

**SLOW SEPARATIONS: EVERDAY SEX WORK IN SOUTHERN CHINA**

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This work is an ethnographic inquiry into questions of development, subjectivity, and violence through the marginal lenses of lower-echelon sex work in Guangzhou, People's Republic of China. It is based on over three years of fieldwork, including summers in 2002 and 2003, two years of consecutive fieldwork from 2004 – 2006, and follow-up research visits from 2007 – 2010. Focused primarily on underground brothels called *falang*, as well as street and freelance sex work in bars, this dissertation explores the forms of mundane physical and existential violence that constitute the experiences of those multiply marginalized at the edges of one of the world's most rapidly developing megalopolises. The figure of the prostitute in modern China has occupied a position against which gendered normality and modernity have been measured and made. This work, in contrast, explores the lived experiences and stories of migrant women who have attempted to realize the entrepreneurial promises of post-Mao China in one of the few financially viable ways available to them. It further explores the costs of doing so at and beyond gendered, sexual, spatial, and class margins. Implicated within the rapid spatial reconfigurations of the city's development, this ethnographic account explores the conditions that many migrant workers face in China, conditions unique yet resonant with devalued labor elsewhere. In

contemporary China, the intersection of gendered/sexual abjection and discourses of “human quality” (*suzhi*) raises important questions regarding the relationship of productive and coercive forms of power in the context of global violence and late-capitalist realities.

Ultimately these issues of force and inequality are experienced in the body, this dissertation argues, in the production of desiring selves who cannot attain the basic conditions of their desire – material success, dignity, and respect. While creatively making use of the tools at their disposal to realize often simple dreams, this research shows this to be overall a losing battle. From the ethnographic perspective of one form of marginal, migrant labor in southern China - lower-echelon sex work - the refusal to allow the separation of the self from the hopes that constitute it is sometimes a last agential refusal.

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## PREFACE

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Sites are fragmentary and convoluted histories, pasts stolen by others from readability, folded up ages that can be unfolded but that are there more as narratives in suspense, like a rebus: symbolizations encysted in the body's pain or pleasure. "I feel good here" – an effect of space, set apart from language, where it suddenly bursts into light.

Michel de Certeau (2000: 114)

His ass is his only beautiful feature.

Liu Fang (*falang* owner, commenting on her kept lover as he walked away)

This work addresses the issue of everyday violence, its social and individual effects, in the lives of the women whose stories this work is engaged with – namely Chinese women who have migrated to the urbanized south of Guangdong and who have at one point or another in the course of complex and diverse social and work lives, and as those lives have intersected over the course of the last five years of my research, exchanged sexual services for money in the specific ways that are contemporarily coded as "prostitution." The stories here are mostly of women (and a few men) who worked, at least as the anthropologist encountered them, in direct sex-for-money hair salons called *falang*, as well as some freelance street and bar work, all towards the lower-end of direct sex-for-money venues in China. These stories are not merely narratives, or language, but are about speech and silence, place and history,

and the practice of everyday life for people living and working in Guangzhou's "rougher" areas and doing what they can to get by. Sometimes that meant exchanging sex for money.

These stories tell of a "quotidian violence" in most instances, the slow, grinding violence of day to day uncertainties, vulnerabilities, fears and abuses. More, they tell in some cases of the gradual and painful disaggregation of the self in a condition outside of "normality" – an ongoing set of social and individual separations, a form of abjection (Kristeva 1982; Butler 1990; 1993) for which there is precious little ground upon which to frame a response or build solidarity. As Butler notes of the broader circulation and effects (regulatory and productive) of abjection in modernity:

The abject designates here precisely those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. (1993: XII)

This is thus not merely a form of marginalization. It is a constitutive expulsion. Yet the act of expelling must continue, and there is, as always in abjection, a remainder.

These stories take place in a very specific place and time and register that is nevertheless familiar, a place of migration and inequality and relative poverty in a glittering, globalizing world. They are not, however, "representative" in the normal sense of anything but themselves in their complexity and diversity, and as worked through this ethnographic

and writing labor. Yet this labor has been a form of bending towards the other across the past several years, attempted with good faith as a pursuit of truth in the full knowledge of its unattainability. This is as much an undoing, a pregnant absence, as any presence. The anthropologist was not alone in this struggle and not, I believe, the only one changed by it.

These stories in their diversity and specificity share common echoes - with each other as migrant, poor women in China who have at one time or another exchanged sex for money, with poor, rural, women (and men) in other places who also struggle to get by with varying degrees of success and in what appear to be losing battles from the point of view of the outside observer. Yet, however diverse is this lived ground, it is made spectrally whole as that against which the shiny, the new, the clean, the fresh and crisp, the cosmopolitan and urbane, are measured against. This Wholeness is the internal other of the social deviant, the backward remnants of earlier corruptions, the imperfections yet to be eliminated by inevitable progress, the naturally inferior, and for progressives in China, a victimized group who, with the perfection of development systems of various types, will be raised up – materially and spiritually.

These forceful traces, a better word perhaps than stories for the material marks they leave, are spectral. To call them up, to conjure them in ethnographic writing is to put them in opposition to another form of spectrality, which is itself also an exorcism, a casting out of the “past” through the magic of “development,” a forced separation of spaces and what makes them livable. Opposition to this violent disaggregation is then a practice of “hauntology,” partly in the Derridean sense (1994), an authentic absence called up against the false spirits of progress – flashing, shimmering, violent re-renderings of matter and spirit

(place), sleek surfaces of titanium and fiberglass, hysterical voices and flashing images - no respite from the breathless enthusiasm of progress, a cacophony with one voice, Legion, but this time in the opposite role of Exorcist, the dizzying disorientation not merely of all things solid melting into air (Bermann 1982) but of meanings dissolved in a shallow, corrosive pool of singular clarity. “Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony” (Derrida 1994: 37). A sonorousness that drowns out sound, difference, texture, history. And space. A great and perfect “Om.” Except for the ghosts.

These ghosts are the remnants, an anamnestic potentiality, a resource. For Derrida these ghosts are that which is not present in the present, that which gazes at us but is not here, or in other words, the absence upon which presence is structured. Yet in what sense are they not present – or material? The palimpsestic site(s) of my fieldwork exist, I argue, as absences in the present, silences that resonate even when not heard, or more simply, that *are* even as what they were is gone and what they will be is mapped out already in the offices of Guangzhou’s municipal offices, national directives, corporate computer files and PowerPoint presentations, and shared assumptions – in other words, already exist in various yet resonant formulations at the nexus of local, national, and transnational global arrangements of force. The “future” which is not present then is very much in the present, but in a specific register – as that which is to come – prophesy – and like all prophesy, that which attempts to render itself true - to rend and wrench a recalcitrant but increasingly pliable materiality towards itself in the practice of making a certain form of erasure. White noise that drowns out a rich cacophony of silences.

It is this form of wholeness that firms up, stiffens and perpetually invigorates, a shifting “normality” of progress. To be “zhengchangde” (正常的. normal; upright) is to be human and to live in the light of what can be understood. The “bu zhengchangde” (不正常的. abnormal; deviant) live in darkness that is not an absence of light; it is to not fully Be. Whether by nature or by the inequities of society, indeed whether or not the human remains a potential inside them, “they” are not now fully human. In this relatively slight disagreement within a generally singular hermeneutics of the other lies the difference between progressive and Marxist intellectuals in China and the majority of informed opinion - reduced to struggles over the raw and malleable clay of humanity vs. the natural order or progress and inevitability of distinction. Yet abjection is not a fixed position, nor is the subject a whole. We must be attentive to the shifting positions, often simultaneously held by those we would call “abject” in an overgeneralizing way, as the lack of complete identification, as prostitute or sex worker, enables a mobility among positions to others – factory worker, spouse, mother or father, small business owner or entrepreneur, lover, and many others. It is here that questions then not of human or not, mournable or not, normal or deviant must shift to China-specific and more scaled questions of Human Quality, or *suzhi* (素质) (Anagnost 2004; Zhang 2001; Yan 2003a; Yan 2003b; Sigley 2009). Part of the argument here is that neither theories of abjection nor *suzhi* discourse fully account for the positioning of people who are simultaneously both beyond the social and at the same time embedded in it in multiple ways.

It may be that to speak of stories itself begins to approach this same abhorrent rationalism. I will, however, continue to employ the term here in its fullest sense – as meaning both the ordinarily coherent and the unexpected, the linear and the erupted, but

mostly as linguistic and bodily excess. In other words, this is about stories as both rhythm and alterity - living stories – the spoken and silent (as much as I could attend to it), and the context (as much as I can tell it) out of which were produced what follows. I follow Certeau here in arguing that attentiveness to the productive nature of storytelling, and to the conditions of their production, is not merely deconstructive, but rather is the potential ground for a more truth-bearing and ethical engagement with the life world.

These “stories” then are most assuredly about, and at least partly by, mostly poor, migrant women in China who sell or have sold sex in ways that are legally and socially coded as prostitution. They are also most assuredly not simply about that but rather about women (and men) struggling to get by in the midst of their multiple marginalities, a framing that does not fully capture what that multiplicity adds up to in experience and the life of being there – Dasein.<sup>1</sup>

If this is not, at least superficially, the “culture of terror” that Taussig, drawing on Walter Benjamin, speaks of, it is assuredly akin to the “nervous system” that he and others have written about (Taussig 1992; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Bourgois 2003). In the telling and expressing of these stories we see not only the standard listing of marginalizations – economic, gendered, regional, legal – which we do, but more than that we see the material, embodied effects upon the bodies and spirits of the people involved. We can see how the framing of intelligible, “normal” subjectivity is partially given and then denied, or rather

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<sup>1</sup> Hershtatter refers to a similar notion of “nested subalterns” (1997: 29) in a way intended to acknowledge but complicate the notion of “subaltern” as expressed by Spivak (1988). This is similar to my attempt to complicate a more stable framing of the “abject”, partly by putting it in to contextual relationship with contemporary Chinese discourses of “*suzhi*” (human quality).



given in “dreamland” (Schein 2001: 226) then taken, often by force, from hands which do not wish to let it go for it is of them and part of them – not merely a dream, but a making-dream which has constituted a form of subjective being whose desires, the fulfillment of the promise of the subject, of Being, almost by necessity, cannot be realized. If there is a meaning in this “denuding beyond the skin...to being as vulnerability” (Levinas 1998: 49) it is not found here, for this suffering is not an act of intention but rather a stripping bare, a very gradual dismemberment of the unfulfilled and unfulfillable hopes and expectations of ordinary people who have come to Guangzhou to make their way and usually find, most harshly, they cannot. Or there is no way.

If constituted partly in hope and possibility, it is in longing that this meets a certain reality, in melancholy that it is not let go, and beyond melancholy that the forces that have brought into coherence this person, this location of force relations, this ensemble of embodied historic-spatial conditions - this mother, daughter, sister, lover, and friend (and much more), unravel it, separate and dismember it in the same mechanical gesture of production and disaggregation. A second key issue for this work is in asking how then are we to approach this melancholy, this refusal to acknowledge that the desires that both state and market inculcate in related but various ways, desires for better material lives, for social and familial respect, for security, for cosmopolitanism are ultimately unattainable for most, a reality that comes attached most cruelly to the mark of failure – you don’t have what it takes to make it. Is this refusal to acknowledge the obvious up to the point of melancholy - in early Freudian terms a failure to expel or substitute the lost - merely that, or can it not also be seen as an agential refusal, a sign of excess and possibility?

If this is found in the stories of some women and men in the south of China, it also most assuredly shares a great deal with the stories of many others around the world. It is a telling/making that is also an unmaking of unspeakable, simple sorrow and longing. And something beyond sorrow, for the self that would sorrow is slowly unraveled in its isolation, its ultimate separation from others who likewise are unthinkable and unmournable (Butler 2003). And longing is for a remembered object that has never been present. In this something beyond loneliness, without any ground for solidarity, no alternative language/eidos for self and community, these stories also tell of a being-with-Others that by rights should not be possible, where in irony and shared hopes that are not at all believed in but in speaking have a power, in small gestures of brusque and unadorned and disavowed care, in the ongoing-ness of mourning, in the mangling and soldering and re-crafting of the imagined/material tools that oppress them – self-sacrificing daughter/wife/mother, erotic innocent girl, sexual object/feminine space – people get by, up to a point, practicing the immediate art of survival in unnamed spaces.

By unnamed, I do not mean that labels are not applied. They are, with vigor, consistency, relish, and force. Prostitute, whore, social ill, innocent victim, sex worker – an endless circulation of naming and counting and identifying. But of what? Such names and the images/programs they call into being have little to do with the far more complex, human, and mundane lives they so self-righteously offer themselves up to represent. Of the programs these names conjure – proposals, policies, and practices – we will speak later. For now, briefly, let us focus on the naming itself and what it accomplishes. It is a naming that drowns out other names, a naming that sets the parameters of the imaginable, of the very

language that can be brought to bear, that brings into being a very real and material thing – the Prostitute figure (it could be other figures) – with very real and material consequences. One can fairly argue, contra Derrida, that these lives – materially discursive - are NOT the absence upon which the presence of their social imagining is predicated, that “they” are not even an absence, not necessary at all. If systemically needed, they are, as Gail Hershatter has argued, as the other against which this organization of gendered, sexual, and political economic force relations we sometimes, and imperfectly call post-socialist China is co-figured (1997). Yet these women do exist and struggle, and leave their traces of voice and silence. Importantly for this work, they engage in specific forms of ordinary yet endlessly creative re-signification in the “out of the way” spaces of their lives and labor. These mitigate, but do not eliminate, the disaggregating forces that largely constitute their material lives – places, bodies, and identities.

Some silences speak or haunt, and some fall still. “A kind of knowing has fallen silent” (Certeau 2000: 114). There is no guarantee of the return of the repressed, or rather, there is no repressed outside of intelligibility, or rather, the repressed is a necessary component of presence, not an undoing. That would perhaps be the end, unless materiality is more than its name implies. We do not end in language.

This is not a set of stories about passive victims (third world prostitutes; global underclasses) or about much resistance, except in the day-to-day struggle to get by. The slow, breaking down partly borne witness to here was not accomplished without a fight, often ferocious and strong, hopeful and passionate, then stoic and determined, then tired but not broken, then...seemingly broken but trying again, and so it goes. The grounds of the fight

are not merely unequal, they are the very ground of loss, the tools available for the fight the very tools with which these women are beaten down. There is not, as Levinas reminds us, any meaning inherent to this suffering – except the meaning it embodies in the witness to it (Farley 2004). This meaning is responsibility, for we are not merely witnesses.

### **1.1 A BRIEF NOTE ON TERMS**

The relatively recent history of the Prostitute forces us to attend to the materiality of language, what it calls in to being. The term, and its application as a signifier of social identification appears to have arisen, historically, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in conjunction with a broader epistemological apparatus that began to stake out a variety of essentialized social positions, including the criminal, the deviant, and the insane (Agustin 2005; Bell 1994; Walkowitz 1980). The circulation of the term, and the social position into China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while intersecting with prior social realities associated with the exchange of pleasures, one based on a hierarchy of skills and position rather than a broad category of social type, nonetheless, in post-1994 China positioned the prostitute as a decadent and/or victimized marker of traditional backwardness or capitalist corruption (Hershatter 1997; Gronewold 1984; Henriot 2001).

Contemporary debates over the meaning of female sexual labor, particularly within feminism, have been powerfully contentious, representing a major site of struggle over the meaning of the female body, of oppression, and of the possibility of female agency. The bodies of women involved in sexual labor, particularly “third world” women, have been discursively co-opted, their varying existential codings enlisted in a larger, densely political

field of representational struggle. As Shannon Bell notes “The prostitute body is a terrain on which feminists contest sexuality, desire, and the writing of the female body” (1994: 73). In response to theoretical and activist notions that position all women in prostitution, particularly third world women, as paradigmatic victims of male patriarchy, Carole Leigh, sex worker activist, artist, writer, and filmmaker, coined the term “sex worker” in the late 1970s in an attempt to shift to a labor framework, therefore to work conditions and dignity and away from essentializing notions of victimization and deviance.

Use of the term “sex worker” then is an invocation, one that I am sympathetic to. It attempts to eschew the recent history of the prostitute figure as a power-laden term, as a material, carcerating, incarcerating term, one that frames vast numbers of women and men as essentially other. In this, it is partly successful. The shift to labor calls up a set of theoretical (and potentially programmatic) apparatus and displaces a moralism that attaches to even, or especially, some feminist approaches to Prostitution (Agustin 2007; Kempadoo 1998; Doezema 1998). It similarly calls our attention to structural similarities with the labor of others under oppressive and marginalized conditions across worlds called First and Third.

What, though, is to be done in contexts in which the term is not, or cannot, be publically claimed? Or is refused by those we wish to apply it to? Can we employ this term in ways that do not lend themselves to oppression? This is not an abstract question. It is a material one. What effects are called up in such naming? What programs? And isn't this term, at least as deployed in China, merely a stand-in for Prostitute, leaving the formation of otherness, and the legal, social, health, and other consequences of that – as well as the social function it serves as abjection, untroubled?

“Sex Workers in China,” (Zheng 2009) however sympathetically written about, are again that Wholeness that at the very least, obscures more than it reveals, at worst, reproduces an epistemological logic that makes claims to knowing and identifying, sympathetically or with hostility, or without such conscious intentionality at all – a technic of distinctions, an elaboration of, rather than challenge to, existing relations of force. In what ways are women who work in KTVs in Dalian in positions similar to those working in low-end *falangs* in Guangzhou? Do the latter not share more in common with factory workers in the Guangzhou area? Indeed many move back and forth between factory and *falang* work, or other kinds of work, or only briefly (as the researcher encountered them) worked at a *falang*, confounding, rightly, the attempt to pin them down as sex workers. There are a vast number of ways in which money, sexuality, eroticism, power, identity, and position are imbricated in relations in China today. Some of these we call prostitution, or, if we are sympathetic, sex work. Some we do not. We should thus be attending to the axis along which those apparently arbitrary distinctions are made, in the accreted context of what histories and spaces, and with what material effects. It is to this that this work seeks to attend.

I have not generally used the term “sex worker” here for the reasons above. Most of the people that I knew who were working in the exchange of sex for money (among many other aspects of their work that included emotional and intellectual labor) would have rejected the label “sex worker,” correctly understanding that in China, this still comes attached with an essentializing mark that is not true of most other forms of labor.<sup>2</sup>To apply

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<sup>2</sup> When I initially suggested this term during fieldwork, I was vehemently criticized. My attempts to describe it as a possibly empowering term were rejected, seen as at best naïve in a context in which no positive claim to such an identity could be made.

the term “sex worker” in a context in which there is neither a private space in which to claim it nor a public space in which that can be articulated and fought for, is not empowering. It is a mark of forced identification. .

If not “sex workers,” the women that I knew were certainly part of the massive movement of migrant labor towards Guangzhou from villages, towns, and more inland cities. The women I met in Guangzhou’s *falang* were the same as women working in factory or other migrant labor in the south. They came almost entirely from China’s lower classes – a misleading term given the massive population it accounts for and the huge gap between them and the next rung of what is quickly solidifying as a lofty, if still heterogeneous, elite class. None of the women I knew had attended university and most had not finished senior high school. The majority sent some or most of their earnings back home to families that needed, and desired, the money.

Most of their customers, though certainly not all, came from similar class and regional backgrounds. These were mostly men who had “made it” as petty businessmen and small-time entrepreneurs. The cost of services in a *falang* in Guangzhou – around 150 RMB on average (about 20 USD) at the time of my research – was generally too expensive for other male migrant workers, yet too cheap and “low class” for more successful men who preferred the comfort and business-friendly sociality of KTVs, saunas, and the like. Male *falang* customers also told me that they preferred being with young “country” girls, with whom they felt comfortable and familiar, as opposed to the “snobbish” women of fancier venues. Also, not being from Guangzhou made the physical exposure of entering a *falang* less of an issue of embarrassment or approbation.

In some *falang*, university students also made up a small but important percentage of clientele. These tended to be from upper class families and had spending money, but typically not enough for frequent nights out at KTVs. And in some areas, older, retired men, often Guangzhou residents, visited their neighborhood *falang*.

## 1.2 SITES AND METHODS

This project focuses primarily on lower-echelon, sex work in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou, in particular forms of sex work that can be broadly conceived of as “freelance.” I chose this focus for two reasons. First, very little ethnographic research has been conducted on this specific, yet remarkably common, arena in China. Secondly, being very transient and unprofessionalized, the work of women (and men) in often temporary sexual labor is both revealing of broader conditions of migration and marginality, and the specific conditions of sexual labor at its lower margins. Finally, freelance workers in *falang*, street, and some bars workers, because they were less beholden to managers or physically inaccessible in KTVs or Saunas, allowed me a certain possibility of encounter, although that was predicated typically on their individual and re-negotiable agreement to participate in my research. Unlike a factory or KTV, in which the primary point of access was a manager or owner who gave permission and officially authorized my work there, my focus had the advantage of mobile flexibility, in keeping with a very mobile population, and the added complexity, often a fruitful one, of requiring the participation of hundreds of people without much official approval/force. In addition to *falang* labor, this dissertation draws selectively on ethnographic research among primarily freelance street and bar workers in Guangzhou, as



well as on fieldwork in Hong Kong, particularly when it is helpful in exemplifying a point, whether one of broader commonalities or a point of comparative difference.

The seeds of this project were planted in a graduate seminar taught by the historian of modern Chinese urbanity, Poshek Fu, at the University of Illinois. One of the readings for the seminar, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shanghai*, accompanied by a visit by the author, Gail Hershatter, was for me eye-opening in terms of the prominent role the prostitute figure had historically played in reformist and revolutionary ideology in China, primarily as a negative marker against which various forms of modernity were measured, as well as more contemporary formulations that resonated with those reformist imaginations but cast them anew in terms of decadent historical “dying embers that flare up again” (*sihui furan*), the inevitable costs of “opening” to a larger world, gendered and economic victimization, and concerns over social management. While the Maoist notion of the prostitute had been an impossible figure of capitalist degradation, the post-Mao definition of prostitute, while sometimes referencing labor (*maiyin funu*, “woman who sells sex”), was a social problem, one figured by both earlier notions as a marker of greed and market decadence, and a criminal figure who, as an individual, does not adhere to modern notions of legality and gendered, sexual propriety. While the prostitute, virtually always gendered female in this imagination, is a prominent discursive feature of modern notions of the city, development, proper gendered and sexual national subjectivity, as well as discussions of pleasure and nostalgia, very little long-term ethnographic work has been undertaken on this topic, particularly on the lower echelons of sexual labor, and in the context of a major economic center and destination for migrants from around the country.

According to even Chinese government estimates, there are several million women at any given moment working in the direct exchange of sex for money in the PRC, that in a field of labor often quite transitory, making the number who have worked in sexual labor even during the course of single year extraordinarily high.<sup>3</sup> Part of the argument here, then, is a deconstructive one, contesting the notion that this is an “other” realm within China’s uneven globalization, layered as it is upon, and in intersection with, earlier formulations of value, politics, and meaning. What this ethnographic work reveals, rather, is a quite ordinary laboring reality, one that is however rendered “deviant” or “extraordinary” in even sympathetic accounts. This rendering has material, usual very negative, consequences.

I selected Guangzhou as a site for my fieldwork for a number of reasons. I was familiar with the city, having taught there in 1994-95 at Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen) University, and then later returning on occasion as a representative of the Lingnan Foundation and Yale-China Association working on cultural exchanges and higher education development projects in the region in 2000 - 2001. Guangzhou is also among the earliest areas to “open up” as part of the Opening and Reform policies initiated by Deng Xiaoping. Just across the border from Hong Kong, Guangzhou is known as a city of early, somewhat wild capitalism, often identified as a place of decadent and exuberant entrepreneurialism and as such, a bellwether of China’s economic and cultural directions. Along with Beijing and Shanghai (although receiving far less scholarly attention than either) Guangzhou is a “top-tier” city, a

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<sup>3</sup> Statistics on activities like sex work are notoriously unreliable, however, all evidence shows large numbers of women engaging in this economic strategy. See Pan 1999; Hershatter, 1997; Ren 1999. Statistics on men in sex work are even harder to come by. Anecdotal evidence suggests not insubstantial numbers (see Rofel 2010; Kong 2009). Sex work continues to be associated metonymically with female bodies.

major economic power at the forefront of development and among the largest nationwide receivers of migrant labor. An ancient city with over 2500 years of history, a delta city like my sometime home area of the New Orleans delta, and at the same time the conduit between the mainland and the “ever new” city of Hong Kong, it is in part where the action is and at the same time offers a view on to where things are heading.

This research began with a summer of volunteer work with Ziteng, a sex worker empowerment organization in Hong Kong in 2001. This involved eleven weeks of outreach work among mainly mainland women working in sexual labor in Hong Kong and helping to organize and hold a major international conference on sex worker rights bringing together workers and activists from across Asia, Europe, and Australia. That was followed by two summers of preliminary research in Hong Kong and Guangzhou in 2002 and 2003. The main portion of this research was conducted over a two year period from late 2004 to 2006, with a number of lengthy follow-up research visits from 2007 to 2010. During those summers and the two years of primary research, I spent virtually every day hanging around the neighborhoods and in the *falang* described below. In the daytime there were few customers, so my presence was usually tolerated, or even welcome, helping to alleviate the boredom of long workdays.

I also spent on average three or four nights a week hanging around bars or street areas where freelance workers plied their trade, getting to know many of the workers well over the years. These were primarily “older” women in their late 20s to mid-40s who, as I describe below, used their cultivation of English language and certain social skills to cater to a mostly international clientele. Their stories provide points of similarity with the “freelance” work

based out of *falang* as workers within a broadly similar labor arena and faced with common forms of stigma. They also, however, reveal considerable differences based on the specificities of their labor and venue, age, place of origin, and other seemingly minor but very material conditions that were relevant to the vulnerabilities, difficulties, and furtive opportunities that were a part of their lives and labor.

My own positioning in these neighborhoods was, while complex, not as problematic as I had originally feared. Outreach work in Hong Kong among mainland workers had provided me some insights and skills in terms of how to approach people working in this form of underground economy. My appearance as a white foreigner (*lao wai*)<sup>4</sup> who spoke Chinese was generally helpful, provoking initial interest, as well as alleviating concerns that might have arisen had I been a Chinese person. The concern there was what that person might do with the information, for example publish it in a local newspaper or tell the police. That understandable concern was lessened in my case due to my “outsider” status. My practice here has been to use only pseudonyms and to alter selectively personal details that might, however unlikely, identify the person in question. I have similarly been scrupulous in avoiding any identifying references to specific venues.

Being an outsider also meant that my interest in their work was more intelligible to most, and was often associated with a common stereotype of Americans being very “open” (*kaifang*) about sexual things and generally curious. It also meant people were often more

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<sup>4</sup> While the term “*lao wai*,” literally “old outsider,” could technically refer to any foreigner, in practice it is used almost exclusively to refer to Caucasians, or anyone who could broadly be considered to fall in to that category. Other Asians are usually referred to by their country of origin; black people are called either “black people” (*hei ren*) or “black devils” (*hei gui*).

willing to explain things to me, bearing patiently, on most occasions, my often silly-sounding questions. I was variously positioned in the different contexts of this research work. In *falang*, with mostly younger women workers, I was often positioned as a kind of “friend” or even “older brother” (*ge*). Among the street and bar workers I spent so many nights hanging out with, I was usually called “young Ming” (*Xiao Ming*) or “little brother” (*didi*).

My presence in *falang* in particular undoubtedly affected the trajectory of conversations that in part make up this ethnographic research. That was, however, partly mitigated by the hundreds of days I spent in hanging around, during which I became an ordinary, if odd, fixture. I have not tried to hide the traces of my involvement or the politics of my own interventions, when they occurred, particularly when they reveal an aspect of the life of these women as they labor at and beyond the margins.

### **1.2.1 Neighborhoods**

I conducted extensive research throughout dozens of Guangzhou neighborhoods. These were mostly *chengzhongcun* (urban villages), although some were newer migrant worker settlements that did not enjoy the same rights and privileges, however limited, of official villages within the city. I choose here to focus primarily on three neighborhoods that I call, for purposes of anonymity, X, Y, and Z. These neighborhoods all had a large number of *falang*. They also had heavy concentrations of migrants from other parts of China and were at the time of the research considered somewhat “chaotic” (*luan*) parts of the city. All, it turned out, were slated for “development,” rendering them within a few years either completely destroyed or fundamentally altered, “gentrified” in a Guangzhou-specific way. They also had a number of differences that exemplify the range of conditions within

even this narrow niche of sexual labor in one southern Chinese city. Both commonalities and differences are crucial for understanding the experiences of the women and men below.

This research at times draws on ethnographic work in other neighborhoods, or on select streets and bars of the city. Street and freelance bar work was focused in the post-Opening and Reform international business district. The first area to open foreigner-style pubs (Zeng 2009), home to most of the early business hotels in the area, the streets and bars from 2002 to 2005 were a rowdy mix of businessmen from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Europe, other parts of Asia, the US, as well as a large number of local businessmen looking for a good time. Mostly freelance (but not exclusively) workers from all over China found opportunity here for a while, carving out places on the street or in pubs, and earning money through paid accompaniment, fun, and sexual encounters.

### **1.2.2 Methods**

I have drawn on a diverse array of textual, visual, and ethnographic resources in this research. I have made little attempt to epistemologically distinguish between various registers of discourse, finding, for example, a critical reading of a journalistic account of prostitutes in Guangzhou to be as insightful, in its way, as a scholarly account of legal conditions, or indeed a narrative account by someone who works in a *falang*. My main concern, here, however, is with the narratives of people who labor in these conditions. Given this, the bulk of my research work has been a form of extended loitering, or what I call here, “vagrant anthropology.” This is partly a play on Louisa Schein’s notion of “itinerant anthropology” (1998), similar in some respects to Marcus’ multi-sited approach (1998). I argue below, however, that the spaces of Guangzhou that I examine bring together a range of

places, histories, and other relations of force that makes them inherently plural, a kind of localized multi-sitedness, in contrast to the more literalized physicality of Marcus' notion. Further, the notion of "vagrant anthropology" is intended to invoke the inherently illicit and inefficient practice of ethnographic fieldwork. I have found this practice, in its long duration, to be necessary. It takes time to get to know people and to understand their conditions, particularly those who work and live beyond the margins of the "city proper." It also requires the patience of the many who, for various reasons, are willing to talk, share and experience with the anthropologist.

I spent literally countless hours in the three neighborhoods that this research primarily focuses on, in addition to other neighborhoods, streets, and bars that make up the unofficial terrain of sex work at the lower, but freelance, ends of Guangzhou's vast and omnipresent market of gender and sexuality. In the course of this, I came to know hundreds who worked at or outside the margins of "normality," as well as many, including government officials, academics, NGO workers, and police who were, quite by chance, on the other side of that sometimes very grey, shifting line.

I have focused a great deal of the attention to follow on a small number of women who worked in these various areas and venues. This is in part a matter of practicality. I could not include all the stories and experiences of the people that I came to know over the years. This also serves, I believe, to focus the reader on individual people, who, however complexly implicated they are in broader conditions, are nonetheless also unique in their voices and experiences. These ethnographic accounts are thus meant to exemplify common themes that worked through the stories and experiences of many others as I encountered them, and at the

same time reveal differences based on often apparently minor variations in work location, age, experience, and background. They also, I think reveal a certain inevitable uniqueness, a “thinking otherwise” that arises from close attention to stories on the gendered, sexual, legal, and social margins of one of the world’s most dynamically globalizing cities.

I did not in generally use a tape recorder to record interviews and discussion. I found the presence of a tape recorder unwelcome, one that stifled conversation, and raised suspicions and concerns. Note taking was a different matter. The sight of me perched on a wooden sofa at one end of a *falang* scribbling away in my notepad was a common one

### **1.3 CONCERNS AND THE ETHICS OF TELLING**

I want to mention two kinds of representational problems that I explicitly aim to avoid.

The first is a naturalized relationship between female bodies and sexual labor. Although I have focused here on female sex workers, I aim to de-naturalize their relationship to sexual labor by illustrating the contextual conditions that delimit and shape these particular women’s choices. The point is not to replicate an all-too-common devaluation of sexual labor, but to challenge its natural connection to female bodies. This naturalized connection *and* the devaluation of sexual labor are mutually supportive in strategically maintaining varying forms of gender inequality. It is not coincidence that one of the few forms of labor that appear to offer economic and geographic mobility for non-college educated women in China is also a form of labor that is heavily de-valued and stigmatized. Recognition of the mutually supportive relationship between unequal gendered economic opportunities and the de-valuation of what is coded as female labor demands a strategy that challenges both.



Secondly, I wish to avoid to the extent possible any sense of a “pornography of suffering,” whether that be of the “inevitably victimized third world prostitute” sort or one that adds to the stigmatization of people already at the margins by revealing some of the tactics, not always pretty, which they use in their struggles to get by. That last is the point, of course, that these are ordinary people constituted in part through the ordinary hopes that framed the discursive realities of their lives, doing what they can to realize those hopes, or failing that, to get through the days with some dignity and material security.

While keenly aware of the treacherous ethical ground of representations of the poor and marginal, I follow a number of anthropologists in arguing that to turn away from what are often ugly realities is a greater abdication of responsibility. Honest, sensitive, compassionate accounts of the stories of others, particularly at the margins, attentive to the politics of their reception, must be told in all their flawed partiality. As Scheper-Hughes notes of the ethnographer in the role of a minor keeper of records, “...they are the work of recognition. Not to look, not to touch, not to record, can be the hostile act, the act of indifference and of turning away” (1992: 28). To ignore the ethical concerns of representation is as much a failure as the “turning away” Scheper-Hughes refers to. These sometimes competing ethical concerns must, I argue, be held together in tension, negotiated as honestly and rigorously as possible, and then expressed in a language that seeks truth through, not apart from, an ethical engagement with those at the margins. Finally, the reception of this telling is not the responsibility of the writer alone.

## 1.4 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

This work addresses common themes of work, experience, and desire in the context of multiple marginalizations – regional, rural/urban, gendered, sexual, and class – and within the context of a city rapidly engaged in the often violent, wrenching realization of a unique, historically and culturally inflected vision of modernity, cosmopolitanism, and development. Chapter 1 uses the trope of encounter to exemplify and initially explore the themes that will be addressed throughout the dissertation. These themes are simultaneously ethnographic, theoretical, and ethical. This chapter situates our view of Guangzhou’s “development” from within the “other” spaces of *falang* sexual labor at the same time as it situates the ethnographer writing it in a series of distances and proximities.

Chapter 2 continues this theme in the context of socially constituted desires vis-a-vis both a state rhetoric of opportunity and individual responsibility, and a market that celebrates wealth, entrepreneurialism, and glamorous, sophisticated consumption. In exploring questions related to the production of human value (*suzhi*) and hope in China, questions that also resonate broadly throughout other late-capitalist locations, this chapter traces the production and extraction of surplus value as a form of irreconcilable loss. This will be complicated when viewed through the ethnographic lens of those whose labor is discursively outside of even *suzhi* discourse, raising difficult questions about abjection and the relationship between productive and sovereign forms of power. Ultimately this chapter addresses the embodiment of melancholy, not merely as a failure to “let go” or substitute for the lost, but as an agential response to embodied conditions that are impossible to reconcile.

Chapter 3 will examine the spaces of *falang* labor in Guangzhou in their relationship to the discursive and material practices of the city's development project(s). It will draw in part on an existing literature on space, power, and development, contextualizing this within Guangzhou's unique concatenation of global, national, and local forces and histories. It will go beyond the existing literature, however, in exploring these "out of the way" spaces as themselves heterogeneous, characterized by a variety of internal fault lines of power, visible from the point of the view of those altogether, if temporarily, "outside." It will further explore these as variously material spaces, or sites of accretion, arguing for the possibility of authentic specters, or traces of lived experiences that are not fully erasable by, or incorporable into, Guangzhou City Planning. The *falang* space is thus explored as the marginal of the marginal, both a part of and separate from the "outer" neighborhoods it is putatively within, as in some sense a spectral space whose absent presence haunts a development that attempts to exorcise it from the City Proper.

Chapter 4 explores the various work practices and tactics available to women in Guangzhou. In particular, it explores how different objectifying discourses may be turned to the benefit of the individual worker in the limited, out of the way context of their labor. It further explores how production and exchange of emotion and intimacy, primarily as a work strategy, but also as a kind of embodied practice that sometimes exceeds the bounds of the work encounter. Chapter 5 continues the focus on work practices, but in the context of discourses of the body – its pains, pleasures, forms of self-apprehension and experience, and anxieties. This in part relates to work practices and strategies, as the bodily labor, and the emotional labor which is often narrated through the body, figures prominently in the stories

of these women. Further, however, the almost daily discussion of bodily ailments and pleasures, reveals a great deal about the material and emotional conditions of migrant labor, both specific to this laboring arena and resonating more broadly with migrant, devalued labor in southern China in general. Finally, anxieties about the intrusion of racial others into one of the three neighborhoods focused on here raises difficult questions about ongoing registers of identity and otherness, and the ways in which resistance on one register of power may be a form of oppression on another.

## **1.5 SIGNPOSTS**

This work draws in somewhat bricoleur fashion on a range of theoretical inspirations that constitute, in a loose use of Deleuze and Guatarris conception, its “plane of immanence,” the contours and limits of its intelligibility (1994: 38). These are best exemplified in the stories that follow. Briefly, however, I have found a certain reading of Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the body and place useful (1962), particularly in conversation with a more Marxian notion of space as produced, a view most commonly associated with Henry Lefebvre (1991) and illustrated ethnographically in the Chinese context by Zhang’s work on migrant communities on the margins of Beijing (2001). A shifting attention to the phenomenology of being interpenetrated in various ways with places, people, and histories, in conversation with a broader but conditional views of spatial production, power, and value, reveals power and inequality as process in the immediate givenness of life and language, primarily as it is already present as the realm of the intelligible and visible.

Recent scholarship related to escalating forms of human devaluation, accompanied by escalating global violence, in particular the work of Agamben, Butler, Derrida, and Spivak, have resonated with my own ethnographic experiences and concerns. Agamben's concern with human value and devaluation, or with what he calls the "bare life" of persons whom "sovereign power" has rendered value-less (1998), resonates to some extent with Butler's modified use of the notion of abjection, drawn in part from her reading of Kristeva, although I find the notion of abjection a more useful analytical tool for exploring the systemic necessity of the abject in both its semiotic and bodily registers (2004; 1990). I am critical, however, of Butler's more static notion of abjection, and find placing it in conversation with *suzhi* (human quality) discourse in China to offer a more finely tuned approach to understanding the shifting conditions of value narrated below. I found some inspiration in Derrida's notion of "hauntology" and what it begins to suggest about the revolutionary potential of authentic traces, but like many of his critics, including in this case Gayatri Spivak, found his approach unnecessarily, even harmfully immaterial (1995). Finally, I have tried to make creative use of the ethical/epistemological work of Certeau (1984; 1986) and Levinas (1998) in the context of recent scholarship on human value and loss, arguing that the productive mode must be viewed in the light not of stable "otherness" but of its direct opposite – unmaking. This is not loss, it is an ongoingness of losing, undoing, and separation. If there are hopeful signs here it is not in the finely grained tactics of getting by, I argue, it is in a common ground of shared losing, and a final refusal to give up the very tools of making and unmaking that tear and rend and undo via the living modes of hope, struggle and exhaustion. This refusal is melancholy.

## 2.0 ENCOUNTERS IN EXILE

Above ground, the neon lights and bright window displays dazzle us. Beneath the surface, however, live the people of *liu*.

Michael Dutton (1999: 81)

We inhabit the megalopolis only to the extent that we declare it uninhabitable. Otherwise, we are just lodged there.

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1991: 200)

Loss has made a tenuous “we” of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire.

Judith Butler (2003: 10)

In 2004, the small streets and alleyways of Guangzhou were temporary and marginal home to countless small, often privately owned, shops selling sex. Typically semi-disguised as tiny hair salons, these shops, *falang*, or sometimes *hei falang* (“black” hair salons), seemed to me to be literally everywhere, and their disguise to be very thin. They were at the time the main common venue for the direct exchange of sex for money in the city.

