

# Buying Sex

## *Domination and Difference in the Discourses of Taiwanese Piao-ke*

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*In this article, I attempt to deepen feminists' understanding of the power dynamics in the practice of client-prostitute relations by exploring how clients (in Mandarin, Piao-ke) make sense of their relationships with prostitutes. On the basis of tens of online and in-person interviews with Taiwanese Piao-ke, I explore the diverse and subtle details that surface in the clients' narratives and that might otherwise have been neglected. Instead of totalizing Piao-ke as problematic, I suggest a postmodernist feminist understanding of the practice, namely, one founded on a distinction between acceptable from dominant practices and discourses that should be targeted.*

*Key words:* prostitution; client (*Piao-ke*); postmodern feminism; masculinity; domination; Internet research; Taiwan

The perception of prostitution and prostitutes has changed in the past three decades in Western feminist literature, changes that have made the issue a battlefield of different perspectives. The most crucial change is the emergence of the prostitutes' subjectivity and their own framing of prostitution. Radical feminists' totalizing notion of prostitution and of the prostitute-client or prostitute-pimp relationships has been under attack since the 1970s, when prostitutes started to organize and speak for themselves. Researchers have hence conducted a series of empirical studies to understand this "profession" through a different, namely, a postmodern feminist, lens.<sup>1</sup>

Laurie Bell's *Good Girls/Bad Girls: Sex Trade Workers and Feminists Face to Face* (1985) and Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander's *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* (1987/1998) are among the pioneering publications embodying this postmodernist awareness and combine collections of (Western) sex workers' own narratives and writings about

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their work and life that literally reveal “varying degrees of victimization, exploitation, agency, and choice” (Weitzer 2000, 3). Other remarkable publications (e.g., Chapkis 1997; Plachy and Ridgeway 1996) followed from the above groundbreaking works. Together, they point out that prostitution should be “read in more complex ways than simply as a confirmation of male domination” (Chapkis 1997, 29).

What is peculiar, if not odd, about these deconstructive efforts is the evident lack of studies on clients—the indispensable half for a sex deal. As Ronald Weitzer says (2000, 7),

When we think of pornography, prostitution, and other sex work, we tend to think of female actors, despite the fact that sex work involves at least two parties (at least one of whom is usually male), and despite the fact that customers are much more numerous than the sex workers who service them.

A direct consequence of such neglect is that although most feminists today dare not negate the agency of sex workers, they still portray a unitary—that is, a dominant or exploitative—image of clients and hence conclude that the practice of prostitution is inherently oppressive. This is why in the recent policy debate in Taiwan, many feminists advocated the Swedish model that punishes *Piao-ke* (“sex buyers”) but pardons prostitutes. In other words, *Piao-ke*, along with pimps, are held culpable for creating the wrongful demand.

Enlightened by a postmodern epistemology, however, I believe that the buying of sex also deserves a subtle reassessment. In particular, I aim to better understand whether clients are “oppressive” and, if so, how “oppressive” to narrow the empirical knowledge gap between sex workers and clients, a knowledge that shall profoundly contribute to the feminist discussion about prostitution. The limited firsthand studies on clients either provide, with an objectivist attitude, descriptive summaries of the “facts” about clients (McKeganey and Barnard 1996; Monto 2000), or condemn, with a radical feminist stance, the clients’ various desires and practices, even when the desires and practices are merely unusual, not necessarily sexist (O’Connell Davidson 1998). Unlike the former value-neutral and the latter value-committed stances, a value-critical approach characterizes this article and helps reveal the clients’ own narratives and perspectives without neglecting the feminist bottom line, which is against domination and oppression—though the definitions of these last two terms are also subject to deliberation. I will also respond to the above-mentioned studies when relevant in the following discussion.

## METHOD

The analysis presented in this article is derived mainly from the online interviews I conducted from August to December 2003 and, second, from my

interviews with prostitutes, my random discussions with heterosexual and homosexual men on this topic, and some related news coverage. I conducted the Internet interviews through a popular Bulletin Board System (BBS; a kind of Internet chat room) in Taiwan. By choosing the ID *Talking to Piao-ke* and introducing myself in the profile as “a *female* graduate student seeking respondents to accomplish my thesis,” I managed to get fifty-six voluntary respondents in three months,<sup>2</sup> though only about half of the respondents’ narratives are rich or reliable enough for analysis (my strategies of corroboration will be addressed later). Partly owing to many respondents’ desire to remain anonymous, I met only four out of the fifty-six online respondents in person. The same desire for anonymity demanded by clients also prompted McKeganey and Barnard (1996), in their prostitution study in Glasgow, United Kingdom, to change their plans: rather than recruit respondents off the streets, the two scholars chose to recruit respondents from among the pool of people who answered an advertisement and to interview them by phone.<sup>3</sup> Finally, I interviewed another two Piao-ke who were acquaintances whom I had initially met years earlier through a personal network. In our casual conversations, the topic of my research project was raised, and both of them agreed to share their experiences.

Most of my respondents, being BBS users, are relatively young and highly educated. Their ages range from early twenties to thirties, and their education from undergraduate college to Ph.D. At least seven of them were married, and sixteen had girlfriends at the time of the interview. Despite the homogeneity of their demographic background, the respondents’ frequency of patronization randomly varied from two or three times total to an extreme case, who claimed to have had a fifteen-year history and more than a thousand occasions on which sex was bought. Also, some of the respondents claimed to have forgotten how many experiences they had had. It is interesting to note that some respondents, although they had had only a few experiences or had ceased buying sex for several years, still identified themselves as Piao-ke when responding to my ID.

### *Power and Sexuality in the Field*

My *virtual* gender appears to be a major factor in attracting respondents. Often, they asked me first to confirm that I was female—a precondition for them to spend time, or to share their experiences, with me. Because I claimed to be a female and proposed discussing such a sensual topic, aggressive messages like “if you prostitute yourself you will learn more” and “let’s go to a motel and I will tell you every detail” were inevitable. One respondent continuously asked for my underwear for his collection. It was also common to get questions regarding my age, figure, (cup) size, major (in school), marital status, and personal sex experiences.

