

Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

EVELYNE MICOLLIER

Plural discourses on sex, components and methods of workings of sexual cultures in Asia need to be explored in more depth, and this book should be taken as one brick added to the edifice of this specific body of knowledge. The main focus of our book is the study of sexual cultures and commercial sex work in East Asian societies. Most chapters have been revised from papers presented at the IIAS Conference 'Health, Sexuality, and Civil Society in East Asia', which took place in Amsterdam on July 6–7 2000, while a few contributors have joined us in the publication process (Henriot, Kelly, Walters). The book is organized in two parts: (1) 'Sexual cultures: caught between traditions and transitions' and (2) 'The social construction of sexuality and sexual risk in the light of STDs/AIDS control'. Topics discussed may, of course, overlap in the two parts. The first part deals with issues related to sexual cultures such as the role of commercial sex work, the kinship system, matrimonial strategies, gender roles in the family, gendered power relations in society and in the building of these cultures in transition. A dialectical relation between traditional and new elements in the ideological and behavioural configuration of sexual cultures is underlined throughout the papers. The second part examines specific issues related to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the social construction of sexual risk. As Parker (1995:362) put it, 'The social construction of sexual excitement and desire, ways in which sexual identities are formed and transformed, the relations of power and domination that may shape and structure sexual interactions, and the social/sexual networks that channel and condition the selections of potential sexual partners may all be salient issues that must be taken into account in developing more effective strategies for AIDS prevention.'

As many scholars have shown since Foucault (1976), sexuality is a dense nodal point for competing power relations and discourses of sexuality play a crucial role in efforts both to regulate and reform the political, economic, and social orders (Bristow 1997; Di Leonardo and Lancaster 1997). The complexity of the subject and the multi-layered social phenomena to be examined suggested that the perspective of the book should be multidisciplinary. Indeed, the contributors are sociologists (Blanc, Pan), anthropologists (Derks, Lunsing, Micollier, Walters), a

historian (Henriot), communication specialists (Hsu, Lin, Wu), a development expert (Kelly), medical doctors and/or medical anthropologists (Wolffers, Van der Kwaak).

East Asian societies are usually labelled family-oriented 'Confucianized societies' and are, roughly speaking, characterized by hierarchical human and social relations, authoritarian political organizations, a high level of social codification, and gender inequality. They share a common cluster of values, a cultural feature relevant to be used as a working hypothesis for the study of the intimate side of the Self such as sexual behaviours, meanings, and ideas. The relevance of a cultural constraint in the social construction of sexuality is discussed in a number of papers (Blanc, Derks, Kelly, Micollier, Wolffers). In our understanding, East Asia includes the Chinese world (P.R.China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and the Chinese diasporas), Vietnam, Korea and Japan. The comparative perspective is trans-Asian and is thus a proximity comparison – a tentative endeavour to draw comparative lines between East Asian countries, and in a broader perspective between East and Southeast Asia. A few papers document the situation in Mainland Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand) and Insular Southeast Asia (Indonesia). Vietnam is the most obvious and significant link between East and Southeast Asia, a fact explaining the number of papers (3) focusing on Vietnam in the book (Blanc, Kelly, Walters). Throughout these papers, there is a remarkable contrast in the description of Vietnamese attitudes towards sexuality although it should be noted simultaneously that there is an ambivalence towards sex workers in most East and Southeast Asian societies.

SEXUAL CULTURES: GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In our understanding, the concept of sexual culture is borrowed from Herdt (1997:10): 'A "sexual culture" is a consensual model of cultural ideas about sexual behaviour in a group. Such a cognitive model involves a world-view of norms, values, beliefs, and meaning regarding the nature and purpose of sexual encounters. It also involves an affective model of emotional states and moral guidelines to institutionalize what is felt to be "normal, natural, necessary, or approved" in a community of actors.'

Societies differ greatly in their normative codes of sexual conduct and the expression of desires, needs, and sexuality may change drastically in the course of life (Mead 1961). Most academic works stress the differences between Asian and Western sexual cultures focusing on the comparison between a much mythicized 'East' and 'West', along the lines of an Orientalist intellectual tradition, and by doing so falling into the research

bias of 'exoticizing' the Other and considering Asian culture as one to be opposed to the West. Moreover, most of the discussion on sexuality in Asia takes place in Western academic arenas pursued by either Western scholars or Asian scholars based in the West. This work will diverge from this common perspective in discussing differences within Asia, mainly by drawing a few comparative lines between sexuality in East Asia and Southeast Asia, and in bringing together Western scholars and Asian scholars from Asia in our collective editorial project.

