Universiteit Utrecht

# Voice of the Subaltern: Media Representation of Sex Workers in China

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A Thesis Submitted in Conformity with the Requirements for the degree of
Master of Gender Studies
Department of Humanities
Utrecht University
2016

**Abstract**

This studies examines different kinds of media representations and self-narrations of sex workers in post-socialist Chia. The central question this study ask is how do sex workers in China negotiate the forces of social stigma, the abolitionist-centered policy and media regulation, and how do they use self-representation as a way of resistance. The thesis first demonstrate the reality of sex workers in China and further define their subalternity, by contextualizing layers of disadvantages imposed on sex workers. This is followed by an analysis on Chinese state policy and its collaborative media propaganda. Further the thesis explores media representations of sex workers, in mainstream media, social media and self-produced media. This work concludes with a discussion of the possibility for sex workers to speak via the rise of new media and self-mediation. Because of the advance of technology, a more creative, precise and not entirely passive representation on the subaltern is made possible.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor Professor Christine Quinan for guiding my research and providing me with invaluable and meticulous feedback during the writing process. Without her patience, kindness and encouragement, this thesis can never be accomplished. I would also like to extend my heartwarming gratitude to my internship supervisor Nadian van der Linde from the Red Umbrella Fund. Working with her is extremely rewarding and inspiring. She has always been supportive, and helped me developing my thoughts during the early stage of writing. I am truly benefitted from her positive energy and very useful suggestions.

Also I would not have made it through this year if not for the amazing company of Jom Semah, Lena Hornstein, Josh Grindroid, Corey Sutch and Estee Chen. Each of these people has taught me a great deal and guided me through my down time. My special thanks to Peter McVitie, for refining this thesis during the last stage, and being my first and most supportive reader. And finally, I offer words of gratitude to my parents for their never ending support and love.

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## introduction

"Chinese police are scaring sex workers away from using condoms." This shocking title of a Shanghaiist online news article was just released on 29 July, 2016, covering the study made by Asia Catalyst about the well-being of Chinese sex workers. Asia Catalyst is an independent organization focusing on the right of health for marginalized groups in Asia. It found out recently that the criminalization and law enforcement practices in China are hindering sex workers' awareness of protection from sexually transmitted diseases. The sex workers who were interviewed admitted that they are less likely to use condoms after having experienced police interrogation (Fung 2016). Entertainment venues are also hindered from dispensing condoms due to police scrutiny. The legal enforcement of Chinese police toward a highly marginalized group of sex workers has not only increased their vulnerability to HIV, but also conflicted with the government's policy on HIV prevention and condom distribution. This type of news article can rarely be found on mainland China, especially as its quote from Asia Catalyst is highly critical of China's current policy on sex workers' legality and human rights.

In the article composed by Shanghaiist, sex workers' voice in this case is captured, not by local media, but an international organization and a news website based mostly in the United States. On the contrary, news coverage about sex workers in China is highly visible, while due to the legal oppression upon them, sex workers' true voices are underrepresented in politics and media. Issues about sex workers' rights are usually kept silent in Chinese mainstream media in accord with the abolitionist state policy, with only passive depiction and imprecise description that simplifies the lived experience of sex workers. The barrier that refrains sex workers from public space and self-representation, I argue, is the reinforced identity of the subaltern, which will be explained more in detail in latter chapters.

The rise of new media has changed the way people access the public domain, giving every individual equal opportunity to speak and providing new approaches to help capture the voice of ‘the other’. Under legal oppression, media controls and social stigma, the majority of sex workers in China are largely marginalized and often passively represented in mainstream media, while their agencies are invisible. By drawing upon Spivak’s discussion of the two kinds of representation, proxy and portrait, this thesis aims to look into how sex workers in China are represented and re-presented in highly mediated world, and how sex workers in China negotiate with the reinforced subalternity with new media. This thesis not only explores the representation of sex workers in mainstream media, but also examines the subaltern political practice with different digital tools, in this case social media and film-making, and its impact on sex workers.

Sex in traditional Chinese society is not always a taboo. In Chinese history, public attitude toward sex has been quite open and positive. Taoists, for example, raised sex to a high art, and published detailed manuals on how a man should bring a woman multiple orgasms. Confucianists supported sex as holy, and saw it as a means of procreation, sanctioned polygamy (Butler 2015). In 1949, Communist replace those sex positive tradition with strict monogamy and ‘sex inside the bedroom’ rule, as well as banning pornography, prostitution and criminalizing homosexuality and adultery (Butler 2015). Until now, there are still lots of old Chinese idioms about sex work, for instance “逼良為娼“, which translates to the idea that decent women are forced into prostitution, or a recent term to describe sex workers as “失足少女/婦女”, which means that young women trip and fall into the misery of prostitution. Both of these sayings imply that sex workers in general have no choice but to be forced by certain powers to sell their bodies. Even though sex workers in China have diverse socio-economic status and backgrounds, the intersection of criminalization policy, legal oppression, social discrimination, and the distorted representation on media make them obscured and invisible from the public. Chinese sex workers presence in print media or audio-visual media has been severely restricted. In most cases, they are represented as promiscuous, immoral, or victims of patriarchy, since the domination of governmental policy on anti-prostitution. The extreme representation on mainstream media strengthens stigmas around sex workers, at the same time depriving their agencies, while the criminalization of prostitution makes it unlikely for sex workers to express themselves.

On the other hand, the restrictive media environment and the abolitionist-centered policy on sex workers limit the space of almost any liberal commentary. According to international NGO Freedom House who supports democracy, human rights and political freedom worldwide, freedom of press in China ranked 181 among 195 countries in 2010. China was categorized as ‘one of the least liberated countries’ in terms of freedom of the press, along with Vietnam (178), Laos (184), Cuba (190) and North Korea (195) (Freedom House 2010). The majority of the mainstream media in China, including television programs and newspapers, are state-owned or owned by local governments. “China’s constitution affords its citizens freedom of speech and press, but Chinese media regulations also allow authorities to crack down on news stories by claiming that they expose state secrets and endanger the country”(Xu 2015). However, the definition of state secrets remains vague, which enhances the censorship on any information that is deemed to violate political or economic interests (Xu 2015). Due to the media regulation and the governmental surveillance, mainstream media in China, especially those dominated and sponsored by the state, are not allowed to support sex workers’ rights so as to follow governmental policy on anti-prostitution. That is to say, the abolitionist-centered policy on sex worker (including prostitution, pornography, and other forms of sex work) is basically shaping the way mainstream media portrays sex work and sex workers. The majority of news coverage on sex workers in mainstream media appear to be rather biased, emphasizing the lack of legitimacy, and the criminal act of commercial sex. Some TV programs even cooperate with local police, videotape the entire process of police raids, and amplify the criminality and immorality of sex work. This all indicates how mass media in China has subordinated to the authority, and the way governmental policy takes place in media communication.

In this thesis, I will first introduce the anti-prostitution policy and the reality of sex work in China to show the intersectional subalternity that is imposed on sex workers. The first section will mainly target on the stigma surrounding sex workers, especially street-based sex workers, to see how they are ‘othered’ in Chinese society. By examining the national policy on prostitution, its impact on media and the reality of sex workers, the first part of the thesis redefines the subaltern in the context of Chinese sex workers and unveils reasons behind their invisibility. With multi-layered disadvantages, including criminalization, social condemnation, poverty, sex workers in China become the out-casted group, unable to speak. The subalternity of sex workers is based on the intersection of these disadvantages, which can be seen from their representation on mainstream media. The state power of China is above freedom of press, therefore news outlets and TV programs of mainstream media are very much controlled by the local or central governments, which poses influence on the presence of sex workers as a news material.

Second, both mainstream media and alternative media, to present Chinese media policy and compare various media environments.  I have chosen several media case studies: a popular Chinese TV show *Tiger Talk,* which discusses a police raid on Dongguan's sex industry in 2014, an online documentary about a trans* sex worker *Magic*, and a short film, *Blossom in Midnight*, produced, filmed and published by sex worker-led group Xin'ai. Also, I will take an app, 'WeChat' as an example of the rising social media community in China, which provides a platform similar to a Facebook fan page, that people can follow and discuss specific topics. Through media content analysis and the support of several interviews, I will explore the representation of Chinese sex workers in media, seeing how they represent themselves, showing their agency and how do sex workers negotiate the criminalization of and stigmatization with media.

**Research question and sub-questions**

In this thesis, I am thus interested in the reality, diverse backgrounds and obscurity of Chinese sex workers and the reasons behind. Because the main-stream media either demonize or victimize sex workers into two extremes, sex workers seem to become powerless and without agency. Some media representation address sex workers as victims, which "reinforces society's discrimination and denigration of sex workers' bodies (LIU 2008: 107);" others, on the other hand describe some sexual trade scenes as 'promiscuity and carnality' (Pugsley & Gao 2009 :111). Plus, the criminalization and discrimination of sex work makes them invisible in most of the public sphere. As Elena Jeffreys, a Sydney-based sex worker and sex workers' rights activist has contended that, "Silencing or deliberately undermining sex workers' voices is one way that anti-sex work campaigners hide the harms that are created by criminalization (Jeffreys 2011)."

