Migration, Prostitution, and Human Trafficking
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The Voice of Chinese Women

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Preface

China has gone through a wide-ranging transformation in the last three decades since the Chinese government initiated economic reform and an open-door policy. A series of reform strategies, while producing an economic miracle in China, has, however, resulted in myriad social problems. The resurgence and prevalence of prostitution is one of these. Rarely have there been any attempts to explore prostitution in relation to human trafficking. This study tries to explore questions such as whether Chinese women in the sex sector are victims of trafficking, what are the factors causing Chinese women to get involved in prostitution or become victims of trafficking, how authorities respond to these issues in terms of laws and policies, and so on.

This study was conducted in Shenzhen—China’s best-known boom-town since the 1980s, where many sex establishments involving internal migrants have been set up. Guided by qualitative methodological approach, a total of sixty-four interviews were conducted: forty with women working in sex venues, nine with sex-ring operators, and fifteen with law enforcement officers. Eight field observations were also completed. Participants included women practicing prostitution in four types of sex venues: nightclubs and karaoke lounges; massage parlors; hair salons; and the street.

A variety of factors relating to women’s involvement in prostitution were discovered. Different paths to prostitution were identified and described. Six out of forty women were identified as trafficking victims. The organization and operation of sex venues and the life of women on the “job” were examined. In addition, China’s responses to the expanding sex industry were analyzed in terms of law and administrative regulations, as well as policies. The ineffectiveness of campaign-style policy and reasons for its failure to contain prostitution were also explored.

While this study helps improve our knowledge and understanding of prostitution and sex trafficking in contemporary China and provides information for the Chinese authorities on the nature, magnitude, and
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Gravity of these problems, some issues emanating from this study remain unanswered, such as the definition of terms such as exploitation, coercion, or forced work, which are key elements in defining human trafficking.
Acknowledgments

This book is the result of two years of research and investigation, including two months of fieldwork at the research site. As with any qualitative study, it has gone through many phases: research design, IRB bureaucratic obstacles, data collection and analysis, and finalizing of the writing. Accomplishing this task would have been impossible without encouragement, support, assistance, and inspiration from many people.

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Thanks are also owed to my friends in China who introduced me to their friends or acquaintances, some of whom became intermediaries or subjects in this study. Special thanks to those women who trusted me and shared their life stories with me. Their consent to participate in this research constitutes the most significant contribution to this study—it would be an unaccomplished mission without them.

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Economic Reform, Migration, and Prostitution

Prostitution, one of the oldest professions in the world, has existed in China for over 2,000 years (Ren, 1993; Gil and Anderson, 1998; Zhou, 2006), despite economic development, cultural traditions, changes in social systems, and authoritative suppression. Historically, prostitution has been a topic of research in differing disciplines, such as law, psychiatry, penology, sociology, history, geography, and social work (Davis, 1993). To date, however, few studies have examined the relationship between the increase in prostitution and the development of society, that is to say, the extent to which economic development, industrialization, and urbanization affect the development of prostitution. In the United States, it has been observed that prostitution evolved into a highly visible business along with the economic development, industrialization, and urbanization of the mid-nineteenth century (Barry, 1995). In China, although prostitution prospered under several dynastic reigns, it did not reach its peak until the country opened its door to the outside world during the second half of the nineteenth century (Zhou, 2006). Coincidently, from 1978 onward, as the Chinese government began implementing economic reform, and adopting an open door policy, and as China began experiencing rapid economic development, moving towards industrialization and urbanization, prostitution has seen a revival. It is increasing rapidly after approximately 30 years of purported abolition.

After examining changes in prostitution in Shanghai from 1849 to 1949, Henriot (1996) concluded that prostitution could only prosper in a context where the population is growing rapidly and is diversifying; where foreign trade has opened, and people from all walks of life relocate with the hope of making a better living and attaining prosperity. Even if it is accepted that the advancement of society, especially in the form of economic development, is inevitably accompanied by thriving prostitution, the question still remains: Why has prostitution
in contemporary China been developing so rapidly in the presence of Western culture and a growing economy? Does the current climate of economic reform inevitably engender prostitution? What social changes have occurred in China since 1978, and how do these changes give rise to prostitution? The present study attempts to examine prostitution in China within the context of a society in transition—an isolated, agricultural and underdeveloped country transforming into an open, industrialized, and urbanized one.

**Economic Reform and Floating Populations**

When China ended its isolation from the outside world in 1978, the government initiated a policy of economic reform and opening to the outside that has profoundly changed people’s lives. One of the most prominent results of these new policies, in other words, China’s economic boom, has been double-digit economic growth rates, lifting millions of people out of poverty and bringing the poverty rate down from 53 percent in 1981 to only 8 percent in 2001 (Ravallion and Chen, 2004). In 2001, there were 400 million fewer people living in extreme poverty than 20 years previously (World Bank, 2005).

The economic reform and open door policy, however, has also restructured the lives of Chinese people in a negative way. Not all the reform strategies have achieved their intended results, nor are all beneficial to people from all walks of life. These less desirable changes, especially noticeable in urban areas, include the abolition of government subsidies for education and the loss of free housing and medical services provided by work units. The loss of these benefits, along with a high unemployment rate, has affected the welfare of the Chinese people very significantly.

**Significant Economic Reform Policies**

Chinese economic reform has gone through a number of phases, affecting people’s lives in different ways. With the initiation and enforcement of a range of reform strategies, many people have become unemployed and have consequently sought jobs in areas offering more opportunities, while others were encouraged to migrate in search of alternate sources of income.

Changes in economic strategies resulted in a large number of unemployed and underemployed people in urban areas, and surplus labor in rural areas. Generally speaking, three significant nationwide reform
measures gave rise to this high unemployment rate and the huge floating population. The first is the rural economic reform policy. The initial reforms in the late 1970s and early 1980s targeted the agricultural sector, which is the most important economic sector of China, through the institution of the Family Production Responsibility System (the FPRS) in agriculture. The FPRS contracts farmland to individual households to be cultivated for whatever purposes they see fit as long as they meet the crop quotas for their collective unit. Those who meet the quotas keep the surplus harvests and net profits. Later, in 1993, the government abolished the 40-year-old grain rationing system, leading to more than 90 percent of all annual agricultural produce being sold at market-determined prices (Findlay and Chen, 2001). This reform gave more power to each family to meet its individual needs, and as a result, the farmers have become more energetic and productive. They have been able to retain a surplus from their individual plots of land.

However, although China’s agricultural output is the largest in the world, only about 15 percent of its total land area can be cultivated (The World Factbook: China, 2008). As China’s industrialization continues, vast amounts of agricultural land are being converted into industrial land, aggravating the historical problem of limited space for farming. Farmers displaced by such urban expansion often become migrant labor for factories. They are encouraged to leave their rural homes to seek jobs outside of the depressed agricultural sector and to find multiple income opportunities in urban areas.

