



11-11-2019

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Recommended Citation

Yu, Yeon Jung, "Precarious Moral Economy: Female Sex Workers in Post-Socialist China" (2019).
Anthropology Faculty and Staff Publications. 38.
https://cedar.wwu.edu/anthropology_facpubs/38

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Precarious Moral Economy: Female Sex Workers in Post-Socialist China

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Received: August 30, 2019

Accepted: November 4, 2019

Published: November 11, 2019

Citation: Yu YJ. Precarious Moral Economy: Female Sex Workers in Post-Socialist China. *Madridge J Behav Soc Sci.* 2019; 3(1): 71-73. doi: 10.18689/mjbss-1000112

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Published by Madridge Publishers

Introduction

This article examines what I describe as a “fleeting moral economy,” a system of culturally shared mores formed among migrant women who are engaging in illegal and stigmatized activities in urban areas. I suggest that the rationale or norm for the particular value of reciprocity varies not only by the complexity of a society or a culture, but also varies due to specific networks or communities depending on their particular circumstances, especially level of resource needs. This short communication is the product of my 27 months of ethnographic field work in post-reform southern China.

By ‘female sex workers,’ I mean women whose primary mode of livelihood is the sex trade, who participate in the activities on a daily basis, and who largely think of themselves as professional sex workers (*xiaojie*). In my field sites, a female sex worker usually works at various sex venues (e.g., brothels, massage parlors, night clubs, etc.) and/or through various work modes (e.g., via madams and brokers, second wife, escorts, etc.), and often simultaneously. As to the business operation of sex work, participants enjoyed flexible work schedules, did not have a formal contract, and paid madams a commission [1,2].

My participants were largely from families of low socioeconomic status and less education (e.g., elementary school dropouts through junior high school graduates). In China, female sex workers are predominantly young, unmarried, and less educated, having migrated from poor rural areas to towns or cities [3,4]. According to data from my 175 in-depth interviews, women in the sex trade are thirty years old on average and make 4,887 CNY (roughly \$820) per month (Table 1) – a sum roughly two to three times greater than recent college graduates in the region earn and considerably more than women can make in their villages where they are unlikely to find any paid work at all [1,2].

Table 1. Age and Income of Sex Workers.

	Age	Monthly Income (CNY)
Mean	30	4887
Min.	18	300
Max.	50	40000
S.D.	7.9	4885.2

Of equal significance, the sex worker population is skyrocketing and the commercial sex industry is booming in post-socialist China, the world’s most populous country—even as the sex trade remains strictly forbidden by law and punishable with arrest and detainment [5,6]. This transformation in the sex industry can largely be attributed to recent, unprecedented market-driven reforms in post-socialist China [7,8]. The dramatic socio-economic transitions that have ensued over the past four decades have led to more individual freedom and the liberation of sexual mores [9-11]. But it has also led to widening economic disparities, growing the gap between rural and urban areas and

setting into motion large scale migration [12]; 120 to 250 million rural migrants are flooding into cities, searching for job opportunities and seeking the fruits of Chinese economic growth [13]. Migrant women make up the majority of this "floating population" engaged in labor in electronics and textile factories, domestic work, and commercial sex [3]. Although existing estimates of the illegal population of workers vary dramatically, the number of female sex workers is proliferating [14]; between three and ten million women are estimated to be currently involved [15].

The Moral Economy among Female Sex Workers

The nature of sex work in China remains, unfortunately, precarious, as sex work is by no means a stable source of income. There are many reasons for this instability, such as constant police crackdowns, anti-sex work state policies, and social stigma [4]. As a result, the moral economy of sharing among the women in the sex trade is a requirement for mutual survival in a hostile urban environment. Following Edelman's [16], definition, by moral economy I mean culturally shared mores or ideas about fair and proper economic activity as it supersedes the maximization of individual gain.

An unspoken but fundamental consensus among sex workers, for example, is that one should protect, by any means necessary, one's colleague's ("sisters'") material and emotional interests. A moral woman in the sex trade protects her network members' material interests by keeping the nature of their work secret and by meeting continuous reciprocal obligations [17]. Material reciprocity is even more significant for women who have limited resources or are of low socio-economic status. The sisterhood bond of relationships developed in urban spaces is not an exact replication of their rural networks but rather a limited support system; instrumental purposes are intertwined with sentiments produced through the creation of intimate networks in everyday life.

This moral economy of female sex workers is often precarious. Their temporary but intimate moral ties provide relief from social disadvantages; indeed, they are vital given these women's living conditions of stigma, illegality, insecurity, violence, and poverty. That said, these networks do not exclude lying, betrayal and distrust and are constantly evolving. Even though fleeting and complex, the morally-bound social networks created through mutual obligations provide an insurance against starving and illness during difficult seasons. In this sense, moral economy operates as a social force redressing the defects of socio-economic insecurity.

Discussion

This study highlights the demands made on women by their moral economy, demands made throughout migrant women's daily struggles in the sex trade where their rights and interests remain largely unprotected by public or state institutions. Their predicament and their developed system of reciprocity might be compared to homeless drug addicts in

San Francisco, who clearly have scarce and unpredictable access to resources and therefore participate in drug-and-needle sharing [18], or in the way hunter-gatherers, who have unstable and unpredictable access to resources, closely cooperate to share resources for their future survival [19]. The moral economy of sharing between women in the sex trade entails mutual obligations, establishes community boundaries, and enables the women's survival.

This study also points to various standards or relative values between Chinese moralities; among members of a network, a local morality supersedes other moralities critically valued in the larger society. And the chosen morality prioritizes the given network members' (and, to an extent, their families') survival in a hostile environment. It is critical to note that, to outsiders, their sense of morality may look like impropriety or immorality and thus can be misperceived through the lens of an outsider's moral economy or propriety. For example, Ecuadorian peasants prioritize their productive use of unused land over the private property of a banana-company, and they squat on the land based on the moral-economic value [20]. To Puerto Rican fishers, their tradition is to fully take advantage of a resource and give to elders rather than waste the resource because of the laws prohibiting fishery of undersized, deepwater fish [21]. In these instances, community members' local sense of morality may appear an amorality as it deviates from outsiders' morality, and yet it is, by necessity, unbounded by outsiders' rationale or morality.

Finally, this project challenges cultural claims about Chinese female sex workers' ethics. Rather than being estranged from moral discourse, they are richly embedded in the moral concerns of everyday life. Women enter the sex trade as a way to fulfill their moral obligation to support their families; they attempt to, and are encouraged to, diligently participate in a moral economy with other women in the sex trade; and, when conformity with culturally gendered morality proves impracticable, these women learn and practice performances of verbal deceptions in order to preserve the appearance of conformity.

This article is based on the author's dissertation project [22], which was supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and Stanford University.

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