My research question and sub-questions would thus be as follows:

- How do sex workers in China negotiate the forces of social stigma, the abolitionist-centered policy and media regulation, and how do they use self-representation as a way of resistance?
    - Are sex workers in China subaltern? (Can we define Chinese street based sex workers as subaltern, in either legal, social or political way?)
    - How are sex workers portrayed in the media in China?
    - How does the highly-mediated society affect the state of subalternity?
    - Can subaltern nowadays still be seen as voiceless?

## Chapter 1: theoretical framework

Before exploring the reality of sex workers in China and determining if sex workers belong to the social group of subalternity, we have to first define the term ‘subaltern’. There has been a great wealth of academic research done on the notion of subalternity. Subaltern studies originated with a focus on the post-colonial and post-imperial societies in South Asia, and the group of scholars is generally called the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG). The notion of ‘subaltern’ was first raised by Marxist Antonio Gramsci and refers to a single individual or group of inferior rank, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. After decades of transformation and re-appropriation, the South Asian historian Ranajit Guha, who is greatly influential in subaltern studies, reinvented subalternity (Ludden 2002: 1). He argues that the term subaltern refers to a class or a group without access to social mobility, which is contrasted to the privileges that elite or ruling classes possess: “the social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all this home we have described as the ‘elite’” (Guha & Spivak 1988: 44). To Guha, the purpose of SSG is ‘to rectify the elitist bias’ in a field ‘dominated by elitism- colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism.’(Ludden 2002: 9) And postcolonial studies scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was the first to discuss the role of women, which had been neglected in the work of the SSG.

Through a feminist perspective, Spivak in her seminal text “Can the Subaltern Speak?” re-examines the manner of how western culture investigating other cultures and claims the complicity of creating objective knowledge, which is usually ignorant of its colonial essence. She takes up the work of Karl Marx, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, pointing out the fact that research itself is in a way colonial, in defining the ‘other’, creating distance, and that this research has served as a justification of the conquest of other cultures. She states: “Deleuze and Foucault ignore both the epistemic violence of imperialism and the international division of labor would matter less if they did not, in closing touch on third-world issues" (Spivak 1988: 84). For Spivak, researchers or, so to speak, western intellectuals should never neglect the history and colonial background of the target, and approach or represent other culture directly, since colonized subaltern subjects are extremely diverse and impossible to be homogeneously categorized. Spivak, in the text, also disagrees with Guha's point of view of creating relationship between subaltern and elite groups. To Spivak, the subaltern is not simply a subordinate position to elites in socio-economic terms, but should be defined by their lack of access to the public sphere. In *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media and Cultural Practices*, Wanning Sun, scholar of migration and subalternity in China, follows Spivak's concept of the subaltern and states that "subalternity is about being unable to access structures and institution that would allow grievances to be recognized and recognizable" (Sun 2014: 31). The core question in Spivak's text, of course, is "can the subaltern speak?", which she answers by stating that "in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history, cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 1988: 83). Even though Spivak states several times that the 'subaltern cannot speak', it does not mean they cannot talk; instead, their voice is rarely recognized and registered, due to the lack of the accessibility to public sphere: "subalterns speak outside the line of representation laid down by official institution where it can count, so it ultimately does not catch or hold**"** (Sun 2014: 31).

Although coming from different historical backgrounds, there are a fair amount of scholars who have linked the lived experiences of Chinese peasant workers with subaltern studies. Especially the Chinese use of the term 'diceng' generally refers to people of the lowest social stratum in contemporary Chinese society, which, in terms of socio-economical backgrounds and post-communist history, bears a close equivalence to 'the subaltern' in South Asian postcolonial history (Chiu & Zhang ). Also, Chinese scholar Xinyu Lu contends that, in fact, the term 'subaltern' is widely used after the mid and late 1990s in China, to signify "the collapse of the unitary social spatial relationship and the accelerated polarization of Chinese society" (Park 2014: 7). The most famous example is Gail Hershatter's reflection on Spivak's *Can Subaltern Speak?* in the context of Chinese post-socialist history. Hershatter takes the sex workers in twentieth-century Shanghai as examples, showing that the representation of the subaltern is very divergent. In Hershatter's research *Dangerous Pleasure: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth- Century Shanghai*, sex workers in early Shanghai composed anecdotes, poetry, fictionalized accounts of the scams and sufferings of prostitutes, gossip columns in the tabloid press, and so on. To Hershatter, these unorganized, fragmented remarks fully manifest the subjectivity of sex workers as subaltern. That is to say, ‘subaltern’ should not be limited to a ‘fixed and unitary category’ (Hershatter 1997: 28), “for most groups in China, it is important to keep in mind the possibility of multiple, relational degrees of subalternity… frees us from the monolithic category of ‘the subaltern’” (Hershatter 1997: 29). Similarly, Spivak herself had once explained the complexity and potential diversity of the subaltern, which is never a limited definition. According to Spivak, subaltern’s subject position is determined by heterogeneous determinations such as “politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language and so on” (Guha & Spivak 1988: 13).

If we look at the subaltern and subalternity in the context of contemporary digitalized and mediated world, the state of the subaltern might be challenged. In the recently published article, *Subaltern Struggles and the Global media in Koodankulam and Kashmir* by Sudheesh Ramapurath Chemmencheri, he, as well, argues that subalternity is not a ‘frozen identity’, but ‘changing and responding to the time and context’(Chemmencheri 2015: 2). He points out that the hyper-globalized media environment has brought new possibilities for all kinds of communities “to speak, be heard, perform, resist, and to gain social mobility” (Chemmencheri 2015: 2), even including the subaltern. Even in a recent essay of Spivak, she notes that “in the interim years, through the electronic circuits of globalization, the subaltern has become greatly permeable” (Spivak 2006: 483). To scrutinize the current situation about subaltern and understand the media representation of subaltern, first we have to understand the difference between representation and re-presentation. Representation (vertretung) can be explained as speaking for; whereas re-presentation (darstellung) can be understood as presenting again (Spivak 2006: 29). In a more traditional sense, the voice of subaltern stands outside  the public space, here refers to mainstream media, where its representation is therefore often inaccurate, or running the risk of assuming agency. The traditional media representation thus can be both ‘vertretung’ and ‘darstellung’, but only the subaltern is usually passively represented by intellectuals and representatives, and re-presented in possibly a distorted way. On the other hand, the uprise of new media, such as social media and personal blog, basically provides a shortcut for the subaltern to public domain. Personal mediation can be clearly seen as a way of ‘speak for’ (represent) oneself. To put it differently, the way media interact with the subaltern can generally be seen in two ways: media covers the subaltern in a passive way, or the subaltern steps into the ground of mediation “in search of new possibilities for voicing her opinion” (Chemmencheri 2015: 2). In Chemmencheri’s definition, the subaltern stands for those who “have been on the receiving end of hegemonic structures and is defined according to the context” (Chemmencheri 2015: 4). Chemmencheri contends the globalization of media representation actually re-inscribes and reinforces the identity of subalternity, rather than long the subaltern's muteness. Thus, subaltern does not refer to only subordinate class, but to an embodiment of multiple woven factors. Under different situation, and with the influence of media, the subaltern is not a fixed and monolithic contour, but can be seen in a rather diverse approaches.

This thesis will examine the stigma on sex work, specifically at Chinese sex industrial scene, in support of the subaltern identity of sex workers in China. In this part, I will use theory about public sex and sex hierarchy by drawing upon the work of Gayle Rubin. In her work *Thinking Sex: Notes for Radical Theory of the Politics of sexuality,* she defines the boundary on 'good sex' and 'bad sex'. She argues, sexual hierarchy is an intertwined discourse within politics, religion, psychiatry, popular culture and so on. (Rubin 1993: 152) Good sex, according to Rubin, has to be 'normal', 'natural', 'heterosexual', 'marital', 'monogamous', 'reproductive', and 'non-commercial'.
On the contrary, any sex that violates these rules, such as 'homosexual', 'unmarried', 'promiscuous', 'non-procreative' and 'commercial', is 'bad', 'abnormal' and 'unnatural' sex (Rubin 1993:168). The unwritten rule to distinguish good and bad sex explains that only good sides of sexual behaviors are accorded moral complexity, otherwise, it will easily cause general aversion and shame, which forms the public perception of 'sex negativity', considering sex to be a 'dangerous, destructive and negative force' (Rubin 1993:152). Rubin's essay states that it is in different discourses and institutions that sex hierarchy is created: "the realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequalities and modes of oppression." (Rubin 1993: 143) When it comes to sex work, Rubin links the circumstance of sex workers with male homosexuals, since both of the communities are seen as 'criminal sexual population', that are stigmatized on the basis of their sexual activity. Both of them suffered from legal persecution and seen as 'inferior undesirables'. (Rubin 1993: 156)

Even though contemporary sexual taboos and marital systems have a linear legacy originating from Western politics and religion, in Chinese society social norms and moral rules on sex and sexuality might be as harsh and complex as the counterparts in western society. In *Sex Politics and the Policing of Virtue,* Gary Sigley draws upon attention on the Party-state policy in China, which, similarly, frames the "heterosexual marital unit as the 'normal' place for the practice of sexual relations,"(Sigley 2007: 49) and maintains that the family is the 'cell of society' which pushes Chinese society to function stably. On the contrary, commercial sex is also seen as 'bad' by Chinese authority, and should be eradicated. Chinese government calls its anti-prostitution policy as 'anti-yellow', and the legal actions toward sex workers are generally called 'anti-yellow campaign'.

