

COSMOPOLITAN SEX WORKERS

Women and Migration in a Global City



CHRISTINE B.N. CHIN

Cosmopolitan Sex Workers

Oxford Studies in Gender and International Relations

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Oxford New York

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Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chin, Christine B. N., 1963–

Cosmopolitan sex workers : women and migration in a global city/Christine B.N. Chin.

p. cm.—(Oxford studies in gender and international relations)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-989091-0 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Prostitutes—Southeast Asia. 2. Immigrants—Southeast Asia.

3. Cosmopolitanism—Southeast Asia. I. Title.

HQ241.A5.C45 2013

306.74'20959—dc23 2012046070

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

*For my father who instilled in me the worth of a good heart above all else,
and for my mother who raised me to believe that with courage, there is no
mountain too high to climb*

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CONTENTS

List of Figures ix
List of Tables xi
Acknowledgments xiii
Abbreviations xvii

1. Kaleidoscope of City, Creativity, and Cosmopolitanism 3
2. Making of a “World-Class City”: The State and Transnational Migrant Labor 32
3. Reestablishing Internal Borders of the Nation: Creatively Repressive State Strategies 60
4. “What Is Wrong with Being a ‘Miss’?”: Transnational Migrant Women and Sex Work in the Twenty-First Century 84
5. “We Sell Services; We Do Not Sell People”: Case Study of “Syndicate X” in KL 120
6. Knowing and Living in KL’s Contact Zones: Gendered, Racialized, and Classed Cosmopolites 146
7. Conclusion 173

Notes 185
Bibliography 197
Index 219

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LIST OF FIGURES

| | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 2.1 | Map of Kuala Lumpur's Golden Triangle | 33 |
| 2.2 | Kuala Lumpur skyline | 35 |
| 2.3 | Map of Selangor State | 36 |
| 4.1 | "Sample Routes Taken by Transnational Migrant Women Sex Workers" | 97 |
| 5.1 | "Syndicate X" Organizational Chart | 133 |

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LIST OF TABLES

| | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 2.1 | Transnational Migrant Workers in Malaysia by Country of Origin, 2000–2010 | 46 |
| 2.2 | Transnational Migrant Workers in Malaysia by Economic Sector, 2000–2010 | 46 |
| 2.3 | Tourist Arrivals in Malaysia by Selected Country, 2000–2010 | 50 |
| 2.4 | Employment of Transnational Migrant Labor by Approved Sector and Country of Origin, 2011 | 53 |
| 2.5 | Enrollment of International Students by Top Sending Countries, 2009–2011 | 56 |

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When we hold an open book in our hands, or click on a hyperlink to access an e-book, we enter a world to which many voices have contributed, directly and indirectly. The analogy of a symphonic choir comes to mind here: the choir, orchestra, arrangements, back and front stages of the hall, lighting, and acoustics are some of the crucial elements. The conductor has to make and give sense to integrating and coordinating all elements for a successful performance of brand new scores, reinterpretations, or even radical rearrangements of much vaunted classics.

Any single-authored book, then, is an intellectual symphonic choir with the author as conductor. This book is no different: many individuals have contributed to its production, intellectual and physical. First and foremost, I am awed by the choir without which this book could not be written. They are the transnational migrant and local women and men whom I encountered and interviewed in the field. Each soprano, alto, bass, and tenor voice could have sung alone and indeed, as you shall read, many did so in this study. Although their narratives conveyed specific hopes, fears, and dreams, when woven together they elucidated common paths to pursuing meaningful and secure lives in the twenty-first century, despite what they knew others might and did think of them. I owe an immense debt of gratitude as well to the women and men whom I got to know during the production of my first two books and who eventually helped pave the way to some members of this choir.

No symphonic choir is complete without the orchestra: the strings, percussion, and brass and woodwind instruments. Contributors can be found in the bibliography. They come from different disciplines and fields of study such as feminist international relations, critical political economy, geography, transnational migration, sociology, and intercultural communication. Unbeknownst to many of them, they have contributed to the construction of an interdisciplinary conceptual framework. To be sure, my participation

on International Studies Association panels, and especially conversations in the past few years with feminist IR colleagues, have helped shape the orchestral arrangement. As always, I am very grateful for their time and intellectual generosity. Among them is J. Ann Tickner, who, once I described the emerging project and related challenges, not only posed incisive questions but persistently reminded me of the project's value and the need to move forward with it.