Even though sexuality is an important aspect of life, it remains a difficult subject for scholarly research. In Western societies, the sexual liberation and the feminist movement from the 1960s favoured the rise of plural discourses on sex. It allowed people to live experiences questioning traditional normalization and regulation of sexual relations. However, even contemporary anthropological research, with every tool of fieldwork and all imaginable theoretical sophistication, has difficulties in obtaining reliable information about these recent changes in sexual behaviour and meanings in Western societies. The *mise en discours* of sexuality in Europe in relation to power and control has been extensively researched by Foucault (1976). He argued that the regulation of sexuality in Europe was a political tool for both the state and the church in their agonistic strive for power and control over the people. In Asian societies, sex is far less an object of discourses and studies than in the Christian and republican traditions. The social significance of sexuality in various contexts, namely marital, extramarital, commercial, is different in Asia as compared to Western societies. In general, it is even more difficult to study sexuality in Asia than it is in the West. Despite these problems, Dikötter (1995) has shown in a pioneering work that a similar state discourse regulating and monitoring closely sexual behaviours and meanings did prevail in modern China and, to some extent, still exists in contemporary China. In contrast to China, there is almost no state discourse on sex in most Southeast Asian countries.

The papers further contribute to explaining how and why sexuality is not a primordial acquisition or comprehensible in terms of totalizing or essentializing theories but is definitely a social construct within an open, dynamic and contingent set of social, political, and economic relations.[1] These theories were challenged by social scientists who demonstrated that sexual conduct was socially and culturally constructed (among them, Gagnon, and Simon 1973; Gagnon 1977; Weeks 1985). As soon as the theory of natural gender difference is rejected, a structural social inequality between men and women, thus the power of gender, becomes obvious; gendered power relations appear then as an important factor to explain the differences between the sexual lives of men and women (Gagnon and Parker 1995:14). The local discourse on sexuality, its incorporation into

people's worldviews, disciplinary efforts to normalize it, and divergent critical voices highlight the modern tendency for sexuality to become a central point in contesting broader issues of identity politics and gender relations. Representations of gender and sexuality are far more than before created through a whole range of forms from the commercialized images of the female eroticized body to those of the supportive and self-sacrificing wife. For instance, in China, the views of medical experts, agents of the state, as well as commercial bodies interested in responding to consumer demand come together in transmitting such images: 'Indeed, the explosion of sexually explicit material since the 1980s and the transformation of sexual practices among urban young people denote the emergence of what could be called a new sexual culture in China's urban centers.' (Evans 1995:387; 389). However, ideas and practices rooted in the traditional system can still be remodelled and re-emerge in new conditions through a process of cultural revivalism, men and women being agents both complying with and resisting competing constructions of sexuality: for instance, there is an implicit gender code prescribing for the middle-class Chinese woman the respect of Confucian family values and of the status quo (Maclaren 1998:196).

COMMERCIAL SEX WORK AND MARRIAGE

This book mainly documents female sex work. However, one has to keep in mind that male prostitutes do constitute about one third of the total number of sex workers on an international scale even though all figures and estimates about prostitution should be taken cautiously (Davis 1993). Commercial sex work should be analysed as a complex social phenomenon closely related to drastic socio-economic changes occurring in Asia and to cultural traditions as well. Identifying social, cultural, economic and environmental factors of commercial sex work[2] are at the core of most papers (Derks, Kelly, Lunsing, Micollier, Pan, Walters, Wolffers). These factors are, of course, related to sex roles in the family and in society. Some forms of prostitution have their roots in traditional forms of debt bondage, which was a well-established social institution in Southeast Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, and China (Testart 2000).

Female prostitution in East and Southeast Asia is mainly meant for native men. Even in Thailand, where international sex tourism is fully developed and where sex tours are so common, prostitution for foreigners constitutes only about twenty per cent of all commercial sex exchanges. Forms of prostitution range on a continuum from slavery to free operation by girls and free choice about engaging in the sex industry. There is a high