None of the above personal inquires or requests irritated me, mainly because I was also an anonymous user on the BBS and could always manipulate my virtual identity. I also felt that my decision to participate in some respondents' fantasies in exchange for their personal experiences was both reasonable and fair, provided that the actual participation be limited to the discursive level and that the responses be helpful. Even when responses were disrespectful to prostitutes (something that particularly irritated me), I could easily conceal my reactions and continue the interviews. In a sense, as a prostitution researcher, I have learned to handle and disregard the quasi whore stigma that was attached to me.

On the contrary, face-to-face interviews were much more intimidating, though also more rewarding, than were online interviews in that the former could disrupt the boundary that maintained my distanced relationship with the respondents, making me "a sexualized, gendered self" (Coffey 2002, 68) in the field. Thus, although meeting the respondents enabled me to experience, firsthand, the power and the domination that different clients might impose on prostitutes during their sexual encounters, the relationship between the respondents and me might easily get too personal, so that I, as a female researcher, would find the managing of such interviews uncomfortable.

As Coffey (2002) points out, "The fieldworker is both open to the pleasure of sexual intimacy and the violence of sexual intimidation" (p. 68). One particular uncomfortable experience resulted from the respondent Chang's disrespectful attitude both to the prostitutes—I would address this attitude later—and to me. During our interview, Chang revealed that he needed to go to the bathroom to deal with his "bodily reaction." At the time, I was uncertain how to react and decided to wait for him. After he returned from the bathroom, I pretended to know nothing of what he had done in there and continued the interview for another few minutes. Afterward, the more I thought about this incident, however, the more uncomfortable I felt for having tolerated his unwelcome sexual harassment. Yet this unpleasant experience gave me a hint of the kind of disrespect that some clients cast on sex workers—clients for whom the prospect of invading a prostitute's boundaries is a source of excitement insofar as the "invasion" allows them to show off their domination.

Similar statements made by other respondents about their sexual reactions did not offend me as much, though I was still embarrassed. Put simply, one can hardly continue the interview when a respondent says he is "hard" when recalling or reconstructing his experiences. It was even more embarrassing when I myself felt sexually aroused because of the erotic details recounted by the respondents. As such, although I truly agree with Coffey (2002) that "[sex] can be revealing and epistemologically valuable if it is reflected upon critically and honestly," as "[emotions] do have an impact on the knowledge we produce" (p. 69), I had to adopt and maintain an asexual attitude during

the in-person interviews so as to accomplish the task of interviewing. In this very respect, I gained a valuable sense of the emotional labor that many sex workers invest in their efforts to distance their “selves” from erotic or sexual encounters with clients (Chen 2003).

### *Methodological Concerns and Limitations*

Like other Internet research, the validity and the reliability of the narratives that I collected through online interviews are a matter of concern. Some might suspect that I was merely recording either a BBS user’s fantasy of whoring or his manipulation or reconstruction of old memories. In my dealings with the interviews, I employed three strategies of corroboration to reduce the possibility that mere fantasy or false construction would color the narratives; yet it should be noted that any discourse, whether it is collected through the Internet, in-person interviews, or secondary sources, *is* a reconstruction and reflects only a certain (usually the speaker’s) perspective(s). Therefore, instead of claiming to reveal what is really going on between clients and prostitutes, I have sought to follow the interpretative approach (Yanow 2000) and to reflect how clients *make sense of* their interactions and relationships with prostitutes. Such a subjective interpretation is a necessary (though not sufficient) text in our understanding of the power dynamics in prostitution.

As such, my assessment of the discourses will focus on whether the respondents were really Piao-ke and whether they were revealing to me the “real” perceptions of their experiences. The first strategy of corroboration that I usually applied to each interview was the prompt questioning of the respondent, which made it difficult for the respondent to fabricate coherent stories. I posed questions that concerned the following characteristics of the client-prostitute encounter: location, form, prostitute(s), establishment, cost, length, and pimp(s). Rapid questioning on these points was largely sufficient to test whether a person had, indeed, patronized one or more prostitutes. If a respondent lingered over a question or responded to a question with short or ambiguous answers, I employed a second strategy of corroboration that followed from the first strategy: further questioning of the respondent about specific details and rationales that might legitimate their stammering or their hesitant primary answers. In this way, I eliminated a few narratives that were inconsistent. The third strategy of corroboration involved the further—and, this time, cumulative—interrogation of respondents’ narratives, whereby I contrasted details from respondents’ accounts with my accumulated knowledge of their accounts. This third strategy not only facilitates the eliminating of suspect narratives but also enriches genuine narratives for later analysis.

Despite my having completed the three strategies of corroboration, I am not prepared to declare that the remaining respondents revealed the whole

truth. I am not sure, for instance, whether it is believable that none of my respondents ever patronized child prostitutes. Therefore, to avoid exaggerated cases, I drew from discourses that generally represent the viewpoints of more than two respondents.

Finally, it should be noted that the numbers used in the analysis are *not* of statistic validity. Given the unstable nature of Internet interaction, I was not able to get answers to every question from all respondents. Some respondents were disinterested and ignored certain questions, and some made themselves unavailable after a few questions. I also found it difficult to get the same respondents for a second, or follow-up, interview. It is possible that during or after the first encounter, the respondents grew bored as they learnt that I was *really* doing research and was not flirting with them. At any rate, I do not intend to provide a statistical summary of the various narratives. I use numbers instead of a vague *some* or *most* only when it facilitates an understanding of the analysis. Yet the focus of this article is still on the diverse and subtle details that surface in the narratives and that might, otherwise, have been neglected.

### DIFFERENT IDENTITIES AND MOTIVATIONS OF PIAO-KE

It is wrong to assume that every Piao-ke legitimizes or enjoys the client-prostitute practice without hesitation. The competing discourses (norms, mores) about prostitution and “normal” sexuality in the society have inevitably led to contradictions and even crises in the identity of some Piao-ke. Nabis, a twenty-three-year-old who has had sex only with prostitutes, is an extreme case that experiences an identity crisis. On one hand, he is experienced at finding prostitutes through whom he releases his “extreme suffering caused by sex drive.” On the other hand, he seems to indulge in a denial and maintains that whoring is his “greatest shame” and that he “hates” himself for doing it. When asked what he felt ashamed of, Nabis gave me what would be accepted as a feminist answer: “I felt sorry for the girls. I felt that they were being treated as instruments, as men’s outlets.” However, Nabis did not ask the prostitutes whether *their own* feelings had been hurt or damaged by his actions, nor did he ever meet coerced prostitutes. His guilt and shame, in a sense, were largely based on his pity for the women’s imagined suffering, a point that is discursively significant.

