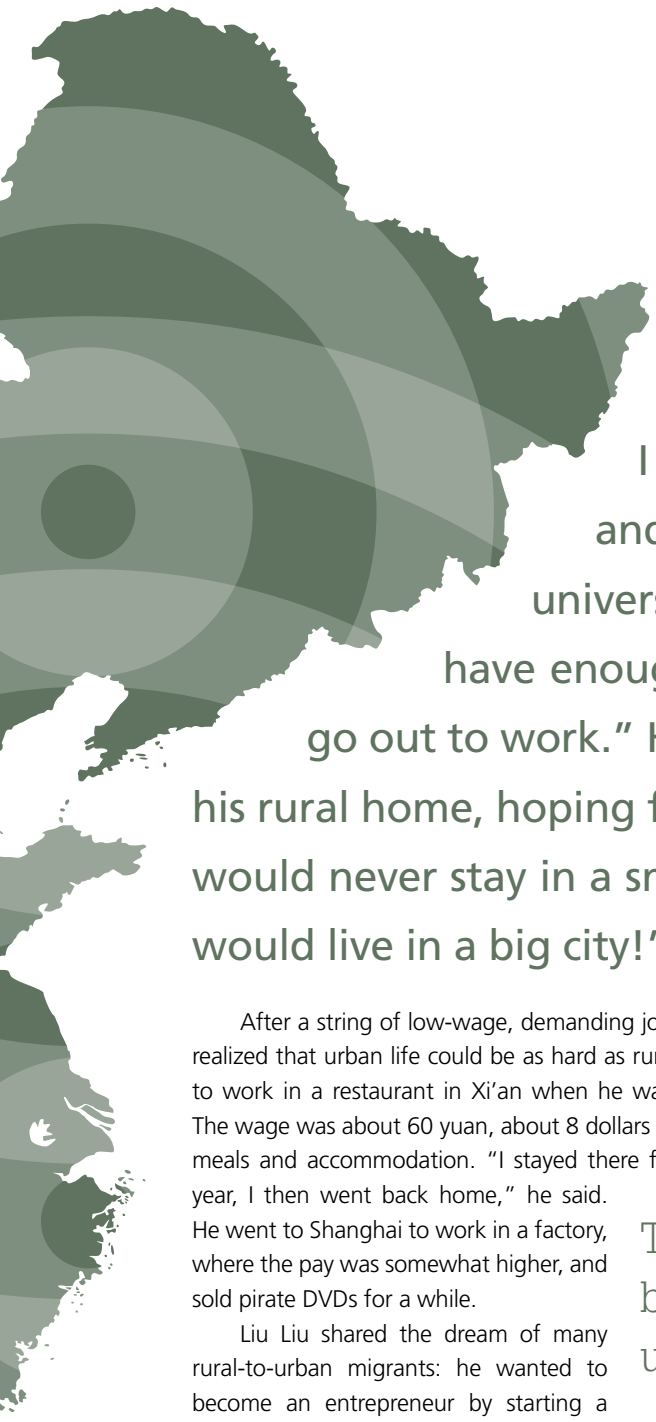
sex entrepreneurs in the new china

by travis s.k. kong



Liu Liu was born in a small village. "My family was very poor," he told me. "When I was young I did not do well in education and knew that I would not be able to go to university. Even if I could, my family would not have enough money to afford my study. I decided to go out to work." He desperately wanted to move away from his rural home, hoping for a brighter life in the city. "I swore that I would never stay in a small village for the rest of my life. I swore I would live in a big city!"

After a string of low-wage, demanding jobs, Liu Liu soon realized that urban life could be as hard as rural life. He went to work in a restaurant in Xi'an when he was 16 years old. The wage was about 60 yuan, about 8 dollars per month, plus meals and accommodation. "I stayed there for about half a year, I then went back home," he said. He went to Shanghai to work in a factory, where the pay was somewhat higher, and sold pirate DVDs for a while.

Liu Liu shared the dream of many rural-to-urban migrants: he wanted to become an entrepreneur by starting a small business or opening a small shop such as a restaurant, grocery store, or boutique. These aspirations were never realized. So, rather than moving back to his village, he grasped an opportunity to earn some quick money, and became a sex worker. In 2006, through some friends he made chatting on the Internet, he began to work in a bar and to earn money from sex work.

In China, male sex workers who predominantly serve men are called "money boys," or *zai* ("son," "boy"), while those who serve women are called *yazi* ("duck") or *nan gongguan* ("male public relation"). Money boys comprise the largest group of male sex workers. The actual size of this population is unknown, and estimates vary widely. Of the 2 to 20 million men who have sex with other men in China, 5 to 24 percent of them are money boys.