The abolition of the rationing system (whereby only urban residents could have rations of food, clothing, etc.), the loosening of recruitment policies governing urban enterprises, and the demand for labor by newly established private and joint-investment companies have motivated farmers to move to urban areas, especially those along the southeastern coast, for economic reasons. With differences between urban and rural life becoming increasingly more prominent, more and more rural farmers are enticed by the diversity and high quality of city life. Incomes from jobs in the cities are much higher than those from farming, especially in areas where the land was not arable to begin with, providing another incentive that motivates farmers, especially young people, to join the increasing “floating population.” With China’s urbanization accelerating over the last decades, more than 200 million people have left the land. Currently, over 120 million rural workers are “on the move,” making their way into towns (China Labor Bulletin, 2007a).
Unlike rural residents who are emancipated from the land, the floating populations from urban areas are people who are unemployed or underemployed as a result of a series of reform measures carried out in state-owned enterprises. During the Maoist period, the majority of urban residents in China were attached to a work unit, an enterprise or institution which provided comprehensive social security for its employees in the form of housing, children’s education, pension, and health services. Most urban residents spent their entire lives in the same work unit upon entering the labor market. This was referred to as the “Iron Rice Bowl.” One of the hallmarks of China’s socialism, the Iron Rice Bowl gave urban residents the promise of employment, and virtually lifelong tenure, by recruiting local urban residents, particularly family members of its current employees. This is one of the reasons why rural residents did not have any chance to work in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) during the pre-reform era. Urban residents were allocated by the local government to a work unit which provided them with a comprehensive benefits package. This employment policy was once touted as one of the advantages of socialism over capitalism. However, the inherent problem with the Iron Rice Bowl raised its head soon after its implementation. The unintended consequences included overstaffed industries, and a reduction of workers’ incentive due to job security. As a result, reformers regarded the labor market as unproductive, and a number of strategies were introduced to address this issue. One of these strategies was the termination of the Iron Rice Bowl, which meant that a lot of urban residents lost their jobs, and many young people were no longer guaranteed a job as they entered the labor market. As the economic reforms progressed, government-controlled job allocation declined sharply from 76 percent to 52 percent of the total job market between 1980 and 1992 (China Labor Bulletin, 2007b). The Iron Rice Bowl was shattered, and guaranteed lifetime jobs were replaced by performance-based labor contracts. Those worst affected by these changes were poorly educated, unskilled workers. As a result, unemployment has become one of the Chinese central government’s most pressing problems.

Another policy contributing to the high unemployment rate in urban China was the reform of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Economic reform entered a new era with the dismantling of inefficient and unproductive state-owned and state-managed industries and enterprises, and the development of social security systems (Ren, 1999). The most affected areas were provinces with a high concentration of state-owned enterprises established by the Communist Government,
especially those in northern China. In some severely affected areas, SOEs started to lay off employees, or were shut down due to economic reasons. Families with several members working in the same industry or work unit were the most adversely affected. Unfortunately, such situations, in which several family members worked in the same unit, were very common because of the Iron Rice Bowl employment policy. Thus, unemployment began to increase significantly at the end of 1990s, as the government’s big push to reform SOEs got underway. About 20 million SOE employees became unemployed as enterprises restructured, merged, or declared bankruptcy (China Labor Bulletin, 2007a).

As stated earlier, the closing of inefficient enterprises meant not only the loss of jobs, but also loss of the benefits provided by the work unit. When the old welfare system was dismantled, a new system had not yet been established. The socialization of welfare made the lives of those who lost their jobs even worse.

The extent to which the closing of state-owned, inefficient enterprises affected Chinese people can be extrapolated from the changing components of the Chinese economy. Once predominantly state controlled, less than one-third of all enterprises are now state-owned. As of 2005, the private sector was responsible for approximately 70 percent of China’s gross domestic product (GDP), while the state ran about 200 large state enterprises, mostly utilities, heavy industries, and energy resources (China Industry, 2008).

The pattern of change in the employment rate reflects the tremendous effect of economic reform on urban Chinese residents. China’s official unemployment rate has remained at between two or five percent for the last two decades. Even in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the effects of economic reform and SOE restructuring were at their most intense, the rate barely exceeded four percent (China Labor Bulletin, 2007). However, the official unemployment statistics only include urban residents who have registered as unemployed. Neither the rural unemployed nor urban employees who have been laid off are included, as these latter retain an “employment relationship” with their former employer. Unemployment is more severe in the poorer western and central regions and the northeastern provinces that had a high concentration of SOEs. In 2005, the highest official unemployment rate was five percent in the northeastern province of Liaoning (China Labor Bulletin, 2007a). Enterprises in the southeastern coastal areas, such as Guangdong and Shanghai, which opened up to foreign investment much earlier, were far more capable of providing employment opportunities to workers.
Thus, the cessation of the Iron Rice Bowl and the closing of unprofitable state-owned factories resulted in millions of unemployed laborers in urban areas. Along with surplus laborers from rural areas, these urban workers migrated from poor, undeveloped state-enterprise-ridden areas to relatively rich, developed, private-enterprise-ridden areas. The creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in the southeast coastal areas became a magnet for these migrants and they constituted what is referred to as a “floating population,” i.e., temporary migrants without local household registration.

Unequal Economic Development Motivating People to Migrate

As the economy boomed and public welfare improved, China began to witness a large-scale migration of people, both within and beyond its borders. Economic reform strategies resulted not only in high rates of unemployment, but also in an unequal pace of economic development. In order to attract international investments, the government designed a variety of favorable economic policies and applied them to southeastern cities. The financial development in these areas is greatly responsible for China’s economic boom since the 1980s. Although economic growth in China was dramatic, it was also highly uneven, generating vast inequalities of living standards and opportunities between those at the hub of economic growth and those at its margins. Average rural incomes in China remained less than half of those enjoyed by city dwellers, and earnings from agriculture continued to stagnate (Davidson, 2001). The income gap between rural and urban areas prompted people to move eastward for a better life. These inequalities have triggered this migration (AMC, 2000).

According to most recent statistics, the migrant population has increased from less than 2 million at the beginning of the Economic Reform, to 140 million in 2007. This figure accounts for 10 percent of the total population, with farmers constituting the main portion of the migrant population (Legal Daily, 2007). Experts estimate that from now until 2015, at least 250 million rural laborers will move to urban areas, swelling the migrant population to approximately 400 million (Legal Daily, 2007).

A popular phrase, borrowed from the title of an ancient Chinese novel, aptly describes the regional pattern of migration in the 1980s: Peacocks flying southeast. Because three of the first four special economic zones (Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shantou) are located in Guangdong,
the province has witnessed an economic boom, with a large amount of foreign investment and a prominent migrant presence. Although it has less than 7 percent of China’s population, Guangdong accounted for 27 percent of China’s floating population in 2000 (Liang and Ma, 2004). The cheap labor afforded by these migrant workers is the fuel that powers Guangdong’s thriving economy, which accounts for half of China’s gross domestic product (Rosenthal, 2002).

The scale of internal migration in China is so phenomenal that the population in destination cities becomes really huge, compared to what it was before the economic reform. This can be demonstrated by the population changes in one of the SEZs, namely Shenzhen. In 1979, the year before Shenzhen was decreed an SEZ, it was a small border town with less than 40,000 calling it home (Hobson and Heung, 1998). The population of the 1953-square-kilometer region boomed to 10 million people in 2005, 31 times the number recorded 25 years ago, according to an official newspaper (Xinhua News Agency, 2005), making it the largest migrant city in China. Several government employees interviewed for this study say that the registered permanent population in Shenzhen has reached three million, while the registered temporary population is seven million. Adding to these figures the unregistered people living there, the total population of Shenzhen is about 14-15 million, with some sources even estimating it to be as high as 18 million.

The new residents come from a variety of backgrounds: educated and uneducated, skilled and unskilled. Many people who are unemployed in the region they are originally from, desperately migrate to other cities because opportunities for unskilled workers are greater there than in their home villages. Their lives change following migration.

Farmers constitute the main part of the migrant population (Legal Daily, 2007), and like most migrants, are politically marginalized and economically disadvantaged (Davidson, 2001). They are unskilled, have limited education, and may have lived in poverty before migration. More than 80 percent have no education beyond middle school and 70 percent have no training. Their age ranges from 16-40. Some of the new dwellers are children of the first migrant generation (Legal Daily, 2007). It is reported that in some mountain areas in Sichuan Province, no one between the ages of 15 to 40 can be found at home; everyone moves out after finishing middle school. Almost half of the area’s young adults live in two places, Foshan and Dongguan-gray satellite cities just outside Guangzhou and Shenzhen (Rosenthal, 2002).
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After moving into developed cities, most migrant workers have a limited choice between physically demanding occupations, such as construction, renovation, and manufacture (Legal Daily, 2007). They have few rights, and are blamed for every social ill, from crime to pornography. By migrating, they may solve the employment problem, but they encounter other problems including a high cost of living, children’s education, and conflicts of culture and values. Some of them may not be able to make enough money to support themselves, let alone send remittances back to their families. In addition, not all migrants can find a job. For women and girls, the sex industry provides a convenient option (Ren, 2000) and is a major receptor of female migrants (Davidson, 2001).