turnover among sex workers; prostitution is not a fixed career. For a woman, involvement in sex work during a period of her life may generate a long-term stigma or an improvement in her living conditions, if she uses the money earned to develop other lucrative activities. The agency of prostitutes is an important issue to be raised in the analysis of prostitution. Sex workers may make impressive careers or slowly improve their position: the origin of Thai women's economic activities in Europe took place at some point in the sphere of sex work. For instance, they have managed to open Thai restaurants, and the very existence of Thai communities in Germany, Holland, and Scandinavia is evidence of the agency of sex workers. Their agency is related to women's position in the kinship system (Brummelhuis 1997; 2000). The Thai situation offers the greatest contrast to India where women are strictly bound to male agnatic families. As for China, even though traditional kinship systems are agnatic, socialist ideas and practices have influenced other rules of behaviour, and deep changes in gender roles within marriage. In the context of East and Southeast Asia, some similarities can be pointed out. The common Western idea that sex for money can be clearly distinguished from a love or a marriage relationship does not exist in Asia, where economic factors are always essential in the building up of social and/or intimate relationships. In such a context, prostitution and marriage are closely interrelated institutions so much so that any discussion about prostitution should extend to the issue of marriage for several reasons. Firstly, they both combine sex and money according to positions in the kinship system. Second, a man tends to make a division between the woman he will marry and the person(s) to whom he is sexually attracted. The married woman will be the mother of his children and have access to the family economic resources. Sex roles within marriage tend to suppress any sexual agency or subjectivity of the wives, who are supposed to be 'good women'. A 'good woman' is per definition not a 'whore' and should not take any sexual initiatives. Asian women are trained to look for a husband and they know at a very early stage that it behoves them to look for a husband in the future. In that context, the fact that women use their bodies strategically, their youth and their beauty, to get money is consistent with their education in society and in the family, and not even in contradiction with a 'globalizing' context.[3]

As Derks shows in her paper about sex work in Cambodia, 'researching sex work gives of a picture of the contradictions that exist between oppression and exploitation on the one hand side and power and freedom on the other hand side.' Lunsing offers an anthropological perspective on sex work in Japan with the question about the agency of prostitutes at the core of his analysis. He shows that 'the economic aspects of sex have become more explicit than they have been for some time' and that 'there is an actual

increase of sex being traded for money' in Japan, which is not the result of any 'globalizing' process but is rather related to a traditional sexual permissiveness. Pan's paper is composed of selected extracts from his pioneering book about the underground sex industry in China recently published in Chinese (Pan 1999). His book is the first ever published on the subject based on sociological first-hand data. For that reason, it provides a new valuable source for an overall understanding of the development of a sex industry in China. The emergence, patterns, and methods of working of a red light district can be drawn from his work based on three case-studies conducted in three different towns in South China (provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Guizhou). Pan, from the 'Sociological Research Institute on Gender and Sexuality' (*Xing shehuixue yanjiusuo*) at the China People's University (*Zhongguo renmin daxue*, Beijing), and his research associates did field research about sex work in 1998 and 1999. The results were unveiled in two books (Pan 1999; 2000) which provide a deep insight into actual and contextualized working and living conditions of sex workers, and a record of their voices kept silent until now. Their long-term project research is still underway: another field research was done in 2001. The institute directed by Pan is the first of its kind in P.R.China. Its aim is to document different aspects of sexuality such as sex work, sexual identity and homosexuality by using methodological tools of sociology and anthropology rather than those of biomedical sciences, epidemiology and public health as is usually the case in China. In her paper about sex work and sexual culture in China, with a few references to Vietnam and Korea, Micollier uses some of Pan's findings in addition to her own fieldwork data, and discusses the role of sex work in the social construction of sexuality. She argues that a whole range of cultural, social, and economic factors tend to shape a sexual culture in which sex work plays the main role because of marriage rules and women's traditional roles in the Confucian family. Sexuality is thus approached through the dialectical relation between marital and extra-marital sexual life. Two papers in the book emphasize the structural relations between prostitution and marriage (Derks, Micollier). The study of sex work at international and national levels shows that movements of the population are closely interrelated with the flourishing of a sex industry (Herdt 1997; Blanc 1998, Husson 1998, Micollier 1998). One explanatory factor of its rapid expansion in developing Asian countries is linked to an economic development, which stimulates the mobility of the labour force. Besides, sex work is a way for women to climb the social ladder in society, and that social factor is a recurrent motive for engaging into prostitution (Brummelhuis 1997). Through such social mobility, poor women can support their families and middle-class women involved in occasional high-class prostitution may alleviate economic dependency on