While the city's comparatively small number of KTVs, Sauna's, *Yezonghui* (dance-oriented pick-up and sex service clubs), and relaxation centers catered to the affluent, traveling businessman clientele, providing lubrication for business deals, companionship, as well as more explicitly sexual services, *falang* were where one went for quick, immediate, inexpensive and direct sexual service. Sandra Hyde has written about *falang* in the Dai ethnic minority regions of southern Yunnan, and these share some similarities (2007). They are, however, in Guangzhou, a part of a huge and ever-growing megalopolis, not a marker of its "development" but a temporary holdover of a more primitive stage of development, bastions of migration and chaos (*luan*) that are a natural part of development, but do not fit with the city's imagination of itself as a fully developed, glittering, cosmopolitan super-city. Where in Hyde's account, Han Chinese women may trade on the exoticization of minority others in their business practices, and where that forms a central part of the area's tourism-based model, in Guangzhou the *falang* is an unwelcome growth, owned and staffed mostly by outsiders, the "liu" (floating) of the *liudongrenkou* (floating population), a temporary necessity, even fleeting pleasure for a city on the move, in which the locally-owned and uncontrollable tiny shop selling sex (or whatever else) is inexorably replaced with the shiny, the clean, the regulated, the taxed, the ordered. It is in this set of spaces then that the *falang* exists as a palimpsestic site, as location of post-80's hope and individual opportunity, temporary home for migrants from Hunan, Sichuan, and other places with their own unevenly layered complexities, all within Guangzhou's own heavily breathing mixture of history-spaces and hysterical development SEZ (Special Economic Zone) style, haunted, moist, and weighty. City development projects attempt with frantic speed to erase

the traces of their own richness and violence even as that remains rooted in the city-self in ways that cannot be included in government planning offices. It is at this intersection that we sit ourselves down and listen and talk and loiter, and in this, through this, see the everyday violence of progress at its living edges. And in this we bear witness to the specters of loss and hope, and the losing battles of space – the forceful exchange of space for history – that accompany this most mundane violence. And sometimes we may glimpse history’s small, unplanned escapes.

## 2.1 OVERVIEW OF VENUES

The vast array of venues in which, at least in part, services called “sexual” were exchanged, either directly or indirectly, for money as a basic aspect of their business model are too extensive to fully list here. Pan Suiming, China’s best-known scholar of “prostitution,” has proposed a 7-tiered schema covering the broad categories of sexual labor in China (1999), some of which falls under administrative sanctions and law enforcement control, some of which do not.<sup>5</sup> While Pan’s schema is useful, it necessarily fails to account for a great deal of variation, as well as some of the complexity of the categories as they blur into each other or have unclear relationships. It nonetheless frames a hierarchy which I found to generally hold true in Guangzhou.

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<sup>5</sup> First-party participation in the transaction of paid sex does not fall under Chinese criminal statute. It is, however, banned under the 1991 *Decision on Strictly Forbidding the Selling and Buying of Sex*, the 1991 *Decision on the Severe Punishment of Criminals Who Abduct and Traffic in or Kidnap Women and Children*, and the 1992 *Law on Protecting the Rights and Interests of Women*, and thus falls under China’s system of administrative sanctions (see Jeffrey 2006a: 574-575). Categories like “*er nai*” (second wives) and paid mistresses, higher-level tiers in Pan’s schema, do not generally fall under administrative sanction or within the purview of law enforcement concern.



Briefly, and only in ways directly relevant to the ethnographic work here, KTV workers, those at elite saunas, dance clubs, and “pleasure centers” (*le bu*) tended to form a higher-echelon within the ill-defined realm of sex work in Guangzhou. Those venues had fairly strict requirements on minimum height, body shape, skin color and texture, and overall appearance and manner.<sup>6</sup> Women, and men, who worked in those venues tended to earn more than those in *falang*, street, or freelance bar work, and did so under generally safer, highly structured conditions. At the same time, they were subject to greater control by owners and their managerial teams, a combination of labor management techniques including extensive training and fines for tardiness and other disciplinary measures, and more direct measures often found in underground or under-regulated economies, including physical force and coercion. Despite that, street and *falang* tended to see such work as far superior to their own. Greater earnings, considerably greater security from police harassment and potential customer violence, and higher prestige made those jobs seem glamorous in comparison. Small, dirty, street-level *falang*, run and managed by other relatively poor, entrepreneurial migrants without political or economic power, were physically and otherwise very vulnerable to predation at the hands of police and small-scale organized crime. Street work was worse.

## 2.2 FAMILY RUN

It was the first *falang* where I was welcome as guest and friend. It also happened to be only a 10 minute walk from the west gate of Zhongshan University, where I was housed. When I

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<sup>6</sup> See Hanser 2005 for a discussion of the gendered anthropometrics that apply to urban service work in general in contemporary China.

told Professor Ai Xiaoming, my sponsor, local mentor, and feminist scholar, activist, and documentary film maker of the shops right next to the university, indeed encircling the university, she was shocked. It had not occurred to her that university graduate students, and undergraduates, would be out buying sex at night. They were, and they were good customers. They were generally safe, they paid, and they were quick. Professor Ai believed, like her friend and colleague the sexologist Li Yinhe, that a major problem with Chinese society was that people weren't having enough sex. From where I saw things, there was a huge amount of sex going on.

The *falang* was family run by a couple from southern Hunan. As was typical, the wife, Ah Qiang, ran things while her husband tended to other affairs, which seemed mostly to be gambling at *mah jiang* and discussing business affairs with other men from the same part of Hunan who also had a lot of time on their hands while their wives ran various small, unlicensed businesses. It had a very mobile staff of women, mostly from southern Hunan,<sup>7</sup> mostly with friend or family connections to Ah Qiang and her husband, all in Guangzhou looking for opportunities they couldn't find at home. Money yes, financial prosperity, a husband, yes, all of that – but also life, where life was, the city, the cosmopolitan life, the glittering breathe and step of life – to *chu lai* – to come out, to taste life, to seek opportunities, not just for money, to Be Alive in the big city.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Mandarin word for “chicken” is very close in pronunciation to the word for “prostitute.” The prevalence of women from neighboring Hunan in the sex work business in Guangzhou from the 1990s onward is expressed in the commonly used “Hunan Chicken,” a euphemism for “prostitute.”

<sup>8</sup> A substantial amount of scholarly work has explored, in part, the role that images of urbanity and cosmopolitanism play in the motivations behind, and experiences of, migration and labor in China. See for example: Schein 2001; Yan 2003; Zhang 2001; Solinger 1999; Lee 1998).

I do not know the first *hei falang* I stepped in to, paid money at, and received services from. It would have been in 1994. I was at Sun Yat-Sen University teaching spoken English and academic writing to graduate students, and mainly avoiding the seeming inevitability of law school following an undergraduate degree in philosophy. I went to many small hair salons for bad haircuts – I never understood why they were so bad – or to have my hair washed for 20 – 30 minutes, which as odd as it may sound, was one of the great public pleasures of that time, a lengthy head and neck massage for 15 RMB (at that time less than two U.S. dollars).

When I took a friend to my favorite neighborhood hair salon for a washing, who himself happened to be from Changsha, Hunan, I did not at first notice his apparent surprise at the place I had chosen. Thinking it might be a bit too “low” for his tastes, he being the son of government officials, I assured him the services were quite good, which did not appear to ease his surprise, although his half smile grew. As we left, our hair over-washed and puffed into something like a bouffant, he asked me, in an odd way, if I knew what kind of hair salon that was. I hesitated, confused. He rushed forward, “It’s a special *falang* ah. They give you special service!” It started to dawn on me what he meant, more from his demeanor than the words, but still confused, I again hesitated, and he rushed forward again with “They give you the sex!” I was stunned, less at the idea that somebody may give you the sex for money than that I had been going to this place unaware for months. It began to dawn on me that I passed dozens of places that looked just like it every day; were they all providers of “special services?” My friend laughed at my American naiveté, tasted his superiority, and then told me authoritatively that no, not all that looked like that did, but it

was easy to tell the signs. Hadn't I noticed that the hair salon workers were unusually young and sexily dressed, that the salon had slightly less hair related equipment on display than some others, that there were no male stylists? I admitted that I had not. They all looked like tiny hair salons to me with just a few staff hanging around, generally pretty dirty little shops that all seemed seedy to my middle-class American eyes.

We then went on a little tour around the University, my friend pointing out the *hei falang* from the "regular" *falang*, complicating all of that by telling me that the "regular" *falang* may or may not provide *da feiji* (Hand jobs – literally to "shoot the planes," a metaphor for the penis as an artillery gun) in the back room, and sometimes the women who work in the "regular" *falang* also work in the *hei falang*, and sometimes *hei falang* will shift to be being regular *falang*, and you just have to know or sense or sometimes just try and it usually works and at least you can get a handjob, but sometimes not - and then just leaving me befuddled, realizing now that I was surrounded all the time by a world I was totally ignorant of, and him satisfied that he'd educated an admittedly ignorant American. Thus began my introduction to *hei falang*, which I was soon to temporarily forget. My confusion about how *hei falang* were different from other similar shops, of all sorts, though, was the beginning of something, for in fact, they are not different, or rather, the production of their difference is the fissure along which our skepticism and intellectual anger should run.

### **2.3 VAGRANT ANTHROPOLOGY**

In 2004, I was back in Guangzhou to undertake what turned out to be years of dissertation field research. My first experience with *falang* in Guangzhou was now several years past.

I was returning with an MA degree in Chinese Cultural Studies, three years of anthropological coursework, years of Mandarin training, summers of volunteer and preliminary research work, extensive experience with NGOs in the region, and having studied obsessively the general and regional literature on gender, sexuality, labor and migration. Gail Hershatter's book on 20<sup>th</sup> century Prostitution in Shanghai, perhaps more than any other text, framed my initial interest, pointing to the fundamental ways in which normality and the nation in modern China had been formed in relation to the figure of the female prostitute, first in revolutionary discourse and then later in the marketization period of the post-Mao era, in both cases, although somewhat differently, working as a signifier of lack and deficiency against which normality, development, and proper gendered and sexual subjectivity was defined. Her work opened my eyes for the first time to Prostitution not just as a form of economic and gendered oppression but as a speciating formation that runs through modernit(ies) and has founded itself an edifice upon the bodies of many woman and men who did what people do in trying to get by.

I had spent a summer as a volunteer for ZiTeng, a sex worker empowerment organization in Hong Kong doing outreach work among 1-4-1 sex workers,<sup>9</sup> applying for funding grants and helping organize the first, and largest, Hong Kong sex worker organization conference bringing together non-profit workers and sex workers from across

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<sup>9</sup> 1-4-1 is a euphemism for "one floor - one sex worker," a type of sexual labor venue specific to Hong Kong. This is the only technically legal form of sexual labor in the territory. One sex worker who privately rents her or his own flat, does not advertise or publicly solicit, is self-employed, and works alone may, under this very narrow standard, exchange sex legally for money. In other words, all activities related to the reasonable business prospects of any form of service labor have been criminalized. Further and by definition, this narrow frame of legality renders the lone sex worker tremendously vulnerable. This includes a vulnerability to police harassment despite being legal.

Asia, Europe, and the Americas. I had done preliminary research for months in Hong Kong and Guangzhou on the conditions of sexual labor, talked with outreach workers, academics, sex workers, pimps, club owners, taxi drivers, police officers, a couple of low level Guangzhou government officials, and read everything that I could find. Now I was here in Guangzhou for a year. That became two, then more years to follow. *Hei falang* were everywhere, now that I could see.

The question that now faced me was how was I going to really get to know these places and people, not just academics, and sex worker activists, and cops, but really get to know people who are the most marginal of the marginal – the marginal of the migrant, not only the *liu* of China, working as many do on or across the official lines of legality, but in a conspicuously and deliberately singled out realm of “otherness,” the sexual other that frames national and individual disgrace in one lone, gendered, figure. The selfish deviant, the expelled waste of economic reform, the corruption of urbanity, the fly that enters with opening to the West, the helpless victim of evil forces – never the natural result of gendered economic and spatial policies that privilege certain regions (physical places and social groups) dramatically over others while erasing all competing meanings in a deafening chorus of Development. How could the triumphalist celebration of personal initiative and ability and ambition and entrepreneurship be interpreted as “I need to use my own abilities and skills and newly found mobility to get ahead in the world?”

These were not the relatively elite working in KTVs and Saunas and in the lobbies of 5 star hotels, organized, enclosed, with bosses and training and bodyguard/bullies, who, if I were friends with a boss, would have to accept me and talk to me and maybe eventually take

me as friend. This was the lower echelon of people who came and went, who envied the KTV workers, the nice shop workers, the assistant restaurant managers with their relatively safe work spaces and relatively higher earnings, but at the same time did not envy them their confinement – for *falang* workers could come and go, quit the next day, start working for another *falang*, head back home, wander around during the day when there were few customers, typically take the customers they felt comfortable with (although not always). They did not, however, have much protection from the worst mafia of all, the police, who could come when they wished and take what they wished. Their only protection then was the skill and connections of the “mommy” – did the money she paid to the police each month, and the friendships she courted, lead to the crucial phone call, the tip off, the sign that today we close the shop, everyone stays home?

We all taste black and white (*hei bai tong chi*), you know Ming? What does this mean anyway? I don't try to do bad things. I do my business, what is necessary.

You know, the world is like this, you Americans are like this. We understand each other anyway. We need them for fun and to relax, but we don't need too many, then things are not balanced.

This from Mr. Wang, Guangzhou official and my best supplier of Italian wines which he ships back in crates from his yearly trip to the Tuscany region on a modest official's salary.

## 2.4 AN UNCERTAIN LABOR

This is where one is tempted to tell an entry story in the anthropological tradition. The key trope here is of irrevocable penetration. One transgresses a boundary, the line separating

self and other, typically via a significant event that mediates what are fundamental distinctions. Once transgressed, this trope is not repeated (in language) for one has now entered the group – acceptance, friendship, respect – and the authority that flows from that. That such things as acceptance, friendship, and respect are negotiable positions, variable in complex ways, contingent on a variety of temporally based factors – in other words happen in practice is not part of this rhetorical strategy. To call it rhetorical is not to claim it is unreal but rather to focus on its function in language, in particular, in writing, not only anthropological.

The trope of penetration then is predicated on the group. I have penetrated a group, or the group has enfolded me in it. Once done, it is complete enough to authorize authority. The relationship then of ethnographer, in the anthropological instance, is firstly one, ironically, of distinction. The penetration of the other (group; individual) is made possible by a notion of boundedness, whether skin or other, the pointillary locatedness of subjects in space-time, and the crossing of an infinite distance between that are shorthanded as acceptance or friendship. All of this supposes not only distinctions, but also solidities, namely the unity of the collective or individual self vis-a-vis the other. In this humanistic notion then, the possibility of contact with the other is ironically predicated with our ultimate separation. We are thus compelled to tell stories of entering to anchor our authority.

The point here it not to deny the dialogical character of ethnographic writing, and to be clear, this is about writing, nor is it to deny Marilyn Strathern's critique of a naïve notion of dialogical production absent of broader concerns with force (1987). Rather it is to take her point farther in that where dialogic exists it can be said to do so, if at all, phenomenologically,



although this does not mean merely experientially as though language were not material (a common misuse of the term) and thus not at the level of an episteme of distinction. Or rather this exceeds the individual/monad, or is not this individual but is a location of force relations in shifting and dialogic relationship to this “other” who is not other. To put it simply, this is a political encounter. I hasten to add that this observation is only slightly preferable to a more naïvely linguistic approach to Being With, and that preferability lies solely in that force relations thus understood can be said to be more nakedly at play, or rather, more poignantly so, than in the narrative trope of entry and friendship.

This does not then imply that this dialogic, such that it is, and ultimately it is expressed in language even if it is not fully encompassed by language, is not a product of human encounter based at times in friendship and care, nor is it to rehearse the by now common observation of this as authoritative rhetorical trope (Which hasn’t stopped its use). Rather it is to call attention to this as a profound divergence, as a point of departure in important, sometimes unacknowledged debates, as well as a crack in intelligibility, “the events of a thought yet to come” (Certeau 1986: 195). If we put aside more simplistic tropes of boundedness and unity, we are left with what Joseph Alter has called “the tragedy of encounter” (1999: XII), in which we see, in the shadow plays of our own best intentions, our noblest responses to others, the daily horror of development and the “nervous system(s)” of ordinary violence at the intersection of being with others on terms not of our own making. At this precise point, then, is the cutting edge of our most fundamental ethical-intellectual labor, namely, either the possibility or false hope of excess.

There was no substitute, I found, for duration, for what was ultimately a form of vagrancy mixed with loitering, a long-term and recurrent “*liu*”-ness that is peculiar to some forms of ethnographic practice. Like other loiterers, including Benjamin’s “*flaneur*, sandwichman, and whore” (See Buck-Morris 1986), I was up to no good and did not abide by the temporal demands of this most anxiously developing of megacities, housed in its southern delta’s and waterways, vibrating and pulsing along and past its borders with Hong Kong and “The World,” beating with a similar rhythm, its own unique concatenation of global force relations, a massive, throbbing assemblage in a breathless race to develop towards an ever receding vision of itself - as development - that in Lyotard’s words “had no finality.” And he continues, “Development is not attached to an Idea...It is reproduced by accelerating and extending itself according to its internal dynamic alone (1988:7). In raising this, Lyotard reminds us of the amnesic violence of development, and asks, as I do above, though he is speaking of a particular dialectic of the self, “is there a remainder?” Or, I would ask, are there memories, living revenants? And how do we find them, and in Derrida’s sense, engage productively with them? And why is this so urgent?

I, along with most of the people I came to know, some for many years, was not “developing” with the city. The difference was that my irregularity was legitimized, to an extent and for a time, by institutional affiliations under the broader rubrics of “research” and “international” and “university.” They were beyond legitimation, the marginal of the migrant, and the other of the whore. The marginality we met in, the forms of exile that we shared, were thus not the same in many ways, although we did find at times in our shared distance from a home that changed as our memory of it remained the same, our inability to

articulate to our families how our sojourns had changed us, a mixture of longing for home and despair at knowing we could never go there, some common ground.<sup>10</sup>

“We shared the same danger..,” says Zheng Tiantian (2009: 33 of her ethnographic work in KTVs in the northeast city of Dalian, expressing another of the forms of authority and authorization that we thought perhaps, in “dreamland,” anthropology would leave behind or deconstruct and turn into something fruitful. That assumes development; we have no right to that violent conceit.

More than a few times I had to run. A couple of times I was caught and roughed up. I helped others to hide, was helped to hide, spent many nights with someone in a hospital or visited someone who had had things done to them, negotiated and assisted different forms of departure with a combination of learned skills, dumb luck, and, critically, help from others, and mourned losses and the lost. I did not “share their dangers.” I could leave, and I had certain other invisible protections based on my different class standing and outsider position. I was also never alone with a stranger in a room, naked, vulnerable except for my wits and skills and the hope that if I screamed colleagues, or someone, would come running. I was a witness and minor keeper of records of the violence of the everyday; I lived it with others who lived it differently, far more urgently and vulnerably. We lived in a form of shared exile in the midst of a megalopolis, and with various distances and proximities that wove themselves through our encounters.

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<sup>10</sup> See Constable 1999 for a related exploration of a form of exile in the experience of Filipina workers in Hong Kong, one in which the figure of “home” is both impossible and affectively powerful.

There was no “entry.” This was not a tribe or village-monad; it was different people, working in different *falangs* in the three major parts of Guangzhou that I concentrated on, with different histories and goals and trajectories, with much shared and much different. I learned that the aleatory was as or more important than the generalizable, for it offered glimpses into “thinking otherwise” (Certeau 1986: 194). I came to be known among *falang* owners and workers as generally someone to trust, a strange but nice person who would listen and talk, a poor international student who seemed to care, who didn’t have money but knew bits of useful information about health and law and coming crackdowns, who had helped people out in some dire situations, who wrote notes down on tattered spiral notebooks and looked at books and hung around a lot with seemingly little to do. With some people, my relationships go back to 2001 and continue, with others they lasted a few years, some I knew only for a month or a day.

I was never “in” with “sex workers.” I knew and know and have spent years of ethnographic and human engagement with hundreds of people in southern China who have at least once sold sex directly. This activity, this exchange, is both meaningless in and of itself, little or no different than the other actions of the market, and at the same time imbued with the full force of identification and disavowal – the full political and social force of the stigma – the mark of an unwelcome but necessary excrescence. It is the force of this mark that leaves material traces of the shared, traces that the anthropologist tries to elucidate and then render into narration, revealing, not reinscribing, their production, and marking the passage of people whose experiences are likewise marked with shared proximities and contingencies, and the fleeting glimpse of the aleatory - with perhaps a denser web of proximities than

others who do not share, however unequally, these experiences, but much in common with the subaltern others of the worlds – increasingly The World – of, around, and in us.

The “non-productive” labor of vagrant ethnography involved the usual visits to, and selective plundering of, archives, the collector’s obsession with articles, newspaper reports, online chat site postings, blog rolls, and interviews with police, government officials, academics, NGO workers, activists, physicians, and others. Mostly, however, this was a work of walking and loitering. The focused vagrancy, as I mentioned in the Introduction, was in three main areas of Guangzhou, each different, but with many commonalities. I also at times refer to other areas and events in Guangzhou and Hong Kong when it is helpful for clarifying an issue. All were relatively poor areas with high populations of migrant workers from other parts of Guangdong and China. All had high numbers of the lower end sex-for-money shops called *falang*, along with many other marginal shops of all sorts that were routinely swept up in “clean up” campaigns, mixed small business and residential areas, with lots of foot traffic, less car traffic, and not along Guangzhou’s major thoroughfares, the showpieces of the city behind which a more complex, living world went about getting by.

Their differences, though, were as important as their commonalities, affecting the conditions of life and labor there – from the two *chengzhongcun* with their land and other rights, although each different as well, it turned out, to the purely migrant worker enclave that one day was disappeared – acres of buildings, shops, homes, the accreted products of years of human life, gone in rubble that stretched as far as my surprised eyes could see behind a blue metal fence with images of tomorrow’s promises upon it. Now there stands that promise; mostly empty high-end, high rise apartments.

It was over the course hundreds of days and very late nights in these areas, and many others, that I did the slow, loitering work of ethnography, of bearing a form of witness, which is not a passive act, is a political act, but an act in the service of truth, however partial, and we do not need to fear its constructed and unevenly dialogical nature. This activity, or commitment, is in recognition of an always prior responsibility.

## 2.5 A STRANGE CITY

All you want to ask humbly is this question – isn't a city a strange city if it does not intend to preserve its dweller's living traces? (no matter how the city is named after; it is usually named after prosperity – progressiveness – hope – happiness). A strange city, then why bother cherishing, maintaining it, or even having an attachment to it?

Zhu Tianxin (qtd. in Hsu 2004: 560)

It was clear by now why migrants flooded into the city of Guangzhou. They came for money. That's what the urban residents told me, and sometimes that is what the migrant workers themselves told me. But what was this money? It was prosperity, it was a different life, it was a freedom from a home that seemed stifling, it was something called opportunity, it was what one does when was is young, it was "going out" to try your fortunes, it was the cosmopolitan, the real Life. Xiaojing, who figures prominently in many of the stories below, told me that in her small town in Hunan there were almost no young or middle-aged people left. Everyone had "gone out." It was a town of old people taking care of babies and small children.

“There are two things that I hate the most!” Xiaojing said this suddenly, waking me from a half-doze on my usual perch on the wooden sofa at the back wall of the front room of the *falang* right outside of Sun Yat-sen University’s western walls. It was summer, hot and humid, and the mid-day when everyone tended to rest after lunch, sometimes half-watching the Tele-drama on the TV in the upper far corner, but mostly sweating and dozing and watching the occasional passerby make their way along the narrow alleyway outside the shop. Xiaojing liked to sit in one of the barber shop chairs and listen to music on her latest cell phone. I called it her “thinking chair,” as it was from there that she often had inspiration and things to say.

Hearing her sudden exclamation, I sat upright. “What’s that?” I asked. “What do you hate?” “I hate people talking about me,” she said. “I always hated that, when I was little I hated it. Why do they talk about me? I didn’t do anything to them. Fuck their mothers!” I knew what Xiaojing was talking about. She meant people in her hometown engaging in petty gossip or just “talking about” others, almost invariably in a critical way, analyzing, assessing, judging. She also meant what people did to her on the street here in Guangzhou.

I laughed a bit in sympathy. “It’s very different in America, right? People are open-minded and mind their own business, isn’t that right?” she asked? For Xiaojing, as for many others I would talk to over the years, including an activist or professor or two, *Mei Guo* (USA) was where this sort of nonsense didn’t happen. It does, and I tried to say that gently and with context, but that misses the point, which isn’t really about that archive we call America but about comparing the here and now with what could be – a kind of spatial version of Kantian ethics.

“Well,” I replied, “Sometimes it does happen...” “But not so much!” She interjected firmly. “What was the other thing?” I asked. “I hate my parents trying to control my freedom (*kongzhi wode ziyou*). They always do this, really! You can’t believe it! They didn’t want me to come to Guangzhou, they just want me to stay home. What do I do there? Now they call me and send me text messages to come home. It’s very troublesome (*hao fan ah*)!”

Xiaojing was perhaps 18. She claimed to be that age, sometimes. She was in many ways a very trusting and childlike young woman, and was taken especial care of by the other temporary residents of the *falang*. “*Xiao bizi, xiao yanjing, xiao zuiba, te keia!* Small nose, small eyes, small mouth, so cute! It was a sort of chant they would occasionally use to embarrass and delight her. She was very popular with customers in the *falang*, cute and even younger looking than her age, with the pale skin most desired, although she was very self-conscious about the 16 small, black moles that she said were on her upper chest and back. She never exposed those areas even on the hottest of Guangzhou’s sweltering summer days. I heard that number 16 many times over the more than three years we knew each other. During that time, I saw her often, with brief exceptions when she went home or moved to Shenzhen or Dongguan.

Xiaojing’s first boyfriend was a minor mafia-style boss from her hometown, 26 years old, good looking, a successful local boy with cash. She had run away with him when she was around 15 to Changsha, then to Guangzhou briefly. Her parents worried she said, but she also made clear they didn’t complain as much when she sent back a bit of money. Still, they worried, and their worry was very “*fan*” (irritating, troublesome) and made her upset.



It seemed to make her feel guilty, like a weight she carried. I could usually tell when she had recently talked to her parents on the phone as she was more gloomy and irritable than her usual cheerful self. Running away was exciting and fun, and most of the others her age had left already anyway, so why did her parents give her such grief, she wondered.

While Xiaojing had enjoyed her first adventure, it didn't work out so well in the end. He didn't hit her as much as most boys hit girls, she said, but he didn't really love her and played too much with other girls. He also, it seemed, introduced her originally to the notion, if not the practice, of selling sex. Low on cash at one point, he suggested that she go to work for a few weeks at a *falang* in Guangzhou that was run by a *laoxiang* (person from the same hometown or home area) to make a bit of money for them. It was around this time that she went back home to stay with her parents for a while. She didn't want to talk about the details of what happened, only that it didn't work out and that she didn't regret it. Xiaojing would just shrug and say "He was ok yah, not so bad, but I was too young then for marriage."

As Xiaojing went from 18 to 19 years old, her parents began asking and pressuring her about marriage, which took its own toll. She found, she said, home even more impossible after "going out." Backward thinking, "dead minds" (*sinaojin*),<sup>11</sup> always so conservative and trying to *kongzhi* (control) her *ziyou* (freedom). Xiaojing missed home and her parents when she was away too long. She would talk and talk about her mother's cooking, and her father's cooking which she said was better, but he seldom cooked, only on special occasions.

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<sup>11</sup> This is a common pejorative directed at rural people. Xiaojing used it herself to refer to her hometown folk and to distinguish herself from them as someone whose mind was alive, open, and part of the modern world.

I told her about my grandpa's barbecue, which came rarely, but was spectacular. We swapped food stories regularly. And she loved her parents and they worried about her, which made her worry. But she couldn't stay long, they would drive her nuts. "Where are you going? Who are you going with? When do you come back?" They would ask again and again. She liked and needed her independence. In the city, she could do as she pleased, come and go as she pleased. Home was an important place, but she could not stay there long. She always came back to Guangzhou.

Guangzhou was a city of disappointment. It was never what it should have been. People there looked down on her, talked about her on the street and in the shops where she bought inexpensive clothes and jewelry and new gadgets. Not because they knew anything about her occasional work in a *falang*, but because she was marked with *tu* (rurality; country manner; backwardness) – her clothing, her manner, her accessories, her speech, the way she walked, all of this marked her as clearly as a neon sign as *tu*. That she was pretty probably didn't help. So she struggled to be more cosmopolitan, shape shifting in clothing and accessories and style and phrases, a different presentation every new time I saw her again, never blending in but never able to feel comfortable back home either. Xiaojing was sensitive to the subtle slights of the street, the too openly appreciative glances of men, young and old, the subtle spatial politics of condescension when walking. It bothered her enormously. But she could never stay home for very long, and in part, did not feel at home anywhere.

Xiaojing did not enter the world of the sex trade as though a different realm. Here again entry tales obscure more than they reveal, reifying the lines that we should be

interrogating. She worked in different jobs during her many trips to Guangzhou and nearby cities Dongguan and Shenzhen. At times she worked in a *falang*, sometimes for a week sometimes longer, leaving to return home or for other work that she picked up through friends or other *laoxiang* connections. During the years that I knew her, Xiaojing had also worked for a shop selling counterfeit (*san zhai*) cell phones, in the grocery store of a friend's mother, briefly in a tiny factory gluing silver sequins onto t-shirts, and as a cashier at the Guangzhou International Airport, among others "floating" positions. None made very much money, *falang* work the most, but she found it boring, mostly composed of hanging around for hours doing nothing and waiting for customers. She would usually wander with some of the others to the internet shop at the end of the cul de sac their *falang* was housed on to play online games and chat on QQ.<sup>12</sup> The work itself at the *falang* didn't bother her very much, she said it was better than work in the small factory, where the chemicals and tedium and dust made her feel sick.

I didn't ask about what it was like being with customers, though she once told me that she'd been with men before and they were with her for her beauty, she was with them for their money. Her mom openly calculated the level of man she could marry with her good looks. Xiaojing was suggesting that her work in the *falang* may be a difference of degree but not of kind in the basic exchange of beauty and feminine youth for money. She hoped for more, and like most of the others she would get caught up in the romance and drama of a particularly good Tele-drama series. She talked and argued, as we all did, about what made a good man, and while money and success were most important, they weren't the only things.

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<sup>12</sup> QQ is similar to Twitter.

Our conversations were often framed in relation to music. I told Xiaojing about American folk songs that dealt with migration and poverty, hope and injustice. We listened to Emmylou Harris sing “Red Dirt Girls,” a song about a young woman from Alabama who wants to get away from her small hometown and all that meant – something like death and burial in the red dirt. She liked the melody, and we used the lyrics in our *falang* English class. Xiaojing liked Emmylou and Gillian Welch. She was less fond of Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, though she said she liked the words that I translated. In return, she had me listen to her favorite Chinese pop songs, most of which were about love, loss, and longing. At first they sounded to me like the pop songs of the 80s I grew up with – *Journey* – “Don’t Stop Believin’” – “Just a small town girl, living in a lonely world, she took a midnight train going anywhere. Just a city boy, born and raised in south Detroit, he took a midnight train going anywhere.....” Songs all earnest but abstract emotion, so devoid of local content (There is apparently no place referred to by locals as south Detroit) that they exemplified where production value had begun to overcome all claims to meaning. I listened to her talk about these songs, even older songs (also from the 80s) like “Weidao,” and I struggled to understand what they meant to her beyond a shallow and critically false dream of romance. It took a while, but fortunately I kept listening because there was more to that story.

One day when she was in her “thinking chair,” again in the middle of a long, hot Guangzhou day, I noticed her singing to herself quietly. This normally wouldn’t have caught my attention – most of us would sing a bit to ourselves on those long days. Xiaojing never did, although she loved music. She was self-conscious about her voice, which she claimed was awful, and never sang, even the night the boss took us all to karaoke for a

birthday celebration. I realized after a minute she was singing a classic 80s love song of the type that even being old and “out” was such a classic as to still be beloved by the young and trendy. The song is called “*Weidao*” (scent; aroma):

*Xiangnian ni de xiao, xiangnian ni de waitao, xiangnian ni baisi wazi, he ni shen  
shangde weidao, xiangnian nide wen, he shouzhi dan dan yan cao weidao, ji yi zhong  
ceng bei ai de weidao....*

[I long for your smile, I long for the sight of you, I long for your white socks and the smell that comes off of your body, I long for your kiss and the faint smell of tobacco on your fingertips, the smell of being in the midst of being loved...]

A bit startled by her singing and by what seemed to be an unusually melancholy mood, I asked if she was ok. She said she was, but she was thinking about someone. An ex-boyfriend, I asked? She said no, she was thinking of someone she had not met yet, her “*weilaide*” (future; not yet arrived) love, someone who would love her and take care of her and be good to her. This love came packaged with a whole life. He didn’t need to be rich, she insisted, just stable, and they would live in the city, never back in Hunan, and she would take care of the home and cooking – he must like spicy food – and it was ok if he was Cantonese, and they could have an apartment and not have to move and she continued on in rich detail.

What struck me first were two things. First, as she was talking, she sounded older than I had ever heard from her. The dreams were youthful, but she said them like a recitation of things that she thought she might never see. She sounded tired in a way I hadn’t seen. But by then she had been coming out for over three years – years of working

and moving around, years of crappy jobs and an endless stream of equally crappy jobs ahead, with marriage the only obvious avenue towards a better life, not just materially richer, but Life – cosmopolitan, stable, respectable – with a place of her own. She was never at home, though home was always with her as the place she was from, felt compelled to return to, and used as a yardstick against which to measure the goodness of the cosmopolitan – a cosmopolitanism that she could never fully share in, no matter how much she studied the styles and manners of the city women around her, and the poses and postures in magazines and blog posts. It was already three years of trying and nothing much had changed.

In the months to follow, she became more and more melancholy, worried that she was getting too old for any good man to want. She was 19 then, and beginning to look clearly at a future that didn't get better, and perhaps, almost certainly, would get worse. She was tired.

The other thing that struck me, haunted me even, was that she talked of this man in the present, as though he were already there for her but just not yet there in the now. Indeed, the “*xiangnian*” of the song meant to long for someone that has once been present and was no longer there, to feel that visceral sense of loss, that almost undoing of separation from an other who is not fully other but is implicated in who we are. In this loss it seemed that we can be unraveled, even by someone we've never known.

The more Xiaojing talked about this, the more I realized she meant “*xiangnian*.” He had been with her for years, very much a part of her life, a part of her, if a dream, then that making-dream that produces us in force and without our knowing, that constitutes without thought to how in incarcerating this set of dreams that cannot be realized, in this most disinterested of gestures, in the gap between the materializations of dream and non-dream –

both material but not identical, there is a helpless undoing, and unraveling, confusion, and loss. This is a space of endless deferral, between cruel hopes and their unrealizability.

The Xiaojing I first met was constituted largely in hopes that were unattainable. She did not hope. What she was made up of was, in part, hope and expectation. The loss of those hopes over time, or more cruelly the ever-receding distance of those hopes, the hope of development that is never realized, was becoming a most fundamental undoing. Xiaojing has “come out” bravely to the city; she did not realize that to the city she had merely “floated” (*liu*) in and could float out. A few months later we went with a couple of others to a bar that featured a band from the Philippines. They covered this song, “Weidao,” and Xiaojing, in a feckless mood, got up to sing with them in front of the crowd. She had a clear, beautiful voice.

## 2.6 A BOSS

The *falang* Xiaojing worked in when I first met her, the first *falang* where I was welcome, where I taught basic English classes, and where I loitered so long, was run by the mother of her former schoolmate who was now studying at a high school in Guangzhou. His education cost a lot of money, particularly as his family members were *waidiren*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Waidiren* literally means those from another place. It refers to Chinese who are not local both in terms of origin and in terms of local legal status. As is true with other Chinese cities, being a legal resident of Guangzhou was dependent on a system of registration, the *Hukou* system, that fundamentally differentiated between rural and urban residents and fixed persons within official place-based identification schemes. Guangzhou residents have a number of rights and privileges, including access to public education facilities for their children that by and large are not available to non-residents. The overall trend in the past several years has been a gradual relaxation of the *hukou* system, and the education of the children of migrant workers has been an issue of some public controversy. However, education for the children of poor migrants to Guangzhou continues to be very limited in terms of access and quality.

Ah Qiang, the co-owner and general manager, ran the whole show. She had worked in half a dozen different jobs she said, from washing dishes to starting a small clothing shop with her cousin to a bit of “this kind of work.” It was temporary, she said, but so was everything, you made some money while you could with what opportunities were there. In any case, “they” (the powers that be) would eventually come and take it away, or squeeze you out, or suddenly your building or block or whole neighborhood would be demolished to make way for “*fazhan fazhan fazhan*,” as she liked to say. Development, development, development. She’d gotten in to this line of business through a friend who’d run the shop previously and was now, she enjoyed telling anyone who would listen, living very comfortably with an old Hong Kong man.

Most of the women who worked for Ah Qiang and her useless co-owner and husband, were connected either as family or close *laoxiang*. I only saw her husband about a half dozen times in several years; he came and went with a sauntering ease, and spent his time on “things that men do,” mostly *mahjiang* and “serious” discussions about business over food, liquor, and cigarettes. He didn’t bring in much money. Ah Qiang, managed the *falang* business.<sup>14</sup> She recruited through her hometown connections young women who wanted to get to the big city. They could earn money, and she, their *laoxiang*, would take care of them. She took 50RMB per transaction, with the worker taking usually 100. In return, she provided the space for marketing wares (the front of the hair salon), space for the transaction (room upstairs and two private rooms nearby), security, and dinner and dormitory-style

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<sup>14</sup> Most *falang* that I was associated with were owned and managed by women, with sometimes a man (husband, boyfriend) as a co-owner, but usually not involved in the day-to-day operations.



lodging – this last she charged a small additional fee each month for. Ah Qiang paid for the *falang* and other rentals, she paid the cops in cash and more, she paid for basic food, which she cooked herself on a small stove every evening in front of the *falang*, she paid for the hair care supplies – trimmers, scissors, shampoos and gels and sprays, hair dryers, mirrors, barber stools, beds in the back and in the work apartments nearby, cartoon sheets, condoms, huge amounts of toilet paper, feminine hygiene products, blow-job and hand-job training classes from a young *shifu* of such arts, cups and dishes, TV and cable, electricity, plus the expense of the legitimate *falang* license, which cost quite a bit in expensive dinners for government and police officials, not because they were running a *hei falang* but because that's what you have to do to get a business license. This initial licensing investment was followed by the occasional gift, during Chinese New Year, for example, of expensive wine or cigarettes or some other more personal service, depending on the tastes of the important personage in question. It was, Ah Qiang would tell me over beer, an expensive business, very hard work.

Ah Qiang liked beer. She liked harder stuff too and could drink a government official or cop under the table, on most occasions. But when she was working, she restricted herself to beer. We would sit sometimes outside in front of the small sundries shop at the corner, on plastic, colorful chairs, folded wooden table between us, sipping cold Zhujiang draft beer in 1 litre bottles, 6 kuai per, talking. Ah Qiang called me *didi* (little brother), and I called her older sister (*jie*). She often said that I reminded her of her younger brother who had died some years before in a motorcycle accident. She reminded me of a lot of people who worked hard, were harried and tired, and generally just trying to get by and do it as decently as they can.

So we sat outside drinking. It was cooler out here than sitting in the *falang*, and I tended to not hang around from late afternoon as that was when business started to pick up. I didn't want to interfere. Ah Qiang's cousin, Ah Fei, was sitting in the *falang* to manage any transactions and make sure nothing happened without their cut.

I asked Ah Qiang how much she was making. We'd known each other a while and she knew I'd ask this. She exhaled her cigarette, took a sip of cold beer from a tiny, thin, plastic disposable cup, and looked at me with a twinkle in her eyes. She said, "Not bad" (*bu cuo*). We both laughed. She'd been saying this to me for years now. She leaned towards me and said, as she had before, "But I won't let that bastard know. He'll just waste it." The "bastard" in question was her husband. Ah Qiang was stashing money away; she once told me she could clear 6000RMB in savings per month; that was after giving him spending money each month. It wasn't a lot, but it was clear, and it was adding up. She would save, she told me, for herself and her son. The bastard wouldn't get any of his hands on it. He didn't know it was that much. In time, she laughed towards me, she could afford a young lover, maybe even a foreign lover. She winked at me, and we laughed again.