According to Sigley, the governmental intervention is to ensure a ‘healthy’ moral environment, in accordance to the contemporary value of morality and civilization. For example, in the Maoist era, sex was a taboo and the prostitution rate fell to the lowest point throughout Chinese history. The reason behind that is believed to be the prohibition on market economy and the limitation of personal choice. The economic and political transformations in China have simultaneously provided a ‘new degree of choice’ (Sigley 2007: 54) but also developed a ‘vulgar culture’ denied by central authorities (Sigley 2007: 55). However, Sigley posits that “the official condemnation of notions of sexual liberation and sexual freedom fails to acknowledge the multiple ways in which sex, morality and power have come to intertwined in most societies (Sigley 2007: 58).” The idea of civilization is dichotomized by the boundary of sexual norms. Commercial sex is recognized as indecent, unhealthy and uncivilized, while in fact, “‘sexual morality’ is not an ahistorical presence embodied in the civilizing process; to be civilized is not necessarily to be puritan (Sigley 2007: 58).” The binary of good and bad sex creates stigma around sex minority, including commercial sex, in order to fit the mainstream ideological position of ‘moral puritanism’(Sigley 2007: 58).

## Chapter 2 Methodologies

In this chapter, I will show the methodologies of how I collected and analyzed my data for this thesis. I first chose several media sources and conducted a media analysis. The sources that I chose include mainstream media, social media and alternative media. In addition, I conducted two unstructured interviews with Chinese sex workers’ rights activists, Liu Yan and Lan lan, to enrich the background of my research.

The media sources that I analyzed include two Chinese popular talk shows, *Tiger Talk* and *Social Watch*, other two of the most popular social media platforms in China, WeChat and Weibo, and a self-produced short film ‘*Blossom in Midnight*’, by sex worker-led NGO Xin’ai based in Tianjin. I used the first two more as the build-up of the backstory on Chinese media environment, governmental control and legal prosecution; as for the latter three sources, which I classify as new media production, I put more focus on the content analysis. Here in contrast to old media such as television, radio and print media, new media refers to content that is available through the Internet, and usually containing interactive user feedback and creative participation. Although feature films and documentaries are usually categorized as old media, in the case of Xin’ai, the making of a film does serve a certain extent of creative participation and interaction, in terms of its possible variety brought by the advance of digital devices. Independent films, like '*Blossom in Midnight*' are usually streamed online nowadays, which does include interactive feedback and formss of participation.

Media content analysis is used to study all forms of media resources, such as TV programs, films, and editorial and advertising content of newspapers and magazines. Jim Macnamara had collected multiple different ways on media content analysis methodology. He points out that, according to Shoemaker and Reese, content analysis can be categorized into two traditions – the behaviorist tradition and the humanist tradition. The primary concern of the behaviorist is the effects that content produces and this approach is the one mainly pursued by social scientists. Whereas the behaviorist approach looks 'forwards' from media content to try to identify future effects, the humanist approach looks 'backwards' from media content to try to identify what it says about society and the culture producing it. Humanist scholars draw on psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology to analyze how media content such as film and television drama reveal 'truths' about a society – what Shoemaker and Reese term "the media's symbolic environment" (Shoemaker & Reese 1996: 31-32). The concept brought by Shoemaker and Reese helps explain the phenomenon of "how mass media create public opinion, attitudes and perceptions, or reflect existing attitudes, perceptions and culture (Macnamara 2003: 3)."

However, when it comes to the analysis of media representation, especially under a feminist lens, the embodiment of 'the other' in feminist research could be problematic. As feminist theorist Saba Mahmood says, even the understanding of emancipation, freedom and agency could be different between cultures. To impose a western, secular-liberal understanding of freedom and agency onto the third world women could lead to the distorted representation of different cultures, wrong interpretation of other women's experience and simplification of their cultural and historical specificity (Mahmood 2001: 203). Over the past two decades, many feminist scholars have focused on gender representation in the news and other forms of journalism. Therefore, according Margaret Gallagher's *Feminist Media Perspectives*, other than examining the sex-roles and stereotypes, the feminist approach to critique media content is the application of the question: "how women are 'spoken for' or 'spoken about'(Gallagher 2000: 25)," which is also the main technique I will adopt in this research but focus my target on the media representation of sex workers in China.

Due to the tight media control in China, the majority of mass media choose not to support sex work and sex workers in order to follow abolitionist policies on prostitution, especially when most of the news media companies are quasi-governmentally or governmentally owned. *Tiger Talk* is a TV show produced by one of the biggest Chinese mass media companies. The episode I will analyze focuses on the sex industry raid in Dongguan in 2014, which triggered tremendous turmoil in Chinese society. Another show, *Social Watch*, interviewed a famous activist and former sex worker Haiyen Ye, who engaged in sex work in a political and experimental way, in order to raise the public awareness about sex workers' rights. In the second section of media analysis, I will focus on the influence brought by new media and choose WeChat and Weibo as examples to discuss the new possibility for the subaltern to step in media representation and public space. WeChat and Weibo are both the most popular social media, with the largest amount of users in China and serve the purpose similar to Facebook and Twitter. Also, I will bring in the activist Haiyen Ye's Weibo microblog to see how she as a sex worker is engaging in new media, and further explore the definition of the subaltern and subalternity. The short film *Blossom in Midnight* is produced by a sex worker-led group Xin'ai. Based on the true story of a sex worker, the film is used to deconstruct the victimized image of sex workers in China and tries to tell the story of sex workers from a different perspective, and scrutinize the interaction between the subaltern and mediation.

Besides, the unstructured interview section will decode and fit into my analysis as a support. The interviewees are respectively Liu Yan and Lan lan. Liu Yan is a Chinese movie director of a trans* sex worker documentary *Magic*, a (former) sex worker and a NGO co-founder supporting LGBT movement and HIV prevention. Lan lan is also a (former) sex worker, the director of sex worker-led NGO Xin'ai, and the producer of an independent film *Blossom in Midnight.*

## Chapter 3: Sex workers as the subaltern

Sex workers in China are regarded as a cultural contaminant and a symbol of social corruption. Their act is seen as promiscuous which carries contagion and disease, which places them outside the framework of acceptable sexuality. (Kapur 2005: 72) Female sex workers in China are often regarded as victims of patriarchy, or immoral women that betray their family. In reality, sex workers in China are rather diverse, they mostly works on streets, massage parlors, night clubs, or other different venues. A majority of Chinese sex workers are migrant workers moving from rural areas to cities. Many of them are financially desperate women, with families to support. According to Pan, Suiming, professor at People's University of China and associate secretary of the Chinese Association os Sociology, sex workers in China can be categorized into seven tiers in terms of their income, working environment, and service they provide (Pan, 1999). Most of those living in bottom of the society are possibly older, less-educated, less desirable and with less knowledge of their risks, such as sexual transmitted diseases. The hierarchy of sex work not only create multiple layers of discrimination, morally and financially, but also brings out their incapable of self-articulation. On the other hand, the criminalization of sex work maybe one of the main barrier for sex workers to defend themselves, even if they have the intention to do so.

The intersection within criminalization and social stigma around sex work truly refrain them from participating in public space. That is to say, instead of the fact that the sex workers cannot speak, in most of the cases they are lacking access to the public sphere. The definition of the subaltern is never monolithic. Chinese sex workers are not simply a subordinate group distinguished by socio-economic terms; as a group of the subaltern, their identity is in a way, forced by layers of disadvantages. Here, Chinese sex workers' repetitive suffering from legal oppression, violence and diseases reinforces their identity as the subaltern.

### Chapter 3-1: Criminalization of sex work in China

The beginning of strict regulations on sex work started from the Maoist era. The anti-prostitution campaign had been extremely harsh, especially between 1949 and the 1960s. The Communist Party of China embarked on a series of eradication of sex work after 1949, right after it took power. Until 1980s, the government control slightly loosened, which lead to the resurrection of prostitution in mainland China, throughout both urban and rural areas. Meanwhile, the Chinese government's 'one-child policy' started to take effect, which caused a serious imbalance between genders, with a particularly higher population of males, which consequently lead to the dramatic rise in prostitution and the trafficking of women in recent years. (McCurry & Allision 2004)

Throughout the 1980s to 1990s, an estimated 150 million people migrated from rural areas to developing urban areas. The enormous labor force came along with economic growth during that time, creating a more diverse consumer society and new types of prostitution. During this time, most of the sex workers were poorly educated, young female migrant workers from poor and remote provinces, although sex workers in practice come from multiple backgrounds and classes of society (Jeffreys 2012: 3).