Some other four Piao-ke also mentioned their sense of guilt, but unlike Nabis, theirs did not stem from their having “exploit[ed] the misfortunes of others (prostitutes) to satisfy their own ends” (O’Connell Davidson 1998, 207), an act that many feminists regard as blameworthy. Seldom did my respondents feel that they owed prostitutes anything outside the agreed-upon monetary value of the encounter. Instead, the men felt guilty mainly for

having cheated on their spouses or girlfriends or for having “wast[ed] money, because the woman (prostitute) is not particularly good” (quote from respondent Aabb). Moreover, such a sense of guilt may be due to the discursive abnormality of commercial sex. As a thirty-five-year-old respondent, Amuer, put it, “[Sex] is supposed to be priceless. Now you measure it with money. I don’t like that. I don’t think it should be materialized like that.”

For another two respondents, though whoring per se was not wrong, the stigma attached to it affected them. Twenty-five-year-old Lymp indicated his feeling that to visit prostitutes, is a taboo, particularly for highly educated men, who typically care about their reputations:<sup>4</sup>

I feel guilty for doing it because I am highly educated. I am afraid that I will be found out in the future. Were you a regular person, you probably wouldn’t need to care. But as I am climbing up the career ladder, the pressure becomes heavier.

But this same pressure does not seem to bother most of my respondents, who were also highly educated. The moral stigma from which Piao-ke suffer might be disturbing but is seldom a major concern. Concealment of their whoring habits does not bring them identity crises, as the practice is supported and legitimated by various discourses. Wolf, a thirty-year-old frequent Piao-ke who confidently justifies his whoring habit by referring to his “excessive sexual demands,” which are “too much for [his] girlfriend to take,” talks about this secret habit:

I would not reveal it to my family because they might worry for me about the risk of getting diseases. Nor would I reveal it to my girlfriend because she might mistake it as a sign that I don’t love her or that she is not sexually attractive enough. [*Researcher*: What about to your friends?] It depends. There is no particular reason either to reveal it to, or to conceal it from, my friends.

Twenty-one-year-old college student Cobe had been patronizing prostitutes for two months when I met him. Prior to that, he had been a virgin and was thus eager to experience sex before his college graduation. Although he greatly enjoyed the experience, he concealed it from his friends because, as he put it, “my opinion is very marginal. I do not want to bother arguing with others. This society is based on relativity, not absolutes.”

Cobe is one of the six respondents whom I met in person and who did not care much about anonymity. It is interesting to note that before we met, he kept emphasizing that I would be surprised when I saw him because he “does not look like Piao-ke.” Apparently, though himself a Piao-ke, Cobe subscribes to a myth about Piao-ke and assumes that other Piao-ke are not as “good-looking and young” as he is.

As mentioned, Cobe’s desire to become sexually experienced motivated his decision to start buying sex. This motivation is a very common sentiment

for young men his age. Indeed, one may argue that a twenty-year-old male virgin suffers more stigma than a Piao-ke of the same age. Determined to have sex during his last summer vacation, Cobe placed his hopes on a chance encounter that would lead to a one-night stand: "I logged onto the BBS for some ten hours every day for a whole week. It is impossible to find free girls because females constitute only 10% of all users." Eventually, he got a phone number of an escort service from a "net pal," who also shared many secrets and tips about whoring with Cobe anonymously.

Most of my respondents are like Cobe in that their primary motivation is *sex* rather than *the buying of sex*. This point is made clear by McKeganey and Barnard (1996), who state that the male clients they interviewed echo sentiments that many men share. After conducting 143 street or phone interviews with clients of prostitutes in Glasgow, the two researchers inferred the existence of five aspects that their respondents felt were important in the appeal of commercial sex: the capacity to specify particular sex acts, the capacity to have sex with a range of different women, the ability to seek out women with specific attributes or images, the thrill of doing something that is socially condemned, and the unemotional nature of contact with a prostitute (McKeganey and Barnard 1996, 50). These findings are echoed by the sentiments expressed by my Taiwanese respondents:

- Never did this with a stranger. (Yang)
- Just want to try [having sex with] a different person. (Nixx)
- Want to have sex with someone other than my wife. (Pons)
- Want to test different feelings and techniques. (Tham)
- Want sex without responsibility. (Adua)
- Feel lonely and also never tried anal sex. (Vansu)
- Because money is the fastest way to have sex. (Teamo)
- Because my girlfriend demands too much and I just need an outlet. (Lymp)
- Because I don't have a girlfriend but want to make love. (Vesti)

Similarly, in Martin Monto's survey study on arrested clients in San Francisco, the most endorsed statements by those seeking a prostitute are "I like to be with a woman who likes to be nasty," "I like to have a variety of sexual partners," and "I am excited by the idea of approaching a prostitute." Monto notes that "the 'woman who likes to get nasty' is not explicitly defined as a prostitute" (Monto 2000, 80), and this notion exactly reflects a point that feminists tend to ignore. That is, the buying of sex is often an alternative to free, casual sex. If a man seeking free, casual sex is *not* condemned as exploiting women's bodies and dignity, why should a man who *pays* for it be necessarily condemned?

Chen (2003) argues that for many Taiwanese men, whoring is a compulsory masculine practice: "respondents tended to see their first visits as a social performance and/or a ritual by which they expected to be included in



their peer group” (p. 266). It seems to me an exaggeration, however, to view prostitution as compulsive for *all* Taiwanese men, since in a 2002 national survey, only 19 percent of Taiwanese men between the ages of eighteen and eighty-seven admitted having ever paid for sex.<sup>5</sup> In addition, though peer pressure may be a factor,<sup>6</sup> most of my respondents did not indicate that they had been “forced” by their peers into patronizing prostitutes; rather, the respondents appeared to have derived encouragement from them.

