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Article in *British Journal of Criminology* · May 2015

DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azv040

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BUYING SEX AS EDGEWORK: HONG KONG MALE CLIENTS IN COMMERCIAL SEX

TRAVIS S. K. KONG*

Commercial sex is a risky business and men who buy sex engage in a form of voluntary risky behaviour. Using Stephen Lyng's notion of edgework, this qualitative study examines Hong Kong men who buy sex in Hong Kong/China and argues that these men's engagement can be understood as a form of leisure edgework which balances risk and pleasure by negotiating the boundary between order and chaos. This article concludes that men buying sex can be seen as a form of resistance to normative companionate sexuality and the skills they exercise are key cultural principles needed in late-modern society. Edgework therefore plays an important role in modern intimacy, especially in shaping masculinity and men's sexual scripts.

Keywords: edgework, men who buy sex/male clients, Chinese masculinity, companionate/recreational sexuality, commercial sex

Introduction

Commercial sex is a risky business. In most societies, it is illegal. Men who buy sex engage in a form of voluntary risky behaviour. Why take these risks? Existing literature suggests various social psychological reasons, but none has drawn from Stephen Lyng's (1990) notion of edgework, which goes beyond psychological motivations by linking risk-seeking/taking behaviour to broader social contexts. Based on 24 in-depth interviews and 2 focus groups conducted from 2012 onward with Hong Kong men who buy sex in Hong Kong/China, this article argues that men buying sex can be understood as leisure edgework which involves a negotiation of risk and pleasure by balancing between order and chaos. In particular, these men negotiate four major risks at the normative 'edge' of social behaviour while enjoying the thrill of commercial sex: the consumption risk of overindulgence, the emotional risk of mixing love and sex, the moral risk of being discovered and the legal risk of being caught. They thus negotiate the boundary between normal and 'excess'/'addicted' consumption, between fun and commitment, between the good and bad man and between legal and illegal behaviours. By situating Lyng's notion of edgework in the context of the transformation of intimacy in contemporary Hong Kong, I conclude that the purchase of sex can be understood as an escape and resistance to the normative and hegemonic model of companionate sexuality, whilst the skills and competencies they exercise—regulating excess, control and balance, being vigilant and self-reliant and believing in one's survival capacity—are key cultural principles needed in late-modern society. Edgework therefore plays a key role in modern intimacy, especially in shaping masculinity and men's new sexual scripts. This analysis has made two contributions: firstly, it contributes to the growing body of studies, which examine different aspects of social life deemed to have an 'edge',

*Travis S. K. Kong, Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong, Rm 917, The Jockey Club Tower, Pokfulam, Hong Kong; travisk@hku.hk.

and secondly to illuminating, a heretofore little examined aspect of edgework, i.e. the intricate relationship between edgework and gender as a process and practice.

Men Buying Sex as Edgework

Early sociological discussions about prostitution were dominated by sexology and psychiatry in which the purchase of sex was seen as a pathological desire, a deviant behaviour and/or a mental disorder (Davies 1937; Ellis 1959). Since the 1980s, discussions shifted away from the pathology of the male sexual drive and viewed clients as normal men with special 'motives': they desire sex with a person with a certain image or bodily appearance; they are unsatisfied with the sexual dimension of their current relationship; they have difficulty finding a partner for a conventional relationship; they find commercial sex thrilling; they wish to avoid the long-term obligations or emotional attachment of a conventional relationship or they seek a limited emotional connection in addition to or instead of sex (e.g. Holzman and Pines 1982: 102–10; McKeganey and Barnard 1996: 50–3; Campbell 1998: 162–6; Weitzer 2009: 224–7; Milrod and Monto 2012: 793–5; Milrod and Weitzer 2012: 448–9; c.f. Sanders 2008b: 44–5). The literature provides ample reasons why men buy sex but remains tied to a socio-psychological paradigm. Although sociological accounts have been suggested in this bulk of literature, analyses that link the purchase of sex to a broader social context need more consideration.

From the 1990s onward, the study of male clients has underscored important trends. First, studies have investigated clients' different motivations and experiences in various forms of commercial sex such as street prostitution (e.g. Monto 2000), brothel prostitution (e.g. Sanders 2008b), strip clubs (e.g. Frank 2006), escort services (e.g. Huff 2011) and online client forums (e.g. Milrod and Monto 2012). Second, studies have examined client–worker relationships with the focal point of whether clients, especially regular ones, merely seek sexual release or seek affection and companionship (e.g. Plumridge *et al.* 1997; Bernstein 2007; Sanders 2008a; Huff 2011; Milrod and Weitzer 2012; Kong 2015). Third, studies focus overwhelmingly on sexual risk, adopting a public health paradigm in which clients are seen as a 'high-risk group' (Vanwesenbeeck 2001); and on legal risks, including whether clients should be prosecuted or not (Sanders 2008b).

In Hong Kong, the few existing client studies adopt a public health approach (Lau and Tsui 2003). Although this approach provides an important baseline of epidemiological trends, the complexity of client's life experiences is not yet documented. A few qualitative and ethnographic works on Chinese male clients exists on China (e.g. Zheng 2006) and Taiwan (e.g. Peng 2007; Shen 2008) with a focus on marriage, monogamy and masculinity. None, however, look at the specific problems Hong Kong men face with its distinctive and long British colonial history, religious conservatism regarding love and sexuality and overemphasis on economic success and entrepreneurial masculinity except Kong (2015).