Here at American University, my deep appreciation goes to James Goldgeier, Dean of the School of International Service (SIS), and Phyllis Peres, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Academic Affairs, for their unwavering support of me and my work. I also thank my colleagues in SIS, especially James Mittelman for always seizing the opportunity to ask me provocative intellectual questions. Successive SIS doctoral students assisted in keeping track of, and coordinating major components of the project. Kia Hall jumped right in, even as she and I worked on her Fulbright Fellowship to research Garifuna gender relations and development in Honduras. Yelena Osipova, who took over when Kia was awarded the Fellowship to Honduras, spent many hours reading and discussing the different chapters, and working on the maps and charts. Willow Williamson assisted in the final copyediting stage. My dear colleague-friends Fanta Aw and Loubna Skalli Hanna made it a point, during a lonely and at times frustrating process of writing the book, to juxtapose some of my arguments with those from their specific fields of specialization, and notably, to make me laugh with much (unprintable) humor. They were resolute in refusing to let me entertain doubts or to wallow in self pity, even for a moment.

Production of this symphonic choir could not have been completed without the backstage work of Angela Chnapko and the editorial, marketing, and production team at OUP. They were the consummate professionals who made the journey from review to production a painless and smooth experience. To the anonymous reviewers, thank you for your time and effort: I remain heartened by your constructive criticisms and encouragements to help me arrange and conduct the best performance possible. I alone am responsible for the contents and any errors in this book.

My deepest and most abiding gratitude goes to my family. They are my rock: I am, primarily because of them. My sisters and I were born into a never-let-go-of-tradition, extended patriarchal family. Yet our parents, grandmother, and Buddhist teachers deliberately raised us to believe that despite the explicit and implicit privileging of sons and grandsons in the very large family, we were equally worthy of support and respect: our gender was not a handicap at all. We were expected to choose our own paths

and to walk them with courage, commitment, and conviction. In the process, we were enjoined never to compromise decency, civility, and kindness.

I am the only one among the daughters and granddaughters who eschewed other opportunities in favor of conducting intellectual symphonic choirs. Still, my sisters are the most fervent champions in their steadfast endorsement of my work and their unconditional love for me. They insist that we must not relinquish the right to ask questions, even if the answers may elicit discomfort for some. If the ultimate goal is to improve the human condition for all, we will have to be able to “hear” while we listen to different voices, and to “look” while we see different peoples as they present to us, and not as we may wish them to be.

Christine B. N. Chin
Washington, D.C.
November 2012

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------|--|
| ASAs | Air Service Agreements |
| ATPA | Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act |
| BCIC | Bumiputera Commercial and Industrial Community |
| CATW | Coalition Against Trafficking in Women |
| FT | Federal Territory |
| GAATW | Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women |
| GATS | General Agreement on Trade in Services |
| GaWC | Globalization and World Cities Research Network |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| IE | International Education |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| KL | Kuala Lumpur |
| KLCC | Kuala Lumpur City Centre |
| KLIA | Kuala Lumpur International Airport |
| MAS | Malay Agricultural Settlement |
| MOHA | Ministry of Home Affairs |
| MOHE | Ministry of Higher Education |
| MOU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| MSC | Multimedia Super Corridor |
| NEM | New Economic Model |
| NEP | New Economic Policy |
| NGOs | Nongovernmental Organizations |
| OPEC | Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries |
| PHEI | Private Higher Education Institutions Act |
| PRC | People's Republic of China |
| PTT | Petronas Twin Towers |
| RELA | Ikatan Relawan Rakyat Malaysia (People's Volunteer Corps or Malaysian Volunteer Corps) |
| RM | Ringgit Malaysia (Malaysian currency: approx RM3 to USD1) |

| | |
|--------|---|
| SAPs | Structural Adjustment Programs |
| STDs | Sexually Transmitted Diseases |
| SUARAM | Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Voice of the Malaysian People) |
| UNODC | United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime |
| USD | US Dollar |
| USTIP | US Trafficking in Persons Report |
| VIPs | Very Important Persons |
| VOA | Visa-on-Arrival |
| WB | World Bank |
| WTO | World Trade Organization |

Cosmopolitan Sex Workers

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CHAPTER 1

Kaleidoscope of City, Creativity, and Cosmopolitanism

It may seem peculiar to offer a study titled “Cosmopolitan Sex Workers” when international journalists, policy makers, and academics typically focus on women and girls trafficked for sex. Sold by families, duped by boy-friends, or tricked by recruiters, these trafficked people are transported in-country and across borders and forced to perform sex work. This book’s title, then, may raise some eyebrows, because it calls attention to women who are not sex-trafficked and who, in the process of migration for sex work, may and do exhibit qualities that have been associated exclusively with elite travelers. This is not to deny the empirical realities of sex trafficking that are documented and analyzed by researchers in different regions of the world. Rather, it is to foreground a less often acknowledged phenomenon of nontrafficked women who participate in transnational migration for sex work. Women sex workers of diverse nationalities now are in major cities throughout the world, from Nigerian women in Kuala Lumpur and Chinese women in Paris, to Italian women in Doha and South African women in Dubai.¹ This, too, is an empirical reality.

