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`Sex' – It's not only Women's Work: A Case for Refocusing on the Functional Role that Sex Plays in Work for both Women and Men

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Abstract

Mention of the term sex work often invokes images of marginalized women at risk for HIV infection. Such images, however, are counterintuitive to the functional role intended by the movement that spawned use of the terms 'sex work' and 'sex worker'. This article looks at the sexual practices of men in urban China to argue for a return to a functional definition of 'sex work', which was originally meant to legitimize the role sex plays in work. The progenitors of this movement intended to use 'sex work' as a means to legitimize sex as an income generating activity for women involved in prostitution. I show that sex can also serve a functional role in the work-related duties of men seeking economic and political success in contemporary urban China. Men in China utilize sex as one way for demonstrating the loyalty necessary to access state-owned and controlled resources in a market economy governed under a Leninist system. Overall the article demonstrates that reclaiming perception of sex work as a functional rather than behavioral category can expand its use for preventing HIV among the broad subset of people who engage in sex as part of their work.

Keywords

Sex work; China; men; work; HIV

Introduction

Mention of the terms 'sex work' or 'sex worker' often invokes images of marginalized women at risk for HIV infection. This discourse was nevertheless developed well before HIV became a public health threat as a functional category meant to distance prostitution from its association with dirt and disease and instead legitimize it as an income generating occupation. The public health field appropriated 'sex work' as a behavioral category useful for targeting a population determined to be at high-risk for HIV infection. This health related objective has remained the dominant discourse used to promote campaigns around sex work. This approach, however, has divorced the term 'sex work' from its primary function of legitimizing prostitution as a form of work and instead returned us to a position that identifies prostitution as a behavioral risk factor for disease. This misconceptualization of the term 'sex work' has, in turn, increased stigma and discrimination against commercial sex workers and, consequently hindered efforts to design effective interventions for the sexual transmission of HIV.

This paper argues for a return to a discourse that favors the functional role that sex work serves for both the women who sell sex as well as consideration of the role sex serves in the work of the men who consume commercial sex. I demonstrate this through an examination of sex work in urban China, where I argue that sex can be considered work for both women and men. The exchange of sex in this context, as I illustrate, is frequently conducted for the construction and generation of social relations rather than as part of an individual behavior. These social relations, used to define and maintain 'social fields' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) in China have become an integral part of the work that defines success for urban businessmen and government officials. Addressing sexually transmitted HIV in this context thus requires a reconceptualization of both 'work' and 'sex work'. This connection between men, work and sex may not apply globally, but it is a useful framework for revisiting the way we conceptualize sex work in Asia and also reminds us that we must ultimately look at sex work as a functional category rather than a behavioral category in our work to prevent sexually transmitted HIV. I begin with a discussion of the behavioral and functional roles of sex work and then go on to discuss how the concept of 'work', as it is understood within China's Leninist bureaucratic system, can include sex for both women and the socially and politically elite men who consume a large proportion of sex work in China.

The functional and behavioral roles of sex work

The term 'sex work' dates back to 1973 when the organization Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE) proposed supplanting the term 'prostitute' with the term 'sex worker' in order to disassociate these women from dirt, disease, and wanton lust and instead legitimize them as a social category engaged in an income generating occupation (Kempadoo 1998, Farley 2004, Weitzer 2009). 'Sex work' has since become integrated into global discourse but primarily for the role it plays in preventing HIV transmission and less for its role in promoting sex worker rights. The sex work movement spawned many advocacy organizations but most had trouble finding support to transform the image of a morally questionable profession. This quickly changed when the public health field recognized sex workers as a 'vulnerable population'. Funding suddenly increased for sex worker organizations willing to take a public health approach in their advocacy (Doezma 1998). This also changed the direction of work around sex work from advocacy targeted at reducing stigma and discrimination against women employed in a legitimate occupation to disease prevention that strongly associated sex workers with a highly stigmatized virus. The new public health programs that appropriated the sex work agenda also took their cues from international legal discourse that focuses primarily on keeping people out of prostitution rather than promoting rights for women engaged in sex work. So, while many programs have been developed to prevent and treat HIV infection in women who can be identified as sex workers, little progress has been made on efforts to legitimize sex workers or protect their rights. Ultimately, this risks defeating the public health agenda because a public health approach in the absence of advocacy leaves women vulnerable to laws that criminalize sex work and deprives them of the occupational control or legal protection they need to achieve the necessary rights that can protect them from HIV infection (Huang *et al.* 2004, Gruskin and Ferguson 2009).

