

# Self-Empowerment and "Professionalism":\* Conversations with Taiwanese Sex Workers

## Abstract

The question of female sexual power and agency has been the focus of feminist sex wars in the past decades; the sexual agency of sex workers constitutes another hotly debated issue. Based on conversations with active sex workers, the present paper explores the self-empowering discourses and practices that some Taiwanese sex workers have forged out of limited cultural resources that are barely available to them. These discourses and practices not only help sex workers maintain better control of their work condition, but also provide images of professionalism for the purpose of self protection from physical harm and social defamation. The articulation of self-empowerment and image of professionalism serves as an important locus for an understanding of the current struggle of Taiwanese sex workers.

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If I know the dreams of only my own, then I will never understand where my impulse for freedom impinges on another history; where my interpretation of someone's life is weakened by my own limits of language, imagination, or desire. Joan Nestle, *A Fragile Union*

Carol Leigh, aka Scarlot Harlot, of prostitutes' rights group COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) invented the term "sex work" in 1979 as a feminist contribution to the English language as well as an acknowledgement of female subjectivity and agency within the sex industry (1997: 225, 230). In 1997 a similar transformation took place in Taiwan with the emergence of its first prostitutes' rights movement, in this case led by none other than the lowest stratum of sex workers.<sup>1</sup> The persistent struggle of the Taipei licensed prostitutes 台北公娼 not only kept the issue of women's sexual self-determination at the forefront of public debate for well over a year in all print and electronic media, but also uplifted the morale of sex workers all over Taiwan who continue to put up fierce resistance against the anti-obscenity campaigns launched by the government and its desire to reach respectable nation-state status.<sup>2</sup> Such an atmosphere of contestation and

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<sup>1</sup> When Taipei's 128 middle-aged, nearly illiterate sex workers took to the streets in September of 1997 to protest the city's sudden policy to revoke their long-held licenses, their presence and uninhibited shouts of protest in public space not only ripped open the silence and stigma that had kept them ostracized in dark alleys and back streets, but also added a dramatic accentuation to the muffled split among feminists who had been debating the question of female sexuality since 1994. Forging a movement out of this historic event, the emergence of the Taipei Alliance of Licensed Prostitutes (TALP 台北公娼自救會) introduced a new understanding of the prostitute as a "sex worker 性工作者," and kept up so much pressure on the city government with continuous direct action protests that it is believed that the movement eventually contributed to the downfall of the mayor's reelection bid and won a two-year grace period for the prostitutes themselves in 1998. Incidentally, Carol Leigh herself, along with representatives of prostitutes' rights groups from 15 different countries and areas, was also present at the international forum on sex work rights that TALP organized in May 1998 to support the Taipei prostitutes' cause.

<sup>2</sup> Ironically, these anti-obscenity campaigns are fueled by feminist discourses produced by what are now called the "good-woman feminists 良婦女性主義者," who are often also self-proclaimed "state-feminists 國家女性主義者." The former term describes the middle-class-based scope of their general concerns: safety, childcare, sexual harassment and sexual violence, etc. The latter term was created in 1996 to mark a transformation in the role of the feminist as well as in the goal of mainstream women's movement. According to its leading spokeswoman, Liu Yu-Xiou 劉毓秀, feminist ideals are to be carried out by none other than housewives who are to be encouraged to become political agents and enter the public realm of the state apparatus en masse. The sheer presence and number of women would then swallow up the public realm with the private realm, thus feminizing the state and forcing it to take up the job of caring, while the self-professed feminist "philosophy queen" dethrones the "philosophy king" (cf. Naifei Ding, "Prostitutes, Parasites, and the House of Feminism" in this volume). It is with this vision in mind that mainstream feminists devoted themselves to the project of nation-state-building, which was to culminate in opposition party candidate Chen Shui-Bian 陳水扁's triumph in the 2000 presidential election, who, incidentally, was none other than the Taipei mayor in 1997 who issued the order to revoke the licenses of the prostitutes. In that sense, the struggle of the Taipei prostitutes has come to mark not only a significant moment for feminism in Taiwan, but also a significant moment in class politics expressed as a nation-state-building project.

mobilization has also made it possible for pro-sex-work feminists to finally meet with and learn from previously hidden-from-view sex workers, and in contexts other than the disciplinary institutions where arrested or rescued sex workers were sent, as objects for research and rehabilitation, in order "to reveal the horrible truth about sex work."<sup>3</sup>

The focus of my research emerged exactly from the heated debates that raged among feminists over the fate of Taipei's licensed prostitutes. The anti-prostitution feminists constantly invoked the image of the sex industry as a location least likely for the existence of female power and agency. Contrary to this assertion, I have observed numerous demonstrations of power and agency that have been and are being forged by sex workers in this context that is said to be inimical to women's right to self-determination.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in contrast with the first official prostitutes' rights movement of France in 1975 that aimed at police harassment and repression of the prostitutes (Jenness, 1993: 2), the Taipei prostitutes' rights movement, sparked by the city government's sudden revocation of their licenses, their right to work as prostitutes, structured their struggles around the idea of prostitution as "sex work," as a viable profession for women.<sup>5</sup> This articulation of self-empowerment and the legitimate discourse of professionalism thus constitutes the focus of my conversations with sex workers.

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<sup>3</sup> Such encounters are not as common as imagined. In fact, in the west although sex workers and feminists had worked side by side in the women's movement in the early 1970s (Nagle, 1997: 3), the polarization of the feminist camp over the issue of sexuality divided them until special efforts were made to create dialogues between them in 1985 (cf. Bell, 1987: 11). In the case of Taiwan, for security, secrecy and other complicated social reasons, sex workers had been inaccessible to feminists/researchers except in the context of those disciplinary institutions where arrested or "rescued" prostitutes were sent to be rehabilitated. Consequently, the prostitutes have long been portrayed either as victims or as confused women to be rescued or enlightened by feminists. The moment of mutual recognition took place in 1997 when the Taipei licensed prostitutes marched in front of City Hall, supported by feminist sex radicals including me and many of my friends. It was this united front that built up enough trust for the TALP sisters to grant me interviews with them.

