that include karaoke bars, hotels, saunas, hair salons, disco and other dance halls, small roadside restaurants, parks, movie houses, and video rooms.

### **Rationales for Sex Work**

Rural women face limited employment opportunities in the city. First, in post-Mao China, there is a lack of private sector jobs. Second, as migrants, they often lack the social connections essential for job searching in the already over-saturated urban labor market. Their ability to find work is further hindered by a discriminatory government policy that denies migrants equal status with urban residents. Among the jobs that are available to rural women, most are in low-paid, labor-intensive industries. Under these circumstances, hostessing (euphemism for sex work) is not only a well-paid profession, but also a vocation that offers them independence and a sense of self-esteem. Their life experience goes contrary to the state rhetoric of forced sex work and a need for reeducation.

Hostessing holds out the allure of high incomes in the least amount of time. Hostesses typically entertain a customer for one to two hours and earn an average tip of 200 to 400 *yuan* – the equivalent of, and often more than the typical rural migrant's monthly wage, and almost half the average monthly wage of an urban worker. Working as a hostess provides rural women access to a wide network of influential male figures in the city's business and political sectors. Hostessing requires a minimal upfront investment. Newly arrived hostesses typically borrow money from other hostesses or friends to purchase the clothing and accessories worn while servicing clients. Because of the high profitability of hostessing, the borrower can typically settle her debt with the earnings from one or two sessions with clients. Thus, rural women who lack economic resources can nonetheless enter the workforce as hostesses.

In my research, many women actively seek sex work not only in the city as undocumented

migrant sex workers, but also outside of China as a means of earning money that it would take them nearly ten times longer to make if they stayed in China. They expressed the view that it was their dream to migrate to other countries to conduct sex work. From my fieldwork, I know at least a half a dozen sex workers who had worked in countries like Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea, and then returned to China to keep working as sex workers.

Each of these “trafficked” sex workers actively made the decision to seek out traffickers to move for a better living and a new livelihood. None of them could meet the criteria established for legitimate immigration: the points system, family reunification program, refugee determination system or the business and entrepreneur recruitment programs. Each of them turned in 20,000 RMB, the money they borrowed from relatives or friends to whom they paid back over time. Each of them also passed the interview before being permitted to go through the visa process. After one year of sex work abroad, they returned to China. They expressed their wish to return to these countries and continue working as sex workers.

These women became role models for many other hostesses. Their stories of fast money, albeit tempered by descriptions of poor living conditions and exhausting work schedules, were a major impetus fanning the enthusiasm of other sex workers to participate in the global sex industry. Indeed, for these women — many of whom had already tasted the bitterness of factory work or labor as domestic maids — the risks and hardships reported by returned sex workers are but minor concerns compared to the possible pay-off.

These women perceived the traffickers as the only people who could help them cross the border and work abroad. To them, the source of the exploitation is not the traffickers, but the restrictions of their mobility and the illegal status. Unlike the portrayal of them as passive victims of trafficking, these women exercised their agency to seek out people to help them migrate and conduct sex work. To them, deportation by the state and immigration officials constitutes the biggest threat to their free movement and a new livelihood.

## Independence

Hostesses’ experience of rape and abandonment in the city teaches them not to be duped by men’s romantic words, instead to embrace independence through hostessing. They commented: “Dalian men try to cheat both our bodies and our emotions. Without spending a cent, they get what they want from us.” Hostess Guang served as a domestic maid in an urban family before hostessing. Within two months, she was raped three times by her male employer. Hostess Min worked as a restaurant waitress when she was raped and then abandoned by an urban customer. She said: “Urban men take advantage of us both emotionally and physically. We cannot be too innocent (*tai chunjie*) or devoted; otherwise, we will be tricked, used and abandoned. Only women who are not pure can protect themselves.”

Han worked as a hairdresser in the city. She lived with an urban man for three years in his home. During this time, she suffered from all kinds of physical and verbal abuse from his aunt and mother. For instance, they accused her of stealing their jewelry and associated her “thieving habits” with her rural background. Han exerted every effort to endure this inhumane treatment. However, her urban boyfriend also worried that her rural family would become a bottomless pit, eventually draining all his money. He abruptly abandoned her, saying: “Our social status just doesn’t match.” Devastated, she believed that she would never find happiness unless she

became the social and economic equal of the urbanites. She started working as a hostess. Five years later, she became very successful. She possessed two household registrations — one urban and one rural. She purchased two houses, one in her hometown for her parents and one in Dalian for her siblings. She supported her two younger sisters and a brother through school. She paid for the weddings of her four older brothers and sisters, and so on. She is now married to the financial director of a prestigious hotel chain.

If rural origin and cultural inferiority are the roots of the hierarchical relationship between rural migrant women and urban men, then hostessing offers an opportunity to escape this subordination. As paid work, hostessing represents an act of defiance against the androgynous urban men who freely exploit the women's bodies and emotions. At the bar, men have to pay a high price to hostesses in exchange for even approaching them. This transaction transformed the situation that existed when migrant women were available to men for free at the men's whim.

Hostessing allows the women to earn an economic profit, and therefore, gain independence from men. In the monetary transaction, hostesses attain a certain equality with the urban men by taking advantage of the men's resources. Having financial resources at their disposal brings the women power and confidence otherwise unavailable. Many hostesses who are married or are kept as second wives, sneak out of the house to work. Setting up their own separate account allows them to spend their own money at will and secretly support their natal families. The economic power brought by hostessing can earn a great degree of independence and equality in social and gender status in both familial and spousal relationship with urban partners.

## **Laws About Trafficking and Sex Work**

China's anti-trafficking laws adopt an abolitionist policy that deems sex work a form of violence against women. Over past decades, China has published a number of laws to ban sex work and third party's involvement in sex work. This abolitionist policy is predicated upon the belief that no woman would choose sex work voluntarily and that sex work strips women of their "natural" and legal rights.

Underlying these laws is the ideology that sex work humiliates and commodifies women, and that unless sex work is outlawed, women's position would not be advanced. Because the government holds the belief that women would not choose a profession that violates their own human rights, the purpose of these laws is to prohibit the third party from organizing sex work, engaging in illicit relations with a prostitute, and trafficking women into sex work.

Informed by the laws, the crime of trafficking is committed simply by facilitating a person's entry into sex work, regardless of the person's full consent to sex work. The 1991 Decision on Strictly Forbidding the Selling and Buying of Sex, for instance, criminalizes those who organize, force, induce, accommodate, or introduce others into sex work. The law subjects organizers or facilitators to severe criminal punishment and punishes the entertainment industry and hotels for failing to prohibit sex work. While the law criminalizes third party involvement in sex work, it prescribes mandatory educational detention to rescue and educate those who sell sex. The minister in Shenzhen admitted, "a large number of prostitutes, once completing their compulsory education at reformatories [sic], go straight 'back on the game,'" and "although many are repatriated [sic], more are coming [into the city]."

Due to the lack of distinction between voluntary and involuntary sex workers, there has been no documentation about women being sold, kidnapped or abducted into sex work. The existing literature describes them as “trafficked,” but not sold, kidnapped, or abducted, into “sexual exploitation,” as there has been little or no evidence that these women have entered sex work through force.

*\*[Read the [final part](#) [18] on August 31. This article was originally published as "Prostitution and Human Trafficking in China," in [The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Criminology](#) [19] and is republished with permission from the author and publisher.]*

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