Building on my previous work on sex work in Hong Kong (2006; 2009; 2015), this article fills the gap for male clients by using the notion of edgework (Lyng 1990; 2005) to understand men who buy sex and by extending the limited notion of risk. What is edgework? How does this concept help us understand commercial sex in particular and risky behaviour in late-modern society in general? Lyng (1990) conceptualizes skydiving as

edgework—a (re)action, activity and state of being which has three major components: risky activity, skill and sensation. Edgeworkers are those individuals who engage in voluntary high-risk and thrilling activities that involve a clearly observable threat to their physical or mental well-being or their sense of an ordered existence. They maintain a sense of control over their lives and/or situations whilst pushing themselves to their physical and/or mental limits—the lines between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, sanity and insanity and order and chaos. To push to the edge requires ‘skills, competencies, and symbolic resources’ (Lyng 2005: 7) and, most importantly, the ability to maintain control (order) of a situation to avoid chaos. They encounter fear or threat in anticipating the experience, but the (successful) experience produces a sense of ‘self-actualization’, thrill and excitement and a kind of hyperreality, ‘much more real than everyday existence’ (Lyng 1990: 861).

Originally, edgework was proposed as a synthesis of Marx and Mead to further theorize social action; it later drew heavily from risk society (e.g. Giddens, Beck) and governmentality (e.g. Foucault). Lyng (2005: 5–10) argues that edgework represents a paradox in contemporary life: as an escape and resistance for individuals to experience intense sensations of self-determination and control against structural alienated labour experiences and oversocialization, and the skills, competencies and symbolic resources gained from edgework are essential to navigate other challenges of risks present in late-modern society. The traditional view of risk has been dominated by rational choice (i.e. individualistic cost-benefit calculation) and psychological causes (e.g. ‘intrinsic motivations’ or ‘personality predispositions’). Edgework goes beyond this traditional view by linking actor’s negotiating of high-risk experiences with a broader social context (Lyng and Matthews 2007: 78).

While Lyng’s work was based on dangerous sports and occupations, later works have looked at other high-risk pursuits, such as excessive substance use, business entrepreneurs’ stock trading, street anarchism or avant-garde art (Lyng 2005). None, however, have examined the commercial sex except Nicholls (2009), who briefly discussed a female street sex worker Claire who exercised edgework as a transgression act to deal with homelessness in the UK. Moreover, Lyng’s conceptualization tends to idolize the subjective position of edgeworkers, especially men’s position as most of the edgeworkers that he draws from are young White men. He thus has been criticized for privileging the middle class White male experience (Miller 1991) but more generally emphasizing a positive relationship between men and risk-taking behaviours, thereby reinforcing traditional masculinity that values excitement, adventure, power and control (Walklate 1997; Chan and Rigakos 2002). Subsequent work has taken gender, class and race into consideration (Lyng and Matthews 2007; Laurendeau 2008), such as men and women rescue workers (Lois 2001), drug-involved minority women in violent intimate relationships (Rajah 2007) or women’s participation in pro-anorexic sites (Gailey 2009). Moreover, the original idea of risk-taking focuses overwhelmingly on physical or mental threats, and later work has broadened the notion of risk to include emotional risk (e.g. Lois 2001; Newmahr 2011) and criminal risk (O’Malley and Mugford 1994). Finally, the edgework literature focuses overwhelmingly on alienation and lack of control in one’s work life as a driving force of high-risk activities without considering other factors such as the mundane nature of coupled or family life in one’s private sphere.

By bridging the gap between the literatures of male clients and edgework, this article contributes to both literatures: first, to view male clients not so much as men who

are compelled by internal needs and urges, but men who engage in leisure edgework which requires certain skills and competencies in balancing risk and pleasure when they purchase sex; second, to expand the limited understanding of the notion of risk to include a variety of risks (e.g. consumption, emotional, moral and legal) that may involve voluntary risk-taking behaviour such as commercial sex and third, to extend the reason why people engage in edgework from their alienated work life to the mundane nature of their family or coupled life. Using the case of Hong Kong men who buy sex, this article connects these men's high-risk experiences with a broader social context and argues that edgework plays a key role in shaping masculinity and men's sexual script in modern intimacy.

Methodological Note

This article is based on 24 in-depth interviews and 2 focus groups conducted during the period of 2012–14 with self-identified Hong Kong heterosexual men who patronized female sex workers. Respondents recruited were as diverse as possible in demographic background and commercial sex experience in order to grasp the complexity of the client population. The interviews ($n = 24$) were conducted at the author's office, NGO offices or respondents' places. The two focus groups (each with four participants) were conducted at the author's and an NGO office. Respondents received HKD300 (£25) honoraria for in-depth interviews and HKD200 (£20) for focus groups for their participation and time.

Interviews were free-flowing in style, focusing on participation in commercial sex: (1) the trajectory of the client's involvement with commercial sex (e.g. history of engagement, motivations and meanings of commercial sex, client identity, social stigma and coping strategies, participation in virtual client forums); (2) the experiences of the client–worker relationship (e.g. what they bought, risk negotiation, safer sex practices, differences between commercial and non-commercial sex); (3) their encounters with the criminal justice system in Hong Kong and China and (4) the relationship between commercial sex and male identity.

After in-depth interviews, I invited respondents to join focus groups to discuss and share their experiences and provided a means for triangulation. One-third of them joined. They were asked to comment on the meanings of commercial sex, client-worker relationships, models of regulating commercial sex as well as the relationship between commercial sex and male identity.