She grew quiet and I knew enough just to sit there. He'd hit her, she said. He was drunk. His friends had been teasing him that his wife made the money, gave him his pocket money, had other men. He came home shouting at her. He kicked her. The downstairs neighbors, also from Hunan, had come up to see what the racket was. Seeing it was a normal domestic quarrel, they went back downstairs. "He hit me here," she said, pulling up the back of her long hair and showing me a large, swollen, purplish welt, just to the left of where her skull met her spine. "He swung and I ducked, and he hit me here." "Fuck him,"

I said, “How could he do that?” She looked at me and said:

He’s a man. A stupid man, just a man. I took a knife, and I told him if he hit me again, I’d cut his dick off. I’d kill him in his sleep. I’d bury his body where no one would know, and no one would pray for him or remember him. I hate him, his son hates him, no one would care. He stared at me, and I thought he was going to hit me again, but I stared back at him with no fear, so he just went to bed. It’s nothing (*mei shi*). But if I don’t fight him, he will beat me more. This is normal between husbands and wives. That is why I want a young lover who I can bully!

She laughed and winked at me again, pouring us both another tiny, plastic glass full of beer. Ah Qiang already had many young lovers. I knew from one of them that she was kind and tender and treated them almost as a son who shared her bed at times. She liked, he said, to cook for him and watch him eat. She asked him about his troubles. She gave him advice and told him to be strong and not let anyone bully him. She had advised him on one occasion to hit his girlfriend or she wouldn’t respect him.

The more serious problem for Ah Qiang was the police. They came when they wanted, asking for money and more. The “mafia,” such as it was, she said was easy. She had friends, they had friends, they came once a month and that was usually it. The police could come whenever they liked, when they needed extra money – and they hit hard before Chinese New Year – a very expensive holiday when they needed to fill a lot of red envelopes – and when they were drunk and wanted to play, or just when they felt like it. It was, she said, getting worse. The “crackdowns” were becoming more frequent, and the cops she had spent years and money cultivating weren’t as reliable anymore with tips on when to close the shop.

A couple of years before, she had as many as 30 girls working for her. Now she was down to half that number. Cops kept coming by. There were closures and a couple of arrests a few months ago. The cops came to get money and sex; sometimes they came to get arrest numbers. She was feeling squeezed and told me it was time to get out. She was trying to protect herself and the people who worked for her. If she didn't do the latter, no one would work for her. But times were tough and getting tougher. She was working on an exit strategy, getting away from here with her savings.

Ah Qiang was nervous, as always, but made light of things. One could almost think that what she was talking about was normal. And it was; the normality of nervousness and fear, the tenuosness of the best lived life, the violence that was ever-present and had to be distanced. She operated a *hei falang* now. She had done a lot of other things in her life to earn money, owned and operated other businesses. It was all the same, in her telling, the only difference being in the precise nature and amount of the shit you had to deal with. It was always cops and officials and bribes and the threat of closure, negotiations and cajoling and flattering and scheming. In this business, at least she was boss.

Crackdowns were just a form of violence, an ever-present threat, as unpredictable as the weather. They were often, but not always, preceded by increased visits by cops demanding money and sex in exchange for tip-offs, then closures, then sticking a thumb to the wind as to when was the right time to re-open, then rounds of cops visiting with hands out, then the slow process of convincing the girls to come back, then customers starting to come back around. The problem was that the crackdowns were coming more frequently, reducing the profits, making this business model increasingly untenable, the costs growing

higher, the profits lower, the risks greater. While *falang* closed down and re-opened and closed down, fewer re-opening each time all over the city, well-financed and well-connected KTVs and Saunas sprang up, sprucing up Guangzhou's visual modernity repertoire where *falang* had once been, with their small-time, out of town operators and mobile (*liu*) work force.

*Falang* workers could come and go. And they did. Wandering during the day, not working when they didn't want to or need to, when the terms weren't right, leaving and returning, or sometimes just leaving. The boss kept a number on call, enough, and each transaction earned 50kuai. Very *luan*, very fluid. KTVs and Saunas keep everything indoors, have various levels of management, regulate and train staff, keep them under control, immobile, hidden behind shining exteriors, under contracts enforced by law and direct coercion. They are the modern, efficient factories of pleasure, hygienic, well-regulated, well-connected, well-disciplined, paying their bribes on time. Their workers do not wander during the day. They have shifts, rules, and quotas. As *falang* disappear from "developed" areas, as the *luan* is ordered, they appear, the sanctioned pleasure spaces of a Civilized Guangzhou (*Wenming Guangzhou*. See Zhu et al. 2010 for a discussion of the "Civilized Guangzhou" campaign as represented in posters and visual media).

## 2.7 OTHER EXILES

The way that Xiaojing found her work in Ah Qiang's *falang* was fairly typical – through connections with family or friends who could vouch for the *falang* and the owner. It was usually thought that *laoxiang* could be trusted more, although that was not always the case.

Most of the women were like Xiaojing, young, just working temporarily for some cash, thinking about doing other things with their lives or just wanting to get away from home, or both. Conditions varied considerably, however, depending on a number of important factors. Location was important. If the *falang* was in a *chengzhongcun*, this often offered some measure of protection as municipal police had to go through the village council for raids and sweeps – and collection of bribes of cash and sex.

The relationship to the owner mattered. In Xiaojing's case, her family had close relations with Ah Qiang's family back home, and she received somewhat better treatment and protection than some of the others. And the owner themselves can make a huge difference. Ah Qiang was tough, but she ran things in a way that generally most were satisfied with. She always had plenty of young women working for her, so as long as there were enough staffing things, she didn't care where people might wander off too. And in most *falang* I spent time in, staff could come and go as they liked, just stop working at any time, giving them considerable leverage. "If I don't like it, I'll just leave." Or if one wasn't making enough money because the location was bad, or the mommy wasn't good at bringing in customers, or the police came too often, or a host of other possible reasons, one could simply leave. Not that there were other great options out there. And in some cases that will be addressed later, leaving could be very hard.

*Falang*, like other small businesses in Guangzhou, were places with all sorts of people, most just passing through. If you needed a bit of money, if you had the right look, or if not, some skills, you could set up temporary shop there, make some money, pay your commissions to the boss, and then move along.

Wangwang was over 30 years old, how much over she wouldn't say. For her, entering *falang* work was a fall, a descent from KTV to Sauna and finally, to almost the lowest of the low, the *falang*. Below was only the street.

She had been beautiful, she told me. I believed her. She still was. She had wanted independence most of all, and that took money, the ability to make your own money. She sold what commodities she had in the new economy. As a woman, that was beauty, charm, and pleasure. She had been married, but he was a loser (He couldn't make any money she said), so while he was away for *da gong*, she left.

Wangwang had scars from her work in the KTV. "I made a lot of money. In those days, it was easy, everyone with money, just throwing it around. There was always a lot of drinking. I hate Remy Martin. It made me throw up."

The competition was tough. "You couldn't trust anybody. I mean, when I first started, I was a stupid young girl. I trusted the other girls. I was wrong. It hurt me a lot."

After years of that, and falling in love a couple of times, and drinking too much, and taking too many pills, she attempted suicide. She showed me the scars on her wrist. After that, she worked in a Sauna, learned massage and other skills. It was a step down, less money, but less competition, no all-night drinking, and regular hours. But she'd been recently fired from that. "Too old," they said. So she found temporary work at this *falang* in a *chengzhongcun* on the northern edge of the city, protected by its land rights and distance from the city center, where she sold sex directly, although she felt her training and experience was going to waste. What will you do, I asked her. "Keep working," was her answer. "What else can I do?"

### 3.0 MELANCHOLY DAYS

I'm not myself sure why I feel sad like this. I'm so stupid. Life is not so bad. It's just that I feel that I'm waiting and waiting. And suddenly I realize I can't remember what I'm waiting for.

Wangjing (2006)

In a late and unexpected turn back to Kant, although rejecting any enduring quality outside of history, and in which rationality is dependent and inherently multiple, Foucault explored an ethical engagement predicated on a form of self-making (2005). This was in a way a turn from the edifice of hegemonic discourse that his earlier work had built, but one undertaken in an oddly evasive register. Rather than exploring the obverse of his prior work – a task Certeau partly appointed himself to – he approached a kind of aesthetics of self-cultivation. This left aside both the social dimension of self-making, or in a sense an ethnographic elaboration of his earlier work, as well as the furtive in-practice possibilities that arose from examinations informed by both the uncertainty and materiality of language.

I introduce this chapter this way not as a critique of Foucault's later work but rather as an aperture into thinking of self-making as a hegemonic practice, one with uncertain, in practice slippages, but one in which that uncertainty is not external but rather integral to a certain productive capacity. What happens, in other words, when we accept the notion of self-making fully as discourse but also find that the in-practice uncertainty of its reproduction



constitutes the “nervousness” of a system that in turn makes of self-making a form of long-term undoing? In other words, what of lives that are constituted in hopes whose pursuit is not amenable to life itself?

In some ways, this chapter takes up where Xiaojing’s song in Chapter 1 ended. It asks in part what happens when the longings that constitute the self are undone, when their absent presence as an unrealizable part of the imagined self becomes unsustainable? What, in other words, happens beyond the melancholic refusal?

Xiaojing, as did many others, worked towards an ever-receding vision of an idealized cosmopolitan, gendered self, based on forms of usually unrealizable, yet deeply felt and embodied longings.<sup>15</sup> It is important here to note that that vision was not monolithic or static, even in the case of “one” person’s practices of becoming. It is likewise important to note that this vision is very material; it is the word that is spoken over and over and over again. It is not a single act – the Lord spoke – as in Althusser’s notion of the sovereign speech act but neither is it infinitely fluid. It is repeated in seemingly endless sets of images, voices, practices. If it appears to be “the word” it is so because, as in film, it is the repetition of 24 or even 48 frames per second giving the appearance of a singularity that endures.

Following most prominently Butler, a certain semiotic/material hope has been theorized as immanent within this recognition. This is an aperture to an inherent instability, a constant reiterative vulnerability, a failure of accurate reproduction – like mutation, if mutation were occasionally deliberate. Yet, what if the failure to performatively achieve

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<sup>15</sup> Lisa Rofel refers to this as “yearnings” (1999). I prefer “longing” here as I think it better captures not only the aching desire for the (other) object in post-Mao China, but also the sadness that was an integral part of that desire in the recognition of its likely unattainability.

union (transcendence) with idealized norms was not the fissure of possibility in practice but was instead the conditional and ongoing processes of failure, loss, and existential violence?

Yet, Xiaojing and others saw themselves as agents. Xiaojing saw her “coming out” as a choice, one aimed towards the cultivation of her self within the context of a life of value. She wanted to go out not only because she was bored at home, or because everyone else was, or because she would make more money. She wanted to develop herself, to come in to closer approximation with the cosmopolitan in part through practices of consumption and built identification (Schein 2001; Gillette 2002). This may seem stark. A closer look, as I think Schein would agree, and as we read Dutton (1999) and reception theory in general would show us the clever appropriations of dominant discourses in the course of this lived activity, and would further show that there is no singular discourse that finally dominates the imaginative field of the cosmopolitan, however apparently over-determining it may appear at times to the anthropological viewer.

Again, though, what if the response in terms of complexity and practice and alterity is both correct and missing something, namely that the latter are features of a more complex and agitated system in which indeterminacy is crucial to the elaboration of loss. If so, then what is left are the terms of the making of the self, their forceful undoing, and a last refusal. That last refusal is to let go of the terms that have been promised and denied, terms that inhabit the life and longing of the women I worked among. These were terms turned to other tactical uses, sometimes cynically, but they were also not fully released even in the full-knowledge of their bad faith.

Classical Freudian conceptions of melancholia as an individual disorder understood it to be the result of loss, ultimately a loss within the self whose proper address through grief and ultimately substitution has not taken place (Freud 1917. See Clewell 2002 for an overview of Freudian views on melancholy, as well as critical responses). It was, in other words, a failure to let go of the absence that loss had created.<sup>16</sup> I view melancholy here as social, the result of a givenness in imagined possibility that in other material registers cannot be realized. The failure to release the object of loss, in this case, the self as imagined in a developmental moment of simple possibility, is not a subjective failure to properly mourn and continue, it is, I argue, potentially a final choice beyond the realm of imagined hopes and simple sadness. Though borne in the bad faith of market opportunity, such ghosts have their own lives, and to let go of them is a final undoing, an exorcism not just of possibility but of a stubborn stake in the world.

### 3.1 WANGJING'S *FALANG*

Wangjing's *falang*, like most, was rented out in the same spaces rented by fruit sellers, small clothing shops, other tiny hair salons, noodle shops, and the host of other small, independent business that operated on Guangzhou's literal and figurative margins. The shops themselves were stacked in neat, horizontal rows, stretching along minor streets or alleyways, with just enough foot traffic so that interested passerby would mark them out, usually for a later, evening visit, but not so visible as to be presumptuous. It was not as though police and others didn't know where they were; but they would not stand for a place along a main

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<sup>16</sup> Freud later complicated this view (1923), exploring the ongoingness of grief.

thoroughfare. Housed and embedded in networks of shops and small streets, residential complexes and wet markets, they were both a part of the neighborhood and subtly excluded. Other shops sold illegal goods – fake electronics, medicines, shoes, sex aids, Nike shorts, milk powders – but the *falang* was marked in different, invisible ways.

This *falang*, in what I call Neighborhood Y, was like other small shops, fronted with a metal door, like a garage door, which rolled up at the beginning of the work day. *Falangs* in better areas, or the more prosperous, may have a glass front with a door. Those in poorer areas, like Neighborhood Y, usually just open directly into a square or rectangular space. On one side were a row of barber stools, on the other a wooden sofa. There was, typically, a TV for the entertainment and distraction of the employees who hang around all day with little to do. That was particularly true of older workers, or those who otherwise are more distant from ideals of youthful beauty and the erotic, who tend to hang around most of the day and in the evenings, attempting to raise their overall transaction numbers during the day.

There was a sparse selection of hair care and cutting equipment. Many *falang* owners, including this one, Ah Liu, and some older workers also learned the basic skills of hair cutting and washing. Some also learn to do facials and manicures for a primarily male clientele. Many businessmen in China have learned the pleasure of a facial and may be seen in *falang* during the day with wraps of mud, fruit, pale creams, or other products worked onto their faces and in to their pores. Dental floss is used then to isolate and pop pimples or squeeze out blackheads. This is another, small source of revenue during long, usually uneventful days of waiting.

On one wall, prominently displayed, was the business license. Real, it may be purchased from underground sellers, or worked through the system the way that other licenses are. The latter entails a lengthy and usually frustrating paperwork process, friendly gestures towards relevant officials in charge of the paperwork, and more. The cost for this type of license is higher, but it is thought to offer more protection during crackdowns. The ones purchased from underground are also generally real. They may be licenses that others have procured through the system but no longer need, or they may be generated by someone working inside the licensing bureau for additional “grey” income. The initial cost for such a license is high, but there are no additional costs for maintaining the license later. In crackdowns on illegal licensing there is an additional risk run with such a license, but there is no guarantee of protection with one procured through the regular licensing system.

The police, as Ah Liu, this *falang* boss would say, can come when they want and always find something illegal. She called them “the mafia with badges.”<sup>17</sup> While the exchange of sexual service for money as an individual transaction falls under China’s administrative rather than criminal codes, in practice this is often seen as neither here nor there. Under the *laogai* (re-education through labor) system the police have enormous discretion to send virtually anyone who is not powerful or well-connected for re-education for years.

The key here is then to blend in and not make a fuss, keep sensitively aware of prevailing winds, make informal connections with cops and others with authority, try to make

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<sup>17</sup> An old friend of mine who manages and owns bars in the Tsim Sha Tsui area of Hong Kong refers to local police there exactly the same way.

money while you can and get out when things are getting too rough. One must be ready to come back when things quiet down again, and so the cycle goes. Licensing is a necessary pretense, as it is for other businesses in Guangzhou. And like other businesses, this only offers some protection. Police can come when they want to take it all away, whether café or bar or wine shop or *falang*. The most important thing is to keep on the right side of things, to know which way the tide is flowing, to hear things in a timely fashion, to intuit, to balance risks and gains and know when to go, when to return, and when to look for something else.

A crackdown here and there happens. It is traumatic and humiliating. Afterwards, most *falang* open, quietly, again. Police, according to *falang* workers and bosses, take their money for keeping you open, and they take more money from closing you down. They get their arrest statistics up as needed. They know where you are, they know what you are doing, and they know how many arrests they can get. Crackdowns, like the “Blade Action” (*Jianfeng Xingdong*) in 2005, designed to boost the career of the new Baiyun district police chief and harm his internal enemies by closing down their client shops, are usually accompanied by considerable press. Police, reporters, and camera crews descended in 2005 on dozens of *falang* in the district ((See for example *Nanfang Daily* 2005; *Xinhuanet* 2005). A reporter for the *Southern Metropolis Daily* newspaper, who, with other reporters, was invited along by the police told me:

They were all the *falang* associated with a rival group of police. We walked right past streets with many *falang* on them and they didn't raise a finger.

Then we swooped down on certain streets protected by the rival police faction.

It was “killing two birds with one stone” (*yi ju liang de*). The new police

chief took advantage of the nationwide crackdown to boost his image. And he hurt his internal rivals. In this way, it was a very successful campaign.

When the police come, they will be wearing their finest uniforms, carefully polished and pressed. They will inevitably force the women to kneel or squat, and to hide their heads in shame and degradation. They will tower above them in press photos, straight and rigid and righteous. They will gaze down at the women. They will point at them in condemnation and authority. And the women will cower, or pretend to, because they must. In other words, as they try to work, to realize an entrepreneurial dream, they will be demeaned and literally ground down by a dick cloaked in power (a uniform) who has come before to take their money and later comes to take more, including dignity. This is a constant threat, and one that is usually realized at least once in the experience of most *falang* workers that I knew.

### 3.2 OPEN SPACES

Wangjing was afraid of open stretches of road. She told me time and again about the long walk from her school to home growing up. It was a lonely walk. It took almost an hour. Along the way, each day, she dealt with many things. Sometimes young boys from town called out to her nasty things. Wangjing would pretend not to notice. “If you show that you are afraid, it will encourage them,” she explained to me. She had learned that the hard way, she said. They used to do more than call out. Seeing her fear and vulnerability, they would encircle her saying dirty things. One grabbed her breasts. Wangjing cursed them, and they laughed. She learned, she said, to look tough and unconcerned, and they grew

bored after a while, occasionally coming back but with little new material. This was the beginning of her training, she said, of how to deal with the threats that daily life posed.

Wangjing told me how she liked to go the nearby park in the mornings. It was one of the largest in Guangzhou and had a big lake. It was a few minutes' walk from the *falang* that she worked in. She would walk there for hours, unmolested, anonymous, and quiet. In that time, as she told it, she was living a peaceful, urban life as a young woman quietly strolling along pleasant pathways, enjoying the sight of flowers and trees, sitting occasionally in peaceful repose, and being both with others in the space of the city park and alone with her own thoughts.

Wangjing liked the rhythm of the park. She enjoyed the regular cycles of old people in the early morning, the appearance of elderly with grandchildren a bit later, the slow but steady hum of the park. She told me, "I like to sit and watch the kids play with the old people. Also, there are runners there, you know. They run around in a big circle, and I sit there, and then after a while they come back around again. It keeps me calm. I feel peaceful." It was in part a place of refuge away from the crowded, ever-busy spaces where she worked and lived.

It was also a space of connection to an imagination of the good life. Wangjing at times likened the park to scenes from the Korean Tele-dramas that she had watched on the 20-inch TV screen in the upper corner of the *falang* that she worked in. These were scenes of parks, "normal" lives, babies in strollers, couples strolling, joggers jogging, elderly enjoying the sunshine and fresh air. This was a middle-class urban dream of the park space, all light pastel colors, healthy bodies, and leisurely paces.



Wangjing could narrate, without pause, the entire, complicated, multi-dimensional narrative plot and structure of whatever her current favorite TV drama was. Any single event would be put in the context of dozens of prior episodes of character development, betrayal, love, moral conundrums, economic struggles, human weaknesses, tender moments, absurdly funny encounters, frustrating misunderstandings, chastely romantic passions, and generational conflicts. She would narrate this as though rehearsed over and over and prepared to tell, and as though, correctly, this one event that I had asked about would make no sense without the full context. Wangjing often talked about these in terms of expectations for her own life. Invariably critical of the more conniving female characters on the shows, she identified most closely with the simple girl who sometimes, at the end of many misadventures and misunderstandings, found love.

She (the main female character) was always misunderstood! Always that Auntie blames her because she says she is too low class. Too unfair! And she had to do many things. But it was always for a good reason. Or she had no choice. Her heart stayed pure though. I don't think she'll be with him (the main male character) in the end but maybe she will.

"But does he deserve her?" I asked. Wangjing seemed confused by this question and thought for a moment. "He's a good guy, but he always listens to his mother and the Auntie. He doesn't know that she is a good girl and really loves him. He is rich so he thinks she is just after him for money. But really she is pure."

For Wangjing, the inequities of the drama, a major driving force of tension in the narrative, were the result of individual "bad people," mostly but not solely women who took

turns representing class discrimination, traditional discrimination, and character flaws like spitefulness, jealousy, and arrogance. At the heart of the story were two people, a boy and a girl, who were in their internal integrity untouched by these vices. For them, class and tradition were less relevant than a love that transcended other differences, although they may ultimately be thwarted by evil social and individual forces. Wangjing, it is not too simplistic to say, identified explicitly with the misunderstood but essentially good female protagonist of her favorite dramas. Like Xiaojing in Chapter 1, she hoped for the possibility of transcending her class and rural origins, and the work she was now doing out of circumstance, through a man who provided financial and emotional security and care, lifting her in one swoop from where she sat. Wangjing saw little other recourse as she surveyed her current and future prospects. A form of fairy tale was, for her, the most realistic possibility as she saw it.

When we didn't meet at the park to talk, we often met at the moldy café at the top of the international market near her work, in a mall named after a Golden Elephant. This area was becoming what would soon be called by Guangzhou locals "Chocolate Town," a deliberately belittling term for an area that would be the base for African traders working out of Guangzhou and helping to drive China's economic, export-oriented, engine. Ongoing police actions to "clean up" this area ahead of the 2008 Olympics and 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic in 2009, resulted in mass deportations, large scale police abuse, and more than one death.

Wangjing had come to southern Guangdong as part of a cohort of workers organized by her high school. At 16, after graduating from junior middle high school, she and her

classmates were given the choice of three work destinations by their school. These were: to go to the provincial capital; go to the Shanghai area; or go to the Guangzhou/Shenzhen area. The school had made arrangements with factories in all of those regions to send laborers, from which they made a considerable profit. I asked Wangjing if she was forced to go. She said, "I think that everybody went. My parents already knew, everybody knew. My dad encouraged me to choose Guangzhou and Shenzhen. They thought there was more opportunity there. So that is what I chose."

Wangjing hated the factory work in nearby Dongguan and didn't like to talk about it. She told me once that the manager raped her during a late shift when they were locked in the small, boxlike factory in order to meet a tight deadline. Afterwards, and after repeated rapes by the manager, Wangjing contacted a distant relative who was working in Guangzhou. He said that he would find a better job for her. With his help, she left the factory, leaving some pay she was owed, amounting to one month's salary, or 1,100RMB. She said that she was sure she wouldn't get what was owed her and just wanted to get away. Her relative took her to the *falang* where I first met her. When she resisted, he beat her in front of the others. She would not say directly what happened then, just that it was terrible. Then, she said, she found that it was ok, at least better than the factory. When I asked if she would consider working in another factory, a better one, she replied, "I don't think so. Even if it was better, it will still be very uncomfortable and low paid. Besides, I am used to this work now. I don't think I could adjust to always having to be on time and work so many hours."

Wangjing had come to appreciate her relative freedom compared to what she saw as the more complete control of working and living in a factory.

### 3.3 AN INEVITABLE FAILING

*Suzhi* discourse presented a set of hegemonic values against which Wangjing, and other rural, uneducated, migrants were invariably found not only lacking but essentially positioned as an almost naturally lower form of human life. The investment in the cultivation of *suzhi*, as Kipnis (2007) notes as being resonant with earlier Chinese notions of cultivation of the self, was, however, as Anagnost (2004) points out, seen in fundamentally different ways according to class – a notion *suzhi* displaces in public discourse. Investment in children of the middle and upper classes, entailing a range of educational, nutritional, and emotional resources, produces in them a high-quality individual. People of inherently lower *suzhi*, the rural in particular, require, and are naturally suited to, different forms of investment. These include teaching them better hygiene, more disciplined work habits, thoughtfulness of others, appropriate body postures and dispositions, and temperament.

While generally understood common-sensically by urban residents, Wangjing, Xiaojing, and others did not usually see things in the same way. They neither understood nor accepted this dual *suzhi* system, one that placed them in a naturally inferior position. They also did not accept their even more fundamentally “other” position as “prostitute.” They did so not by rejecting the devaluation itself but by rejecting what they were doing as a form of labor, casting it rather as a temporary necessity or a fleeting moment on the way to other things. In the city, they worked through practices of the self to position themselves closer to the valued *suzhi* positions of the sophisticated, urban resident, usually via forms of consumption and the appropriation of style choices, and bodily and mental dispositions.

Xiaojing was the most adept, and among the most naturally suited, to this strategic and deeply felt approach to trying to consumptively “better herself.” She had pale skin, features considered refined, and had grown up in a family which, while not urban sophisticates, were neither very poor nor very rural. She had, in her own telling, been considered among the prettiest and most fashionable girls in her hometown. Her efforts to achieve urban cool in Guangzhou, which took place over the course of at least a couple of years, were met with some limited success, although more often with awkward embarrassment or failure. Hers was among the most successful accounts that I knew of. Most others struggled in different ways to make do with some dignity in Guangzhou. Money was important but not the only issue. This was part of the efforts towards respect, a way of living in the world that could make one, and one’s family, proud. This was a life others could not look down upon and that was filled with other values: love, security, and respectability.

Wangjing was among the many that I knew who maintained in her way this sensibility, one increasingly idealized the longer she worked in sexual labor in Guangzhou. For Wangjing, like the female heroines she admired in her Tele-dramas, the point was the heart not what one did. She may be doing things that society considered bad, but her heart was pure. She struggled to hold on to this vision of love, romance, and idealized, hygienic, respectable life. Once while watching one of the ubiquitous commercials advertising a deeply gendered vision of a utopian, Ikea-style life, an “oasis” life (Zhang 2010; Fraser 2000) at the margins of the city, with gardens, Roman statuary, shiny and open kitchen spaces, and glimmeringly clean and healthy residents, Wangjing remarked:

Aiyy, I would love a kitchen like that. I can cook. My mother can't cook. Her food is terrible! Haha. My father is a good cook but he seldom cooks. I take after him. My mother is *tu* (rustic; unrefined), but my father is more educated. He is much older than my mother. He was sent to our village in the Cultural Revolution. He told me to read more. My mother only scolds me and tells me to do chores. But my father would shout at her that I must study.

The explicitly class and gendered image of the shining kitchen, all open spaces, chrome, and white cabinets, accompanied by the slim, attractive yet maternal female figure, herself incomplete without the grateful, smiling, obviously successful male figure and plump, pale exuberant young son, had called up for Wangjing a number of resonances. She recalled her own home, and in so doing scaled internally a certain set of values, ones that placed her more rural mother in an inferior position to a father she saw as educated and from a more urban place (although she was not sure where his hometown was). This resonated through some familiar frames of value, namely rural/urban and strict, narrow-minded mother/liberal, more open-minded father. These were exemplified, interestingly, by cooking. Wangjing's mother's cooking was *tu*, where her father's was more sophisticated and rare, buttressed by and associated with his greater cultural sophistication. The ubiquitous gendered image of the high-class, maternal mother, housed in satisfaction within her idealized domestic space, had intersected with Wangjing's narratives of her self. Cooking, but only in a very specific register, was a medium for the expression of sophistication, one she associated with her father's background, and one opposed, in her telling, to that of her mother as someone who merely cooked and labored but did not fully appreciate what that was about.

My father taught me to understand food. He knew what is healthy and why. He explained this to me. He told me about not overcooking meat and how to combine ingredients. He never complained about my mother's cooking, but I knew he didn't like it. It was rough. She just put meat, vegetables, and garlic together and cooked. She didn't know. For her, food was for living. Ha, like it is for Americans (She laughed, repeating a common stereotype of American food as being nutritionally sufficient but lacking in flavor).

In Guangzhou, Wangjing was considered very *tu*. No one cared about the complexities of her family background or her many, yet relatively simple, longings. Her longings reflected an intersection of histories, yet were not ultimately reducible to any, at least not simply. Her father's wish for her to be a more sophisticated person was a part of this, but even more were contemporary scales of value that rendered the rural a dirty, unpleasant cousin, at best. Wangjing drew on her father's heritage as a "sent down" youth in adding value to her own story and explaining her own natural inclination towards the chimerical values of urbanity and nuanced pleasures. Yet, in her telling, she had been virtually forced to the city, and then initially forced into her current work. She did not leave, she said, because it was better than factory work and better than going home. What she maintained was a sense of herself as a "good woman" in the face of a host of forces that undermined that. She was not merely rural; her father had taught her sophistication. She was not a bad woman. She had been forced to this work, and circumstances forced her to continue it, but she was still a simple girl to the extent that she kept alive her dreams, very social dreams, of gendered class respectability. To let go of those dreams was to let go of a

system of values that constituted her telling of herself. Wangjing struggled to hold on to her self, in the face of daily, often minutely-enacted forces that tried to take that from her.

The slow stripping away of these tellings, taken it seemed in myriad and daily ways in the course of her life and work in Guangzhou, was painful to witness. “Ha, you are so special? Your father was poor like all our fathers. He just thought he was special, and he told you that you are special. What else can he do? He’s just a stupid old man and you are a stupid little girl.” One of the “older” women of Wangjing’s *falang* told her this, following a short argument about clothes and urban style. Wangjing had made the mistake of referencing her father, who, she said, had taught her about style.

It took some years, but her story about herself began to crumble:

You know what I do Ming. I don’t feel anything, you know. I don’t know what to do next. I don’t hurt anyone. You know I am kind to others. Right?

But how am I going to meet anyone good here? My father is getting sick, I told you right? My mother is taking care of him, but they are both old. They don’t have money. I have to take care of them.

Wangjing sent most of her earnings back home every month. Her parents needed this to live, and from this she was, as she herself said, *xiaoshun* (filial). Yet, in fulfilling her responsibilities as a daughter, she saw her other hopes, those coming from her father’s “sent down” status in the 70’s, post-Mao value systems of commercialized, cosmopolitan value, and romanticized visions of monogamous love as the transcendental culmination of material and personal values, fading, scaled away in thin slices across months of actual work in the city, in the material encounter of accreted expectations and the failure of their realization.



I began in 2006 to notice an unpleasant similarity between images that Wangjing and I watched on the *falang* TV screen of the long suffering, desolate, perhaps hopeless waiting female figure and her own posture when I encountered her in the park nearby. I often passed through the park in the mornings on the way to the neighborhood and began to notice her standing on a particular, curved bridge looking out over a brief expanse of dirty water. To some extent, this bridge and the water below looked like the bridges melancholy Tele-drama heroines stood upon as they contemplated either a brief romantic setback, or worse, their impossible fate. I usually didn't interrupt Wangjing when I saw her like this, lost, it seemed, in a sort of sad reverie. Never once, though, did she stop talking about the possibility that she saw as partly her birthright as the daughter of a sophisticated father and as the pure-hearted girl who had to do what she had to do to in suffering for her parents, a suffering they could never know, all the while, in her own secret heart, hoping for a place already envisioned and assembled for her in China's market moment. Within this she longed, impossibly it seemed, for a place of her own and a modicum of dignity. When she finally stopped talking about it, even as something she knew would likely never happen but would not let go of, that was when I and her few friends in the *falang* began to worry.

### **3.4 ASSEMBLING**

In thinking of the assemblages of body, place and value, particularly of "making dreams," we must also talk of activity and space-time. In what world does this take place, what are its spaces composed of, what of their density, their texture and force? It is thus to the other side of production that we must also attend.

Marshall Sahlins gestured towards a certain slippage between semiotic structures and the life world, a risk of signs in practice (1981). What was this slippage? If for Althusser it was truly a making-dream, the authority of a voice that called in to being that which it named, from whence did this voice come and why was its ongoing re-making imperfect?

In a kind of eulogy to Foucault, Certeau says of the tension between surgical elimination and the role of surprise in his work:

It is a question of “discontinuous practices,” born of inventions that arise from chance encounters. The event that is elicited by the “wild profusion of beings” adds to each carefully constructed map another possibility. None of these maps defines a destiny of truth of thought. These successive places are not linked by the progress of an Idea that would gradually formulate itself, but by a common way of thinking. They answer to the laughs of history. (1986: 197).

If as Certeau is suggesting here, Foucault was a “new cartographer” of discourse,<sup>18</sup> he was one whose exactitude in mapping, an ironic method indeed for one who left no doubt as to the role of the “visual” in modernity, arose from a most peculiar place – the aleatory, registered by the laugh. Certeau suggests that his exactitude and surgical practice may have won out over time but that what is ill-attended to in Foucault’s work is a most profound respect for surprise. If this is so, then it is ironic indeed. Arising from “thinking otherwise,” this work enacted an ever more precise and complete discursive closure, an inescapability of formation and force predicated, revealed and itself formed in a surprisingly visual repertoire of increasingly steely and bare prose. Yet at the same time, Foucault began

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<sup>18</sup> Certeau is using Deleuze’s phrase here (1986: 197).

to explore technologies of the self, or self-making and care, turning in a way to the other side of his discursive apparatus.<sup>19</sup> In asking why do the marvelous and fluid apparatus of modern biopower ultimately fail to reproduce the normative bodies and beings they name and incite to life, Certeau began with the question Foucault seems to have approached at the end.

The “assemblage” of the body as a location of multiple, sometimes incompatible and complexly “other” imbrications constantly in flux is not passive, nor is the suggestion of “flux” sufficient. Flux suggests an equivalent indeterminacy or the apriori givenness of the world, rather than a political, power-laden concatenation of force relations that are engaged in varying degrees of materialization. For why should there be only one form of materialization? And in asking, as Certeau does, his foundational question relative to Foucault, one that of course is about life, how are we to explain the various powers of incarceration of language and authority if not in their effects? Or rather, the question becomes the Spinoza-ist question – what do these force relations do and accomplish?<sup>20</sup>

In other words, this is about activity. Where Butler addresses Althusser at this point, noting in her own way the slippage between the word and its materialization, we are left with the full measure of slippage in practice and recitation. Yet we are left without, and cannot yet find, a theoretical mapping beyond that which charts the relationships between various modes of force and their differential materialization. In focusing on what bodies do, not what they are, we are compelled to this question of force and materialization, and compelled in such a way as to pluralize both terms in their relationality. This is an unsatisfying

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<sup>19</sup> See for example Foucault 1997; 1990.

<sup>20</sup> See Ian Buchanan (2011) for a rich discussion of Spinoza in the context of Deleuze and Guatarri’s theorization of the body.

conclusion to a dialectical relationship between systems of thought and production, and the slippages of time against the ravages of development space. This leaves us with only the notion of self-making as a place-holder for a certain possibility, for an apparent reiterative requirement. Where Wangjing and others were materially constituted by, and made active use of, relations of force, in the language of value and hope, their tactical maneuvers as embodied forms of self-making were not merely possibility in the necessary slippage of citation and practice, they were an elaboration of undoing and loss. What if, in other words, this nervous, twitchy need for reiteration becomes not a feature of possibility but the foundational iteration of development – a shifting, omnivorous set of indeterminate symbols whose manipulation is not about calculations but about forceful processes? This suggests that indeterminacy and surprise may at times, and in certain registers, be the very conditions for the continuance called power.

Certeau's work has been often wrongly interpreted as hopeful, the obverse of Foucault in theorizing, and partly illustrating, how people get by in the day to day with evasions, poaching, and subterfuge. What is forgotten in these accounts is that these are less than the "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1990; 1985); they are not weapons at all. They are the immediacy of survival, in other words, taking advantage of cracks in the ass of the system to get by. This is not hopeful; it is the bitter edge of a refusal to complete despair.

In writing about mystics, Certeau textually follows the bizarrely eclectic, 17<sup>th</sup> century religious figure Labadie to the edge of reason and hope (Certeau 1984). This is a metaphor, in some sense, for the epistemological "Crisis of the European Sciences" (Husserl 1970).

There is no reason that he doesn't follow. He simply turns back for there is no other way

forward. I sometimes thought of this when I saw Wangjing standing on the bridge. The hopes that had constituted her reached a certain limit. As she stood at the bridge, engaging in a form of melancholy, she held on to something that was more than vital to her, it was her.

Jumping forward in this narrative a bit, or shifting in time, I recall here the last time I saw Wangjing. I intend for this to inflect following stories about her, as they have inflected my interpretation of them.

I did not know that it was the last time that I would see her. She was sitting at the corner of the alleyway outside their *falang* where it branched off into another set of alleyways that then led out into a small square, some cheap apartments, and three other *falang*, before heading off to another little area much the same. At least it was that way then. A couple of years later it would all be changed beyond recognition.

Wangjing was sitting between her two friends, pale as usual. She had put on the makeup they told her to, trying to look like the cool, urban, unattainable girl that the lower-level Chinese businessmen who visited her *falang* often looked for that year. This played on marketing images of the very modern girl, stylish, affected, almost cold, desirable for being aloof and hard to get. This was the look most of the young, thin girls in the *falang* were then going for. Wangjing's friends were trying to help her attain it.

They took care of her as best they could. She was thinner than I had seen before. She'd always been almost gaunt, but now she had an unhealthy pallor to her skin. For a while she had traded on her youth and pretty face, which partly compensated for her boyish physique. She looked her age now, 21, which was considered a bit old.

It was marketing in ever-constant motion. The “there” of desirability was an almost ever-shifting set of possible targets, the materials that made up the realization of those targets so diverse as to make the ultimate product of desirability, each, in its own right, unique. But this was a unique concatenation of the same forces beyond the self. There was agency and indeterminacy in the aggregation and making, the “individual” assembling of a cornucopia of materials and the cultivation of the self. It was never-ending. It is where the possibility of Bahktinian dialogue is transformed into the indeterminate code whose goal is not final production but simply producing. And this production – let us call it development – is an elaboration of force relations and is both an extraction of value and something more subtle and horrific, for these are still human beings. Thus if there is an excess, it may perhaps only add to the horror and violence of self-making and being undone. Wangjing was, over the years I knew her, coming apart.

Her friends knew this. Or more precisely, they knew that she wasn’t getting many customers and was not well. Her friends worried about her, coached her, did her make-up and helped her pick clothes from the alleyway shops next door. They sat with her and in many cases encouraged potential customers to consider taking her. I saw this several times; her friends passing on customers, encouraging them to go with Wangjing. They worried and cared for her. I brought fruit and stories and sometimes medicine. We were witnessing a deterioration, but neither I nor they knew what to do about it. Some encouraged her to go home, but she refused. Others encouraged her to take a break for a couple of weeks, or to go see a doctor, or to get some fresh air by hiking up nearby Baiyun Mountain. We held a small party with karaoke and food and red wine. Wangjing told me many times that she

wanted to “learn about” (*xuexi*) red wine. Nothing we did cheered her up, and there was continuing, very worrying deterioration in her health. A visit to the doctor did little. She was prescribed eleven different western and Chinese medicines, along with a bottle of 100mg vitamin c tablets.