The company of one’s peers is particularly crucial for first-time Piao-ke. Yang, a thirty-four-year-old engineer with a master’s degree, noted that his first experience had been promoted by a senior schoolmate who had just passed his oral defense that day and who wanted to celebrate. The schoolmate brought him and another schoolmate to a tea house near their dormitory, which “[he] passed every day but never realized . . . was a brothel.” Always a well-behaved student, Yang admitted that he was excited but nervous about whoring. Realizing that it was his first time, the prostitute even performed a special form of oral sex on him, a generous offering that left him extremely satisfied. After his first time, Yang continued to visit the place alone three more times without informing his schoolmates. Eventually, he stopped patronizing the establishment because what occurred there “became routine” and because he worried about the risk of venereal disease; moreover, “it was costly for a graduate student.” Instead, he started seeking casual sex on the Internet.

## UNILATERAL PLEASURE

Because paid sex is not necessarily preferred to free sex, some respondents, like twenty-eight-year-old Xiao, tried to maximize returns on their investments in prostitutes. Xiao’s few visits to prostitutes were mostly urged on by friends. After a few bad experiences, Xiao concluded that he preferred clubbing. He was especially discouraged by the impatience of some prostitutes, who “kept hurrying [him] to finish.” Xiao enjoyed flirting with girls in pubs and had had casual sex with “pretty girls.” Although he disliked whoring, however, Xiao tried to take full advantage of his position as a client and enjoyed the unilateral enjoyment provided in paid sex. He was very aware that he did not need to be as “considerate” of the prostitutes as he would (have to) be during casual sex:

For example, I would not allow [a prostitute] to stop giving me oral sex when she complained that her mouth was tired. I don’t think it necessary to let an *enjo* girl rest. Nobody said making money is easy. If you want this job, don’t complain about being tired.<sup>7</sup>

Cobe and another four respondents maximized their satisfaction by trying different women each time: “If it is free, I would like to have stable sexual

partner[s]. Since I spend money, I will certainly try as many [women] as possible" (Cobe). Moreover, after establishing himself as a regular client with an escort-service provider, Cobe started to enjoy the consumer's privilege of rejecting prostitutes who did not meet his standards.

The privilege and the process of selecting women seem no less exciting than sexual intercourse itself for some clients. During my online chat with Idon, who was in a hotel room, he dismissed three call girls successively. He couched his reasons for these dismissals in the following expressions: "oh, she is ugly," "this one is ugly too . . . and even her voice is raspy," and "fuck, another fat woman." I sensed Idon's pleasure as he indulged in his privilege as a client. I asked him whether he would be considered a difficult client for being so picky, and Idon replied, "Of course not. I can even call to blame the manager for wasting my time! . . . I certainly want it to be worth my money."

Idon's attitude might be legitimate in any other commercial transaction, where a customer's satisfaction is paramount. This is why a frequent Piao-ke, Nixx, said, "You can have whatever beautiful girls you want as long as you can afford it." However, when the "commodity" to be picked and returned is a human being judged according to her figure, appearance, sexual skill, or age, the legitimacy of the customer-is-always-right motto becomes suspect. Although the identical process of elimination occurs in other institutions (say, the auditions that actors go through), it is imperative to point out, through a feminist lens, the sexist and classist discourses that prostitution contributes to—the discourses that celebrate the dominant form of masculinity as embodied in the process of picking, dismissing, and commanding a female (or male) given the privilege granted by the client's money.

Given the significance of unilateral sexual enjoyment in the buying of sex, it is naïve to assume that as long as casual sex is available, prostitution will not be necessary. There are Piao-ke who enjoy or need to be *unilaterally* sexually serviced. Just like Xiao, who enjoys oral sex performed by a prostitute, both Lymp (twenty-four years old) and Onsq (twenty-one years old) explain how their frustratingly unsatisfactory sex lives with their girlfriends induced their desire for paid sex:

- I was often angry after having sex with my [former] girlfriend. She didn't allow me to enter her before I give her an orgasm with my fingers. It usually took more than twenty minutes. Sometimes I even fell asleep in the process or lost interest when she finally came. (Lymp)
- My girlfriend is young and thus very tight. Sometimes I cannot last more than 5-6 minutes when having intercourse with her. Then she would show her disappointment. . . . In paid sex, the prostitute will show only satisfaction. Since they are relatively loose, I can last more than 10 minutes. And they usually want you to ejaculate as soon as possible. (Onsq)

Frustration with their sexual partners drives some Piao-ke to the purely unilateral enjoyment of paid sex. This tendency supports McKeganey and

Barnard's (1996) claim that some clients seek prostitution for the unemotional nature of the sexual encounter. Yet this finding does not mean that these Piao-ke desire *only* unilaterally enjoyed sex. On the contrary, prostitution might be only a supplement to their regular sex lives. Stwo was a twenty-nine-year-old who had had casual sex. He paid for sex because, as he noted, it is the easiest way to get sex, though he admitted that a one-night stand is always more fun:

Prostitution is kind of boring compared to a one-night stand. After all, she is only doing her job, without an emotional rise and fall or expectations. [Researcher: Why continue buying, then?] Because of laziness. . . . I am too lazy to seek one-night stands. Besides, you might have trouble leaving the woman after one night.

Cycon also clearly distinguishes sex with lovers from paid sex: “[The prostitute] is not my woman. She only wants my money. I am not responsible for her [satisfaction]. But having sex with your girlfriend is making love, it’s not like a pure fuck.”

Unilateral pleasure drives prostitution—as well as most service businesses. Hence, any condemnation of the practice that hinges uniquely on the grounds that the prostitute does not enjoy the sex *concurrently* with the man lacks persuasive rigor, given that the prostitute’s intention is just to make money.<sup>8</sup> The point is, it seems to me, that unilateral enjoyment of a sexual encounter does not equal disrespect or domination. In fact, the expectation of “mutuality” in a paid relationship is often a unilateral and oppressive fantasy entertained by the clients. The following section will show how the regulative discourse of “good sex” affects the perception of Piao-ke in their commercial sexual encounters with prostitutes.