The Chinese government has implemented an abolition model of prostitution since the Mao period. Until now, following this model, third-party prostitution (organizing, inducing, introducing, facilitating, or forcing another person to engage in prostitution) is a criminal offense, punishable by a number of years' imprisonment and possible fines. First-party prostitution is not criminalized but is regarded as socially harmful, with both prostitutes and their clients being subject to periods of reform detention, also with possible fines. (Kong 2014: 322)

However, not until the 1990s, did the Chinese government start to develop specific regulations and policy on prostitution. Under the request of the Ministry of Public Security and the All-China Women's Federation, the National People's Congress passed legislation that expanded the range and scope of prostitution controls, which is the "1991 Decision on Strictly Forbidding the Selling and Buying of Sex" and the "1991 Decision on the Severe Punishment of Criminals who Abduct and Traffic in or Kidnap women and Children." Further, there were more regulations made in the following years, such as the "1992 Law on Protecting the Rights and Interests of Women, which defines prostitution as social practice that abrogates the inherent rights of women to personhood." In 1997, a new law strengthened the abolitionist-oriented national policy and included the death penalty in the prostitution related law, but only for serious cases of organizing prostitution activities that involve serious bodily injury, rape, and repeated offense.

Nowadays, the sex industry in China is highly visible and creates considerable economic output. Although all forms of sex work are officially illegal, its legal treatment on sex workers is often arbitrary, due to the imprecision on types and period of punishment, which usually include regular detention or rehabilitation (Jeffreys 2012: 98). On the other hand, the police-led crackdown on prostitution is generally criticized for its ineffectiveness and corruption (Jeffreys 2012: 98). In the study of *Prostitution Scandal in China: Policing, Media and Society* by Elaine Jeffreys, most of venues in China providing sexual service can easily dodge police scrutiny by temporarily closing during the campaign-cycle, and only re-open once it is over (Jeffreys 2012: 98). The whole process of campaign-style of crackdown encourages arbitrary policing practices and corruption, since local police usually own full right on their management and punishment. (Jeffreys 2012: 98).

In recent years, Chinese police has enhanced the frequency of patrols and raids, and implemented large-scale media campaigns**.** Sex work has been highly visible in the media over the past 20 to 30 years, and most of the coverage is related to regular anti-prostitution actions and HIV programs targeting female sex workers. Anti-prostitution campaigns are often accompanied by nationwide media propaganda, to publicize the related laws and regulations. For example, the biggest quasi-governmental media company, Central Chinese Television (CCTV), have taken action and investigated several red light districts in different cities, which is usually followed by pervasive crackdown, arrest statistics, and restatement of abolitionist policy by Chinese official (Hershatter 1993: 363). According to the research made by sexologists in China, Yingying Hung and Suiming Pan, taking the police crackdown in 2010 in Beijing for example, several famous night clubs, karaokes and bars were shut down and the eradication on sex work has ever since brought up nationwide. (Huang & Pan 2014: 2). The incident gathered a lot of attention around Chinese society and also gained full media coverage, which was followed up by active public debate on governmental policies, circulation of HIV/STI, and well-being of female sex workers (Huang & Pan 2014: 3).

The frequent police raids and the conjoint media campaign have caused the most damage to street based sex workers. For those who are apprehended, they might have to pay fine up of 5000 RMB, which roughly equals to 673 euros, or taken into custody (re-education through laboring) for six months to two years. "In theory, when a sex worker is arrested and detained, police should notify his or her family, while in practice this is not always the case (Huang & Pan 2014: 2)." In fact, the problematic policing practices are directly linked to the sexually transmitted infection rate of sex workers, since police in China often take condoms as evidence of commercial sex, which causes a higher risk of unsafe sexual intercourse. The violence from police is not only detrimental to public health and personal health of sex workers, but also blatantly conflict with state policies on HIV and STI prevention (Huang & Pan 2014: 2).

In response, sellers and buyers of sex have adopted a wide range of tactics to avoid legal prosecution, such as using instant messaging software (WeChat or QQ), or web pages. While only those who are privileged, educated, have access to technology are more likely to work in secure environment, with less chance to legal oppression.

Due to the criminalization of sex work in China, sex workers' agencies are nearly invisible, even though their images are highly and repetitively represented in mainstream media. In many cases, sex workers are succumbed to the violence from clients and police, since the price of being exposed to the public and their family is too high. The oppression to sex workers in China is mostly interwoven within legal practice, violence from clients and police, and the stigma surrounding prostitution, which make them a threatened group under the well-defined political, cultural and sexual normativity in Chinese society. Ratana Kapur in her research *Law and the Sexual Subaltern: A Comparative Respective* describe several sexual minority groups, such as sex workers, gays, lesbians in post-colonial India as 'sexual subaltern' (Kapur 2000: 16) as a theoretical device; Here I also take the terms 'subaltern' extended from the Spivak's study, to define sex workers in China. Their subalternity originates from the intersection of several disadvantages, while under this category they still remain heterogeneous and flexible. Due to the criminalized policies, the voice of Chinese sex workers' are not able to be registered or hold in public space, even when they are under different forms of violence and oppression which are against laws.

## Chapter 3-2: The reality of female sex workers

Drastic social hierarchy has always been a significant problem in Chinese society. Even though the sex worker community is largely marginalized because of the criminalization of commercial sex and the long-lasted social stigma, it is extremely diverse in terms of income, job content and social status. Some sex workers from a privileged background tend to have more resources and capitals than others, especially women from rural areas. According to Pan, Suiming, professor at People's University of China and associate secretary of the Chinese Association os Sociology, sex workers in China can be categorized into several tiers according to their income, socio-economic status and working environment (Pan 1999).

Through different income, working environment, lived experience, human capital that each person owns, several types of professions have developed under sex industry. From Pan's observation, sex workers in China can be categorized from the top level of mistress, temporary companion, those working at dance venues, karaokes and night clubs, to the bottom of stratification, such as masseuse, doorbell girls, street-based sex workers. Sex workers working in worse environment, such as ten dollar stores and street-based sex workers, can only receive the smallest payback for each service, roughly from 10 to 80 RMB, which roughly equals to less than 2 euros to 15 euros. They are mostly migrants from rural areas, with little capacity and education, aged from 30 to 60, and are mostly struggling financially.

A sex worker-led organization Xin'ai based in Tianjin conducted 11 interviews with migrant sex workers working in different massage parlors. Most of the interviewees originally came from 'diceng' families, which means they lived in poor rural areas, were financially struggling, forced to drop out of schools and then married to someone they were not attracted to. In order to support their families and takeover the duty from their 'irresponsible' husbands, those women worked from one place to another, and finally settled down as erotic masseuses. In the majority of the cases, those female sex workers aged from 30 to 50 years old, had children, parents, siblings or parents in law to support, and mostly suffered from regretful marriage. From the conversation, these women who work in massage parlors have very similar lived experiences and family backgrounds. Due to the lack of opportunities in their home towns, they financially struggled in their early ages, walked into unhappy, mostly arranged marriages, and regretted with their life before starting on sex work. On the other hand, to peasant sex workers working on the street or at massage parlors, which are usually deemed as unhygienic and degrading, the pressure of social discrimination and the spread of disease are dreadful since the legal oppression, and an expensive fine coming (5000RMB) might actually drive them to the absolute poverty (Pan 1999).

According to the interview made by Xin'ai, the criminalization and legal oppression are the biggest difficulties peasant sex workers face. That, combined with the stigma of sex work, make them truly invisible from the society. Even though those women are the main source of income for families, they are forced to stay discreet about their occupation, for both legal reasons and personal/family reputation. Most of the sex workers choose to pay the fine once and for all or even bribe the police so they don't have to be detained for months, which might end up exposing their identity. They are not given voices or chances to speak; instead, the state reinforces them into the subordinated status by depriving them of the opportunity of legality, and assuming their agencies by representing them in mainstream media.

In Jenny Sharpe's book *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text,* she suggests that "subaltern" can mean both subaltern classes" and "subordinated forms of knowledge" (Sharpe 1993: 16-19). As an unstable category, the subalternity of Chinese sex workers is rather complex, with layers disadvantages and restriction. This chapter explores the reality and criminality of sex work in China. The social discrimination, poverty, criminalization, legal oppression and all forms of violence interwoven, subordinating sex workers. Most of the street-based sex workers in China are subordinated in many ways, from their educational level, socio-economic background, working environment, criminality, which make them more susceptible to poverty, disease and violence. Criminalization and legal oppression of Chinese sex workers, however, is the main reason sex workers are highly visible in mainstream media, and passively represented/re-presented by intellectuals or state propaganda, yet have little chance to show their agencies.

## Chapter 4: Chinese sex industry and the role of media

Prostitution has long been debated in Chinese print media and on the internet. In spite of the fact that the media coverage on prostitution includes social, legal and political aspects, it is often represented as 'scandal' that is morally and legally wrong. In a way, mass media has become part of the tool of social policing for Chinese government, and have altogether exempted the controls on prostitution. (Jeffreys 2012: 2). This chapter explores the post-socialist Chinese state's stance toward prostitution which is represented in the official media. Through addressing media policy and examining an Chinese official TV program, this section seeks to give more background on the Chinese media environment and what information regarding the issue the official media attempts to avoid. After the overall examination on national policies on media and how the state uses media as a tool of propaganda, we will look into the media representation of sex workers, where Gayle Rubin's theory on sexual politics will be adopted. Rubin's theory explains how sexual norms dominating policies, media, and public opinions. In order the maintains certain boundary, the discomfort around sex is created and widely spread. For those sex that violates these rules, such as 'homosexual', 'unmarried', 'promiscuous', 'non-procreative' and 'commercial', is 'bad', 'abnormal' and 'unnatural' sex (Rubin 1993:168). Sex workers are therefore deprived the accessibility to public space, in that giving sex workers voice, in a way challenges the idea of public morality and decency.

