



Children in the Sex Trade in China

By Julia O'Connell Davidson



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Contents

Introduction	5
Methodological note	8
Migratin, Human Rights, Children's Rights and Commercial Sex	9
In Search of Work	12
From Yunnan to Thailand	15
From Vietnam to Yunnan	18
The Demand for Commercial Sex	23
Borders and the Sex Trade	26
Some Conclusions	30
The Demand for Commercial Sex	30
Sustainable Economic Elternatives to Prostitution	30
CSEC and Prostitution Law	31
Acknowledgements	34
References	35

Introduction

In China, the market for commercial sex has grown rapidly over the past 20 years, and now represents a diverse economic sector in terms of the identity, earnings and conditions of its workforce. As in other parts of the world, there is an 'elite' within prostitution comprised of adult women (and some men) who work independently, make relatively good money and enjoy a fairly high level of control over the terms of the contracts they enter into with clients. Such women typically act as 'call girls' to a regular clientele of wealthy and powerful clients. There are also women who take on the role of 'second wife', sexually servicing one client over a long period of time, and charging him by the month (Hobson and Heung, 1998, Pan, 2000). Depending upon their skill, experience and connections, women who solicit independently from hotels used by foreign and successful Chinese businessmen can also earn good money, as can 'packaged women' who provide companionship and sexual services to businessmen throughout the course of a business trip (Pan, 2000, p104). On the lower rungs of the prostitution hierarchy in terms of earnings, conditions and vulnerability to arrest are street-workers servicing working-class clients, and women and girls who enter, or are coerced into a variety of different forms of contractual relations both with third party employers and with clients. They work from a range of settings, including restaurants, hotels, karaoke bars, and beauty shops and hair salons.

Employment relations, working conditions and earnings within prostitution are also subject to regional variation. In the relatively affluent and economically developed coastal regions of the South East, conditions are typically better than in poorer Northern or South Western provinces:

In the South, sex workers mostly work in big cities. They can move freely among hotels, restaurants and hair salons. Though some of them work under a Madam, the Madam only takes 15%–30% of their incomes for the most. Sex workers will not be scolded, beaten or confined. In the North, sex workers concentrate in small communities like small restaurants and small hotels along the highways. Since they cannot move easily and have nowhere to go, they are dependent on and always controlled by the employers or confined by the pimps. In some cases, the pimps may even take away all the money from the sex workers.

(Zi Teng, 2000, p11)

The market for commercial sex in Hong Kong is even more highly developed and diverse than that in Mainland China. There are nightclubs and go-go bars that cater mostly to demand from Western businessmen, seafarers and tourists, as well as hostess clubs serving demand from wealthy Hong Kongers and Asian businessmen and tourists. 'High class' prostitutes work through escort agencies or independently from their own apartments. At the cheaper end of the market is massage parlour and street prostitution, and prostitutes can also be found soliciting from a variety of other settings, including karaoke bars and restaurants.

There are hierarchies within different types of prostitution, making it impossible to generalise about the earnings and conditions of *all* street-workers, or *all* those who work in nightclubs. In both Mainland China and Hong Kong, a high percentage of those working in prostitution are migrants. Again, however, we cannot generalise about the condition of *all* migrant sex workers, for there are also divisions between and among sex workers of different nationalities. In Mainland China, for example, Russian sex workers are able to command higher earnings than indigenous prostitutes, while Vietnamese and Myanmar prostitutes tend to earn less than their Chinese counterparts. In Hong Kong, a Thai or Filipino woman who enters the territory legally with a contract to work as an 'entertainer' in a go-go bar may be able to earn more from prostitution than a Mainland Chinese woman who enters Hong Kong illegally to work in street prostitution.

Analysis of official data on arrests of prostitutes and their clients in Mainland China suggests that between 1982 and 1997, some 2 million cases related to prostitution were processed by the Public Security Department (Pan, 2000, p102). Since this figure refers only to those who have been arrested for prostitution-related offences, it can tell us little about the actual scale of the sex industry in China. It is harder still to estimate the numbers of children – defined as persons under the age of 18 – who are involved in the sex trade in China. Even where official data on prostitution-related offences are made available, they are not broken down by age, while statistics on sexual crimes perpetrated against children do not show whether the victim worked in prostitution. So, for instance, it is known that arrests for the crime of 'fornication with underage girl' (the age of sexual consent being 14) rose dramatically between 1979 and 1987, and that in 1985, 1986 and 1987, a total of almost 30,000 people were charged with this crime (Li, 1999). We do not know, however, whether these crimes were linked to the expansion of the commercial sex industry that was taking place during the same period.

It is notoriously difficult to produce reliable statistics on the numbers of children involved in the sex trade, and estimates of the scale of child prostitution in any given country or region provided by governmental agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) often vary widely. It is therefore impossible to advance reliable numerical claims about the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in China. However, there are good reasons to believe that persons below, as well as above, the age of 18 are present in China's booming sex trade. To begin with, 1980s statistics on juvenile crime show that a very high proportion of teenage girls dealt with by the Juvenile Delinquent Correction Institution were charged with 'sexual crimes and mistakes'. In three cities surveyed, '95 percent of the female delinquents, some as young as 12 years, were charged with sexual violations' (Ruan and Lau, 1997, p11), and it seems highly likely that many of these 'violations' would have involved prostitution offences. Furthermore, whilst 1990s data on a sample of 724 females imprisoned in Sichuan for prostitution offences revealed that they ranged in age between 19 and 41, with a median age of 22.7 years, data on 626 prostitutes seeking STD Clinic services in Sichuan revealed modal age ranges between 14 and 24 years (Gil et al, 1996,

p144–5). Next we should note that some of those Mainland Chinese women working in prostitution in Macau and Hong Kong and sex workers in Mainland China who have participated in various research projects report having entered prostitution at the age of 16 or 17 (Zi Teng, 2000 and Yim, 2000). Journalists have also reported on the presence of minors in prostitution in China (for instance, Manns 1995, South China Morning Post 1995, Mitchell 2001). Finally, NGOs, academics and journalists have consistently identified the Mekong sub-region (including China's Yunnan Province) as a site in which children are vulnerable to trafficking and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation (for instance, Ren, 1993, ECPAT 1998, Lim 1999, ESCAP 2000, McGregor 2001).

Notably absent from reports on CSEC in China is any suggestion that 'paedophilia' or the prostitution of pre-pubertal children represents a widespread problem. Here, as in most other countries of the world, it is unusual for adults to display a specific or fixed sexual interest in pre-pubertal children, and those whose preferred sexual objects are very young children are viewed as sexually deviant and morally reprehensible. This certainly does not mean that pre-pubertal children are safe from commercial sexual exploitation, but it does suggest that the segment of the commercial sex trade that caters to demand from such individuals is a small and largely concealed 'niche market' within the sex industry. Existing evidence on prostitution in contemporary China points to the conclusion that the vast majority of children affected by CSEC in China are post-pubertal teenagers working within the mainstream sex industry and catering to demand from 'ordinary' clients who neither know nor care whether the prostitutes they use are above or below the age of 18.

This report is concerned with adolescent children's involvement in the mainstream sex trade and aims to highlight the following:

- Links between children's presence in China's commercial sex trade and the inequalities that exist between urban and rural dwellers, between more affluent and poorer provinces, between city residents and migrants (internal and international), between Han majority and ethnic minority groups, and between men and women;
- The need to understand CSEC in the context of migration and the general migrants' human rights situation in contemporary Asia;
- The significance of gender inequalities and socially endorsed beliefs about gender and sexuality for the demand-side of the commercial sex trade, including demand for the sexual services of those under the age of 18;
- The need to understand CSEC in the context of human rights issues affecting all those working in the commercial sex trade.