### THE (UNILATERAL) DESIRE FOR MUTUALITY

In her deconstruction of clients’ eroticization of prostitute use, Julia O’Connell Davidson (1998, 158) points out a “contradiction of clienting”:

Clients often want to believe that, although the prostitute is a paid laborer, in *their* particular case she enjoys her work and derives sexual and/or emotional satisfaction from her encounter with them. (emphasis original)

Indeed, though each paid sexual encounter ends in the client’s ejaculation, the process is no less valued than the end. A good session, at least according to most of my respondents, usually implies a sense of mutuality in the process. That is, the girls also, it would seem, enjoy the sex or willingly submit to the men:

- I brought her to orgasm twice. Yes, she could barely walk after that. She even asked if we could adopt certain positions. She kissed and hugged me goodbye like a lover. (Cobe)
- She was very tight and wet, and wildly responsive. She groaned very loudly, which made me fucking satisfied. (Fatman)
- The girl didn't care about the time. So we kissed each other, gave each other oral sex, made love, everything . . . for two hours. At the end, we ate dinner together before saying goodbye. It's just like a one-night stand. (Stwo)

On the other hand, the statements of respondents indicated that prostitutes whose service is considered poor by some respondents are usually those who provided *only* sex or those who showed no emotion or desire. Here is what the respondents said:

- She took her clothes off right after entering the room, then lay on the bed opening her legs, and kept urging me to hurry in the process. (Aabb)
- She was not involved at all. She looked absent-minded. (Caesar)
- They are like dead fish, lying on the bed and not moving. It's always me moving. (Vansu, describing some inexperienced enjo girls)

For some respondents, it is fine even if the mutuality remains on a performance level. Some respondents informed me of their awareness that the prostitutes were merely pretending to enjoy the sex. Yet some of them would participate in this act as though both of the parties were happy:

I don't think they enjoy [sex]. After all, they just want to make money. It is easy to spot their fake groans, fake orgasms. . . . I will pretend that I am satisfied too. But both she and you know very well what is going on. (Wolf)

This sentiment shatters the myth that prostitution involves only biological needs. Many Piao-ke, like those who look down on prostitutes, still desire sex with mutual affection, if not love. This is why many Piao-ke like to use the word *empty* to describe their feelings after paid sex. Such a unilateral demand for mutuality also explains why some ethnographic studies on prostitutes indicate that most sex workers have to practice intense emotional labor in the process (Chapkis 1997; Chen 2003). They need both to pretend that they enjoy the sex—emotionally and physically—and to distance their “selves” from such affection.

However, because not all prostitutes are as affectionate as the men desire them to be, some respondents quickly lose interest in their purchase because a sense of the routine, or the monotonous, comes to pervade their sexual encounters. Patient is a thirty-three-year-old PhD student who stated that after three sex-for-sale experiences, he decided not to patronize sex businesses again because the acts had become, in his word, “meaningless”:

*Patient:* I could not understand why other men enjoy it [prostitution] so much, so I tried it a few times. And I concluded that I would never feel happy in visiting prostitutes, so I stopped.

*Researcher:* Why not? Do you enjoy sex only with someone you like?

*Patient:* Not necessarily *like*, but at least with *feeling*.

*Researcher:* But why don't you pick someone [a prostitute] whom you have feelings for, in the first place?

*Patient:* You can pick someone that looks pretty, but it is not possible to have feelings. It takes time to develop feelings.

If, for some Piao-ke, whoring is more than sex, then the fact that some Piao-ke fall in love with prostitutes should come as no surprise. Although the romance may not be like the fairy-tale Hollywood movie *Pretty Woman*, at least six respondents have had romances with prostitutes. As mentioned by Chen (2003), Taiwanese Piao-ke use a mocking term, *seasickness*, to describe the dizzy feeling of being in love with a prostitute; yet it seems that some Piao-ke implicitly expect such a romance. This is why many club girls and higher-end prostitutes sometimes try to seduce Piao-ke romantically. Teamo, a businessman now working in China, revealed how a prostitute is trained by either madams or experienced prostitutes to fulfill the romantic fantasy that most Piao-ke desire, which is how some Taiwanese businessmen in China meet their mistresses or why some Piao-ke keep patronizing the same prostitutes:

She lays towels on your forehead when you are drunk; interlinks her fingers with yours; asks for your cell phone number; gives her photo-sticker to you to keep; holds your hand and is reluctant to let go when you need to go . . . even your girlfriend will hardly treat you so tenderly.

Another two respondents who fell in love with Chinese migrant prostitutes in Taiwan were unable or unprepared to relate to the prostitutes as lovers; nevertheless, they changed their interaction patterns in the room—for instance, they would watch the prostitute go to sleep, allow her to rest, or perform oral sex on her, a practice that most Piao-ke feel too dirty, risky, or unthinkable to do—and hence disrupt the prostitute-client relationship.

Thirty-three-year-old Pons also admitted to disrupting the prostitute-client relationship. He stated that he had applied the monogamous principle to an enjo girl whom he loved. At the time of the encounter, Pons had been married for three years to his first girlfriend. The reason he tried to seek extramarital sex was simply to “have sex with a different woman.” After failing to meet females willing to participate in one-night stands, he went online looking for a prostitute and, after a few months, had his first enjo deal with JJ, a college graduate who he said “looks like a model.” Although Pons had two casual sex encounters after JJ, he felt so strongly for JJ that he stopped seeking out other girls because he did not want to “betray her.”

Although Pons confessed his love to JJ, he did not get a passionate response in return: “I feel that she doesn't sincerely like me, though there is

some attraction. After all, I treat her very nicely, and thus she is nice to me too." JJ agreed to go out with Pons on dates "just like regular lovers." But, given that the boundary between clients and prostitutes had been broken, if they had sex, payment became an issue. Pons told me that he felt awkward about giving JJ money after sex, but he added the following insight:

If I don't give her [money] . . . I am also afraid that she will be unhappy. She never really said anything when I didn't give her money. In fact, I feel like giving her more money, provided my wife would not find out. It could be just like parents giving money to their children, or like . . . a husband giving money to his wife.

Like other Piao-ke who fall in love with prostitutes, Pons also indicated that he considers prostitution to be a dangerous job. Thus, he had been urging JJ to find a regular job. Yet JJ did not heed his words until she was scared by a Piao-ke who pretended to be a policeman during a deal. Afterward, she stopped doing *enjo kosai* and, at the time of my interview with Pons, had a normal job. Indeed, JJ also found a boyfriend. However, she still went out and had sex with Pons occasionally.

## VARIOUS WHORE STIGMAS

The dynamics between prostitutes and clients can give one insight into the existing power relations that govern interactions between these two classes of people. Another aspect that interests me is how Piao-ke view the prostitutes who service them. Do clients discriminate against the prostitutes even though the former need or enjoy the services of the latter?