Resurgence of Prostitution

Prostitution in History

Prostitution has existed in China for more than 2,000 years (Ren, 1993; Gil and Anderson, 1998; Zhou, 2006). It is difficult to determine when and how the practice originated, but it is possible to speculate about the development of government-owned brothels. Some researchers believe that China’s first brothels were established in the seventh century B.C. by the famous statesman and philosopher, Guan Zhong, who used them as a means of increasing the state income (Ruan, 1991). Institutionalized prostitution in China began in the Han dynasty (256 B.C.-A.D. 220), when the famous monarch, Emperor Wu, recruited female camp followers for his armies. These women were called “ying-chi” (camp prostitutes) (Ruan, 1991). In the Han dynasty, the prostitution business also began to segregate into two systems—officially run brothels and privately owned prostitutes (Ren, 1993). The institution of government-run prostitution reached its peak in the Tang (A.D.618-905) and Song dynasties (A.D. 960-1279), whereas private, commercial prostitution became most highly developed during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties (Ruan, 1991).

In fact, the history of prostitution in China was so rich, that it became the theme of many famous works of Chinese fiction, such as Jin Ping Mei and Du Shi Niang. Famous ancient poets in feudal societies, such as Li Bai, have depicted prostitutes. Some courtesans in Chinese history have become very well known, for example Chao Fei-yan who became a queen, Hsueh Tao who composed sophisticated poetry, or Li Shih-shih, who was much admired by a most enamored emperor on account of her beauty and sexual techniques (Ruan, 1991).
The commercial sex industry in China was enhanced by state agencies specifically created for the sex industry. The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) established a ministry to regulate and manage prostitution (Ren, 1993). It was not until the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) that the government began to abolish state-owned brothels (Ren, 1993; Ruan, 1991). Nevertheless, in ancient China, prostitution was always regarded a privilege for upper-class men (Ren, 1993; Zhou, 2006).

Prostitution did not reach its highest point of proliferation until the second half of the nineteenth century when China was force to open its door to the rest of the world (Zhou, 2006). The business of prostitution was highly organized, and prostitutes fell into different categories within the hierarchical structure (Hershatter, 1997). A high-ranking prostitute was trained to be skilled in many different arts such as singing, painting, writing poetry and playing musical instruments (Zhou, 2006). In 1920, there were 60,141 registered prostitutes in Shanghai, and 3,550 in Beijing. It is estimated there were 7,000 unregistered in 1917 (Ruan, 1991). By 1935, prostitutes, either licensed or unlicensed, constituted 2.3 percent of the total population of Shanghai (Zhou, 2006).

Prostitution was so rampant before the Communist Party took power, that the government launched a series of intense campaigns against it, such as shutting down brothels; arresting brothel owners, procurers, and pimps and providing educational and vocational training to prostitutes (Ren, 1993; Ruan, 1991). Prostitution was purportedly eradicated by the Communist government soon after the Communist Party came to power in 1949 (Barry, 1995; Jeffreys, 2004a; Ren, 1993; Ruan, 1991). As a symbol of its success, the Communist Party closed research institutes for venereal diseases in 1964 (Evan, 1997). Although some studies demonstrate that the disappearance of prostitution was far from total (Hershatter, 1997; Ruan, 1991), at least prostitution did not exist as the object of serious governmental concern for almost three decades. It was not until the 1980s when it was revived and became increasingly visible in China that prostitution, along with other social problems such as drug use and increasing crime rates became a priority on the government’s agenda and a major concern of the public and law enforcement authorities.

A Rampant Phenomenon

Though technically illegal, commercial sex is omnipresent in contemporary Chinese life and a very popular theme in media reports (e.g., French, 2006a and 2006b; Lynch, 2003; Goodman, 2003; Sunday, 2007),
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with some describing it as the fastest-growing industry in the country (French, 2006a). Since the economic reform, China has recognized the recurrence and growth of prostitution, which was ostensibly abolished when the country operated in relative isolation (Ruan, 1991). Beginning in 1982, however, the rate of prostitution increased every year (Zhou, 2006). Between 1986 and 1990, the number of those engaged in prostitution increased fourfold when compared to the previous five years, despite repeated crackdowns and police raids. Since 1987, 183 new educational detention centers were built exclusively for those arrested for prostitution (Zhu Xudong, 2001). Analysis of official data on the arrests of prostitutes and their clients in Mainland China suggests that between 1982 and 1997, some 2 million cases related to prostitution were processed by the Public Security Department (Pan, 2000). Since this figure refers only to those who have been arrested for prostitution-related offenses, it constitutes only a fraction of the number engaged in prostitution, and tells us little about the actual extent of the sex industry in China (Hershatter, 1997; Pan, 2000).

There is no reliable data about China’s sex trade. Estimates of the number of prostitutes vary widely from one million who earn their primary income from sex, to eight or ten times that figure, including people who sometimes accept money, gifts or rent in exchange for sex (Sunday, 2007). Chinese officials estimate three million prostitutes nationwide, the U.S. State Department reports as many as ten million (French, 2006a), while several other sources say the number is closer to four million (i.e., Agence France Presse, 2000; Ren, 2000; The Economist, 2000).

Police report that prostitution arrests account for only 25 to 30 percent of all actual infractions; some experts estimate that the number is only 10 percent while others think it is lower than 5 percent (Zhu Xudong, 2001). Whatever the number, prostitution is rampant in China. While acknowledging the methodological limits of comparison, Gil et al. (1994) illuminated the prevalence of prostitution in China by comparing it with incidents of prostitution within the United States, which is not as heavily populated as China. In 1990, there were 91,093 arrests for prostitution and commercialized sex in the United States. During 1992, Chinese public security forces made approximately 200,000 prostitution arrests nationwide.

The rapid growth of prostitution can be evidenced by the following facts. In the 1980s, flourishing prostitution businesses were especially visible in the Special Economic Zones and other eastern, coastal cities (Wong, 1992; Jeffreys, 2004a). But now it has become so prevalent that
“sellers of sex can be found throughout present-day China.” (Jeffreys, 2004b: 83). It is scarcely possible to walk for 10 minutes in any big Chinese city without coming across the sex trade in one of its many guises (French, 2006a).

The prevalence of the practice is evident—prostitutes solicit customers openly in public places. No longer limited to well-known bars, or a growing number of karaoke parlors, prostitutes are everywhere in China, and they come from all walks of life: college students looking to pay tuition, uneducated women at private residential compounds, those who approach customers via mobile phone networks (Sunday, 2007), and so on. Although specialized brothels no longer exist in contemporary China, sex services are provided at a variety of facilities, including hotels, restaurants, rented apartments, roadside stores, hair salons, coffee houses, dance halls, sauna lounges, teahouses and other entertainment facilities. This is one of the most striking features of prostitution in today’s China (Hershatter, 1997). It is reported that in Ningxia, a northwestern, backward, autonomous region of China, prostitution is used to lure motorists to more than 1,000 gas stations. Motorists have to buy a tank of gas before they may purchase sexual services (Reuters, 1998a).

The variety of people involved in selling sex includes farmers, workers, unemployed persons, private business operators, corporate employees, and state-employed staff (Zhu Xudong, 2001). “In the past, prostitutes came principally from the unemployed and the poorly educated; a few were foreign. But now, employees of state, collective and private enterprises, party and state cadres, intellectuals, science and technology personnel, and even university students and researchers are becoming prostitutes” (Quanguo Renda, 1991: 12). Their clients used to come from outside of mainland China; now, they represent all walks of life, including celebrities, high class party or government officials (Zhu Xudong, 2001).

