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cosmopolitan sex workers: women and migration in a global city

Christine B.N. Chin, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, 256pp.,

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This book is primarily a study of migrant women sex workers in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur. Christine Chin contextualises the migration experiences of thirty nine women sex workers from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, embroiled in Malaysia's neo-liberalisation processes. Specifically, the book tries to understand these personal narratives at the intersection of the state projects to build Kuala Lumpur into a 'world-class city' while further securitising the borders, and the 'syndicates' (the Malaysian–Chinese organisations that facilitate the migration and labour of these migrant women in the city) that make possible the women's movement and labour in the transnational sexual economy. Chin demonstrates remarkable interview skills with diverse populations: migrant women, syndicate members at different ranks, and ordinary Malaysians who live and work in close proximity to these populations. The book is most engaging in describing how individual women and men grapple with the opportunities opened up by the transnational network of global cities, with a focus on Kuala Lumpur (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). It is most refreshing and illuminating when it identifies migrant sex workers and their facilitators as cosmopolitan subjects, detailing the diverse ways they 'perceive and relate to different cultural environments and people' (p. 27). However, Chin's creation of a category of 'non-trafficked women who participate in transnational migration for sex work' (p. 1) and a syndicate that operates as a service provider rather than 'buying women' like other syndicates seriously undermines the effectiveness of her analysis, as I will show below.

The chapters in the book are organised to help readers make sense of both macro developments of state projects and neo-liberal economic reforms and micro realities of women's migration into Kuala Lumpur for sex work. In Chapter 1, Chin lays out her framework of 'city, creativity and cosmopolitanism' in understanding how neo-liberal economic restructuring processes encourage and sustain the transnational flow of migrant sex workers. Chin observes that migrant sex workers and their facilitators have made use of the opening up of the education market and tourism development in Malaysia to enter the capital city, as Kuala Lumpur becomes increasingly embedded in a network of 'global cities' for these cosmopolites. Giving a brief overview of the feminist debates about 'sex trafficking', Chin boldly states that '[u]npalatable as it may be, given the global imperative to combat human and sex trafficking, some migrant women do view the exchange of sexual services for money as a life enhancement strategy, as the means to what they plan as a better end' (p. 21). Chapter 2 provides a rich history of the postcolonial city of Kuala Lumpur, its racially–ethnically diverse spaces and its transformation into a 'world-class city' that relies on a constant supply of cheap migrant labour—including migrant sex workers who cater to the growing number of elite travellers and tourists. State strategies of diversifying migrant nationalities and privatisation of border control are explained in Chapter 3. Chin details how the Malaysian state 'creatively' mobilised citizen-civilians with the People's Volunteer Corps

(RELA) together with security forces to police the internal borders of the nation. In Chapter 4, readers learn about the perspectives of migrant women from China, Africa and Eastern Europe in the Malaysian city: their ideas about sex work, their desire to travel and their ideas about 'freedom'. In Chapter 5, Chin's main point is that the globalising and neo-liberal processes of the Malaysian state have encouraged Syndicate X to transform from a Chinese secret society into a corporate-like organisation that '[i]nstead of owning and controlling trafficked migrant women ... offers fee-based services related to migrant women's entry, employment, and forward journeys' (p. 143).

The most interesting chapter in the book, Chapter 6, throws into relief the diversity of emerging cosmopolitan subjectivities forged by this flow of migrant women sex workers: how the intersection of gender, race-ethnic and class hierarchies of the city shape their 'cosmopolitan sociability' and how they manage their everyday lives and interactions with diverse ethnic and class populations in Kuala Lumpur—not only clients, but also tourists, expatriates, shopkeepers, restaurant and shop owners, neighbours, and so on. For the women, their awareness of the stigma against their work and their goal to make money do not reduce their presence and social connections in Kuala Lumpur to only utilitarian purposes. Not only do they sometimes develop strong bonds with each other; their desire to learn about the world propels some to engage actively with others, while fear of exposure and discrimination, or desire to stay above the fray of racial-ethnic conflicts, ensure 'self-exclusion' for some. The Malaysians—including syndicate members, both male and female—find ways to connect with the migrant women and to express their discontent against the class polarisation embedded in neo-liberal developments. Chin helps readers gain some insights into migrant sex workers' experiences as cultural and social beings, with their own ways of discriminating and engaging with others—and not just sex workers. Chin concludes the chapter elegantly, discussing these cosmopolitan practices forged out of the irregular migration that both the state and public discourses denigrate: how they 'construct little spaces of hope and empowerment in which there is good in bad and sameness in difference' (p. 172).