I saw her once in the late morning sitting on a bench in the park staring off into space, looking very frail, her cheeks sunken into her already thin face. She folded her hands across her knees, wearing a light, pastel yellow dress with a small blue ribbon on the upper left side. I sat with her for a while and tried to ask her what was wrong, what would make her feel better. She talked again about a TV drama. “There is a Korean show I really like now. The actor is so handsome! Aiy, who would love me now? I’m old and there are so many pretty, refined (*you qizhe de*) girls in the city. I’m just waiting, waiting (*yizhe dou deng zhe de*), but there is nothing (*shenme dou meiyou*). I don’t even have education.” “But you are smart and pretty and nice,” I said. “If you don’t want to do this work anymore, we’ll find something else!” Wangjing didn’t want to talk about circumstances. She talked about essences. “I know now that I am a low *suzhi* person. The only good thing that I have done is send money home. My mom criticizes me now because I send less money home. I lived in a dream.”

We parted for the day. I told her that I would see her again soon and we would find her some other job if she wanted. I asked her to “hang in there,” one of the most popular phrases in our occasional *falang* English classes. The cartoon image of the man hanging by his fingers at the edge of a cliff always brought laughter and appreciation. “We’ll find something,” I said.

A few days later, I was hurrying through the alleyway to an interview with a new boss at one of the other *falang* beyond Wangjing's. She was sitting at the corner between her friends. They saw me and looked glad, they urged me to stop for a while and talk with Wangjing. She smiled at me wanly but said nothing. I told them I would try to come back, but I didn't have time after the interview. A few days later, I left Guangzhou for a few weeks. When I came back, the *falang* was closed. I couldn't reach Wangjing on her cell number. One of her friends told me that she also couldn't find her and was worried. I later heard bad news. When her best friend from the *falang* called Wangjing's family she said they didn't seem concerned and had asked her for money. She spit and cursed them. We both did.

### 3.5 A MEETING

We have to push the notion of hegemony into the lived space of realities in social relationships, in the give and take of social life, as in the sweaty, warm space between the arse of him who rides and the back of him who carries.

Michael Taussig (1987: 288)

Ah Lang told me about what was going to happen. This area was run by someone, at least the *falang* activities were. I called him Mr. Qiu. He was connected with the original development group that had gotten in in the early 80's on government funding for development and factories. He had heard about what I was doing here and apparently didn't like the idea of and form of publicity. Mr. Qiu had decided that he was going to have me



beaten up and thrown out of the area. The idea was to beat me enough to discourage me from ever coming back, but not badly enough that the municipal police might get involved.

The area was run like a corporation. It is more accurate to say that it was in fact, in some ways, a corporation – a village, that was under the direct managerial control of a small investor group. The area had been leased to this controlling group – made up of mostly Hong Kong and some local investors - using public funds. In other words, the city paid the group investment funds in order for that group to then turn around and use those funds to invest in the area. The latter's job was to develop the area using its contacts with Hong Kong and Taiwanese businesses, to bring in factories, and to make business grow.

The village council had taken advantage of the development policies following Deng Xiaoping's famous "Southern Tour," and ties to Hong Kong, in order to be an early entrepreneurial space for small-scale factories and early export-driven markets. They used funds to set up local schools, a recreation center for the elderly, to pay off local residents, and allowed in factories. With that, came migrant workers, the first major post-80s waves. They came from Sichuan, Hunan, Anhui, Gansu, even Xinjiang. Some local residents sold out right away, others stayed on and rented out their spaces to the new workers, and shops, restaurants, and *hei falang* that catered to them. At the time, they were at Guangzhou's margins. By the time I was there, Guangzhou had swallowed the area.

Later, due to the area's growing Xinjiang population, more traders from the Middle East began appearing, then later, traders from mostly southern Africa. Things were getting out of control there, and the area was developing a reputation for being dangerous and chaotic, filled with undesirables. *Hei gui* ("black devils," a common racial slur directed at Africans)

were particularly troubling to the local public. Violent police raids ahead of the Guangzhou Asian Games, then ahead of the 2008 Olympics, ending in mass arrests, deportations, and at least one death were a sign of the end of this model for the city.

My beating and expulsion from this area had apparently been in the planning for several days. I asked Ah Lang, the one to tell me, how many people knew about this. She said that everyone knew. I asked why no one had told me. She replied that she had volunteered to be the one to tell me so if anyone was blamed for tipping me off, it would just be her.

“Ok, so what do I do?” I asked. “You should talk to Boss Liu,” she said. “She can talk to Boss Qiu for you.” Boss Liu ran one of the larger *falang* that I was welcome at in the neighborhood. She helped to set up the initial meeting with Mr. Qiu. I learned later that she had vouched for me, even arguing with Mr. Qiu about my presence and the potential risk he apparently associated with it.

Mr. Qiu eventually became a “patron” of my work in the neighborhood. This was accomplished mainly through the intervention of a few *falang* bosses and workers who vouched for me, something that involved some risk on their part and virtually no benefit. My relationship with Mr. Qiu was cemented on our first dinner together when it turned out that I could drink almost as much *baijiu* (Chinese grain liquor) as him. He told me “Ming, you’re ok! I like you. You’re not stuck up like most foreigners. You can drink! Now we are friends. You understand?” He said this last loudly, so others at the dinner could hear. Thereafter, he occasionally invited me to dinners, usually involving a varied group of government officials, business investors, and more directly criminal figures.

Other than occasional dinners, I seldom saw Mr. Qiu or his henchmen (who I'd run from twice before) after that. He had many other business interests and soon after became involved as an investor in a new Guangzhou – Hunan high-speed multi-lane highway project. His apparent “low *suzhi*” – cursing, drinking, whoring, the casual application of violence, was not a matter of concern, as it was not for his government and other business associates. It was an ordinary part of their business and personal lives. It did not undo them; it made them. Money and power, and gender, made him part of a second tier of *suzhi* scales. This scale wasn't about disciplining unruly rural bodies, it was about the value metrics of gender – male financial success and female beauty.<sup>21</sup> On this scale, his quality was secured by his ability, power, and wealth.

Mr. Qiu and his business associates sometimes laughed at the naïve morality of the “people” (*renmin*), although when the term *renmin*, or a similar term signifying the common people (*laobaixing*; *pingming*; *dagong de ren*) was employed, this shifted the conversation in an almost autonomous fashion. The ghosts of earlier socialist formulations of language inhabited even these spaces. This would then follow with a few perfunctory remarks on the difficulty of the laboring classes, some concern over social stability, and a general note of solemnity about how tough life can be. Quickly, however, joviality returned, and with it humor. “Ming thinks that these women have a chance,” Qiu remarked, drunk one night. “I told him there is no way. He doesn't listen to me.” Another guest, a minor Guangzhou government official replied, “Well, they have the same chance as others, right?” To which

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<sup>21</sup> Farrer's (2002) gendered scale of social value is accurate but ignores “lower class” and rural metrics of *suzhi* that operate fundamentally differently, as both Yan and Anagnost describe, and as I explore here.

Qiu replied with booming voice and laughter, “Exactly!” By “others,” the official and Mr. Qiu meant the “*laobaixing*,” the common people, who were in the process of becoming a fixed underclass. This was in a sense a kind of arrogant, condescending benevolence. The “common people” do what they can to get by, including petty crime, prostitution, various forms of grinding labor, tax evasion, minor schemes and ventures, and the like. The issue was not whether or not they were bad. The issue was regulating them so things did not get out of control.<sup>22</sup> A melancholy refusal to give up impossible hopes was not unique by any means to the ill-defined realm of temporary sexual labor. It was, as Mr. Qiu and his friends were suggesting, the natural condition of a massive underclass of people who needed hopes to continue but of course could not realize them.

They laughed and ate and drank what would have been enough, in financial terms, to support three or four people for a month or two. Mr. Qiu leaned towards me, offering advice. “You can’t help them Ming. There are too many. They are simple people. You and I, we know what the world is like. Everyone has their place.” Where Fong (2006) has written of the “only hope” of the “people” in the multi-generational investment, sacrifice really, of migrant workers lives and labor for their children’s education, Mr. Qiu and other government officials and business leaders I knew viewed this condescendingly as a form of appeasement for the masses. What they did not fully understand at the time, but which has become increasingly apparent, even at the highest levels of government, is that the “common people” are not only aware of the profound, structural inequality of the “system,” including

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<sup>22</sup> The popular post-80s phrase “山沟里飞出个金凤凰” meaning “from a low, rural backwater flies forth a golden phoenix,” is used to praise the “one in a million” rural person who becomes successful, and to emphasize the almost miraculous nature of that rise from humble beginning to success in contemporary China.

educational, but they are, despite great patience, becoming convinced that there is no hope.<sup>23</sup>

Thus the most important area of governmental concern in recent years has been the preservation of “social stability.”

Belief in the possibilities of success, not simply material, but a life, a good life as it was rendered visible and intelligible around us, was the goal of most of the women I met working in sexual labor. This was what they had left their homes for, this was what they worked for in the spaces of the *falang*. It was, in the years I spent among them, almost never achieved. There was competition among them, certainly, and “habits” that inhibited it. But most were fairly disciplined, focused, working towards a clear and certain vision. Their “failure” is not due to a lack of effort or commitment. Nor is it to mutual sabotage, drugs, inherent weakness, low quality, prior hurt, or low discipline. It is not a failure at all, but rather an attempt to realize the self in the world, but one in which the world is unamenable to the self as the world has made it.

Ah Hong, an older street and bar worker, explained it to me this way:

I had these dreams and ideas when I first came out. I still do. Ha. But what good are the dreams. I work, right? I don't cheat anybody, at least not more than anyone else. But this is all I can do. And it won't last. I'm getting older. I work hard, but it doesn't mean anything. What does it mean? Nothing! I have nothing. I thought that if I work hard, if I am smart, I would have something. But nothing.

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<sup>23</sup> For example, the first public speech by the new Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang (New York Times 2013), focused heavily on the issue of inequality as the most pressing issue facing China's continued, stable development.

### 3.6 IONIZATION

I will certainly never now know her real name and probably could not find that place in Hong Kong again. A friend in had put me in touch with someone she knew. He called and said yes, I could come and hang out and talk a bit with the women. My friend had vouched for me, and she had a very strong reputation.

I found the place eventually. It was in Prince Edward. A big guy with an impassive, square and acne scarred face checked me at the door, then let me up the elevator. Once upstairs, I was shown to another interior elevator. We went up, through double doors, and then to a heavy, white, locked door with a small window. I was then let in. The door was locked behind me.

Behind the door were five small, individual rooms, each equipped with a bed, television, and small bathroom with shower. In each room lived a young woman from mainland China here illegally, who had been provided with fake papers to cross the border, and now in Hong Kong, trapped, each in their own small, clean, white room.

They could not go out, they were told, because they would be arrested on the spot. The Hong Kong police were on the lookout for mainland women selling sex in Hong Kong. It was a campaign, an action. It even had a name. At that time, the cops were calling it the “Fire Lily Action.” The Hong Kong government said that is was both intended to save mainland “trafficked women” and protect Hong Kong from this unwanted sexual intrusion.<sup>24</sup> The latter reason was a bit incoherent and tended to be associated loosely with protecting Hong Kong from disease, or something about how this fed the mafias, or this undermined

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<sup>24</sup> See South China Morning Post 2002a; 2002b; Apple Daily 2002.

Hong Kong social stability, or was just bad in threatening but unspecified ways (Shih 1998; Ming 2004). The predominant image was of a massive population of low-class mainlanders entering to parasitically feed off of the resources of Hong Kong.

That mainland sex workers in Hong Kong could not go out safely was not a lie. Mainland women who didn't look like affluent shoppers on holiday were being stopped on the streets of Kowloon during this period and checked for papers. Often without much evidence – even condoms in a purse would do – many were detained in Hong Kong. Those detained were fined and then handed over to mainland police who detained and fined them further. For some, particularly if this showed up as a second offense, detainment on the mainland was at a re-education through labor facility for from several months up to two years (Ziteng 2002; Laidler et al. 2007).

Wang Wan asked me, in English, if I had a lighter. I didn't. "Do you need help getting out of here?" I asked. She paused, and then asked me what "ionize" means. I hesitated and admitted that I didn't know exactly. I stumbled over "something to do with adding a charge to an ordinary molecule...something about cleaning the air."

It was a feature on the mobile air conditioner in her room. The room was about 8 feet by 12 feet. It had a bed dominating most of it, a side bathroom, a small dressing table with mirror, a poster of a Caucasian couple in a black and white photo, in passionate and voluptuous embrace, pillows on the bed, a television, and a small stuffed bear with a red bow tie on. She had been in this room almost every minute for the last 29 days, she said, so she noticed everything. Wang Wan's English was good, but she didn't know what "ionize" meant. I didn't either, exactly.

This was one of the few times that I was close to, or in direct contact with, someone in a situation like the “trafficking” of breathless news and NGO reporting. The vast majority of women, and men, I encountered were not in these situations and found the reportage, when we talked about it, both laughable and irrelevant to the actual problems they had to deal with on a day to day basis. In this case, though, the presence of organized crime was clear. The women were trapped and unable to leave. I had not known this when I came, but there I was.

“Do you need help getting out of here?” I repeated. “I can call people, you don’t have to stay.” Wang Wan didn’t want to go. She had come to Hong Kong to work in sex work to make more money. She hated her confinement but she was making money, although a lot of that was taken from her. She blamed the cops for not being able to go out and see Hong Kong, or just walk around. Her captors had taken advantage of the crackdown.

Wang Wan had been charged fees in every direction. She had been charged in total 40,000 HKD. That was to pay for her border crossing and papers (valid but illegally arranged), housing, food, and other costs. It was a huge amount. Against this, each transaction earned her 200 HKD. She saw on average, she estimated, about 15 customers per day. That meant that she averaged a profit of 3000HKD per day, much higher than most, although she was “repaying” a huge debt. She showed me how she had carefully calculated how much she would earn over the following 62 days of her visa (confinement), subtracted an expected “additional” set of charges, and come out with a figure that, she said, was a bit better than if she had stayed in Shenzhen working. It was better enough that she could think about doing something else with that money. She had a sense of fashion, she



told me, and had thought about opening a small shop with her friend. Or perhaps she would open a shop online. She had dreams, she said, and was going to use this money to secure them.

Wang Wan asked me where I was from. She had had a boyfriend in Shenzhen who was from the US. She really cared for him. They talked only in English. He didn't speak much Chinese. Wang Wan laced her English with "shit" and "fuck" almost every sentence. They had gone to lots of foreigner bars in Shenzhen. She rattled off a list. Did I know them? I didn't. She didn't want to go back to hanging out at local places. She felt she didn't fit in any more at the local places in China. She also didn't fit in here in Hong Kong. This was a stop along the way, a temporary confinement. She would use the money she earned here to start her own business.

Would I visit her when she got back? I said yes, I definitely would. She seemed pleased to hear this. "I can't speak English with anyone here," she complained. It's very low *suzhi* here in Hong Kong." Wang Wan was disappointed in her Hong Kong experience, and felt that Hong Kong people were low and greedy (a reverse image of mainlanders in Hong Kong) but held on to her self, reflected in the low *suzhi* mirror of Hong Kong and her vision of a business future.

She saw her condition of confinement as one that did not belittle her or make her less than she was, but one that reflected badly on Hong Kong. Wang Wan was angry and unhappy about how the police threat made her more vulnerable to the whims of her Hong Kong "bosses," and she found the physical confinement difficult. She endured it, however, with a vision of her self and her future in mind. She assured me that they could not take this

from her. “When I leave this shit place, I will have some money. Then I will have my own business. Then I can say fuck to all these fucks.” “Fuck *you* to those fucks,” I corrected. “Ha, yes, fuck you fuck you!” We laughed and practiced a few more ways of cursing people in English and Chinese until my time with her was up.

#### 4.0 OUT OF THE WAY PLACES

This unique and enchanting episode of urbanization will go down in history as part of Guangzhou's magnificent cultural tapestry.

Guangzhou Municipal Website (2011a)

Guangzhou's *falang* are typically located in “out of the way” parts of the city, usually *chengzhongcun* (urban villages) or migrant worker settlements. There they border, at least for a time and in somewhat different ways, the city's proper edges. The city continues to expand, making “out of the way” a very mobile location of meaning, bodies, and the putatively concrete yet ever-remade building materials of development.

This chapter explores the relationship between different forms of spatial production and the experience of women working in the lower echelons of sexual labor in Guangzhou. It is concerned with the often violent material effects of spatial marginalization in the city, what Philippe Bourgois has referred to as “inner city apartheid” (2003). It also explores the relationship between spatial configurations and tactical possibilities, or “getting by.” While agency and some unpredictability appear in these tellings, they must still be posed with and against an array of developmental and regulatory responses.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See Chau 2008 for a timely discussion of the “awful mark” of development – the Chinese character “chai,” which appears on buildings marked for destruction.

Places and bodies here are not understood as radically discrete but as mutually constituted along shifting and contingent borders.<sup>26</sup> This partly then entails a political critique of spatial production itself, in particular urban development projects as a primary vehicle of late-capitalist production and social domination and control. This does not displace the politically critical valence of time but rather, as Zhang argues in the context of her research on migrant worker communities in China, “...deals precisely with the historicity and temporality of space” (2001: 8). Even this critical, combined approach may, however, reify the discrete personhood of bodies who are then seen to be channeled along and within the produced time-spaces of development. Thus this chapter also addresses embodiment as a co-substantial part of the processes of urban development(s) in Guangzhou.

Approaching the body and space as in-discrete opens theoretical cracks into thinking otherwise the relationality of subjective and spatial-temporal production(s). On the one hand, it raised the specter of neoliberal development as a more or less deliberate and apparently complete project. How then can the isolating and fragmenting aspects of urban spatial production (“inner city apartheid”) possibly be dialectically overcome from within? On the other hand, thinking space and body as already implicated in the in-time practices of *emplaced* life points us toward the hidden limitations these projects may have, the concrete tactical possibilities that might inhere to their necessarily recitational elaboration, and even what limited possibilities for what Nancy Fraser calls “subaltern counter-publics” (1990) there might be. In this chapter I thus ask how are the changing spaces of the city and the bodies of *falang* workers variably co-implicated within the city’s development projects; what

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<sup>26</sup> This is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “flesh” as a material interweaving of body and place (1962).

are the effects of Guangzhou's spatial transformations on the lives of the city's most marginalized; and finally, what possibilities – collective and tactical – are there to be found in the practices of those living in the shadow of Guangzhou's global ambitions?

#### 4.1 DISORDERED SPACES

Guangzhou is a very dangerous city. There are many thieves and bad elements.

A Guangzhou municipal government official originally from Jiangsu province, 2005.

In this section I briefly explore the material and discursive conditions within Guangzhou's *falang*, and other "illicit" marketplaces that are situated within the city broadly. This is a fraught situation within a development project partly predicated on the elimination of areas of disorder that do not match with Guangzhou's vision of the city self. I argue that Guangzhou's national positioning, one shaped in part by historical prejudices, and in competition with Shanghai and Beijing, adds a certain urgency to the city planning as it attempts to render the city to conform to a vision of meticulous order, efficiency, cleanliness, and cosmopolitan, entrepreneurial urbanity.<sup>27</sup>

Guangzhou, with its "southern barbarians" and rough sounding and unintelligible language, which the locals refuse to give up, has for a very long time been far from the centers of national power and order. Guangzhou bears the burden of a historical imagination that casts it as *luan* (chaotic; disordered), a place of southern traders, unruly spaces, and

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<sup>27</sup> For scholarly overviews of Guangzhou's post-Opening and Reform development projects see for example Li et al. 2005; Xu and Yeh 2003. While told from the point of view of urban planning and rationalization, these accounts are revealing of the scope and speed of "development" in the city.

almost foreign traditions.<sup>28</sup> In these times of marketization, when the catchword of the day is globalization (*guojihua*), this image of independence, entrepreneurialism, and a long-standing tradition of international trade, has had an invigorated power, but this has not fully erased a longer historical vision of the city as itself a rough, if dynamic outlier.

Guangzhou's distance from the capital, strange language and customs, and enduring sense of local identity and independence marked it as a remote, humid, exotic internal other in pre-revolutionary times, and its trading tradition, indeed its very urban status, marked it as a center of deviance, an early site of corrupting foreign influences in the Maoist period.

That this region was the source of many of the early reformist movements of the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries mattered little against the broader ideological stigmatization of the city. This was particularly true of one so "foreign" in many respects, and with long-standing ties to other places and peoples in the practice of commerce.

Even after Deng Xiaoping's famous Southern Tour, marking the Opening and Reform period of China's recent marketization, stigmatizing images remained, layering on to each other rather than disappearing under the weight of the new. Guangzhou is where the famous "flies" of openness first entered, as Deng Xiaoping declared, bringing with it links to Hong Kong and beyond, but re-igniting, in many tellings (Hershatter 1997), sources of urban decadence and decay that had not been fully extinguished in the Maoist period. Prostitution was among these supposedly re-ignited embers.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Turning that stigmatizing historical vision on its head, Guangzhou people like to say "The mountains are high and Beijing is far," highlighting the independence of Guangzhou and its people far from the tight controls of a prickly and rigid center of power, and suggesting all sorts of opportunities

<sup>29</sup> Guangzhou people remember a different, more revolutionary, history. Important late-Qing reformers, like

Guangzhou is often, interestingly, accused of being old in a very improper way. It has a material history from a less rational and scientific past. Alleys, streets, old buildings from the Imperial, early Republican, early Maoist, post-Maoist, and 1990s are all scattered and disordered, jumbled together in unseemly fashion. Unlike its neighbor, Shenzhen, a city formed – it is imagined - out of almost nothing,<sup>30</sup> Guangzhou is most solidly, in all of its accreted layers, there. One cannot start from scratch. Yet this in part, remains the developmental ideal; to re-make the city, erase what it has been, remove the detritus of a decayed past, and build a new and shining global metropolis, and then to import, or re-invent, a sanctified past that marks the city as uniquely as its recently built landmark structures.

## 4.2 ORDERING

*Luan* is translated as “chaotic and disordered,” but it comes with a broader array of historical burdens. In Guangzhou’s version of the contemporary mystical market moment,

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Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, were from the villages of the southern delta neighboring Guangzhou municipality. Kang Youwei’s home village, Nanhai, is in fact now of part of Guangzhou proper, absorbed in the city’s expansion. Sun Yat-sen, claimed by both the PRC and Taiwan as a “father” figure of the Nation, was Cantonese, probably Hakka (Erbaugh 1992; Constable 1994). The earliest known (celebrated) peasant uprising against British colonialism sprung from a meeting held at a temple in the village of Sanlitun, just north of Guangzhou, and where some of my fieldwork took place. It was on Guangzhou’s Shamian Island that the Qing dynasty first sought to canton, in Canton, its engagement with aggressive, mercantile, imperialist powers, and from that island that one of the first massacres of angry Chinese citizens via the rifles of British troops occurred. It was here that the Qing official, Lin Zexu, attempted to halt the Opium trade, helping precipitate what was likely an inevitable war with a mercantile, aggressive imperial Great Britain. Guangzhou, as many of its people remember, was not only a home to the independent entrepreneurs of Qing and Republican China, among the earliest to send their sons to study in Japan, Europe, and the United States, it was, understandably, the ground from which revolutionaries sprang (See for example Ho 2006; Hsu 2000).

<sup>30</sup> See for example O’Donnell’s ongoing virtual ethnography of Shenzhen urban villages and spatial transformation (n.d.).

*luan* urban spaces are the as- yet-unrealized potential of localized yet global development, the stubborn remainders at the pointing, penetrating end of flexible elaborations of force. They are at the same time more than that, they are accretions (and recognized as such) but accretions of a historical detritus that is dis-ordered and out of place in the cosmopolitan imagination of the Guangzhou city self. *Luan* space is at the same time the necessary other that is both a present absence and a material presence of disorder. It is the “as yet un-rendered” that feeds the needs of Guangzhou’s ongoing elaborations of displacement and attempted erasure, arising from and in turn supporting an ever-receding vision of cosmopolitanism conjured up at the intersection of heavily state-centered multi-year plans and “millennial capitalism” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). The state arrogates to itself the power of naming, cleansing, and developing.

Within the spaces of a city desperately, and somewhat successfully, struggling, in competition with Shanghai, Beijing, and other global cities, to become an international conduit of global capital flows, the identification and regulation of internal disorder is, I argue, of great urgency. The urgency and ubiquity of images of order and disorder in the city mark out a terrain of power and segregation that almost any contemporary Guangzhou resident is familiar with. This obscures the ordinary practices of daily life, an ordinariness lost in layered hysteresis, an enormous gap between representations of normality of the city and the more complex actuality of life in the streets behind the shiny buildings now flanking its main thoroughfares. It attempts this disappearing act with great force, but it does not completely erase the presence of ordinary spaces or the ordinary violence that is a part of them. Unable to erase, it seeks to displace the responsibility for the violence that



accompanies Guangzhou's development – to streets and buildings, communities, and lives – in other words onto an other within, a lingering presence that is unwelcome in the city.

In 2009, the Guangzhou city government approved its most ambitious plans yet to re-order the city's recalcitrant *luan* spaces, its old urban villages, with a completion date set at 2020 (2011a; 2011b). It announced that of 138 official urban villages, 52 would be completely demolished and 86 “completely renovated.” Of those to be renovated, two models have been offered. The first is to demolish all existing buildings and put land plots up for sale or auction. The second model is for the village to solicit real estate developers in order to transform the area – typically meaning demolishing existing buildings and selling off land, usually at lower-than market values as negotiated by local government officials. The plans include relocation schemes for official residents, which in practice has generally not included residents from outside of the city or from other provinces. It also includes a provision for preserving a limited number of villages and buildings that exemplify the “essence of Lingnan culture.” An official announcement by the municipal office of the “Three Olds Transformation” announced in 2011 that this plan was being implemented successfully (2011b). Among the successful models it touted was that of Xian Village in the Tianhe district.

A 2010 article in the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* titled “Guangzhou Slum Residents Battle Police: Tear Gas Used on Protesters in Urban Village Facing Demolition Ahead of Asian Games” reported briefly on the act of renovating the village (SCMP 2010). It noted that residents had protested the demolition officially for at least a year but their protests had been rejected. It further noted the claims of residents that they

had been forced to sign over land at below-market rates to real-estate developers. It reported on the physical resistance of large numbers of village residents to police armed with tear gas and in riot gear that lasted a full day and night. The article balanced what turned into savage beatings of residents at the hands of riot police with the insight of one eye-witness who noted that residents were trying to hit police too.

What the article reports troubles the official narrative of Xian Village as a model success story. It is quick, however, to put this in the proper context. “These slums make up about 22 per cent of the city. They are poorly built, have bad infrastructure and attract migrants and paid workers because of the cheap rents. They are considered hotbeds of crime.” Migrant workers are associated quickly and without the necessity of explanation, with crime. They are “attracted” to these spaces rather than simply moving where they can afford to live. They live in slums, not poorer neighborhoods. The slum and the migrant are a mutual constitution. Where there are slums, migrants will be attracted. Where there are many migrants, there is a slum. Slums are also “hotbeds” or sometimes “breeding grounds” of crime and disorder. They are not neighborhoods, apartments, or houses. In the official planning, and in order to make a more “scientific” use of these spaces (2011b), the large scale destruction and dislocation involved in Xian village’s “renovation,” a mode of graphic violence on a large scale and within the city itself, is made to disappear. At the time of the violent struggle with police, barely a ripple was felt throughout the city. It now appears as a proudly touted model of development by the Guangzhou municipal government.

### 4.3 BODY CLAIMS

The material constitution of lived space is never absent the piling up of bodily maneuvers, even if this layering of uncertain motions does not appear and makes no sound. This is in part, lest this be read too hopefully, the piling up and emplaced carceration of power-laden, segregating images. Louisa Schein notes the constitution of spaces vis a vis the bodies that inhabit them in the context of mobile bodies inhabiting urban spaces, carrying with them the discursive traces of the spaces from which they come (Schein 2001; 1996). They carry with them, as Wan Sunning argues, different local substances predicated on their origin, be it Anhui, Sichuan, Hunan, Xinjiang, Zhejiang, Guangxi or elsewhere (2009a; 2009b).

While agreeing with Anagnost and Yan regarding the general devaluation of migrant laboring bodies along a rural/urban divide, Wan Sunning notes correctly the greater specificity with which prejudice is registered according to provinciality in the sophisticated spaces of the urban and its more finely tuned marketplace of selectivity and rejection, and in relationship to a historically constituted Chinese notion of origin. In ethnographic work in Beijing and Shanghai, Wan finds, for example, that Anhui female domestic workers are relatively devalued –noting that in earlier times Anhui people were associated with culture and dependability, illustrating an important historicized reminder – while Sichuan *mei* (Sichuan young women) are a “good brand” in the *baomu* (nurse; household servant) urban market. Migrants from Anhui, a poor province, and the northern province of Gansu, the latter a very dry and poor regions, are associated with dirty habits, backward ideas, and unreliability. Sichuan, a fertile, lush region (*Yu Mi Zhi Xiang* – “*Tianfu Zhi Guo*”) is associated with gentle, lovely, yet hardworking “young sisters” (*mei mei*). As Wan notes,

the Sichuan *meimei* brand (literally) has quite a bit of market cache (2009a; 2009b). This bodily branding is then used to “sell” the services of these then locally-framed women.

I would extend in two ways Sun’s complications of Anagnost and Yan’s work on *suzhi*, gender, and migration. The first is that these stereotyped images vary by receiver city. In Guangzhou, Gansu does not have a clear discursive presence and is generally not distinguished from a poor, dusty north. Sichuan does have a presence similar to that which Sun describes but is often contrasted with Guizhou, also a southern, fertile nearby province. Guizhou, and its women, are seen as more wild, uncouth, darker skinned, and associated with minority people (*xiaoshu minzu*), though Sichuan is home to many minority people as well. Hunan also is an important marker of *waidi* (outsider) differentiation. Bordering Guangdong to the north, it is a major source of migrant labor to the city and often associated with migrant prostitution. The term “Hunan Chicken,” for example, is used widely to describe both a spicy dish and a prostitute in Guangzhou.

This leads to the second complication, namely that these images differ according to labor. In the case of sex work in Guangzhou, for example, the images of Sichuan women that Sun describes remain but are contextualized within an explicitly sexual frame. Stereotypes of Sichuan women in the realm of sexual labor include a supposed spiciness that mirrors and embodies the complex spiciness of their foods. Hunan women may likewise be stereotyped as temperamentally and sexually “hot.” Yet like the raw, aggressive spiciness of their foods, they are often portrayed, and market themselves, as rough and directly sexual. Guizhou women in sex work are often marketed, or market themselves, as a more exotic, brown other in ways similar to what Hyde describes in minority regions of Yunnan (2007).

And Northern women often market themselves as brusque (as northerners are stereotypically thought to be) but physically robust – in the case of sex work, translating as physically voluptuous and strong in bed.

There is then perhaps a third complication. Sex workers in *falang*, and in other low tier sexual labor venues, make deliberate use of these images for their own profit. *Falang* bosses may market in the brief encounter with a prospective customer these images, but the primary profit from such use goes to the worker. Workers play upon these images in ways that will be discussed in more detail later, shifting roles relative to how plausible they are and what they sense to be the customer's desires. While the Sichuan *mei* in Sun's account are marketed, disturbingly, by *baomu* agencies, these women use those images more self-consciously, tactically drawing on them in a form of performance that generates a field of desire in the context of regional, carceral imaginations, ones that both attract and satisfy customers.

Rural bodies thus carry many loads scaled along the axes of many identifications. Beyond the originary myths they carry, as that meaning is defined by the urban center(s) to which they come, and as that is framed within a now hegemonic, gendered and spatial notion of human quality (*suzhi*), we must also consider the features of motion or mobility, or in this case, the political valences of *liu*. An outsider body in Guangzhou carries not only the semiotic baggage of a constituted prejudice specific to its origin and other marks of identification; it carries with it the mark of an improper and unhealthy mobility. The rural, mobile other is a "problem" in the generic sense. They invade urban spaces, are uncultured, difficult to manage, strain urban resources, and bring diseases of various sorts. At this level,

“they” are undifferentiated. In Guangzhou, we thus find the materiality of gender, sexuality, and region operating in complex and dialogical ways in relation to stigmatizing images of migrant bodies.

The presence of the rural other is registered across the senses of sight, smell, and sound. Along sleeves and creases, joints and upon a skin that cannot be washed free of it, we find an earth-bound claim upon the body, that is both of a place, with the stigmas of that place, and out of place, both a fullness of presence and an absence of proper placement. In some sense, this is reminiscent of Fei Xiaotong’s famous notion of “soil” and origin as fundamental to Chinese identity and social being (1992). There is, as he argued, a local claim upon the body. What he did not foresee – and how could he - was how malleable that earthly claim to the body would come to be.

Such images may, however, also be turned into brief forms of entrepreneurial possibility. Women working in sexual labor, as will be explored in more detail below, often make use of stigmatizing images, revaluing and turning them to their own uses. Pheng Cheah, in a critical reading of Fruit Chan’s *Durian Durian*, a well-known film about a mainland sex worker in Hong Kong, drawing briefly on my ethnographic research there, has referred to this as a “parody of entrepreneuriality” (2010: 263). If this is a parody, it differs not noticeably from the practice of entrepreneurialism in general. What difference there may be is not due to a prior authenticity but rather to the materially consequential assignation of authenticity and social value.

#### 4.4 SCALES, MOVEMENT, AND THE PROSTITUTE

The violence of the city, or its development, is partly a matter of disappearance or the fruition of Benjamin's prophesy in which buildings become yet another commodity. "With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the ruins of the bourgeoisie even before they have crumbled (Benjamin 1935). Sharon Zukin, extending Harvey's insight (drawn in part from Benjamin and Baudelaire) regarding the material obsolescence of buildings in late-capitalist urbanity, notes that they are increasingly marked, as are other commodities, by cultural obsolescence (2006; 1995). Buildings and neighborhoods swiftly become "out" in the way of other fashions, ushering in the new with all its glosses and glamour. As Akbar Abbas writes in regards to a supposedly always new city, Hong Kong:

The city from the point of view of architecture may be associated with painterly modes of looking derived from classical tradition, but architecture from the point of view of the city can be associated only with film, "the visual art that developed alongside the modern city," that is to say, the art that problematizes the visual as stable because it is film that gives us, in Lean-Luc Godard's words, truth twenty-four times a second. (1999: 147).

That this may be applied more broadly, to cities with material histories, is telling both of the falsity of the city without history (Hong Kong; Shenzhen) and of the ways histories are erased productively in older cities (Guangzhou; Paris; New York).

The city is not only buildings. In this, visuality becomes not only a marker of loss, it also works to make disappear, in its productive capacity, the materiality and value of laboring bodies. What is material is rendered away with great speed while what is imagined, in this

case the devalued, gendered body of the migrant other, has greater endurance. This is especially true of the “prostitute” figure, in some ways paradigmatic of broader imaginations of the devalued rural other. This is true whether or not imagined as polluting rural, female outsider, without skills or cultivation, willing to do anything to earn money and with nothing to sell but the physicality of her body, or the rural rube tricked, kidnapped, conned into sexual labor – a victim, but one whose victimization is inherent to their rural ignorance or desperation. This latter hints at an undeveloped critique of development and inequality, a discussion whose organization – in internet media, traditional print, and other public fora is cut short by government censors faster than any other, suggesting the sort of anxiety that one hopes and assumes underlies the calmer, segregated surfaces of life in Guangzhou.

This implicit reference to the rural prostitute, albeit negatively, begins to approach an uncomfortable truth – the common ground of the ordinary though stigmatized migrant female worker and the prostitute figure. A number of anxieties are thus at play and must be rendered, though not resolved. Where the normality of the rural figure is disappeared in rural/urban, regional, and *suzhi* discourses, the normality of the rural body of the female sex worker is dissolved in a discourse of deviance or a more profound outsider-ness than even that of the migrant laborer. While not resolved at the level of rurality in the city (commonality), I argue that resolution is not necessary because the multiple axes of otherness on which the Guangzhou urban imagination relies in framing the outsider allow for both the use of the prostitute to condemn the migrant figure on the axis of *suzhi* AND allows for the more profound othering of the prostitute figure on the axis of sexuality. In so doing, the Guangzhou urban self – cosmopolitan and normative – is made visible and sustained,



co-figured (Hershatter 1997) against the unwelcome and lowly general migrant outsider, and its cousin, or latent and gendered/sexual potentiality, the figure of the female prostitute.

If it is difficult to remake neighborhoods – pathways, buildings, street corners, local places of historical import – it is more difficult to remake the bodies of those who do not fit, whose literal and embodied distance from normative ideals of proper urban citizens (Solinger 1999; Gaetano and Jacka 2004; Yan 2003a; Anagnost 2004) are great, and at the same time the very condition, in contrast, of the cosmopolitan subject. This is why they are proper in their place, and when out of place, must keep moving. The shoulders and hips of someone who has done heavy labor growing up, the skin of someone who has worked in the sun, the posture and pallor of someone who has worked in southern China's factories, the stature and dimensions of someone who has not always had meals fat with nutrients, supplements, milks and powders and elixirs of modern biomedical or "traditional" Chinese health are all meaningful marks. These are immediately grasped in the visual, gendered repertoire of the cosmopolitan, identified, tagged, and visually released. Recalcitrant bodies, they cannot be recast in the image of ideals. Such investment in them is a waste, but they can be more effectively regulated, realizing the limited *suzhi* that is inherent to them in disciplined, laboring bodies that do not trouble the urban.

Identification and scaling against the gendered grid of *suzhi* relies not only on the technology of the gaze but also works its way through other senses. The sound of cosmopolitan subjects is contrasted with that of the rural other along its own gendered frame. Loudness, accent, rhythm, vocabulary, appropriateness, wit and verbal skill are matched against a norm of sophistication, *suzhi* and *wenhua* (culture; civilization). Likewise smell,

as the smells of the laborer who steps on to a Guangzhou bus or metro train mark them as clearly as do the cheap perfumes or body washes of women who cannot afford better or more subtle liquids and creams. This is a familiarity of class antagonisms, framed and worked within a socialist history predicated on a profound division of the rural and urban, older imaginations of localized differences and a Guangzhou neo-liberalism that seeks to obscure these antagonisms beneath a legitimating and condemnatory rhetoric of quality.

The embodied presence of the migrant (*waidiren*) does not, in general, belong as lingering thing in Guangzhou's shiny, clean spaces. Loitering, despite important variations in the sensual codes of the urban, is still here a paid privilege. The *liu*-ness that marks the rural migrant as out of place is reversed once in the city as they are compelled to move along, where the lack of mobility is a form of unwelcome vagrancy – a double mark of improper mobility (*liu*) and misplaced fixity. In the “out of the way” neighborhoods, it is different. In the centralized yet “out of the way” spaces in which *falang* are housed, there is no such compulsion. People may linger, even in groups, without apparent purpose. They may also linger with economic purpose.

*Falang* occupy a flickering in-and-out space. They are housed in the same physical spaces as the small shops that neighbor them, and come and go, perhaps more swiftly, but also sometimes linger. They are staffed and peopled by bodies and gestures, voices and dialects, mobile sets of clothes and hair that are similar to those around them but also other. In some ways, they practice a daily *peruqe*,<sup>31</sup> mimicking the *luan* but still ordinary

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<sup>31</sup> This is Certeau's term for a certain form of tactic (1984: 25). He defines it as is the worker's own work being performed at the place of employment under the disguise of work for the boss. I am using it loosely here to mean a space that disguises its work from the eyes of the police and city authorities.

commerce of their neighbors while blending in with them. In this, they practice a diversion of labor away from the limited proscriptions available to a female migrant underclass for their own ends. In the centralized yet “out of the way” spaces in which *falang* are housed, there is no such compulsion. People may linger, even in groups, without apparent purpose. They may also linger with economic purpose.

#### 4.5 LOITERING

My fieldwork and the work of the *falang* were not so different from one another. Both involved a great deal of focused loitering. And with both the production and exchange of emotion was essential. While the hanging around and chatting did not look like work, it was (Bell 1994; Bernstein 2010; Hochschild 1983; Kong 2009; Doezema 1998; Chapkis 1997).