The thriving resurgence of prostitution in China coincides with significant economic reform strategies (Ren, 1999 and 2000) and the influx of the labor force into cities (Gil et al., 1994; Ren, 2000). More rural women among the migrant population means more of them in the sex trade. In a study surveying 2,057 women prostitutes, Gil et al. (1994) found that most prostitutes were from rural areas. Before 1985, only about 3 percent of women arrested for prostitution came from rural areas. But this increased to 62 percent in a 1999 survey (Xu, 1999). The impact of urban reform strategies (especially the cessation of the “Iron Rice-Bowl” employment system and the closure of ineffective state-owned
Migration, Prostitution, and Human Trafficking enterprises) on Chinese women’s lives can be exemplified by changes in the ages of women detained for prostitution. Two surveys found that the maximum upper age of women prostitutes increased from 37 in 1991 to 54 in 1999 (Ren, 2000). Tens of thousands of workers were laid off due to the reform measures. Women, especially those in their late 30s, or those over 40, bear the brunt of these measures as evidenced by demographic changes in prostitution.

Prostitution and Human Trafficking

With prostitution thriving in China, an important aspect of this issue—the connection between human trafficking and prostitution—is largely ignored by the government, law enforcement authorities, academics, and the public. Rapid economic development along China’s east coast, along with the unemployed laborers in undeveloped and underdeveloped parts of China, has resulted in massive internal migration. This mass movement has seemingly created opportunities for traffickers to lure women and girls who are desperate for well-paying jobs. They can become easy prey for sex traders, who offer jobs that do not materialize except for prostitution (Gil et al., 1994).

It is claimed that China is a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking; the majority of which is internal trafficking (Human Trafficking, 2008); it has a significant amount of internal trafficking of children and women for sexual and labor exploitation (The U.S. Department of State, 2006). Three purposes of trafficking in women in contemporary China can be identified, namely, prostitution, forced labor, and marriage (Lee, 2005; Lu et al., 2006).

Selling children, especially young girls, was a prevalent practice in poor families seeking to solve their financial problems in patriarchal, feudalist China. Selling and buying women to be wives was largely accepted in some regions, and often triggered kidnapping or abduction. However, with the development of the economy, of communication and information networks, and the improvement in women’s education and status, human trafficking for marriage purposes is not as prevalent as it used to be. This is evidenced by the falling rates of kidnapping and abduction. Over the past ten years or so, the rate of kidnapping and abduction has shown a generally decreasing trend, from the initial rate of 2.29 per 100,000 in 1991, to a rate of 0.44 per 100,000 in 2002 (Lu et al., 2006). Due to limitations of the statistics, it is not clear how many women were kidnapped or abducted for the purposes of prostitution. To the best
of my knowledge, the data covers only those who were kidnapped or abducted by obvious force or deception; not those who were coerced or coaxed to leave their hometown. Due to the fact that forms of force have changed, and include many subtle, impalpable methods, as outlined in the UN definition of human trafficking (Human Trafficking, 2007), very few women trafficked for sexual or labor exploitation are included in this data. Therefore, the decrease in these crimes may be attributed to a reduction in women being trafficked for marriage purposes.

According to a Chinese leading newspaper, China Daily, an official for the Public Security Ministry said that the traditional crime of human trafficking for the purpose of marriage has gradually been controlled and the number of selling women and children has been dropping 20 to 30 percent a year. However, human trafficking takes two new forms—forced labor and sexual exploitation and the number of such cases is rising (Wang, 2007).

The Ministry of Public Security estimates that 10,000 women and children are being abducted and sold each year; in addition, it reported about 2,500 trafficking cases during 2008 (U.S. Department of State, 2008). From 2001 to 2005, in a remote southwest province in China from where many women are trafficked, 1,794 cases involving trafficking of women and children have been exposed, and more than 2,000 victims have been rescued (Xinhuanet, 2005).

These statistics, nevertheless, still do not provide any information about how many women are trafficked for sexual exploitation, or whether sexual trafficking is a more serious problem compared to trafficking for other purposes. The exact extent of women forced into prostitution is unknown due to lack of data. Statistics indicate that tens of thousands of women are sold every year (Gil and Anderson, 1998). The question of whether those women in the sex trade are forced, deceived, or coerced into the sex trade has never been a priority of research concerning prostitution in China.

The trade of human beings in China goes back a long way. Historically, it refers to the practice of traffickers abducting and selling women and girls to be wives. Sometimes, especially in cases of poverty, the women and girls are sold by their own families. The result is the commodification of human beings, especially women. Under current circumstances in China, the trafficking of human beings may take on new forms for different purposes, such as for sexual exploitation. However, due to the fact that prostitution was purportedly eradicated in China for almost 30 years, there is little research on prostitution in relation to sex
trafficking. A handful of studies on Chinese prostitution focus heavily on the abolition of prostitution by the Communist government in the 1950s, the socio-cultural factors that contributed to the resurgence of prostitution, the current legal response and the limited effect of police campaigns against it (e.g., Anderson and Gil, 1994; Evans, 1997; Gil and Anderson, 1998; Ren, 1999; Zhang, 2006; Zhou, 2006). There have been rare attempts to explore whether the sex industry is related to sex trafficking; how these women migrate to their destination cities and end up in prostitution; whether or not they are victims of trafficking; and the nature and extent of sexual trafficking in China. My research is intended to shed light on these issues. It will represent one of the few attempts to examine sex trafficking in China in the context of the development of prostitution in general.

Research Site

This study was conducted in Shenzhen, China. Shenzhen, one of the thriving sex industry centers, was a small fishing village in the Pearl River delta. Due to its proximity to Hong Kong, the Chinese Government decreed it as one of the four Special Economic Zones in 1980. It is located in the very south of Guangdong province. It is just 25 kilometers away from the center of Hong Kong. Overlooking Hong Kong to its south, this area is commonly referred to as Hong Kong’s “backyard.”

Since the 1980s, Shenzhen is China’s best-known boomtown. Few cities anywhere have created wealth faster than Shenzhen; the city has grown at an annual rate of 28 percent since it was decreed a Special Economic Zone, albeit this rate slowed to 15 percent in 2005 (French, 2006a). Since the 1980s, Shenzhen is renowned throughout the country for its economic growth, high salaries, modern fashions, and adherence to so-called “bourgeois” morals. It is an open secret that economic progress has brought with it the seedy side of the free market: prostitution, corruption, drug trafficking (Wudunn, 1991).

Greater contact with Hong Kong and Taiwan businessmen has cultivated a booming prostitution industry in Shenzhen. Many sex establishments involving internal migrants have been set up in the forms of massage parlors, nightclubs, karaoke lounges, beauty salons, and brothels. Prostitution, usually disguised in karaoke lounges and massage parlors, ranks as one of the biggest industries in Shenzhen (French, 2006a), which is referred to as the “den of vice” (Cody, 2006). In Shenzhen, there are an estimated 200,000 women working in the sex business (Hughes, 2002; Wudunn, 1991). According to one government
employee’s estimate, however, there are about 700,000 prostitutes in this city whose population is nearly 15 million yuan (1 US dollar is worth about 7 yuan) (conversation with a government employee).

Prostitution is widespread in Shenzhen, and brothels and saunas attract many men from Hong Kong just across the border (Reuters, 1998b). Over the past few years, the number of trips made by citizens of Hong Kong to mainland China has shown a constant annual increase of 10 percent or more (Lau et al., 2002). It was reported that citizens of Hong Kong made more than 50 million trips to mainland China in 2000 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2001). Furthermore, it was reported by Lau and Thomas (2001) that approximately one-third of the surveyed adult male travelers in their study reported having sex with one or more prostitutes during the previous six months while traveling in mainland China. A government employee estimated that even today, there are about 50,000 Hong Kong citizens per day (mainly on weekends) who come over to Shenzhen with the purpose of seeking sex services. Each person spends 400 yuan; thus, the daily expenditure is 20 million yuan (conversation with a government employee).