It is not easy to interview stigmatized groups like clients (Sanders 2008b: 13–32). I overcame this problem due to my research experience in the sex industry of over ten years. Apart from two respondents who were recruited by a sex worker referral ($n = 1$) and an advertising pamphlet ($n = 1$), the rest were through three main sources: (1) my personal network gathered over the time spent in the field as a researcher ($n = 8$); (2) the snowball technique from other participants who were keen to tell their sexual stories, like a 'cathartic experience' (Campbell 1998: 158) or a 'desire to confess' (Grenz 2005: 2098–2103), and their referral of friends for interview ($n = 7$) and (3) referrals from NGOs who provide outreach and support for sex workers and/or clients in which I have established rapport ($n = 7$). It should be noted that this paper is concerned primarily with men's management of risks in buying sex and secondarily with the production of masculinity and reproduction of sexism as well as alternatives, and as such, does

not focus on women's subjugation. For further understanding on the latter, see [Kong \(2006\)](#).

Ethics approval was obtained through the University's institutional review board. The nature of the study was carefully explained and confidentiality and anonymity were emphasized. All names appearing in this article are pseudonyms with minor alterations of their biographies. Written consent was sought before audio-recording interviews, which were later transcribed from spoken Cantonese to written Cantonese by verbatim, with quotes translated into written English. Guided by a grounded theory approach ([Strauss and Corbin 1997](#)), data analysis included identifying themes, building codebooks and marking texts ([Ryan and Bernard 2000](#)). Coding themes were initially based on the interview guidelines, derived from existing literature on clients and edgework. Findings and analyses were then compared to existing local and international literatures.

The interviews lasted from 1.5 to 3 hours and focus groups 3 to 4 hours. Respondents' ages ranged from 17 to 68 with a mean age of 35.8 years. Nine were single, another nine were single with regular girlfriend(s), five married and one divorced. While one had only primary education, the rest had completed secondary ($n = 8$) or tertiary education ($n = 15$). The age of first patronizing female sex workers ranged from 15 to 35 with a mean of 22.6 years. Their length of involvement as a client ranged from six months to 35 years with a mean of 11.5 years.

Chinese Masculinity and Commercial Sex

What is the role of buying sex in the changing nature of Chinese masculinities and heterosexual sexual scripts in Hong Kong from colonial to post-colonial times? Hong Kong was a British colony from 1842 until 1997, when it became a special administrative region of China. In early colonial Hong Kong, men assumed the patriarchal role of the household head. Polygamy and arranged marriage were widely practiced and men's patronage with prostitutes did not necessarily imply a violation of masculinity, as long as they fulfilled conjugal and family duties and had the ability to control their 'excess' desire (e.g. masturbation, homosexuality). From 1879 to 1932, prostitution was legalized and prostitutes were required to register for license, pay fees to the government and undergo medical examination. In 1932, the colonial government issued a ban on prostitution and three years later, licensed prostitution ended ([Lethbridge 1978](#): 76–8; [Yang 2006](#): 52–3). The colonial government then followed the British's model of regulating prostitution (1932–now), which allowed the sale of sex but banned all related activities such as soliciting, pimping brothel-keeping with the intention of balancing public disorder and private freedom. As a result, prostitution is legal only when an individual works independently and indoors, whilst soliciting and all third party activities are prohibited. Despite the legal change, prostitution was still culturally tolerated, functioning as a release for men's tensions under arranged marriage and thus retaining men's loyalty towards the traditional family unit ([Lethbridge 1978](#): 73).

In modern industrial Hong Kong (1950s–1980s), male identity was increasingly defined in terms of material security and possession in order to improve family livelihood ([Kong 2009](#): 726–7). In the realm of intimacy, monogamous marriage became the only form of marriage in 1971. This legal change was advanced by the colonial

government to modernize the law, as well as through campaigns pressed by women's groups, churches and professionals (Lam 2004: 72–80). Since then, love and affection have become the cornerstone of modern marriage; life-long, heterosexual and monogamous relationships are privileged and are the benchmark of all other relationships (Kong 2011: 111). It is under this hierarchical valuation of sex (Rubin 1984) that recreational sexuality like one night stands, extra-marital affairs or commercial sex have been heavily stigmatized.

In contemporary Hong Kong since the 1990s, individual competence and material success have become key dimensions for defining a man (Kong 2009: 726–7). However, Hong Kong men have increasingly felt the pressure of accomplishing masculinity. In the realm of work, breadwinner masculinity has been threatened by the economic restructuring from a manufacturing-based to a services-based economy and by the rise of women's education and their participation in the labour market (Equal Opportunities Commission 2012; Leung and Chan 2014). In the realm of intimacy, the 'companionate marriage model' has become the norm and men are increasingly prone to the 'romantic script' (i.e. courting, falling in love and forming a monogamous life-long coupled relationship). However, this creates tension as they find the exclusiveness of projecting emotional and sexual needs onto one person unrealistic. They are increasingly subject to the 'adventure script' (i.e. uncontrollable sex drive, sexual adventurism without commitment) rooted in traditional Chinese patriarchal culture as well as under the 'promiscuous paradigm' of sexual pleasure that has been largely endorsed in consumerist urban sexual culture (Kong 2015).

Hong Kong men thus seek ways to fulfil emotional and sexual needs in different intimate and sexual relationships (e.g. commercial sex, extra-marital affairs). Two salient (push and pull) factors account for and facilitate this 'hedonistic' shift in Hong Kong. First, increasingly more women are entering the sex industry as a means to earn more money (mainly local women) or as ways of survival (mainly mainland Chinese women who come as new migrants or tourists) (Kong 2006). Second, the massive relocation of industrial infrastructure from Hong Kong to mainland China after China's economic reforms (1978–now) has facilitated cross-border familial and sexual relations (Lang and Smart 2002; Xiao 2011). Cross-border commercial sex is very common. Hong Kong men whose businesses have shifted to China have to adopt a typical Chinese business culture in which dinning, visiting karaoke lounges and nightclubs are part of *guanxi* ('relationship') building (Zheng 2006; Shen 2008).