Guangzhou *falang* tend to be staffed throughout the day, beginning in the late morning or early afternoon and through until late in the evening, ranging from around 11pm to 1am, depending on the boss and workers, and how business is going. They are marked less by the appearance of the shop, although there are tell-tale signs there as well, and more by the presence of women in the postures and disposition of *falang* workers. This means, largely, hanging around, although in a specific manner. The couch, or other seats, of a *falang*, tend, as mentioned prior, to be along the wall nearest to the door. It is arranged such that the legs and parts of the body are visible through the door (if there is one), to whomever is passing by. The sight of legs in mini-skirts or sheer dresses, or of more than a few pairs of women’s legs seated, as viewed by the passer-by in a peeking flash, indicates the likely presence of a *falang*. In the case of windows through which those inside are visible to passer-by, workers often

take up positions on chairs or barber stools so as to be visible, though not very clearly, from the outside. Once positioned, usually for long stretches of time, one sits, relaxes, chats, rests, watches TV, or plays card or other games. The important thing is some visible display to any potentially interested customer as they pass by.

This is like the display of other commodities in other shops, with three important exceptions. The first is that the act of display has to walk a fine line between attracting wanted attention and discretion. Attracting too much attention leads to complaints to *chengguan* or police.<sup>32</sup> The second is that the display must be positioned consistently such that a very quick glance suffices. During the day, men pass by *falang* as they pass other shops and stores. Their glances, however, especially during the day, must be quick and discrete. In many cases they may live or work in these neighborhoods, or even if not, would find it embarrassing to be noticed peering in to a *falang*. And finally, critically, these are women who are advertising themselves.

I asked Ah Qiang on one of those long, humid Guangzhou days in 2005, why, even during the heat of the day, when for hours no customers came, she remained open and insisted on a minimum number of women in the shop at all times. She explained to me:

Look, you know usually men don't come during the day. They don't just walk in, right? They would feel embarrassed (*bu hao yisa*). Even if they are not from here, or businessmen. But they walk by during the day. They see our place. If they see

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<sup>32</sup> “*Chengguan*” are a kind of para-police force found cities throughout China. They have less training and technical authority than police, and are typically responsible for dealing with petty crimes. They are notorious for abusing their limited power to bully the less powerful and run extortion rackets. Even in China’s state-regulated media, reports of *chengguan* abuse are frequent.

no women inside, or just one, why would they come back at night? They will go to the other place where they see a few women. They know during the day time there won't be so many. But if there are a few during the day, it means the place is good. They are working. At night, definitely they will have a lot to choose from.

I asked her what they would think when they saw a white guy hanging around. She laughed, saying:

They will probably think this is some kind of high class place! Ha. They will think even a *laowai* will come here, so it must be good! They will also be curious la.

What is so special here? It must be so special and feel so good (*tai shufu*)! Maybe they have some special and rare international services!

Everyone in the *falang* was cracking up with laughter at the thought of me as additional advertisement, as well as at the thought of what my presence implied in terms of their services. Xiao Fang, celebrated for her humor, added, "Aiiya, so now you raise all of their expectations, but we don't know any foreign skills! So this is almost like false advertising!" Everyone, including me, was laughing hard. Xiao Fang continued, "So you must show us your special international skills! Or we are falsely advertising, and then people will surely blame us. Plus (she paused for comedic effect), I have always wanted to taste foreign rice! Or should I say bread?"

With that, everyone in the *falang* lost it in laughter. I was put in my place, reassured that my presence was ok and also teased into submission. Xiao Fang turned me briefly, in language, into a sexualized object of desire, a kind of linguistic version of the more general sexualization that was a routine part of their work.

Later, I asked Xiaojing what she thought about having to hang out during the day. She replied “I don’t do it at all. I pretend I have to go buy something, or I ignore her (Ah Qiang). Sometimes if I am tired or have no one to go outside with, I will hang around and then she is satisfied.” On my visits to the *falang* from 2004 – 06, Xiaojing and the other younger workers at the *falang* spent most of the day at the nearby internet café or wandering the neighborhood window shopping or buying inexpensive, usually fashion-related items. They felt reasonably comfortable in that area. There were a lot of small shops and migrants from all over China. It had not yet fully developed and was as yet outside of the central purview of the city proper.

The area, around Sun Yat-sen University’s original campus, is south of the Zhujiang River. When the university was established in 1888,<sup>33</sup> it was in an area outside of the city completely. It was farmland and villages. When I first came in 1994, it had the university within which most professors lived. It had a vast array of small shops, wet markets, and privately owned restaurants and noodle stands. There were very few glossy signs and national franchises. It was home to many *chengzhongcun*, which had their land rights and were nominally part of Guangzhou, although almost at that time like the *Desakotas* that Gregory Guldin has described.<sup>34</sup> It was prosperous and thriving and chaotic outside the central attention of the city. It was not much changed when I returned for fieldwork.

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<sup>33</sup> This is somewhat disavowed by the university today, which cites its establishment as being in 1924 as National Guangdong University, established by Sun Yat-sen himself.

<sup>34</sup> Guldin is referring to arguably Asia-specific tertiary zone of de-agriculturization, industrialization, and integration into urban-centered, often international, economic networks (1996; 1992). This has blurred the boundaries between urban and rural, though apparently without shaking the rural/urban imagination that privileges urban citizens as the vanguard of China’s cultural and economic progress

It was changing though, it just wasn't apparent to us in the *falang*. The new metro line extending to the south was completed for use in 2003. Ahead of that, real estate developers had begun moving in. As we sat in the *falang*, they were busy building new high-rise apartments all around the area. A bit later came franchises, mostly national, some international like 7-11s, two new McDonalds, a Pizza Hut, and a Park N Shop Mega Store. Small shop owners, like the woman I bought *baozi* (buns) from in 1994-5, who was still there in 2004, were being squeezed out. She told me they wouldn't renew her lease under any conditions. The area was marked for development.

White collar workers desperate for reasonably priced rental, and more importantly for-sale, apartment properties moved in to the newly conveniently accessible area, a trend that continues as Guangzhou expands, particularly along its southern and western borders. It was not clear to us at the time, but the relatively comfortable moment of our *falang* was a brief respite. Dealing with corrupt police and mafia-like figures was as nothing in the face of property developers and city planners. Within two years, all the *falang* in the area that I knew would be gone. The workers would be mostly dispersed to grinding, low-paid factory work, sex work in areas farther from the city where the earnings were less and the environment worse, marriage (for a few), work in shops and small restaurants, and several failed businesses and a couple of small successes. In general, things have not worked out well for the people that I knew. There is a lot of movement and a constant, restless search for opportunity. They are getting by in a world where real opportunities for a permanent underclass, both men and women, but even more so for women, are like dreams of oasis that draw one on, even when recognized as a dream.

Ah Qiang kept the younger, more attractive women on a rotating daily schedule. Older or less attractive women tended to hang out in the *falang* during the day anyway, hoping to get that extra stray customer while the “*liang niu*” (pretty girls) were away. Ah Qiang needed at least one or two of the younger women during the day, however, so that passerby, marking this place for a later return, would be enticed by what it had to offer. She justified this with a rhetoric mixing a collectivist moral rhetoric reminiscent of a still living socialist past, regional appeals, and market disciplines, mixing them up, or using them individually depending on the situation or who needed to be persuaded. Ah Qiang had to rely on persuasion as *falang* workers can pick up and go anytime. If a boss developed a reputation for being difficult to work for, unreasonable, or unable to bring in enough customers, they would soon be out of workers and out of business.

Ah Qiang’s appeals to collectivist morality seemed less effective on the young, perhaps both because that had less resonance with their own sense of morality and because they were the ones being asked to sacrifice for the good of the group. Ah Qiang tended to apply this to the slightly older but still successful workers in convincing them to stay during the day. She would appeal to a communal ethic, which while perhaps not believed in, still carried persuasive weight. To this she would add a gendered, maternal appeal of responsibility for the young. “Aiy, you know we have to help each other, and the younger ones don’t understand, they think they will always have plenty of business and will be pretty always, but we know. We have to work together; we eat from the same bowl. If no one sees our place in the day, no one comes at night.”



To the younger workers, she would leaven the collectivist good approach with a rhetoric of self-discipline. “You know if there is no one here during the day, no one comes at night. And how do you expect to get ahead in this world if you don’t work hard. We have a schedule and everyone must abide by the schedule. This is basic to any business. Do you think if you work in a big company it is different? You must learn to manage your time. Not just play all day. This way you will not develop good habits for your future.”

And for all she would add a regional dimension, drawing on the ethic of shared origins and soil. “We are all *laoxiang* (from the same area or town) ah. We have to stick together in this place.” When any of this failed, or often just for good measure, Ah Qiang would add in a motherly touch of self-sacrifice and guilt. “I work so hard to take care of you all. I have to deal with so many troubles you don’t even know about! I cook food for you and try to teach you how to take care of things. I ask only a bit but you are reluctant to do even this!”

Lacking formal power of the women working in her *falang*, Ah Qiang was forced to rely on a mix of economic reason and emotional appeal that drew strategically on generational and regional differences for effect. These appeals, while not entirely persuasive, had, in their continuous reiteration, largely the desired effect. This was why, she explained, her husband could never do this job. He would order and demand, had no patience or subtlety, and would lose interest. Her work required daily, complicated maintenance, as she saw it.

#### 4.6 PUBLIC TRACES

There is an ordinary flow of movement along the peopled pathways of the city. This ordinariness is of a different sort than I mean by the ordinary life on the back streets, or in *falang*, or the ordinariness of nervous lives and the threat of violence. It is the numbing effect of ceaseless and faceless movement in time with the urgent rhythms of the city. This is a mundane-ness that forces itself upon the consciousness. “This is just an ordinary city, with ordinary citizens, both going about their business,” the city says. This movement, in the aggregate, presents permanence, a deceptive solidity, of the natural presence of the city.

Another sort of ordinariness intrudes though, at times. These are brief event-like moments of erupted force that bear testament to a grim reality of antagonisms that only grow as surely as their separation from the imagination of a developing city self. These framed moments are not in themselves anything other than a momentary flash of life, a flash of violence that tells nothing of worth. There is no meaning inherent to this. These moments come and they go. Nothing is pregnant within them. They are nothing, or worse, grist for a larger discursive mill of devaluation. The violence of apartheid is used to illustrate the necessity of apartheid in the name of a paternalistic civilizing mission that is engaged in the production and maintenance of a continuous and growing underclass.

Fortunately, other stories persist, often bound up with certain places. A street corner. A shop. An old tree at the intersection of very old city pathways. These stories are told and re-told, and they keep alive a certain alternate, fragmented history in dialogue with those material markers of location. In some sense, they bear these memories for a time. Or this is a relationship activated between the physical marker of space, the person who remembers,

and the flash of the event. The loss of those material markers, and the resistance to them, is in part a struggle of history and meaning. It is an uneven fight, if it can be called such. It is more a making do, a final refusal of the one voice of state-sponsored history and purpose. It is a telling of events in their place that often does not directly contradict a righteous, repeated, and omnipresent telling. It is a mumbled aside from that, a terse way of saying that something is not right. This is temporary. The material changes quickly. People move about. Collective memories of meaning, often circulating around events of violence and palpable injustice, are dispersed, erupting only in their own flash-like moments of anger and resentment then to be quickly cast in turn as merely a local incident, the dumb and natural resistance of the animal against too heavy a yoke. It is turned in to a managerial problem.

Memories in place remain for a time, however. They are told, or more often, are silent. This is a different form of possibility, one not of unfolding logic but of contingent, though sometimes deliberate, evocation. This is thus a form of magic, hidden away in bodies and places, dispersed, a material magic. It is flexible and adept, tactical in the moment. One is reminded here, though, of the flexibility of this global capital moment, as though it were a shadow of the most “fantastic hope” there was left, as though it had vampirized and displaced life’s myriad and uncertain pathways. As proliferating pleasures had shadowed and mimicked authentic desire (Jameson 1996; Deleuze and Guatarri 1983) so, I argue, has flexible accumulation mimicked the tactics of life. If so, the Certeau-inspired notion of the tactical takes on an unexpected spectrality, a mimetic displacement of living uncertainty with its doppelganger form – a dead, reductive adaptability that is both strategic and tactical. This is akin to the notion of spectrality employed by Yan Hairong (inspired by

Gayatri Spivak's formulation) on the spectralization of the rural in post-Mao China as a space of death or the absence of life, noting how this is "...constitutive of rural young women's desire for the city, and it traces such women's struggles with the impasse posed by the discursive violence of post-Mao modernity itself" (2003: 579). Truer in spirit to Marx's notion of the specter – Spivak took great, and somewhat ironic, exception to Derrida's "incorrect" appropriation of the term (1995) – it acts, I argue to set up the necessary other of authentic haunting. And by the latter I mean a genuine uncertainty of outcome, or more precisely, a material memory whose meaning is not already foreclosed. Here, as with "desire" and "tactics," the specter is doubled in mimesis, the death dance of the One ushering offstage and cannibalizing the life of the other.

Weeks sometimes went by without an incident or word or encounter that disturbed the apparent normality of the place of the *falang*, and of *falang* workers, in the neighborhood. When things did happen, they provided an aperture, revealing momentarily the ordinariness of force and violence that structure urban life in Guangzhou's versions of modernity.

Neighborhood Y was not as comfortable or as safe as Neighborhood X. It, for one, was more centrally located in Guangzhou, denser, with dark, wet, mazelike alleyways. Residents spent some of their time each day sharing stories of the latest mugging, home invasion, rape, or murder. These were generally not reported in official media. When I asked why, the answer was that people didn't trust the police, that if you called, who knows what they would do to you or who they would blame. "What about in the case of a murder?" I asked the owner of a small restaurant, who had been there for several years after migrating from Hunan. "Well, then the *chengguan* will know, and of course the police will come if

there is a body. But if there's no body, then usually nothing happens. It doesn't happen often though. Sometimes people just disappear and there are stories. But don't worry! Mostly it's just mugging and stuff, or some domestic quarrel. Don't worry!"

In this neighborhood and the other out of the way places I worked in, distrust of police and *chengguan* was high, precluding their solicited involvement except in extreme cases or where something could not be hidden or dealt with internally. The view of most was that bringing in the authorities would not help, and in fact would likely add to the trouble. The police were unpredictable and powerful – who knew what they would do, who they would end up blaming, how they would use this for their purposes? While there was a lot of concern about criminal violence; there was at least as much concern about official violence.

Almost everyone had a story to tell, either about themselves or someone they knew personally. Every time Wangjing and I passed one small corner on the way to the alleyway the *falang* was in, she would say "That's where Xiao Lan was beaten," as though I had forgotten. It was a reminder to both me and to herself to be careful.

Xiao Lan told the story matter-of-factly. She said she had been walking back to the small apartment she shared with several others. Three young men knocked her violently down from behind and began to kick her. She tried to hang on to her purse, but she was stunned and they kept kicking her until she let it go. In her purse were 400RMB and her cell phone. Her cell phone had photos of her friends and family, the loss of which made her very angry. She had a good-sized gash on her forehead from the incident where her head had hit a raised piece of concrete. She pointed at the spot once to me, asking, "Do you see that stain? That's my blood." I strained to see it, but the ground was covered with stains.

Almost everyone had a story like that to tell personally or about someone close. No one that I knew of called the police or *chengguan*. It was a fact of life. The blame, typically, went to the victim for being careless. Or to Xinjiang people. “Fuck their mothers! Since Xinjiang people moved in to this area its very *luan*,” said the boss upon hearing a telling of another *falang* worker violently mugged. This time involved a 2-day hospital stay. I pointed out that we didn’t know they were from Xinjiang. The boss replied, “Well, we don’t know, but we know since they came it is worse. You see! You don’t know Xinjiang people.” A few years later it would be African traders who were the supposed source of the chaos in the neighborhood.

In 2005-2006, there were about a dozen instances of physical violence against someone that I knew personally in Neighborhood Y. Most of these were muggings. There were two rapes that I knew of. One night, one of the women who worked at the *falang* was beaten badly by a group of young women from the neighborhood. She had insulted one of them during the day when she was trying on clothes at one of the tiny, neighborhood shops. In the heat of a verbal disagreement, they had called her a whore. She had replied that she may be a whore but she earned money, unlike they, who were just poor, worthless trash. The beating put her in the hospital for five days. No one from the *falang* went to that clothing store after that. We could again see the mark on the narrow concrete path where they had caught and beat her late one night going home.

Only in one instance did I know of a *falang* boss calling on the “mafia” figure, Mr. Qiu, who, while not exactly running the area, was the one who oversaw the young men who came by once a month to collect “fees.” The difficulty in dealing with him was that the

distinction between him and his group and the *chengguan* of the neighborhood was grey and opaque even to long-time residents. They were not identical, but they seemed to have very close dealings. Calling on this boss, it was believed, could create its own troubles, or even result in attracting unwanted *chengguan* attention. In this instance, one of the *falang* workers was not paid after services to a man claiming to be from Anhui. She was badly beaten when she argued with him. Mr. Qiu, who often spoke of “taking care of his people,” seemed to take this case seriously. He portrayed it as a case of low-quality outsiders creating chaos in their neighborhood. He took it up personally. After, the rumors were that his people had found the man and beaten him to death as a warning to others who disturbed the regular workings of the neighborhood.

There were other traces too. There was the small, moldy café we would sometimes go to during the day with cheap but above-average lunches and plastic foliage. There were some happy memories there, beginning with a late-night birthday party that ended around 6am the next morning. There were sad memories there as well. Wangjing loved the nearby park and sometimes took others along with her to wander or just sit and people watch. The park figured heavily in her stories. She organized a group outing on Mid-Autumn festival night in 2006. The boss protested, complaining about lost business. She was overridden by shouts of tradition and collective determination. We all bought cheap plastic lanterns with cartoon characters on them and wandered slowly around the park’s lake, mingling in the darkness, anonymously, comfortably, with hundreds of others.

The *falang* itself was a place of many traces, mostly of work, sometimes competition or antagonism, as in other work spaces, but also one of camaraderie and friendly play. It was

also a space of discussion about life and ethics, often with online TV dramas as a platform.

In some sense, the *falang*, tenuously, temporarily, was a comparatively safe space compared to the outside.

#### 4.7 OTHER PATHS

In March 2003, Sun Zhigang, a young migrant worker, died from beatings he received at the hands of Guangzhou police (*China Daily* 2003). He had been detained while walking on the street for not having his ID card on him at the time, and he had not yet applied for his temporary residence permit. Under then-existing administrative procedures, migrants in cities could be detained by police, fined, or sent to labor camps for up to two years without trial. There was nothing unusual about this case except that Sun was a graduate of a prominent university and his family had the means and will to press for answers. Professor Ai Xiaoming of Sun Yat-Sen University became a major coordinator of efforts to draw national attention to this case. The *Southern Metropolis Daily*, a Guangzhou-based commercial paper with a reputation for tough reporting, also led the way in spreading awareness of this individual case and the power of police to almost arbitrarily arrest and detain migrants in Guangzhou and throughout Chinese cities. This represented an early example of mobilizing public opinion and pressure on government officials via the combined efforts of academics, legal and medical specialists, and various forms of media, including both print and internet.

When an independent autopsy performed by medical professors at Sun Yat-sen University contradicted the official police medical examiners report that this young man had



died of heart complications, the story took on national proportions. In June 2003, then Premier Wen Jiabao announced the abolishment of the “Custody and Repatriation” ordinance that gave urban police this authority (Hand 2006). Afterwards, the editor of *Southern Metropolis Daily*, Chen Yizhong, was charged with misuse of public funds and removed from his post. Professor Ai, although perhaps not fully aware of it at the time, had attracted the attention, and enmity, of Guangzhou authorities. It also galvanized her activist efforts and taught her the power of committed organization and the effective use of media.

While this story of indiscriminate police violence may have come as a surprise to most Guangzhou residents, it did not to most migrant workers in the city. They knew of this not from newspaper reports but from stories shared or personal experiences. They knew that if they were caught on the streets at night by police and did not have on them their ID cards and temporary residence permits, they could be taken, held, fined, roughed up, and sent to labor. They knew that police used this to make money, whether directly through fines or through a large, unpaid labor force. They knew that police could do with them what they wanted, and that this included killing them. They knew that many died while in police custody of heart attack and suicide.

The 2003 case had been a victory in many respects. It did not solve the problem of police abuse in a system of remarkable power differences, one in which the migrant was still viewed as more a nuisance or infestation in the city than as people, or even a necessary source of cheap labor. In 2007, Xiao Fei, someone I had known first while she was working in a *falang* just north of the Pearl River, on the Eastern side of the city, called me crying and frantic. Her cousin, a young man who had been in the city only a few weeks, had been

stopped by police late the night before. He had been drinking with friends and was on his way to his apartment. She said he had probably mouthed off to the police when they demanded his ID. They beat him badly and he was likely to lose vision in one eye and had damage to his spleen. Thankfully the law had changed in 2003 otherwise he would be recovering at a police medical facility and still in custody instead of recovering at a hospital.

I went with Xiao Fei to visit him. His mother had come to stay with him. She blamed him bitterly for being stupid for antagonizing the police. Xiao Fei also blamed him. He seemed to blame himself, though he pointed out he had been a bit drunk and they had been very aggressive from the start. It wasn't, Xiao Fei told me when I asked, that they didn't blame the police. But what good would that do? "You can't be so stupid," she kept saying to him. She did note, bitterly, that he was just a boy, and he weighed less than her. He looked to me to weigh about 105 – 110 pounds. And, she emphasized, he was new to the city, he didn't know the rules. She and her aunt were angry; they only had the young man to take it out on, and in so doing, also express their care and remind him of the lesson he must learn to survive. Later Xiao Fei noted how different it must be in the U.S. I wished I could have told her this didn't happen where I come from, or that we didn't export violence.

Walking in the city can be a dangerous thing for a migrant worker in Guangzhou, especially one who looks the part of the migrant in the city, especially at night. Young men are more likely to be targeted for direct physical abuse. The legal changes of 2003 are, however, important. In most cases, migrant workers caught without papers on the streets cannot be legally detained very long. They can be harassed, they can be bullied, and they can be beaten if they don't show the proper respect. Police tend to be less likely to go for a

direct beating, especially with other people around. *Chengguan*, the para-police force of the city, are less scrupulous, and are widely reviled, even in China's state-controlled media.

The vulnerability of walking came home to me on a few early, and minor, occasions. The first was when walking across an overpass with a young woman from Sichuan who worked mostly the street business outside the foreign-heavy bar district near the city's first post-Opening and Reform commercial and international visitor district. We talked while walking across the bridge. She was going to meet a man from the middle-east who worked for a local import and export trading company. She had learned some English and used this to fill a niche in the market place, catering to international men who stayed in the hotels, or came to the bars in the area. I was heading for my nightly walks in the area and then on to Neighborhood Y. As we walked down the steps on the other side of the overpass, a *chengguan* ran towards us with the then-common one meter long, brightly painted heavy metal poles they carried and suddenly began poking and jabbing her with it. She cursed at him, trying to avoid the assault and get down the steps and away. I stepped between them and started shouting in Chinese to distract him. She made her escape and the *chengguan* turned on me. I found myself surrounded within seconds by several others with metal poles. There was a lot of threatening and pushing. I was shouting as loudly as I could that the *chengguan's* job was to protect people, not bully them. A crowd had gathered, as I had hoped, most watching quietly. One older man kept shouting, trying to incite the *chengguan* to beat the foreigner who comes to China to cause trouble. I stuck to my "justice" line, repeating over and over that you cannot attack people for walking, that their job is to protect not bully, and some in the crowd seemed to be going my way. This was the goal as the

crowd was acting as both witness and jury. Plus, hitting a migrant woman, especially one who is seen as a prostitute (even if that is not the case) was one thing, beating a foreigner in a relatively crowded area was different, although not unheard of. The shouting and public moral trial continued for a couple of tense minutes. In the end, an older Chinese man who managed a nearby bar came out and vouched for me. The crowd had already begun to shift to my side. The moment passed.

The young *chengguan* and I later became friendly. I sometimes visited him on my late-night walks. He was very young, only 18 years old, a migrant himself from Hubei. He was lucky to have this job. He was tall, which helped, and his relative had helped him to get the position in the big city. We would sit outside late at night at his post and talk for a bit. He didn't like to bully people, he said. He was told that any time he saw a man crossing that overpass, and a woman approached them who looked like a *ji* (prostitute) he was to intervene forcefully. That was his job. He was glad to have a job.

I brought him a bottle of *baijiu* (strong Chinese liquor) one night to celebrate. He was going back home for Chinese New Year, and he wasn't coming back to Guangzhou. His father had found him a job back home. He was homesick, and he did not like working in Guangzhou. He told me that his boss was a bad man. He was glad to be going home.

The second early sense of the risk of walking was in Neighborhood Y. I met Wangjing at the large park near where she worked. We planned to walk from there to the *fang* together. I followed Wangjing as she ducked down tiny alleyways, taking what I thought a very impractical and circuitous route. I asked her why we were going this way instead of the more direct route, also alleyways, but larger and more peopled. She told me

that *chengguan* were patrolling. Surprised, I asked why that would be a problem. It was daytime, she was just a young woman walking along towards somewhere. She replied “They can give me trouble if they catch me along the way. They can bully me or make me go somewhere and do things.” I knew *chengguan* were increasingly patrolling the larger alleyways. This was part of an effort to reduce muggings, which were now becoming rampant. I did not know they might take this opportunity to do other things as well. When I asked others at the *falang*, they said the same thing. In the *falang*, or in groups, it was different. But if alone in the small alleyways, they felt very vulnerable.

#### 4.8 PRIVATE SPACES

Wangjing liked to talk while we walked from the park to the *falang*. One day walking from the park to the *falang*, Wangjing started to tell me that she was thinking about renting her own apartment with two of her co-workers. She hated the conditions of the apartment space they rented from the boss. It was crowded and dirty, and she felt the boss was taking advantage of them, earning money on the place. She was probably right about the boss and the money. Further, she told me, it was very uncomfortable to stay there. There had been a murder in the apartment next door. She whispered this to me. She had heard it. It was a fight between a man and a woman. He accused her of sleeping with another man. She heard the fighting, but it sounded just like normal fighting. He was hitting her, but it sounded like a normal thing. The next day there were police and the man was taken away. The police came to their room and gave them a lot of trouble (*mafan*). The boss had to come and spend a lot of time talking to them. They wanted money, so the boss gave it to

them. One of the police came back later by himself. He had been the one who seemed like he was in charge. Her co-worker, the prettiest in the *falang*, was sent by the boss. They went in the back room together for a while. Her co-worker said he had been very rough and dirty. That girl had already left the *falang*, Wangjing told me.

“Do you want to leave?” I asked. “I just want to move to a new apartment,” she said. “I want my own space.”

The *falang* boss in Neighborhood Y rented a couple of apartments for the workers. They were damp, dirty places, usually two or three bedrooms, basic and smelly plumbing, moldy because of the dark and wet conditions. The claustrophobic closeness of the buildings in their narrow alleyways meant little sunlight made its way into any room. Each room had a bed and often one other piece of cheap furniture, the walls were usually bare and stained with mold and pollution, with an occasional poster stuck up, usually placed so as to cover a particularly ugly stain. These apartments would sleep several of the *falang* workers, who paid what the boss considered to be a very cheap fee per month, but the women themselves complained was far too much considering how many of them there were and the low rental fee of the apartment. Still, it was cheaper than finding one’s own, even in a group. And that would require a deposit and a longer commitment.

So most stayed in such apartments. When the back rooms of the *falang*, and the 3-bedroom place rented for work were occupied on busy nights, these would also double as work spaces, although the women themselves did not like mixing their work spaces with their private spaces. Many were concerned with getting dirty things (*zang de dongxi*) on their own beds, mostly related to fluids like semen and sweat. Almost everyone that I knew was

very concerned about condom use, but they saw this as imperfect protection. And there was always the chance of something contaminating, physical and otherwise, getting on to the sheets. This didn't seem to fully account for all of the ways that *weisheng* (hygiene) was being used in our conversations.<sup>35</sup> When we talked further, the "scientific" notions of contamination – disease and fluids tended to give way to a more general notion of uncleanliness and contamination, a mixing of things that shouldn't be mixed, namely their work as a form of intimate labor with the actual intimate spaces of their non-work lives. This engendered a visceral discomfort and many vocal critiques.

The most common complaints, then, unsurprisingly, were of the violation of individual rights and spaces. Drawing on a post-Maoist notion of private space, women at this *falang* complained that the boss did not respect them. "We work here, she doesn't own us. When we are not working, we are in the room that we rent ourselves," Wangjing explained to me one day, with others nodding or voicing agreement. "We pay for it. This is my bed, it's where I sleep. I work in the place for working, but this is where I have to live. I feel very *bu shufu* (uncomfortable) to mix them together."

Wangjing, like most others, understandably preferred to maintain a clear physical separation between work and private spaces. In critiquing her boss and complaining of the circumstances, she drew on a mixture of "modern" discourses of individual spaces, consumer rights (as renter), and hygiene (*weisheng*). There was also a veiled but present complaint on the basis of the violation of work rights via the bleeding over of work time and space and

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<sup>35</sup> *Weisheng* is a commonly cited term, a form of "key word" associated with other power-laden terms like "modern" and "scientific."

privacy. These were where the collective rights of the worker cross over into the individual right to private spaces. It did not then form into a more specific sense of identity and rights, such as “sex worker,” but it did draw on a still-existing narrative of socialist justice combined with the more recent notion of individual privacy and consumer rights. This was a constant source of complaint and sometimes tension.

Wangjing, like most of the others, however, did use her room at times for work. There was no other choice if she wanted to earn money to live and send her monthly payments home to her parents. While she and the others complained of this frequently, and she was disturbed by a murder incident next door that led to a policeman’s rough and unwelcome treatment of her colleague, in the time I knew her there she never moved out. It cost too much. They could not afford it, there was a deposit, and it was hard to find someone who would rent to her and her co-worker friends.

This contrasted with Neighborhood X, where apartment prices at that time were lower and apartments tended to be larger and newer. Ah Qiang had enough back area space and work space for even busy nights. While the apartments were shared, their size allowed for a greater degree of privacy and comfort. Also, almost all of the women who worked there were from the same hometown as Ah Qiang, a medium-sized town in southern Hunan. Ah Qiang liked to explain her kind treatment of the others in terms of them being *laoxiang*, giving herself moral credit. Some of the women liked to point out that her source of new employees was through local networks. If she treated them badly, they said, they would tell everyone and she would have a lot of trouble finding new women to work in her shop. Informal networks provided in their case a degree of protection and power



Most of the women who worked there, complained Xiaojing, had boyfriends to sleep next to them at night. These young men were usually *laoxiang*, in some cases they had come together with their girlfriend, or a group of friends, to the city. The boys spent most of the day, from what I could see, playing computer games at the nearby internet café, hanging out, playing cards, and occasionally doing some odd job or other. When I asked them why they didn't work more, they complained loudly that for them, there were no good jobs, unlike for young women. "Girls" (*nv haizi*), they said, can make good money working at the *falang* or other places, much more than the young men could make doing factory work or construction. It wasn't fair, they told me.

When I asked Xiaojing if she thought the young men were taking advantage of their girlfriends, she answered ambivalently:

Aiyy, these Hunan boys today are very lazy! They don't want to do any work at all. They just want us to take care of them. They act like emperors! Do you see those clothes (She pointed to clothes hanging on outside line)? Zhu Zhu washes all her boyfriend's clothes and also tries to cook for him, all he does is play "CS" (*Counter Strike*, a popular, war-oriented online video game). But it is true they can't make as much money as we do. What can they do? They are useless.

What bothered Xiaojing the most, though, seemed to be her loneliness. She was enamored of the young Hunan boys. "They are so cute! Much cuter and more attractive, more stylish than ugly Cantonese boys," she said on many occasions. Other young Hunan co-workers generally agreed. Xiao Jing would say this in an almost motherly way, as she

expressed her complaints about them as well, with a mixture exasperation and affection. She was herself a teenager, but she saw them as younger than she and in need of tending, as well as very desirable. “Everyone else has someone to sleep with at night but me,” she complained one day. “They talk together at night and laugh, I’m just alone in my bed.” She said it made her feel very lonely at night. It also made her feel that she wasn’t attractive to the boys. Pretty, yes, but they seemed to think that she couldn’t take proper feminine care of them. She didn’t know how to wash clothes very well, and she didn’t know how to cook. Her cousin, who also worked at the *falang*, was trying to teach her both, especially cooking.

Xiaojing voiced a commonly shared set of ambivalences. There was a lot of complaining about the boyfriends, though usually not in front of them. There was even some sense that they at least weren’t pulling their weight in terms of working and income in the city. At the same time, the boys were excused from this by an ironic gendered twist – they couldn’t make nearly as much, everyone agreed, in the big city as the young women (This doesn’t fully explain why they didn’t work at all). There was at the same time an out of place (home) gendered practice of care that the women invested in the young men. They enjoyed, it seemed, taking care of them, and even in their criticism of their laziness and “wildness” seemed to at the same time be praising them for being “boys.” In a most strange set of circumstances, these young women were taking on the full burden of wage earners, beautiful young girls, and mothers in this exile from home. Where other classes (urban or socio-economic) may divide these gendered norms of value, as James Farrer has described as masculinity = financial success, femininity = beauty and feminine charm (2002), both, I would add increasingly conditioned by adeptness at consumption and the production and

cultivation of high-*suzhi* children, for these young men and women from Hunan, the women bore both sets of burdens in their own persons and labor. They earned more and sent a great deal more home. They cooked and cleaned for the boys and supported them financially and emotionally. In return, they asked only that the boys be putatively theirs. If the revolution had freed women to labor outside the home, and the Opening and Reform and land de-collectivization had freed the rural from their lands and sent them to the sites of productivity and glamour – cities – it had not at the same time freed these women from the demands of nurture and care of men. They were freed in physical mobility, freed to earn money, and yet still bound by the obligations of family and femininity and patriarchy. Money was earned and sent home, used to support a brother’s education, a mother and father who earned little back home, a boyfriend who did as boys do, in this tragic imagining that sacrifices many young women. The boys played and gambled and fought and had other women and waxed indignant at attempts to control their manly freedom. But what, in this grim gendered view, that Xiaojing expressed above, is a woman who cannot find or keep a man? Here, unlike in Farrer’s accurate, though class de-limited account, the fulfillment of womanhood is not in a set of attractive traits in balance with male earning power, it is a caring female figure that surrounds the man, cradles him, and provides materially in exchange for the mere presence of him. A woman without a man is not a woman at all, in this context, even one who is not (yet) financially stable. A man without a woman has other options, he may marry later, he may have many women, he may simply “play” (*wan*) for a while. Women from where Xiaojing were from were thought to be past their “peak” at around 23 years old. The pressure was very high very early on.

Susan Greenhalgh has posed the difficult question of why the preference for sons continues in rural communities in China (1993, 1994). Female children, who go out to labor (*dagong*), in my ethnographic experience, generally sent more money home (See also Greenhalgh 1995; Lee 1998). Why has there not been a shift to daughter preference? Or at least some balancing? Has there, as some argue, been a return to patriarchy, a cultural norm so profound that its life is independent of relationship to economic realities? The answer, I think, relates to both duration and post-Maoist gender realities. Daughters may earn more temporarily in youth, but this is limited both in terms of their future marriage and in terms an almost complete lack of career advancement. Sons, however miscreant and wastrel they may be when young, provide the hope of family security and prosperity in a male-dominated post-Maoist business world. Uneducated sons still have a chance of finding opportunity or getting ahead eventually, unlike their sisters who may find more ready work in factories, domestic labor, or other arenas, but there is no future in that. Family resources, in a contemporary world in which Chinese market and national prowess is predicated on its resurgent masculinity after the supposedly de-masculinizing humiliations of (semi) colonialism and Maoist China – the latter being a supposedly unnatural time in which gender, here masculinity, was erased, men could not be real men and engage their natural power and prowess in the competition of the market. Their parents are not wrong that their daughters' best chance for economic security is a decent marriage, and that their own best chance, however slim, of security in old age is based on their son somehow "making it." Family resources, in ways reminiscent of older patterns, but also very much part of the brave

new world of the male-centered marketizing Chinese nation, are best invested in the son.<sup>36</sup>

The tremendous unfairness of this did not go unnoticed by the women workers that I knew.

While Xiaojing complained bitterly about the inequity of all of this, she was enchanted by the lazy, cocky, skinny young men who lived off the labor of the women who worked at the *falang*. She liked the idea of taking care of them, of making them dependent, even temporarily on her. She felt that she was less of a woman because she did not have one to sleep with at night and worried about what this meant for her future.

Xiaojing told me that her parents must know what she did, but they would never admit it. “They are glad when I send money back, then they are nicer to me for a while. If too long goes by, my mother will start to complain and then to blame me, saying I am a bad daughter. Last time she said she regretted having me, that I was a waste.” This hurt Xiaojing terribly. The money she sent back helped to support her parents and pay for her younger brother’s high school education.

Pheng Cheah’s reading of *Durian Durian* (discussed in Chapter 2), and through it a certain reading of the experience of the migrant female Chinese sex worker, registers a considerable complexity and ambiguity. This is embodied in the female sex worker, and through the frames of entrepreneurialism, mobility, Chinese identity and fraternity, and stigmatization. Ah Yan, the protagonist of the film, earns a considerable sum of money in Hong Kong through sexual labor, specifically in the walk-up brothels of Kowloon. Yet she

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<sup>36</sup> For important discussions of gender in the post-80s “socialist market economy” in China, a framing of the entrepreneuriality of the nation, its power, and its pride of place in the international arena as male, see for example: Jacka 2005; Yang 1999; Andrews and Shen 2002; Chen 2002; Evans 2002; Gilmarten et al. 1994; Judd 1994; Lee 1998; Rofel 1999.

is, in Pheng's reading, thereby in a form of exile, never able to tell anyone what she has done or be a more natural part of the home that she has originated from. I agree in terms of exile but wonder how that extends to other migrant, laboring women. Further, Xiaojing's telling considerably complicates this vision. It suggests a more painful register of unrecognizable contradictions of both home and exile, a series of disavowals that make home a place of exile both for the returnee and for those who live there. Caught between dilemmas of value – economic and cultural – Xiaojing's parents accept and erase in the same gesture. She uses this, leveraging her economic power for power and respect within the family, knowing that they cannot both publicly accept her wealth and denounce her. At the same time, she cannot go home, and the home of her parents is a place that itself is built upon necessary misrecognitions. There is an irreconcilable gap between the overwhelming value of money and the almost impossibility of its virtuous accumulation. In different ways, both Xiaojing and her parents live in this gap. This gap is exile.

#### 4.9 OTHER SIGNS

Daily, almost invisible exclusions shaped the place of *falang* and *falang* workers in the neighborhoods within the metropolis. These were often less apparent or dramatic than incidents of direct violence, but they had a considerable impact on daily life. These were small, brief moments – glances, a comment, a brusque encounter at a shop, less consideration with space when walking by - the minute gestures that structured the daily environment of the women who worked at the *falang*. Sometimes, this erupted in a minor incident that punctuated, revealed in a flash, what was there every day. These provided an important

glimpse into an array of discriminatory forces and meanings that were experienced in daily life but were difficult to point to or pin down. Brief events provided then a focal point around which discussions of more subtle, everyday unfairness could coalesce. A brief example will illustrate this point. It involved the weighing of fruit.

In Neighborhood Y, we usually went to the nearby fruit seller who operated off of a wooden cart. No one trusted this seller, however, and it was generally believed that his scale was rigged. One of the young women from the *falang* went to buy some lychee for everyone. It was the season. A few minutes later we heard shouting and cursing. She had asked the shopkeeper next door, just several steps away from the fruit cart, to verify on her scale that the fruit weight was correct. The fruit seller didn't object, but the shopkeeper did. She scolded the young woman, called her "whore" and told her she should keep to herself like the other whores next door. The young woman shouted back, but there wasn't much she could say except to curse. She came back visibly shaken, and told us the story. It was clear that in her mind she was just a person who had asked their business neighbor for a small favor. She had been unprepared for the extremely hostile response or to be put in the place of "bad woman." The others reassured her and told her not to worry about it. But they also reminded her that she must be careful and that some people would not treat them fairly because of their work. Although this was not always visible, this sort of treatment, and the fault lines they revealed, was a facet of daily life.

By themselves, these fault lines constituted a daily unpleasantness, often eroding whatever remaining sense of security or community the women may have felt, and making them very self-conscious and defensive when they went out. It could, however, become

much worse. When development projects or mass police actions occurred, these relatively minor pains often became the energized lines along which forms of violence – as development and cleansing – unfolded.