Methodological Note

In the course of researching and writing a theme paper for the second World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, I spent two weeks on a 'fact-finding' trip to Hong Kong and Yunnan Province. I was able to undertake some observational work in red light areas and brothels, and to speak briefly and through an interpreter to 12 sex workers (three of whom were aged under 18), and six third party organisers of the sex trade. I was also able to interview several other informants, including three clients, either through an interpreter or directly in the case of those who spoke English. The data this yielded can hardly be described as thorough, detailed or systematic, and in preparing this report, I have therefore relied heavily upon existing research literature and other secondary sources (as referenced throughout). More importantly, however, I am indebted to a number of academics and representatives of NGOs involved in outreach work and/or research on the commercial sex trade, including trafficking, in Hong Kong or mainland China, who very generously agreed to discuss their work with me.¹

¹ Because trafficking and prostitution are sensitive political issues (particularly where local officials are believed to be involved either as users or financial beneficiaries), some researchers and members of NGOs I spoke to did not wish to be identified, and my debt to them must therefore go unacknowledged.

Migration, Human Rights, Children's Rights and Commercial Sex

Chinese human rights abuses today are, in the main, quite different to those which predominated in the Maoist era... [They] are... less about heroic dissident voices being suppressed than about the desultory practices of the hooligans, pimps, prostitutes and unemployed being extinguished. Human rights abuse in China may be multifaceted, but the frequent and most serious cases invariably involve the stranger, the outsider, the vagrant or the wanderer. This is because the principal human rights story in China is a tale of movement: the movement of the society from one mode to another as it attempts to modernise, and the movement of the subalterns to the city as they attempt to gain a share of the wealth that modernisation brings.

(Dutton, 1998, p8)

Until the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s, the pace of economic development in China and several other countries in the region was dramatic. It was also highly uneven, generating vast inequalities in terms of the living standards and life chances of those at hub of economic growth, and those at its margins. Average rural incomes in China remain less than half of that enjoyed by urban city dwellers, and earnings from agriculture continue to stagnate (AMC, 2000, p116). These inequalities have been a trigger for migration as people from rural areas seek to escape poverty, unemployment, and the bleak, unchanging routine of their daily lives by moving to more prosperous cities or countries. While holding out the promise of a better life (or in some cases, the only chance of life itself), migration can also expose people to a range of human rights violations. As the Asian Migrants Centre (2000, p5–6) notes:

The general migrants' human rights situation in Asia in 1999 (and through the first half of 2000) remained peppered with serious abuses and violations. Irregular migration, trafficking and human smuggling remained among the worst forms of abuse. The Mekong region (Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Burma) continued to be a major hub of trafficking and irregular migration – which have been compounded by the refugee problem... in Asia, violence against women and labor rights violations were common, even among documented workers... Receiving countries, who began to see nascent recovery from the previous years' economic recession turned their attentions in 1999 to migrant workers – through aggressive anti-migrant moves aimed at extracting greater value added from foreign workers at the expense of their human rights.

It is often forgotten that such abuses and violations affect children as well as adults, and yet all over the world, the children of unskilled migrant workers typically face particular difficulties and disadvantages. If children's parents migrate,

then they must either remain behind (sometimes in circumstances that leave them at increased risk of various forms of abuse), or move with them. But when unskilled workers migrate across borders, they are rarely accorded full rights of citizenship by the host country, are sometimes subject to serious human rights' violations by the host state, and are often victims of racist or xenophobic hostility and discrimination by the host community. Migrants' children may be denied the social, educational and health services that are enjoyed by local children, and even if they are formally entitled to benefits such as schooling, they may find themselves seriously disadvantaged by racism/xenophobia on the part of teachers and peers.

In China, such problems affect internal migrants and their children, as well as migrants from other countries. It is estimated that there may be as many as 120 million internal migrants in China (AMC, 2000). This so-called 'floating population' is politically marginalised by the hukou system, 'under which each person in China is fixed to a place of residence and classified as either urban or rural' (AMC, 2000, p116). Those who leave their official place of residence in search of work without first obtaining all the required permits are at risk of arbitrary detention in 'Custody and Repatriation' (C&R) centres. An estimated two million persons pass through these centres each year, and, as in the immigration detention centres in other countries in the region that they resemble, conditions are generally very poor. There is ...

...insufficient food and water, bad sanitation and unchecked brutality, either from guards or "cell bosses" – fellow inmates given duties to "manage" other detainees. In all centers on which HRC [Human Rights in China] collected information, children were held together with adults... C&R represents the ultimate enforcement arm of the hukou system. It is also one of a number of manifestations that demonstrate the fallacy of the claim that the system is essentially defunct.

(AMC, 2000, p120)

Meanwhile, the children of internal migrants who do manage to settle in cities are often educationally disadvantaged:

In 1998, the Central government finally acknowledged the fact that large numbers of children of migrant workers were missing out on education because urban schools either refused to admit them or charged prohibitive fees. But the regulations it passed that year merely stated that migrant children should not be excluded from school; these regulations failed to address the problem of fees being set at levels that are completely unaffordable for students whose hukou is not registered in the city in question

(AMC, 2000, p120).

We should also remember that children, as well as adults, may be subject to pressures to migrate. Very few of the world's children are able to remain entirely economically inactive until the age of 18. Even in extremely affluent countries,

it is only a privileged minority of children who can depend on their parents to meet their every economic need and want until they are no longer legally minors. Children from families that are struggling to subsist certainly cannot and do not expect this luxury. Nor do children who are brought up in impoverished rural areas always simply resign themselves to poverty and its attendant privations until the morning of their 18th birthday. Teenagers, and sometimes even younger children, have aspirations and dreams, often also a sense of responsibility towards their families, and are capable of actively seeking work. Persons under the age of 18 are not sheltered from poverty, discrimination and disadvantage simply by virtue of being constructed as “children” in international laws and conventions. Nor are they passive, incompetent and incapable of independent thought and action until the moment they legally come of age. It therefore follows that migratory pressures can operate directly on children.

The sex industry is a major receptor of female migrants – aged both below and above 18 – in a number of countries in South East Asia. Most have followed one of three routes into prostitution:

- Some have migrated in search of other forms of work, but have been unable to find jobs, or to live on the wages from other work. They thus become vulnerable to pressure from others to enter the sex industry, or to making a decision to engage in sex work;
- Some have been tricked and trafficked into the sex trade when they sought to migrate for factory, farm, restaurant, hotel or domestic work;
- Some have chosen to migrate into sex work because it ‘is more highly rewarded than any occupation available to uneducated (and – in present conditions – even many educated women)’ (Fiengold, 1998).
- The following sections sketch out the involvement of three different groups of children in the sex trade: internal migrants in China; Yunnan girls in prostitution in Thailand; Vietnamese girls in prostitution in Yunnan.

In Search of Work

The scale of internal migration in China is phenomenal. Special Enterprise Zones (SEZs), which hold out the promise of factory work paying two-to-three times the average rural wage have attracted vast numbers of migrants. For example:

In 1979, the year before Shenzhen was declared a SEZ, it was a small border town with a population of less than 40,000. Some 15 years later, Shenzhen has been transformed into a city with a population of some 3.7 million

(Hobson and Heung, 1998, p136).

Employers looking for cheap, green and compliant labour invariably favour a female workforce, and this has certainly been the case in the SEZs. In Shenzhen, 'working sisters' account for more than half the migrant labour force and outnumber the local population. Most live and work in extremely poor conditions. Many do not have official permission to be in Shenzhen, and 'This has sometimes made getting official employment difficult. Furthermore, there is considerable pressure to remit money to their families in the rural areas they came from' (Hobson and Heung, 1998, p137). Unsurprisingly, the sex trade in Shenzhen developed rapidly, as many rural migrant women and girls turned to prostitution, serving demand from the large number of Hong Kong and international visitors, as well as local and migrant men.

