DAN LIGHTS HIS CIGARETTE as he climbs to the upper deck of the 45 minute ferry heading to the Indonesian island of Batam. Soon he will be massaged, pampered and desired. He will feel like a ‘real man’ once again. Singapore has played the role of metropolis to the hinterland of Batam since the early 1990s as part of the sub-regional ‘growth triangle’, which includes the Malaysian state of Johor. The metropolis, however, spills over more than just capital, skills or tourists – sexual desires and masculine identities are shared as well.

The sex industry on the Riau islands has grown and diversified in tandem with the maturing economic relations to Singapore. From the smattering of bars, discoteques, and massage parlors, in addition to traditional kielokelis (brothel compounds) in the early 1990s, a strong supply of low- to mid-range hotels, together with shopping malls, has since been established in Batam to cater to the increasing number of tourists. While Indonesian laws do not explicitly prohibit sex work, it is illegal to participate in the trade of women or to live off the earnings of sex workers, although such laws are seldom enforced.

Though much has been written about women sex workers, there is far less documentation of the men who boy sex. Notoriously shy and elusive, men have become the invisible subjects of the sex industry. The Singaporean men who travel to Batam for sex are predominantly working class, many of whom consume sex not just as a way to satisfy carnal desires but to reassert heteronormative notions of masculinity. In reality, Batam is more than just an overseas destination, and an imagined frontier that conjures up a sense of lawlessness, personal freedom, and relief from the grind of work for these working class men to ‘defer’ their masculinity, which has been displaced from the hyper-capitalist metropolis.

“In a crisis of masculinity
There is a dark side to Singapore’s shiny global city status. Traditional notions of masculinity have been eroded by structural unemployment, the downgrading to lower income jobs, and the perceived failure to adequately play the role of provider. One social consequence of this is the undesirable working class Singaporean man to local women, resulting in many seeking foreign brides from neighbouring countries like Vietnam, Thailand, or China. Naturally, Singaporean men who married foreign brides were more likely to be older and less educated.

In light of their subordinated masculinities, working class men interviewed generally speak of two things when they travel to Batam for sex. Firstly, they talk of being pushed or squeezed from the metropolis. Typical sentiments from respondents include: “It’s hard to make a living in Singapore”, “if you’re not rich (in Singapore), forget it...”, and “I’m not a foreign talent job, so cannot make it”. Secondly, they speak of seeking new spaces – both territorial and cultural – as necessary to regain their sense of self. “I come here to relax and enjoy, or else go crazy” says one. He goes on to reveal that, “go there [Batam], can cheng [Hokkien, meaning ‘to seek pleasure’] until peng san [Hokkien, meaning ‘to faint’].” In short, sex in Batam is “an escape into the fantasy of men...seek pleasure’” until he arrives on the island again.

“Dan is a 50 year old bespectacled Chinese warehouse worker who has been going to Batam, and occasionally Bintan, for commercial sex for about 10 years. He is married with two teenage daughters who, he admits, are closer to his wife than they are to him. He earns about S$2500 a month, only patronises massage parlours and returns to Singapore in the evenings, hardly ever spending the night away from home. Dressed neatly in well-pressed short-sleeved shirts and trousers, Dan prefers to go to Batam alone and dislikes girls lasting for as long as they remain on the island, some of whom he patronises regularly. “They are my friends. I visit them to see if they are okay... Sometimes when they go back home [to their home province] I feel sad. I will give them an eng poh and tell them to take care of themselves.”

Over the years, Dan has formed a series of friendships with girls lasting for as long as they remain on the island, some of whom he patronises regularly. “They are my friends. I visit them to see if they are okay... Sometimes when they go back home [to their home province] I feel sad. I will give them an eng poh and tell them to take care of themselves.” Dan’s feelings of friendship suggest that the sexual encounter, though premised on economic power, may be characterised by more than just ‘libidinal bonds’.

On the other hand, Dan’s ability to show care and concern has been deferred from the metropolis to the hinterlands. The imaginary frontier has allowed the sexual encounter to develop into a more socially complex relationship where money purchases the opportunity for men to display certain traits such as care and concern, which may otherwise not be required from his emotionally-distant wife or busy teenage daughters. In such cases, these scenarios of affection are intense and temporal, filled with physical contact like hand-holding, cuddling and playful teasing, but suspended when the man leaves the imaginary frontier in a mutual understanding that the woman’s sex work must continue until he arrives on the island again.