Many of these dilemmas result from a pragmatic need to target a concentrated population associated with a high-risk behavior. Sex workers provide a good target population for HIV prevention programs because their occupation easily associates them with the disease. They are also typically concentrated in a location associated with sex and risk for infection. In addition, sex workers present an efficient 'sentinel' population for epidemiologic surveillance of the disease, which depends on large concentrations of people potentially infected with HIV (de Zalduondo 1991). A population group associated with risk, however, is also branded with a reputation related to danger and immoral behavior that leads to stigma and discrimination (Douglas 1990, Lupton 1993). As a result, the well-intentioned strategies designed to target sex workers have had an unintended consequence that has reified stigma and discrimination against these women who are often implicated as the primary vectors of sexually transmitted HIV. These programs that focus on the individual determinants of health or, in this case, sexual behavior, decontextualize behaviors from their social, cultural, economic, and political foundation; neglecting the important factors that truly shape sexual experiences and mediate risk for disease (de Zalduondo 1991, Parker and Aggleton 1997, Parker *et al.* 2000, Hirsch *et al.* 2009). A focus on the behaviors associated with sex work and the pragmatic considerations for public health has further resulted in neglect of the men who are also vulnerable to sexually transmitted HIV through sex work.

Behavioral interventions identify the men who consume commercial sex as 'clients of sex workers'. But these highly mobile men who constantly move between work, home, and occasionally the brothel are mistakenly identified with an enduring status that they can easily eschew once they leave the brothel and return to work or home. For many, sexuality is a means to build relationships with one another and not something that can be associated with negative risk. It is these types of relational factors, that I illustrate through an examination of men's sexual practices in China, that often motivate men globally to engage in sex work and not simply the behavioral categories targeted by most public health interventions (Bernstien 2001, Hirsch *et al.* 2009, Weitzer 2009).

The social organization of sex work in China

Anne Allison's (1994) pioneering work on female hostesses in Tokyo nightclubs illustrated the functional role sex work plays in the everyday lives of Japanese businessmen. We have similarly seen the functional role sex work plays in building political and economic relationships among men in Korea, China, and Vietnam (Allison 1994, Cheng 2000, Uretsky 2008, Phinney 2009). Despite widespread popular recognition of the function that sex work plays for Chinese men, their engagement in commercial sex is still analyzed as a behavioral category. Chinese discourse on sex work, which is perhaps more developed than any other global discourse on sex work, recognizes the various social functions of the women engaged in transactional sex. Women are associated with specific functional identities that range from the elite mistresses (*ernai*) who maintain an exclusive relationship with one man in exchange for luxurious provisions like houses, cars, and expensive clothes to women referred to as 'tent dwellers' (*zhu gongpeng*), so called because they exchange sex for basic housekeeping services with myriad construction workers who live in makeshift tents or other temporary housing structures. The gap in-between is occupied by a variety of brothel-based and entertainment establishment based sex workers that include 'three accompaniment

misses' (*sanpei xiaojie*), so called because they accompany men in singing, dancing, and drinking in karaoke clubs and 'calling misses' (*tinghu*), who call hotel rooms to offer massage and hair washing services (as a euphemism for sexual services). The categories also extend to brothel-based sex workers or *fanglangmei*, which translates as hair salon sisters, because many brothels are officially registered as hair salons. Streetwalkers (*jienü*) complete this system at the bottom of the hierarchy (Pan 1997, Huang *et al.* 2004). Men, on the other hand, are recognized as consumers of sex but can veil the role that sex plays in their work behind their official capacities and social roles, unlike women sex workers whose social roles are all associated with the provision of sex.

The scant research on men who consume sex work in China takes a behavioral approach that identifies them as 'clients of sex workers' (Lau *et al.* 2009, Yang *et al.* 2010a, Yang *et al.* 2010b). Careful examination of the demographic composition of the men who dominate China's roster of 'clients', however, often reveals motivations for engaging in sex work that are not simply rooted in behavioral prompts. China's commercial sex industry is fueled by men in management and entrepreneurial positions (Pan 2001, Pan *et al.* 2010) who also account for a disproportionate rate of HIV associated with clients of sex workers and perhaps even a much greater proportion of HIV than women identified as sex workers (Wang *et al.* 2009). Few, if any of these men, however, would be willing to step forward as a 'client of a sex worker'. Highlighting their individual connection to a disease that is associated with illegal practices is politically sensitive in view of China's current crisis of party legitimacy (Gries and Rosen 2004). This reinforces the need to examine the social context that motivates wealthy businessmen and government officials in contemporary urban China to frequently engage the services of commercial sex workers. As I illustrate below, many of the urban businessmen and government officials who purchase sex in China also engage in these activities as an informal requirement that helps to build and maintain the relationships needed for economic and political success in contemporary China.