Although the Chinese government claimed to have successfully eradicated prostitution in the Mao period (1949–78), the sex industry has loomed large since the reform (Jeffreys and Huang 2009). The Chinese government aims to eradicate all forms of prostitution. As a result, both sex workers and their clients, if arrested, are subject to periods of reform detention (usually for 14 days) along with possible fines. At present, common forms of commercial sex in Hong Kong are street prostitution, one-woman brothels, karaoke bars, massage parlours, escorts and 'compensated dating' (clients finding teenage girls online for companionship and/or sexual favour) and in China, street prostitution, hair salons, massage parlours, karaoke bars and night clubs. The purchase of sex can be an individual act (e.g. 'rite of passage' to become an adulthood), a social activity (e.g. birthday gift or after-drink activity) or part of a Chinese business culture.

Therefore, Hong Kong men are undergoing a new ‘reflexive project of the self’ (Giddens 1991: 9), torn between two opposing sexual scripts: they are prone to the romantic script under the companionate paradigm of relationship, which emphasizes monogamy, fidelity and commitment. However, they are also prone to the adventure script under the promiscuous paradigm of sexual pleasure, which emphasizes explosive sex drive, sexual adventure and pleasure without commitment. It is under these two opposing sexual scripts that buying sex can be seen as an interesting site in which masculinity is actually produced. It is a site where Hong Kong men exercise their power and domination and reproduce a form of dominant masculinity that justifies sexism. At the same time, it is also a site where they experience a new form of intimacy and vulnerability that they may not be easily found in a non-commercial intimate relationship. In either way, buying sex presents a variety of risks that these men are experiencing in Hong Kong and in China. The notion of edgework helps us understand how they negotiate risks in commercial sex. What are the thrills perceived by these men, what are the risks involved and what are the major edgework skills that male clients employ?

Commercial Sex: Risks, Sensations and Edgework Skills

Consumption of female bodies and the risk of overindulgence

As reported by most respondents, the first thrill of commercial sex derives from the abundance of women, like other consumer products, ready for them to consume. Similar to other studies (McKeganey and Barnard 1996: 51–2; Peng 2007: 324; Milrod and Monto 2012), respondents found great pleasure in the selection process (e.g. surfing online sex forums, visiting brothels/hair salons). The most dazzling and spectacular experiences reported are in Dongguan, China. Dongguan represents one of these economic zones which are important masculine ‘playgrounds’ that facilitate capitalist expansion by cultivating commercial sexual culture into working relations and networks, celebrate masculine erotic desire and the public ritual of male bonding and reinforce these women as consumer products to be sold in the sexual market (Shen 2008: 70–1). In other words, this is one of the major sites where men reinforce and reproduce sexism and gender discrimination.

There are mega sex clubs in Dongguan with hundreds of women graphically displayed, giving these men great pleasure in choosing and consuming women and making them ‘feel like a king’. It is the actual entering of, what respondents called, ‘an underground secret “meat” market’, meeting these women, and creating a sexual fantasy, mingled with elements of fear and adventure, that gave them the first thrill (Holzman and Pines 1982: 111; Sanders 2008b: 45–6). Lyng’s skydivers are ‘weekend warriors’; so, too, are these men in their sexual adventures.

Sunny (29, single, secondary school educated, garment salesman) has a regular girlfriend but has been a client for about six years. He finds the Dongguan experience the most rewarding:

When we got there, there were hostesses greeting you at the lobby. You just felt like a king... and then there were a few hundred girls waiting for you to choose...they dressed so sexy... and transparent, you could see their bras and underpants...they also dressed in different colours with different prices... red, white, yellow... ranging from \$258 to \$1,000 (£20–80)... it was dazing and spectacular Too many girls... some were really pretty... looked like movie stars or models.

The second thrill emerges from stepping outside of their ‘normal’ mundane intimate encounters to experience ‘fun’ and have sex with a woman whom they find attractive. As Sunny said, ‘I started to feel the sex with my girlfriend boring after around six months. Because it’s always the same person, the same move and the same procedure, it lacks “freshness”’. Ah Tak (52, married, secondary school educated, cross-border businessman since 1994) has been a client for more than 30 years.

At the beginning of your marriage, you were excited to have sex with your wife... but afterwards, you lost interest and are not getting excited so easily... but they (female sex workers) are different... they have much better skills... they know how to blow you... how to lick you all over the body... and with different weird and bizarre positions, etc. you just can’t ask your wife to do these to you, can you?! ... I did anal intercourse once. It was trendy at a time... it was kind of exciting... well I didn’t really enjoy the act, but I did enjoy the fact that you asked her to do it and she did it for you.

The respondents compare paid and unpaid sex (Plumridge *et al.* 1997: 170) by expressing certain dissatisfaction with their intimate partners (Peng 2007: 324) and by enjoying specific sex acts with sex workers that their partners would not perform (Campbell 1998: 163; McKeganey and Barnard 1996: 51). Sex with girlfriends/wives is seen as safe and comforting but mundane, whilst commercial sex is exciting, fun, dangerous and risky. Home is seen as a sphere of obligations, commitments and conflicts whilst commercial sex becomes ‘an ideal space for some men to access a fantasy of freedom, independence, and idealized masculinity’ (Frank 2006: 122).

Moreover, commercial sex is about personal consumer choice. They refer to this as ‘me’ time; they are not obligated to serve but only to enjoy the sex. Leo (28, single, university student) said, ‘If I am having sex with my girlfriend, I would think 70% how to make her comfortable and happy and 30% about myself.... but with a sex worker, I would think 0% whether she is comfortable or not’. As said by McKeganey (1994), ‘by paying for sex the males felt able to place their own sexual desires at centre stage and to largely disregard the sexual preferences of their female partner.’ (295).