#### 4.10 CONCLUSION

The *luan* of the spaces and the *liu* people who inhabit them are mutually constituted in a larger imagination of urban development, one that produces them as deviations within the City Proper, a title that does not do justice to, or rather elides development's speculative, gambling nature (Harvey 2003; 1989). These are other spaces within the city, delimited discursively and physically, in cyst-like fashion, containing, yet in furtive fashion recognizing the need, if temporary, of those polluting human elements within. It is primarily within the *luan* neighborhoods and out of the way spaces of this *luan* city that the other spaces of the *falang* operate. One way of understanding these spaces is in terms of abjection or, in Butler's terms, the "unmournable" other (2006). This is absence, or lack as not even an absent presence.

Yet, if we are to think of abjection as a static or singular condition, we risk a return to the twin tyrannies of unity and presence. *Falang*, perhaps even more than other sites within the spaces the city labors to abject, are flickering sites, moving in and out of sight even more rapidly than other little shops of illegality and outsider-ness, with more camouflage and subterfuge, but with their own mix of very marginal legitimacy and mundane ordinariness.

There is no public space in which to form a challenge to the one voice of development, no coherent counter-narrative available to those without university degrees and the



technological sophistication required to scale China's "Great Fire Wall".<sup>37</sup> There is, however, on these small back streets and alleyways, a rumbling silence that is pregnant with a sense of injustice, as the weak, even the "ji" (chicken/prostitute/whore), sometimes just seen as another trying to get by, are trodden upon while the rich and powerful do the all the trodding. In these rumbles, only briefly audible, one hears partly the ghosts of a socialist history, one that lives on in senses of grievance and righteousness long after the socialist reality of China, such as it was, has gone, given in its own form of making dream that lingers on in the materiality of bodies and places, or the littered remains of other modernities (Rofel 1999). Change comes too quickly, however, in the form of local government officials and real estate developers.

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<sup>37</sup> This is the commonly used nickname for the vast array of government initiated and supervised internet controls and filters. All internet traffic in and out of China passes through these filters, as does all domestic internet traffic.

## 5.0 NICHE MARKETS: WORKING GENDER

Tears don't bring money.

Xiaojing 2005

At a major anthropology conference, a scholar whose research also focuses on migration and female sexual labor, commented on my presentation on mainland female sex workers in Hong Kong. After a number of insightful and constructively critical comments, she lastly suggested that if I “dig deeper” I will find that many of the women from the mainland working in sexual labor in Hong Kong have histories of sexual abuse. This reference to a notion of prior psycho-sexual hurt as an important variable in the histories of those engaged in sexual labor surprised me, especially coming from a scholar well-attuned to the history and politics of the prostitute figure.<sup>38</sup> Eliding the gendered political economic conditions that produce the possibilities and conditions of “sexual labor,” and typically without empirical grounding, this view historically arises from an individualistic, psychologized account of “deviance,” one that speciates the “prostitute” as uniquely distinct from others who labor under difficult conditions and with few good choices.

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<sup>38</sup> I use this example not as a criticism of the scholar who made that comment but rather to illustrate the perniciousness of this largely unexamined yet powerful view of female prostitution.

The modern history of the prostitute as a figure of state and social concern has been marked with, among other essentializations, the notion of inherent disposition to sexual labor. This has taken the form of biological explanations (Lombroso and Ferrero 1895) as well as psychological accounts at least partly related to traumatic experiences and psychological damage (Silbert and Pines 1982; Winick and Kinsie 1971; James 1978; Benjamin and Masters 1964). While the explicit association of psychological types with “criminal” behaviors has declined, the broader, more deeply held association with prior hurt and criminal behavior, in this case, sexuality out of bounds, continues in many formulations (See for example Barry 1995; Farley 2004; Flowers 2006). In contemporary discursive practice, this is expressed more commonly as a generic association between sex workers and histories of hurt, with the relationship between this prior hurt and what we today call sexual labor or prostitution usually left un- or under-explained. The continuous pairing of these elements, however, takes on, in its repetition, a common-sensical life and at time prefigures the work of even scholars otherwise critically attuned to these issues. Owing its continuing, unexamined, life to historically constituted criminological/psychological attempts to explain why women would sell sex for money, it elides the “in your face” saliency of the gendered political economic forces that are shaping and delimiting opportunities for bodies devalued in various yet resonant ways globally.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> It was certainly true that in my outreach and fieldwork, stories of sexual abuse were common. If feminist scholars and activists in China are correct, however, sexual and other forms of abuse towards children and women are a serious problem in China broadly, one in which a gaping lack of legal protections, social norms of silence and shame, and gender inequality all play major roles. Even the All-China Women’s Federation, not known as a bastion of feminist activism but rather more as a mouth-piece of the Chinese Communist Party, has identified sexual and physical abuse of girls and women as an issue of epidemic proportion for the nation (Jeffreys 2006).

Given that there is no evidence that rates of histories of sexual abuse among women in China who exchange sexual services for money at some point in their lives – a very broad category that could easily be expanded to include mistresses, *er nai* (second wives), or any woman who had ever prioritized economic benefit in a romantic relationship – are higher than the general population of which they are a part, the pairing of “hurt woman” and “sex worker” in the above story tells us more about the longer, political, and oppressive trajectory of prostitute discourse than it does about anyone’s life and labor. The women that I came to know were not a *type* of person of whom could be asked what individual motivation or hurt drove them to this work. This question, however sympathetic, seeks to find in the person some trait or characteristic, the truth of who they are as defined by a feature of their sexuality, in an apparent re-enactment of an ongoing epistemological moment (Foucault 1978, 1979; Agustin 2003; Walkowitz 1977; Hershatter 1997). Had I encountered them sooner, or later, I would have encountered a factory worker, a wife, a small dress shop owner, a waiter, a bartender, a *falang* boss, and many other variations on a laboring theme. Many had histories of abuse. So did many of the women that I knew going back to 1994 who were professors at Sun Yat-sen University. The question that should be asked in terms of women who at one point or another sell sex in exchange for money and have abuse in their histories is the same as we would ask in other labor contexts. Why are so many women in China subject to this abuse? What factors contribute to this? What can be done to improve this situation that even a central government organ points to as a critical site of unresolved socialist promises? This raises serious social, legal, political-economic, and gendered questions, questions that

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impact a very large number of women in China. To cation these issues of “hurt histories” into the figure of the woman who at one time or another sells sex for money does a disservice both to the reality of abuse and violence that is a feature of life for a massive, solidifying underclass in China, as well as to the women who have the courage to try to find a way among a very limited, undesirable array of possibilities.

In consciously identifying and rejecting a deeply flawed and often unspoken association with “hurt” or other sources of personal deviance, with the millions and millions of women (and men) in China who at one time or another, often briefly and in the course of very fluid and shifting work lives, sell sex, we are left with more disturbing gendered political economic realities. This harder reality does not allow for an all-too familiar displacement of individuated deviance, even sympathetically framed, on to the bodies of female “sex workers.” These are not hurt others more than others marginalized in locally emplaced, global marketplaces are hurt, nor are they simply “sex workers.” This is work where it can be found. It is not an aberration in the market. It is getting by as best one can under the sorts of grinding, unequal conditions described in the previous chapter. It is work at, and sometimes beyond, the margins.

This chapter explores some of those ways of getting by, the finely graded work tactics, that women at the lower ends of sexual labor employ in their day-to-day lives and labor. Women in various freelance venues in the lower, often interconnected, echelons of sexual labor in Guangzhou draw on an array of gendered/sexual norms - niches in the market - and turn them to their own economic uses. In so doing they deploy a range of specialized strategies in attracting and satisfying customers, and mitigating, to the extent possible, their

vulnerabilities. They often rely upon otherwise oppressive gendered discourses that sexualize women's bodies in various ways, turning those to their own uses in the "out of the way spaces" of their work. These tactical approaches do not directly challenge sex/gender norms but they do exploit them for their own ends, turning the more ordinary flow of power briefly on its head. These women consciously perform various sexualized roles that they deem suited to their age, appearance, and skills. Reminiscent of drag, these performances, usually for an audience of men, self-consciously parody sexualized gender norms, with denaturalizing effects (Butler 1990; Harding 1998). Male customers may believe such performances or not, depending on a variety of factors, but by and large do not seem concerned with questions of authenticity.<sup>40</sup> This denaturalization, while accomplishing some degree of financial gain, does not appear to have broader de-stabilizing effects – both because of the isolation of its performances and because its fits nicely into a marketplace already made of surfaces, in which authenticity is itself a marketing tool and is aimed at men already accustomed to and welcoming a supermarket style selection of experiential choices. This is troubling indeed for more hopeful notions of performativity and subversion.

As women get older, as in other professions, they must also "upgrade their skill sets."

They, like other workers, risk being left behind or rendered obsolete. This is inflected by a

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<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Bernstein's work on the question of commercial sexuality and what she terms "bounded authenticity" importantly explores this issue within the contexts of late capitalist shifts in labor and intimacy. She argues, as I do here, that under these conditions, the isolated space of produced, consumed, and sold intimacy is temporarily authentic, as much as other forms of intimacy in late-capitalist relations. While her work focuses on relatively privileged women in the U.S., as well as on sex work in northern Europe, there is considerable overlap with the circumstances I explore here. I would add, however, that this may not simply be a new phenomenon; prior ways of viewing intimacy, bodily relations, money, and power are as much at issue here. My point is that the notion of intimacy itself as a sacred, purely personal ground is the historical anomaly.

powerful fetishization of youth, one that renders 25 year old women already “past their prime.” Ah Feng, a woman in her mid-30’s from Sichuan who has worked freelance street work and bars in Guangzhou for years, told me:

We old women (*lao niu ren*) have to work much harder! When I was young, men wanted me and so it was easy. They want what is fresh and tender. Do you know the phrase “Old cows eat tender grass (*lao niu chi nen cao*)?” Ha! You do! It is hard, you know, so I have to learn new skills. But it changes so fast. It’s because of Japanese yellow videos!<sup>41</sup> Before we just do it and they were happy. Then they wanted blowjobs, so I had to learn that. Then it was “fire and ice” blowjobs. Then it was anus games (rimming and pleasure beads) and prostate massage. Now some of them want to kiss me down there! Aiyy, I have to keep learning. If I can’t do it, they will go elsewhere. I had to learn some English also, and some Japanese. Konichi wa! Ha! My friend even learned S and M for her work in Hong Kong. It is very difficult, but if I go to Hong Kong she will teach me. She only does the S, ha! But the men like it! I would like to beat them some!

Deploying a variety of performative tactics, learned skills, and other strategies, women in Guangzhou’s lower market of paid sexuality engage in the ordinary and very difficult labor of the marginal. This involves emotional, intellectual, and physical forms of labor. This work carries more than the usual risks. That so many millions do it says a great deal about their other options.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “Yellow” is the color most commonly used to refer to pornography. This is like “blue” videos in the U.S., or “pink” in Japan.

<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that the large-scale participation in sexual labor in China is a result of the

## 5.1 A BAR VISIT

The Elephant and Castle bar was one of the earliest pub style bars to open in post-reform Guangzhou. It was right across from the city's then premier international business hotel, the Garden Hotel, and in the heart of the main first post-reform international business section of the city. The Elephant and Castle served draft beer in pint glasses, even Guinness, and had a selection of mediocre "western" food selections, including cheeseburgers and crinkle-cut fries. Its clientele was a mixture of western businessmen, local expats, and local Chinese, mostly men, who appreciated the "authentic" western atmosphere.

It was also where older Chinese women who had learned some English language skills went to ply their trade. Ah Hong, who worked this bar and a few others along the same strip, as well as the streets around it, told me:

Xiao Ming (Young Ming), I know I am not so old, but I am also not young. I'm still sexy though, right! But Chinese men are very strict about youth. For them, I am too old. The foreign men don't see me as old, they are not so strict. And they don't know how to find ladies. Here, I can talk to them. They think I am a pretty lady, and we can talk. Foreign men like to talk. Chinese men just want you to listen. So here, everyone is happy!

Sitting at the bar with Ai Xiaoming, my Chinese academic sponsor, scholar and feminist activist, was at first uncomfortable. She had asked to come along on a field visit and was interested in the work of these women. "Don't worry about me, just pretend you

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confluence of class, regional, and gendered inequalities that is simultaneously a foreclosure of opportunities (particularly those that might result in class mobility) and the opening of the limited (and stigmatized) "opportunity" of sex work (Ming 2005).



don't know me," she told me. "Hey Xiao Ming, who is your new friend?" teased another of the women I knew. "She's my lover!" I shot back. Ai Xiaoming laughed and some of the tension was eased. While she pretended to sip a Carlsberg, I chatted for a while with Ah Hong and her newly arrived *laoxiang* from Sichuan, a woman in her late 30s. She, like Ah Hong, was separated from her husband. She had a child, a son, who was back at home with her parents. He would be starting junior middle school in the coming year and the tuition fees were high. Her parents were poor. And her husband gave little or nothing, when he wasn't asking for money for himself or his family. Ah Hong asked if I would teach her friend a bit of English. I wrote down a few initial phrases, with Ah Hong's guidance.

These included:

Hello, nice to meet you.

You are handsome.

Where are you from?

I am from Sichuan.

Do you like me?

I like you.

Do you want massage?

Very comfortable/Feels good.

Tits and ass.

500RMB. 600RMB. 700 RMB. 800RMB.

Ah Hong laughed and said that it was only because her friend had big boobs that she could succeed with such limited vocabulary here. As she said that, she grabbed her friend's

breasts in a mock erotic gesture, saying loudly “Ohhh, ohhh, how comfortable they are, how soft and round, like melons, ohhh.” Her friend laughed and pushed her hands away. The display had been partly for fun, but it had also been to attract the attention of nearby men in the room. Ah Hong had pitched her voice loudly enough to be heard without shouting, and her moaning and grabbing had a performative dimension. Sure enough, it attracted the attention of two 40-something, slightly drunk British men who laughed appreciatively and began ambling over. I exchanged glances with Ah Hong, and moved away back to where Xiaoming was pretending to sip her beer. We had been in the bar about an hour and a half by then. “What do you think?” I asked. I thought perhaps she would just have seen people chatting and drinking, or possibly taken a superficial glance at women attracting men for money. “They work really hard,” she said. Her face was tight in concentration and seriousness. “It is not easy. Every move or word. It is like fishing but you don’t know if you will catch anything, and then nothing to eat.” To Xiaoming, as to me, it was obvious. This was hard work in a niche space of the market. Women from what was solidifying as China’s massive underclass, whose age largely disqualified them from attracting Chinese customers, had learned English language and other social skills, and were using these to attract a small but lucrative subset of customer – foreign men. It was difficult, long, and uncertain work.

Bar work was a relatively safe haven, a small niche market for older, freelance workers. *Falang* workers had the semi-protections (and mutually-exploitative condition) of being housed in a physical location where they depended on the skills of the boss to bribe and befriend police, and to keep a sensitive antennae up for coming crackdowns. They also

worked with other women, offering protection in numbers. In return they gave up a certain amount of control over their work encounters and life, as well as a portion of their earnings. Freelance street/bar workers in the foreigner-heavy business traveler district around the Garden Hotel tended to be either too old to be accepted in to, or be able to compete in, *falang*, or too unattractive in other ways (including being too *tu*), even with youth or skills like massage that might have otherwise qualified them for work in saunas or other venues. In some cases, they were also too independent, preferring to rely on themselves to navigate the difficulties of this work environment, and thus be beholden to no boss.<sup>43</sup> The women who could transition from street to bar space tended to be freelance, women who had cultivated the English skills, and had the internationally-inflected social skills to interact within an imported bar culture and with men from all over the world, and in the process attract enough paying customers to earn a living and in most cases support children or other family members. It was difficult emotional work, involving not only interacting for long periods of time with men who may or may not pay anything in the end, but also befriending mostly young, female bar staff who could make their lives considerably easier or harder, and other women working there who they had to cooperate with in creating a “party atmosphere,” but who were also their competition. At the end of a long, frustrating night, Ah Hong sighed, “Those damn

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<sup>43</sup> Some of those who worked the streets only in the area were organized under pimps. Men typically, though not always, ran the street businesses. It was a common perception that the greater physical dangers of the street, and the more direct physical control of women who did street work, was better suited to male managers. *Falang*, with a dense concentration of women working as independent operators required the more patient management of a “mommy” to regulate relations and ensure a degree of harmony and smooth operations. For an interesting recent historical parallel, see Elizabeth Sinn’s fascinating work on the early opportunities colonial rule provided to Chinese women to run their own businesses in Hong Kong, namely licensed brothels (2007).

Germans. They are so cheap. I played with them all night, and they only bought me two drinks. Oh baby, oh baby..haha..I even let that big one touch my “balls” (*bo*, breasts). I don’t even get any money for that, just a fatter beer belly. Then they just leave. I wasted too much time on them. I should have fished around more tonight.” The ability to know when to invest valuable and limited time, and when to move along, was critically important. It meant the difference between a long night without any money and the earnings that the woman, and typically a few others, depended on.

Ah Hong and many of the other “older” women who worked the bars and streets in this area referred to me as Xiao Ming, suggesting I was younger or junior to them. That I was around the same age of most of them did not matter. This put me in my place as someone inexperienced, and it also extended a caring dimension, one that not coincidentally entailed forms of reciprocity. In truth, most of the time that meant others looking out for, guiding, and teaching me. It also made me closer to them, something like a younger brother, which Ah Hong liked to proclaim loudly to anyone who would listen. She liked the idea of what I was doing. After a few drinks one night she told me, “Xiao Ming, you should listen to our stories. I have many stories but I can’t tell anyone. I can’t tell my family, even my son. I’ve been through a lot. I’ve already seen a lot. I have much bitterness that I can’t even say (*shuo bu chu lai de ku*). You listen, Xiao Ming, and you can tell others.” Ah Hong was in part “speaking bitterness,” as her generation had learned to from a time not that long ago that yet seemed from a different world. She used this language of bitterness that she had learned – of a worker’s hardship, a woman’s hardship, a long, difficult suffering – not as a recitation but as a language for telling the things that she had learned and experienced and that no one

would listen to. Or the telling was impossible. To her I was a collector and a translator, someone who would record. There was a great deal of truth in that.

Ah Hong was respected among the freelance workers largely for her still strong beauty, her commanding presence, and her unusually good English skills. When we were together, either in the bar late at night with few customers, or hanging around outside, she liked to call me her “*didi*” (younger brother). This always brought laughter. “*Didi*” is also a slang word for penis. Ah Hong was saying “This is my young friend,” claiming me and with it some authority, and at the same time giving me her signature of approval, which carried weight. She was also saying, with affection, “this is my dick.” The claimed dick in question was both a symbol of power – she mimed once having a big dick after saying this – and also a way of saying “hands off.”

Sexual jokes were a favorite pastime. They were a source of much-needed simple pleasure and camaraderie. They were also a way of managing, controlling things. They brought things, like penises and men in general, down to size. This joke, which she never tired of, was more than just a sexual play on words. It also offered me further cover via both its meanings. Once, on an early trip to Guangzhou in 2003 when I had only known Ah Hong for a couple of months, one of the newer arrivals from *Dongbei* (the Northeast) started hitting on me heavily. She was drunk and it was late. Ah Hong intervened suddenly. She put her arm around me and said, “This is my *didi*.” The other woman, Ah Fei, laughed and wandered off.

## 5.2 WE CAN'T LET IT GET OUT OF CONTROL

In her work on the modern history of prostitution in Shanghai, Gail Hershatter mentions one non-textual event. It takes place in a hotel lounge in Shanghai where she observes women who appear at first glance, in dress and manner, to be regular customers, but who are actually engaged in the work of attracting male clients for paid sexual encounters. Hershatter notes that they “exhibit the kind of concentration and seriousness that one might associate with work” (1997: 392). She also notes, however, the foreclosure of the work narrative in contemporary Chinese official discourse, a foreclosure that has material consequences. Although one relatively contemporary and official term for prostitute, *maiyin funu* (women who sell sex), appears to emphasize economic exchange, in post-reform China sex is not officially designated as labor.

The “prostitute” figure, as discussed in the introduction, remains an important one in Chinese national discourse. She works co-figuratively to define the gendered and sexual national norm of female sexuality in its proper place, and lower-class female ambition constrained within its proper bounds. The prostitute functions as a marker of deviance, decadence, social disease, or vectors of literal disease. In sympathetic portrayals, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, she is a hurt person, another variation on an essentializing theme. She is not a worker.<sup>44</sup> This has important consequences. As Hershatter notes, “A formulation does not only name; it also silences other possibilities” (1997: 330). A worker has rights and protections that the prostitute does not share.

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<sup>44</sup> Jeffrey’s (2006) notes correctly that there have been some official and domestic academic calls for decriminalizing prostitution. See for example Shi (n.d.). While this has at times been informally implemented at local levels, it has not been, and is very unlikely to be, implemented as official policy.

While the prostitute figure continues to be that against which progress and proper national female norms are measured, the direct exchange of sex and feminine beauty for money is nonetheless widely tolerated in practice, if less so in official government statements and public moral discourse. In 2004, I arranged a meeting with a “white collar” police officer who worked in the central Guangzhou police administration, a graduate of Sun Yat-sen University, and a former classmate of a close friend. After some negotiation, he agreed to meet but would not specify the exact time or place, only the date. I was told to wait for my friend to let me know where to go. I thought it all a bit much. On the other hand, he was a police official in central government. If he was concerned, there was probably good reason. By late afternoon, I had heard nothing. I was beginning to think this was a no-go and started planning my nightly fieldwork schedule. As I was preparing to go out, my friend called and said we were meeting that evening for dinner. She sent me a text message with the location: a restaurant far outside of town on the side of one of the mountains to the northwest of the city. The taxi took about 45 minutes from my location, already in the northwest corner of the city, but the driver knew the place. It was both remote and yet well known. I arrived first and my friend and the police official arrived soon after. I had many questions, and he answered most of them with a mix of candor and caution. The question I was most keen to ask, however, one that was entirely opaque to me, was “how do police actually see prostitution? Do they see it as a crime? Why do they spend so much time harassing women who are trying to earn a living when they could be chasing muggers, rapists, murderers, and ubiquitous corrupt government officials?”

He admitted that sometimes police take advantage of their power in these situations to earn money. I pressed a bit, and he agreed yes, sometimes other things as well. His view, as someone privy to central police policy, was that police do not see this as a real threat and they in general do not care about arresting prostitutes. They do this when there is pressure to do so. They do it when there are complaints from neighbors, which they are required to respond to. They do it, yes, when they need some money. The basic view, however, he expressed as:

Of course there are many women who will do this. Do you know how much they make in factories? Too little. And the work is very hard. It is very bitter. Of course if there is this chance many will take it. But if we don't put pressure on, if we don't control this, it will explode. Too many will want to do this if they are not afraid of police. It will happen, sure, but we can't let it get out of control.

In this telling, he had recognized that this is an alternate form of work, one that is rationally attractive compared to other forms of labor available to China's female underclass. He further saw this as the inevitable result of profound inequality, almost a safety valve allowing, clandestinely, a re-distribution of some financial resources. The role of police, as he saw it, was not to eliminate sexual labor, it was to maintain public stability by limiting and regulating it, managing the tensions of an increasingly unequal society both by allowing a certain amount of illegal activity and pruning it back when it became overgrown. "Social stability" (*shehui wending*) or in more recent Chinese official parlance, "harmony" (*hexie*) were the keywords. So it is in times of trouble.



### 5.3 YOUNG AND COOL

The degree of fetishization of feminine youth in contemporary China would be difficult to overstate. In a radical departure from pre-Opening and Reform era norms, the fragile, delicate, blossoming figure of the “beautiful young girl” is everywhere (Hung and Li 2006; Andrews and Shen 2002; Evans 2000; Brownell 2001; Farquhar 2002; Yang 1999). In some ways this deliberately references earlier visual formulations of desire – a nostalgic celebration of feminine beauty and sophisticated pleasures that harkens to, while re-imagining, pre-revolutionary times. Youthful, even almost pre-pubescent beauty embodies a vitality of spirit and tender desire that evokes many historical imagining and contemporary desires among men who see themselves as connoisseurs of feminine beauty and youthful tenderness

This, however, is an aggressively marketized phenomenon, the fetishized center of a great number of flirtatious glances<sup>45</sup> and seductive visual sales pitches. In a bewildering display of pink, rounded cheeks, bright eyes, shy glances, and natural contemporary cool, the young girl is splashed across the metro’s flashing electro-signage, TV screens, videos, internet video games, magazines, supermarket aisles, billboards, shopping malls, music videos, sides of buses, the video screens in the back of taxis, and everywhere else that there appears to a space for it.

The consumption of youthful femininity at times, and as older men in Guangzhou described it to me, drew partly on re-imagined Daoist practices in which the *qi* (energy) of the young girl is absorbed, through sexual encounter, by the older man.<sup>46</sup> While none of the men

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<sup>45</sup> Haug (1986), drawing on Marx, connects erotic and commodity forms of desire.

<sup>46</sup> See Farquhar (2002) for a rich discussion of post-reform re-imaginings of Daoist sexual practices, consumption, and male power and vitality. See also Zheng 2009 for an interesting, though less critical account

that I knew were necessarily steeped in this post-reform Daoist-inspired physiological vision/practice of male empowerment, they did pick up the general notion, connecting it to Daoism and Chinese tradition, of men gaining power from young women (Farquhar 2002; Zheng 2006). Rather than giving his *qi*, the normal flow of energy, he is able through a practice of concentration and discipline to reverse that flow and take youth and vitality in the sexual transaction. This supposedly historically grounded, somewhat ill-defined imagination intersected with, was indeed more an expression of a very contemporary mode of consumption and fetishization. Older men narrated through the language of Chinese “traditional” sexual practices a very contemporary notion of desire and masculine empowerment through consumption. The young inhabit naturally a world very different from even 10 years ago, far different from that 20 or 30 years ago. The envy of the older generations is great. In consuming the young girl, older men seem to believe they are partaking of this youth and vitality as an erotic contemporaneity, once that is otherwise foreclosed to them. Lao Wang, a 50-something man from nearby Shantou described it this way:

When I was young, we could not have this kind of fun with girls. It is natural. But we could not do it. We didn't know anything. How to dress or behave in modern ways. Now I have money, I am successful. You know right? So I can indulge my natural desires and play. I like the young women. They know how to dress and they are not *luohou* (backward) like the women from my hometown.

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of the association of Daoist sexual practices and male power in the KTVs of northeastern China.

By consuming feminine youth, Lao Wang felt himself younger and closer to urbanity and contemporary cosmopolitan life. It wasn't simply that the consumption made him feel like a man. It made him feel like a cosmopolitan, powerful, invigorated man. Savvy younger women who were exchanging their youth and sexuality for money, knew how to make use of this. Among the range of erotic, cool, young positions available were the funky aloof girl, the dark aloof girl (a variation on "goth"), innocent schoolgirl, quirky innocent girl, innocent but natural country girl, and others. All drew on images that circulated in media advertisements and porn produced in Asia, with Japan as the gold standard, with South Korea also a strong presence.<sup>47</sup> These cool, youthful images mimicked as well the styles of actual schoolgirls in a back and forth exchange of marketing creativity. Having sex with young girls who approximated these images provided a powerful erotic charge to the older men who viewed those other young girls with a distant, unrealizable desire. In consuming these images via the paid-for emotional and physical performance of the *falang* sexual encounter, they satisfied a transgressive desire, typically in the knowledge of its artificiality.

Wen Wen was by far the coolest of the young workers in the *falang* in neighborhood Z. The neighborhood had several *falang* filled with mostly younger women – the competition was fierce and even the slightest sign of age would have been a terrible handicap. This area was frequented mostly by Chinese businessmen, with a smattering of businessmen from other countries. Like neighborhood Y, it was a *chengzhongcun*, offering some buffer from direct

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<sup>47</sup> This is in a loose sense akin to the "translingual practices" that circulated in dialogic fashion in early 20<sup>th</sup> century exchanges between Japan and China, as Lydia Liu has described (1995). In this case, these are transvisual as well as translingual practices, involving the circulation and interpretation of semiotic as well as bodily practices. This brings to mind the notion of "mediascapes" as theorized by Arjun Appadurai (1996).

Guangzhou municipal police interference. It was also home to a small number of business hotels and a large number of Guangdong middle-class migrants to the city. The area would within a few years be changed into a part of the city's most glamorous mixed residential and shopping district. The *falang* and other small shops would mostly disappear. At that time, however, it was the hot spot for finding young, beautiful *falang* workers.

Wen Wen was around 19 years old and from the south of Hunan, but she had lived in the Guangzhou area for a few years with her aunt and uncle. She wouldn't talk about her parents much, only to say that they had divorced and she didn't know where her father was. She wouldn't speak of her mother. She was proud of the fact that she spoke Mandarin, her local Hunan dialect, and Cantonese. She saw herself as a naturally cosmopolitan person, someone who was comfortable in different places and could adapt quickly to different circumstances. When I first met her in 2004, she had been working at the *falang* for only a few weeks. Wen Wen felt that she did not fit in with the other workers whom she considered *tu* (rustic; local). She was admired, by the others, however, for her style and coolness. Wen Wen had straightened hair and long legs, and she dressed in a manner reminiscent of Korean pop stars – layers of mostly black and dark purple, thigh-high boots, and tasteful make-up. She had a baby face, which suited her Korea-pop look precisely, all combining to make her look like the super youthful, yet aloofly cool young thing that she saw herself to be. She was by far the most popular worker with customers. After a time, as she began to feel closer to some of the other workers, she began teaching make-up and style tips.

She taught them in part the art of distant self-appraisal:

You see, I am very satisfied with my body shape (*shenduan*). You see my legs and hips and ass are all well-proportioned. My legs are long. But I am not satisfied with my breasts. They are too small.

She did breast enhancement exercises every day. Others in the *falang* began to do different exercises to address their “problem areas.” Liu Hong, for example, began doing 45 minutes of hula hoop exercises to trim her belly. She, like the others, was learning the art of objectively viewing her body – turning it in to an object of urban-style appraisal – and the discipline of self-improvement. Find a problem, fix a problem. Liu Hong was glad to know this new information. “I never knew I was too fat! I thought I was voluptuous (*fengmande*). My parents never told me I was fat. I never heard this before. Aiyy, I need to have a slimmer waist.” I told her she wasn’t fat at all, that she looked very healthy and pretty. “Ha, you can say this, you are a man! And you are a foreigner. Your women are fat anyway. Chinese men like slim women with snakelike waists, but also with big tits. Aiyy, it’s not easy. At least my tits are big though, but now I think maybe that is not so cool, I’m not sure.”

Wen Wen’s cool aloofness was apparently irresistible. She represented the cool young, inaccessible urban girl, but in a context in which that could be bought and tasted. Lao Wang, the 50-something frequent customer of the *falang*, commented on her several times in graphic detail. He relished telling stories of what he done to and with her. His stories particularly lingered on the texture and soft firmness of her skin and her facial expression when he entered her. He seemed to take particular delight in seeing her “cool” (*ku*) face register

some discomfort. His stories were greeted with appreciation and usually sparked a competition of stories about “tasting” young girls. I asked him once, with some anger evident in my voice and manner, if he would talk that way about someone he cared about. Wasn’t she a person? He looked at me confused for a moment and said, “She’s doing this for money, right? It’s her job. I pay money, why can’t I enjoy?” For him and the others, part of the enjoyment was afterwards in telling and sharing stories. They were buying an experience and felt they rightfully owned it. It was filed in to a catalogue of bought memories in much the same way middle-class travelers store, savor, and share travel experiences.

Wen Wen appeared to like talking with me, taking it for granted we were both worldly people. Our conversations also seemed to enhance her status within the *falang*. She told me that she had always been an independent person (*ai ziyoude ren*), someone who didn’t like rules or to be controlled. Her account of entering *falang* work more closely mirrored stereotypical accounts than any others I had heard. It also further enhanced her status within the *falang* and differentiated her from the others.

She said she had been in love with a young boy. She was crazy about him and would have given him her life. She ran away from her relative’s home outside of the city to live with him in Guangzhou. He had left her suddenly for someone else. She had gone a bit crazy, she said. She ran around with her friends at night and liked drinking and drugs, especially *fingtao* (Ketamine). She wanted to be a bad girl. Her boyfriend had said when he was leaving her that she was too nice for him. On her back was a large, beautifully done multi-color tiger tattoo that she had done after he left. She pointed to it as a sign of how she

had become “bad” and didn’t care anymore. And since sex with men was basically the same, just putting a penis in a vagina until the man was done, why not make some money doing it.

Later, she told me, contradicting some of the spirit of this storyline, she was going to go to school to learn English. She felt this was a key to a better job and a better life. She felt she had a talent for languages and for dealing with people from all over the world. She couldn’t afford English language study or travel any other way. At the *falang* she was making a lot more than she could anywhere else, she felt, and in a shorter time. Wen Wen did save up and left the *falang* to go study in nearby Shenzhen. I heard from her only a couple of times during the next few months. She didn’t like the school and felt that she had wasted her money. I saw her at the *falang* a few months later. She seemed demoralized by her experience. Some of her old confidence was gone. “Ming, it was a stupid school. The teachers weren’t even good. And the other students were lazy kids. It doesn’t matter anyway. I hate to be cheated.” She confided that their English had been better than hers and they had made fun of her, which she couldn’t stand. Even the teacher made fun of her. She noted that they grew up in Shenzhen and were “rich kids,” so of course their English was better.

Wen Wen continued to work off and on at the *falang* through a series of minor crackdowns in 2005 – 2006. These were initially precipitated by complaints from a group of women whose families owned apartments in the area. Police were obligated to respond to the complaints of legal local residents and began a series of half-hearted crackdowns. These mostly involved telling the *falang* to stay closed for a while, with occasionally an arrest or two. Bosses and working women thought this would all blow over as it had in past

years. They would close when the warnings came, lay low, and then re-open with discretion. This worked for a while until the complaints of the women's homeowner group coincided with increased scrutiny of the area by government officials ahead of development plans. This area was being re-made into a showpiece of the city, the Zhujiang New City (*Zhujiang Xin Cheng*) development project. While the *falang* area bordered that newer, massive development, it still fell under central city government pressure. The crackdowns intensified, more arrests were made in 2006. The *falang* owners were finally told bluntly by police what was going on. Wen Wen said "The policeman told the boss this time is different. We really can't re-open again. The pressure is too big. If we re-open, they will arrest everyone. This will be a respectable neighborhood, ha. So anyway, it is clear." "What will you do," I asked. "I don't know, maybe go back to Shenzhen. I really don't know."

Xiaojing and Wangjing from neighborhoods X and Y also, in their own ways, worked to approximate urban, feminine cool. In some sense, as with Wen Wen, this was not a marketing ploy. They attempted to position themselves closer to dominant cosmopolitan imaginations through consumption. Xiaojing in particular went through a number of style changes, shifting her look about once a month, and ultimately transforming herself from a pretty young country-looking girl to a more hip, modern, city girl through clothing choices, a vast array of colorful, usually cartoonish accessories, and a range of hair styles and colorings, and make-up choices. She continued to work on this project of the self throughout the years I knew her, becoming an ever-more sophisticated consumer, increasingly attuned to minute shifts in the marketplace of cool, when something had become "out," the precise way in which a particular style of bracelet was to be worn, the gif that was displayed on her cell



phone, and more. Xiaojing's main concern was in self-making, turning herself into someone that was cool, and who others would not talk about or make fun of. She largely, though not completely, accomplished this. At times when we walked together, I would hear Cantonese young women making fun her. Xiaojing did not understand Cantonese, but she was finely attuned to the mocking sounds of others' voices and the scornful, amused looks she sometimes received. These lessened with time as her sophistication grew, although her pale skin and inability to speak Cantonese still marked her as an outsider, something of an imposter in the world of Guangzhou urban cool.

For Xiaojing, the benefits this had to her work and income at the *falang* were a secondary concern. She was young and pretty enough that this didn't matter much, although it did appear to help. It mattered more to some of her co-workers who were not as popular. She was frequently asked for beauty and style advice, which she gladly and authoritatively gave. Many women in the *falang* began to dress and look a bit like Xiaojing as they attempted to attract customers in the evening hours of work. Wangjing was less personally interested in these things, though she too engaged in trying new, cool, youthful forms of dress and make-up. This became particularly true as she got a bit older. When she first started at the *falang*, she had looked very young. That alone brought considerable business. After a year or so of work, she looked considerably older and there was a sharp drop-off in her business. At the suggestion of her closest friend in the *falang*, she began putting on green eye shadow and wearing pastel colors in a rough approximation of the look that I had seen Xiaojing work to perfect – youthful, funky girl. It helped her business quite a bit. She was also learning to act flirty and cool, drawing more on the innocent than the aloof variation.

This better suited her introverted temperament and her look. She began to giggle behind her hand, something she said she had learned from a Taiwan drama she liked. That way she didn't have to speak, she could just giggle and look shy and a bit coy, but in a way that appeared unaffected. I saw her get several customers this way, using a stifled giggle and downcast eyes to draw attention and portray a youthful treat waiting to be devoured. Some of her co-workers made fun of her about this:

Aiyy, so fake (*jiade*)! It just shows how stupid men are. Tee hee, oh older brother (imitating Wangjing's new performance style), I am so shy, I am a little virgin! Ha, you are looking older every day. Disgusting!

The woman who said this was in her mid-20s and struggling a bit for business. Wangjing had taken a customer who had initially been interested in her with a well-timed movement of her hand to her mouth to cover a shy smile. This woman continued to harass Wangjing for weeks after, bringing her on one occasion to tears. The woman laughed, "Ha, you are too stupid. Look at you. Cry cry cry! Ha ha! Idiot. Look at your skin. Rough and old. No man will want you soon." Wangjing's friend retorted in her defense, "Huh! She is still young. You are the old one with your big, saggy tits." "I have tits, what do you have?" was the reply. "I am a woman, what are you but an ugly kid?"

Afterwards, Wangjing toned down her new look and act. She needed it, however, to generate business and so continued, though with more discretion. The fight had in part erupted along generational lines. Wangjing and her friend were among the younger group, the other woman Hong, was part of a slightly older cohort. The older cohort tended to grow their hair long and to prize the rounded voluptuousness of their bodies as a major asset.

Theirs was closer to a generation in which women growing long hair and having full, plump, pale, soft bodies was a modern and glamorous expression of femininity – a deliberate rejection of pre-reform female norms of cropped hair and curves hidden under baggy, standardized clothing, and in which soft skin and soft demeanors were markers of decadence. The younger cohort, influenced by more contemporary trends, prized slimness and what they saw as more elegant, cosmopolitan feminine curves. They saw large breasts as vulgar (*suqi*) or rustic (*tu*), in keeping with trends in media and advertising. They did not deny the allure of large breasts for many men, but they did deny the cultural value in them. Later Wangjing said, “All she has is big tits. Just like a cow. Who cares. Some men like it, like they want a mommy. So *tu*.” Her friends agreed and assured her that her thin body was much better than that of the “old jealous grandma.”

#### 5.4 SEPARATE WAYS

Wen Wen, myself, and two others from the now permanently closed shop in Neighborhood Z went out one night to celebrate, our own private “middle finger” to the cops, officials, and meddling busy-bodies of the neighborhood who had shut down the *fang*, and to say our farewells. People were going their separate ways. Some were going home first to regroup and figure out the next move. Wen Wen had decided to try out Shenzhen again. She was going to try for the higher earning, higher echelon work of a KTV there. Her friend knew someone who worked at one in the city’s generally upscale Futian district. She worried about having to talk and flirt and drink with customers for long hours, but she was expecting more money and less police worries. We decided on the Sleeping Wood Café, a

famous/infamous place frequented by underground artists, journalists, and musician types. The others were a bit uncomfortable at first, but not Wen Wen. She felt herself cool enough for the place. Besides, she had been to plenty of cool clubs in Shenzhen. We talked for a bit about the “Muzi Mei incident.” Muzi Mei, a graduate of Sun Yat-sen University, was a self-proclaimed sexually liberated woman, a writer and magazine journalist who ran one of the earliest popular blogs in China. She used the blog to depict in detail, and with names, her various sexual hook-ups in Guangzhou. With a few particularly explicit posts, and a few prominent names, her blog exploded across the Chinese internet, becoming one of the first truly major internet scandals in the country and the focus of a nationwide debate about women, sexual morality, generational differences, and China’s future direction (See Liu 2010 for a discussion of the “Muzi Mei” scandal in the context of discussions of gender and sexuality in China). Sex, especially related to women, took on the familiar dimensions of an anxious discussion about the state and future of the nation. The debate was complex but overall fell broadly along “this is a national problem for various reasons” group, and another group who saw this as a sign of liberation and modern, cosmopolitan, healthy lives. I had seen Muzi Mei several times at this café but only spoken briefly. An interview I arranged through a mutual friend in 2003 following this early internet explosion was cancelled. She had to get out of town. Guangzhou had become a very hostile place for her. She had named too many men among her sexual partners, including among her circle of friends, some who were married. By the time I returned to China she had departed for the safer shores of Shanghai.