This arrangement, on the other hand, has also been beneficial for Batam sex workers who enjoy treats and gifts from men like Dan. “Indeed older girls often purposely nurse a series of such liaisons with different men, and then derive their main support from remittances, rather than from regular work in prostitution.” The imaginary frontier is thus an escape for the men to play out certain emotional needs and familial desires while the sex worker may willingly subject herself to such male imaginations, either because of the rewards at stake, or because her own imagination of a caring, perhaps even lovelorn, boyfriend offers a comforting counterbalance to the uncertainties and dangers in her profession.
Under the spotlight: Southeast Asia continued

Interview with Dr. Miksic conducted by T.S. Foo

As a young boy, I must pay for their food, cigarettes if the drinks and drinks such as beer and liquor. The total cost is around Rp700,000 to Rp900,000

Khairun is a 31-year-old Malay Singaporean.6 As a contract woman, she spent five-six years in the hinterland. His occasional Singaporean girlfriends

Some of the Batam girls try to cheat your money … Do not

For Khairun, activities like drinking, smoking, relaxing and paying for the girl's expenses are intertwined with sex. Sex is part of a collective experience and cannot be simply isolated as an act of hegemonic masculinity or exploitation of women. Interestingly, Khairun’s ability to treat the girl to meals, drinks and cigarettes in Batam is a simultaneous reminder of his inability to do the same in Singapore. Slightly plump and casually decked out in jeans and T-shirt, Khairun

Q: What do you feel are some of your biggest contributions to your field?

The main change has been the growing number of Southeast Asian archaeologists who can operate independently of foreign advisors. I hope that in the future, collaboration between countries in Southeast Asia will become more common.

Younger scholars are eager to see this happen. When I started 38 years ago, very few Southeast Asians had archaeology degrees, or any significant field experience. They were reliant on foreign partners for funding and guidance. Few foreign archaeologists left a good impression on their Southeast Asian partners, and there was not much transfer of knowledge. Few of them learned local languages. This has changed completely. Now foreign and local archaeologists work as equals, or in situations where the Southeast Asians are the principal investigators. Foreign funding is still significant, but Southeast Asians are fully capable of planning and carrying out projects. The only remaining weakness is in publication. This is partly due to the fact that most archaeological projects in the region are conducted by national departments of archaeology, and their main performance indicator is to produce a report. These reports are usually not published, and often are very difficult for outsiders, including local academics, to obtain. This situation must change.

Q: In December 2013, a bronze sculpture called Uma Parmeshvari at the Asian Civilizations Museum (ACM) in Singapore was found to be stolen from a temple in Tamil Nadu. What are your thoughts on the issue?

The case of the Uma Parameshvari statue is sadly typical of the problems confronting museums wishing to acquire Asian art. Museums now do conduct research before acquiring major pieces, but there is still no complete international registry of stolen antiques that can be consulted in such cases. It is still standard practice to assume that certain well-established dealers are too subject to scrutiny to deal in stolen art, but unfortunately this is not always the case. Such a register needs to be set up, and it is in the interests of museums themselves to contribute to its development.

Q: Finally, what advice would you give to someone who is thinking of studying the art history or archaeology of Southeast Asia?

Farangs: Travels in the Skin Trade: Tourism and Transnational Politics, Economics and Culture, edited by John Henderson, a young archaeologist who was working on the Maya, if he was interested in supervising me and he said ‘yes’. That was the moment when I realized I was actually going to become an archaeologist. For my PhD work at Cornell I did comparative research on the Maya, the specialization of my professor, where we came from and how much formal data of the kind that led me to decide to focus on Southeast Asian earthenware.

After graduating with a PhD in January 1979, I had two job offers: one to teach archaeology in Montana, and one to join the US Agency for International Development and work in Sumatra. I chose the latter because I wanted to be in Southeast Asia if my expertise was moving back into rural development. I spent two years as a rural development and management advisor in Bengkulu, Sumatra. While there I learned of an opportunity to join the Ford Foundation to develop a new university curriculum for archeology, so that enabled me to get back on track.

Q: How did you come to live and work in Singapore?

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