<sup>4</sup> Such power and agency, emerging despite the dampening forces of sex negativity (Rubin, 1984, 1989, 1992: 278) and sexual hostility (e.g., undesirable sexual advances or harassment), provide fascinating insights for our reconceptualization and reimagining of female subjectivity.

<sup>5</sup> The professionalization of sex also carries significant implications for women in general. For the rationalization and ritualization that accompany sex work signify its impersonality. That is, the sex in sex work does not operate according to the sex/gender inequality that saturates the private realm. In contrast to the modern idea of sex as private, intimate, profound, and thus catastrophic for women if it happens outside wedlock; sex work offers a different conception of sex as work, as manageable activity, as merely part of a functional relationship. For a brilliant discussion of the above points (especially, the implication of sex work for women's relation to sexuality) and more broadly the inner connection between modernity and sex work, see a series of essays written by Yin-Bin Ning 甯應斌 (卡維波), including "Sex and Work in Sex Work 性工作的性與工作：兼駁反娼女性主義", *Working Papers in Gender/Sexuality Studies* 《性/別研究》, special issue: Sex Work: Prostitutes' Rights in Perspective 「性工作：妓權觀點」專號, nos. 1&2, January 1998, pp. 240-263.

Anti-prostitution feminists have criticized the idea of treating sex as “work” (Jeffreys, 1997: 161-195), but my conversations with sex workers have shown that at times treating sex not only as “work” but maybe even as “profession” (both in appearance and in spirit) could prove to be most useful and beneficial for sex workers. Here I am NOT using the term “profession” to denote the special prestige and power bestowed upon select occupations, e.g., medicine and law, for the knowledge and organizational features they have demonstrated (Watson, 1980, 1987, 1995: 224)--sex work, with its long-standing ignominy and the constant bombardment of moral outrage, can hardly afford this kind of piped dream. Nor am I interested in applying an analysis of the process of professionalization to the sex industry to prove the latter’s progress in modernization. Eliot Friedson’s historical overview of the semantic history of the word “profession” and the hotly debated ambiguities/complexities that follow such semantic potency (1986: 21-32) has more than adequately dispelled these illusions of empirical ahistoricity.

What may turn out to be quite useful for the discussion here would be Magali Sarfatti Larson’s casual remark in regard to the organizational and institutional supports that make professionalism possible and identifiable. For although sex work is forced to do without much of these supports, “...these supports are features that occupations which aspire to the privileges of professional status can *imitate*, without possessing the cognitive and normative justifications of ‘real’ professions” (Larson, 1977: xi, italics mine). Larson’s implicit essentialism aside, the import of the idea of “imitation” points to the possibility of all occupations being performed as “professions”--which may not necessarily promise any real enhancement of status but it would at least inject some new variables to complicate the original power arrangement within such occupations. As a matter of fact, in the case of the sex workers I talk to, the existing respectable “professions” are hardly ever treated as ideal models to be “aspired to”; instead, they are useful raw materials to be appropriated, transformed, or “imitated” so as to, for example, produce effective resistance to unwanted impositions, create new erotic contents for daily routines, save on work efforts, etc.. In the following pages, I will present how some sex workers, faced with the debilitating effect of social stigma and the encroachment of gender inequality, have learned to experiment with various cultural resources and have come to empower themselves with various innovative practices and discourses that prove to be most helpful for managing their “profession.”

### **Managing the Body**

Many feminists object to prostitution on the ground that it makes women’s

sexuality more accessible to men by allowing the clients to obtain "unilateral right of direct sexual use of a woman's body" (Pateman, 1997: 204). Prostitution is even seen as a clear-cut case of "male supremacy" where women are treated no better than slaves (Jeffreys, 1997: 183). In stark contrast to that pitiful picture, sex workers themselves never seem to assume such positions of powerlessness--except perhaps when they are arrested and turned over to social workers for interviews that would determine their fate in the legal system. On the contrary, the longer they have worked in the sex industry, the more resourceful they seem to become in challenging or even subverting any such unilateral impositions of power.

For one thing, sex workers have long invented what sociologists call "boundary markers" (Giddens, 1989, 1993, 1997: 78) to shape the meaning of their sexual transactions as well as to ensure only limited accessibility to their own bodies. In my interviews, when I asked about her feelings when going to work, 48-year-old prostitute Mei-Mei 美美 says, *"I've made up my mind to do this kind of work and I don't want to think too much about it any more. I will just treat it as 'OK, now that you have come into the shop, I will be nice to you, but after you are done, I will not acknowledge you."* The wording here may give off an impression of helplessness, but when she said those words, she was quite at ease and even somewhat exhilarated toward the end. For whatever power the client may hold exists only when the client is "in the shop"; outside the location, the sex worker will not allow the client to hold any power over her. In the past, such a resolute attitude has earned sex workers the name of "heartless whores 婊子無情," yet for the prostitutes themselves, seemingly "heartless" when the transaction is over--in other words, "being professional" about the transactional relationship--is exactly how sex workers can keep the clients from exerting too much control over their lives. Being heartless, being impersonal about her sex, is the basic work ethic of sex work. Viewed in this light, the common label of "heartless whores" is not only a term that aims to debase sex workers, but also an effort to deny self-determination to sex workers--for it seeks to expand the domain of sex unto the whole of the sex worker's lives. It is in direct opposition to such pressures that the idea of "professionalism" becomes a powerful weapon for sex workers.