The same patterns are found in urban centres outside the SEZs. The following account of one girl's path into sex work illustrates how children, as well as women, can be affected by the structural factors that underpin the supply-side of China's sex industry:

I worked in a porcelain tile factory in my village in Hunan. According to China's Labour Law, workers under 16 are defined as child workers. I started work when I was 13 because our house collapsed after heavy rain. The houses in my village are over 100 years old, and collapse easily. I became a child worker because the economic situation in my family was very bad after the house collapsed, so I decided to stop attending school and look for work. I worked in the factory for two years. In the factory I earned Rmb300 per month at the very most. When I was 15, a friend told me I could earn up to Rmb10,000 per month, so I decided to leave home... I worked in Changsha [capital of Hunan] in a salon... Every job is worth Rmb200, and I have to pay Rmb50 of this to the employer... I did this job for six months. I met a boyfriend, but he cheated me. I was so disappointed that I went home and stayed there for one year. But the economic situation there did not improve, so I decided to leave again.

(Zi Teng, 2001, p2)

The girl then worked in prostitution in Zhuhai, and at the time of the interview was applying for a visa to go to Macao, where earnings from sex work are reputed to be higher. She hoped to earn Rmb150,000 and then return home. This 'career' trajectory – migrating first to prostitute in an urban centre and then further afield - appears to be fairly common. Large numbers of Mainlanders are reported to work in street prostitution in Hong Kong, and in a variety of forms of sex work in Macao, many of whom have prior experience of prostitution on the Mainland. NGOs and academics working on prostitution-related issues in Hong Kong believe that some Mainland sex workers in the territory are below the age of 18.

On the basis of groundbreaking research on the social organisation of prostitution in China, Pan Suiming concludes that a young rural woman is more likely to enter into sex work if...

...she lacks a social network which can help her to depart from her hometown, wait for a job, or to become a factory labourer; if she has already lost her virginity, has been abandoned by her boyfriend, or is divorced; meets a mother or a hen head [third party organisers of the sex trade] or has a friend who is already a sex worker.

(Pan, 2001)

It has already been observed that internal migrants in China, especially those without the necessary permits, constitute a socially marginalized and politically disenfranchised group. Migrant women and girls who end up in sex work represent a still more vulnerable and excluded population, for Chinese prostitution law is extremely harsh and punitive. Among the first social measures introduced by Chinese Communists when they took power in 1949 were those designed to suppress prostitution:

Less than eight weeks after the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, more than 2,000 Beijing policemen raided and closed all 224 of the city's brothels, arresting 1,286 prostitutes and 424 owners, procurers, and pimps. Other cities soon followed suit. In Shanghai, China's most populous city, there were 5,333 arrests of prostitutes between 1950 and 1955.

(Ruan and Lau, 1997, p12).

Legislation banning prostitution was introduced in October 1957, and in 1979, penalties against third parties who coerce women or girls into prostitution were increased to a fixed term of imprisonment of three to ten years under the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China. During a particularly harsh crackdown on prostitution in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the death sentence was given to a number of pimps and brothel owners. Female prostitutes also risked serious punishment. Those who were caught 'were put into rehabilitation camps for two to three years, and had the fact of their prostitution recorded in their identification papers' (Bulbeck, 1994, p99). In 1991 alone, some 30,000 prostitutes were sent to forced labour camps (Ruan and Lau, 1997, p13). Even

clients are not immune from prosecution, although the penalty paid by men caught paying for sex is generally far lighter than that paid by women and girls selling sex.

Ruan and Lau (1997, p12) note that 'Between January 1986 and July 1987, 18 prison camps for prostitutes were opened, and by December the number of camps had more than tripled to 62', and yet the heavy legal penalties against both female prostitutes and third party beneficiaries of prostitution did not prevent a massive expansion in the sex trade. The burgeoning demand for commercial sex has been readily met largely because the sex industry offers unparalleled opportunities for earnings (whether as prostitutes, pimps or procurers) to those who are unskilled, poorly educated, and/or socially and economically marginalized. As the market for commercial sex develops, other third parties can make healthy profits from organising prostitution on a larger scale or recruiting/trafficking women and girls into prostitution, while corrupt local officials and law enforcement agents can benefit from bribes and other pay-offs (Manns, 1995, Mitchell, 2001, Pan, 2001). Perhaps more important as regards understanding local officials and law enforcers' propensity to approach the expanding commercial sex trade with 'one eye open, one eye shut' is the widespread assumption that sexual exploitation, like other social problems, is a necessary cost of economic development.² Prostitution is often viewed as part and parcel of an investment-friendly business environment. Local government officials are therefore reluctant to stamp it out entirely, and instead intersperse periods of repression and periods of tolerance, and/or combine tolerance of certain forms of prostitution with repression of others.

2 Many academics and Government officials in China believe that economic development can and should be pursued at any price, since all social costs and problems associated with development will disappear when China is rich. This is a legacy of Deng Xiao-ping's insistence that 'Development is the hard-core truth'.

From Yunnan to Thailand

Yunnan is China's eighth largest province, covering a land area of 394,000 square kilometres in the southwest of the country. It has a population of around 40.9 million, of whom 33.2 percent belong to ethnic minority groups. 1996 figures showed that more than two thirds of Yunnan's population was rural, with around half its people employed in agriculture (ESCAP, 2000). Because agriculture is declining in importance, and because Yunnan is poor by comparison to many other Chinese provinces, there are strong pressures on the rural population, especially the young, to migrate to urban cities in Yunnan or more prosperous regions of China. Economic opportunities are also greater in some near-by countries (most notably Thailand), and as a result there is also some cross-border out-migration from Yunnan.

Migration of this type impacts on those who remain behind in rural villages, as well as those who leave. Though some migrants from rural villages end up unemployed or working in jobs that are so poorly paid that they are barely able to subsist on their earnings, others are able to remit part of their wages back to relatives. Furthermore, some migrants are in a position to buy consumer goods that their fellow villagers are unable to afford, and/or pay return visits with stories about the glamour and excitement of life beyond the village. In these and other ways, migration can spark changes in the attitudes and aspirations of those living in even the most remote rural communities, thereby increasing the likelihood that others from the same village will seek a way in which to migrate. Domestic violence and family breakdown can act as additional pressures on women and children to migrate. One study that involved interview research with 23 sexually exploited children in Yunnan found that their entry into the commercial sex trade was precipitated by a combination of factors:

All the girls had strained relations with their parents, a low level of education, lack of employment opportunities and, for some girls, prior sexual abuse. The second set of reasons concerned their family and community life. The parents were often separated or divorced, had a low educational level, and were poor.

(ESCAP, 2000, p53)

Although there are a few known cases in which children have been abducted by armed men and taken to work in brothel prostitution in Thailand, the researchers I spoke to explained that third parties do not usually use force to recruit women and girls into the sex industry. Rural young women and girls, especially ethnic minority women and girls from remote villages, are generally eager to migrate not simply because they need employment and there are no jobs for them in the countryside, but also because the idea of travelling beyond the narrow confines of their village to discover life in some far-off city holds a good deal of charm for them. Providing children are aged over 15 or 16, their parents are also usually keen for them to find paid employment, and so happy for them to migrate to work in a hotel or factory. This makes it easy for third parties to trick young

women and girls into prostitution by promising them well paid work in restaurants, hotels or factories in Thailand, then putting them to work in a brothel once they have been transported away from their home village. There is a limit to how many women and children from any given area can be lured into the sex industry in this way, however. Gradually, news of what has happened filters back to the villages concerned, and women, parents and children become more wary about recruiting agents' offers of lucrative 'employment'. This underlines the importance of various awareness-raising campaigns currently being organised by NGOs in Yunnan to inform villagers about the phenomenon of trafficking.