Also, one of the central question will be unfolded through the scrutiny on the strategy that mainstream media adopted: How are sex workers silenced in public space? The uprise of mobile technology and easy access to social media have given voice to the subordinated, which brings out the question that "how does the highly-mediated society affect the state of subalternity?" In fact, sex workers in China are still very much obscured and invisible on the Internet. Blatant self-representation and self-mediation of Chinese sex workers are still pretty much unlikely, since their criminalization and scrutinized cyberspace. However, on the other hand, new media provides a chance to self express, to advocate, and the most important, to catch the voice of the subaltern.

## Chapter 4-1: policy and environment

The media policy and environment in China has long been restrictive and suppressed. From the revolution era till the early 1990s, China's media was wholly funded by central or local government and functioned as a tool of policing propaganda. Nowadays, even though Chinese mass media has become more market oriented, governmental surveillance still limits the freedom of press. The biggest and the most pervasive broadcasting mainstream media, including TV programs and newspapers, are state-owned, or local governmentally-owned. China's constitution affords its citizens freedom of speech and press, but Chinese media regulations also allow authorities to crack down on news stories by claiming that they expose state secrets and endanger the country. However, the definition of state secret remains vague, which allows the authority to exempt the media censorship in an arbitrary way, in favoring of its political or economic interests. It is believed that Chinese government employs roughly 2 million people to constantly monitor China's Internet (Hunt & Xu 2013). Therefore, there are many key words or concepts, which are seen as 'harmful' to national interest and be categorized ‘pornography’, unable to surpass the censorship filter. The post will either swiftly be blocked, or even unable to submit in the first place.

The restrictive media environment and the abolitionist-centered policy on sex workers limit the space of almost any liberal commentary. In 2015, Reporters without Borders stated that the freedom of press in China ranked 176 out of 180 (Reporters without Borders 2015). Due to the media regulation and the governmental surveillance, mass media are not allowed to support sex workers’ rights since it’s conflicted with governmental interests and the state policies. “The Central Propaganda Department (CPD) even gives media outlets editorial guidelines as well directives restricting coverage of politically sensitive topics.” (Xu 2015). In recent years, the CPD surveillance is getting more aggressive than it had been previously, ever since their new leader Jinping Xi has taken place in 2013. From then on, censorship in both old and new media spheres has been tighten and many commentators, protesters, activists, lawyers, journalists, and feminists have been arrested, detained, jailed, and threatened (Schlesinger, Henochowicz, Wang 2016). One of the famous case is the detention on the sex workers’ rights activists/feminists, Haiyen Ye, who had been arrested in both 2013 and 2014, even persecuted by legal force several times. In May, 2013, she held a protest on a scandal of a primary school principal, who sexually assaulted six school girls. In 2014, Ye posted her nudity online, in advocating Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The local government arrested her and confiscated her properties such as cellphones, laptops and hard drives.

According to Council Foreign Relations Backgrounders, a nonprofit think tank/publisher based in New York City, websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia, Google, YouTube and other ‘dangerous’ resources are not allowed in China. Before 2015, people in China used VPNs (virtual private networks) to obtain access to the so-called ‘dangerous’ websites, while in early 2015, the government cracked down VPNs, leaving people no choice but to switch to domestic services, such as Baidu, Weibo (microblog), Sina, Tudou, and so on, which are all under the surveillance of the Chinese government (Xu 2015).

### Chapter 4-2: Polarization of sex workers

In the following two sections, examples on mainstream and social media will be brought in. Except for presenting how sex workers are represented on both types of media, the analysis on media cases will also show how Chinese sex workers as the subaltern, negotiate with governmental media controls, a top-down power, and how the development of new media lens capture multiple voices of the subaltern. Also, this chapter goes back to my core research question: does the rise of new media challenge sex workers' identity as the subaltern? As Sudheesh Ramapurath Chemmencheri mentions in his article *Subaltern Struggles and the Global media in Koodankulam and Kashmir,* "the subaltern's interaction with the media is not just a struggle with the media opportunity, but also the media's own struggles with opportunity structures in the resistance movement" (Chemmencheri 2015: 10). Since prostitution has been a long-debated topic in China, not only the subaltern sex workers struggle to strive for voice, Chinese media also constantly engage in the topic of prostitution, with the method of undercover and investigation, in a way to service national policy.

Very similar to the Western media, sex workers in Chinese mainstream media is polarized into two extremes. In most of the news coverage, sex workers' faces are censored, and often portrayed as financially desperate victims, who work in filthy environments; some of the news articles on the other hand, based the story on criminal act of sex work, describing sex workers as shameful and immoral. The biggest government-owned media, China Central Television (CCTV) often conducts undercover investigation in different red light districts, sometimes cooperating with local police. Most of the coverage present only pictures of them, instead of giving their lived experience or showing their agency. In this section, I chose a popular Chinese TV program, *Tiger Talk*, produced by Phoenix TV, debating the sex industry in southern China, to contour the current media environment and how it is influenced by the abolitionist-centered policy on sex work. Phoenix TV is not officially owned media but is legally broadcasting in some provinces.

In 2014, the most severe sex industry raid in Dongguan triggered turmoil in Chinese society. At the beginning, a group of reporters from CCTV investigated the sex service in Dongguan, disguising as clients and revealing the long-lasted, local sex trade system. After the coverage revealed the reality of sex industry in Dongguan in an almost humiliating way. A series of crackdowns followed, with 12 brothels, parlors, saunas and hotels among 1948 venues were shut down, 162 people were retained. The anchor of the news broadcast emphasized the immorality, illegality and obscenity of sex service and prostitution.

A week after, a television show "*Tiger Talk*"[1] invited scholars, movie director, writer and audience altogether to discuss the raid in Dongguan and the Chinese policy on sex work. Even though the program invited scholars of opposite viewpoints, the conservative side obviously surpassed the side supporting sex workers, "it is not just about prostitution itself. Prostitution can

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actually bring about corruption, drug dealing, violence, sex trafficking," said by a Taiwanese businessman Jiang. An audience maintained that "anti-prostitution is all about three principle, equality, dignity and health. One buying sexual pleasure from another shows the inequality, indignity. Let alone the health problem, such as HIV, STI brought by prostitution."

The majority of opinions in the show were against sex work, which polarized sex workers into victims of patriarchy and social hierarchy, or immoral gold diggers. Professor Ying ying Huang from Beijing People university states that the criminalization on sex work in China is not a reasonable law which violates basic human rights of sex workers, since there are many women empowered by this way of financial independence. However, in the Dongguan incident, sex workers became scapegoats of false policy, stigmatization and social pressure. In most of the news coverage on Dongguan incident, sex workers were described as criminals, and were even condemned as 'polluting Dongguan city', creating other criminal acts such as drug dealing, human trafficking. Most of them try their utmost to stay anonymous and invisible, due to the criminalization and stigma, while it does not mean the absence of their daily struggle. But under the abolitionist policy, sex workers can only be passively represented, their agencies and their struggle can be barely recognized consequently. On the other hand, the opposite side believes that 'sex, gambling and drugs' are the major problems of Chinese society, and most of the sex workers are described as criminals and therefore sex work cannot be seen as a real occupation, and they are not 'workers' either. The opposite side believes that the commodification of sex is extremely immoral, and corrupted. In their opinion, the crackdown does not only solve the social corruption and human trafficking, but also save sex workers from 'unwanted' and 'forceful' prostitution.

Even though Tiger Talk is prestigious for its neutral and respective perspective toward different voices, Ying Ying Huang in the show was the only guest who dared to publicly and positively talk about the welfare of sex workers and actually use the term 'decriminalization' when expressing her opinion against the police raid. Along with her, there was also a documentary director, who barely mentioned the agency of sex workers, and a sexologist who appeared for no more than two minutes. On the other hand, the voice from the opposite side was relatively dominant, although most of them are not professional trained researchers on sex work. One law professor, a lawyer and an entrepreneur based in Guangdong, their opinions on sex work and the Dongguan incident were homogenous and straightforward, focusing on the lack of legitimacy of sex work, and how commercialized sex had brought up, or linked to other criminal acts, such as drug dealing and gambling. They believed the police raids were capable of significantly eradicating these illegal acts, or, as they called it, the social corruption, “sex itself is not stigmatized, but sex with economics is extremely degrading!”, “prostitution is illegal, so you cannot call it a normal work, and you can not even call them sex workers.” These two opinions exactly manifest Galye Rubin’s theory on sexual politics. The commercialized, promiscuous and unmarried sex are categorized into the bad, abnormal sex, which reflect on how Chinese people perceive sex work. “The unwritten rule to distinguish good and bad sex explains that only good sides of sexual behaviors are accorded moral complexity, otherwise, it will easily cause general aversion and shame, which forms the public perception of ‘sex negativity’” (Rubin 1993:152).