Even during the actual transactions, boundary setting directly undermines any kind of unilateral control that may have been imagined by the client. For not only the location but also the body parts and the activities involved are often clearly specified by the sex worker herself as terms of the transaction. When I asked one sex worker Feng-Ying 鳳英 whether the client could do anything he wants with her besides penetration into her vagina, she vehemently insists: *"No, No, just the usual thing. It will only take five or ten minutes...My service is for the client to fuck me,*

*and I treat it as a dream. It will be over very quickly and then he is out.*" In other words, the vagina is the only body part that she offers in the exchange; no other body part is included. Furthermore, penetration is the only activity allowable for the vagina; no poking or fondling is acceptable. The key point here is that when sex exchange is reduced to penetration (which results in more of a demand on the penis than on the vagina), it not only significantly cuts down the duration of the exchange but also limits accessibility to the rest of the sex worker's body.

When I pursued by asking whether the client could fondle her genitals, Feng-Ying 鳳英 says that she would never allow that to happen: "*What if I become aroused when he touches me? I am here to make money, not to have fun.*" The proclamation echoes the spirit of any regular workaholic: to be fondled, to be aroused, to have fun would be to mix work with play, and that is not supposed to happen during work. One reading of this statement may be: she is keeping work and play separate because "what she [the sex worker] does for money is not an expression of her own sexuality" (Morgan, 1987: 26), which then bestows a higher status to the sex worker's "true" sexuality as distinct from that at work. Yet we can still imagine another possible reading: the sex worker is preemptively protecting the professional status of her work, and whatever sense of power that is granted her by that status, from being compromised by the activation of feelings and sensations deemed personal and playful. Whichever may be the case, it is important to note that this type of reservation or boundary setting in no way signifies the sex worker's "aversion" to sexual transaction, as anti-prostitution feminists would have it. Instead, it is more a strategy that sex workers themselves have developed to actively limit the scope of the transaction, shape the meaning of the sexual act, and reduce the emotional values that are attached to sex work in this sex-negative social environment. <sup>6</sup>

Anti-prostitution feminist Carole Pateman may insist that "the integral connection between sexuality and sense of self means that, for self-protection, a prostitute must distance herself from her sexual use" (1997: 207); that is to say, there is something unusually profound and sacred about sex, so much that the sex worker would go to extra length to protect her inner self--her own sexuality. Yet as shown in the above interviews, the reason for distancing work from private life is not so much an effort to protect the sex workers' inner self as an effort to, in one way, minimize work efforts and the duration of transaction--a labor-saving strategy, you might say--and in another way, desexualize the transaction to make it as professional

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<sup>6</sup> I believe these aspects are where sex workers can greatly contribute to the empowerment of the so-called good women by demonstrating the possibility of women's agency in changing the meaning of sex for all women.

as possible so that the sex worker may assume a position of control and autonomy accordingly. In short, restricting the transaction to specific, partial, designated parts of the body and activities, or, changing the meaning/significance of the sexual transaction, represents the sex worker's effort to mobilize the power associated with professionalism, which then allows the sex worker to have better control over what lies inside and outside the process of transaction.<sup>7</sup>

Pateman's assertion becomes even more absurd when faced with sex workers whose "professionalism" expresses itself not in setting up body boundaries but in thoroughly professionalizing the whole body. This strategy may take two completely opposite directions. One sex worker who is also a lesbian says she does not set any boundary for her transactions; it is even ok for the client to fondle her genitals: *"When the client is doing it, I do not feel a thing. And since I do not feel a thing, it really does not matter whether he touches this part or that part. That is simply my work."* This, she reiterates, actually needs no special effort on her part. *"I am a lesbian. I like women. That's why I can make a clear distinction between my work and my sex. When the client comes in, he is here for the transaction. He pays the money, I give him my body for a while. That's nothing. But when I do it with my lover, that is a totally different act. This is probably why my work never affects my sex life."* For her, the heterosexual act of penetration carries no meaning at all; likewise, to be fondled by a man effects no erotic significance either. In contrast with the passionate sex she enjoys with her lover, sex at work is completely insignificant and meaningless—except in terms of monetary gains, of course. In this sense, for her, sex work has little to do with sex; sex work is truly ordinary "work," and her body is simply the tool of her trade.<sup>8</sup> Thoroughly professionalizing her body for sex at work, then, allows this lesbian sex worker to successfully negotiate the seeming contradiction between her sexual preference and her sexual occupation.<sup>9</sup>

In another case, the total professionalization of the sex worker's body stems from

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, in all the other workplaces such as regular offices or factories, employees also invoke the connotations of "professionalism" to resist the boss' demand for overwork or to decline the clients' propositions for non-work-related engagements.

<sup>8</sup> But she also says jokingly that she is not "professional" at all, because she never really applies herself to her "work"; she is simply indifferent about her work.

<sup>9</sup> Like their counterparts in the US and elsewhere (e.g., Dworkin, 1987, 1995, 1997: 63; MacKinnon 1989: 142), many anti-pornography and anti-prostitution feminists in Taiwan have also described "penetration" as the most horrible assault on women and that it greatly solidifies the humiliation and domination of women. Yet the sex workers I have talked to consider penetration as something that happens only incidentally during work; and more importantly, it is something that CAN be manipulated by the sex worker herself through shortening its duration or a transforming its meaning. This new conception of penetration is very different from the good women feminists who continue to insist that penetration sex (with strangers and outside wedlock) will produce irreparable damage to women.