**Overview of Research Methods**

The aim of this research is to discover the socio-economic factors, individual backgrounds, current circumstances and situational factors that drive Chinese women to migrate and enter into the sex industry. Along with other kinds of qualitative work, ethnography is the preferred method of achieving this goal. It is a powerful tool for accessing women’s lives and it allows a process of representation for those who often have little voice (Sanders, 2004). It has become a popular approach to social research. Through ethnographic fieldwork, methods such as field observations and in-depth interviews, we can understand how and why women migrate and enter into commercial sex work.

**Data Sources**

The data of this study was collected though field observations at commercial sex establishments in Shenzhen, and through in-depth interviews with women practicing prostitution. Interviews were also conducted with sex ring operators, and law enforcement officers. Field observation and interviews are both independent methods of collecting information. However, they are also interdependent. Interviewing is an extremely important and valuable source of data (Hammersley and Atkinson,
1995; Maxwell, 1996). It is a way of gaining a description of actions and events and of obtaining the perspectives of the participants. Most importantly, it is the only way to learn about events that took place in the past, or those to which access cannot otherwise be obtained (Maxwell, 1996). Observation and interviews can provide additional or missing information, and can each be used to check the accuracy of the other. The triangulation of observations and interviews can provide a more complete and accurate account than either one alone. There are, thus, distinct advantages in combining participant observation with interviews. In particular, the data obtained from each method can be used to illuminate data obtained from the other (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 131). Through interviews and observation, a description of behavior and events, and the perspectives of actors can be obtained.

This study also draws upon secondary data sources such as official statistics, government documents, legislation, policies on trafficking and prostitution, books, articles in journals, research reports and media accounts. It is worth commenting on the official data regarding arrests of women and their customers in one district police bureau of Shenzhen. The data in question represents most of the arrests related to prostitution made by the district police bureau during the period of January 1, 2007 to May 30, 2008. Due to the rigid evidence requirements regarding prostitution-related arrests, police cannot arrest prostitutes and their customers unless 1) they are caught in the act; or 2) a condom is found at the scene that can prove that sexual behavior occurred; or 3) there is proof of a monetary transaction (conversation with a police officer). As a result of these requirements, usually both prostitutes and their customers are arrested during police raids. Consequently, 37 cases found that a total of 43 women and 43 men were arrested. Information obtained from this official data mainly consists of demographic characteristics of arrested prostitutes and customers, i.e., age, source provinces, marital status, education, etc. and incident information, such as when these incidents happened (timing), where they happened (venues), prices of the trade, and punishments imposed. Because of the limited information provided by this data source, police statistics were included in the current study only to serve one purpose, i.e., to illustrate the representativeness of women recruited in this study in terms of their demographic characteristics. As shown in Chapter 4, demographic data of both arrested women and interviewed women was compiled and compared, which evidenced high representativeness of women participating in this study. Inclusion
of the police data allowed a general profile of prostitutes in Shenzhen developed.

**Sampling Objectives**

Research in the field of prostitution is difficult for many reasons. The most challenging factor is that the research population constitutes a so-called “hidden population” (Heckathorn, 1997). Prostitution also involves stigmatization and illegal behavior, leading individuals to refuse to cooperate, or give unreliable answers to protect their privacy. Random sampling of sex workers is impossible. Based on his own research experience, Weitzer (2005a) noted that in order to compensate for the weakness of non-random sampling, prostitutes in different types of venues should be included, and the sampling and interviews should be carried out in a rigorous and impartial manner.

Research questions in this study focus on a) describing women’s differing paths to prostitution, b) exploring socio-economic and individualistic factors that motivate women involved in commercial sex, and c) identifying trafficking victims among women working in the commercial sex industry. The best and most efficient way to explore these research questions was to set the sampling frame to include individuals who are a) active prostitutes as opposed to incarcerated samples; b) working in varied sex venues. To achieve a diverse and representative sample, therefore, women in different sex venues were included in this study. Specifically, women in the following sex venues were included: 1) streetwalkers; 2) hair salons; 3) massage parlors/sauna; 4) nightclubs and karaoke lounges.

A total of forty formal interviews with prostituted women were conducted; nine with operators or managers of sex establishments, including nightclubs/karaoke bars, hair salons, massage parlors, and those involved with street prostitution. Fifteen interviews were also conducted with law enforcement officers. I intended to include interviews with representatives of non-government organizations (NGOs) to enrich the sources of data for this study. Unfortunately, I had to give up this idea after exhaustive efforts had been made to contact several local agencies of the All-China Women’s Federation in Shenzhen. None of them agreed to participate in this study because they did not possess any information about women in the sex industry. No victims related to prostitution have tried to seek help from them.
Snowball Sampling

A snowball sampling method was employed to obtain participants for both formal and informal interviews. The most difficult aspect of research using snowball sampling techniques is finding the initial subject who then refers the researcher to other subjects (Maxfield and Babble, 2001; Wright and Decker, 1994). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggest that the initial access may be focused on “gatekeepers” who can grant or withhold permission. Therefore, the priority is to find out who has the power to open up or block off access. In the case of the present study, the following people were determined as potentially having the authority to grant or refuse such permission: the prostitutes themselves or their friends/colleagues/bosses who could either be owners, managers, or supervisors of entertainment facilities.

My intention was to use my guanxi or social connections. I had relatives and friends living and working in Shenzhen and they could help me locate such gatekeepers. These relatives or friends had either direct or indirect relationships with people who were managers or owners of entertainment facilities, or they knew people who were regular users of commercial sex and maintained a friendly relationship with the women or with the madams. These friends and relatives, in turn, asked other friends and relatives to help me contact the subjects. In short, I began with direct personal contacts, and then asked those acquaintances to refer me to other middlemen, and so on, to eventually locate subjects and produce informative and insightful data. I employed the snowball chain until a suitable sample had been obtained. One benefit brought about by these social connections was that I was able to gain the trust and confidence of the research participants, a factor that was extremely important for the gathering of truthful and accurate information.

People who act as the first middlemen between the researcher and potential subjects are referred to as intermediaries. A number of potential intermediaries were contacted, and eventually, a total of four intermediaries were involved in this study. Each of them introduced me to others who would be able to refer me to gatekeepers working in commercial sex. The gatekeepers then referred me to prostitutes. In this way, three middlemen were usually involved before the potential subjects were reached (See the following graphs).

Intermediary 1 →Community officers→owner or manager of hair salons→subjects.
Intermediary 2→manager/John→Mami→subjects.
Intermediary 3→owner of the venue→Manager→subjects.
Intermediary 4→owner of the venue→Manager→subjects.

Obtaining a sampling of streetwalkers involves a different process from the one described above. Initial contact with streetwalkers was undertaken directly by the researcher. The first streetwalker was located directly in this way and led to two other subjects being referred to the researcher. Three other streetwalkers were reached via their pimps.

Researcher→subject→subjects
Researcher→street pimp→subjects

Intermediaries also played an important role in providing me with general information about Shenzhen, the development and magnitude of the sex industry in this bustling city, its principal sex service venues, the hot spots for streetwalkers, etc. Preparation for fieldwork began even before I went back to China. A number of phone calls to my friends provided me with some information about this city I had never visited, and built up my confidence, even though I had no idea if any women would be willing to participate in this study and whether I would be able to accomplish my proposed research. These friends later became intermediaries who referred me to their acquaintances, colleagues or friends. Without their help, it would have been impossible for me to accomplish this study. Within a very short time, I was able to obtain knowledge about the component districts in Shenzhen: the area with a high concentration of entertainment facilities, the hot spots and main venues of prostitution, etc.