Project background and method

My argument draws on evidence from a larger ethnographic project, conducted during eighteen months of research between 2003 and 2006, that examined how trends of masculinity and male sexual culture in contemporary urban China can expose men to STIs and HIV (Uretsky 2007, Uretsky 2008). The study focused on the social, cultural, politico-economic, and historic structures that prompt urban Chinese men to seek sexual experiences outside of marriage and how they negotiate, use, and experience sex with various partners. Research was primarily conducted at a border region in southwest China that is home to the country's first concentrated HIV epidemic. The significant role this region plays in the history of China's HIV epidemic as well as its active cross-border trade industry make it an ideal location for studying the interaction between male sexual culture and HIV in China. Men who engage in trade in this region rely on entertainment, including sex work, as a way of fostering communication with the officials who have the power to govern their success.

Participant observation and in-depth interviews with men and women who occupy varying roles in restaurants, hotels, massage parlors, hair salons, karaoke clubs, saunas, and brothels provided a foundation for a comprehensive characterization of the daily lives of urban

Chinese men who engage in professional networking activities. It also facilitated detailed understanding of the relationship between the activities that occur in these venues and political and economic success in contemporary China. Below I describe a typical day for many of the successful businessmen and government officials I encountered while conducting research for this project; scenarios that are typical in many of China's urban areas (Yang 1994, Wank 1999, Osburg 2013).

A 'typical' workday for China's wealthy businessmen and government officials

The official workday in China begins at 8:00am and ends at 6:00pm with a three-hour break from 11:30am to 2:30pm for lunch and siesta (*xiuxi*). Government employees are required to work five days a week from Monday to Friday. As I observed, however, many men seeking political or economic success frequently engage in work-related duties that do not allow them to return home until 2:00am on many nights. In addition, while offices are closed on the weekend, many men are still unofficially required to attend to the many work-related duties outside the office that keep them out late.

Government officials and businessmen in this region frequently begin their workday at 8:00am hosting a guest at a popular breakfast spot that serves food typical of one of the local ethnic minority communities. Guests are other government officials or businessmen from out-of-town who have come to evaluate the work of local officials or prospect a new business opportunity. Breakfast at one of these local establishments consists of local delicacies of rice noodles with spicy beef, pork, or a hot pudding made from yellow peas. Coffee served with sweet condensed milk is also on the breakfast menu. Breakfast provides a good introduction to the area and a perfect way to begin cultivating a relationship with a government official who can provide access to the necessary elements of success for a local official or businessman.

Breakfast is usually followed by trips to the field to view and inspect a local site of either business or government operations. This provides evidence of the host's capacity to carry out either their official duties or their intended business venture. True success, however, is dependent upon establishing a trusting relationship with one's guest. This involves continued demonstration of respect through a series of shared ritual networking practices collectively referred to as *yingchou*. These practices, which include ritualized forms of smoking, banqueting, drinking, and female-centered entertainment that can culminate in sex, have been central to the demonstration of trust and loyalty between elite men in China since the Song Dynasty (960–1279) (Anon 1979). Today they dominate the time of many government officials and businessmen as a way to help them cement the relationships that facilitate exchange between the men who occupy these two social fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Most men understand, however, that the ritual gesturing does not end after their first meeting. Like the loyalty a party member demonstrates to the party, this loyalty and respect must similarly be repeatedly demonstrated throughout the duration of the relationship. Consequently, a morning of breakfast and surveying is typically followed by an invitation to a luncheon banquet at 11:30am, which includes various local delicacies and requisite strong

alcohol used to demonstrate mutual respect through a ritual hierarchical model of exchanging formal toasts.

Lunch is usually followed by a brief siesta (*xiuxi*) when a woman who sells sex may visit the guests. Official work related duties resume from 2:30 until 5:30. The host always invites his guests to dinner in the evening for another banquet that consists of more local delicacies and strong alcohol. After dinner, hosts typically invite their guests out for entertainment, which can include massage, foot reflexology, hair washing, or a trip to a local disco and karaoke club. This is often followed by a midnight meal. Entertainment can be coupled with sexual services from a service girl who works at the establishment. Alternatively the guest can be offered services from a brothel-based sex worker who is discretely solicited to his hotel room. Finally, cigarettes are constantly exchanged between host and guest throughout the day, again as a means of initiating and maintaining communication and respect. This typical day of hosting and entertaining can define six or even seven days of the workweek for local officials and entrepreneurs in the region where research for this study was conducted.