The abolitionist-centered policy on sex work is basically shaping the way the mainstream media portrays sex work and sex workers. The prominent abolitionist voice in most Chinese official state media often represents sex workers as either immoral gold diggers or powerless victims. Through the representation and widely broadcast of official media, Chinese government is able to justify its policy, in a way of creating benefits and improvement to the country. In *Tiger Talk*, the voices of sex workers are excluded. The criminalized identities, social discrimination, unrecognized occupation, and the tight media policy refrain them from participating in public debate. Without a safe space and discrimination-free environment, sex workers mostly choose not to take the risk of exposure.

Interestingly, another TV program, *Social Watch*, also produced by Phoenix TV, invited Chinese sex workers’ rights activist Haiyen Ye, not long before the Dongguan incident. Ye is also a (former) sex worker herself and has promoted sex workers’ rights for more than a decade. In the interview, Ye addressed her personal experience of working at ten dollar stores, and how ‘diceng’ (low-tier) sex workers suffer from legal oppression. Ye herself has been arrested and prosecuted by the authorities several times, which even happened just right after the interview of the show. It might be the first time that a sex worker ever spoke up publicly in Chinese media history. However, at the first beginning of the show, Ye’s word was taken out of the context and presented as ‘they (sex workers) feel sorry to their husbands and children’, which implies that sex work is morally condemned. Also, the hostess concluded the show with “prostitution violates basic women’s rights, which is illegal,” in a way denied the advocacy raised by Ye. Moreover, although Phoenix TV is not a state media, and allowed to broadcast in many areas in China, it still, to some extent, follows the national policy. Some of the controversial content may even be censored arbitrarily, replaced with random images of countryside scenery.

## Chapter 4-3: Sex workers negotiating the cyberspace

As mentioned above, it is rather difficult for Chinese netizens to access commonly used Western cyberspace due to governmental controls. Without Facebook, Twitter, Google or other web tools, Chinese government created Weibo (similar to Facebook, or microblog), WeChat and multiple different types of online platforms providing information or self-expression. Sex work is constantly debated on Chinese social media, while one can hardly find a specific safe space for a sex worker to express themselves. Even though, according to Lan lan, the director of a sex worker-led organization Xin'ai, many sex workers use instant massaging tool such as QQ or WeChat to get to know more clients, broaden their business and contact with friends, in that sense the function is relatively limited. In order to avoid any risk of exposure, sex workers rarely participate in blog writing or online debate on prostitution policy, at least not in a recognizable way. As Yinhe Li, a prominent Chinese sexologist and activist, stated, "although there are discussions on prostitution in China and there have been call for it to be decriminalized, no-one asks what prostitutes themselves think or whether they enjoy their work" (RNW).

In *Sex in China,* Elaine Jeffreys and Haiqing Yu examine the sexualization of China's youth culture, which is closely linked to the spread of new media and communication technologies (Jeffreys & Yu 2015:10). The phenomenon can be proved by growing rate of premarital and casual sex, the advocacy by female autobiographical novelists, sex bloggers, and the emerging sex education websites and LGBT friendly communities. Nevertheless, the rise of new media does not necessarily help all sexual minority communities. According to Liu Yan, a movie director of a trans* sex worker documentary *Magic*, a former sex worker and a NGO co-fonder supporting LGBT movement and HIV prevention, because of the criminalization, most sex workers choose to stay away from public space, in order to avoid any risk, "it is obvious that to most of the sex workers, putting yourself on public space is extremely dangerous. They are not activists after all. Most of them just try to fit into the society as much as possible." Liu said it from a short interview.

Compared to the invisibility of sex workers in cyberspace, there are numerous progressive online spaces discussing the sex and sexuality of women and other gender minorities, which pose a drastic contrast comparing to the amount of sex worker-focused microblog. Since 2001, a famous blogger Muzi Mei started her sexual diary blog, which contains frank descriptions of her sexual encounters with various men, which is to be the first sexually progressive blog in China. Her case has even been widely circulated in late 2003 through the New York Times, Time magazine and Washington Post. In 2014, several online communities were established, which provides thorough sex education and allows young Chinese to finally to explore and share their desire freely. Compared to pornographic websites, these sexually progressive forums are more about experience sharing, even academic or artistic discussion. These types of forums about sex, sexuality and bodies are usually registered as ‘public accounts’ on WeChat, which works similarly to Facebook fan pages. Also those public accounts work differently from Facebook but more topic-oriented. Some of them work as news feed platform for specific group, for instance, gay community, and others provide more diverse content, such as regular events, information, stories, photographical works, literatures and so forth. However, so far there are not so many public accounts that perceive sex workers as their target users, neither are there sex workers who use public account of WeChat to express themselves, at least not under the condition of showing their true identity or talking about their lived experience as sex workers publicly.

Take Haiyen Ye for example, as an activist and former sex worker, has used social media, including WeChat, Weibo and other online platforms, to spread her message and raise awareness about sex workers’ rights. Before the creation of Weibo, in 2003, Ye had started to defend for sex workers online, until her account was blocked by the website. In 2005, she created her own website “China Grassroots Women’s Rights”, which attracted lots of netizens, with a sex worker Yao yao actively speaking on the platform, while several feminist bloggers refused to involve sex workers in their online mobility, since sexual minority is often excluded from the mainstream feminist discourse in China. In fact, a large amount of feminist lobby in China enunciate the state policy on anti-prostitution (Jeffreys 2004). Therefore, Ye created another web space specifically for sex workers to speak, which was unfortunately, threatened, hacked and blocked in a few days. In 2006, Yao yao was stabbed by a client with scissors, and passed away. Ye tried her utmost to mobilize the society by writing articles defending her and sex workers' freedom of speech. Ye used her body as a tool of opposition, such as posting naked pictures, providing sex free service, live-broadcasting her sex-selling, promoting the decriminalization of sex work, and lobbying for women, sex workers and AIDS patients. However, her deeds have thrown national sensation and criticism, finally suffering from legal oppression, and several attacks from local people. According to Chemmencheri, mainstream media nowadays “attempts to give a voice to the subalterns hearing their logic, in which process the leader (who is taken to represent the collective) asset and reasserts the status of suabliternity through references to state oppression” (Chemmencheri 2015: 9). To Chemmencheri, it is dangerous especially on media, where the voice of subaltern tend to be overpowered by the activist representative. In the context of contemporary China, when sex workers have no chance to express publicly, in fear of the risk of exposure and legal oppression, only somebody like Ye as an activist can speak on behalf of those sex workers. In this way, she actually tries to give them a voice, and negotiate for sex workers through media appearances rather than overpowering the voice of the subaltern.

If we draw upon Spivak's idea of representation here, digitalization brings about both media representation (vertretung), which means speaking for, and re-presentation (darstellung), meaning repetitively presenting (Spivak 2006: 29). The advance of technology and easy access to social media provide space of self expression. However, the situation in China is fairly different for sex workers. Sex workers in China are criminalized therefore the chance of speaking up actually poses a tremendous threat to them, along with the risk of exposing the stigmatized identity to the society, especially to their family. Further, the fact that mainstream sex workers are marginalized in cyberspace, by mainstream feminist opinion also marginalizes their stance in public space. In this situation, sex workers in China cannot speak, but the vertretung and darstellung brought by new media, in a way giving them space where they can possibly, anonymously express, strengthen their capacity or get knowledge; on the other hand, representatives like Ye represent those who cannot speak, repeatedly challenge the restrictions under legal force, and struggle to make their voice heard.

Thanks to the development of technology, ways to access the public space are rather diverse. The rise of new media, including social media, video channels, instant messaging tools and so forth, is widely spreading from the top to the bottom of Chinese society. However, media as the most friendly, and easily approached public space opens with conditions, the oppression of media controls and criminalization of sex work leave sex workers with no opportunities to access public space to show their agency. Of course, there are many reasons behind this barrier, while most of the sex workers, even those of the subordinated class, are able to use several accounts of WeChat, QQ at the same time, or even just basic phone call to stay in contact with their clients, which maintain, and even possibly expand, their business. Here, the opportunity to access public space is not so much to do with one's socio-economic background or capability, but about one's identity. That is to say, sex worker's identity as 'the subaltern' is not only limited under the frame of social class or income, but also other outside factors such as legal oppression and stigma. As Hershatter contends, for most groups in China, it is important to keep in mind the possibility of multiple, relational degrees of subalternity (Hershatter 1993: 111). The subalternity of sex workers in China is intersectional, complex and with multiple degrees. Mainstream media only passively 're-present' sex workers, often in an imprecise way, while self-expression in cyberspace to sex workers is still highly risky. Instead of speaking up, they prefer remaining silent because of the outcomes brought by criminalization, stigma, family shame, and so on, which are also the factors reinforce them into subalternity.