But the supply of labour for the sex industry does not rest entirely upon trickery, for it is also possible to openly recruit women and girls into prostitution. The recruiting agents sent by Thai brothel owners are often young women, originally from Yunnan, who have themselves worked in prostitution since they were teenagers. They return to their village or neighbouring villages with gold jewellery and modern clothing, and photographs (sometimes even videos) portraying an (idealised) vision of the life they enjoy in Thailand. Some may actively deceive village girls about earnings and conditions, but we must also recognise the fact that the earnings from prostitution can genuinely be very much higher than any other form of employment open to teenagers and young women. David Fiengold (1998) illustrates the point by citing a 1996 study of a sample of 23 Chinese and Burmese women working in the Thai sex industry. The women's 'average monthly income was 5,008 baht, of which they were able to send home 1,283 baht. In contrast, other occupations (domestics, etc.) earned 1,957 baht per month and were able to remit 563 baht' (see also Fiengold 2000).

Nor can we assume that all those who make the trek from Yunnan to Thailand are seduced into so doing by mendacious or manipulative recruiting agents. Many adults and children desperately want to get to Thailand because employment opportunities for unskilled workers (whether in farming, factories, hotels, domestic work or prostitution) are known to be greater there than in Yunnan. Unable to find their own way across Myanmar and into Thailand, such people will sometimes pay a third party to guide them. The price for this service varies according to whether or not the Thai and Myanmar authorities are engaging in a clamp down on undocumented migration, and some guides may also ask for a cut of the earnings of those they help to migrate.³

Whether tricked into prostitution, deluded about the terms and conditions of their prostitution, or making a rational, if desperate, choice to prostitute in Thailand, there is much evidence to suggest that ethnic minority women and

3 There is also an internal market in women and girls in China, this time one in which they are traded as brides, rather than into the commercial sex industry. A number of Northern provinces have witnessed high levels of female out-migration, with young women leaving rural areas to work in factories in more industrially developed South Eastern provinces. This has made it increasingly difficult for men in some Northern areas – even those who enjoy relatively comfortable financial circumstance – to find wives. A number of enterprising third parties have responded to this demand, recruiting women and girls from South Western provinces such as Yunnan, and moving them to the relatively richer North to marry. Again, this trade sometimes involves deception or force, but in other cases, the middle-agent is meeting a demand from both sides, for there are many women and girls who are attracted to the idea of marriage to a Northerner. Indeed, to marry a local man and remain one's whole life in the same village is increasingly viewed as a sign of personal inadequacy or incompetence.

girls from the hills of Thailand and Myanmar, as well as Yunnan, occupy an especially disadvantaged position within the Thai sex industry. They are predominantly found in establishments at the cheapest and most exploitative end of the commercial sex market, they are amongst those least able to negotiate or enforce condom use within prostitute-client transactions, and consequently amongst those most at risk from HIV infection (Fiengold, 2000, Pyne, 1995). As the following section shows, Vietnamese women and girls who migrate and/or are trafficked into the sex trade in Yunnan are often vulnerable in the same ways and for the same reasons.

From Vietnam to Yunnan

Yunnan has borders with Myanmar, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Vietnam. In recent years, several towns along these borders have come to represent pockets of economic prosperity in what is otherwise an extremely poor region. It is the logging industry that chiefly accounts for the economic growth of towns on the Myanmar-China border, while towns on the Yunnan-Vietnam border have benefited from the many and various trading businesses that have developed since cross-border trade between China and Vietnam was re-established in 1989. 'Town X', the small town on the Vietnam-Yunnan border that I visited, was a case in point. When cross-border trading with Vietnam recommenced, frontier towns in Yunnan (also in Guanxi, the province to Yunnan's east) found that they suddenly attracted large numbers of businesspeople, traders and migrant workers from other parts of China and from Vietnam. A range of service trades grew up to meet demand from visitors and the newly affluent residents – drug dealing, gambling and prostitution were amongst the economic activities to develop in this new leisure and service sector (see Xie Guangmao, 2000). This in turn made frontier towns attractive to domestic tourists and tourists from neighbouring countries, the vast majority of whom are male tourists who visit in order to engage in prostitute-use and/or gambling.

In Town X, there are various different types of prostitution, but most prostitutes work from hair salons and beauty shops. Hair salon/beauty shop prostitution is a prominent feature of the sex industry that has developed in China. As Pan Sui-ming (2000, p111) notes, this form of prostitution is said to have originated in Japan, and then 'spread to Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam, then Hong Kong and finally the coastal areas of China ... in the mid 80s'. Hair salons from which sexual services are sold are identifiable by the fact that they are poorly lit and equipped with only the most rudimentary tools for hair-dressing (Wei and Wang, 2000, p71).

The bulk of the commercial sex workers in Town X are Vietnamese women and girls, and they are to be found in two large Trade Centres in the town. These three story buildings each contain of some 40 or 50 small stores or booths. On the ground floor, most of the booths are rented by traders selling fruit, shoes, clothing, baskets, hats, hot food and so on. But some of the ground floor booths, and all those on the upper floors, are beauty shops or hair salons employing Vietnamese sex workers. These hair salons/brothels are Chinese owned, but mostly managed by a Vietnamese mamasan. The sex workers live on the premises, sleeping in small cramped quarters behind and above the booths, and cooking their food on camping stoves in the corridor in front of the booths. A few of them have babies or young children living with them in the same conditions.

The majority of Vietnamese sex workers we saw and spoke to were in their 20s, and some were in their 30s, but we did also find evidence that girls under the age of 18 are present in this form of prostitution. Observation is an inadequate means by which to determine a person's age, but amongst the 40 or so sex workers I was able to see clearly as I passed by their booths, I counted five who

appeared to me to be in their mid-teens, as well as several more who could have been either just below or just above 18. We stopped to talk to three girls who looked as though they were under-age. They told us that they were from Hanoi, and two of them admitted that they were only 16 years old. One of the 16-year-olds had been working in the Trade Centre for almost a year, in other words, since she was 15. The other had arrived in Town X only one month ago, and told us she was homesick and unhappy working in the salon. At another salon, we spoke to a girl who told us she was 17 and that she too had been working in the Trade Centre for nearly a year.

My brief and superficial tour of the Trade Centres suggested that the Vietnamese sex workers therein ranged in age from around 15 to about 40, with the majority in their 20s. Nobody we spoke to in Town X had stories to tell about very young children being involved in the sex trade, nor did the academics or representatives of NGOs I spoke to report concerns about pre-pubertal children being sexually exploited in the border regions of Yunnan. Though it would require months of painstaking ethnographic research to be in a position to reliably describe the scale and nature of children's involvement in the sex trade in Town X, it can probably be safely claimed that the town is not some kind of 'paedophile paradise' in which there is ready and extensive access to pre-pubertal children. It may well be that clients with a specific interest in very young children could find third parties in Town X who were willing to supply them with small children to abuse, but this is not a visible or central feature of the town's sex trade. Instead, child prostitution appears to take the form of teenagers working alongside adult sex workers, meeting demand from clients with a general interest in prostitute-use, rather than a particular interest in child sexual exploitation.

Between 50 and 70 hair salon/brothels are to be found in the two Trade Centres in Town X. Around three to five women/girls (including the mamasan) appeared to be attached to each booth, so we can estimate that somewhere between 150 and 350 Vietnamese women and girls are working in prostitution in Town X. Chinese prostitutes do not work in the Trade Centres, but rather in hair salons, beauty shops and restaurants elsewhere in the town, or in street or hotel prostitution. The explicit segregation of so many Vietnamese prostitutes makes them highly visible. In fact, it is quite impossible not to notice that they are engaged in sex work in the Trade Centres. This immediately suggests that local government officials and law enforcement agents connive at their presence in the sex trade, indeed, we watched Vietnamese sex workers laugh and joke with the Public Security Police Officers who were patrolling the building.