Edgework activities can have addictive consequences (Lyng 2005: 18) and buying sex is a highly addictive hobby. This seemed to be the case with Ah Kit (32, secondary school educated, car mechanic) who reported that he was addicted to commercial sex, feeling compelled to visit brothel women a few times a day when he was in his 20s. The monthly salary of Terry (63, married with two children, secondary educated, cross-border businessman since 1999) was once \$30,000 (approx. £2,500) but he spent almost one-third (\$10,000, approx. £800) on commercial sex per month for a year. They both admitted that these were the ‘craziest and ridiculous times’ which for them represented a kind of self-destruction, chaos and slavery. In the focus groups, most respondents reported two to three visits per month and spending less than 10 per cent of their incomes was ‘optimal’.

Respondents tend to understand buying sex as a consumer behaviour which gives them the opportunity to choose, enact their wild imagination, escape from mundane intimacy and have ‘me’ time—to give in to excess and dive into the action. But they also realize that they should have the ability to come back and take control of this highly addictive behaviour. Similar to Reith’s (2005) discussion of the edgework of recreation drug users, men who buy sex have to negotiate between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ consumption and between the ‘annihilation of the self in addiction and the realization of the self in fulfilling activity’ (234). The task of edgework is to regulate the excess, to monitor the risk of overindulgence and to negotiate the boundary between control and excess.

Consuming 'bounded' romance and the emotional risk of falling in love

One recent debate in male client studies is whether men merely seek a purely sexual release or seek a romantic/emotional connection with sex workers (Plumridge *et al.* 1997; Bernstein 2007; Sanders 2008a; Huff 2011; Milrod and Weitzer 2012; Kong 2015). The sale of affection is not new, as it was common in courtesan prostitution (e.g. Shanghai in pre-modern China); what is new is the marketing of such experience (Weitzer 2009: 227). As Bernstein (2007: 105) argues, post-industrial prostitution deliberately incorporates emotion into the commercial sexual contract. Respondents do not seek the standardized, mechanical and impersonal kind of sex in commercial sex. What they purchase is not just sexual labour but emotional labour of sex (Kong 2006: 418–21; Sanders 2008a: 413). They want a certain degree of emotionality in commercial sex but set a clear boundary with these women. They seek time bounded romance in the purchase of commercial sex (Bernstein 2007: 120; Milrod and Weitzer 2012: 452–61; Kong 2015). However, respondents commonly develop special feelings for these women over time. Most respondents have had at least one such experience.

Aron (25, single, university student) dislikes the mechanical and impersonal sex but finds pleasure in the emotional interaction with female sex workers (such as 'hugging and kissing'). At one time, he patronized a young brothel woman, gradually becoming more intense in their interactions, and within a few months, the relationship became serious:

I was so into her... I really liked her and I think she also liked me too... she could let me do whatever I wanted. And so I did it once without using it (a condom).... And I also French kissed with her while we were making love.

Condom use for vaginal intercourse is a widely established rule in commercial sex and kissing, especially French kissing, is regarded as something more intimate that should be avoided in commercial sex (Kong 2006: 420–21). These two practices can be seen as major edgework skills for clients as these are the ways they differentiate different types of sex partner. After doing this, Aron 'freaked out' as he violated the taboo in commercial sex—falling in love with a sex worker ('sunken boat' in Hong Kong (Kong 2015) or 'seasickness' in Taiwan (Peng 2007: 327))—as popularly circulated in online client forums. As he said, 'our relationship had been built on money and I only wanted to satisfy my desires. My main purpose was to have sex, not to think too much ... like a relationship'. So he eventually stopped seeing her as the relationship became more like a conventional love relationship which killed the 'fun'.

However, some respondents go over the edge and, in becoming emotionally engaged with the sex worker, wind up becoming vulnerable. The encounters usually end in remorse. Terry (63, married with two children, secondary educated, cross-border businessman since 1999) recounted one of such an episode with a woman whom he met in a sex club in Dongguan:

I had been going out with her for almost two years... and then she treated me so badly... I had once waited for her in a hotel for the whole night and she didn't show up... another time she didn't want to have sex with me... and she disappeared for a year but all of a sudden she showed up and asked me for money. She said she wanted to open a beauty salon and asked me to lend \$30,000 (£2500) to her... I gave her \$5000 (£200)... and later deposited another \$5000 to her account... She then disappeared forever... I know I was fucking stupid. I was angry with myself, not the money but I trusted the wrong person.

Respondents, in individual sessions and focus group discussions, frequently commented that engagement with commercial sex without a certain degree of emotionality with these women was not 'sophisticated' and was 'boring', whilst investment of too much emotionality was 'stupid' and 'dangerous'. These men thus seek a time-bounded quasi-romantic and emotional connection with these women without turning them into their girlfriends. In other words, they compartmentalize their relationships with their non-paid partners and sex workers (Campbell 1998: 163) in order to fulfil their different sexual and emotional needs. However, emotional risk is an essential component of the pleasure with this kind of bounded intimacy (Huff 2011: 120). Most respondents had experiences of falling in love with a sex worker and they later found out that they were cheated in money and were left emotionally wounded.

It should be noted that emotional risk relates to other risks, e.g. sexual risk (e.g. contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)) as clients tend not to use condoms when they have special feelings with sex workers (Robertson *et al.* 2014; Kong 2015). It also relates to the risk of divorce or breakup if the client falls in love with a sex worker and the relationship becomes too serious. Emotional control is thus important in edgework experiences (e.g. Lois 2001) and emotional chaos should be included in the discussion of chaos in edgework literature (Newmahr 2011: 690). Men who buy sex have to negotiate the emotional (and sexual) risk of time-bounded 'romance' as a form of recreational sex without mixing love and sex. The edgework is to find the thrill of buying 'bounded' romance without collapsing the boundary between love and sex, between commitment and fun or between companionate sexuality and recreational sexuality, in order not to fall into emotional chaos which will have real consequences.