a completely different orientation. When asked about clients fondling her genitals, one most articulate sex worker, Xiou-Qin 秀琴, who is always at the forefront of the Taipei prostitutes' struggle, says nonchalantly, "*Now that you have become a sex worker, what else needs to be kept off limits?*" This was not said in despair, but with the resolution to become thoroughly and whole-heartedly professional. Thus in contrast with other sex workers who remain rather passive during transactions, 41-year-old Xiou-Qin 秀琴 makes it her policy to actively perfect and enhance the quality of her service. According to her, when she started in the trade, she was still an inexperienced young woman. Yet she had always been proud of her beautiful figure, which had won her a lot of admiration from men. From the moment she became a sex worker, that self-pride transformed itself into a pursuit of professional achievement. Before the first day of work, she even went to bookstores and read up on the subject of sexual intercourse: "*I wanted to learn how to please men so that they would keep coming back to me. I am here to make money, right?*" As the hottest prostitute in her workplace, Xiou-Qin 秀琴 happily reveals her secret of success: she would automatically strip herself stark naked to greet the client as he enters her room, and would open her arms to embrace the client with the most enticing smile. This is done without any shred of reluctance, though; instead, she does it with the confidence and self-pride that make up the most potent ingredients for her professionalism:

*I feel that if I am going to be a prostitute, I'm going to be an unusual prostitute: I should try to find pleasure in my work. Besides, if sex is simply penetration, and when the man ejaculates, it's over—then men can just stay home and do it with their wives. Why spend money on us? So, as long as I get money from you, I will do my best to make it worth your while by giving you a wonderful experience. But at the same time, as a sex worker, I also have the duty to send the client home happily without lingering and hoping to have more than a casual relationship with me. I will make him miss me, but I will not let him love me. Every sex worker should know that.*

The world may want to isolate the sex worker and create a sense of inferiority in her; yet the sex worker continues to uphold her sense of professionalism to build up her own pride and dignity at work. Here, "finding pleasure at work," making the client "spend the money happily," and sending him home happily to miss but not love the sex worker--all these have far exceeded the scope of the monetary motive that most people attribute to sex workers: they are, instead, direct expressions of the sex worker's sense of self-pride and her spirit of professionalism. Interestingly, such practices bring extra benefits too. On the one hand, at the sight of a naked and hospitable female body, many clients quickly reach orgasm and thus put an end to the transaction, saving the sex worker's much time and energy. On the other hand, being pampered with such special treatment, many clients instantly bought extra time just to



be with her, which brings the sex worker extra pay and more business. Here, the benefit of projecting images of professionalism is not only immediate but also more than concrete for the sex worker.

Anti-prostitution feminists may scoff at the idea of sex workers “finding pleasure at work,” yet the fact of the matter is, some sex workers have developed ways to transform work into pleasure-seeking opportunities and have learned to negotiate for it with the most professionalized attitude. Here is an excerpt from a conversation I had with Xiou-Qin 秀琴 on negotiating mutual love-making sessions with clients of her choice:

J: *What would you say to the client? How do you phrase it?*

X: *“I have certain needs today, and if you feel...” You know you need a special process to do it, and that cannot be done in a few minutes.*

J: *You mean you would like more time for extensive foreplay?*

X: *Yes. So I say, “Can you afford the money? Can you pay for an extra one or two hours beyond the 15 minutes that is allotted our usual transaction?” The clients usually say OK very quickly.*

J: *Really? Now during those extra hours, do you feel the activities are different from the usual?*

X: *Of course!*

J: *What would you say is the difference?*

X: *The difference is that you would feel you are surrounded by affection, a feeling of love...that is, you don't treat it as work, you can imagine yourself having sex with a lover.*

J: *Usually it is you who serve the client, but in those hours do you still serve?*

X: *No, just the opposite. It's like I am the client and he serves me.*

J: *Really? Would the client agree to that?*

X: *Yes, yes. And it is very different from the usual situation. In this atmosphere, you can touch each other's body all over, or do other things that you like. You know, having a good time without any reservation.*

It is hard to see how the sexuality of the sex worker could be, as anti-prostitution feminists claim, “unilaterally at the disposal of the client” on these occasions. On the contrary, most clients are well aware that the sex worker's sexuality is almost always beyond their reach unless she chooses to make it available. That's why when Xiou-Qin 秀琴 expresses her own sexual needs and opens the possibility for mutual interaction and negotiation, the clients are more than happy to comply. Because, for once, the clients would have a chance to reach the sex worker's sexuality. And for once, the person in need is not the client, but the sex worker. Furthermore, it is worth our attention that in this process of negotiation and exchange, the dominant person is obviously the sex worker: the one who is served is the sex worker, the one who enjoys the pleasure is the sex worker—and the one who gets paid for it is still the sex worker. Just as Xiou-Qin 秀琴 puts it, she never needs to seek the service of

male sex workers, because as she says, “*I can satisfy my need at work! Earning money and earning pleasure at the same time. Ha ha ha!*” The confidence, autonomy and pleasure, expressed in this hearty laugh, is nowhere to be found in the victimization model that many feminists rely upon when analyzing sex work.

## Managing the Discourse

As demonstrated above, some sex workers have learned to construct an image of professionalism in managing their own bodies; furthermore, it is an image that aims more to enhance their control of work conditions than to improve their general social status. Of course they are well aware that the social stereotyping of sex workers could create an environment inhospitable to their profession, evidenced by the uncontested popularity of anti-obscenity campaigns launched by much-resented politicians. Faced with the social branding and discrediting effect of stigma (Goffman, 1963, 1986: 3; Coleman, 1997: 224), yet fortunately working and living in an age when such pressures are increasingly challenged by stigmatized groups in revolt (e.g. lesbians and gays, aborigines, the disabled, etc.), sex workers likewise have learned to appropriate existing legitimating discourses to reconstruct positive meanings for the negative attributes that have been associated with their work and identity. Consequently, the dynamic of humiliation and shame, which was to force the sex workers into withdrawal and vulnerability, now encounters massive refraction and displacement put up by self-empowered sex workers.