For gay money boys, migration represents a way to escape from the rural homophobic environment and avoid familial pressures to get married. In Shenzhen, perhaps the most liberal city in China, Liu Liu says, "I can make love with men, lots of men!" Like other rural migrants, he was drawn into sex work when he became disillusioned with the hardships of both agricultural and industrial work. He wanted the freedom offered by an urban lifestyle. "I thought I would earn some money, and yes indeed, I have earned quite a lot of money," he says. "And my clients helped me buy a flat! I can tell people that I live much happier than any one of my relatives who still live in my home village."

Transience characterizes the lives of money boys, self-reliance is their motif of survival, and urban entrepreneurship is their dream.

Since 2004, I have conducted ethnographic research on the male sex work industry in three major Chinese cities that

Contexts, Vol. 11, No.3, pp. 28-33. ISSN 1536-5042, electronic ISSN 1537-6052. © 2012 American Sociological Association. http://contexts.sagepub.com. DOI 10.1177/1536504212456179

© Qilai Shen/In Pictures/Corbis/Associated Press

China's growing emphasis on capitalist ideals prompts many rural citizens to migrate to cities in pursuit of greater wealth.

have large concentrations of money boys: Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. I have interviewed more than 60 money boys, and participated in non-government organization outreach teams, visiting venues frequented by money boys and gay men, such as parks, bars, saunas, massage parlors, and nightclubs.

Most Chinese people see money boys as powerless young men who suffer personality deficits, childhood traumas, and family dysfunction, or as rural-to-urban migrants with little or no education, who are unaware of the illegality of prostitution. Attracted to the quick money that can be earned through sex work, these innocent young men, they believe, are lured by pimps, who then lock them up in brothels and force them to have sex with clients. Such experiences lead to severe depression, substance abuse, and high-risk sex for money boys, who become vectors of sexual diseases and victims of exploitative capitalism.

Contrary to this widespread view, what I've found is that money boys are rural-to-urban migrants who have made a rational choice to engage in sex work in order to become successful urban citizens and entrepreneurs. The experiences of men like Liu Liu must be understood within the context of China's quest for urbanization, modernization, and globalization. The reconfiguration of the "capitalist" market and the "socialist" party-state in reform China has generated new forms of possibility and control on both the societal and the individual level, opening up a labor market that has led to massive rural-to-urban migration. This, and the state's diminished control over private life, has led to a growing informal sex labor market, as well as the emergence of gay and lesbian identities and communities.

The growing emphasis on capitalist ideals in China means that individuals are being encouraged to pursue their fortunes, prompting many to move from the countryside to the city. Sex work provides financial and other rewards at a time when China is undergoing rapid change and modernization. It enables some to escape the constraints of their daily lives, but also leads to dislocation and displacement.

becoming a money boy

In China, the state's increasing promotion of the market economy has led to a massive "floating population" of rural-to-urban migrants. The adverse working lives of these migrants have been well documented: from the increasing numbers of protests and strikes by rural migrant workers in recent years, to the recent suicide cases at Foxconn, where Apple iPhones and other products are manufactured.

Money boys move to cities with the same goals as other rural-to-urban migrants: they want to earn money, experience a new world, and become successful urban citizens. Primarily ethnic Han Chinese (the dominant group), they tend to be from rural or semi-rural villages, and sometimes second-tier towns. Most self-identify as homosexual or bisexual, while a few identify as heterosexual. The majority are single, having been raised in conventional families and possessing similar levels of education as other rural migrants. Few report having suffered from sexual abuse, or being forced to enter the sex industry against their will.

Like other migrants, money boys are governed by the system of *hukou* ("household registration"), through which a registration number is designated to an individual based on his or her locality and family background. Since 1958, the *hukou* has controlled the flow of internal migration, especially rural-to-urban, governing people's lives and providing the government with a mega-database on the populace.

If you are born in a rural village, you acquire a rural *hukou,* and are eligible for lesser housing, healthcare, and education benefits than those with an urban hukou. Consequently, rural-to-urban migrants end up in the temporary, menial jobs in the construction, retailing, or catering industries that most urban citizens are unwilling to take, or they simply drift from place to place.

While the Chinese state claimed that it had successfully eradicated prostitution in the Mao period, it "resurfaced" in the late 1970s, coinciding with China's move to a market-based economy, and has since become a highly lucrative business. Prostitution offers a relatively attractive alternative to other menial jobs, not just in terms of monetary rewards, but also in terms of the potential for self-management, flexibility, social

mobility, self esteem, and sexual pleasure. There are many types of sex workers: independent workers; hustlers at parks, bars, and on the Internet; brothel workers, who labor under a manager (or a pimp), who are often required to stay at the brothel; and houseboys, who are kept by a man.