The moral risks of discovery

Respondents justified their buying of sex with different reasons (e.g. male sexual drive, a hobby, a lifestyle or even consumer or sexual right) but they gave a unanimous reply that society has a strong moral stigma against male clients, being considered a 'bad' guy. However, this does not stop them from their behaviour even though they would not run the risk of admitting to it. Peter (40, married with three kids, university educated, cross-border businessman since 1995) has been patronizing sex workers for more than a decade but has no intention to end his marriage, 'I am morally bad, unfaithful, to my wife, and this is wrong...I am selfish... but for personal enjoyment, I am still doing it... this is another form of satisfaction'.

Because of the 'discreditable' stigma, most of the respondents chose to hide their client identity and live a double life. For those who are married or in a relationship, concealing their status as client is of utmost importance as affairs and buying sex are still regarded as major relationship problems and as legitimate reasons for divorce or deal breakers, even though in reality divorce (or a breakup) usually results when the client falls in love with the sex worker and the relationship becomes too serious. Nevertheless, divorce has financial implications as the husband usually has to pay alimony which paradoxically makes them less financially able to afford commercial sex. The edgework is thus to manage the stigma, similar to Goffman's (1963) stigma management techniques like 'passing', 'covering', 'denial' or 'lying'. Most respondents did not reveal these details to their family but shared them with friends or colleagues who are also clients or whom they could really trust. They used fake names and concealed important

personal information from sex workers and used various reasons to lie to their family members (e.g. fake business trips). All would deny their involvement even if they were found out. They developed skills to avoid leaving traces, negotiating the risks of secrecy and disclosure. Peter said,

You have to throw anything away before you get home...you have to search your whole body first... I did once that I bought stuff for that girl and had the receipt in my pocket. It was woman stuff... It was found out by my wife and I lied to her that it was for my client...I have two phones and I will delete every message before coming back to Hong Kong... I never find sex workers over weekends. These are the times I will only spend with my family.

Tony (42, married with a daughter, university educated, cross-border businessman since 1996) developed 'tricks' to cover his tracks.

My baseline is not to sleep over night... sometimes I avoid hugging and kissing with them because of the smell and lipstick ... I would do it when we both take off our clothes... I would not do aromatic massage... don't use shampoo or soap when shower... don't be too clean or smell too hygienic... sometimes I would ask my friends to cover for me.

As Sanders (2008b: 111) observes, men felt bound to the contract of marriage or partnership but also underwent a process of restructuring their intimate personal lives through commercial relationships. They found the merits of marriage or coupled relationships (e.g. emotional reliance, co-dependence and public accountability), yet sought a combination of sexual and emotional intimacy through commercial relationships with sex workers. Due to social stigma, these men carefully conceal their engagement with the sex industry through different edgework skills, e.g. passing, covering, time management, compartmentalization, denial, tricks, etc., in order to negotiate the moral risk of being discovered and carefully maintain the boundary of secrecy and disclosure between a public 'good' man (e.g. good husband, good father) and a private 'bad' guy (e.g. male client).

Legal risks

In Hong Kong, although sex workers are the main target of prosecution, clients can be arrested if they solicit sex workers in public or have sex with a minor. The risk of being caught in Hong Kong is small. Still, two respondents were charged by the police for 'soliciting for an immoral purpose' (Cap 200 s 147) when one was waiting for a female sex worker with an agent and the other dated a compensated dating girl who was the 'bait' in a police entrapment operation.

In terms of legal risk, buying sex is more dangerous in Mainland China. That is why almost one-third of respondents decided not to buy sex in China and only did so in Hong Kong. For those who go to China, they have to face the threat of detention. However, the laws, either in Hong Kong or in China, do not seem to stop respondents from buying sex even though, they, like clients in other studies, anticipate fear of being arrested (Holzman and Pines 1982: 106; Holt and Blevins 2007: 347–9).

So how does edgework operate in this context? How do they continue this risky behaviour without being caught? In Hong Kong, they learnt not to initiate soliciting, not to be the first client of a 'new' girl and to check ID. Lawrence (40, married with

a daughter, university educated, works in the IT industry) browses sex forums to find compensated dating girls.

I will only find those (girls) I know... I will find those who have been already reported by other clients in online forum... I always check ID... there was once that I asked the girl to show me her ID card and she was 16, so I left.

In China, they went to big night clubs/massage parlours or to those where they had established rapport with the managers. As Terry (63, married with two children, secondary educated, cross-border businessman since 1999) said,

I never walk in! I only go to a brothel that is recommended by a friend. Some people brag about they know some 'iron vice den', which would not be interfered by the police because these brothels have good connection with some powerful people or the authority. But from my point of view, there is no such thing as an 'iron vice den'. Experiences tell me that the only thing that you must have when you play around in China is a close friend who can save you quickly. Let's say if you got arrested last night, there should be someone to bail you out this morning. I have never got arrested so far, but I have experienced police checking the hotel rooms several times. People from the hotel somehow knew the police were coming and they notified you in advance. Then, I would not keep a girl in my room.

Ah Tak (52 years old, married, secondary educated, cross-border businessman since 1994) had an experience in which he was almost caught red-handed.

It was so dangerous, we had already taken off our clothes... and the mommy called and said police was raiding the venue... the naked girl rushed to the toilet and closed the door... I was sitting on the bed, and saw her slippers and I threw them out the window and put her clothes and other stuff under the bed. The police just came in and they searched the room and left... but my \$200 dollar notes put on the bedside were gone.