The sex workers who have demonstrated the strongest vitality in the discursive maneuvers are the so-called “betel-nut beauties 檳榔西施.” These are teenage girls who dress in scanty sexy clothes and sit in transparent booths well-lit and decorated with mirrors, waiting to take packages of betel nuts, beverages or cigarettes to mostly male working-class customers who drive by in their cars or more commonly in their trucks of all sizes. The most common depiction of these scantily-dressed girls is that they are “lewd” and “obscene” in their clothing, with their super-short skirts and extremely high heel shoes.<sup>10</sup> But as one owner of a betel-nut booth tells me in a very dignified way, she always makes sure that the girls she hires dress in the most “respectable 端莊” fashion when working. As odd as it may sound, she goes on to explain that to be “respectable” means a girl must dress in an out-of-the-ordinary way, with a complete set of outfit, and with stockings and high heel shoes to complete the

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<sup>10</sup> The betel nut beauties are also often considered “sex workers” not only because parading their sexuality is the core of their job, but also because it has always been rumored that many of them do practice prostitution on the side.

picture. Glancing at the betel nut girl who was walking daintily toward a stopping car to deliver the betel nuts, the owner says with admiration:

*Don't you think the betel nut girl looks great and very respectable with her high heels and stockings? I think she looks very respectable. You know, when you put on high heels and stockings, even your walk is totally different, you're just not like the ordinary people.*

Within this definition of “respectability,” the length of the skirt is of no concern; whether body parts are exposed or not is of little consequence. The important thing is: whether the girl gives the customers the impression that she has made special efforts to make herself presentable to them--an impression that is most gratifying for the male working-class clientele who rarely enjoys such hospitality from women, not to mention pretty young girls in scanty clothes. At the same time, this out-of-the-ordinary impression also functions as a kind of self-definition that helps the betel nut girls carry themselves with pride--for they are, after all, NOT like ordinary people: their outfits imply that they are more in line with the performers in the entertainment or modeling businesses. The linguistic strategy of redefining “respectability” deliberately chooses to highlight certain connotations of the term (a formal image, a complete outfit, special paraphernalia such as stockings and high heel shoes, etc.) while downplaying those connotations having to do with propriety and prudishness. It tactfully transforms the cultural meaning of the betel nut beauties’ outfits from unacceptable lewdness to an image of respectable professionalism. According to this interpretation, the betel nut girl look is in no way lacking in respectability; quite on the contrary, it exactly embodies the essence of “respectability.”

If critics refuse this interpretation and insist that the betel nut beauties’ outfit is lewd or licentious, the girls can still substitute the “special look” discourse with another discourse that seeks instead to naturalize the betel nut girl look. The girls point to the numerous window displays of fashion in department stores and clothing stores where lots of equally exposing dresses are on open display. One betel nut girl contends:

*If these clothes are not to be worn in public, then why are there so many of them for sale everywhere? Besides, the most popular performers wear them too. In fact, they often dress less than we do. If they can dress this way, why can't we? When the performers wear these outfits, people say they are pretty. But when we wear them, what do people say about us? It's simply not fair! Their scanty dresses are seen on TV by the whole country, even the whole world; in comparison, we are only seen by the small crowd that pass through this area. If there is truly harm, which one does more harm?*

In this case, fashion trends in the capitalistic system and mainstream media images

provide the most powerful defense for betel nut beauties, who then mobilize all the favoritism associated with fashions and glamorized performers to improve their own social image <sup>11</sup>. As the look of the betel nut beauties, with their flashy short dresses and other paraphernalia, is in every way on a par with images of well-known popular performers, the latter's professionalism and possible contribution to Taiwan's nation-state-building project are implicitly shared by the betel nut beauties. Furthermore, whatever criticism may come this way toward the girl's sense of propriety or morality is hereby cleverly displaced onto the unfair workings of class politics. (“*We all wear the same outfits, why are we treated differently?*”).

While the betel nut girls invoke popular culture to defend their appearance, the betel nut booth owners, situated in a different subject position, can invoke another discourses in defense of the trade and the girls. Thus the owner of a chain of betel nut booths actively reconstructs an image for his girls, describing them as admirable models for the service industries of Taiwan and ranking their professional service higher than that provided by well-respected multi-national fast-food services. The girls' eyes glared as the owner went on to defend them:

*To tell the truth, betel nut is also a service industry. We not only sell betel nuts, but also cigarettes and beverages. When motorists are tired of driving, they don't have to get out of their cars to get a coke from the 7-11s; the betel nut beauties would bring cokes right up to their cars and say welcoming words to them. When you go to the McDonald's drive-through, the service staff stays inside the windows. But here, just pull over to the side of the street and the girl runs up to you to service you. Who can provide better service than she? Besides, if we put all the betel nut booths together, I bet we sell more cigarettes every day than all 7-11s put together. Think about how much tax we have created for the government!*

In this description, the betel nut beauties' quality of service surpasses that of McDonald's; and the contribution of betel nut booths to the national economy outranks that of the 7-11s. Again, the issue of the betel nut beauties' outfits disappears into the background; instead, the service they provide is highlighted as exactly what this aspiring country needs. In this kind of discourse, betel nut beauties and their work are deemed professional in every way; two huge multi-national corporations serve as the relief against which the betel nut girls display their

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<sup>11</sup> The two best-known examples cited by the girls include one singer, A-Mei 張惠妹, who has held massive concerts in China and is said to have made important contributions to promoting friendly relationships across the Taiwan Strait between China and Taiwan. The other singer, Coco Li 李玟, has just entered the US top 40 with her English album, a first for any performer of Taiwanese descent. The national and international fame of these two performers, emerging at a time when Taiwan is thirsting for international recognition, has successfully legitimated their scanty dress and sexy moves on stage, and likewise legitimated the body decorations of thousands of teenage girls in Taiwan, betel nut beauties included.

professionalism.