Wright and Decker (1994) suggested that an alternative means to contact potential subjects involves “frequenting locales favored by criminals” (1994: 17). Applying this to my study, I devoted an extraordinary amount of time visiting a variety of sex establishments to initiate the snowball chain. This, however, proved impractical. On two occasions, I visited karaoke lounges, intending to talk to potential subjects. I did not tell the women the real purpose of my visit because I wanted to test how much information I could get by talking with them as a regular customer would, without them being aware of my real purpose. On another occasion, I told hostesses about my research intentions and wanted to find out if it was possible to interview the women in their natural environment. These efforts proved not to be viable for several reasons. Firstly, I felt
uncomfortable and awkward asking the women questions such as how much they earned, or how they ended up in commercial sex. Secondly, some questions aroused their suspicion, or made them unpleasant, since it is unusual for regular customers to ask such questions. Thirdly, even when I told them the true purpose of my visit, they would not admit that they provided sex services. Finally, the noisy environment, with people drinking, singing and playing games was not really conducive to conducting interviews. I realized very soon that interviews could not be completed in a natural business environment and there was no way for me to locate subjects without help from a third party (except in the case of streetwalkers).

In my search of women practicing prostitution, I intentionally avoided seeking referrals directly from law enforcement officials, although some of my intermediaries are indeed police officers. Nor did I interview women currently detained or arrested for prostitution. For practical and methodological reasons, Wright and Decker (1994) think that referrals by law enforcement officials would “arouse the suspicions of offenders that research was the front for a sting operation” (1994: 17). Due to the difficulty of locating women in the prostitution industry, some research projects rely on gaining information from women in custody or those detained at the border. Interviewing someone at a detention facility is not an ideal situation because individuals are constrained and influenced by the environment, and this affects what they say and how much they are willing to talk (Kelly, 2002). Furthermore, a sample obtained in this manner might be highly unrepresentative of active prostitutes. Such a sample might include a disproportionate number of prostitutes who work on the street or at hair salon (police date shows that women working at these two venues are disproportionately arrested), but exclude those who work in an invisible way (such as women working in karaoke lounges).

**Interview Setting and Rapport Relationship**

In order to conduct interviews in an ideal context and to enable subjects to talk to me without any constraint, I intentionally arranged for interviews to occur in contexts that are conducive to disclosure. Therefore, upon obtaining the subjects’ consent to be interviewed, I would ask them to choose a convenient place where they felt safe, and allowed them to decide the best time for the interview.

I have learned from experience working as a research assistant for a project on prostitution that these women can refuse at any time to talk
to you even if they had agreed in advance to be interviewed. Thus, in order to seize all opportunities, I conducted the interviews immediately upon obtaining their consent. Most interviews were conducted during the subjects’ working hours.

The research relationship established between interviewers and interviewees is the means whereby the research gets done. This relationship affects factors such as whether subjects participate in your study and how much information they would like to share with you (Maxwell, 1996). One of the greatest challenges is establishing trust (Dalla, 2006). Potential participants are more concerned with what kind of person the researcher is than with the research itself. It is irrelevant whether or not they have knowledge of social research, or what their attitude is as regards the study itself (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). This implies that a good rapport between interviewer and interviewee is of paramount importance in ethnographical research.

One salient consideration in shaping a relationship with the people studied is personal appearance (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Investigators must dress and behave in an appropriate way, in harmony with the research setting, otherwise, the establishment of trust may be jeopardized. By way of illustration, in response to a friend’s spontaneous invitation one day, I went to a nightclub directly after conducting an interview. I did not get a chance to change my clothes. I was dressed casually, in a T-shirt and blue jeans, attire that is definitely incompatible with a nightclub setting. I became aware of this very shortly, from the expression of the mammies, in which curiosity and suspicion were apparent. On other occasions, however, especially when I conducted interviews, dressing casually and neatly was helpful in developing a good rapport and reducing the psychological distance between interviewees and myself. The tricky part is to present oneself as a non-threatening, easy-going person, as well as a well-educated classy woman attractive to your subjects. In this way, voluntary participation and information-rich data can be obtained.

All interviews were conducted privately, with only the interviewer and interviewee being present, although, on several occasions some subjects said that they would like to be interviewed together. Under such one-on-one interview circumstances, interviewees were willing to divulge information and express opinions that they would not have done in front of others. All interviews were conducted after acquainting subjects with the purpose of the conversation. Otherwise, subjects would not have spoken openly and freely.
Interviews occurred at different places, including my hotels, the subject’s work place, a community office, restaurants, and in a friend’s car. Interviews with women working at hair salons were conducted at a community office that is located on the third floor of an apartment building in a residential area. A number of convenience stores and hair salons line a narrow alley. This place was chosen because many young women work in hair salons in this residential area. When the interviews were conducted, no third party was involved except the interviewer and subjects.

Interviews with women working at nightclub/karaoke lounges and sauna/massage parlors were conducted either in my hotel room or at the places where they worked. Helped by a prostitution client, the manager of a club, and the owner of sauna/massage parlors, I waited for the subjects in my hotel. Interviewing subjects at their workplace, however, is a better strategy for it allows them to relax much more than they would in less familiar surroundings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Therefore, I didn’t object when subjects preferred to be interviewed at their workplace. Interviews with women from karaoke lounges and massage parlors were conducted at their work places. Street workers with their pimps were also interviewed in a room or lounge in a hotel. One independent street worker was interviewed in my friend’s car, and two others were interviewed in restaurants (see Table 1.1).

Subjects are very cautious, even when they are willing to participate in this study. One subject working at a sauna parlor wore sunglasses during the entire interview even though the interview was conducted at night. Another subject working in a karaoke lounge kept asking me not to record information about her children, although I had repeatedly assured her that I would not record any identifiable information.

Field Observations

Field observation in my research project refers to the collection of data by visiting sex venues and observing, reflecting upon, and interpreting the actions of the individuals being studied. Whereas participant observation involves assuming some kind of a role in a social group or its fringes (Jupp, 1989), the field observation that I conducted was confined to observing the working conditions of the groups under study, and the social interactions among them in their natural surroundings and with minimum disturbance.

A total of eight field observations were conducted over a two-month period at four different commercial sex venues in Shenzhen. Three of these were carried out at nightclubs/karaoke lounges, one at a massage
### Table 1.1 Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Minutes</th>
<th>Interview Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hair salon</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiao Xiu</td>
<td>4-5 p.m.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Community office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sha Sha</td>
<td>3:30-4:40 p.m.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Community office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah Lian</td>
<td>5-6 p.m.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Community office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah Hong</td>
<td>11:50 p.m.-1 a.m.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Community office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li Xue</td>
<td>5:10-6:30 p.m.</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Community office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiao Yu</td>
<td>6:35-7:30 p.m.</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Community office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah Rong</td>
<td>7:40-8:40 p.m.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Community office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen Hong</td>
<td>9:40:50 p.m.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Community office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiao Hui</td>
<td>6-7:10 p.m.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Community office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah Mei</td>
<td>8-9 p.m.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Community office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nightclub/Karaoke lounge</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>9:10-10 p.m.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li Na</td>
<td>10:30-11:20 p.m.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah Ying</td>
<td>1:50-2:30 p.m.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nan Nan</td>
<td>5-6 p.m.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiao Ke</td>
<td>6:30-7:15 p.m.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li Fei</td>
<td>9:40-10:30 p.m.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang Mei</td>
<td>12:45-2 p.m.</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na Na</td>
<td>7:55-9 p.m.</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Booth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li Ying</td>
<td>9:10-10 p.m.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Booth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang Xia</td>
<td>11:30-12:10 a.m.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Booth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li Ying</td>
<td>10-11:10 p.m.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Booth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Massage parlor/Leisure Center</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah Wen</td>
<td>2:45-3:40 p.m.</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yan Yan</td>
<td>10:30-11:30 p.m.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiao Ya</td>
<td>4:15-5:10 p.m.</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liu Yan</td>
<td>7:50-9 p.m.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Manager’s office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fei Fei</td>
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<td>Manager’s office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An An</td>
<td>9:55-10:55 p.m.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Manager’s office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah Xiang</td>
<td>6:20-7:15 p.m.</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Manager’s office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lan Lan</td>
<td>7:20-8:10 p.m.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Manager’s office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mei Fang</td>
<td>7-7:50 p.m.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Technician lounge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Le</td>
<td>8-9:10 p.m.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Technician lounge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang Hong</td>
<td>9:25-10:15 p.m.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Technician lounge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiou Xiu</td>
<td>6:30-7:15 p.m.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Booth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Mei</td>
<td>7:15-7:45 p.m.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Booth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Street</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ding Ding</td>
<td>1:30-2:40 a.m.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiao Fang</td>
<td>9:20-10:50 p.m.</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin Dan</td>
<td>11:30-12:30 a.m.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Hotel Lobby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin Yan</td>
<td>9-9:50 p.m.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiao Ju</td>
<td>5:30-6:20 p.m.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wen Wen</td>
<td>7:20-8:10 p.m.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Migration, Prostitution, and Human Trafficking

