

How China’s Male Sex Workers Mix Business With Pleasure

By Yifeng Cai

When I went to China in May to study “money boys” — male prostitutes providing sexual services to male clients, known colloquially as MBs — I imagined that I would be seeking entry into a world of darkness, violence, and suffering. In China, the word “prostitution” seems to conjure up a rather specific image in people’s minds. Whether in movies, novels, or even academic works, the sex industry is always depicted as an abyss where the country’s poor — particularly uneducated rural migrants — are forced into sex work to survive the unforgiving life of the metropolis.

Modern media teaches us that sex workers live in cramped, dirty, and cheap rented apartments with no private bathrooms. They endure verbal, mental, and physical abuse from their customers. They have to hide from the authorities to avoid fines or detention. And all the while, sex workers are accosted by evil-minded pimps who force people to work even when they are sick, and fire volleys of their own abuse when MBs fail to bring in enough money.

The Chinese popular image of sex work is unsurprising. Prostitution is illegal here, and MBs’ compensated sexual services violate China’s law and regulations. Therefore, transactional sex is a largely underground, unsupervised phenomenon that poses threats to the well-being of both MBs and their clients. This is not the whole picture, however. The MBs I researched in China’s big cities revealed certain nuances frequently overlooked by the general public. Indeed, my sympathy and sense of social justice were displaced when I realized suffering was actually quite hard to find.

Take Nan as an example. A former spa employee, Nan works as a personal trainer at a well-known local chain of gyms. He also has a solid customer base to whom he provides regular sexual services. Even back when he was working at the spa — in truth, a massage parlor whose workers frequently

administered “happy endings” to paying customers — he was already making close to 40,000 yuan (about \$6,000) a month. Nan left the spa after newly hired younger guys gradually made him less competitive. However, with a regular flow of customers from that job, as well as new clients he brought in from personal training, Nan is able to live comfortably in one of China’s biggest cities.

“How much do your services cost?” I asked him during one interview at the apartment where he lives and works.

“Several hundred yuan,” Nan laughed. “But you see, my main income doesn’t come from sex, but from tips. Sometimes people will tip me thousands more.”

I must have looked awestruck, so Nan continued: “That’s nothing. I have a friend whose client bought him a house in his rural hometown and a small apartment in Shanghai. It all depends on how lucky you are in getting wealthy clients who will take care of you.”

Indeed, throughout my fieldwork with multiple MBs, I noticed that they almost never struggled financially. Their prices ranged from 400 yuan for a massage with a happy ending to 7,000 yuan for intercourse. Even without tips, MBs often earn more than many of white-collar workers in China. But their earning power was not the only thing that surprised me. I was also intrigued by how blurred the line between selling sex and hooking up often became during these men’s sexual encounters. Most people in China still assume that people who sell sex don’t enjoy it; it is taken for granted that they endure the work to make money. Today, though, many customers who pay for sex are in fact young, conventionally attractive men. MBs themselves are frequently drawn to some of their own customers. In these cases, it becomes complicated to separate transactions between MBs and customers from sex between two or more mutually attracted men.

Liang, another MB I met during my fieldwork, said in blunt terms that he sometimes wanted to have sex with certain customers the minute they walked

into the room: “I won’t even care about the tips, you know?” This is no “Moulin Rouge” moment where the prostitute falls in love with the customer and charges nothing; it is, however, real sexual tension, something that complicates the otherwise transactional nature of the MB-client relationship. The question here, then, is how one defines this kind of human interaction. It has all the elements of a hookup: Two or more individuals have casual sex due to mutual physical attraction. But it also fits the definition of prostitution: Sexual services are provided and compensated.

After all, it is not as if intimacy or pleasure cannot coexist with monetary transactions. What if selling sex and hooking up simply cannot be separated sometimes? What if receiving money for sexual services does not exclude the possibility of mutual affection or sexual desire? Many cultures are replete with stories preaching the sacredness of “true love” and the detestability of money, framing the two as mutually exclusive. In Chinese literature, the famous female prostitute Du Shiniang allegedly threw a chest of treasure into a river, and then drowned herself, after her lover sold her to a passing merchant. In short, we are told that money and love are incompatible.

But is that really so? As Liang indicates above, it is entirely possible that MBs can genuinely desire sex with their clients. My fieldwork dispelled the prejudice that China’s sex industry only consists of trafficked victims forced into prostitution. Granted, human trafficking most certainly exists — but to see that as the only reality is mistaken. For many MBs, selling sex and hooking up are deeply entangled. My conversation with another MB named Zhang further illustrates this point.

When I asked about his daily routine, Zhang replied: “I’m not always online trying to find a client, you know. Sometimes I only log into [gay and bisexual dating apps] Jack’d or Grindr because I’m horny, and I only respond to guys I find attractive.”

“Why would you still charge them then if you like them?” I asked, incredulous.

“Why not? It’s like getting paid to hook up. How great is that?” Zhang exclaimed.

Sex, work, desire, money, pleasure, intimacy — these are all components of sexual transactions, at once distinct, entangled, and compatible. It’s like dropping different-colored liquids into a bowl of water: It is impossible — and in my opinion unnecessary and meaningless — to try and separate them. I left China with totally different data from what I expected, pondering the fluidity of my interviewees’ lives and my newly confounded sense of social justice. Back in the city, Nan, Liang, and Zhang carried on with their jobs, wealthy, fulfilled — and not asking to be “saved” from anything.

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