The category of 'non-trafficked women', in contradistinction to 'victims of trafficking', however, prevents Chin from developing a similarly complex understanding of these women's experiences as migrant sex workers. That Chin is committed to showing these 'non-trafficked women' as empowered subjects is clearly captured in this statement: 'Women who migrate for sex work realize neoliberal globalization's promise of free markets as the sites from which people can and should be authors of their own destinies, because of and despite inequities and inequalities circumscribed by their gender, class, and so forth' (p. 21). To show that they are unlike 'victims of sex trafficking' in any way, Chin presents a picture of these cosmopolitan sex workers making autonomous decisions about their labour and everyday life in Kuala Lumpur, served and protected by the professionalised syndicate. In this way, Chin's writing is remiss about the struggles and negotiations that take place outside of this ideal arrangement. I provide a few examples below.

While Chin asserts that state policies against migrants and prostitution render these women vulnerable, there are few interviews and little ethnographic material to support these claims. Only one migrant Chinese woman is quoted as saying, 'It is the police who bother us' (p. 99). This offers one possible avenue to examine how police abuse undermines these women's rights and well-being. Yet there is no narrative to help readers understand what this actually means on an everyday basis. This leaves a glaring empirical gap for readers who appreciate Chin's discussion of the securitisation of borders against irregular migrants by both civilian and security authorities.

In portraying the relationship between the women and the syndicate, Chin presents the *formal arrangement* but not the messiness that might arise in reality—probably placing the migrant women at a disadvantage in relation to the local organisation.

In return for monthly board and lodging fees and taxes, the syndicate's connections to a range of firms, agencies, and individuals offer migrant women a one-stop shop for services: clients, personal security, housing, transportation, and banking. Syndicate X and its seven counterparts are the informal version of the formal economy's conglomerates... (p. 143)

Even conglomerates in the formal economy engage in unfair practices. Where migrant workers depend on the syndicate for almost all their working and everyday needs in Kuala Lumpur, there is plenty of room for abuse. For example, migrant workers may accumulate debts if business is slow or when they are sick. What kinds of financial arrangements or loan systems are in place between the women and the syndicate? What rates of interest are levied in these sorts of financial arrangements? What happens when the women simply do not want to work, or want to terminate their arrangement with the syndicate? In any case, readers would benefit from a more detailed understanding of what problems may arise and how they are resolved between the syndicate and the women outside of this official agreement.

Relatedly, Chin describes in passing (p. 98) how syndicates make sure that women take health tests upon arrival and regularly thereafter—as often as every other day. There is no discussion about how the women see these health tests, what happens when a test comes back positive, and whether and how their STD status affects their work and immigration status. What is the difference between 'services' and 'control' when the migrant women are overwhelmingly dependent on the profit-oriented syndicate for their recruitment, employment and forward journeys (p. 143)?

In order to gain insights into the lived realities of cross-border sex work, migrant women's sense of empowerment, agency and aspiration needs to be discussed in relation to their negotiation of structural vulnerabilities in different sites. Creating a false dichotomy of 'non-trafficked women' versus 'trafficked women', or groups 'specializing in non-trafficked migrant women' versus those specialising in the 'buying and controlling' of women, Chin risks reducing the broad range of abuse of migrant workers to problems suffered by some unfortunate individuals abused by a few unscrupulous and unprofessional syndicates or network of criminals. The peculiarities of viewing migrant sex work through the distorting lens of the non-trafficked/trafficked dichotomy creates the illusion that there are two distinct categories of migrants (non-victims/victims), depending on their luck with syndicates. Yet reality is often messier than that.

Cosmopolitan Sex Workers is to be appreciated for its fascinating personal narratives of migrant sex workers and its engagement with theories of cosmopolitanism. However, cosmopolitanism is not dependent on migrant women's 'non-trafficked' status. Women who have been forced, tricked or 'bought' may also desire to see the world, meet new people, learn new languages and continue to travel to other global cities. They find themselves negotiating with similar structures of border securitisation, labour flexibilisation, and escalating gendered and racialised inequalities, as Chin has described.

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