parents or husbands to satisfy consumerist and individualist aspirations. As Derks subtly notes, mobility in the context of sex work is an aspect to be studied in more depth as a multi-layered process involving changes of settings and changes of behaviour as well. Wolffers, Kelly and Van der Kwaak go further in their analysis by talking about 'shifting identities' when they refer to drastic changes of conduct of sex workers at home or in work settings. They distinguish self-defined identities and identities defined by others, and underline that sex workers commonly keep their different identities well-separated from each other, an attitude mainly attributable to societal disapproval and legal prohibition. Their paper documents the situation in Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia, drawing a few comparative lines between East and Southeast Asian countries. Walters focuses on the economic factors underlying the development of a sex industry in Vietnam, and identifies some cultural factors as well: he explains for instance that female prostitutes support their families and that, by doing so, fulfil their filial duties: 'Those involved in the sex industries see themselves as making sensible and filial contributions to family, employer, and the country.' One should recall here that filial piety was among the most important Confucian values, if not the most important, in traditional China, Vietnam, and Korea, and still is to some extent. Kelly analyses gender and sexuality as social constructs in the context of the Vietnamese society with a feminist perspective. On the basis of her experience as a development expert, she chooses to use a number of research reports focusing on implications for intervention, which are usually more scarcely referred to in academic works.

SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL RISK IN A TIMES OF AIDS

Sex education, State/NGOs relations are approached through the analysis of local STDs/AIDS campaigns (Blanc, Micollier Part Two, Wolffers *et al.*). Throughout all the papers, it is constantly reiterated that sexuality may generate and stimulate a debate in society involving the State and diverse actors of civil society through the issue of controlling communicable diseases as STDs, including the HIV/AIDS epidemic. News analysis of discourses about the AIDS epidemic sheds light on the social construction of disease as a social stigma (Hsu *et al.*). Henriot's paper offers a historical study on STD control and prostitution during the Republican period in Shanghai (1912–49). Henriot concludes: 'While no direct parallel with the Republican period can be traced, the dominant mode of intervention by the Chinese authorities has been stigmatization and repression. As in the past, the approach to the problem of prostitution and STDs – a problem made

more sensitive with HIV and AIDS – is derived from prejudiced views rather than a genuine attempt to confront the social dynamics that run below prostitution and from a deliberate policy of imposing a blackout on these issues, especially the extent of HIV in China, both internally and externally.' His research appears as complementary to anthropological and sociological studies conducted in contemporary China (Pan 1999, 2000; Micollier 1999; Jeffreys 1997). The issue of *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* edited by Jeffreys (1997) aims at clarifying the nature and the effects of government regulations of prostitution in China today, offering a specific reading of the relationship between State and society. It is a contribution to the understanding of the particular forms of knowledge and institutional practices explaining how prostitution could be conceptualized as an object of political concern and as a target for corrective intervention: translated materials from Chinese reveal the highly differentiated and organized nature of prostitution in China today, and detailed various responses to this social problem.

Whether we can or cannot talk about an 'emerging civil society' or a 'civil society' really needs to be asked through the lens of public health issues related to sexuality (Blanc, Hsu *et al.*, Micollier part II). For instance, in China, although the State is still trying to regulate sexual life and attitudes towards sex (Dikötter 2000), people are being submitted to diverging influences. They tend to act and think away from prescriptions coming either from traditional family ideology or from State discourses. A public health issue can both reveal and fuel social change. In her paper about sex education in Vietnam, Blanc shows how sex education programmes are implemented at school and out of school, and which tensions and negotiations are at work in the process. She emphasizes the tensions engendered by cultural taboos, which fuel the resistance of the teachers and the families as well. These tensions have to be negotiated between all the actors involved, namely the official bodies ruling the educational and the health-care system, the educational and health personnel, the families, and the local NGOs, which have been developing in the context of a emerging civil society during the 1990s.

DISCUSSION: SELECTED POINTS

In addition to the points mentioned earlier, the following issues were raised during the discussion at the 2000 IIAS Conference designed to be a research workshop:

At this stage of the current research on gender and sexuality, as Brummelhuis noticed, the existence of transgender is no longer considered

a curious, marginal phenomenon but appears as a very interesting topic for further study about the relationships between sexuality and gender. Gender is not a strictly dichotomic concept but rather a bipolar one usually stretching out on a 'male–female' continuum. Ethnographic studies conducted in Latin America have inspired a new idea showing that gender and sexual identities can be drawn on a bipolar 'male–non male' continuum rather than a 'male–female' one, referring to the famous Latin 'macho' figure (Balderston and Guy 1997). Moreover, there is a prevalence of more fluid constructions of sexual identities questioning a strict homosexual–heterosexual polarity (Green and Babb 2002). In Asia, transgender people (third gender) have been known for a very long time in some countries such as India, Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Locally, there is a plurality of discourses on them emanating from the modern health-care sphere (sexologists and health workers), the popular sphere or the 'globalizing' sphere.