Compared to female prostitution, the organizational structure of male sex work is relatively loose, and workers can move quite freely from one type of work to another. Street prostitution is also not as stigmatized for men as it is for women. While prostitution provides career opportunities, it's also a risky business. China operates a "prohibition" model in which all prostitution activities are illegal, and sex workers and clients are subject to detention and possible fines if they are caught. Third-party prostitution is considered to be a serious criminal offense punishable by years of imprisonment. Because they fear being caught, money boys find it difficult to move up the ladder to become managers, or pimps. There is also the constant risk of physical violence, and robbery, rape, sexual disease, and stress.

As Ah Jun, a 20-year-old man who worked full time at a brothel for three years, told me, "Some [clients] took you out and you had to drink with them and take pills with them, they wanted to get 'high' and then brought you home and had sex with you … they could then do it many times … day and night … I think I kind of abandoned myself. I don't want to learn anything. If I have clients, I work; if not, I just watch television, play cards. Every single day I am idle, I don't know how a day is spent … time just passes … I can't think about the future, I don't know what it will be … I just hang in there."

There are also the stresses of a short-lived career. Internal competition among money boys is fierce; the sex industry is constantly looking for "fresh meat." The longer one is in the business, the less one is paid. As a result, money boys are a highly mobile class of migrants, shifting continuously from one occupational setting to another—between street hustling, brothel/massage parlors, freelance, and houseboy varieties—in China, Hong Kong, Macau, or other South East Asian countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. This transnational "circuit of desire" is the lifeblood of sex tourism in Asia.

Because prostitution is traditionally defined as a feminine activity, the masculinity of money boys is often suspect, and they are not considered "real men." Their same-sex activities are also stigmatized. Since 2000, lesbians and gay men in China have been transformed from pathological, deviant subjects to responsible, respectable consumer citizens. This emerging homosexual subject—urban, cosmopolitan, civilized, consumerist, and middle-class—is the new homosexual norm. In this context, money boys are often seen as "failed" gay citizens: "bad" gays that mix sex with money, corrupting the image of middle-class gay men.

migrants "on the wing"

While the *hukou* system certainly contributes to their political, economic, and social exclusion, most money boys do not view *hukou* as a structural problem. Rather, they see it as something they must learn to bear. Very few have managed to raise the amount of money they would need to buy an urban *hukou*, so they tend to remain suspended within the rural-urban chasm, often moving between their home village and the city.

Xiao Hao, a 35-year-old gay man who was born in a small village in Chongqing and spent six years as a money boy, suffered a lot at the hands of the *hukou* system. "I hate the *hukou* system very much … wherever I go, I need to apply for a temporary resident permit," he said. "If I stay here [he now resides in Shenzhen], I should be able to live here without hassle, right? Since you are not from here, you cannot enjoy the insurance, medical care, etc. Why should one family treat its members so differently?" He has no medical care if he gets sick, and needs to go home. If he goes abroad, he must provide certificates from his hometown. "If I am married and have babies, it will cost more for them to study," he says. "It is very troublesome."

> One man told me, "I live much happier than any of my relatives who are still in my home village. I can make love with men, lots of men!"

Nan sha gz — Imaginechina/Associated Press

Money boys share the goals of all rural-to-urban migrants: to earn money, experience a new world, and become successful urban citizens.

Given these common experiences, it is no wonder many migrants seize the opportunity to become transient city wanderers. Xiao Qing, a 25-year-old gay man who has freelanced for the past eight years, mainly meets men through the Internet. He chats with clients online and they send him travel money. He moves around and stays with any client that wants to "buy" him for a few hours, a few months, or a few years, watching for opportunities he can seize "on the wing." It is precisely through this transient, temporary way of operating that Xiao can maximize his profits from different clients. Soliciting on the Internet is also less dangerous than soliciting in public, or working in a brothel that may be raided by the police at any moment. Without a physical entity, the Internet serves as a *hukou*-less world, which allows him to erase rural-urban boundaries and perhaps even escape the criminalizing gaze of the state.

Many money boys don't see selling sex for money as work. Instead, they adopt the attitude that "this is not a job, it's just a tool to earn money"—words I heard time and again. They stress that it is simply a way to meet "friends" and have fun, downplaying the exchange of their body for financial rewards. This is particularly true for the gay money boys, who view sex work as a way to find a boyfriend, someone to love, who might help them get out of the industry. This leads to a blurring of the boundaries between love and money, friend and client, and sex and work.