Women’s transnational migration for sex work is occurring within the larger context of economic restructuring processes that interlock the global, regional, national, and local levels to bring about a new global economy. This raises the question: “In what ways and with what consequences do contemporary economic restructuring processes encourage and facilitate women’s transnational migration for sex work?”

These economic restructuring processes most often are referred to collectively as “neoliberal globalization” or “economic globalization.” Arising from the post–World War II era’s “embedded liberalism” and ascendant

since the late twentieth century, neoliberal ideology champions selling state-owned firms to private sector interests, removing barriers to the free flow of capital and goods, and opening up protected economic sectors and industries.² States implement economic privatization, deregulation, and liberalization policies to bring about or strengthen and integrate free market economies. The state's role henceforth "is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to" national, regional and global free market operations (Harvey 2005, 2).

The contradictory effects of economic restructuring processes on different groups of urban and rural people are well documented all over the world. Although there may be robust economic growth in some sectors, it often is accompanied by unemployment in other sectors, as well as by dependence on "flexibilized" labor in the form of temporary, contractual, outsourced, and offshored work. States help render labor less demanding (or more flexible), for example, by weakening or eliminating workers' rights and benefits, and by encouraging firms to parcel out or subcontract work (Standing 1999, 2011; see also Chin 2003; Van Eyck 2003): "Temporary workers . . . never achieve seniority, are not eligible for fringe benefits, considered to perform menial chores, and have no resources to independent and collective means of redress" (Teodosio 2007, 117). Data on employment, wages, nature of work, and so forth reveal that women continue to be negatively affected by labor flexibilization processes. For example, although the International Labour Organization study "Women in Labor Markets" found a narrowing of the gap in employment rates of women and men,

There is a clear segregation of women in sectors that are generally characterized by low pay, long hours and oftentimes informal working arrangements. And even within sectors where women dominate, it is rarely women who would hold the upper managerial jobs.

(International Labour Office 2010, 5)

Women's and men's transnational migration for employment exists as a concurrent phenomenon that shapes and is shaped by labor flexibilization processes. Labor-sending states directly and indirectly promote out-migration of their nationals in order to relieve the pressures of underemployment and unemployment, while generating foreign exchange earnings via migrant remittances. Labor-receiving states open their immigration gates to meet the labor demands of their formal and informal economies. However, not all transnational migrant workers enjoy unrestricted mobility: receiving states selectively open their immigration gates based on

considerations such as nationality, race-ethnicity, religion, gender, class, education, and occupation. Migrant women and men who fail to qualify for entry via legal channels will often pursue alternative means of entry. Some succeed, while others fall prey to traffickers.

More and more, migrant women pursue “mobile livelihoods” via legal and extralegal channels, participating in intra-regional and inter-regional migration (Briones 2008, 62). In major receiving cities, many work in low-wage jobs in such places as restaurants, homes, factories, hotels, and hospitals. Despite the fact that the range of positions is broad—including domestic workers, nursing home aides, assembly-line workers, restaurant servers, and hotel housekeepers—the common denominator is that these jobs are made available to, and often occupied by, migrant women. The labor is often in line with women’s ascribed gender traits:

As the service sector grows, many “female” tasks, such as child care and food service, are incorporated in the market economy. The affinity of many of these new service sector jobs to women’s traditional domestic roles may broaden the gender division of labor into the sectoral and occupational spheres.

(World Bank 2011b, 214)

According to the ILO, women account for 83% of all domestic workers worldwide (Simonovsky, and Luebker 2011, 8). In London, for example, women constitute 82% of all Slovakian and 71% of all Filipino migrants, and the majority of them are employed in domestic and health-related service jobs (Vertovec quoted in Dyer, McDowell, and Batnitsky 2010, 640). There are migrant women, to be sure, who exchange their sexualized labor for wages as well. Migrant women who perform gendered or even sexualized labor in cities rarely receive affirmative recognition in public discourse or in national and international accounting registers.

On the other hand, as regularly reported by global newsprint media such as the *Financial Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and *Forbes*, men “expatriates” or “highly skilled” transnational migrants and local professionals are seen to “organize and lead the drive to global control and the opening of markets to international competition” (Acker 2004, 29). They represent the “global talent” symbolized particularly by bankers, corporate managers, accountants, lawyers, and information technology experts who travel from major city to city all over the world, sharing their much in-demand knowledge and skills.