Perhaps her most famous encounter took place in the courtyard behind Sleeping Wood. It was this that sparked our conversation. We all laughed at the overwrought nature of the sexual ethics discussion. Zhu Zhu said, “We are all human, right! Men need sex, but so do women. It’s natural, who cares. Yeah, I like it! I wanna do it right now!” She pointed at me and wagged her finger, then, apparently changing her mind, she pointed at Wen Wen. We all laughed. “Why not everyone together?” asked Wen Wen, still laughing. Zhu Zhu replied very seriously, “What! That would be perverted!” Wen Wen wondered aloud what the difference between herself and Muzi Mei was. She had seen Muzi Mei’s photo in a magazine and felt herself both cooler and hotter. She had sex with lots of men too. “Sometimes I enjoy it,” she said, smiling. “What’s the difference then? Except I make money and can enjoy if I want. She just does it for free.” After the laughter died down, Zhu Zhu observed, “Yeah, but she went to a university.” That ended that line of conversation. We moved on to what the coming days would hold.

Zhu Zhu’s perspective resonated with that of prominent Chinese sexologist, Li Yinhe. Li has argued, from essentially a repression viewpoint, that the problem of women, and men’s, sexuality in China is a lack, one shrouded in shame, and that the answer is in more open, healthy approaches to vigorous, joyous sexuality (1997: 1996). Like Zhu Zhu, she sees this arising from an innate human disposition, the stifling of which hurts our humanity, and the free and healthy expression of which is liberating. Wen Wen complicated this with the direct financial aspect. Was sex without enjoyment for money part of this liberation? What if it included enjoyment at times? How did either of these differ from the millions of women who married for financial security? Or from women who didn’t need the money

and could just enjoy sex with different men without worrying about eating or sending money home? Zhu Zhu's final answer to that question was to point, in shorthand, to class differences. Some, she was saying, can just enjoy this. We have to work at it.

No one addressed the difficult question of gender inequality. Why, bluntly, is it ok for men to have sex with many women, some just for pleasure, some with economic and emotional commitment, but in which sexual activity, if anything, adds to their masculinity?<sup>48</sup> I think it is likely they did not address this for the obvious reason that they were on the other side of these lines as women who did have sex with many men per day, but unlike Muzi Mei who could draw on a notion of modernity and liberation as justification, could only draw on the reality of financial need and a lack of other opportunity. Where their participation in "modern" sexual practices was associated, crudely, with money, desperation, greed, or victimization, taking away any value in it, Muzi Mei's combination of youth, coolness, and radical sexual freedom carried the cache of the modern cosmopolitan. This did not come without costs, but it came with a valuation that separated her condition fundamentally from that of the millions of other women who have sex with many partners, those with the economic element more clearly and directly in play. Wen Wen did not fully understand or respect this distinction. Muzi Mei's transgression of gendered sexual norms had a value that arose partly from her class position. Meredith Beloso Brooke cogently notes "...once having grasped class as a theory of privilege and oppression, one begins to see that both within and beyond the sex industry some women are more equal than others (2012: 63).

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<sup>48</sup> That this inequality is grounded in the same set of "natural" discourses that the repression hypothesis draws upon is not something Li Yinhe addresses.

Wen Wen's transgressions had no social value, or worse, made her a bad woman. She did not accept this. She was cool and young, and from this she was making her way in the world, including earning money, having sex, and playing in the city. Her concern was beginning to be what came next. There was not for her a clear way forward.

## 5.5 I MISS YOU

“Older” sex workers in the *falang* setting, meaning often women in their mid-20s and above, had to rely on a variety of other strategies to mitigate the “weakness” of their age. Various forms of youth-based strategies were not effective, and they were in a competitive environment. Customers came in and in general selected who they wanted to have sex with. In a group with other younger women, these women were generally at a disadvantage. As mentioned earlier, one way of addressing this was to work longer hours. Women would come in the late morning or early afternoon, when the younger women tended to still be sleeping or playing on the internet or other activities. The occasional customer who walked in during the day then had a more limited selection. One additional customer per day gleaned from this practice, and over the course of a month, added substantially to overall earnings.

These women also relied on other strategies, in particular, cultivating repeat customers. Unlike women in KTVs, Saunas, or bars, they were not able to use their greater experience, skill in conversation, or emotional skills in a significant way to generate extra business on the first encounter. Customers came in and chose quickly, based mostly on appearance. A friendly, seductive, or welcoming appearance did help on occasion, but in most cases, when

present, youth and youthful beauty won out. On busy nights, there were still customers to be had by process of elimination. Older women also increased their customer base by cultivating longer-term relationships with men after the first encounter. Younger women utilized this tactic as well, though less frequently; their business was brisk.

The most common tactic employed in this regard was couched in the familiar terms of the “longing woman.” This was a locally effective variant on the general use of emotional labor, one that was essential to attracting customers, maintaining repeat customers, and satisfying customer desires. Women did not just use their bodies in a mechanical sense; they produced and sold a variety of emotions. The production and sale of emotion is not unique to sexual labor. Wendy Chapkis, in challenging the notion that emotion is somehow a natural and precious resource, argues that “emotion is always already social – and thus can be performed, created, objectified, and exchanged” (1997: 73). This is similar then to other forms of emotional labor, whether it is that of teacher, flight attendant, counselor, waiter or many others (Hochschild 1983). These women were producing and exchanging emotion, as do others, in the course of their regular labor of marketing to, satisfying, and bringing back repeat customers.

The theme of the longing, waiting woman was a popular one, reflected, for example, in Xiaojing’s favorite song *Weidao*, discussed in Chapter 1. The romantic image of the lovely, lovelorn woman longing for her lover to return had a particular poignancy, in particular to men (and women) of a generation that had grown up on the music and visual repertoire of the 1980s and 90s, one steeped in gendered romanticism, bittersweet sorrow, and aching desire (Rofel 1999). One of the favorite Karaoke songs of Lao Wang, the 50-something



businessman, was, oddly, *Qiu Niao* (Caged Bird). The song was about a person (in the original version a woman) who is like a bird trapped in a cage of love. She can fly free, but she chooses to remain in the cage, exemplifying a terrible, unfulfilled yearning. Lao Wang liked to ask the *falang* women he would take to KTVs to sing the song. He said it brought back memories for him.

I am a bird trapped in a cage by you

I've already forgotten how high the sky is

....

I'm like a shadow that you can do with or without

....

Tears are my last luxury (comfort)

The song depicts a “traditional” notion of the longing woman who is trapped by her love for a man who does not treat her well, and yet she sacrifices herself for him, unable to be without him no matter how badly he treats her. That Lao Wang would especially enjoy this song, then, was not surprising. He did seem to relish the notion of the waiting woman and the power that invested in the imagined male lover. There were, though, unexpected dimensions to this that complicated, while not fundamentally altering, that basic dynamic.

Once, at a Karaoke party Lao Wang and his friends had arranged, inviting several of the women from the *falang*, he asked Xiao Fang, a mid-20s “senior” woman to sing the song for him. She obliged, with a lovely voice and almost professional presentation. As she sang, Lao Wang leaned over to me, slightly drunk on XO:

You know Ming, this song is very subtle. Maybe you cannot understand. You know, Chinese is very subtle. Each word has so many different meanings. You can't understand. Never mind, never mind. I like you, ok? It makes me remember things, you know? In that time everything was simpler. Yes, I loved this girl. Ok? You know love? I loved her! And I couldn't marry her, you know? You can't know, you are American. I had to marry someone else. I can't ever forget this, you know? Ok, sing, drink!

Lao Wang nostalgically recalled the romance of the 80s and 90s, songs imported from Taiwan and Hong Kong steeped in longing and unrequited desire, lovers kept asunder by tradition or betrayal or money. It was a time of change in China, and his generation and the one after grew up on a mixture of hope, newly discovered romance and gender distinctions, possibilities of mobility, entrepreneurship, intimacy, and sexuality, and had not fully navigated all of that even as the world around them continued to change faster than they could keep up with. Longing, to the point of melancholy, was his condition at these events. This melancholy appeared to be, as in the psychoanalytic sense, that loss which constituted the person but was not replaced or expelled. It was a loss that briefly in the Karaoke space constituted a common ground with other women a bit closer to his age. In the Karaoke, he preferred the "older" women. Whatever this common ground might have briefly been, and only in a framed moment, it was lost in the greater value of youth, desire, and consumption outside the Karaoke space, where Lao Wang was an avid consumer and collector.

While these "older" women sometimes shared Lao Wang's nostalgia for *lao ge* (old pop songs), more importantly they recognized their utility. Specifically, they recognized the

utility of longing as embodied in the figure of the waiting female figure. This was a powerful, emotional tool in their work practices. Men felt both compelled by these images and empowered by them. They were objects of longing and desire, and the men were also made responsible for the figure of longing, the tragic female figure whose waiting lays a claim. Lao Wang, like other men I knew, avoided most of these “snares” in different ways but also allowed themselves to be enmeshed if it were someone they liked and who could make them feel those old feelings.

Fei Fei was the *falang*'s great master of longing. She was of indeterminate age, somewhere between mid-20s to early 30s. She had an almost ideal combination of still vivacious beauty with a hint of maturity, and a knowing sexuality that could shift from coquettish to almost coddling and motherly, depending on the client. She was not often chosen by the first-timer to the *falang*, who would aim for Wen Wen or one of the other very young workers. If they paused in their decision, however, she was there with a throaty, warm comment or a strategically timed shift of her hips in the chair. Nothing too obvious, just enough to catch the customer's attention.

Where Fei Fei really excelled, however, was in repeat customers. Some said it was because of her great *gong fu* skills (Kung Fu – also meaning general physical skills). It was said that she had worked in Macao at one of the high end sex emporiums/casinos/saunas. Fei Fei herself said it was about customer follow-up. “You can make a man happy, right, but then they forget right away. They walk out feeling very comfortable. But they don't remember. You have to get their phone number. Don't send a message too fast. Wait a bit, like a lover. Make them feel special.” Fei Fei taught the others that the men know they

sleep with many men. The point is to make them feel that somehow they are different. Their lovemaking skills are better. Somehow they touched your heart. “Yes, you are a fallen woman, but you are still a woman, right?” She told them not to be too overt, which was a sign of falseness. “Don’t say Oh, my lover, I love you so much. My thighs are trembling. Only you can fill me.” This brought a lot of laughter. She advised them to imagine that they really cared about the man, really wanted him to be their lover, and then think what they would say. “Cantonese men are very careful la. You know they are stingy la (She was riffing on the Cantonese accent). But if you can deepen the relationship they will be more committed. This can bring many benefits la!” This brought more laughter and shouts of “Gong Hei Fat Choi” (A phrase used mostly at Chinese New Year wishing the other financial prosperity) in fairly bad Cantonese.

What Fei Fei was teaching is similar in some ways to what Zheng Tiantian has described in her ethnographic research in KTVs in the northeastern Chinese city of Dalian (2009). There are significant differences, however. First, Fei Fei’s approach, while a part of the strategy of “older” *falang* workers, was for most a minor strategy. The main strategy was based on high customer turnover and working longer hours. Secondly, unlike Zheng’s account, men that I knew did not necessarily believe or disbelieve these performances. What mattered to them was the extent to which they made them *feel* that this was true, even for a time.<sup>49</sup> There were different degrees of belief, a very complicated notion in itself, but the main issue was not this. In Zheng’s account, KTV women employ a range of culturally

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<sup>49</sup> This is more akin then to Berstein’s notion of “bounded intimacy” in the late-capitalist production and exchange of emotion (2007).

powerful emotional strategies to bind men to them as part of their overall earning strategy.

Men may resist these or be skeptical of them, but when they accept them, as Zheng presents it, they simply believe. The reality, at least in this ethnographic instance, is more complex.

Lao Wang and his fellow “players” did brush off most such emotional advances. When they did allow them to connect, it was not because they believed; it was because the performance, in something like the authenticity of a great theatrical performance, had awaked feelings within them. It was this awakening within themselves, not a mutual trust or believe in the authenticity of the other that made it, in their minds, worth the extra emotional, financial, and personal investment. And finally, as Fei Fei’s admonition to the others to draw on their own histories makes clear, the women themselves, while inured, were not immune to this same awakening of feeling. The difference was one of power, not of skill or strategy. The man had by far the greater power; the women had much less, and thus much more to lose. The trick where the women were concerned was to call up feeling, make it a tool and not be a tool of it, and then put it to use. These men could risk loss in this emotional game. The women had a much finer, and more precipitous, margin of error.

Fei Fei told me a story one night. We went to drink in a nearby bar. It was too late for customers, and she just wanted to sit in a bar like a “normal person.” She liked cocktails, martinis in particular. She said she had picked up the taste working in Hong Kong, not Macao. It was the most exciting time of her life, she said. She was young and Hong Kong had seemed very exciting and foreign. She didn’t care what she had to do to survive there. Anyway, it was a new world then, so what if she had to fuck for a living. “Men fuck all the time. Women too. It’s so hypocritical (*xuweide*).”

Hong Kong hadn't been what she expected. The work in the Prince Edward district was ok. The money was ok. But she was very lonely. Hong Kong people looked down on her. She was a *bak mui* (Cantonese for "northern girl." This is often shorthand in Hong Kong for prostitute). She didn't speak Cantonese. She felt that everything she did was wrong. "I just wanted to buy some noodles, and I still had to kiss ass! I felt like a foreigner or something. Maybe like you feel sometimes." With this last she showed the ability that made her admired by the others. It wasn't that she didn't mean it; it was that she had the intuition, experience, and thoughtfulness to extend to others a caring, well-placed word, especially to men.

Her loneliness increased, she said. She would touch herself a lot. She laughed, "I was fucking several men a day, but then I was touching myself several times a day! Well, it felt better. I fucked them for money. It was ok. But I had my own needs. That was different." Then she met a very handsome man. He was from Hong Kong. He worked like she did, providing sex for money. At first, she thought they could be like "normal" boyfriend and girlfriend. He seemed to like her, and she was crazy about him. She loved him. He said that he loved her.

Fei Fei had to pay him for the encounters, however. He said he didn't have enough money, he didn't want to ask, but if he wasn't with her he would be working. He preferred to be with her, but he could barely support himself. Fei Fei gave him money. But then he stopped giving her attention. He kept asking for money, which she gave him, but he would offer excuses why he couldn't have sex with or why he had to leave early. He was sick. His father was sick. He was too busy. Fei Fei complained in terms of professionalism.

“He took my money but he didn’t even come to give me service. If you don’t want to come to be with me, how can you take my money!” This had happened several years before, but it was still fresh in her memory. She was indignant at his lack of professionalism and basic work ethics. “If I take someone’s money, I will give them service. If I can’t give them service, how could I take their money?” Fei Fei mixed her emotional hurt with a professional critique. He had betrayed her personally, using her feelings for him to get money. And he had been unprofessional, not even doing his job. She felt betrayed, but she couched this in the language of service and fair exchange.

Fei Fei said they used to drink martinis. She associated Hong Kong with the drink. They often went to a bar in Tsimshatsui, a small, quiet, cool place that was still there the last time I had been in the area. Sometimes they even went to the swankier bar areas in Central. Fei Fei always paid, but she said it had been a happy time going out with him. He was so handsome and she took care of him. Hong Kong and this love affair were the memories she could not, or chose not to, expel, the source of her melancholy. Fei Fei said it was this man she thought of when she sent notes of longing to the likely male customers she wanted to attract. She drew on this in her work, producing emotion out of a personal history that she had shaped, given meaning to, and decided not to let go of. It was this melancholy that was the source of her work prowess. She had made of it a tactic. Prior hurt had not motivated Fei Fei’s “entry” into sex work. When I mentioned the notion, she looked at me with a mixture of amusement and indignation. In her telling, she had been ambitious and adventurous, seizing chances to see new places and make her own way in the world. “Hurt” was definitely a part of her work experience (a part that she made use of), but it appeared to

result more from a life that had crossed different regional, social, and legal borders, rather than being something uniquely intrinsic to what we today call “sex work.”

We drank for a while that night. She didn’t want a simple life – wife, mother – to be trapped in one place. Fei Fei liked her mobility and depending on her own skills. She was at times, though, lonely. Other women, she said, couldn’t be her friends. There was jealousy and betrayal. If they worked together, it was especially bad. Men couldn’t be trusted either. “It’s a vicious world,” she told me. “What about the occasional real friend?” I asked. “Ming,” she said, “when you find that you find a treasure.” We toasted to that. “But don’t believe in it,” she added.



## 6.0 BODY MATTERS

Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language.

Elaine Scarry (1985: 4)

This chapter explores selected narratives of the body in the context of my field research in Guangzhou. This is not an attempt to excavate or dig out an authenticity of bodily experience. Nor does this focus on all the various operations and techniques that I argue constitute the body, individual and social (some of which are discussed in previous chapters). It focuses on the materiality of bodily discourse as both contingent and arising from situated, yet generalizable conditions, and thus is an attempt to focus on the politics of “body talk.” It is an exploration of stories worked through the frames of the body, health, and embodied emotions and experiences, and as these stories are narrated by women working on the margins of Guangzhou’s economy, selling, in part, sexual services. These selected stories of the body tell us something about the conditions of labor in question, the broader gendered political economic realities in which they are situated, and the accreted discursive forces that render the emplaced body, labor, and frames of contemporary Being (including identity) legible.

This is not meant to be a catalogue of all the ways that talk about the body and bodily experience were part of daily life in Guangzhou during the years I was there. That would be beyond the scope of this chapter, and possibly beyond the scope of a single book. This chapter instead focuses selectively on three main frames of bodily discourse, ones that I argue below have broader critical resonance beyond the labor realm of sex work and to some extent the place boundaries of Guangzhou and China. Broadly, these frames are bodily pains, body parts and pleasures, and finally, in a way intended to be more suggestive than definitive, anxieties about the skin of the other.

Framing this chapter in terms of body talk is not meant to deny the empirical realities of physical conditions, vulnerabilities, pains, and pleasures (Scheper-Hughes 1992). Bruises and tears of the flesh are real, as are lesions, infections, sore bodies, organ damage, upsets of the nervous system, bodily imbalances of heat and coolness, dryness and moisture, and other embodied maladies that appear in these stories of labor and life. Nor is this to downplay the importance of examinations of what bodies do in relation to other assemblages of space and history, a project in some measure attempted in previous chapters. The concern here, however, is primarily with the body as narrated and what that tells us about a laboring moment in the multiple marginalities of lower echelon sex work in Guangzhou, and to some extent the broader conditions of labor in southern China. This is not a separation of language and the body, it is a reminder that the body is partly expressed, constituted and experienced through language. In this vein, I have not tried to avoid referencing the body itself (as visually apprehended) when it related to these stories.

Much of the most fruitful recent anthropology of the body has explored and exemplified those themes above, namely the body as lived site of various material relations, including place (See for example Lock and Sheper-Hughes 1987; Strathern 1996; Farquhar 2002; Lock and Farquhar 2007). This view eschews a number of Cartesian dichotomies and focuses on relations of force as they are lived, experienced, narrated, shaped, and evaded. From this, materiality, as discussed in the introduction and Chapter 1, differs substantially from either a crude Marxist, reductively positivist, or a biological structural/anatomic view. Partly drawing on phenomenological perspectives, although extended to the social and collective, materialities, and the body as one example of it, may be viewed relationally as the producers and products of a variety of projects, practices, discourses, images, places, and arrangements of force. When this is combined with a theoretical and ethical concern with force relations and power, we find thinking the body, in its various forms, including discursive, a way of unpacking the finely grained inter-workings of power, inequality, and living experience.

In exploring the stories of embodied experience expressed by *falang* and other workers on the lower rungs of sexual labor in Guangzhou, we find a window on to a variety of material issues that reveal a great deal about their work and its vulnerabilities, the broader conditions in which it takes place, and the historically constituted frames of language and imagination that help to constitute, and are constituted, in body talk. I have, however, considerable worries in addressing narratives of bodily experience in the context of sex and labor in southern China. The first is that this not be read as a variation on the “hurt sex worker/prostitute” image as mentioned in the Introduction and Chapter 4. This view

universalizes and flattens a great range of conditions and experiences, discursively erases the agency of millions and men and women, has often contributed to, in its cooperation with state and law enforcement actors, conditions that add to the difficulty of those they wish to save, and reproduces, in its current focus on “third world women” (men are not included) a too-familiar vision of the “first world” agent saving the “third world” female victim (Kempadoo 2001, 1998; Doezema 2001; Agustin 2007, 2003). I address this concern by contextualizing these stories within the frame of bodies laboring more broadly in southern China, illustrating both the common mundaneness of grinding labor and the toll it takes, and the specificity of bodily conditions of sex work in Guangzhou as they are narrated by those actually involved. The conditions are difficult, but they are not radically unique. Secondly, I wish to avoid reiterating a troubling relationship between Chinese women and the erotic – with both the historical legacies of the erotic Asian woman and the “third world” prostitute figure simultaneously implicated. I approach this with great caution and concern. Yet, to ignore the daily discussions of the body – pains, pleasures, and anxieties - that were a part of the fabric of life on Guangzhou’s margins would be a grave disservice, a furthering of a silence that allows oppressive stereotypes to go unchallenged, and the grim, embodied effects of marginalization, including the hurt the marginalized inflict on themselves and others, unexamined and unaccounted for. I have some confidence that by contextualizing these stories of the body within their mundane, though often very difficult conditions, ones that are reminiscent of other forms of devalued labor in southern China and elsewhere, I both do some justice to their stories and complicate attempts to make this simply about an “other over there.”

At the same time as they reveal common-grounds of labor and marginalization, these stories reveal diverse ways of narrating the body, ones that link to broader political and discursive arrangements, often generationally-defined (Farquhar 2002; Brownell 1995). While older workers often narrate the body in terms of “speaking bitterness,” or as a laboring, largely coherent body, younger workers are more prone to talk about their body as a finely-grained aggregation of constituent parts that require analysis and targeted approaches to improvement, usually through consumption. Various relations of intimacy and sexuality are narrated in terms of a complex and uncertain array of associations with body parts. These stories thus call in to question a singular approach to what constitutes the body, even a single “Chinese” approach, and raise questions about the complexity of intimacy, intention, and the erotic, among others. Finally, questions of difference and revulsion, narrated most prominently through the trope of skin, reveal both troubling currents of prejudice and power, and recall the specters of otherness that haunt, and arguably help constitute, the cosmopolitan moment in Guangzhou. They are also a troubling reminder that agency on one axis of power can at the same time be oppressive on another.

### **6.1 TALKING ABOUT BODIES IN PAIN**

While the stories of the body below are about a number of things, including pleasure, consumption, opportunity, and intimacy, pain, as expressed in bodily terms, occupies a prominent place. The body in pain is partly biological, as that term is conceived in biomedicine, but other expressions of embodied pain are not merely somatic – a kind of biomedical version of “false consciousness” or even bad faith (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 184 -

87) This does not idealize pain. Rather, this is a more empirically grounded view of bodily experience in which what we call the biological is included with other forms and ways of imagining and narrating the experience of the body that is attentive to it as an assemblage of relations of force, one that feels and lives, watches and is seen, speaks and is silent. This is deathly important.

Elaine Scarry's exploration of the body in pain asks in part the important question of how the pain of the other can be dismissed, or further, how we can be responsible for inflicting pain on the body of the other, as in torture (1987). In an apparently opposite formulation, Edward Casey, reading Emmanuel Levinas, asks how it is that I cannot ignore the pain of the other in my glance upon it, particularly, but not only, in the face of the other (2006). Taking this as a starting point, and inspired by a phenomenological perspective, he draws from the moment of the glance that chances upon the pain of the other an authentic prior imbrication of the other within me and vice versa. He draws further upon Levinas in exploring this moment when I am bound by the other's pain, which I may subsequently reject, evade, or accept, an always prior responsibility. In this, we find no direct contradiction with Scarry, whose work asks essentially what happens after the glance and the difficulty of expressing physical pain in language. Complicating this in an almost anthropological way, Judith Butler's reading of Levinas accepts a certain responsibility and interconnection with the other, but insists on contextualizing even the moment of the glance within broader frames of normativity and reception (2006).

Body talk and the sight of the body, particularly in its hurt, wove themselves together in forming a discourse of pain that permeated much of the experiences of the *falang* and other

out of the way sites of sex work. Bruises, cuts, contusions, and scars, the effects of conditions of labor in humid, dirty, moldy conditions, all mingled with stories of abuse, often horrible. These had a lingering effect. Talk of itching, infection, chaffing, vaginal tearing, unexpected skin lesions and other eruptions, marks from pinching and biting, a knot on the head from a *chengguan*'s metal pole, a story about someone who had disappeared after going to see a client she knew that no one else trusted, hair falling out, blood in the mucous, perpetually sore throats and coughing, anxiety, tiredness, chronic aching of the back, formed a very partial catalogue of common bodily complaints. Some of these I could help to address through Western medicine via WebMD and the cultivation of friendships with local doctor friends. Fortunately, a wide array of creams and powerful antibiotics are available without prescription in southern China.<sup>50</sup> Other ailments were not amenable to, or intelligible within, the narrow confines of biomedicine.

Glances in this case were not isolated to the first moment. They continued over hundreds of encounters and a number of years, carrying with them responsibility. I also, by necessity, employed methods of distancing, exemplifying in a sense Scarry's point as to the ability to ignore the pain of the other. Rather than accept her notion of pain as inexpressible in language, however, I would amend that to say that pain may be rendered distant, however it is expressed, but its apprehension carries, potentially, a claim that may then be distanced but leaves a trace. Finally, I take seriously Butler's admonition of pain's expression as dependent on context, in the sense of its meaning and reception. Levinas sought in the face-to-face encounter a universal ground, to ground a "first philosophy," one both prior to

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<sup>50</sup> Whatever the broader effects of overuse of antibiotics in China are, in these cases it was a blessing.

ethics and that made ethical considerations possible (1990; 1998). I would amend that to attend to the materiality of emplaced histories and the shared experience of mutual implication, dependency, and loss. In this we perhaps glimpse a common urgency in the shadow of late-capitalist realities. This is not the essentialized notion of “prior hurt” critiqued in Chapter 4. This is the ordinary and terrible hurt of bodies laboring in out of the way places.

### **6.1.1 Anna**

Anna worked in a *chengzhongcun* that had become, like many others, a home and workplace for migrant laborers in the city. This urban village was at the far southeastern borders of the city, and for a time was home to a number of small and medium-sized factories, as well as a vast array of small shops, restaurants, pharmacies, cheap hotels, and *falang*. This area, like others I worked in, had been slated for “development.” It would disappear almost overnight in 2008, reduced to an endless expanse of rubble. Years later when I went back to see what it had become, it was still partly rubble, partly unoccupied, new cheap-looking high-rise housing.

Anna was from Guangxi, bordering Guangdong province to the west. Guangxi’s official designation is the Zhuang Minority Autonomous Region, which it has been since 1958. A majority of China’s Zhuang people, as well many others from China’s official 55 minority groups, make Guangxi home. Most of the population, however, is Han, the dominant national ethnic group (*Guangxi Government Website* n.d.). Anna was herself not entirely clear as to her ethnic identity. “Han” was the ethnic designation on her official national ID card, but she knew that there were Miao on her mother’s side of the family. She



was not very concerned with finding out the “truth” of her ethnic make-up. “It says Han on my card, so ok. I am Han. What does it matter? I’m Miao, I’m Han, anyway, I’m short and brown, and I want to be tall and pale!” Anna had worked in the area for a year before I met her. She was 18 when we met. She introduced herself as “Anna,” saying it was a name she had heard in a foreign movie. She liked the character in the movie, who was a beautiful, pale, innocent girl. She did not use this name in her work or with colleagues, only, to my knowledge, with me.

Anna was short and slightly built, with medium-brown skin and a broad nose, and a quick, bright smile. Her skin, stature, facial features, too-ready smile, and other features of dress, accent, and body language, made work in the more centralized *falang* unlikely. She was, as she herself said many times, *too tu*. On the margins of the city, past Pazhou tower and in areas that had only recently become concerns for Guangzhou municipality, she did a fairly good business serving mostly migrant workers and small-scale businessmen who worked or resided in the area. The *falang* she worked out of was a basic shell with barely the basic equipment to suggest it might, on the rarest occasion, be used for hair-related work. It was a dark, damp, moldy rectangular space, about 8 feet long and 4 feet wide, just enough room for a wooden bench that could seat two, a TV in the upper left corner, and a mirror along the wall in front of which was placed a lone stool – where someone could conceivably get a haircut. It had a single, naked bulb hanging from the low concrete ceiling.

Down the small, narrow alleyway that the *falang*, and several others, was housed on, was Anna’s apartment. It was located in an abandoned, six-story building. The building had been originally planned as a hotel, according to local residents, but the project had been

suddenly abandoned without explanation. Only one floor, the third, had been turned in to livable, cubicle-shaped spaces. A private entrepreneur, seeing the opportunity, moved in and put up walls, installed wiring and basic plumbing in what was otherwise a basic shell, resembling nothing more than a clay and soot-caked parking garage. Anna rented one of these small rooms, with toilet and wash basin, basic electric, and even internet connection, for 400RMB (less than 70USD) per month. The humidity, stale air, pollution, dust, mold, and a lack of open spaces and greenery affected her in troubling ways.

Aiya, you see my skin!?! I keep itching and scratching. You see! There are blood spots on my sheets. I can't stop scratching. In my home, you know, it is mountains. Everything is clean and the water is good. Here the water is no good and the air is too wet. And it is very easy for me to get *riqi*.<sup>51</sup> At home I can eat spicy food, here I can't because of the water. Also, you know, it is very dirty.

As she said this, Anna scratched at her legs which were covered in bloody, open sores, many of which had originally been mosquito bites, some of which appeared to be a rash, possibly partly caused by the masses of black-purplish mold that covered about half of her ceiling and one portion of the wall above her bed. Her itching was a constant complaint. "You see these little bugs, they bite me, especially at night." She showed me a bloody black dot

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<sup>51</sup> *Riqi* (literally hot energy/air) is an ailment involving an imbalance in the body's energy often caused by foods or other externally-introduced elements or factors that stimulate "heat" within the body. There is an almost constant concern in Guangzhou with *riqi* and taking measures to prevent or reduce it. For a richer discussion of Chinese medical theory see Farquhar 2002 and Kuriyama 20002. This chapter does not engage those more complex discussions in large part because they were not part of the understandings and discussions of *riqi* as I encountered them.

crushed between her fingers. “Look at the walls there (pointing to bloody marks along the white sheetrock next to her bed).” Bed bugs were another consistent problem. I even itch here,” she said, pointing to her groin.

Anna usually tried to remain cheerful. The other, mostly older, women who worked in the *falang* were very protective of her. They said that she could “see no bad thing.” She could be around “bad things,” but she was untouched by them. But her plague of itching continued. Anna associated this with Guangzhou. “Here is it very easy to get *riqi*. So my body is too hot.”

While not denying the environmental cause of her maladies, I tried to counter with other explanations and suggested treatments. I told her that she needed creams and ointments. Anna allowed, with considerable hesitation and complaining, the administration of Western medicines. She did not fully believe in them, and she worried about their effects. “Western medicine is more strong and rough,” she said, “it is not suited for us Chinese.” But she came to a point where she was willing to try anything, except go home. “If I go home like this, looking so ugly with my skin in patches and my face so ragged, and no money, ha! What future do I have then?” “Won’t your parents be glad to see you and take care of you,” I asked, fearing the answer. “I was their pretty daughter, now I come home an ugly, poor girl. What do you think?” she asked in return.

Anti-fungal and anti-itch creams helped some of her skin symptoms and to relieve her discomfort, as did occasional use of allergy medicine. A broad-spectrum antibiotic, following a blood-test at a nearby, illegal health clinic that specialized in sexually transmitted diseases, helped with some of her genital symptoms. None of these fully alleviated her

almost constant sense of itching distress. “The air, water, and food here is not right! I feel so hot and dry inside, even though it so wet.” We sat in the dark, dank *falang* and brooded on this for a while. The medicines were relieving some of her symptoms, but they were not, as both she and I believed (in different ways) relieving their underlying causes.

Anna was, despite her skin allergies and sores, popular with customers, being the youngest in the shop. Once a man dressed like a small-scale businessman stumbled in during the middle of the afternoon. I had seen him and his friends earlier at a small, dirty Hunan restaurant eating, talking business, and drinking *baijiu* (Chinese grain alcohol). Anna went with him. I had never seen her turn down a customer. “It would be too *buhaoyisa* (embarrassing) la. How can I just say no to their face?” We all urged her urged her to re-consider this. “You can just say you are on your period,” said one of the older women. “Then no one is embarrassed. They can pick someone else or go on.” Anna just shook her head at this, and mumbled something about that being like cheating.

We sat in the *falang* for about 30 minutes, with the air thick with unspoken worry. When Anna returned there was a visible relief. She was welcomed back with laughing shouts, and the *falang* seemed a bit brighter. “He hurt me,” she told me later, when no one else was around. “What do you mean?” I asked. “He wouldn’t wait, he pushed in too hard. He was very rough. And then he put it in my butt. I tried to stop it and calm him down. But he was drunk, and I couldn’t.” “Why didn’t you call someone, the boss or me or anyone? We could come and help?” “Help what?” she asked. “Anyway, it would bring trouble.” As she said this she shifted away, reaching for a bottle of water. I saw the pain in her movement and some bruising when her thin shirt lifted off her back. “Did he beat you?” I

asked. She looked at me quietly for a minute. “No,” she said finally. I didn’t believe her, but I think that she didn’t want to make trouble for me or anyone else in the *falang*.

Anna sometimes complained of soreness, rawness, bleeding, and burning after work encounters. Other women in the *falang* advised on her how to mediate this - how to control the thrusting of the man, how to get them to finish quickly, and how to use lubricant. I bought lubricant for her and struggled to remember what I had learned at an international sex worker conference in Hong Kong on how to use one’s thighs to simulate vaginal penetration, making a man believe, in the dark, that intercourse is taking place. I tried to explain to everyone at the *falang*, but no one would believe me. “Ming, would you be fooled by that?” one woman demanded. “I don’t know, maybe, it’s just a feeling, right?” I replied. Nothing came of that discussion. When I confronted Anna after a particularly difficult night, when I found her doubled over in apparent pain, hiding in the small squat toilet at the back of the *falang* she replied, with uncharacteristic directness and anger.

What should I do then (*Ni yao rang wo gan shenme ne*)? You want me to go home and grow crops? It is very bitter and tough! You want me to work in a factory?

You know that I did that already. My back ached. I had terrible breathing problems.

The air was even worse than here! It stank and smelled like chemicals. I was bent over a table for 10 hours a day. It was very bitter and almost no money! So what should I do then. If you can tell me, then I will do it.

Anna had worked in a factory in nearby Nanhai before coming to work in the *falang*. She had hated the factory work, and hated the low, inconsistent pay. She didn’t like her work in the *falang* but saw it as better than factory work or staying at home. Her complaints were

partly about the physicality of the work, which older women tried to advise her, not very successfully, on how to manage. More often, though, her complaints were about her environment and the maladies she experienced as a result. She worked and lived on the margins of a glittering cosmopolitan city. The physical environment was very bad. Trash and raw sewage, mold, chemical waste from nearby, under-regulated factories, bad food, dank rooms, and numerous parasites took a toll. Anna added to this her concern with local air and water as being ill-suited to her body, producing an imbalance in her that partly accounted for her skin conditions and infections. These were, she said, produced by an excess of *riqi*. I cannot fully deny this, or simply say that *riqi* is another way of saying infection or allergy. This is in part because I came personally to know the bodily sensation she was describing, and in part because Western biomedical explanations and drug interventions do not fully alleviate the conditions of bodies on the margins of China's development. I am suggesting here that this is not unique to China. Anna narrated a terrible imbalance produced by the broader world around her. My targeted attempts at biomedical intervention alleviated some of the symptoms, but they did not address, in her own bodily telling, the fundamental imbalances that constituted her experience. This mirrored, in a sense, the failure of my suggestions on improving her work situations to fundamentally address the difficult, apparently irremediable inequalities of her life.

Xiaojing and Wangjing from neighborhoods X and Y, as discussed in previous chapters, had similar, though less severe complaints. Wangjing's neighborhood, work, and living conditions were closer to those of Anna's. Damp, dirty, moldy, and with some nearby shoe and clothing factories, Wangjing and others in the *falang* complained about a host of skin,

respiratory, and other bodily ailments, and often associated this again with *riqi*. The wetness of Guangzhou, and its water, and a host of bad, oily, fried foods were identified as the source of bodily heat, which expressed itself in fevers, skin rashes and other eruptions, including pimples, sore throats, fungal infections, lingering coughs, diarrhea, general discomfort, and physical weakness. When I suggested some of these be simply infections (ie. Caused by tiny animals), Wangjing replied “Of course it is an infection (*yan*)! But why do I get the infection so easily here? It is because of too many bad things in the air and water and food, right? You see? That makes me out of balance, I feel hot inside, my body is not balanced, so of course I can easily get infection.” But, I persisted, do you think it might relate to the pollution, darkness and mold, sewage and trash all around us, not *riqi*? “Of course, aiyy, all of that can make us weaker. It makes me out of balance so I have *riqi*. I just said that,” she replied with a tone that suggested both patience and irritation.

Wangjing and others, myself included, learned to identify a certain hot, itchy internal feeling as the onset of *riqi*, which then led to more problems. Where I thought of this as a subtle symptom of my body trying to fight off infection, an indication that something needed to be done – drinking hot tea, more rest, taking some herbal medicine, taking Vitamin C -, Wangjing saw this as a warning sign of bodily imbalance that weakened the body to other maladies, and she took much the same precautions. While our ways of explaining this bodily sensation differed, our reactions to it, and at a certain level our understanding of it – a body under attack or being weakened – were similar. What the concept of *riqi*, and the prescriptive discourses around it in the *falang*, taught me, however, was to identify a subtle bodily sensation, a very early warning sign of illness coming on.

While skin and respiratory ailments were common topics of complaint, analysis, and discussion in Neighborhood Y, they were less so than in the area Anna worked in. Conditions, while dirty and rough, were still considerably better in Neighborhood Y. There was a nearby park for fresher air and greenery, the alleyways were a bit wider and got a bit more direct sunlight, the layers of dust and pollution on buildings and windows were not as thick, and raw sewage was less present. There were as well a large number of pharmacies and a relatively clean, well-staffed illegal clinic that featured a mixture of Chinese and Western remedies. Their specialty, like with the dirtier, more basic clinic near Anna's workplace, was in diagnosing and treating STDs<sup>52</sup>. Neighborhood X was even better, with more open space and direct sunlight, and greater mobility (temporarily) owing to a relatively pleasant, neighborhood environment. No factories were nearby, the workplace was cleaner and dryer, and the living spaces received direct light and had better ventilation. Xiaojing did complain of skin ailments and worried they would mar her pale, smooth complexion. "Aiy, you see I never had pimples before I came to Guangzhou! It's too wet and hot here, so I can't even eat spicy food or I get *riqi*. I didn't even know what *riqi* is before I came here! I still don't know what it is, but anyway, I get these pimples and sometimes feel uncomfortable."

All three of these neighborhoods shared much in common. Small differences in terms of density of buildings, direct sunlight, the presence of nearby factories, moisture and mold levels, access to medicines and treatments, and mobility all seemed correlated to the general

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<sup>52</sup> Illegal STD and health clinics providing basic diagnosis and care were common throughout the areas of Guangzhou I was working in. To get a sense of the prevalence of such clinics, a Xinhua state news agency article reported the closure of 12,000 unlicensed STD clinics from 2005 to 2008 (2008).



severity of commonly-experienced and discussed bodily maladies.<sup>53</sup> Minor, yet significant variations in the environments of labor, environments that affected most other residents as well, had profound impacts on the bodily experiences, as narrated, of those who resided and worked there.