All the informants we interviewed claimed that local government officials and the Public Security Police unofficially license the brothels in exchange for payment. The four Chinese men we spoke to who owned hair salon/brothel businesses in the Trade Centre explained how to go about opening such a business. First, one must wait until a booth in the Trade Centre becomes available for rent. Next, it is necessary to apply for a trading license from the County Administrative Bureau of Industry and Commerce. The name of the business owner, who can only be a Chinese citizen, must appear on the licence. Normally, it would also be necessary to specify the 'contents of the business' on the application

form, but those intending to operate brothels in the Trade Centre leave this section of the form blank. The license then has to be given an official stamp by the Bureau. Having obtained the trading license, the owner will need to decorate and equip the booth, which may cost several thousand Rmb. To run the business costs around 500 Rmb per month, of which 300 Rmb goes to the Trade Centre as rent, 70 Rmb is spent on electricity and other such expenses, 80 Rmb is paid to the Public Security Police, and 50 Rmb to the Bureau of Industry and Commerce.

Though the sums of money paid to local authorities by brothel owners may not be negligible, neither can they be described as vast. For instance, assuming there are 60 brothels in the two Trade Centres, each paying the Public Security Police 80 Rmb per month, the police (of whom there are many) get 4,800 Rmb to share amongst them each month. This doubtless represents a nice tip for the individuals involved, but it hardly makes them wealthy. It seems likely that the indirect benefits of the sex trade for local officials are far greater than direct benefits in the form of bribes or pay-offs. The town's sex industry makes it attractive to tourists, traders and investors, and has thus contributed to Town X's economic development. This latter increases local government revenues, extends local officials' promotion opportunities, and probably adds to their income far more significantly than do payments made by brothel owners.

Owners reported that it cost somewhere between 10,000 and 50,000 Rmb to set themselves up in business in the Trade Centre, but this is an investment that reaps worthwhile financial rewards. One of the owners we interviewed ('Mr B') reported that when business is good, he clears between 6 and 7,000 Rmb per month from the salon he owns, and even when trade is slow, it still brings him between 2 and 3,000 Rmb per month. Mr B lives in Kunming where he also owns a restaurant, and leaves it to his Vietnamese sister-in-law to manage the salon in Town X. She recruited the three Vietnamese women who work in the salon from her home village, and arranged their transport to Town X. In this respect, Mr B is atypical, for as he and other informants told us, owners normally have to pay a broker or middle-agent to recruit their Vietnamese workers. The fee for this service is reported to be between 2,000 and 2,500 Rmb per sex worker.

Our conversations with 18 prostitutes, owners, and others involved in the sex trade in Town X produced the following picture of employment relations within brothels in the Trade Centre. The salons rely first and foremost on a system of indentured labour, which binds Vietnamese women/girls to an employer for a period of 12 months. During this time, the employer provides them with somewhere to sleep, food and clothing. Sex workers are normally entitled to a salary of around 600 Rmb per month, but payment of that salary is withheld for one year, and then paid, minus the broker's fee and deductions for food, accommodation, clothing and any medical care they have received. After the year's indenture, the woman/girl is free to leave or to stay on and work for the owner – always providing the owner is satisfied with her work. At this point, she will be able to earn good money from prostitution, possibly as much as 9,000 Rmb per month (out of which she will continue to pay the owner for food and accommodation). Sex workers in the Trade Centre therefore represent a mixture of

'free' and unfree labour. As well as being able to 'progress' from a contract of indenture to an employment relation from which they can freely withdraw, some women eventually take on a managerial role and become mamasans.

The story behind Vietnamese women and girls' entry into the sex trade is familiar. Although Vietnam enjoyed rapid economic growth in the 1990s until the Asian economic crisis, economic reforms have intensified the disparities between the rich and poor, and between urban and rural dwellers (Vietnam Economic Times, 2000, p23). The average annual income of rural Vietnamese is now one fourth that of their urban counterparts, and this constitutes a strong pressure on people, especially the young, to migrate internally, as well as across borders, in search of work (AMC, 2000, p272). Because the sex industry in Vietnam itself has expanded rapidly throughout the 1990s, and because a strong cross-national market for Vietnamese sex workers has also developed, these migratory pressures mean that rural and urban poor Vietnamese women and girls, like those in Yunnan, are at risk of either being deceived and trafficked into the sex industry, or of electing to migrate to work in prostitution. As the Asian Migrant Centre reports, there is demand for Vietnamese sex workers in China and Taiwan (also a growing demand by Taiwanese men for Vietnamese 'mail order brides') and 'another phenomenon of greater magnitude is the trafficking of Vietnamese women and children to Cambodia... Vietnamese workers make up about half of the 6,000 foreign sex workers operating in Cambodia' (AMC, 2000, p273).

Those who are trafficked or migrate into the sex trade in Yunnan and Guangxi mostly come from impoverished rural areas or cities in the north of Vietnam. Some are deceived about the nature of the work they will engage in, or about the conditions and rates of pay. In Town X, a number of informants stated that a substantial proportion of women and girls in the Trade Centre have been tricked into sex work and are kept in prostitution against their will. For example, one Chinese man – Mr Z – who speaks Vietnamese and makes money by acting as an interpreter for salon owners, brokers and others involved in the sex trade told us that women and girls, some as young as 15, are lured to Town X with the promise of restaurant or domestic work. They are then brought to the border, many miles from their remote rural villages, where a broker will arrange their entry into China (i.e., organise false identity papers, pay off immigration officials and so on), and sell them on to a salon owner. Once in the Trade Centre, it is extremely difficult to leave. According to Mr Z, some salon owners or their mamasans will beat women and girls who refuse to service clients, but physical violence or its threat is not always necessary to keep them inside the brothel complex. The owners typically confiscate women and girls' identity papers as well as withholding their wages. Without money or documents, and without being able to speak the local language, it would be very hard to get back across the border, and even if they were able to do so, few would know their way back to their home village.

But there are also women and girls who have knowingly entered into a contract of indenture that binds them to a salon owner for 12 months, at the end of which time they are to receive a year's salary minus the broker's fee and a charge for their keep. The use of indentured migrant labour is very common in the sex

industry, and all over the world, indentured workers are at particular risk of a range of abuses within prostitution. At the same time, however, it is a form of employment relation that promises many women and girls an opportunity to save that is unparalleled by any other kind of employment available to them. Research on Thai women who have been taken to Japan as indentured sex workers shows that even those who have only worked their period of indenture, and have not stayed on with the mamasan as a non-bonded worker after their debt is paid off, are able to save what are to them considerable sums in tips from clients (Phongpaichit, 1999, p85).

The Vietnamese women and girls in the Trade Centre in Town X are also able to save their tips, and if their employer honours the contract and pays them their withheld wages at the end of the period of indenture, they can leave China and return home with as much as 2,500 Rmb or more. In Vietnam, this is a significant sum, enough to make a real difference to a rural family's life, or for a woman to set up a small business, for example. Three of the older sex workers we spoke to had unemployed husbands and children back in Vietnam, and told us that working in the salon was part of their 'life plan'. Several women also said that they had wanted to travel and to see a foreign country, and that they liked the 'life-style' in China. Whether above or below 18, those who decide to indenture themselves into prostitution for a year might, if they are lucky, end up with mamasan who does not abuse or mistreat them, a salon owner who honours the contract. They might also make good money from tips from clients, which will add to the savings they accrue. But if they are unlucky and end up with an abusive employer, it will often be just as difficult for them to retract from the contract as it is for those who have been tricked into prostitution to escape from the Trade Centre.