Even though they did not welcome this kind of dangerous encounter, some, like Terry and Ah Tak, found the edginess of the experience exciting (McKeganey and Barnard 1996: 53). The risk of being caught is real. As mentioned by many edgework scholars, the threat of genuine risk is necessary for the experiential thrill of edgework and if danger is too easy to avoid completely, the experience becomes boring and unexciting (Miller 2005: 155; Reith 2005: 241). So the edgework skill of 'survival capacity' is to 'control the uncontrollable', to get to the edge as close as possible without actually going over it.

Discussion and Conclusion

Departing from traditional and historical masculine roles, Hong Kong men are increasingly preoccupied with the reflexive project of the self. They are increasingly prone to the ideals of romantic love, subject to companionate sexuality under the egalitarian model of relationship which emphasizes monogamy, fidelity and commitment. However, they are also prone to the adventure script under the promiscuous paradigm of sexual pleasure that largely endorses recreational sexuality and seeks fun without commitment (Kong 2015). Living under these two opposing sexual scripts in contemporary Hong Kong, male clients negotiate risks at the normative edge of social behaviour while enjoying the thrill of commercial sex.

First, sex with partners is regarded as safe and normal but mundane. Sex with sex workers is dangerous and risky but also exciting and fun. The former is about commitment and duty, and the latter is about personal consumption and gratification. It is thus easy to become obsessed with commercial sex especially under the consumerist urban sexual culture with so many women, on display and on sale. Overindulgence may lead to self-destruction, chaos and slavery. So the first dimension of edgework is to regulate excess and to negotiate the boundary between normal and 'addicted' consumption.

Over time, men who buy sex might develop emotional attachment or feelings of love toward for certain sex workers. But they have no intention of sacrificing their primary relationships over this. They compartmentalize companionate and recreational sexuality to fulfil their various sexual and emotional needs. The second dimension of edgework is to negotiate the emotional risk (and corresponding sexual risk) by maintaining the boundary with these women without falling in love with them and thus turning fun into commitment and killing the thrill.

Buying sex, in most societies, is still regarded as a socially unacceptable behaviour, which may be derived from the hegemonic model of companionate sexuality. They may accept a kind of 'bad' masculinity (which could be seen as an implicit critique to the model of companionate sexuality), yet they do not have any intention to disclose this practice. The third edgework is to stay in the closet and not be discovered. This becomes an urgent task, especially for those who are married or in a committed relationship. Moreover, buying sex in most societies is illegal behaviour. So the final dimension of edgework is to find ways to escape from the legal risks of being caught.

Men who buy sex engage in voluntary risky behaviour that can be seen as a leisure edgework that involves the fundamental boundary of negotiation between order and chaos. In particular, these men negotiate four major risks at the normative 'edge' of the companionate sexuality while enjoying the thrill of recreational sex: the consumption risk of overindulgence, the emotional risk of turning recreational sexuality into companionate sexuality, the moral risk of being discovered and the legal risk of being caught. Edgeworkers are not gamblers and they believe in their ability to overcome the threats (Miller 2005: 156). They thus derive various skills, competencies and resources to negotiate the boundary between normal and 'addicted' consumption, between fun and commitment, between being a good man and a bad guy and between legal and illegal behaviour, in order to overcome serious challenges in their lives. In a nutshell, men buying sex indicate that they participate in the central features of edgework: pushing oneself to the edge, testing the limits of various boundaries/risks, exercising particular skills and experiencing feelings of self-actualization at the end.

Failure in the performance of edgework can result in chaos and disaster, derived explicitly or implicitly from the typology: financial and status loss, emotional damage, breaking up of primary relationships, divorce, contracting illness (e.g. STDs) or even imprisonment. A male client who is being kept in a detention centre for 14 days or whose relationship is facing a breakdown when his wife discovered his habit is undergoing an experience no less damaging and devastating than a motorcyclist having an accident when he was 'screaming through an S-curve at 120 miles per hour' (Lyng 1998: 221), an anorexic woman rushing to hospital due to her organs shutting down from starvation (Gailey 2009: 105), or a drug user who has lost his consciousness completely with no return (Reith 2005: 241). In this sense, the risks involved in commercial sex are comparable to risks involved in other risky behaviours (e.g. skydiving, pro-anorexia or

recreational drug taking). Moreover, taking these different risks into consideration, it is hard to say buying sex in Hong Kong poses less risk than in China. For example, although in Hong Kong, there is less of a legal risk than in China, it is easier for Hong Kong men to buy sex in China in order to conceal their activities. The overall risks involved vary from one case to another.

Using Hong Kong men who buy sex as an example, buying sex exemplifies the paradox of edgework in contemporary society. Commercial sex could be seen as men's escape from and resistance to the hegemonic model of companionate sexuality. Respondents frequently mentioned the mundane nature of companionate sexuality. They were tired of the pragmatic romantic narratives of longevity, stability and comfort. They refused the 'mundane, rational, calculative world and seek to escape through a joy...at the edge of chaos' (O'Malley and Mugford 1994: 194). Commercial sex, as an edgework practice, is located in the 'uncivilised space' of sex venues (e.g. brothels, massage parlour, love motels, etc.) where male clients resist the 'imperatives of emotional control, rational calculation, routinization, and reason in modern society' (Lyng 2005: 6). Commercial sex, like other edgework, serves as a vehicle of escape from social expectations for a man (e.g. good worker, boyfriend, husband) and offers a few opportunities for personal transformation and character development. Men who buy sex seek a temporary escape from the conditions of family life and bureaucratic institutions. Through commercial sex, they experience an intense sensation of self-determination and control and exercise their sexual rights which to them seem to be deprived of by society.