If accusations persist that their outfits are licentious, the betel nut beauties can still turn the arguments around to make fun of the critic's own ignorance. They point to the protection device that shields their vital parts completely from any direct view--the dark-colored or beige-colored non-transparent short tights that betel nut girls usually wear under their regular panties. In their more practical function, these so-called "safety panties" are specially designed as a precautionary measure against any kind of peeping.<sup>12</sup> Yet their size, shape, and color are deliberately designed to give off a certain degree of ambiguity. In other words, "safety pants" do not simply cover over the private parts; more often than not, they function as an imaginary space where flirtations or fantasies could take place. One girl dramatized one such typical exchange of discourse for me. When the betel nut beauty approaches a stopping car to take the order, the customer would jokingly say: "*Look! I can see your panties!*" But instead of feeling harassed or humiliated, the betel nut girl answers also jokingly: "*Really? But what you see may not be my panties! It may be something else!*" If the customer persists by saying the panties are of this color or that color, the betel nut beauty would simply brush it aside by again jokingly saying, "*Oh! You got me!*" or "*Oh no, how do you know?*" By that time the transaction is over and the customer has to be on his way.

This is a good example where a moment of possible harassment is turned into a moment of fantasy and flirtation for both the girl and the customer; where the betel nut girl can carry out her duties without necessarily crossing or humiliating the customer and thus lose future business; where the confidence of knowing that "he cannot see anything" can help the betel nut girl feel at ease with her body, even when she sits on the high stool inside the betel nut booth with her legs crossed.<sup>13</sup> All this is achieved because the betel nut beauties have developed ways to verbally manage that imaginary space within a social environment starving for romantic contacts and fantasies. What is more, this kind of confidence and assurance also fosters a feeling of power in the girls, a power that helps them fight back the hostile flirts that they do encounter at times. As one girl says:

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<sup>12</sup> I might add that it does not really matter whether the girls are actually wearing those tights or not at the moment. (Who would have the audacity to double-check anyway?) The fact that they can always verbally invoke the existence of the tights, and effectively frustrate the critics and curious on-lookers alike, already demonstrates a wisdom and power that is rarely found in the so-called good women, who, when faced with flirtations or harassment, can only respond with anger and a sense of helplessness.

<sup>13</sup> For the good women looking into the booth, the betel nut girls' crossed legs signal licentiousness; but for the betel nut girls themselves, crossing their legs projects the impression of a luring posture yet affords the least exposure and the most protection from peeping eyes.

*I used to lower my head when people stare at me, but now I just stare back at them until they look the other way. And I used to get speechless when men yell sexual innuendoes at me, but now I just yell back at them and shut them up. I have become smarter since I started work as a betel nut beauty.*

Such wisdom is often passed on from one betel nut girl to another by word of mouth, and many of the ideas are quite beyond the common wisdom of good women. For example, people often criticize the betel nut girls for being too loose and licentious with their customers as they are often seen openly flirting with various men in front of their work booths; sometimes even body contacts are observed. Yet as one betel nut girl tells me, she used to feel too ashamed to respond to male gazes or other sexual advances from strangers until she learned a precious lesson from a more experienced co-worker. The senior betel nut girl offered a profound motto: *“I would rather take the initiative to touch the customer than to have him touch me.”* In other words, before the customer gets too far in his flirtations, the betel nut girl would take the initiative to jokingly pat him on the shoulder, the face, or any other body part of her choice to show that she is playing along--but on her own terms. Usually that moderate gesture of friendliness, which carries a note of ambiguous and aggressive flirtation, will be enough to assuage the customers' advances and maintain a cordial relationship between the girl and the customer, to be concretized into many happy return visits by the latter. In that sense, contrary to common perception, the seemingly licentious behavior of the betel nut girls is in fact an active strategy that puts them in control of the interaction with male customers. The girls simply refuse to be objects who are touched; instead, they take action to transform themselves into subjects who do the touching. When the senior betel nut girl said *“I would rather touch the customer than to have the customer touch me,”* the words were uttered not out of desperation, but deliberation.

### **Managing the Trade**

So far we have seen how various sex workers have devised various ways to manage their bodies in the work context as well as manage the discourses in the social context, both empowering sex workers in this less than supportive social environment. The professional image that is forged in this process has provided sex workers with a sense of power that effectively resists the discrediting forces of stigma. Still, sex workers' concerns extend far beyond their personal or social image--and herein lies another aspect of their mimicry of professionalism: they cannot help but devise new ways to sustain their business in this fast changing and highly competitive world.

To continue with the example of the betel nut booths. While the general public

focuses on the lewd outfits of the betel nut girls, members of the industry are well aware that the attraction of the betel nut booths cannot be sustained by simple bodily exposure. One betel nut girl keenly observes: “*Last summer, there were girls who wore only their bras and a pair of jeans in the streets. I have seen them while shopping. When people jog in bikinis, like they do in the United States, the betel nut look will no longer work.*” In fact, as super short skirts and super high heel platform shoes become fashionable among the general population of teenage girls, the look of the betel nut girls is fast losing its uniqueness, its difference, and thus its power of attraction. New desires may be generated by the inflow of new girls, yet new girls are hard to come by. For one thing, anti-obscenity campaigns and the stigmatization of betel nut beauties have successfully discouraged many girls from entering this business. Secondly, as new girls are hard to recruit, the resulting competition among betel nut booths have created optimal conditions for existing beauties to switch jobs, often leaving their employers stranded by surprise.<sup>14</sup>

Such a dead-end alley finally found an exit. One morning, truckers driving by the variously located booths of a certain betel nut chain were pleasantly surprised by the new look of the girls in the booths: the girls were dressed up like nurses, except their skirts are much shorter and the cut in the front of their blouses was much lower. As crowds of people rushed over to enjoy the spectacle, the news outraged other members of the general public who believed it was blasphemous to sexualize such a noble profession and to insinuate that nurses could, like the betel nut girls, serve as objects of sexual fantasy or even transaction. While nurses and feminists deplore the abuse/contamination of the image of nurses, the betel nut girls, on the other hand, understood the new look in a completely different way. As one girl explains:

*I think we have this new policy because with the new look the customers would have something new to say to you. They would come and jokingly say: ‘I need a shot, so I am here to see you again!’ Or when they hand over the money to buy the betel nuts, they would say, ‘Oh, nurse, here is my medical insurance card. Please put me down for an appointment.’ It gives us a chance to make a fun conversation together and then the customers are more interested in coming back.*

The joy and excitement in her voice was unmistakable.