What does openness towards sexuality mean? Openness is again a social construct and if we begin the analysis with Western concepts, most Asian people may appear prudish and silent about sexuality. Indeed, as Brummelhuis and Herdt (1995:16) explain, 'it is necessary to spell out for certain societies the distinctions between prudery, sex-positivity, openness and repression in specific – public and private – cultural contexts (Parker 1995). Actually, the Western case might be extreme and atypical, due to its high tolerance for sex in public discourse, compared to the face of its elaborate ideologies and practices of repression (Foucault 1976).' For instance, the attitude of men towards sex work is significant: while it is very difficult for most Western men to admit visiting prostitutes, it is quite easy for most Asian men to do so. A simple reason is that a Western man who visits prostitutes, is perceived by others and perceives himself as a loser because it seems to spell out that he could not find a girlfriend. In contrast, visiting prostitutes is a mark of status and of masculinity for an Asian man. This example shows differences in values toward sex work, which have implications in the social construction of masculinity.

Why is it so easy to sell people's bodies? There seems to be no normative constraints to the treating people's bodies, to the commodification of the bodies of one's children and women. As Lunsing put it, love and sex may be considered commodities 'whether it takes place in marriage, love relationships, or in the context of prostitution.' Bodies have become a vehicle to getting cash. In the Chinese context, pre-revolutionary conditions, the communist ideology, and the international 'globalizing' model seem to have created an ideal ideological and behavioural configuration for the expansion of prostitution. A simple reason may be that poverty is more shameful than prostitution. Taking the risk to adopt a

reductionist view, one may observe that 'local' bodies are now unavoidably bounded to financial 'international' flows. As Pan pointed out in the discussion, the officer class in China still buy beauty rather than sex as it is the tradition mainly to invigorate the process of traditional social networking (*guangxi* system of social relations). He argues that this feature has nothing to do with any 'globalizing' process. Through the surveys of his long-term research, it appears that most male clients ideally want to have a wife, a girlfriend, and a prostitute to serve and accompany them.

Although sexuality is a difficult subject for social science research to tackle as mentioned earlier, it has to be investigated in order to evaluate sexual risk and to design appropriate AIDS prevention programmes, as well as for a better understanding of human beings and of human life in the context of culture. Public health and educational purposes are obvious. Furthermore, the study of sexual risk in the Era of AIDS and its culture-bound factors are a pressing issue as the AIDS epidemic is spreading at an alarming rate in the most populated countries of the world – China and India, and is currently gaining ground in Asian countries. East and Southeast Asian societies share several factors which make the implementation of appropriate STDs/AIDS programmes more difficult, namely a sharp increase in 'indirect' sexual services,[4] the volatility and diversity of entertainment settings, and a high turnover of prostitutes. Other aspects of sexual cultures and sexual risk in times of epidemics also need to be explored further, and in this book, a few topics among many were selected. The relationship between sexuality and identity remains to be documented in the context of East Asian cultures: indeed, structural factors of gender, class, and age underlie the social construction of identity at different levels – individual, familial, local, national, and even 'globalized'.[5] The question of sexual identities and the erasing of boundaries needs to be addressed: queer, gay, lesbian, and transgender cultures are emerging or are being re-shaped, caught between traditional beliefs and practices, between the visible and invisible aspects of attitudes and discourses, redesigned to cope with the transitions undergone in societies. Even though first hand data used by most contributors were collected using a methodology designed to understand public discourses – official, popular, and traditional – about sexuality, they were also intended to listen to the actual voices of sex workers and sexual minorities as well, addressing the problem of the social stigmas associated with them and the discourses on them may have raised difficulties and consequently silenced some voices. These voices still need to be heard to deepen our knowledge of the social construction of sexuality, and to help in the building up of more appropriate anti-AIDS strategies in the context of East Asian 'civil societies.'

NOTES

1 See Manderson and Jolly (eds), a work which also apprehends sexualities as social constructs in the Asian context; for an insightful theoretical approach and a well-documented state of the field of sex research, see Parker and Gagnon (eds) (1995), and their introduction in particular (pp. 3–16).
2 I will use 'commercial sex work' rather than 'sex work' on the grounds that we should consider some forms of sex work as non-commercial exchanges (sex work performed in such conditions that it becomes slavery, and forced sex in marital life).
3 Some ideas in this paragraph were inspired by the paper presented by H.T. Brummelhuis (2000).
4 Epidemiologists usually distinguish 'direct' prostitution from 'indirect' prostitution. In East and Southeast Asia, the distinction is not very useful because commercial sex work takes so many different forms and takes place in a whole range of settings.
5 For an interesting discussion on the paradoxes of identities and on how 'sexuality is woven into the web of all our identities,' (p. 36), see Weeks (1995).

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