



Tiantian Zheng, *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China*

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RED LIGHTS is an intricately and trenchantly argued ethnographic study of female sex workers in Dalian, a seaport city in northern China. The author, Tiantian Zheng, combines the tenacity of a skilled ethnographer and the elegant diction of a poet when she juxtaposes scenes of visceral violence and emotional tensions with careful yet rigorous analysis of the structural and historical conditions that have given rise to the sex industry in contemporary China. She meticulously traces the historical provenance and cultural contexts that have enabled the commercialization of female bodies and intimacy in late twentieth and early twenty-first century China.

Gender is a well-trodden theoretical and conceptual issue in China studies. While male dominance may be a simplistic theme that has often been used to characterize male-female relations, Zheng complicates and enlivens the discussion by showcasing the fissures and contradictions in this hegemonic formation. She skillfully lays out the uneven historical and cultural terrain of hetero-patriarchal structural relations, stemming from traditional male privilege to a present-day entrepreneurial masculinity that creates and perpetuates the subservience of women by re-domesticating women. This masculinity is not monolithic, and is one of many forms of masculinity at play in China. Class and nationality are also important factors, pitting Chinese Dalian men against Japanese men, or upper class men against lower class. Zheng nicely builds the architecture of gender in intricate and multifaceted ways. The male clients of sex workers are patronizing bars and women to satisfy individual desires and to collectively assert a form of Chinese masculinity that has been “castrated” or shunted by the state under colonial rule and under the Maoist regime. This masculinity is further bolstered by the business and entrepreneurial spirit of the current period that shapes sexual consumption as a reclaiming of the Chinese male clients’ potency, allowing the clients to redefine their relationship to their own masculinity and to reframe their relationship to the state.

The state provides the impetus and instruments for the propagation and shaping of women’s roles and positions across history, whether under Japanese colonial rule, Mao’s socialist regime, or the hybrid capitalism of today. Chinese women, particularly in rural areas, have had a long history of being used as pawns and objects in the “intimate needs” of the state and its apparatus. For example, during the Japanese occupation, these women were used to provide “comfort” to Japanese soldiers and government officials. Zheng’s sweeping historical survey shows that Chinese women’s personhood has been bound by prevailing state economic and political strictures. As such, enduring cultural idioms and ideals such as filial piety and self-sacrifice are not merely passively expressed, but as the author convincingly

argues, these are strategically and contingently performed by the female sex workers she studies.

These women work in karaoke bars that are—for all intents and purposes—sites for procuring paid sex. Karaoke bars began life as entertainment for Japanese businessmen in the early 1980s and they have continued as one of the institutions that has emerged in a consumption-oriented Chinese economy. As a social space, karaoke bars are a site of major contradictions. The bars are well placed within the consumerist and entrepreneurial spirit of post-Maoist Chinese society but at the same time, they run against the persistent and palpable ethos of socialist ideals of egalitarianism. Karaoke bars are also an instrument of the state in its search for extralegal revenues and therefore a vital zone for the clash of state, commercial, and personal desires and ambitions in contemporary China.

A karaoke bar provides the stage for the author's detailed ethnographic limning. She delineates the difference between high- and low-end karaoke bars and then sketches the hierarchies and unstable relationships within—of hostesses, madams, managers/owners, and security guards. If a karaoke bar is a theatrical space, the female sex workers—who are primarily rural migrants—are the primary actors and the focus of Zheng's sensitive rendering. Exposed to the raw and ruthless ambitions of managers, bouncers, police, and other government officials, and subject to the desires of their customers, these women are living bare lives that involve ambivalent relationships with other hostesses and a strategic if subservient engagement with clients and bar authorities.

The hostesses mediate between competing discourses about proper femininity as defined by the state, the traditional family, and various models of modernity and cosmopolitanism. Zheng traces the trajectories of these mostly rural women who enter the sex industry in the spirit of self-sacrifice and filial piety to provide for their families back in villages and small towns. In order to be successful, they refashion themselves through clothing and also in terms of a psychic reformation where they find themselves able to manage and direct various intimate situations to their advantage. This psychic refashioning allows these women to become entrepreneurial subjects able to “perform love and romance” for monetary gain, social mobility, and cosmopolitanism. Through descriptive vignettes, Zheng is able to showcase the paradoxes and ambiguities in these women's situations, particularly as they navigate the compelling pull of filial obligations, individual desire, and the dire material conditions that beset them.

Red Lights follows and adds to the many fine ethnographies of sex work in various parts of the world. As a native daughter of the area, she is also able to locate herself within the historical, political, economic, cultural, and sensorial ecologies of sex work in Dalian. To paraphrase Geertz, Tiantian Zheng successfully “takes us there” not just in embodied ways, but she also enables readers to enter into a capacious space of compassionate yet rigorous ethnography of the plight of this specific group of Chinese women.

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