

Book Review: Cosmopolitan Sex Workers: Women and Migration in a Global City

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2013/11/14/book-review-cosmopolitan-sex-workers/

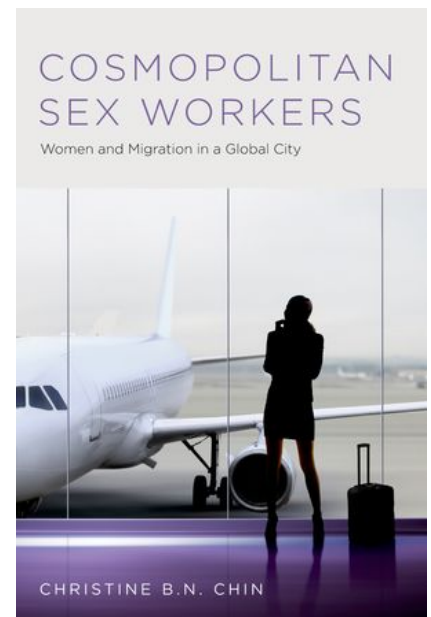
Blog Admin

***Cosmopolitan Sex Workers** examines the phenomenon of non-trafficked women who migrate from one global city to another to perform paid sexual labour in Southeast Asia. Overall, this is a fascinating and extremely unusual book, writes **Charlotte Goodburn**, which brings together macro and micro perspectives to present a rich and nuanced picture of transnational sex work, based on extensive fieldwork in hard-to-access communities. **Christine B. N. Chin**'s work should be of interest to all those studying international migration, the sex trade, and gender and globalisation.*



Cosmopolitan Sex Workers: Women and Migration in a Global City. Christine B. N. Chin. Oxford University Press. May 2013.

Find this book:



How and why do women migrate across borders for sex work? [Christine B. N. Chin](#)'s *Cosmopolitan Sex Workers* is a fascinating in-depth account of women's voluntary migration to the "global city" of Kuala Lumpur for paid sex work. Unlike much other work on migrant sex workers, Chin's book focuses on non-trafficked women and girls. This is not to glamourise prostitution as a liberating form of work, as she makes clear at the start, but an attempt to understand why and how women navigate global migration networks of migration for sex, as well as to demonstrate the interaction between processes of economic globalisation, structures and organisations facilitating migration for sex work and women's own agency.

Chin's analysis is structured through what she calls the framework of "3 Cs"— city, creativity, and cosmopolitanism – in an attempt to show how factors at the individual, local, state, and transnational levels come together to shape women's ability to migrate for sex work. The book draws on many different sources of data, ranging from newspaper articles, state pro- and anti-migration campaigns, and official statistics, to discussions with women sex workers from Asia and beyond; interviews with the men who organise migration for sex work through shadowy illegal groups known as "syndicates"; and detailed ethnographic observation.

The early chapters of the book focus on the history of Kuala Lumpur as a global city and the border control strategies of the Malaysian state, highlighting the contradictory state aims of welcoming increasing numbers of international tourists and students while enforcing strict quotas for labour migration and attempting to prevent the entry of those regarded as socio-economic or security threats. As the later chapters make clear, the migration "industry", and in particular the syndicates, have circumvented the more stringent regulation in a variety of ways in order to keep their illegal businesses in operation.

Easily the most fascinating parts of the book are Chapters Four, Five and Six, which explore the perspectives of the

(female) sex workers and (male) syndicate workers. Based primarily on interviews and observation, this part of the book provides a rich account of an illicit and under-studied world of transnational sex work. The interviews with women demonstrate the wide variety of factors which lead women into selling sex, and make clear that few of the women in this study felt that they had no choice but to migrate. The majority entered the sex trade willingly, as a means of earning money for their families, their education or their own businesses, or as a way to escape patriarchal or religious constraints at home. While this is an important corrective to the idea that all transnational prostitutes are passive victims of trafficking rings, Chin's emphasis on sex workers' own agency and the usefulness of prostitution in providing "new avenues for life- or self-enhancement, such as unprecedented opportunities to travel and experience the world" (p.176) at times comes uncomfortably close to the celebration of sex work she explicitly sets out to avoid, particularly since a discussion of the hardships associated with prostitution in Kuala Lumpur is mostly lacking. However, the book also focuses throughout on the structural constraints shaping women's options, allowing Chin skilfully to expose the ways in which global patriarchy and economic restructuring provide new "freedoms" to women while at the same time affirming old gender roles.



Restaurant tables set up between cars along Jalan Alor in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Credit: [John Walker](#) CC BY 2.0

The migrant women's own understandings of these "freedoms" and structural constraints are especially thought-provoking. One woman, a freelance sex worker from China, explains that she could not earn enough as a waitress to survive, and so turned to sex work. If women are coerced into the sex trade by the need to feed their children, she says, then they can equally be said to be "coerced" into "washing dishes by the side of the road, picking up people's trash...or working in a factory for little pay". If coercion into sex work is wrong, then "it was wrong also to pay people like me just RM600 (roughly £115 a month) for restaurant work". Other sex workers are similarly aware of the limited opportunities available to them, and the fact that they would be valorised as hardworking women if they took low-paying jobs in restaurants and factories instead of better-paying sex work. Arguing that sex work should be considered socially and legally legitimate, several women emphasise that "you are not what you do" because "your character matters more", in spite of hostile responses from family and society.

Just as interesting is the examination in Chapter Five of "Syndicate X" – an illegal but well-established and successful group facilitating migrants' placement in the sex trade within the city in return for a portion of their earnings. Chin shows how the organisational structure of Syndicate X has evolved considerably from its predecessor Chinese secret societies, as well as highlighting the traditional gender roles which have evolved much less. The management of Syndicate X is made up only of men, while the workers are exclusively female, catering exclusively to men (women clients would be "unnatural", according to a Syndicate member). Chin also examines the racial hierarchies of the sex trade: Syndicate X prefers lighter-skinned sex workers, who earn much more than darker-

skinned women – a view of migrants not dissimilar to that expressed by state actors in migration control in Chapter Three. Despite the “cosmopolitanism” of the book’s title and of the sex workers themselves, then, their experiences in Kuala Lumpur remain fundamentally stratified by both race and gender.

Overall, this is a fascinating and extremely unusual book, which brings together macro and micro perspectives to present a rich and nuanced picture of transnational sex work, based on extensive fieldwork in hard-to-access communities. *Cosmopolitan Sex Workers* should be of interest to all those studying international migration, the sex trade, and gender and globalisation.

Charlotte Goodburn is a Lecturer in Chinese Politics and Development at the Lau China Institute, King’s College London. She was previously a post-doctoral researcher in the Centre of Development Studies at the University of Cambridge, where she completed her PhD on the impact of rural-urban migration on children in China and India. Her research interests include migration and urbanisation; comparative development in Asia; educational provision; and gender and household dynamics. [Read more reviews by Charlotte.](#)