Sex workers, in many cases in mass media and social media, are nearly excluded, or passively represented. In mainstream news media, sex workers are majorly criminalized and victimized, unable to speak, or not given a safe space to express themselves. In social media, prostitution often sparks debate but sex workers themselves are seldom included. The Chinese government takes advantage of mainstream media and makes it as a tool of policy promotion. The double suppression on media and governmental regulations mute sex workers. Ye herself is an activist representative, and the intention that first drove her to do sex work is political, for the purpose of mobilization. As an activist representative, she is more aware of the discursive and instrumental value of media exposure, and usually 'speak for' other sex workers.

On the other hand, resistance can be creative and accessibility to the public domain can be diverse. New media brings chance and a safer environment for alternative voices. The subaltern is regarded as those who cannot speak. More precisely, "subalterns speak outside the line of representation laid down by official institution where it can count, so it ultimately does not catch or hold (Sun 2014: 31)". With the advance of new media, everyone has an opportunity and accessibility to technology, even though they are peasants, migrant workers, and sex workers. However, according to the case of Ye, sex workers are often excluded from mainstream feminist discourse in cyberspace, since they are considered degrading. In LIU Ting's *Cyberactivism in the Women's movement: a comparison of Feminist Practices by Women Organizing in Mainland China and Hong Kong,* she highlights how sex workers are marginalized in the feminist movement in mainland China. Besides the criminalization of sex work which makes it hard for sex workers to speak publicly, the Chinese feminism prioritizing its own goal, where social inequality on sexualities is not a main concern, since the main stream Chinese feminist movement is largely intervened by central party. (LIU 2008: 106) The strategic use of new media helps to capture subalterns' multiple voices, but the situation of sex workers is different. Sex workers as the subaltern who cannot speak, are marginalized on cyberspace. The reasons behind their silence are rather intersectional, intertwining with the fact of criminalization, social stigma, family shame, and so on. Ye as a sex worker and activist, tried to create an online space for sex workers, but was eventually oppressed by outside forces, such as legal oppression and social exclusion. By speaking on behalf of the whole community, Ye is actually negotiating with governmental controls, social norm, and media opportunities with her body, sex and sexuality. Her self-representation can be a way to represent sex workers' struggles, which is usually invisible.

## Chapter 5: Self-mediation of the subaltern

From the previous section, we can see that TV program from mainstream media mostly do not deal with the agency of sex workers, but dichotomize them into victims or the personification of indecency. Even though with the uprising of social media and new technology, sex workers are, in most of cases, passively being discussed in public debate. Thus, to continue investigating the question raised at the beginning of this thesis namely, "how they use self-representation as a way of resistance", I have to turn to marginal sources from which different voices that address the lower-tiered sex workers sufferings can be heard. This section explores an independently produced film dealing with the experiences of sex workers, discussing their subalternity within the form of self-representation and how this relatively new form of media creates new opportunities to capture subalterns' voices, in both verbal or nonverbal ways.

Since being founded in 2008, Xin'ai has gotten in contact with more than 3000 female sex workers, published a research report on sex workers in 2014, a book 撐起那一片天, and a short film, *Blossom in Midnight*, based on the true story of a female sex workers. *Blossom in Midnight*, a 20-minute short film telling the story about a rural migrant and single mother, who struggles in the city to support her family. From a janitor to a sex worker, the leading character 'Yue' went through an overall transformation, in which she has gradually gotten to know her own desire and sexuality, and at the same time obtained financial independence. Unlike typical films about sex workers, focusing majorly on the miserable lived experience and suffering of them, *Blossom in Midnight*, shot in a mellow approach and montage technique, reflects the agency of sex work and the process of their empowerment.

### Chapter 5-1: *Blossom in Midnight*

The story starts from a corner of restaurant, where the main character Yue, dressing in a dirty and shabby outfit, dragging a big trashcan, with young and beautiful waitresses sitting and chilling at the other end. In the middle of summer, Yue dressed herself in a brown shirt and dark red pants, sweating as she does hard labor such as cleaning and shifting goods. In order to save money for her family, she did not spend any money on herself, not even to take a good shower in the public bath house. Yue was picked on by other waitresses in the restaurant because of that, "I bet she won't spend money on this. I've never seen her shower since I got here." She, as a rural migrant making a living in the city, was almost invisible, like other peasants. Most of the time she was alone and stayed at the back of the restaurant, but sometimes she would help in the kitchen so that she could at least peek at the cook she liked. One day a waitress found a dirty handprint on her new dress, and blamed it on Yue, "It must be her! Look at her. Who else would be so dirty except her? Wearing this much in such hot weather? You think we don't know that you wearing this much only to cover your dead skin?" The young waitress threw the dirty dress on Yue's face and reported this to shop owner. Of course Yue was fired, without any salary or getting her deposit back.

Crying and wandering the street, her only property was a backpack, and a cellphone. "Hi mom. I'm good. My little girl's sick? Is it serious? Her dad hasn't given any supporting fee? It's ok mom, don't cry. How about borrowing some form the neighbors? I'll repay them when I make enough money. I have to go. I got to work. Bye mom." Without a job or money, knowing her daughter was ill, Yue was weeping when she talking to her mother on the phone. She strolled to a local labor market, but without any intention of getting a job. Instead, Yue just sat and cried at the side of the road. Suddenly, a nicely dressed woman went to her, and invited her to work at a pedicure salon, where they provided training, food and accommodation without withholding payment or her ID card. Employees can even get a paycheck by day. Yue did not believe her or she sensed an ulterior motive, so she did not agree to it. But after a full day of searching, she realized that she did not have any specialty to compete with others, so finally she gave in.

The woman took Yue to the pedicure salon and made her change her clothes. Yue felt self-conscious because of the dry skin on her legs, so she was hiding her legs under a pair of stockings. Afterward, the first client quickly came to her. It was the cook she used to like in the restaurant. "Are you new here? I've never seen you before," the cook did not realize it was Yue, or he had never paid attention to her. Yue was very shy. She dared not to look at him in the eyes, and she did not let him take off her stockings. Rather than taking off her stockings forcefully, the cook kissed her on the neck, gently, and then taking off her clothes with his mouth. Yue reached her arms on his back, and put her legs around his waist. He ripped off her stockings passionately, and holding her tight. She reached orgasm. Yue had never enjoyed the pleasure of sex before. Afterward, they were on the bed, and the cook was caressing her legs, "Look how beautiful they are. Why were you covering them?" It was Yue's first day working.

Now, Yue got a new hair style, dressed fashionably, did her manicure and wore a skirt - without stockings underneath. Sitting in front of the pedicure salon, she called her mother. “Hey mom. It’s me. How are you? Go buy something good to eat. Don’t worry about the money. Let me tell you something mom. I’m pretty well-off at the moment. Let me know if you need money. I’ve got enough. I’ll call you back.” At the moment she hung up the phone, the cook came back to her, with a pair of stockings in his hand. “Here you are. To make it up to you.” “I don’t need them anymore.” Yue smiled at him.

### Chapter 5-2: Capturing the voice of subaltern

The storyline of *Blossom in Midnight* is simple and straightforward: a rural migrant trying to survive in the city, at the end makes her choice to become a sex worker. While it is not telling the miserable past of a sex worker, the film shows the transformation of the main character Yue, as a family supporter, a worker, and a woman. This transformation brings out the agency of Yue which shows how she exercises control over her body, sex and sexuality. Moreover, the revelation of the agency of subaltern symbolize a new possibility for sex workers to speak, since it can be rarely specified and captured in the practices of either mainstream media and social media.

I divided this process of four steps which in the film is presented in four major scenes. At the very beginning, Yue works as a janitor in a restaurant. Her conservative outfit, greasy hair and dusty face pose a dramatic contrast compare to the appearances of other young waitresses. In this scene Yue looks timid and unconfident and barely cares about her appearance. The scene in the restaurant reflects the lived experience of most rural migrants: diligent, hardworking, sacrificing for family. They change from one job to another, receive humble salary, and accept their circumstances. To Yue, her role as a financial supporter for the family, and her gendered role as a woman is in a way contradicting in this scene. Yue constantly curls up at the corner of the kitchen, looks up at the cook she adores; also, she sometimes sits at the back of the restaurant, looking at those young waitresses’ smooth legs with enviously. Having someone to love, dressing up properly like a young lady are both hard to achieve for her as a migrant worker, especially when she is sacrificing her youth and devoting her labor to her family.

The second scene connects this character back to her origin, her poor, rural home town. The countryside is basically an abandoned place by the government in post-socialist China, which creates millions of migrant workers every year, who have to earn a living in the city to raise their families. Many rural women, who are traditionally taking the responsibility of child raising in

China, sometimes have to work in the city in order to support their families, especially when they have irresponsible spouses. Without the support from her divorced partner, Yue has to take the burden of entire family. The phone call from Yue's mother is the distance between work place in the city and home back in the country, meaning the gap between her responsibility of financial support and maternal duty. However, without any particular skill, specialty or connection, she becomes an unwanted laborer in the job searching market, which means she is failing in one of her important roles. Without other surviving skills, the poverty, difficult employment environment and the gender-based burden imposed on Yue as a rural migrant, drive her to the pedicure salon.

In the third and fourth scenes, the plot comes to the climax. From her first sex service experience, luckily with someone she adores, Yue for the first time in her life gets to know her body, desire and sexuality. Afterward, she begins to pay more attention to herself, becomes confident and earns enough money to support her family. The change of Yue does not overthrow the fact that she is still a rural laborer, with heavy financial burden, but empowers her with different roles, either as a family supporter, or as a sexual being.