Speaking of indentured Thai prostitutes in Japan, Pasuk Phongpaichit (1999, p86) remarks that many are aware of the risks that attend this form of migrant work, but:

The potential for saving makes many women overlook the negative side of this venture. Thus, despite all the stories about harsh treatment, exploitation, and risk, many women still flock to Japan. Some of those who go through the ordeal once wish to return as they believe that their experience will allow them to manage the situation better the second time around.

The same point undoubtedly holds good in relation to many of the Vietnamese women and girls who migrate to Yunnan and Guanxi to work in prostitution.

The Demand for Commercial Sex

In China, as in many other developing countries, the tale of the demand-side of the sex trade is a story about both continuity and change. More particularly, it is a story in which economic growth and modernisation equips sections of the male population with the wherewithal to express and reaffirm very traditional ideas about gender and sexuality. What perhaps distinguishes the story in China (and gives it an especially bitter twist) is the fact that this trend runs counter to Communist China's truly remarkable achievements in terms of changing gender relations in Chinese society. We should not forget that for more than 2000 years prior to the revolution, women in Chinese society were socially dead, legally and socially constructed as the property of their male spouse or relatives. As Ruan and Lau observe:

A real liberation and revolution in the female's role has occurred in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The first law enacted by the PRC government was the Marriage Law of 1950. The law is not only about marriage and divorce, it also is a legal statement on monogamy, equal rights of both sexes, and on the protection of the lawful interests of women and children. (1997, p 2)

It takes time to make real inroads into such deep and fundamental social inequalities and it is unsurprising to find that 50 years on, there are many spheres of life in which Chinese men and women remain unequal (as is the case in most Euro-American societies). Thus we find that whilst women's participation in the labour-force is high by comparison with many other societies:

Of the higher level jobs such as technicians, clerks, and officials, women fill only 5.5 percent. Of the country's 220 million illiterates, 70 percent are women. Women now make up only 37.4 percent of high school students and only 25.7 percent of the university educated population. Moreover, actual discrimination against women still exists and continues to develop now. Many women have been laid off by enterprises that consider them surplus or redundant. Only 4.5 percent of the laid-off women continued to receive welfare benefits, including bonuses and stipends offered by their employers. Many enterprises have refused to employ women, contending their absence from work to have a baby or look after children are burdensome.

(Ruan and Lau, 1997, p3)

These continuing gender inequalities mean that most of those whose disposable income increased as a result of economic growth in the 1980s and 90s were men. This fulfilled the first precondition for the development of a market in commercial sex, making it possible for more men to engage in prostitute-use (both locally and when they travelled).

To understand why men should choose to spend part of their newly increased disposable income on prostitute-use, we need to begin by noting that Chinese

clients have been socialised in a society that is extraordinarily repressive in relation to human sexuality. The extent of this repression is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that in China, a single legal term – hooliganism – is used to encompass sexual acts ranging from rape through to consensual homosexual relations between adults. Premarital and extramarital sex, including cohabitation, are amongst the ‘antisocial’ activities that are subject to social control via neighbourhood committees; pornography and nudity are banned; masturbation and oral sex are considered dirty and distasteful practices; and even sexual expression that is considered ‘normal’ (i.e., heterosexual intercourse within marriage) ‘is viewed with contempt as a less important activity of life’ (Ruan and Lau, 1997, p3).

The idea that human sexual expression is something contemptuous and distasteful is communicated to the population so effectively that a professor from the Institute for Research in Sexuality and Gender at Renmin University, Beijing, concluded that one of the major obstacles to research on sexuality in China is the fact that ‘most females feel like vomiting when questioned about sexual matters’ (Pan 1996, cited in Ruan and Lau, 1997, p 4). A 1989 survey of sexual behaviour (the largest ever conducted in China) found that the typical male college student had received little sex education, was entirely unprepared when he had his first seminal emission, and had acquired most of his sexual knowledge from his male peers, books on hygiene and health, news media, novels, and pornographic art (Lau, 1997). If this describes the condition of the most educationally privileged, it seems likely that a high percentage of the population is extremely poorly educated on matters pertaining to sexual life. This doubtless helps to explain the findings of a 1992 study of 8,000 married couples, which revealed that ‘44.7 percent of urban wives and 37 percent of rural wives experience pain during intercourse’ (Liu, 1992, cited in Ruan and Lau, 1997).

Despite (or perhaps because of) this general devaluation of sexual life, male potency is valued extremely highly and is the focus of great anxiety. In 1989, Professor Kang Jin, president of the Shanghai Committee of Rehabilitation of Male Dysfunctions claimed that at least 20 percent of China’s adult male population was suffering from some type of sexual dysfunction (Ruan and Lau, 1997, p16), and there is a strong market for all manner of traditional and modern ‘cures’ for impotence. Societies in which there is a high level of prostitute-use are often also those societies in which there is high level of sexual shame and ignorance, and a widespread preoccupation with male potency. Because female prostitutes are invariably socially constructed as dirty and impure ‘outsiders’, they can be readily imagined as the appropriate objects of unclean and debasing impulses. This liberates clients from the shame and anxiety experienced with ‘good’ women, and helps to vanquish the fear and the reality of erectile failure. Prostitute-use is also known to be more prevalent in societies that attach a high value to male sexual potency and yet simultaneously set in place strong legal and cultural prohibitions against pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relationships. Where men believe it is important to demonstrate their virility through heterosexual sex acts, but ‘good’ women are sexually unavailable or unwilling, there is likely to be strong demand for female prostitutes simply because they are accessible sexual partners. In China, we should note that such demand may also be fuelled by the practical

constraints on adults' sexual lives. Housing shortages and other economic pressures mean that married couples often live apart, and couples who do live together often live in cramped conditions with little privacy.

It is also important to recognise that prostitute-use is widely read as a status-enhancing act. The power to consume commercial sex, like the ability to participate as a consumer in other markets, certainly emerged as a mark of social privilege in China in the 1980s. Statistics on arrests of prostitutes' clients in Guangzhou in 1986 showed that two thirds were Communist party members and country officials (Ruan and Lau, 1997). Businessmen and domestic tourists – in other words, the most affluent of Chinese men – also led the way in terms of providing demand for commercial sex. In this way, prostitute-use appears to have become part and parcel of the status and life-style that many ordinary Chinese men aspire to. Now, even male labourers from rural areas, with relative low earnings, are amongst those who provide demand for commercial sex (Pan, 2001, p4). Male migrant workers often 'travel alone and have no family ties in their new environs', factors that make them more likely to enter into commercial sexual transactions (Gil et al, 1996).

Last but not least, we need to consider how socially tolerated ideas about gender and sexuality intersect with attitudes towards race/ethnicity and nationhood to shape both the supply and demand side of the sex industry. This is well illustrated by returning to the case of Town X.

Borders and the Sex Trade

Town X has a thriving sex business serving demand from Vietnamese and Chinese traders, businessmen and tourists. A number of informants also told us that province officials sometimes hold meetings in the town in order that prostitute-use can be enjoyed as a perk. It has already been seen that the sex trade in frontier towns has emerged partly as a result of economic developments in the frontier region. However, political and ideological factors have also played a role. First we should note that the 'border zone' concept makes it much easier to employ and import migrant labour into frontier towns like Town X than it would be to do so into other parts of China. The border concept originated in recognition of the fact that the political boundary of the Chinese nation state cut across territory traditionally inhabited by various ethnic minority groups, potentially dividing communities and families. Mao therefore created border zones and border passports that would allow these populations free movement between border regions. As a result, anyone who is formally registered as a resident of border zone, whether on the Chinese or Vietnamese side, can move easily back and forth across the border. Temporary residence permits can be purchased from corrupt officials on the Vietnamese side, and if a woman or girl has such a permit, it is technically legal for her to stay in Town X for a month (at which point she will need to get her residence permit renewed).