More than ten Piao-ke whom I interviewed shared similar stereotypes of, and prejudices against, prostitutes. Direct contact with prostitutes did not change the clients' perceptions of the whore stigma; neither, however, were the clients more inclined than other men to discriminate against prostitutes or women in general. Some respondents felt that prostitutes are "dirty" in the sense that they run a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, a view that is shared by the public and that explains why some men never buy sex. As such, almost all of my respondents claimed to have used condoms every time they engaged in paid sex. And it is commonly mentioned that *enjo* and club girls are cleaner than full-time sex workers.

The problematization of prostitutes as deviants or victims also surfaces in some respondents' discourses, sometimes implying a sexist double standard against women's promiscuity. Fzoman, who noted that he had paid for sex more than a thousand times, made the following comment: "I bet that there are problems in their [prostitutes'] families. Usually only those who grow up in an environment lacking in love would choose to be prostitutes." For Yang, prostitutes are pitiful because "they don't know who they are sleeping with";

Jimw put it this way: “Who would marry a prostitute? Their futures are bleak.”

If, in any *moral* sense, my respondents discriminated against or stigmatized prostitutes, they tended to focus on “voluntary” prostitutes. This emerging “new whore stigma” that reproduces the whore-Madonna division among prostitutes has been criticized by Jo Doezema (1998). In her groundbreaking essay “Forced to Choose: Beyond the Voluntary v. Forced Prostitution Dichotomy” (1998), Doezema warns of the danger of emphasizing the difference between voluntary and forced prostitutes:

The Madonna is the “forced prostitute”—the child, the victim of trafficking; she who, by virtue of her victim status, is exonerated from sexual wrong-doing. The “whore” is the voluntary prostitute: because of her transgression, she deserves whatever she gets. (Doezema 1998, 47)

Moreover, Doezema points out that poverty has been widely cited as the main “force” behind a person’s decision to be a prostitute. That is, “no *normal* woman would choose the work unless *forced* by poverty . . . equating poverty with ‘force’ is, like the focus on deceit, a way of establishing the innocence of ‘trafficked victims’ and thus their eligibility for human rights protection” (Doezema 1998, 44; emphasis in original).

As such, those who choose to be prostitutes must struggle with extreme poverty, or their choice is unjustified. This sentiment was clearly shared by some respondents, who explicitly emphasized that they discriminate against “only” those *ai-mu-xu-rong* (a popular Mandarin idiomatic expression referring to people who are vain or materialist) voluntary prostitutes.

- Some of them are indeed motivated by the economic hardships their families face. But most of them simply want money and use their families as an excuse. A girl usually cheats herself when she can make money so quickly and easily. (Teamo)
- All the enjo girls I met are *ai-mu-xu-rong*. They had maxed out their credit cards, wanted to buy new mobile phones, and so on. Only one said she needed to pay the rent. . . . I will never want to have a girlfriend who sleeps with guys just for money. (Vansu)
- Some women have no other choice but to “jump the sea” (sell themselves), and I won’t look down on them. But others do it just for *xu-rong*. Their eyes see nothing but money. I look down on them. (Aabb)

The stigma attached to voluntary prostitutes is a major factor that strengthens, or at least maintains, the continued preclusion of the normalization of prostitution. As Doezema argues, taking this dichotomy to an extreme will logically elicit the dangerous conclusion that voluntary sex workers are disqualified from human rights considerations. Even pimps employ this stigma to justify their exploitation and coercion of voluntary prostitutes.

Ycsd stated that he was a frequent Piao-ke and also an investor in a private brothel. He bluntly described to me how they punish (he emphasized that such punishment is uncommon) Chinese prostitutes who refuse to continue working. The means for this punishment centers on gang rape, which they termed the “destruction of the essence of humanity,” meaning “to degrade a girl so much that she would be indifferent to further indignities.” Instead of thinking this behavior criminal, Ycsd justified it by noting that “she was voluntary in the first place. We did not cheat her or coerce her [to come to Taiwan].” Our online chat further illustrates this consideration:

*Researcher:* Why wouldn't they [Chinese prostitutes] escape and ask for help from the police? Did you really inform her of the actual nature of the work?

*Ycsd:* They were very aware that they were going to be prostitutes and that they had to serve men. My friend told them this very clearly. They wanted to make money.

*Researcher:* You used the explicit term *prostitute*? Not *attendant* or . . . ?

*Ycsd:* Anyway it's clear. Think about it: could you stand it if you had to serve more than ten clients a day? They simply couldn't bear it because the job wasn't as easy as they had thought.

*Researcher:* Why did you require them to see so many clients a day?

*Ycsd:* Because otherwise they would not have made any money. They need to do at least 150 clients to pay off their ship fee.

*Researcher:* Why couldn't they take their time? They would have earned the money sooner or later.

*Ycsd:* That's impossible; the risk [of being caught by the police] is too high. We could work them at most one or two months. . . . Besides only a fresh face sells in this industry. If they stay too long, you won't make much of a profit.

I cannot assure how reliable Ycsd's narrative is, as he is the most deviant respondent whom I interviewed online, but some of the scenarios that he described, such as gang rape and debt bondage, are consistent with the findings in existing literature on women's trafficking (Abraham 2001; Shannon 1999), as well as with a report by the Taipei Women's Rescue Foundation based on interviews with Chinese migrant prostitutes who were arrested (rescued) by the police.<sup>9</sup> What *is* confirmed by other Piao-ke, at any rate, is the very existence of forced Chinese prostitutes in Taiwan.

## INDIFFERENCE AND DOMINATION

The cruel scenario described by Ycsd reminds us of the dark side of prostitution. That is, many prostitutes, especially migrant ones, still live in exploitative conditions that differ only superficially from the conditions of slaves. Regardless of whether these women volunteered to work in Taiwan's sex businesses, there is no justification of slavery-like working conditions. If anyone else might have access to these enslaved prostitutes, it would be Piao-ke. If more Piao-ke reported all such cases to the police, the phenomenon



would diminish in a democratic society ruled by law. Why, then, does sexual slavery and forced prostitution exist in Taiwan, where voluntary local prostitutes are easily available?

One mechanism that sustains, if not reinforces, the existence of enslaved prostitution, is the *indifferent* attitude of Piao-ke. Their only concern is to pay less for an outlet of good “quality” (in terms of age, figure, etc.). Having an unemotional sexual encounter with a prostitute is one thing; being indifferent to a slave-like situation in which another human being exists is quite another. And the latter arguably constitutes cruelty. I am surprised that at least six respondents did encounter forced prostitutes, but none ever thought about reporting the situation to the police.