The film has been on tour and screened in different universities in China, and it triggers discussion especially among younger generation. The film was also elected for the Ghana film festival in early 2016, which indeed brings more spotlights on sex workers' rights and rural migrant women in China. The director of Xin'ai, also the producer of the film, who took the role as salon owner in the film, has therefore been threatened and detained by the local government. The film itself has received criticisms of romanticizing sex workers' life; on the other hand, it also indeed introduces viewers to a different perspective and understanding of sex work. In order to support her family, Yue makes a realistic choice out of the urban-rural hierarchy that pose extra burden on female. The film is produced by sex workers and tells the story of a sex worker, which provides a different point of view of street-based sex workers and their self-representation in the position of subalternity. Even though the film does not reach a broad enough audience through traditional theater screening, because of the legal problem, it allows us to reinterpret the subaltern's voice.

The film *Blossom in Midnight* is not the first time that the identity of a sex worker is visually mediated in China's cultural landscape. However, many films and documentaries are images captured in a third-party perspective. The production of *Blossom in Midnight* is solely achieved by Xin'ai a marginalized sex worker-led group, who raised funds through international donors. The film itself, to the organization and to the sex workers' rights movement, is for the purpose of political activism. In the making of the film, sex workers' lived experiences and agencies are represented, verbally or nonverbally, which breaks the boundary of media controls; in the promotion of the film, the producer Lan lan have been strategically seeking for the possibility of exposure without risking the circumstance of sex workers and the organization.

"How do sex workers negotiate under the forceful silence with new media?" After discussing the environment that sex workers are situated in, we look back to sex workers, as subjects of this discourse. In the film, Yue takes control over her own body, sex and sexuality after becoming a sex worker. Her empowerment comes from multiple dimensions and her agency is able to be represented. Based on a true story, Yue's experience might not be seen as representative, but it manifests the agency of sex workers, and provides a different perspective of seeing sex work as a legitimate job and capturing the voice of subaltern. Outside of the film, Lan lan, the producer, takes it for political cause, making this film to speak for those who cannot speak. As an open (former) sex worker herself, she stands up against the oppressive media environment and abolitionist policies strategically, with all the possible resources. Lan lan uses social media Weibo, WeChat, Skype and other tools to promote the film toward a broader audience.

According to Chemmencheri, in most of the resistance movements, people involved in are usually put to the 'receiving end of structural discrimination or a the lower end of the power continuum,' (Chemmencheri 2015: 5) and the politics of representation, which refers to the interaction between the subaltern and the media opportunity, only makes the subaltern more reinforced into the marginalized identity. Of course, the process of mediation can be very diverse, in either passive or initiative ways. Sex workers in China however, are nearly excluded from public space, due to the criminalization, and strict media rules, and a collaborative resistance movement for sex workers is almost non-existant. Under this condition, some of the prominent activists such as Lan lan and Haiyen Ye, who constantly 'speak for' the subaltern, are actually helpful in conveying the thoughts of fellow sex workers to the public. Here, activists are helping the subaltern to develop capacity, through struggling and negotiating with the boundary and limitation of public space, and the rights of speak. The film *Blossom in Midnight* is one of the best examples, in which Lan lan creates a safe space for sex workers through independent film making, screening, and online promotion. In this sense, internalization of media does not change sex workers' subalternity. Instead, as Chemmenchri argues, subalternity is not a 'frozen identity', but 'changing and responding to the time and context' (Chemmencheri 2015: 2). He points out that the hyper-globalized media environment has brought new possibilities for all kinds of communities 'to speak, be heard, perform, resist, and to gain social mobility' (Chemmencheri 2015: 2). New media grants nearly everyone equal opportunity to self-represent, while Chinese sex workers as the subaltern are unlikely to speak for restriction imposed on them. Nevertheless, thanks to the advance of technology, there is a slight possibility to capture the voice of subaltern, in rather creative, and safer ways.

## Conclusion

My main research question is how do sex workers in China negotiate the forces of social stigma, the abolitionist-centered policy and media regulation, and how they use self-representation as a way of resistance. In an attempt to answer this question, I carried out this research to explore the media representation of Chinese sex workers, and how the uprise of new technology, especially social media affect the subaltern. The previous sections in this study are part of a process of seeking answers to the question.

In chapter 3, I have explored the reality and subalternity of Chinses sex workers. Sex workers in China are not simply a subordinate group distinguished by socio-economic terms; as a group of the subaltern, their identity is, in a way, forced by layers of disadvantages. They face legal oppression and police violence, day in, day out. The frequent police raid and the conjoint media campaign have caused the most damage to street based sex workers. For those who are apprehended, they might have to pay fine up of 5000 RMB, which roughly equals 673 euros, or put into custody (re-education through laboring) for six months to two years (Huang & Pan 2014: 2). Such a large fine is nearly 200 to 300 times more than sexual services for street-based sex workers. Furthermore, police constantly take condoms as evidence of criminal act, which makes sex workers even more vulnerable to HIV and STI. In many cases, sex workers succumb to violence from clients and police, since the price of being exposed to the public and their family is too high. The oppression to sex workers in China are mostly interwoven within legal practices, violence from clients and police, and the stigma surrounding prostitution, which make them a threatened group under the well defined political, cultural and sexual normativity in Chinese society.

Their subalternity originates from the intersection of several disadvantages, while under this category they still remain heterogeneous and flexible. Due to the criminalized policies, the voice of Chinese sex workers are not able to be registered or heard in public space. That is to say, instead of the fact that the sex workers cannot speak, in most of the cases they are, in lack of access to the public sphere.

The media representation of sex workers I analyzed in chapter 4 have brought in several cases standing for both mainstream and new media and ask the question, “how are sex workers silenced in public space?” In China, the restrictive media environment and the abolitionist-centered policy on sex workers limit the space of almost any liberal commentary. Mainstream media usually categorizes sex workers into wither victims of patriarchy, or the personification of immorality, which has significantly impacted on public opinion, and strengthened ‘sex negativity’ (Rubin 1993:152) in the society. The traditional media representation thus, according to Spivak’s theory, can be both ‘vertretung’ and ‘darstellung’ (Spivak 2006: 29), but only the subaltern is passively represented by intellectuals and representatives, and re-presented in possibly a distorted way. On the other hand, the rise of new media, such as social media and personal blog, provides a shortcut for the subaltern to public domain. Personal mediation can be clearly seen as a way of ‘speak for’ (represent) oneself. In theory, the advance of new media would bring about more opportunity and easier accessibility for sex workers for public domain. However, all the subalternity, such as the oppression of media controls, criminalization, stigmatization, marginalization from mainstream Chinese feminism leave sex workers with no opportunities to access public space and show their agency. Sex workers as the subaltern who cannot speak, are marginalized and nearly excluded on cyberspace. The reasons behind their silence are rather intersectional, intertwining with the fact of criminalization, social stigma, family shame, and so on. Haiyen Ye as a sex worker and activist, tried to create an online space for sex workers, but was eventually oppressed by outside forces, such as legal oppression and social exclusion. Nevertheless, by speaking on behalf of the whole community, Ye is actually negotiating with governmental controls, social norm, and media opportunities with her body, sex and sexuality. Her self-representation can be a way to represent sex workers’ struggles, which are usually invisible.

Even though sex workers in China as the subaltern cannot speak directly, new media still provides the possibility for capturing the voice of subaltern. In chapter 5, I chose an independently produced film *Blossom in Midnight* dealing with the lived experiences of sex workers, discussing their subalternity within the form of self-representation and how this relatively new form of media creates new opportunities to capture subaltern's voices, in both verbal or nonverbal ways. The film itself shows the true story of a sex worker Yue, whose transition of becoming a sex worker, and her empowerment in many levels. This transformation brings out the agency of Yue, where it shows how she exercises control over her body, sex and sexuality. It manifests the agency of sex worker’s, and provides a different perspective of seeing sex work as a legitimate job and capturing the voice of subaltern. Outside of the film, the producer Lan lan, also a sex workers' rights activist and (former) sex worker takes the film for political cause, making it to speak for those who cannot speak.

Internalization of media does not change sex workers' subalternity. Instead, as Chemmenchri argues, subalternity is not a 'frozen identity', but 'changing and responding to the time and context' (Chemmencheri 2015: 2). He points out that the hyper-globalized media environment has brought new possibilities for all kinds of communities 'to speak, be heard, perform, resist, and to gain social mobility' (Chemmencheri 2015: 2). Theoretically, new media helps to capture subalterns' multiple voices, but the situation of sex workers is different. Due to their subalternity reinforced by the society, sex workers in China cannot speak. But thanks to advance of technology, a more creative, precise and not entirely passive representation on the subaltern is made possible. Thanks to activists who take risks and use their bodies to struggle, and to negotiate with the boundary and limitation of public space, and the rights of speak, this is made possible. Sex workers cannot directly reach the public space, but in many ways the strategic use of new media allows negotiation and resistance, from down to up, or even just within a slight space in between all the outside forces.

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