On the other hand, commercial sex is a celebration of recreational sexuality which embodies all sorts of risks, e.g. the risk of overindulgence, the risk of damaging primary relationships (or family life), the risk of being discovered, the risk of being caught; these are all uncertainties of the risk society we now live in. The skills and competencies learnt from commercial sex are indeed essential key cultural principles and key institutional demands of late-modern society. For example, the way these men regulate 'excess' commercial sex is the same way people regulate other 'excess' consumption practices (e.g. recreational drugs (Reith 2005) or eating disorders (Gailey 2009)). The way these men balance companionate sexuality and recreational sexuality without collapsing the boundary is the same way people control and balance various aspects of their fragmented lives with clear compartmentalization on family (or conjugal) commitments and work duties, or on personal pursuit and development (e.g. hobbies, interests). The way these men live a double life is the same way people keep their own secrets and maintain a clear division between public image and private self. The way these men escape from being caught by the police is the same way people use a 'survival capacity' to get around the law. In other words, the skills embodied in buying sex—regulating excess, control and balance, being vigilant and self-reliant and believing in one's survival capacity—valorize 'risk-taking propensities and skills in demand throughout the institutional structures of the risk society' (Lyng 2005: 9–10). This kind of skills is increasingly seen as determining one's (especially man's) success in economic, political and interpersonal endeavours (Lyng and Matthews 2007: 92). Edgework not only plays a key role in shaping masculinity and men's sexual scripts in modern intimacy, but also seems to be an integral part of urban social life.

This article is the first attempt to broaden the discussion on commercial sex by using the notion of edgework, contributing to both client and edgework literatures: first, it understands men buying sex as a negotiation between risk and pleasure that require

skills and competencies and has important significance to urban social life; second, it expands the notion of risk (e.g. consumption, emotional, moral and legal risks) in understanding commercial sex; and third, it argues that not only boring work life, but also mundane couple/married life, could be a reason for participation in risk-taking activities. During the course of analysis, it has become clear that edgework is indeed a highly gendered practice as it is closely related to masculinity and intimacy, in particular how masculinity is constructed in edgework practices and how edgework shapes men's sexual scripts. Edgework can thus be seen as a gendering strategy.

This article is written from the perspective of the edgeworker, and in this specific case, Hong Kong men who patronize female sex workers. There is a potential pitfall of idolizing their subjective position. It should be noted that there are unequal relational elements of this business and that gendered and heterosexualized power dynamics are at work. In most cases, male clients, due to their socio-economic positions, occupy a more dominant and superior position. They hold power and control the worker–client relationship, evident by the ways in which they engineer their business trips, spend what they want on the trade with the capacity of opting in and out. On the contrary, female sex workers do not have the luxury to freely retract their labour due to their marginalized positions (e.g. type of trade, migrancy, homelessness, use of drug). Female sex workers are easily trapped by this particular brand of consumer capitalism and are vulnerable to the handling of clients. Therefore, knowing how to 'suss out' the right client free from physical or any other forms of violence, not falling in love with clients or 'finishing' a client under their control are all important edgework skills for female sex workers to protect themselves. However, far from being a sexual victim, female sex workers are well aware of how to make use of their own limited resources (e.g. body, skill, attitude or the art of being 'an emotional labour of sex') in order to advance their own interests, especially the ways how they handle young and inexperienced clients or regular clients (Kong 2006). The client–worker relationship is more complex than a stereotypical dominant-subordinate position can capture.

Gender is a not just a descriptive category, but a socio-political one. Similarly, commercial sex is not merely an exchange of sexual services for money but a site of domination and subordination embedded in a complex web of social relations. It is through this commercial sexual exchange that we can see how masculinity is actually produced in the gendered and heterosexualized power dynamics. It is true that some clients emphasize the fulfilment of 'natural' male sexual desire and are proud of the number of sex workers they have sex with. In a sense, they prefer a more impersonal kind of sex and 'consume' and objectify these women in a very real sense. They thus reflect and reinforce a form of dominant masculinity (e.g. 'feel like a king', 'weekend sex warrior') as well as justifying and reproducing sexism and gender inequality (e.g. sex workers are the 'sexual other', a vector of sexual disease, or an object to be sold in the sex market). However, there are also a substantial number of clients who do not like impersonal sex but prefer a 'reciprocal', 'private' and 'customised' intimacy which can fulfil their affective needs that may not be easily found in a non-commercial intimate relationship. Although they may reflect another form of dominant masculinity (e.g. I want to 'save' these women), be paternalistic about these women or do not necessarily strive for gender equality (e.g. men are stronger than women), they at least are not misogynists and they respect these women. In some cases, their involvements with female sex workers wind up becoming emotionally and financially vulnerable. The traditional marriage/

prostitution (or Madonna/whore) binary that views paid sex as a quick and impersonal sexual outlet or the compensatory argument that views paid sex as a reassertion of masculinity due to men's economic disempowerment in a services-based economy may not fully capture clients' range of aspirations and longings for love, sex and intimacy. Clients, like sex workers, are not a unified subject, but embody a range of experiences and identities responsive to their different sexual and emotional needs through their level of physical and emotional engagements with sex workers. Commercial sex is one of the many sites where men experience both domination and vulnerability in which they derive edgework skills to handle the challenging situation.

Funding

This research is funded by Hong Kong Research Grants Council Public Policy Research Funding Scheme 'Purchasing Sex, Consuming Love: A Qualitative Study of Hong Kong Men Who Buy Sex' (HKU 7014-PPR-12).

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Prof. Karen Joe Laidler and two anonymous reviewers for providing invaluable comments on earlier drafts.

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