The border zone arrangements not only make it much easier for Public Security Officials to connive at the presence of Vietnamese women and girls in Town X but also appear to reinforce a more general tendency to construct and imagine the frontier as a different, almost liminal space, a place in which the normal rules and laws that govern life in China are suspended. This is attractive to tourists since it allows them to experience something 'different' and 'foreign'. It also enables the ordinary citizens of Town X as well as local officials and police to view the sexual exploitation taking place in their midst with 'one eye open, the other eye shut'.

We interviewed three pharmacists in the town, perfectly respectable and legitimate residents of Town X, for example, who stated that the authorities ignore what goes on in the Trade Centres because the sex industry in Town X is good for the tourist trade and for local businesses. 'Without the Vietnamese girls offering sexual services', one pharmacist told us, 'there would be no tourists, and without the tourists, Town X's economy would collapse'. Their own businesses certainly benefited from sex tourism. The numerous pharmacies in the town do a roaring trade in various 'remedies' for sexually transmitted disease (such as alcohol and antibiotic rubs that are marketed as cures for everything from genital itching and odour through to syphilis), and in contraceptive pills and antibiotics, both of which are sold without prescription to sex workers and mamasans. The pharmacists told us that sex workers come to see them in groups to ask for advice on which antibiotics to use for various STDs, or for advice on where to go for abortion. They stated that there is little AIDS awareness in China, and

that though sex workers and mamasans come in to buy condoms, they also tell the pharmacists that many clients are willing to pay more for unprotected sex. The pharmacies further cater to demand for a range of traditional medicines believed to make men more sexually potent and various modern 'sex aids'. These shops thus display what is, through Western eyes, a curiously post modern mixture of wares – parcels of dried deer's penis, dried bat and snake, bottles containing lizard pickled in alcohol, and so on, are lined up alongside dildos, cock-rings and plastic vaginas 'that really suck'. Such products are purchased by Chinese and Vietnamese male tourists and by Vietnamese mamasans, the pharmacists told us. A salon owner explained to us that clients buy these potency potions as a way of protecting the investment they plan to make in commercial sex. 'All Chinese men are terrified of impotence', he said, and since they do not wish to waste their money when they pay for a sexual service, they buy remedies reputed to enhance and strengthen their sexual performance. Another informant explained that Town X had originally gained notoriety amongst men from other parts of Yunnan Province and the rest of China, as well as amongst Vietnamese men, as a place where it was possible to buy snake, lizards, monkeys and other wild animals that are traditionally associated with 'heat' and sexual potency. This attracted male tourists, and as tourism and trading developed so too did prostitution. Town X has gradually become synonymous with sex, gaining a reputation for its 'wild animals and wild women' as men who have sampled its pleasures go back home and report their adventures to their male friends.

Town X is a popular destination for men from Kunming wanting a 'weekend break' as well as male tourists from further afield. Kunming men travel down by bus on a Friday night, arriving early on Saturday morning. The afternoon may be spent sightseeing across the border in Vietnam, or gambling in their hotel, and Saturday night is devoted to prostitute-use. One key informant, Mr T, was from Kunming. He spoke good English and I was able to spend several hours with him talking about the situation in Town X, and about gender, sexuality and prostitute-use. He did not openly admit to ever having bought commercial sex himself, but his detailed knowledge of prices and the workings of the market, and his views on men's motivations for purchasing sex all strongly suggested that he had experience as a client. He claimed that the Chinese tourists who come to Town X to engage in prostitute-use do not necessarily buy sex back in their home towns or cities, but are specifically interested in Vietnamese sex workers. Mr T stated that Chinese men 'get something' from Vietnamese girls that they cannot get from Chinese sex workers. Chinese women who work in prostitution are businesslike and unaffectionate, he explained, whereas Vietnamese sex workers are affectionate and say they love Chinese men. They tell their Chinese clients that Vietnamese men are bad and abusive, and all this makes Chinese men feel like 'real men' according to Mr T.

However, Mr T also noted that it is much cheaper to use Vietnamese sex workers in Town X than Chinese sex workers in Kunming. In Town X, 'short time' costs just 50 Rmb, while 'over-night' deals cost 150 Rmb.⁴ Meanwhile, Mr B, the salon owner mentioned above, explained to us that unlike many Chinese sex workers, Vietnamese women and girls will provide oral sex, and this service is now very popular amongst Chinese clients. According to Mr B, the demand for oral sex has been generated by Western pornography, a relatively new phenomenon in China, but it is not yet widely available, since oral sex is still viewed as 'dirty' by most sex workers. The mouth is for eating, and is defiled by sexual contact. Fellatio is seen to debase the woman who performs it, and Mr B insisted that Chinese men absolutely would not perform oral sex on a woman. (Even in Hong Kong, generally a more 'cosmopolitan' place, many Chinese sex workers will not provide oral sex and look askance at those who are willing to do so, even refusing to eat with women known to sell oral sex to clients, see Kong, 2001).

Mr T explained to me that Chinese men are placed under enormous social pressure to engage in prostitute-use. Their peers expect them to visit karaoke joints, and to flirt with sex workers therein. Visiting such places is very much a group activity, and if a man did not use prostitutes when his friends and colleagues did, they would say 'This man is sick. He's not a real man. He must be impotent'. And, Mr T continued, if they assumed that a man was impotent, they would no longer wish to associate with him as a friend, or to do business with him. When I asked him to explain in more detail why such stigma was attached to impotence, he was unable to do so. For him, the reasons why men care so much about each other's sexual potency are too self-evident to be explained, and my questions were as pointless as asking why fish have to swim or birds have to fly.

Mr T's views on age are also worth considering. He stated that the Vietnamese sex workers in the Trade Centre who attract most custom and earn the best tips, are those who are young and beautiful. He considered those under the age of 20 to be 'youthful', and whilst he expressed horror at the idea of children's involvement in commercial sex, he saw childhood as ending with the onset of puberty. A fully developed and physically mature girl is a 'woman', whether she is chronologically aged 19 or 14–15. He argued that this is a widespread perception, and that the clients of a 15 or 16-year-old Vietnamese girl in the Trade Centre would not consider themselves to be sexually exploiting a child.

It is impossible to say whether Mr T's views on gender, sexuality, age and prostitute-use are typical or representative of those of other Chinese clients. I was,

⁴ The idea that tourists to Town X are in search of cheap sex – rather than or as well as exotic sex – was also lent credence by a salon owner we interviewed who told us about one of his recent business failures. Amongst the sex workers in many major Chinese cities are women from Russia and the Newly Independent States. They have often entered China legally as part of a dance troupe that tours the country for several months performing in expensive hotels, and are able to supplement the low salary from dancing with relatively high earnings from prostitution. Russian sex workers charge around 800 Rmb for sexual services, and in large hotels in big cities they find clients who are willing to pay this (wealthy entrepreneurs, senior officials, foreign tourists and businessmen, etc.) Thinking he had identified a 'niche market' within the sex trade, the salon owner asked a group of Russian sex workers based in Kunming to come and work in his salon in Town X. The Russians continued to demand 800 Rmb for services that Vietnamese sex workers provided for between 50 and 150 Rmb, and quickly found that tourists were not willing to pay this differential. They returned to Kunming.

however, powerfully struck by the parallels between his account of the joys of sex tourism and the accounts provided by many Western heterosexual male tourists who travel to poor and developing countries to engage in prostitute-use. The idea that racially/ethnically other women and girls actually enjoy working in prostitution and genuinely care for their clients is central to creating the fiction of mutuality that many men use to justify the sexual exploitation of women and children in the countries they visit (O'Connell Davidson, 1998, 2001, Kruhse Mount Burton, 1995, Seabrook, 1996, Bishop and Robinson, 1998).