The narrative of a thirty-five-year-old Piao-ke, Chang, whom I interviewed in person, is no less infuriating than that of the criminal pimp Ycsd. In the interview, Chang replied to my question regarding whether he had ever met a forced prostitute with a straightforward “yes.” Other respondents were more hesitant when they came to this question, perhaps because only Chang received a clear request for help:

*Researcher:* How do you know that she was coerced?

*Chang:* She gave me a little note after the deal.

*Researcher:* What did it say?

*Chang:* Something like there were 4 girls being caged there and asked me to call the police.

*Researcher:* What did you do then?

*Chang:* I am by no means a do-gooder. I threw it into a garbage can.

*Researcher:* Why did you not call the police?

*Chang:* It’s not my business. I don’t want to get in trouble. Places like this are usually controlled by gangs, and they have good relationships with the police.

Other Piao-ke might not have been approached for help so directly, but clues led them to believe that the women were coerced and strictly controlled.<sup>10</sup> Tham patronized Chinese prostitutes regularly and told me, “[They] surely are [coerced] because many women have bruises on their bodies.” But he never thought to ask them about it because “it is already evident.” When I asked, “Don’t you feel uncomfortable about having sex with them since they are coerced?” Tham simply answered, “Yes. But what can I do? I have already paid.”

That some prostitutes represent themselves as victims of trafficking so as to avoid the whore stigma and get sympathy from clients is a reasonable assumption.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Auda, Midas, and Amir, for example, who *believed* the Chinese prostitutes who indicated that they were being deceived and coerced, might have been misled by the women. Yet it is equally possible that the women were telling the truth. The point is this: how could these Piao-ke proceed with sex as though the violence and coercion of the women were just a subject for conversation?

The three respondents provided identical explanations. Auda justified his patronage as his way of “help[ing] them escape the suffering sooner.” Midas boastfully claimed that “the woman was rewarded [in this particular deal], since I was a client with good skills.” Amir elaborated on his excuse:

They need money to go back, isn't that right? If I didn't finish the deal, how would they make money? I think as long as I don't make things difficult for them, as long as I'm not a picky customer, I have done enough.

In the case of forced prostitution, it is the *prostitutes* who have no choice but to obey the pimps and traffickers. Oddly, the male respondents whom I interviewed also displayed ignorance of, and powerlessness as to, *what they could do* except finish the deal. They might not have wanted to be indifferent, but by doing nothing other than the sex act, they became a part of the mechanism that sustains the enslavement of prostitutes.

If Piao-ke are able to consider irrelevant either the conditions under which such prostitutes are made to work or the prostitutes' consent (i.e., eventual lack of it), then there can be little wonder that other disrespectful and dominant attitudes toward prostitutes are common. It is not surprising that few respondents revealed to me how they disrespect or degrade some women; indeed, some might be ignorant that their conduct is disrespectful or degrading in the first place. Hence, I have relied on indirect clues or other sources to explore such behavior and attitudes.

The lack of respect is apparent, for instance, in some Piao-ke's complaints about the boundaries, or the rules, that govern some client-prostitute relationships, such as “not allowing [him] to touch her vagina” (Sinon) or “refusing to lick [his] anus” (Vansu), as though clients are entitled to do anything sexual to or demand anything sexual from a prostitute. When inviting me to watch him “fucking a *Dalumei* [Chinese prostitute]” (in his word), twenty-eight-year-old Philip also asserted his domination in that he rejected the idea of touching base with the woman beforehand. Pons, in explaining why he kept urging JJ to stop taking enjo deals, revealed to me that JJ had been complaining about an old client who “always pinched her nipples rudely.”

The dominant-masculine attitude of Taiwanese Piao-ke, moreover, easily interweaves with imperialist and racist notions toward relatively poor countries or peoples. Teamo described to me how his fellow businessmen in Zhuhai (southeastern China) enjoyed deriding and comparing some prostitutes' figures and skills. Thirty-one-year-old Wang used the phrase “picking a pig” to describe a client's privilege, in a club in China, of choosing his attendant from among a full room of undressed girls. He also expressed great interest in visiting Vietnam someday because, as he noted, it is said that “any ordinary woman on the street will agree to sell [prostitute herself] provided she gets a good offer.”

My interviews with sex workers in Taiwan afforded me even more examples of clients' misconduct. Twenty-three-year-old club girl Xiao-Yu, who views her job as no different from that of an air stewardess because both need to "smile at clients who might be absolutely disgusting," described some of the rude behavior of clients. The most common scenario occurs when clients get drunk and then hurl abusive language at her. She also recounted stories of clients slapping her in the face or grabbing her breasts when other people were present. When I asked Fong, a forty-two-year-old hotel prostitute, "Do you feel that the clients disrespect your body?" she forthrightly answered, "Of course! But what can you do? They are *clients*."<sup>12</sup> Fong said that clients who mockingly describe her job as one in which she is "making money while having fun" are very insulting. She also complained about clients who like to dig their fingers into her vagina and who do not wash themselves for days.

Some Piao-ke apparently eroticize their coercion of a prostitute by forcing her "to take" their smell. A twenty-six-year-old call girl revealed the various sexual habits of her clients in a tabloid interview.<sup>13</sup> The most disgusting client, she disclosed, was a famous lawyer who enjoyed demanding that women lick his smelly toes before sex:

He never washes himself before the deal. When he takes off his shoes, the stinky smell of his feet fills the room. Then he will remove his socks and demand me to lick his toes regardless of any hygienic concern. It is particularly excessive when he forbids you from skipping the crevices. . . . Whoever takes his case can literally eat nothing for three days.

I mentioned the smelly-feet story to two Piao-ke, and they provided quite different perceptions on this seemingly debasing request. Teamo considered it, as I do, to be a disgusting and disrespectful request but emphasized that "those who are not polite or respectful to prostitutes usually have inferiority complexes themselves." Wang, on the other hand, simply shrugged his shoulders and replied with a neoliberal account: "That's part of the deal, isn't it? The woman could surely reject the deal if she disliked it so much. Yet as long as she agreed with the request in exchange for a certain price, she was not entitled to complain about it."