parlor, one at a hair salon, and three on the streets where streetwalkers solicited customers. All the observations at off-street sex venues were made by the researcher and her friends visiting these venues as regular customers. Due to the fact of gender, I could not approach streetwalkers as a regular customer. On three occasions, I went to streets that were frequented by streetwalkers, and at one point, I met a woman who became one of the subjects. Most observations were conducted at night, between 8:00 p.m. and 12:00 a.m., except the one in the massage parlor, which occurred in the afternoon. The length of each observation varied.

On an average, approximately two hours were spent per observation, as longer periods of time become quite unmanageable (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995)

Throughout the observations, I paid particular attention to the working conditions, individual behavior and social interaction among the prostitutes, patrons, and operators of the venue (such as mammies, bosses, and owners). Whenever possible, I also engaged in informal conversations with the above-mentioned actors. These informal conversations served two purposes: (1) they could lead to potential participants becoming actual subjects of this research, rendering the sample more representative, and (2) they could provide information about the operation of the commercial sex trade, as well as about the interactions among the above mentioned actors. Although no subject was recruited directly from off-street field observations, these did provide me with valuable information about how the business was operated, how these women worked and how they were treated by mammies and managers, and so on.

Table 1.2  Field Observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of Observation</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nightclub/Karaoke</td>
<td>10-12 p.m.</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nightclub/Karaoke</td>
<td>8-10 p.m.</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nightclub/Karaoke</td>
<td>9-11 p.m.</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Hair Salon</td>
<td>8:30-10:30 p.m.</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Massage Parlor</td>
<td>3-5 p.m.</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Street</td>
<td>9-10 p.m.</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Street</td>
<td>9:30-10:30 p.m.</td>
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Street observations offered me a distinctive way to study how streetwalkers go about their business, and how their solicitation activities are frequently disrupted by police patrols. In addition, conversations with residents of areas where streetwalkers plied their trade provided me with an understanding of local people’s attitudes toward street prostitutes.

Limitations and Strengths of This Study

Strengths

Research that examines the effects of both structural and individual factors on women’s involvement in sex work is scarce indeed. Anti-trafficking literature emphasizes the role of structural factors, such as poverty, inequality in social and economic life, and political turmoil. These structural factors make women vulnerable to trafficking and/or prostitution. Studies on prostitution place emphasis on the effects of childhood experiences on women’s involvement in prostitution. Very little knowledge exists about the role played by individual circumstances or immediate events that prompt the women to migrate and end up in the sex industry. Additionally, there remains the question of how structural factors, combined with immediate events such as unemployment, divorce, illness, urgent need of money, victimization, etc. motivate women to decide to get involved in prostitution and put their future in the hands of alleged traffickers. In addition, prior research has omitted to examine the distinctive characteristics that make these women different from other women who, under similar circumstances, did not choose the same life path. Little, thus, is known about the manner in which these women make the decisions to migrate and get involved in sex work in relation to 1) their immediate circumstances, and 2) other options (if any) available to them.

Furthermore, very little academic research—particularly research that is empirically based—has been conducted on prostitution and trafficking within China, and published in academic outlets. While some research has indeed been published on prostitution, and on trafficking to and within other parts of the world, research specific to China is lacking, particularly so with respect to sex trafficking. Through its focus on ethnographic interviews with the women, this study intends to help address this gap. Through face-to-face interviews of women working in various sex venues, this study intends to discover 1) the differing paths to prostitution, 2) the structural factors, individual characteristics and immediate circumstances contributing to their involvement in the sex
trade, and 3) the extent to which they are forced, deceived, or coerced into sex work.

The second major strength of this study is derived from the methodological approach it employs.

Criminologists have recognized the importance of field studies of active offenders (Wright et al., 2006), and have a long history of interviewing those engaged in illicit behaviors in order to gain insights into the nature of crime and criminality (Copes, 2003; Copes and Hochstetler, 2006). The offenders’ perspective is crucial to understanding the criminal decision making process, because they are in the unique position of being able to describe their motives, the causes of crime, criminal calculus, and the perceived deterrence of crime control strategies (Miether and McCorkle, 2001). The offender is viewed as an impartial narrator of events and qualitative research is seen as the most appropriate way to gauge criminal motives (Copes and Hochstetler, 2006).

The offender’s perspective can be obtained by conducting interviews with individuals known to law enforcement authorities—e.g., those who are incarcerated (e.g., Wright et al., 2005; Shover and Honaker, 1992) or active offenders (e.g., Bennett and Wright, 1984; Cromwell et al., 1991; Jacobs et al., 2003). There are fundamental qualitative differences between the two types (Jacobs, 2006). Institutionalized offenders are not the same as active offenders in terms of their sophistication, skills in evading arrest, or the extent to which they are concerned about being arrested (Jacobs, 2006).

It has been argued that data obtained by interviewing active offenders has greater reliability and validity than data obtained from incarcerated offenders. One reason is that incarcerated offenders are “unsuccessful criminals” (McCall, 1978) which calls into question the extent to which a sample obtained through official sources is representative of the total population of offenders (Copes, 2003; Jacobs et al., 2003; Wright et al., 2006). The other reason is that offenders do not behave “naturally” in a prison setting (Wright and Decker, 1994), and therefore may not be honest with investigators for fear of repercussions from criminal justice agencies and personnel (Copes, 2003). In addition, their account of past activities may be distorted by the passage of time, the prison environment, and a host of other factors (Wright and Decker, 1994). A full understanding of criminal behavior requires that criminologists incorporate field studies of active offenders into their research agendas. Without such studies, both the representativeness and the validity of research based on offenders identified through criminal justice channels will remain
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problematic (Wright et al., 2006). Research focusing on active offenders provides a better possibility of obtaining accurate and reliable data (Cromwell et al., 1991; Jacobs et al., 2003).

Informed by the aforementioned research on offender interviews, this study sets a sample frame that includes only those women who were practicing prostitutes at the time of interview. This sample frame excluded those identified by authorities or NGOs as trafficking victims, and those incarcerated for prostitution. According to Tyldum and Brunovskis (2005), due to the fact that the ratio of cases identified by law enforcement entities or NGOs to the total number of trafficking cases remains unknown, it is difficult to determine to what extent the identified cases are representative of the universe of trafficking cases. Cases identified by the police are likely to be influenced by the ability of law enforcement agents to recognize trafficking, and the willingness of victims to contact law enforcement agencies. In particular, victims of trafficking who were aware they were going to work in the sex industry, or those that had prior prostitution experience are likely to be underrepresented in data on victims identified through NGOs or law enforcement authorities. Similarly, prostitutes incarcerated by authorities are not representative of the whole population of prostitutes; visible prostitutes in the lower end of the class-stratified occupation usually tend to be overrepresented (Weitzer, 2005a). Thus, it would be methodologically biased to study prostitution and sex trafficking subjects by setting a sample frame that included only those women brought to the attention of law enforcement authorities and NGOs.