Some Conclusions

The problem of CSEC in China, as elsewhere in the world, is in large part constituted by adolescent girls' involvement in the mainstream sex trade. It follows that questions about 'child prostitution' cannot be neatly separated from more general questions about the commercial sex industry, and this suggests that there is no 'quick fix' policy solution. Instead, we need to think about long-term measures to address the demand-side of the sex industry; to create sustainable and realistic economic alternatives to prostitution; and to create legal and social environments that are protective of the human rights of both adults and children currently involved in the sex trade.

The Demand for Commercial Sex

Rapid and uneven economic development, rural-urban and gender inequalities, and race/ethnic discriminatory beliefs and practices contribute to an expansion in the supply of labour for the sex industry. They also fuel the demand for commercial sex in China, as elsewhere in the world. Increasing prostitute-use amongst men is, in one sense, the flip side of the tale of movement that leaves women and children vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation. But in another sense it reflects very traditional understandings of masculinity and masculine sexuality, and a continuing acceptance of profoundly patriarchal principles of social organisation. The rapid growth of the market for commercial sex in China over the past 20 years, and the fact that men use prostitution as a way to cement their business relationships and friendships with other men, suggests that women and children are still widely constructed as objects of, rather than full parties to, social exchange. These attitudes will take time to change. In the meantime, it is important to consider the possibilities for 'harm reduction' measures, for instance, strategies to encourage condom-use by clients, and to discourage violence against prostitute women and children. Even efforts in this direction are much hampered by the state's enormously repressive approach to sexuality and punitive and stigmatising treatment of female prostitutes.

Sustainable Economic Alternatives to Prostitution

Girls as young as 11 or 12 are reported to have been abducted or trafficked from Yunnan into the Thai sex industry, but the researchers I spoke to in Yunnan believed that most of the children affected by CSEC are aged 15 and over. Similarly, research on prostitution in China suggests that when children are involved, they are generally girls in their mid-to-late teens. The most obvious conclusion to draw from this finding is that girls become vulnerable to trafficking and CSEC when a) they reach the age at which children are expected to become economically active, and b) their employment opportunities are extremely limited. Likewise, when younger children do end up in the sex trade, they have usually either been abandoned or orphaned, and it is thus their economic position that exposes

them to abuse and exploitation. Since it is not possible to simply raise the age at which children are expected to become economically active by fiat, it is vitally important to consider ways in which to provide sustainable economic alternatives to prostitution. This draws attention to the vital role that the private sector could potentially play in combating CSEC, and underlines the importance of Save the Children's (2001) comments on the difficult relationship between the issue of child labour and that of CSEC:

Partly as an effect of the tendency within the global economy to locate manufacturing where labour costs are low, general child labour in poor countries has become an ethical issue of public debate in countries of strong markets, e.g. Europe and North America, to which transnational corporations and importers have had to respond. Companies need to consider potentially harmful, unintended consequences of specific actions to prevent child labour, bearing in mind that children generally work due to poverty. The most common expedient approach is to fire children without offering them and their families alternative sources of livelihood. In order to ensure that they are not employing under-age workers, some companies have also set 18 as a minimum age for employment. This may further reduce work opportunities for poor children and push them towards more exploitative means of survival.

CSEC and Prostitution Law

It is sometimes argued that the problem of CSEC can be addressed through stronger anti-prostitution and anti-trafficking laws, and stricter law enforcement. However, this approach can often have unintended consequences. Whether based on a model of prohibition or regulation, prostitution law and law enforcement practice around the world invariably focuses more heavily on the control of female prostitutes than on their clients (Sweden is a notable exception to this general rule). Moreover, in most countries of the world, the civil and human rights of females who work in prostitution are routinely, and often grossly, violated. China is a case in point. Here, prostitutes variously face arbitrary detention, deportation, and forcible 'rehabilitation'; the state offers them inadequate protection from violent crime or abusive employers, and corrupt law enforcement agents routinely extort money from them. Since the state is amongst those who most consistently violate prostitute women's rights, it would be naïve to trust that calls for stronger legal controls over those who exploit children within prostitution will automatically produce desirable outcomes for either prostitute women or teenagers.

What then of the argument made by some sex workers' rights organisations to the effect that the problem of CSEC and that of human rights abuses against prostitute women can be solved simultaneously by bringing the sex industry 'above ground' and regulating it as an employment sector like any other? Though there are many compelling reasons to re-think existing legal approaches to the sex sector, there are also reasons to be wary of the idea that CSEC could be eradicated by regulation of the sex industry. Consider, for example, the situ-

ation in Town X. It was noted above that Vietnamese sex workers are kept inside the Trade Centres and are not found working independently in street or hotel prostitution. This suggests that Town X's sex industry, despite its illegality, is actually ordered by a set of unwritten rules - rules that are enforced by the police and local authorities. It seems likely that another such unwritten rule prohibits the employment of minors as sex workers in the Trade Centres. So, for example, although the salon owners and the mamasan we spoke to were willing to openly discuss other aspects of their businesses in the Trade Centre, all of which were technically illegal, they were defensive when asked about the presence of minors in the sex trade. When we remarked that we had seen some girls in salons who looked very young, they insisted that all of the sex workers in the Trade Centre are aged over 18. Moreover, the girls who admitted to us that they were 16 had initially claimed to be 18. All this leads me to believe that the local authorities would look askance upon any brothel owner who openly attempted to sell the sexual services of, say, a group of 10 and 11 year girls in the Trade Centres (whether or not they can be bribed to turn a blind eye to more covert arrangements involving small children is another matter).

If local officials and police do attempt to exert some control over the age of sex workers in the Trade Centres, the point to note is that their efforts do not and cannot guarantee children protection from commercial sexual exploitation. Vietnamese sex workers often require false identity papers in order to cross the border and work in Town X (indeed, this is part of the service offered by brokers who supply labour to the salon owners), and there is no reason to suppose that a girl's true age is necessarily shown on otherwise fake documents. How would matters be different if the sex trade in Town X was 'above ground' and regulated, such that it was possible to legally employ women over the age of 18 as sex workers but illegal to employ children? Changing the law would not mean that Public Security Police, immigration officers and other local officials were suddenly incorruptible, or that false identity papers were suddenly unobtainable. Nor would it miraculously relieve the poverty that drives Vietnamese teenagers, as well as adults, to migrate from rural villages. It would remain the case that, providing girls had identity papers stating they were over 18, and providing they did not look pre-pubertal, nothing would prevent brothel owners from employing them or third parties from trafficking them into prostitution.

Laws and legal regulations are not, in themselves, particularly effective means of controlling prostitution. Just as the market for commercial sex can continue to thrive in the most repressive legal environments, so child prostitution can persist in settings where adults can legally sell sex but those under 18 are prohibited from so doing. It is broader structural inequalities (for instance those between rural and urban, rich and poor, men and women, ethnic minority and majority, migrant and resident) that precipitate children and women's entry into prostitution and that make them vulnerable to abusive employment practices within the sex industry. Unless and until these inequalities are redressed, neither legalisation nor more intensive crackdowns on CSEC and trafficking can, on their own, represent a solution to the problem, and may instead have an extremely negative impact on both adults and adolescents working in prostitution.

There is a great deal of work to be done in terms of changing attitudes towards prostitution and creating legal and social environments which are protective of female prostitutes' human rights before we could be confident that calls for tighter and more extensive criminalisation of CSEC will not have unintended and undesirable consequences for women and children in the sex trade. Likewise, there is much work to be done in terms of creating realistic economic alternatives to the sex industry for both adults and children, and in terms of finding effective means of organising and protecting workers in the sex trade, before we could be confident that calls for the legal recognition and regulation of prostitution as a form of employment would not simply strengthen the hand of employers and other third party beneficiaries. This work should not be seen as peripheral to or beyond the concerns of those involved in campaigns against CSEC, for in the real world, the fate of adult women and teenage girls in prostitution is not always divisible.

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