This weak work identity, which leads them to reject the professionalization of sex work, has made the fight for rights in a collective sense difficult. Under constant threat of violence from clients and triad members (Chinese criminal underground organizations which control illegal gambling, human trafficking, and prostitution), and sanctions from police and government officials, money boys have no legitimate channel for protest.

Money boys challenge middle-class gay sensibilities and the logic of cosmopolitan consumerism they embody.

Due to social stigma, few money boys come out to their families and friends; they are doubly closeted. They cannot hide their money boy identity in the gay community as gay men are their potential clients. Due to the prevalent anti-money boy atmosphere, most choose to keep their distance from the gay community, carefully choosing friends whom they can come out to. "People from society look down upon us," says Xiao Hao. "The gay circle is the same … they discriminate against us. They don't think we are proper. I think people should make their own choice, live their own lifestyles."

urban dreams—and risks

Contrary to conventional understandings that may construct them as innocent, as naïve, or as sociopaths, money

Liang jiahe – Imaginechina/Associated Press

In Shenzhen (population 14 million), there are 12 million temporary or migrant workers.

Mark Ralston/AFP/Getty Images

Money boys and China's other migrant laborers: selling their bodies.

boys are in many respects like other rural-to-urban migrants. Tired of the dead end of menial labor, with its long hours and shamefully poor wages, they chose an alternative route. The men I spoke with are well aware of the hardships sex work may entail, but are determined to take responsibility for their own lives and rely on themselves rather than on a state that has failed to accommodate them. Transience characterizes the lives of money boys, self-reliance is their motif of survival, and becoming an urban citizen and an entrepreneur is their dream.

Money boys illustrate many of the contradictions within China's rapid transformation towards urbanization, modernization, and globalization. The state's capitalist labor market strategies produce massive job opportunities in the cities, while the *hukou* system deprives rural-to-urban migrants of rights and benefits, leaving many in hopeless job situations. Prostitution offers rural migrants an opportunity to escape these situations, and fulfill their dreams of becoming urban citizens and entrepreneurs. Although money boys enjoy job satisfactions such as financial rewards, control, and freedom, they are also exposed to physical, sexual, social, and psychological risks.

The burgeoning informal sex labor market of the past few decades coexists with the state's prohibitionist stance on prostitution, which in turn contributes to the stigma surrounding the occupation. The state's decreasing control over private life has led to the emergence of gay and lesbian identities and communities which have long been suppressed (especially in rural areas), and adds to the growing demands for sex workers. But money boys pose dilemmas for the gay community; their "provincial," "bad," and "disrespectable" image challenges newly established middle-class gay sensibilities, which operate according to the logic of consumerism and cosmopolitanism.

Money boys' engagement with sex work can be seen as a form of resistance to an adverse formal labor market. But the stigmatized nature of the work means that they are not keen to organize to improve their migrant status, labor benefits, or sexual rights. They are shunned by urban citizens as migrants, stigmatized for sexually servicing other men, and rejected by the gay community.

Like many other participants in China's bid for modernization, they search for independence and empowerment but endure displacement and dislocation.

recommended resources

Ngai, Pun and Lu Huilin. "Unfinished Proletrarianization: Self, Anger, and Class Action among the Second Generation of Peasant-Workers in Present-Day China," *Modern China* (2010), 36(5):493-519. Analyzes recent protests and actions taken by rural-to-urban migrants in response to adverse working conditions in the cities.

Parker, Richard. *Beneath the Equator: Cultures of Desire, Male Homosexuality, and Emerging Gay Communities in Brazil* (Routledge, 1999). Chapter Six examines Brazilian male prostitutes who find sex, love, and work through sexual migration within and outside the continent of South America.

Lisa Rofel, Lisa. "The Traffic in Money Boys," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* (2010), 18(2):425-58. Locates money boys in the context of neoliberalism in China, and argues that money boys pose a dilemma for the Chinese urban gay man's search for "proper" desires and cultural citizenship.

Solinger, Dorothy. *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant, Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (University of California Press, 1999). Documents the work experiences of migrant workers in cities in terms of reform China's increasing promotion of the market economy and declining government benefits.

Zheng, Tiantian. *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009). Examines the lives of young rural women trying to become modern and independent subjects by becoming "karaoke hostesses" (female sex workers) in the northeastern China seaport of Dalian.

Travis S.K. Kong is in the sociology department at The University of Hong Kong. He is the author of *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi and Golden Boy.*