Most research on prostitution has been carried out on the least prevalent type of prostitute, namely streetwalkers. Streetwalkers constitute only a minority among prostitutes, yet they have received the lion’s share of attention. The larger population of indoor sex workers, such as those who work in brothels, bars, and massage parlors are overlooked (Weitzer, 2005b). This study includes women in various sex venues. As a result, it includes the following three distinctive features that are rarely characteristic of previous studies: 1) the subjects are women who are active prostitutes, 2) they work at diverse venues, 3) they constitute a population within which victims of trafficking make up a subpopulation. By setting such a sample frame, it is possible to reach current trafficking victims, even if some of them might be reluctant to provide information susceptible of placing them in jeopardy. There is also an added likelihood of coming across past trafficking victims. Through the experiences recounted by the interviewees, a general picture of the
background characteristics of this subpopulation can be formed, and the proportion of prostitutes who are victims of trafficking can be inferred. Understanding the stories of previous trafficking victims could help us identify the factors that result in their becoming prey to traffickers. The sample in this study is better representative of the trafficked population than the statistics provided by law enforcement agencies and NGOs who do not cover more than a small proportion of the total population of trafficking victims.

**Weaknesses**

Although, as subjects of ethnographic studies, active offenders have some advantages over offenders known to criminal justice agencies or officials, exploring the offender’s perspective presents researchers with numerous difficulties, due to the nature of their behavior and the fact that their identities are hidden. For the same reasons, migrant commercial sex workers are difficult groups with whom to conduct interviews, and results can be problematic for several reasons. Conclusions from this study may have limited validity, either external or internal, due to reasons of methodology or the nature of the information.

First of all, all interviews were conducted through snowball sampling, a method that calls into question the reliability of this study. Active offenders are generally hard to locate (Irwin, 1972) and danger is inherent in fieldwork with active offenders (Jacobs, 2006). The difficulty and dangerous involved in collecting information from active offenders has been well documented by practitioners of this approach (see Jacobs, 2006; Wright et al., 2006). As a result, the nature of samples of many studies on active offenders, including active prostitutes, is of opportunity and convenience (e.g., Sharpe, 1998). This is the case of the current study. Participants in this study either knew my intermediaries or met me by coincidence as they worked on the street. Therefore, the samples cannot be considered representative of the entire population of prostitutes.

Sample bias may also be introduced by the fact that voluntary participants probably “are more reflective, intelligent, and well-spoken than the typical street offender” and the researcher’s writing relies heavily upon those interviews (Copes and Hochstetler, 2006: 25). Respondents in the current study are generally more accessible and more willing to talk, thus implying that they are not under the strict control of their employer, pimps, or recruiters. Moreover, because the number of participants in qualitative studies tends to be small, such samples are less
representative of the larger population from which the sample is drawn. Therefore, findings from this study may not be able to be generalized to other countries, or even to other areas in China. For example, the high percentage of rural migrant women in this study cannot be generalized to other areas of China, such as the northeastern areas. Indeed, some studies (Huang and Pan, 2003) have found that in their sample, almost all women involved in prostitution are from urban areas.

The second limitation lies in the nature of the data collected during the interview, namely, self-reported information.

Data obtained by interviewing active offenders should reflect what is going on in the offender’s mind with considerable accuracy (Wright and Bennett, 1990). However, some criminologists have voiced concerns about the extent to which subjects are telling the truth (Glassner and Carpenter, 1985; Irwin, 1972). Due to the illegality of activities in which offenders are involved, fieldworkers are assumed by active offenders as suspicious, and “acting undercover in some capacity with a real mission to expose them” (Sharpe, 1998: 17). They are also considered “spies of some sort” (Jacobs, 2006: 12) or the interview may be viewed as the frontline of a sting operation (Wright and Decker, 1994.) As a result, it is reasonable to suspect that offenders may not tell the truth even if they agree to participate in the study.

Problems with self-reported information mainly include issues of honesty and memory relapse. These are the most serious threats to the accuracy of the data. When discussing illegal behavior such as prostitution and drug use, individuals tend to conceal or exaggerate information (Graham and Bowling, 1995). This study found that some respondents had difficulty remembering how long they had been practicing prostitution, how often they committed acts of prostitution, or details about the economic aspects of these activities. The women may only answer those questions which they are willing to answer, and may provide inaccurate answers to sensitive questions, such as the amount of money they earned, or details about the first time they provided sex services. One subject, for example, told me that she worked in a foot massage parlor for almost two years without providing sex services. With the money she earned, her parents bought a house. However, the money she earned was not enough and she therefore came to Shenzhen and started to work as a prostitute. Based on my field observation and conversations with actual foot masseuses, I had learned that masseuses who provide actual massages end up developing very big and visible calluses on their knuckles; in some cases, their fingers even become deformed. During
my conversation with the subject under discussion, I observed that she
did not have the telltale callous, leading me to doubt that she answered
that specific question honestly.

Nevertheless, face-to-face data collection is among the most accurate
self-report designs (Huizinga and Elliott, 1986). It is the most practical
and accurate way of gaining information about behavior that one can-
not detect, or that is not observable. Such information may relate to an
individual’s feelings, the meaning of their personal experiences, such
as being raped, or being in urgent need of money, living in poverty,
losing jobs, getting divorced, and so on. Though street criminals have a
stereotypical image of lying, or avoiding the truth, there is little evidence
to support this claim (Maher, 1997). This is not to say that offenders’
reports are immune to lies, distortion, or memory relapse. Rather, they
appear to be less susceptible to inaccuracy than some might think (Jacobs
and Wright, 1999).

Copes and Hochstetler (2006) have noted that offenders are often
quite willing to discuss their lives and criminal careers in great detail. It
has been empirically proved by numerous researchers that once subjects
have been persuaded to participate in a study, they often demonstrate
a willingness to tell the interviewer their life experiences in greater
detail than the researcher expected (see Jacobs 1996, 2000; Jacobs and
Wright, 1999; Shover, 1985, 1996). This is understandable because the
secrecy of criminal work “means that offenders have few opportunities
to discuss their activities with anyone besides associates” (Wright and
Decker, 1994: 26). However, once a relationship of trust and rapport
is established between subjects and the interviewer, offenders seemed
to enjoy talking “straight” to someone about their life experiences and
deviant behavior. This was confirmed in the current study by the fact that
some of the subjects told me after the interview that they felt relieved
and comfortable after talking with me.

The third threat to the validity of this study arises from what Maxwell
(1996: 89) refers to as the “threat to valid description.” I did not record
interviews or observations either on audio- or videotape, and this poses
a potentially serious threat to the validity of this study. Where observa-
tions are concerned, it is difficult to accurately transcribe what one has
observed, since what information is relevant to this study is dependent
on the observer’s judgment. Furthermore, not recording an interview
may entail the loss of some of the information provided by the subjects
or information may be recorded inaccurately during the transcription
process. In order to rule out these validity threats, I employed a number
of strategies. I ensured that the expanded notes I made were detailed and complete enough to provide a full and revealing picture of what I observed. I transcribed the interviews verbatim, rather than simply writing down what I believed was significant.

Sharpe (1998) has noted that relying on interviews and field observation does raise questions of reliability and validity; it is difficult for the researcher to gauge how typical the participants are and how reliable the information is. However, the data in this study relies on the perspectives of the women subjects, law enforcement officials and sex ring operators; the data sources include in-depth interviews, official statistics, and field observations. This strategy of a triangulation of perspectives may “enable a comprehensive, unique and realistic picture of female prostitution to be presented and analyzed” (Sharpe, 1998: 26).
References


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