In these ways, there is a gendered and classed dimension to neoliberal globalization. Valorization of masculinized global talent in popular and academic literature obscures what is called “shadow globalization” or “activities

made possible by global flows of information, technology, finance and people, that are taking place in informal and illegal ways, but in the shadows in terms of otherness” (Penttinen 2007, 7). Given the illicit status of sex industries in many labor-receiving contexts, migrant women sex workers then are quintessential participants of shadow globalization. Beyond the dominant dyadic schema of exploited victim—criminal trafficker, the structural forces that directly and indirectly promote the migration of nontrafficked women sex workers—and the ramifications of these forces—remain inexplicably obtuse.

Therefore, this phenomenon of nontrafficked women’s participation in transnational migration for sex work within the larger context of neoliberal globalization calls for a more comprehensive and nuanced framework of analysis. Below, I present an interdisciplinary “3C” framework—of city, creativity, and cosmopolitanism—to organize and analyze complex interlocking forces on the global, national, local, and individual levels. The framework interweaves neoliberal economic restructuring processes that have given rise to networks of global cities and interconnected migratory pathways; “creative” responses of receiving states, migrant women, and facilitating groups to structural constraints and contradictions; and the cosmopolitan attitudes, practices, and worldviews emerging from migrant women’s encounters with difference in global cities.

This book applies the 3C framework to the empirical case of transnational migrant women sex workers in Kuala Lumpur (KL), the capital of Malaysia. Unlike its Asian counterparts, such as Bangkok, Manila, and Seoul, KL did not host foreign military bases (around which thrived “military” or “base” prostitution) in the twentieth century; nor is it internationally renowned as a destination for sex tourism, as are Bangkok’s Patpong district, Singapore’s Geylang neighborhood, and Tokyo’s Shinjuku ward. KL has served, since the 1970s, as the country’s gateway and destination city for low-wage Southeast Asian migrant workers in key economic sectors. By the 1990s, however, and as KL ascended to the club of “global” or “world” cities, it also had become a destination and transit city for migrant women sex workers from within and beyond the region.

CITY

One major outcome of global economic crises in the mid- to late twentieth century was the retreat of states from their respective economies. While those in the Global North voluntarily did so, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund’s structural adjustment programs (SAPs) ensured

that many states in the Global South followed suit. Free-market competition was considered the engine of economic growth, if not a panacea for improving the human condition. Privatization, deregulation, and liberalization policies, in effect, “deterritorialized” or freed capital to flow freely around the world (Scholte 2000).

New spatial configurations began to emerge with the “reterritorialization” of capital: one example is the so-called global city (others are offshore tax havens, free-trade zones, export processing zones, and regional growth triangles). As transnational firms extend their coverage and operations globally, these cities offer one-stop sites with access to specialized services, such as accounting, advertising, legal, finance, and research and development services. These cities “possess capabilities for servicing the global operations of firms and markets, for organizing enormous geographic dispersal and mobility, and for maintaining centralized control over that dispersal” (Sassen 2008, 57). The most renowned global cities of London, New York, and Tokyo are located in the Global North (Sassen 2001).

What of cities in the Global South? The Globalization and World Cities Research Network (GaWC) ranks world cities according to “economic function and the presence of global headquarters and producer service firms” (Shatkin 2007, 2). New York, London and Tokyo are hailed as archetypal or alpha world cities, followed by beta and gamma world cities located in different regions. However, Sassen (2005, 2009) and others (Shatkin 2007; Robinson 2002; Schiller and Çağlar 2009), caution against assuming that these three global cities offer the template for development of other global cities. Doing so is tantamount to adopting a linear developmental trajectory in which the archetypal cities are made to become the mirror of all other cities’ future. The emergence of global cities elsewhere need not follow strictly established economic criteria or perform the same financial functions.³ The characteristics and functions of a global city are shaped by its experiences with economic globalization, its negotiations of global forces, and the agency of local actors, that is, “differences rooted in cultural, geography, and institutional dynamics” (Shatkin 2007, 2). Despite states’ retreat from their own economies, they remain deeply implicated in the rise of their global cities.⁴

As command posts or centers for the new global economy, global cities are connected to one another within and beyond regions via electronic infrastructure made possible by innovations in new information and communication technologies (ICTs), and complemented by infrastructural expansion of freeways, railways, ports, and airports for the transport of passengers and cargo (Derudder et al. 2008; Shin and Timberlake 2000; Grubesic, Matisziw, and Zook 2008; Fu, Oum, and Zhang 2010). States