Here, the betel nut girl unwittingly unveils the circuit of desire in the transactions

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<sup>14</sup> Anti-obscenity feminists have condemned the betel nut trade for its seemingly tyrannical hold on the girls they hire—“sexual slavery” is a common enough imagery in western gender-based social analysis too (Chapkis, 1997: 41-57). But my conversations with the girls and the owners have shown quite the contrary. The informal nature of the business and the girls’ upward mobility for better pay or better social status have always resulted in a serious problem for the owners rather than for the girls. That also explains the constant presence of “help-wanted” ads posted on the betel nut booths.

at the betel nut booths. Rather than merely consisting of, as the feminists put it, one-directional visual exploitations of the betel nut girls' exposed body, desire is more often and more powerfully embedded in the narrative structure of the encounter. And as the simple peeping-flirting routine loses its potency, desire has found a new route in the newly installed, interactive, negotiating, mutually flirting scene that constantly mobilizes/stimulates the imagination of both the girls and their customers. Thus the betel nut girls' new outfit serves to define the scene of transaction, and new desires and new sales are generated by the new narrative as well as the new structure of interaction, adapted from readily available cultural resources and enacted by the girls and the customers in high-spirited collaboration--that is, until its novelty is exhausted in repeated use. The professional language, roles, and interactive routines of other more respectable professions thus serve as prime raw material for the betel nut retail business, to be modified, recreated, and actively performed to produce new, erotically stimulating scenes.<sup>15</sup> And as the new roles are played out, the betel nut girls feel empowered not only by experimenting with the mimicked regular professions but also by vicariously sharing their legitimacy. Of course, it is also understandable that as this nurse-patient scene gradually loses its novelty and potency, new narratives and new roles will have to be created to generate new desires and new businesses. And as a result, the betel nut girls will get more opportunities to try out other roles and other models of interaction adapted from other respectable professions, which will further enrich their experiences.<sup>16</sup>

The invention of new scenarios and new interactive models for transactions taking place at the betel nut booths may have started as one entrepreneur's efforts to renovate or rejuvenate the work routine so as to improve and sustain his business. Yet such a desire for sustenance along with concrete steps to improve work performance--things considered basic to any respectable profession--are by no means alien to individual sex workers, despite constant assaults of stigmatization or legal

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<sup>15</sup> What is more, such transformations also reveal the erotic substratum that underlies many seemingly non-sexual and thus respectable professions. (Why are nurses and stewardesses so popular in x-rated materials and fantasies, anyway?)

<sup>16</sup> As my conversation with this particular betel nut entrepreneur shows, his adaptations are inspired by the most commonplace experiences. For example, the nurse uniform was adopted because nurses are the only group of women that working-class men have the most opportunity and the most legitimacy to come into contact with in a quite intimate way. And the model of interaction is routine enough for the customers so they wouldn't feel uncomfortable reenacting it while visiting the betel nut booths. Incidentally, the adaptation of the nurse uniform was modeled upon what women tennis players wear on the tennis court, an idea the designer himself picked up from watching ESPN. Along the same lines, the entrepreneur has also finished adaptations on the uniforms of airline stewardesses, Playboy bunny girls, Japanese female cartoon characters, etc., all familiar cultural artifacts readily available and familiar. During the Christmas season of 1999, betel nut girls were seen wearing modified Santa suits.



technicalities that aim to discredit them and their demonstrated power of agency. The leader of the Taipei licensed prostitutes, Xiou-Qin 秀琴, has developed on her own a habit of reviewing her daily encounters with clients so as to improve on her later encounters:

*At the end of each day, I would think back. 'What kind of customers did I receive today? How did I interact with this kind of customer and that kind of customer? And with this certain customer, a certain kind of service seems to get better results. And with this other customer, maybe I should try something else next time.'* It is a habit I developed since I started working. You know, I have to do this because I'm completely devoted to making more money. I came from a poor family, deserted by my husband. I have to make money!

In this and other examples, the pure and simple motive to make money, as base as it may sound, not only helped some sex workers develop the habit of reviewing and improving their work, but also helped them, as shown in previous conversations, develop specific practices so as to have better control over the labor process, to reduce the risk at work, to protect themselves from unwanted impositions by the clients, and to gain the biggest profit in exchange for the smallest effort. If the list looks familiar, it is only because all these would have been considered admirable demonstrations of sound work ethic in any other regular profession; yet, as these qualities and practices are associated with the disreputable sex work industry, these endeavors are read instead as signs of greed and laziness.