Defining work in China

The outside observer may view this schedule as a day simply filled with leisure. Indeed, many of the western government officials, business people, or even public health workers I encountered during this project, viewed these behaviors as merely sophomoric activities rooted in influence from western cultural values that have entered China alongside increased access to wealth. To the Chinese men who engage in these activities, though, all are unofficial but integral parts of their work, stemming from the traditional practices of *yingchou*, that are necessary for succeeding in either business or politics in China's post-Mao era. This may seem an inappropriate use of the term work from a western institutional perspective structured by activities directly related to the operation of government, the economy, and society. But in China, where work is defined both functionally and institutionally, sex (in addition to banqueting, drinking, and smoking) has become an official part of the work needed to promote the operation in those very same official sectors of society. Indeed, the observations and discussions from this project demonstrated that successful men in China conduct their work inside entertainment establishments as often as they do inside the four walls of an office compound.

Chinese society was traditionally organized around a rigid hierarchy that placed people into a set of neatly defined 'social fields' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The scholar gentry, who were responsible for governing imperial China, sat at the top of the hierarchy. Peasant laborers occupied the next rung of the hierarchy, followed by artisans, and finally merchants and traders. Bourdieu explains that society is generally comprised of networks of fields that span the spectrum of social practices from the arts to religion, academia, sport, medicine, etc. The field is 'a dynamic structure characterized by the struggles of agents concerned with maintaining or improving their position with respect to the particular form of capital at stake.' (Williams 1995:587). The social fields that defined imperial Chinese society also helped to define authority. While contemporary China has shed itself of the feudal social structure used to maintain order under the imperial state, it still adheres to a strict social division that helps to create the type of order needed to maintain its Leninist political

system. The new state imposed social structure views people within fields defined by party and non-party. The party rules and all other lay members of society (*laobaixing*) are expected to follow as loyal subjects. It is a state defined social system that clearly demonstrates a hierarchy of relations that also controls access to the goods and resources necessary for both political and economic success. Those inside the party are able to use the authority associated with their social field to maximize the material and/or non-material profit and authority of those at the top of the hierarchy by creating a structure that sees them as the legitimate holders of 'economic capital, cultural capital (legitimate knowledge of various sorts), social capital (various kinds of relations with significant social others), and symbolic capital (prestige and social honor)' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Williams 1995). Preserving these boundaries, which define China's modern social fields, is crucial to maintaining the party's legitimacy.

This same social structure affects the concept of work in China, which is distinguished by effort performed for the party and effort performed for individual profit (i.e. effort not performed for the party). To 'have work' or 'have a job' (*you gongzuo*) in China implies employment in a state owned enterprise or work unit (*danwei*) (Entwistle and Henderson 2000). Work in all other instances outside the state is categorized according to a particular function that is also closely associated with identity. For instance, a businessman (or woman) is said to '*zuo shengyi*' (do business), a peasant is said to '*laodong*' (labor), and a migrant worker is said to '*dagong*' (do manual or menial work). All are forms of work that derive the use-value that Marx (1976) associates with work, but generally, only work inside a state owned enterprise is officially called '*gongzuo*'. The party also maintains control over the resources of production, which, under Leninist code are distributed to other members in exchange for their loyalty and hard work. This creates a stark divide between the party and commoners (*laobaixing*) that also serves to protect the legitimacy of party members as state authority. This distinct divide between party and non-party, however, presents great challenges to the development of China's market-oriented economy, which depends on communication between government officials inside the party and entrepreneurs who may lie outside the party. They have worked around requirements of the Leninist system that reserves resources for loyal party members through the process of *yingchou*, a mechanism that has historically aided the establishment and maintenance of loyal relationships among Chinese men.

Under China's Leninist system, government officials are primarily responsible for properly allocating distribution of state-owned resources. What they do in their work to carry out this function, however, is ambiguous. Leninist doctrine instructs they distribute resources as a reward to those who are indoctrinated with party values, which includes party members and employees in government work units (Walder 1986, Meisner 1999). In an environment where a Leninist style bureaucracy must support development of a market-oriented economy, government officials have had to reinvent the requirements for distributing the state controlled resources that determine the success of the market and the entrepreneurs responsible for its operation. The market mechanism promotes private resource ownership and exchange facilitated through money, which is not allowable under the guise of a Leninist state. Government officials have turned to the traditional institution of *guanxi*