In terms of issues specific to *falang* labor, the kinds of rough treatment that Anna faced regularly were less of a concern to Wangjing and others in Neighborhood Y. While such things did happen and were something discussed in terms of strategic avoidance and exemplary lessons, there was a greater sense of professional sharing and skill development. Wangjing described it to me this way.

When I first came, I mean my first time, it really hurt. I didn't know what I was doing. Ha! I mean, I wasn't ready, there, you know? And then I just laid there and let him do it. It really hurt. Then I learned, I had to change my idea. It wasn't romance. I had to get ready myself. And I bought lubricant.

I asked how she had learned this.

Others taught me, and I learned from my own experience. You can't just let them do what they want. You can act soft (*wenrou*) to make them gentler, or be "surprised" by their size and say you are afraid. That makes them happy, but then they usually also treat you with extra care. You can shift your hips when they are coming in so that they can't just pound on you, you can hold their hips like this (She showed me). It

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<sup>53</sup> This correlated roughly with my own experiences. I seldom got sick when hanging around Neighborhood X, or in the quite nice neighborhood of Neighborhood Z, where Wen Wen worked. A few days of consecutive fieldwork in Neighborhood Y, however, almost always ended with some sort of respiratory infection or feverish ailment. And even a day or two in the area where Anna worked was enough to bring on a fever, respiratory infection, and/or skin rash.

should be subtle, so they don't know you are controlling things. You can squeeze inside so they finish faster. And sounds, like this (she moaned) make them more excited. Or like this (she moaned as in slight discomfort) can make them slow down. I think they don't even know. There is a lot more.

There was a vast array of very subtle emotional and physical techniques for managing encounters. These were shared, though differentially, in the *falang* environment and learned through work experience. Anna's small *falang*, with just a few other older women working there, didn't provide the same conditions for sharing work knowledge and experience. It also didn't provide the same level of protections – it was only herself and a few older women – that provided the background of greater security and confidence that made managing the encounters possible in other neighborhoods. Anna worried, rightly, that attempts to manage encounters, if done poorly or misconstrued, could result in very bad things happening, and with no one to turn to if they did.

### **6.1.2 Ah Hong**

“Of course sounds are very important la!” Ah Hong was disgusted with the stupidity of my question. She called over her friend, a *laoxiang*, who was, as Ah Hong put it, also a wanderer. Her friend, Ah Fei worked Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Dongguan, and other cities according to whim, law enforcement winds, and business travel cycles. Ah Hong and Ah Fei proceeded to take me on a tour of moans and groans that ranged from encouraging to subtle hints to slow down to encouragement to finish. “Are you excited now,” laughed Ah Hong? “You know,” said Ah Fei, “with my voice I can touch you and make your body respond.” For Ah Hong, the various bodily management skills of sex work were basic techniques that

any reasonable person in her line of work must master. She, and other, older workers in the bar and street work around the Garden Hotel, saw their work as a form of labor, one that required some knowledge, experience, and skills. “We do this kind of labor (*zhe yi hang*) for the same reason others work, right? I am good at this; after all, I was married before. Ha!” Ah Hong liked to compare the skills of her labor with those of a wife. “At first I knew almost nothing, but then I realized how simple it was to make him (her husband) happy and fall asleep.” That, she said, was the beginning of her training for her current work. More than many of the younger women who worked in *falang* or street, Ah Hong’s narratives of labor began to approach, while still not claiming, a sex worker identity. Where Xiaojing, Wangjing, and others would have, and did, vehemently reject the notion that what they were doing was a profession. They instead narrated their work as a temporary and somewhat indeterminate way of earning money on the way to something else, a cosmopolitan future, financial and emotional security and satisfaction, urban adventure, or just an in-between stage leading on to “real life.”

Ah Hong, and many older women in freelance, lower-echelon sex work, were more likely to talk about their work and their bodies as laboring within a distinct, professional field that they shared with other laborers. Ah Hong used this to complain about the younger generation. “They are so selfish, you know! Those post-90’s generation kids. They only think about themselves. We grew up with the idea you have to think about other people, right?” In this she sounded much like Ah Qiang, the *falang* boss first mentioned in Chapter 1 who used this rhetoric in motivating and managing somewhat older workers. Ah Hong also turned this critique on her fellow freelancers when she felt they had failed to live up to

those group ideals, there were disagreements, or when her business wasn't going well. This was a rhetoric she both believed in and used as a tool for criticizing others.

Their ability to use bodily skills in attracting men and managing work encounters, including the embodied use of voice, pose, touch, and other maneuvers, was a key locus of a sense of professional identity as bodies that labored, learned and applied skills, and depended on those skills for survival. This took a toll.

You know Xiao Ming, we work very hard. It's not easy. Ha! I always tell you this.

But we have to stand for a long time. The cigarette smoke is not good. And the drinking. I don't even like beer! But you see my belly. It burns sometimes.

Many, many hours, and sometimes nothing. Our backs are tired. Our eyes burn.

We work late and then get up late. It's not a natural cycle. We always feel tired, I tell you!

I asked Ah Hong if some of her conditions weren't related to *riqi*. Drinking alcohol and bad sleep patterns were also commonly associated with a rise in heat in the body by *falang* workers. "Maybe, I don't know. I'm not sure, I think it's just standing too long and being old and tired." She finished with a laugh.

Most of the older street and *falang* workers I knew didn't talk about *riqi* much. They were not as steeped in the very finely graded arts of self-assessment and analysis within which much of *riqi* discourse, and broader discourses of health and beauty in China are currently framed. Supposedly "traditional" notions of *riqi*, health, and beauty did not resonate with them as much as they apparently did with a younger generation that had grown up with a vast array of finely tuned health products marketed at them, each targeted towards

an ever-growing array of possible bodily ailments and physical imperfections, and drawing often creatively on a mixture of Chinese and Western medical imagery in identifying hitherto unknown conditions and their medicinal or other remedies.<sup>54</sup> Ah Hong, Ah Fei, and others were more concerned with things like standing too long, weight gain, the bad effects of alcohol and cigarette smoke, and the bad health effects of being poor. Their stories spoke a bitterness that was the natural consequence of long labor, age, and inequality. For younger workers, these were not natural at all. They applied to their bodies, typically, a complex schema against which a fine gradation of bodily parts, conditions, essences, and ailments were discussed and measured against norms of health and beauty, and that came in the same diagnostic gestures with remedies for sale.

Ah Hong spoke often of the toll her work took on her body. She did not mention, however, being with customers in this context. Seeing Big Mike in the bar that night, a sometime regular of the bar and customer of Ah Hong, I asked “What about being with customers? Big Mike is huge.” Big Mike was, almost too stereotypically, from Texas. He was about 6’2, and I guessed around 260 pounds. He had been coming to the Elephant and Castle, and the neighboring pubs, off and on for several years. Big Mike was a kind of international entrepreneur. He dabbled in many things. These included products produced in the southern China region, as well as gems, cultivated pearls, basically whatever came his way via a fairly impressive regional network, based as he told it, on connections going back to his military service during the Vietnam War.

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<sup>54</sup> Elderly Chinese have also adopted this, though in a different way. Farquhar see this as a re-enactment of collective activity and as a claim of agency in addressing their health concerns (2009).

When Big Mike had too much to drink and was in a jolly mood, usually related to a recent successful business deal, he would often take one of the freelance workers for the night. Ah Hong was one of his favorites. Nodding towards him, Ah Hong commented offhandedly:

That's nothing. He's like a baby, if you know what to do. I make him happy, it's very fast. And then he falls asleep. Simple! It's working here in the bar or on the street that are hard. It takes a long time. And who knows *la*. You think being with Big Mike is a problem? It's easy. And then I can rest. He loves drinking more than sex *la*! Usually he just wants to talk a bit while I stroke his *didi*. Then he falls asleep.

Ah Hong didn't see the physical maladies of the brief sexual encounter that was a small part of her work as the main source of her problems. She was tired from countless hours fishing in bars and on the street. She was also tired of worrying and being harassed by *chengguan* or others. And she felt tired being alone. Contradicting her sometime rhetoric of collective identity and mutual support, she felt that she had no real friends, people that she could really trust, around her.

Xiao Ming, I'm just tired. Look at me. I'm used up. My breasts hang down to here (gesturing at her waist). I send money to my parents. I send money to my son for his school. But no one cares. If I die tomorrow they will only notice because the money will stop.

"What about your friends here?" I asked. "You know, Xiao Ming, I have no real friends here. Ha! You know this," she replied. "But what about your *laoxiang*," I insisted. "Yes, sometimes we are friends, but like Ah Fei, she just wanted my help when she first came to

Guangzhou. Now she is taking my business. She uses her big “balls” (breasts) to get them. And she’s been telling men at the bars that my tits are saggy and flat. Ha, yes they are! You can’t see? Thank you so very much (sarcastically). It is the power of my bra! Anyway, she is telling people to hurt my business and attract others to her big tits.”

Ah Hong was worried about her business. The money that she earned each month was not much more than she needed to live and support a small group of others. A bad month, or even couple of weeks, was a very serious matter. “But I still speak better English,” she smiled. “I heard Paul (a British regular at the pubs) say that her cunt is loose. He took her home the night before. So I started telling others. Aiiyy, it’s just a joke, you know. Everyone laughs.”

In the bar itself, Ah Hong, Ah Fei, and some of the other regular freelancers continued to put on a friendly, slightly raucous show. This worked to all of their benefits, creating a “party atmosphere,” and making the men feel happy and cheerful. Drinks flowed more freely, people laughed, relaxed, and enjoyed the company of those women in a simulation of “regular” bar behavior. In the process of these nightly, impromptu parties, particularly Ah Hong and Ah Fei, but also others, sparred with one another, fighting for physical position, attention, and the final goal, the customer at the end of the evening. In this fight, they made use of their bodies and positioning, touching legs and thighs, brushing their hair across men’s faces accidentally, putting a well-timed hand on a man’s chest while making a point, bending and shifting in ways that showed their figures and faces in the best light to whomever were the best targets for the evening. They also told stories about each other when the other wasn’t listening or present, usually in the form of a joke, about the other’s body, or parts of it.

Ah Hong had been losing this battle for some time now, but she was now fighting back with her own weapon of superiority: English language skills. From then on I heard her making a variety of innuendos and jokes at the expense of her *laoxiang*, including one about the scar across her belly from a caesarian section.

I heard from others that this eventually culminated in a pretty dramatic physical fight late one night. Big Mike told me, laughing, “Man, you shoulda seen it. It was a serious knock-down drag out affair. I mean they was goin at it. Hair pulling, scratching, screaming in some gibberish. It was the most fun I had in weeks. We pulled ‘em apart but they kept going at it. Finally that one with big tits left. Man she was fucking mad, shouting and cursing. It was something.”

Afterwards, I didn’t see either in the area for a time. After a couple of weeks, Ah Hong returned. Ah Fei was gone. “Do you know where she went?” I asked. She shrugged, “Who knows. I don’t care. We come and go, you know. Ha! It’s romantic right? We are wanderers. Anyway, I have to work. I’m tired though. You see how old I am. I need to rest. I want someone to take care of me.” “What? Do you mean that you want to get married again?” I asked. I was surprised. Ah Hong had always taken great pride in her independence and very much enjoyed cursing her first marriage with both humor and venom.

I thought I wouldn’t. You know, I don’t like to have my freedom controlled. I can take care of myself. But now I am getting old. I don’t want to be alone. Who will take care of me when I’m sick? But how can I find a decent man? Maybe I can just find a good lesbian, but, you know, women can’t be trusted either. I’m just tired, you



know. My body is used up. I have no more energy. My bones ache. I have to work. Look at me? Do you want me? I don't even like to look in the mirror.

The last time I saw Ah Hong was in 2009. She was still working the same area. She smiled and asked if I had finished writing my "essay." I told her that I hadn't. She criticized me and told me to finish or she would severely beat me. "How can my *didi* be so lazy!" she scolded. Her business was going ok, better than the last time we met. She smiled at me her bright, professional smile, which though having a few more wrinkles around it, still made me feel welcome and comfortable. The smile worked on many customers, I knew. For me, though, she dropped it, momentarily. "I'm tired Xiao Ming. It gets harder and harder." Then it was gone. She had seen my worry and quickly pulled together a cheerful demeanor. "I met a guy from Germany and he speaks some Chinese! He's ok, I want you to meet him." I agreed that I must meet the possible future husband of my elder sister. This last seemed to cheer her up and she hugged and squeezed me with surprising force. And she kissed me on the cheek, which she had never done before. With one more squeeze, and a few words of extra criticism about my weight and laziness, she headed across the overpass to work.

## **6.2 DIFFERENT PARTS AND PLEASURES**

Psychologically-oriented accounts of prostitution, as discussed in Chapter 4, have had a tendency to not only see mental hurt as a motivator for entry into sexual labor, they have tended to worry about the mental harm caused by participation in it. The focus is almost invariably, though uncritically, on women as the assumed subject of concern, without

mention of men or others involved in paid sex work. Paying limited attention to conditional realities including poverty, vulnerability to violence, legal and social marginalization, and the like, these scholarly and journalistic accounts have been concerned with excavating the damaging individual effects of participation in “unhealthy sexuality.”<sup>55</sup> They ask how participation in non-normative sexuality may affect these women’s ability to experience “healthy” sexuality or otherwise damage them. These investigations have circulated beyond their academic boundaries and fit in comfortably with a general notion of “female hurt” that surrounds versions of sex work abolitionism, including what Agustin and others has called the emergence of a “Rescue Industry” (2007. See also Doezema 2001).

If these accounts of inevitable psychological damage are correct, then indeed perhaps rescue is the answer. This must take place even against the will, and apparently against the socio-economic and legal well-being, of women (and men) who are working in some way in the exchange of sexual services for money. Thus Jeffrey’s can be relatively sanguine about an All-China Women’s Federation-inspired police campaign to close over one million “recreation” venues that were believed related to, in some way, prostitution in 1999-2000 (2006b: 9). Jeffrey’s does not pause to note what must have been the frightening vulnerability of millions at the hands of the Chinese state police apparatus, as well as the massive disruption of economic and personal lives. Doezema notes how chilling this collusion of narratives of rescue, including feminist ones, with state and law enforcement apparatus is (2001). She quotes from the 1997 Sex Workers Manifesto produced at the first international sex workers conference in Calcutta. “Charity organizations are prone to rescue

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<sup>55</sup> For examples see: Barry 1995; Farley 2004; Flowers 2006; Skrobaneck et al. 1997; Bales 1999).

us and put us in “safe” homes, developmental organizations are likely to “rehabilitate” us through meagre income generation activities, and the police seem bent upon to regularly raid our quarters in the name of controlling “immoral” trafficking” (2001: 30).

Psychological accounts of hurt prostitutes rely on a number of unspoken and/or unsupported assumptions. Among these are two forms of stability: the stability of healthy sexuality and the stability of sexual parts. Typically relying on an unspoken baseline of natural or healthy sexuality as some variation of that which takes place in a monogamous, loving, committed way, divorced from crude economic or other material concerns, they find evidence of damage in the sexuality, and essential personhood, of women who participate in the relation of physical, emotional, and intellectual labor with money. Unique to work called sexual, the damaged individual invariably compartmentalizes and is alienated from parts of the body as tools of labor, and produces “artificial” emotions and fakes desires and pleasures for sale, making authentic pleasure and emotion problematic or impossible.

If the argument is that we are all, variously and at vastly different levels, hurt by involvement in wage labor it would at least be consistent and less grounded in a foundational bias. This not to argue that hurt –physical, psychological, and otherwise – doesn’t happen in sexual labor. It is to argue that much of that hurt derives from the conditions of that labor, not something inherent to it grounded in essences of both the universal individual (as sexually defined) and following from that, universal healthy sexuality. It is further to argue that hurt in producing and exchanging emotion, and in the use of the body and intellect in labor, is not specific to sexual labor. It is to common and differing conditions of laboring hurt, particularly in its intersection with forms of marginalization, that we should attend.

In addition to an uncritical, static, and ahistorical view of healthy sexuality that aligns closely with U.S. conservative recollections of a never-existing traditional past, one that in historical reality accompanied the rise of wage labor itself, this view also assumes a stability of meanings in relation to body parts and actions. Certain parts of the body are inherently sexual, although, ironically relativizing this notion, only in specific relationship with other body parts. Relations of genitals in ways deemed sexual, regardless of context, meaning, experience, or intent are the focus of concern insofar as they stray from norms of healthy engagement of those parts – namely, and impossibly, disconnected from economic penetration. Use of a body to rub another body (massage) or to examine or manipulate genitalia (physicians) is not generally considered sexual (thus not prostitution), and thus falls under models of labor and/or profession. Further, and in consequence, the notion that one party in this transaction could be working, while the other is having a sexual experience, is unthinkable here. Where sex is happening, as essentially defined by body parts and specific, objectively determinable relations, it is a defining frame of reference that extends to both participants. Thus the female sex worker is having sex, just a deviant, self-damaging form of it. What might otherwise be the hurt of work in conditions of marginality becomes the individual, psychological hurt of participation in non-normative sexuality. Narratives of women working in Guangzhou, unsurprisingly, challenge or undermine these simplistic, culturally-bound notions. They narrate work that involves genitals, as well sexual pleasures that sometimes don't.

### 6.2.1 Anna II

“I haven’t been able to cum for weeks!” Anna said suddenly. She was sitting in front of her inexpensive computer, many of the components of which she had put together herself. A former boyfriend who was deeply involved in computer games showed her how. When she wasn’t working, she liked to chat on QQ with both friends and strangers. She sometimes met customers, patrons, lovers, and in a few cases, longer-term boyfriends this way. Anna explained that because of her itching, she hadn’t been able to orgasm when she was having sex with her current lover, a young man from Guizhou. “It makes me very frustrated! You are American, you know this is important.” I wasn’t sure how to respond. “Aiyy, it is very *fan* (troublesome).” She looked unhappily at her groin area. A week later she greeted me smiling, “Now is much better! Everything is fine.” I agreed that was good news and asked how this had come about.

Very simple la. My itching was less. I was with my boyfriend, and no problem. I think also he wasn’t doing it right. I told him to do more gently, and then woo! Haha. But mainly it’s because not so much itching, so I can concentrate.

She looked so happy that I felt happy for her. Anna and many of the younger women, though not all, viewed sexual pleasure as an important part of normal, healthy, modern life. Anna had learned this, she said, by reading articles and blog posts on the internet. She explained to me that in Chinese tradition, this natural function had been pushed down, and it was important for health and life to enjoy, to play and enjoy erotic pleasures. Anna narrated a familiar repression hypothesis, but she also mixed it with a notion that drew, in general terms, on recent imaginations of Chinese medical theory. “If you don’t release your desire,

it will build up inside you. Then you will be out of balance and not healthy. You can become too hot inside, or your reproductive organs won't function properly, and they are important for your whole body health." She intoned this to me almost rote, as though she had memorized it from her readings. "It is science (*kexue*)! You should already know this, you are American." "So, does being with a customer ever help to release this? I mean, do you ever enjoy that?" I asked. She replied:

Not really. I mean, sometimes if there is a young guy, I can pretend, you know. But it feels different. It's like if a strange person touches your hand. You feel nothing or have even some bad feeling if they just touch you for no reason. Or if your mother touches your hand. You feel something different. Or if your lover touches your hand, it can make you excited or even wet! Ha, or hard!

Anna had, in a very intelligible and ordinary way, undermined the notion that a particular activity of body parts was necessarily sexual, or that the lack of sexualization of those parts in her work necessarily overdetermined a lack in terms of their possible future erotic practice. She had taken, in her words, the notion of the sexual as located in parts and isolated in the individual body, and turned that on its head. It was not confined to certain parts. It could, for example, be the touch of a hand upon a hand. Nor, was it isolated in the individual body; the erotic was for her relational. It occurred in specific forms of relation with another, or even the self. She enjoyed sexual pleasure, which she associated with being with someone she liked and could feel comfortable with, and which she distinguished from work. The latter may have been sexual for one of the participants, although even then not necessarily so, as Ah Hong suggested of Big Mike. Anna saw this realm of pleasure to be her own, not a

part of her work, and one that she enjoyed as a modern person. She saw no contradiction in using her body for labor and then also finding pleasure in her body alone or with another.

Fun and pleasure was not only desirable in itself, it was also a feature of health. She pointed to science (*kexue*) and a “common sense” of normal, healthy, individualized pleasures. At the same time, she related this, based on her online readings, to Chinese medical theories of natural release, imbalance, and a holistic harmony of bodily dispositions. This embraced several discursive modes – a late-capitalist modality of fun, urban pleasure, and self-satisfaction (see Bernstein 2007); a familiar repression hypothesis of the sort championed domestically by Li Yinhe and other sexologists; and a scientific mode that aligned itself with “modernity,” the *Zeitgeist*, in Lisa Rofel’s phrasing (1992), of recent Chinese history. At the same time it was an implicit rejection of prior norms. Understanding contemporary China is as much about what is being rejected as what is being embraced. In this case, Anna’s narrative of individual pleasures could easily be seen as the culmination of decades of rejection of the Maoist period. Where Ah Hong had rejected that ethic, it still partly structured her narratives of work, body, and responsibility. She accepted the possibility of sexual pleasure for herself, but she did not apply the rigorous demands for pleasure and fun to herself and her own life that Anna did. She worked, and her concern was saving money, security, and taking care of her son and parents. Ah Hong liked to have fun, but her sense of pleasures and fun didn’t have the same degree of customized specificity, was not tied to health and science, and did not relate to a larger discourse of “normal” cosmopolitan life. While this can be partly explained in terms of age differences, in their own tellings, we see diverse registers that embrace differing moral and existential visions.

Ah Hong too, had her pleasures, although she had little time or energy for them. “Aiy, I work hard, you know? You ask me about fun? Of course I like to have fun and play in bed with someone I like. Don’t you? But I’m tired, you know. I work hard.” Ah Hong told me about one of her lovers who she saw sometimes when he passed through Guangzhou on business.

He’s very nice, I’ve known him for a long time. He’s from Hong Kong. We are like old friends (*lao pengyou*). Sure he is generous la (laughs). But we play together and it is very comfortable (*shufu*). It’s different Xiao Ming, you know this. You are a man. Sometimes you play with girls, right? Then it’s just like jacking off or meaningless fun. But sometimes you really like someone, then the feeling is different.

When I said that I didn’t play with people I don’t know well, Ah Hong laughed at me.

You are a stupid man then. We can all taste different things. Life is short. We have to enjoy. I work. It is ok. But I also like to taste young men. Or older men I like. Ha. Sometimes, I really like someone, and that is different. That is important.

These are all different things. Why do you make everything the same, so serious?

Others, including Xiaojing and Wangjing, also talked about what they saw the common-sensical difference between having sex with a customer (work) and with someone they liked or were with for desire and pleasure primarily. They found this an almost too obvious distinction, one that didn’t bear articulating. In talking about her work all day and then an empty bed at night, Xiaojing said, “The others have their play at night. Not me. Ok, maybe I don’t work so hard, but I do work. I want someone to hold me and kiss me at



night.” Xiaojing didn’t talk about orgasms, like Anna and some others did, but she did talk about intimacy, partly derived from, or produced through touch. In doing so, she also made things like touch and embrace plural things. In their tellings, these meanings and experiences were determined by who was being touched by whom, in what way, and under what circumstances. Work was work. It was not sexual simply because it involved genitals. The realm of the sexual, the erotic, and the intimate was narrated as separate from work, as it usually is with others who labor.

### 6.3 SKIN WORRIES

Talk about skin worked through many of the daily conversations in the *falangs*. This included complaints about skin ailments as mentioned above. It included talk about the pleasures of the skin, touch, caress, embrace, and warmth. It also included a great deal of talk about skin-related beauty, in particular the desirability of pale skin (particularly for women), as well as for skin to be smooth and silky (*hua*). In this final section though, I would like to focus on a somewhat unexpected and charged intrusion of skin into the narratives of the body that were a part of *falang* life in Neighborhood Y. This was precipitated by the relatively sudden arrival of import/export trades from Africa, mostly from the west and north.

Neighborhood Y, as mentioned in Chapter 2, bordered the larger, northwestern portion of Guangzhou which housed most of the massive whole-sale markets that were one of the main conduits for the sale of goods produced in the region to a wider world. Even one of these markets, for example, a single shoe market, could take a full day or more to walk

through. The scale was staggering. Neighborhood Y had been an early home to migrant entrepreneurs going back to its rental in the 1980s by a joint Hong Kong and local business group, which took advantage of newly available government subsidies for development projects. A few early factories were set up, along with a school, a recreation center for the elderly, and a refurbished ancestral hall. As the area was absorbed in to the city proper, and markets sprang up around the area, it became home to a large number of itinerant traders, small-scale business people, and an associated number of support businesses – restaurants, cheap hotels and apartments, laundries, and *falang*. People came from all over China, with from around 2000 and onwards, a steady increase in people from the Xinjiang region. With their unique dress, language, and facial features (local people said they look like foreigners with their high noses, big eyes, and thin faces), they stood out. They were often associated with a then rising crime rate. This didn't affect much the life of the *falang*, except for comments on rising crime. Xinjiang men did not come to the *falang*, at least as far as anyone knew.<sup>56</sup>

From around 2005, the increasing prevalence of traders, mostly men, from Africa began to intrude on the daily talk of the *falang*. More and more traders from Africa had been coming to Guangzhou in recent years, and a sizable number had begun settling in the neighborhood. From then, it was to become a basic feature of conversation and anxiety. The prominence of this in conversation was not matched by the actual reality. African men were still, and would remain, a small percentage of the local population. They in fact

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<sup>56</sup> It was assumed, not always correctly, that people from Xinjiang could be easily differentiated from other Chinese people.

seldom came to the *falang*. Their presence, however, created shock-waves throughout the *falang* in the area, and provided the frame for an almost inexhaustible series of anxious discussions.<sup>57</sup>

Disgusting (*tao yan*)! Do you see their skin? It's very scary. It looks so dirty. And they smell!" Xiao Yan, the usually cheerful young woman who worked with Wangjing said, expressing what was a very common reaction. "One of them came and looked in at me. Aiy! I felt dirty. His eyes were so white and his skin so black! Can you imagine? I felt sick. He tried to speak some Chinese, but I pretended not to understand. Ohh. Very scary.

Saying this, she literally shuddered. This was accompanied by the muffled gasps and supportive words from co-workers.

"Their skin is so shiny and tight!" added Wangjing. "It's like an eggplant!" "But I thought you like eggplant," I said. "Yes, but on a human it is unnatural. It looks so dirty and oily." "They are very dirty and more like animals in bed. And you know most of them have *aisibing* (HIV/AIDS). Narratives of dirt, disease, and visceral disgust, stimulated by the sight of African men were common. Their gaze in to the *falang*, unlike that of local men, called up an unwelcome, viscerally frightening sexuality. Where most *falang* workers didn't consider what they did with local men really sexual, reserving that more for descriptions of boyfriends and the like, Africans, identified most prominently with skin, which then acted as a referent for a host of other frightening things, was intensely, frighteningly sexual.

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<sup>57</sup> See Dikotter 1994 for a historically-oriented exploration of race in China.

In the following years, I literally only heard one *falang* worker say anything positive about the new residents of the neighborhood. “I think their women are beautiful,” she said. “Their skin looks pretty, and they have nice shape.” This was followed by silence. Even in this one statement, notable for its extraordinary singularity, the focus was on the less threatening female other. The sexual threat of African men, despite the fact that they almost never actually came to the *falang* in my experience, remained as long as they wandered the neighborhood. When in the long build-up to the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou police moved in force into the area and rounded up for investigation all black men, deporting many, the women I knew in the *falang* were reassured and pleased. “You see, we got rid of them. They are low and dirty, why should China welcome them? They just come to make money from us.” The terrible ironies of this very commonly expressed sentiment were at times so extreme, so apparent, that it continued to amaze me that, even with my sometimes passionate exhortations, it never broke through enough to affect the language of the *falang*.

“I would never do it with one of them!” Xiao Yan was expressing a familiar sentiment. Others almost invariably agreed. “Maybe I am low now, but I would never sink that low,” said Wangjing. These were common sentiments. I had heard them directed towards foreigners in general, although this tended to have a more nationalistic than racial valence, although the latter was present as well. In terms of African men, race, as exemplified by their frightening skin and other scary physical features, was overwhelmingly determinative. In this, skin was itself viscerally both disgusting and frightening, unnatural in color and surface properties, and indicative of a broader array of low and bad things. This was in some ways an inversion of Fanon’s famous quote, “When my restless hands

grasp white breasts they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine” (1967, p. 63). To be grasped by black hands, to be penetrated by blackness, was to be grasped by a profound, existential indignity, one both visceral and national. The glance in this case was already determined by a prior bodily revulsion. It was not the basis of a morality or common group in itself. Among the most marginal of China’s marginal still found space to belittle and marginalize others. “I am low, but I won’t sink that low.” This was the refrain I heard over and over again. In rejecting customers, an act seen as agential by those who committed it, and feeling bodily disgust and moral indignation in relation to black others, many of the women who worked in the *falang* felt themselves empowered and righteous. In condemning and rejecting, they were, it seemed, briefly lifted up.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

The stories recounted here, and my own partial attempts at making sense of them, tell of an impossible relationship between forms of dignity, hope, and embodied life in China's contemporary, not-quite-post-socialist moment of globalization and rapid transformations. As many of these women try to live out the entrepreneurial promise of this moment, a promise they believed in, they find, as do many other rural, uneducated, and otherwise devalued others, that there is no way to do so that is legible within a system of values in which they, and their labor, are almost inevitably lowly. They are caught within often competing and accreted systems of value that celebrate wealth, entrepreneurialism, filiality, and shining visions of middle-class gendered married and maternal lives, yet condemn the limited means often available to realize them. The road to a respectable life is not merely blocked. The attempts of these women are featured as spectacle, tautological legitimation of their lowly status.

This dissertation originally sought to explore forms of agency and resistance among gendered and sexually marginalized "sex workers" in southern China. It still, in part, has done that. Years of fieldwork experience have troubled some of those original premises, however, calling in to question the separation from other forms of devalued labor in China (and beyond) that "sex worker," in a space where it cannot be righteously claimed, calls up. Further, agency and resistance, while an important part of the stories above, have shown over

time a different side, one in which they play a role in forms of separation and loss at the edges of material hopes and devalued selves. I call this “development” and find it implicated in the forceful making and destruction of bodies and places. Hurt and violence are thus a large part of these stories, but to associate that with “sex work,” as though it were essentially different from other forms of low or marginal labor, is a too-convenient elision of the ordinary violence of development in this late-capitalist moment.

In critiquing overly general uses of the notion of neoliberalism, Andrew Kipnis notes that in China the *suzhi* system of values acts to constitute an almost natural hierarchy, something akin to a caste system (2007). This, he notes correctly, is the apparent opposite of neoliberalism, even in its more active formulation involving a strong governmental role in producing autonomous, high quality citizenry. The broadly dual nature of the *suzhi* system in China, which grounds different assumptions of quality, investment, and potential in a very superficially constituted skein of general opportunity, is in part the mystification of class relations that it appears to be. Kipnis thus takes issue with the application of the term neoliberalism in the PRC context, arguing that while neoliberalism is the rhetoric of the day, it does not match with intentions, deeds, or effects. I am less concerned with the authentic relation of neoliberal rhetoric with practices or intentions and more concerned here with effects. Whether or not neoliberal, and I find it almost impossible to imagine how such a monstrous imagination could in fact be realized, the effects of a mixture of molecular responsibility, inherently differentiated inferiority, dual schemes of “rational” investment in human quality, all largely built upon the labor of the devalued, combine to bring into sharp yet dizzying focus a familiar image of oppression.

As I conducted fieldwork in 2005 – 2007, I sensed a growing anger and dissatisfaction among the *laobaixing*, the laboring classes and migrant workers who were my companions during those years. I at the time attributed this to disillusionment with the “China Dream.” They had been told since the 1980s that opportunity was out there for the bold, hardworking, and skillful. Their experience did not agree. Where I heard more hopeful words in 1995, and even in 2000, talk was increasingly bitter in 2005. There was no real chance to get ahead, it was all fixed, the people in power – government officials and the rich – ran things and there was no way of getting in to their club.

What I took for a certain realization of deception, a ruse that reminded me of the “American Dream,” I soon began to realize was more. The discourse of state and market was shifting. The dream rhetoric was leaving and the naturalization of an almost caste-like status was coming in to place. Opportunity had been there for a moment. Now it was time to get down to the business of putting the laboring classes in their place and investing limited resources in the best and the brightest, shifting China’s economy towards innovation and global entrepreneurial leadership. The power of development discourse explored here – not just ideology but a mixed form of bio and sovereign power – is both specific to China and one that has uncanny resonances globally.

Older systems of value, and the creative re-signification of current ones, to be sure offer their realms of resistance, tactical or strategic.<sup>58</sup> Claims of worker rights that draw on socialist imaginings, individual professional rights that draw on contemporary mores, land

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<sup>58</sup> For a recent ethnographic exploration of challenges by the marginal poor to current state orthodoxy through the re-creative use of socialist values and slogans, see Cho 2013.



rights that draw on post-Mao values, as well as even more deeply felt senses of righteousness – the figure of the unjustly wronged; the filial daughter; the victim of corruption – continue to have broad power and to offer escapes and evasions, ways of getting by as well as brief sparks of collective possibility. The galvanizing issue of corruption, steeped as it is in a rich history of parables about corrupt officials, the mandate of Heaven (and its loss), and a socialist history of righteous uprising, all taught by the same state apparatus that is now its target, have become more and more prominent in the daily table talk of the people that I know in China. Where *baijiu* brought out talk of new business opportunities in 1995 and 2000, it now more often than not brings out stories of unfairness, the abuse of power, and the contemptible “*fu er da*” – the second generation offspring of the rich and powerful who are most often portrayed as emblematic of a new entrenched nobility, thus a symbol of all that is wrong and unfair in China.

Beyond the realm of the socially inferior, the prostitute occupies a space of otherness that in standard moral rhetoric is not even that of a lowly worker. Post-80s formulations drew on a host of rhetorical strategies in explaining the “re-appearance” of prostitution that, while having their own histories and trajectories, played out along largely condemnatory lines, with an escape hatch of “victimization” for cases that did not fit this model in which blame was placed on other “bad” individuals. Structural analyses that would have seen this as a significant marker of class failure have not, generally, been a part of governmental and police rhetoric or policy, left to a handful of academic and activist commentators. The more disturbing notion that this is not a sign of the failure of the development program of the nation (or neoliberal development more generally) but rather an ordinary feature of its

inherently violent elaboration is not one that generally appears at all. These are the stakes of framing this form of work as ordinary, to consider its relation with devalued labor elsewhere.

*Falang*, and other venues of freelance sex work in Guangzhou have been diminished in recent years. Ongoing crackdowns have, over time, taken their toll. Sex work continues, but increasingly only within the regulated and glossy spaces of KTVs, Saunas, private clubs, and individual, economic/sexual liaisons of the wealthy and powerful, the new elite class of China. Within those spaces, workers are no longer independent operators. Their labor is regulated and regimented, as are their bodies. Yet even now, clever independent operators use technology, QQ in particular, to arrange more targeted encounters and circumvent the vulnerabilities of *falang* and the street.

At times, these often brilliant tactics of evasion give hope. Technology, and its many possibilities, drives this, including within the field of sex work. At other times, tactical responses to the elaboration of force in China appear at times to be grist for a discursive mill of otherness in which agitation is not a sign of weakness but the trembling nerves of growth and penetration. The failure of accurate reproduction may not be the engine of oppression, but it does not appear to be its undoing. But perhaps the apparent infinite flexibility of, the parasitic flexibility, of contemporary modes of bio-power and invisible disciplines in China are partly chimerical, hidden within which is a brittle skeleton.

The women whose stories this work is based upon, and many others not directly mentioned here, were made up of an accumulation of values and desires that offered a range of tactical possibilities. For the vast majority I was able to keep in touch with, these did not lead to the realization of their goals and ambitions. Values, hopes, simple plans were not

hurt in abstraction, they were hurt in their place, in the bodies that they constituted and which bore them, living bodies, that enacted them as creatively and with as great an endurance as one could imagine. It is tempting to equate the destruction of Guangzhou's *renao* (energetic, lively) spaces, replaced as they invariably are, with cold, dead, rational spaces, with the destruction of these hopes and the bodies that they partly made up. That is not a false equation, but they are at the same time not identical. Spaces are destroyed and rendered with greater speed. The traces that attach to in relation to the people who inhabit them for a time are then disappeared in processes of ordinary and continuous aggression. These women, unlike the neighborhoods and venues they worked in, or most of them at least, endure. They carry with them memory in a different fashion than a street corner, old tree, or small shop. Space may be becoming less a friend than an enemy, its violent rendering, painfully, necessarily, also a rendering of history. It is increasingly another form of bodily relation that keeps memories alive along the very inhuman circuitries of computers, cell phones, and chat applications. Physical spaces are taken and occupied. Virtual spaces have become for many that I knew a place of some sharing, even organization.

Other forms of nascent class awareness seem to be on the rise in China as well, framed outside of the government mandated use of language and definition. The Central Government struggles to both continue China's transition to major global power and keep ahead of, in control of, definitions of value and the right to define problems and their solution. It remains to be seen how long that can continue, and in particular whether connections can be made between intellectuals, the technically-savvy, and the many grass roots uprisings around China. I am partly arguing here that loss and a melancholic refusal to let go of the

promise of opportunity and fairness are a basis for a shared community of grief and a potentially revolutionary re-investment in the notion of class that exceeds its hegemonic control by the state. Social unrest due to widening inequalities, a problem the government defines as an issue of corruption, or a natural stage in the ongoing perfection of socialist market systems, rather than as a basic feature of the course upon which China has been set, are without doubt the most pressing issue the central leadership faces. What will come of that, how this will unfold, what potential remains latent in grief and anger and resentment and refusal to give up the hopes that have been offered (even if in bad faith), what ability or willingness intellectuals have to engage organically with “the people,” what forms might that take, how might other forms of marginalization inform, or not, a class-based response to increasingly entrenched, almost caste-like inequalities, all of this remains to be seen. These are large questions, yet very pressing and practical ones. They will profoundly impact the lives of a great many people.

Whatever comes of those issues, the lives of most of the women that I knew continued to be a very unequal struggle. Sometimes, in the difficult margins of Guangzhou life, violence to the self and to others, even friends, was done. Yet, I also was a witness to considerable sacrifices made for others. Wangjing’s friends did what they could to help her, buying her medicine and foods, coaching her on style and manner, and sometimes losing some of their own business in the process. This was not insignificant when living on the financial margins. Anna was cared for by the older women in her *falang* who did what they could to teach and protect her. Ah Hong invariably helped her friends when they came to town, though she sometimes regretted that later. When they re-appeared, however, she was

usually ready to help again. Creative tactics, hard work, daring, sacrifice, and struggle made life partly bearable, though at a cost paid over time. Bourgois is correct that "...suffering is usually hideous; it is a solvent of human integrity" (2003:15). These stories partly tell of a struggle not to dissolve, a holding on to other values and hopes. That was the remainder where agency is at last a refusal.

The usually brief sexual encounters that were a part of sex work were, while not inconsequential, a small part of a range of more pressing concerns. Police harassment, social stigmatization, poverty, immediate health issues, and the seeming impossibility of a future that had a value, as it could be imagined at that time in Guangzhou, all had far more urgency. In often trying to be daughters who sent money home, while at the same time unable to tell their families what they were doing (though they suspected they knew), they enacted a late-capitalist, filial sacrifice. Home then was forever changed, as was home being changed for those who resided there. If there was any common characteristic of the women I knew it was not found in their deviance or weakness or prior hurt, it was simply that, in the words of Wang Anyi, "...they are the most ambitious among us." The failure to realize these ambitions does not reflect ill on anything other than a world of large and growing inequalities, one in which both marginalization and abjection co-operate in devaluing the lives of so many.

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