Here is another example of how sex workers' efforts to manage their trade are again obscured by the effect of social stigma. One massage parlor girl tells me that she and her co-workers would usually do their best to extend the time when the client is lying on his stomach because that is when the client is least capable of making aggressive sexual advances. They would wait until the last few minutes of the session to turn the client over on his back. As the client's desire is now clearly in view and is understood to be somehow gratified as part of the service, the massage girls have developed sophisticated hand maneuvers that gently move across the sensitive parts of the client's body. The girl tells me that this kind of "light skills 輕功" achieves multiple purposes. For one thing, unlike regular strenuous massage, the light skills 輕功 are less hard work for the massage girl. Secondly, as the hand maneuvers resemble delicate foreplay, the client gets more excited more quickly and may end the session sooner. More importantly, the hand movements, without making it explicit, put the client at the disposal of the massage girl as well as keeping him at arm's length so as not to interfere with the stimulation process. Ironically, the client, overjoyed by the seeming tenderness of the sex worker, interprets these moves as royal service and ends the session with contentment and sometimes even a sizable

gratuity. The feminists, on the other hand, read these hand maneuvers as humiliating, degrading services that the girls are forced to perform.

Even when penetration does make up part of the deal for a message session (with much higher pay of course), some message girls have developed ingenious practices for their own protection. Message girl Xiau-Ling 小玲 tells me about one experienced girl who has perfected her skills at oral sex so that the penetration segment can be as short as possible:

*She feels that doing it with her mouth would finish off the client faster. You can make him feel very high with your mouth, and only when he is close to orgasm that you get on top of him--being on top means you can be in control. He will ejaculate in maybe a few seconds. This way, the girls' vagina would not get hurt easily. She would not let the client stay inside her for too long to do all that grinding. That would hurt her.*

Performing oral sex, taking the top position, moving up and down actively to induce ejaculation, not to mention other special tricks such as giving the client's penis a massage with her breasts--all these are considered by feminists and other righteous women as horrible humiliating "perversions" that are said to have been imposed on the sex workers by their clients and bosses. Yet these turn out to be strategies that the sex workers themselves have developed to avoid possible injuries as well as to assume more control, and they are in fact quite effective means to ensure that not too much time would be wasted before taking on the next client.<sup>17</sup> In the eyes of the feminists, the occupational practices of the sex workers only offer up more ways for women to be exploited; yet for the sex workers themselves, they know very well how to protect and benefit themselves--their "professional wisdom" will ensure that.

## Final Words

Erving Goffman's classic study shows that social stigma functions "to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier" (Goffman, 1963, 1986: 1). The marked subject, in the case of the sex worker, then suffers varieties of discrimination that effectively rob her of any legitimate claim to power, agency,

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<sup>17</sup> The passages cited here may leave the impression that there is no pleasure involved in work. Yet as the massage girl tells me, sometimes she does feel pleasure when touched by clients in a gentle way, especially when she is also doing the "light skills" on the client. The difference between her case and Xiou-Qin 秀琴's is that while the latter openly negotiates for the mutual exchange, the massage girl would control herself and not let the client know that she is enjoying it: "*Our agreement is for massages. I don't want him to get the idea that we could go further than that. If we break the agreement, it will make it more difficult for us to refuse, as a general rule, customers who make extra demands on us.*" Here, even the enjoyment of subjective pleasure is subsumed under professional considerations.

autonomy. My conversations with Taiwanese sex workers suggest that many of them have already learned to appropriate legitimate discourses to project an image of professionalism that helps them maintain better control of the work situation. In addition, sex workers have also invented/adopted various professional practices that provide them with the most protection--be it from unwanted sexual advances or real physical injuries--while still giving the clients the impression of congenial service. Sex radical Carol Queen has observed that “whore stigma derives from whores’ sexual availability and presumed copious sexual activity” (1997: 132), yet my conversations with sex workers concur with Queen’s findings only in a special way: many sex workers “are available and sexually active *on their own terms*” (1997: 132). This kind of power and agency cannot and should not be casually denied by feminists.

Critics may point to the fact that power and agency are not available to all sex workers, that those who manage to demonstrate power and agency at work are only the privileged few, that they are not “typical” of sex workers. While such contentions may seem justified, I would point to the fact that intellectual capacity or political sense also used to be considered available to only a select group of women, yet that never stopped feminists from pushing for more education opportunities and political participation for women as a whole. Likewise, if some sex workers have on their own devised ways to utilize/improvise discourses and practices to fight off domination and exploitation, then there is no good reason why feminists should withhold affirming or even whole-heartedly supporting such demonstrations of power and agency. What needs to be done is not doubting the few who have managed to develop agency, but taking aggressive steps to make that sense of agency a reality for everyone else in the same disadvantaged situation.

Other critics may contend that appropriating the idea of professionalism could end up assimilating sex work into the one-sided power arrangements in mainstream professions, and that it would only further consolidate the domination of professional powers. I think this kind of worry overlooks two facts. First of all, as demonstrated in the present paper, the sex workers’ attitude toward professional discourses and images is quite utilitarian: whatever can be appropriated or utilized will be picked up, not as essential traits to be assumed, but only as pragmatic tools useful for specific contexts. In contrast with this pragmatic and non-essentialistic approach that harbors numerous gaps and transformations, the critics’ assertion of the seeming inevitability and immutability of professional power may in fact contribute more to the reification of power. Secondly, as stigmatized, ostracized, isolated subjects, sex workers and their appropriation of the discourse of professionalism remain at best approximations, if not mimicry. Even if sex work is eventually recruited to the rank of regular professions as critics feared, it is hard to say whether

the domination of professional power would still operate in the same way in this newly instated “profession.” In that sense, to second-guess the efforts of sex workers as endeavors to further consolidate professional power would be to deny/frustrate the vibrant forces and resistance created by sex workers in their own discourses and practices. The fact of the matter is: sex workers ARE already empowering themselves with discourses and practices evolved from their work experiences, and the concept and practice of sex work is fast changing because of that. Sadly, the worries and warnings of on-lookers are not going to be of much help for the sex workers. Whether self-workers’ self-empowerment will eventually transform or give in to the demands of professionalism, or, whether professionalism will enhance or circumscribe sex-workers’ self-empowerment--these are questions that can only be answered by the future development of the sex worker’s rights movement.

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