(dyadic personalistic relations) as a way of negotiating this challenge to the free flow of resources necessary for operating a market economy. Informal adaptation of this cultural institution, which signifies the strong bonds of loyalty and trust required for reciprocity in Chinese society, (Yang 1994, Yan 1996, Kipnis 1997, Gold *et al.* 2002, Tsai 2007) facilitates this unusual type of exchange between state and non-state actors. *Guanxi* is inherent to kin or even quasi-kin relationships in China. The needs of the market economy, however, give cause for businessmen and government officials to develop *guanxi* relationships beyond the natural boundaries of kinship. This artificial construction of *guanxi* is daily accomplished through the shared networking practices of *yingchou*. Today, these practices are used as a way of informally governing the distribution of resources. As a result, these activities of drinking, smoking, banqueting, entertainment, and casual sex— all considered leisure in the West— have become an unofficial but expected function of work for men seeking political or economic success in post-Mao China. So, while visits to commercial sex workers and informal sexual relations in exchange for access to positions and resources have almost become normalized for business people and government officials in China, they often occur within the guise of their official capacity or position that is not defined by such a function. If we look at this from a Marxian perspective, these work-related functions that are not officially related to men's jobs do nevertheless produce the same type of use-value necessary for achieving the compensation that Marx (1976) associates with work. For many of the men, they also view these activities as duties required for their work.

The compelling nature of sex and work for Chinese businessmen and government officials

This informal mode of governance that has become so prevalent in post-Mao China suggests that discussion of risk for STIs and HIV among urban Chinese businessmen and government officials is equally tied to issues of work as it is to sexual practices. For many men, the behaviors related to these practices are an unwelcome but also unofficially required aspect of their work that they feel unable to avoid. This aspect of their work demonstrates the party loyalty needed to access the state controlled resources that determine their success. Government workers in the region where I conducted this project can host and entertain guests six or seven days a week and often drop everything, in the name of party loyalty, to leave home for the evening at the request of their boss. In this politico-economic environment, party loyalty has supplanted the loyalty that traditional Confucian culture instructs one have toward their family. This forces men to do things that one government worker described as, “offensive to your own wife (*duibuqi ni ziji de laopo*)”; referring to the unmentionable sexual activities he engages in as part of his unofficial work related requirements. A government worker at a gender training workshop in the provincial capital who was asked to comment about the health risks of being a man in China raised a concern about the frequent use of sex work in his work unit's hosting and entertaining activities. He said although he does not like participating in these activities he feels compelled to accept the services of a sex worker when hosting and entertaining with his boss in order to strengthen and maintain relations with his superiors and limit any potential threat to his own career that may come from a perception of not being loyal. And another man who is HIV

positive explained to me a scenario of hosting and entertaining people five days out of every week:

When a superior (*lingdao*) came down to visit we would go eat with them. Then when we finished eating and finished drinking we would all go out to sing and dance together. And after singing we would go do chaotic things including all the soliciting of prostitutes that comes along with it (*luanqi bazao shenme piaochang de shi ye laile*).

In his words, he said, 'our work made us do these things.' All of this is done in the name of demonstrating loyalty toward the party, which transforms these activities into a crucial aspect of work for businessmen who need access to resources that are still owned by the State and for government and party workers and officials who hope to someday climb the ladder of success.

Conclusion

The term sex work was developed to highlight the functional role of prostitution. It demonstrated that women who engage in prostitution do so as a way to generate income. Development of the term aimed to transform prostitutes from a population identified as dirty, immoral, and diseased into a legitimate part of the work force. Public health efforts to prevent sexual transmission of HIV have once again framed sex workers as an identity associated with disease. The authority that public health brings with this behavioral association has branded these women with a perceived ownership over sexually transmitted HIV that is both stigmatizing and counterproductive to the efforts to prevent HIV. Improved efforts can benefit from realizing the social functions that sex work serves for both women and men.

The example I provide in this paper demonstrates the functional role sex work serves in the work of men (and women) in urban China. What many (including the international public health organizations that conduct HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention programs in China) view as a consumerist act of pleasure does indeed serve an occupational role for men seeking economic and political success in China. But unlike the sex workers who have become branded with this designated occupational identity, the men who visit sex workers do not acquire such an enduring identity associated with sex because sex is not perceived as part of their occupational role, although for many it does stand alongside the requirements they need to fulfill in order to succeed in their work. Even in China where a man's work can be dependent on the commercial sex industry, they work in a capacity that is defined differently and is accompanied with a much different identity. The many conversations I have had with men and women over the expectation to smoke and drink heavily, eat indulgently, and engage in commercial sex as a way to gain capital in their social field and climb up the political or economic ladder recognize these activities as an occupational hazard rather than a public health hazard. Public health practitioners and researchers should similarly reframe their conception of the intersection of sex and work to recognize that these activities are structured more by social and cultural practices in China and elsewhere than by the individual behaviors prioritized in public health models. This will benefit public health programs targeting such risky behaviors.

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