Underlying Wang's narrative represents the typical liberal contractarian ideology, which, as Carole Pateman notes, fails to address the question of women's subordination to men—let alone other debasing behaviors—in a modern patriarchy (Pateman 1988). Indeed, this unconditional acceptance of market logic rests on ignorance of the fact that a prostitute's "consent" is not born in a vacuum but constrained by various—in particular economic—forces. It is in this regard that I agree with radical feminists' criticism of a liberal perspective of consent wherein "only extreme, literal, and easily validated forms of 'coercion' or violence will qualify as an abrogation of the sexual will that must be 'interfered against'" (Haag 1999, 181). It is also in this

regard that O'Connell Davidson's (1998) condemnation of clients for "exploiting the misfortunes of the women to satisfy their own ends" makes better sense. After all, although prostitutes usually are able to develop different strategies to resist or mitigate clients' exploitation of them, feminists should by no means slow down their efforts either to criticize or to weaken such gendered patterns of domination and subordination.

The dominant and exploitative Piao-ke, however, do not represent all Piao-ke. If most sex workers can easily portray and distinguish *good* clients from *bad* ones, on what grounds can feminists totalize sex buyers as people who only "dehumanize the prostitute, refusing to acknowledge her as anything more than her sex" (O'Connell Davidson 1998, 150)? Given that some Piao-ke are aware of their reliance upon prostitutes and establish respectful commercial relationships (in the sense typically applied to other service-sector businesses) with prostitutes, is it not sufficient to deconstruct the essentialist link between patronization and domination?

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I try to illustrate, on a micro-level, the different patterns of motivation, interaction, and domination shown in the discourses and practices of heterosexual men's sex purchases. I point out that for some Piao-ke, buying sex is but an alternative and convenient way to get sex when they cannot get it for free. Others seek prostitutes because they want to enjoy the unilateral satisfaction that customers of other service businesses (such as massage parlors) also enjoy. The point is that there are dominant and nondominant, exploitative and nonexploitative, clients—just as in many other service-sector businesses. In terms of gender relationships, the sentiments and discourses that Piao-ke embrace differ from one another—just as do the characteristics attributable, in general, to heterosexual men. Some of the discourses reflect and reinforce a dominant form of masculinity, but others do not. Even in the former case, nonetheless, prostitution is by no means the only institution that reproduces sexism and gender discrimination as such.

Judith Butler (1997) notes that we should distinguish "injuries that are socially contingent and avoidable [from] kinds of subordination that are, as it were, the constitutive condition of the subject" (p. 26). Instead of totalizing sex buyers as problematic, therefore, I suggest that we distinguish among acceptable and unacceptable clients and practices within prostitution. The condition of prostitution should be viewed as socially contingent and is, like many other gendered institutions, a battlefield within which feminists should struggle.

## NOTES

1. Here, I follow Maggie O'Neill's definition of a postmodern feminist approach to prostitution, which goes beyond the dualist feminist perception of prostitution as either inherently oppressive (prostitutes as victims) or empowering (prostitutes as agents) and advocates a "reflexive interrelationship between feminist theory, women's lived experience and policy-oriented practice articulated through feminist participatory action research" (O'Neill 1997, 24).

2. I started using this approach in early August 2003 and logged onto the BBS about three nights a week. The time I stayed on the BBS ranged from one hour to five hours each time, depending on whether I found helpful responses. I stopped contacting new respondents in early December 2003 but sometimes asked my respondents follow-up questions.

3. McKeganey and Barnard (1996) regard the difficulties in contacting street prostitutes for interview as *nothing* compared to the difficulties in contacting the clients of street prostitutes. The two had few successes in their street interviews of clients. Yet, after placing an advertisement in a tabloid newspaper, sixty-six clients responded in one day, and the interviewers managed to complete the interviews by phone.

4. Speaking of class difference, Mei-Hua Chen (2003) interviewed fourteen Taiwanese patrons of different social-economic statuses and points out that "class" not only influences the narratives of these men in their sexual encounters with prostitutes but also differentiates the men's preferences for certain types of sex-for-sale establishments.

5. Dr. Huang Shu-Ling, a leading abolitionist feminist who has been conducting research on prostitution in Taiwan for years, revealed a 2002 survey on the demographic data of Taiwanese *Piao-ke* to the press. The survey says that of the 9.2 million men over eighteen years old in Taiwan, 19 percent have bought sex at least once; 3 percent have bought sex overseas; and 0.9 percent or 90,000 men buy sex at least once a month (these men were called "frequent patrons"). The first-time buyer is as young as seventeen years old. See "Women's Organizations Plead for Punishing *Piao-ke* Not Prostitutes" (2004).

6. Thirty-six-year-old Korin is the only respondent for whom peer pressure alone made him visit a brothel—in his case, a "military brothel" in an islet base. He stated that after leaving the army and getting a girlfriend, he had not bought sex again.

7. *Enjo* means *enjo kosai*, or compensated dating, and is a term that originates from Japan and that refers to prostitution arranged between older men and schoolgirls. It became a popular part-time job in Taiwan among college girls and young female office workers, who usually find clients through telephone clubs or the Internet.

8. O'Connell Davidson argues that prostitution cannot be *ethical* if it is to be understood in Gayle Rubin's framework of a "pluralist sexual ethics," in which sexual encounters are judged by, among other things, the level of mutual consideration. For O'Connell Davidson (1998, 208), "There is and can be no mutuality of consideration, pleasure or treatment in the prostitution contract."

9. Information retrieved in October 2003 from <http://www.twrf.org.tw/news.htm>.

10. One common clue is that Chinese escort girls are always transported and accompanied by drivers, who first take money from the clients before the deal and then wait outside to take the girls back right after the deal.

11. At a sex-worker forum held at Columbia University, February 17, 2004, Sealing Chen, an anthropologist who conducted an anthropological study of Filipino migrant sex workers in South Korea, mentioned "victimization" as a strategy that sex workers employ to get sympathy, money, and even marriage proposals from clients.

12. Many lower-end hotels in Taiwan accommodate prostitutes who, rather than broker deals with escort services, reside and work there. In general, the women get 70 percent of each payment whereas the hotel owners get 30 percent. The hotels profit mainly from these resident prostitutes, not from room rentals.

13. See *Scoop Weekly* (2004).

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