

News from Southeast Asia



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SOJOURN is an interdisciplinary journal devoted to the study of social and cultural issues in Southeast Asia. It publishes empirical and theoretical research articles with a view to promoting and disseminating scholarship in and on the region. Areas of special concern include ethnicity, religion, tourism, urbanization, migration, popular culture, social and cultural change, and development. Fields most often represented in the journal are anthropology, sociology and history.

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Imaginary frontiers and deferred masculinity: working class men in Batam

Terence Chong

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, discotheques, and massage parlours, in addition to traditional *lokalisasi* (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 buy 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 to satisfy carnal desires but to reassert heteronormative notions of masculinity. In reality, Batam is more than just an overseas sex space, but 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.

"If you're not rich in Singapore, forget it ...": 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 downgrade to lower income jobs, and the perceived failure to adequately play the role of provider. One social consequence of this is the undesirability of working class Singaporean men to local women, resulting

in many seeking foreign brides from neighbouring countries like Vietnam, Thailand, or China.¹ Naturally, Singaporean men who married foreign brides were more likely to be older and less educated.²

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 *lah*, 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 *cheong* [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-as-men and women-as-women, an uncomplicated distribution of roles which provide a refuge from life, because nobody has to step outside the prescribed exchanges and dialogues".³

"They are my friends": beyond libidinal bonds

Dan is a 50 year old bespectacled Chinese warehouse supervisor who has been going to Batam, and occasionally Bintan, for commercial sex for about 10 years.⁴ 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 pubs and discos because "they are too loud and noisy, very *luan* [messy] ... Massage is more relaxing, and got special afterwards, no need to move around ... it's more convenient". After the massage, Dan may bring the girl out for lunch if he enjoys her company. According to him: "There the gals have to survive on 'special services' [euphemism for sex acts]. Some of them go by contract basis [and] are recruited by their friends, and others come [on freelance] basis... I know some who worked in factories and got retrenched and end up in massage joints. Not much of a choice, since they have to feed their family back in *kampung*."

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 *ang pao* 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 one 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".⁵ The imaginary frontier is thus a space 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.

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News from Southeast Asia *continued*

Under the spotlight: researchers in the region

Interview with Dr Miksic conducted by S.T. Foo

Dr John N. Miksic is the Head of the Archaeology Unit at ISEAS in Singapore. He is one of Southeast Asia's leading archaeologists on the study of ceramics, and has published numerous works including *Borobudur: golden tales of the Buddhas* (1990); *Old Javanese Gold* (2010); *Earthenware in Southeast Asia* (2003); and *the Historical Dictionary of Ancient Southeast Asia* (2007). His latest book is *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea: 1300-1800* (2013)

Q: How did you become interested in archaeology?

As a young boy, I became fascinated by the stone tools found on my own farm where I grew up in upstate New York, near Niagara Falls. My grandfather and I used to talk about what life would have been like on our farm a thousand years ago. After my BA work on North American prehistory, I joined the US Peace Corps and was sent to work in the Bujang Valley (Kedah), to help form farmers' cooperatives. As I travelled around the area, I began to notice ancient ruins, including a large stone temple called Candi Bukit Batu Pahat. I also heard stories about Raja Bersiong, a mythical king with fangs.

I started looking for information on the historical archaeology of the area, though not much was available.

When I was applying to PhD programs I was accepted to Cornell University's Department of Anthropology on the basis of a research proposal to study a modern Chinese neighborhood in Penang, Malaysia. Several months after my acceptance, I kept experiencing a nagging feeling that archaeology was still important, even though its practical applications were less obvious. So when I first arrived at Cornell, I reported to the head of the department that I was thinking about switching to archaeology. I was afraid that he might think badly of me for being indecisive, but he immediately shouted across the hall to

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 supervisor, where ceramics are a major form of data. This 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 even if it meant 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 archaeology, so that enabled me to get back on track.

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

I became involved in Singapore in 1984, while I was working at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta (Indonesia), sponsored by the Ford Foundation. We excavated near the Keramat Iskandar Shah, and found 14th-century remains in situ. I continued working in Indonesia for the next three years, but in 1987 I accepted the offer to work at the National University of Singapore. I viewed Singapore then as a good place to do further research on early ports and ceramic trade, within easy reach of Indonesian sites.

Q: What do you hope readers will take away from your latest publication, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea: 1300-1800*?

I was trying to show how Singapore is a good example of a much larger phenomenon, the ancient Southeast Asian port city. Very little archaeological research has been devoted to this type of site, which is a shame, given its important role in the present as well as the past. I hope people will realize that modern Singapore is rooted in an ancient and elaborate tradition that can be traced back two thousand years.

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

Teaching a large contingent of students from all over Southeast Asia as well as some from China; bringing students and young professionals from different countries together to form networks; generating public interest in archaeology and ancient Southeast Asian history; publishing in Indonesian as well as English.

Q: How has the field changed and what are its prospects?

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.

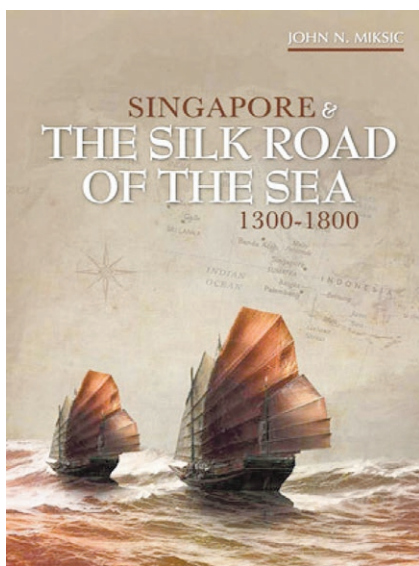
The only remaining weakness is in publication. This is partly due to the fact that most archaeological projects in the region are conducted by national departments of archaeology, and their main performance indicator is to produce a report. These reports are usually not published, and often are very 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 Parmeshvari* 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 antiquities 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?

Be flexible! Be willing to take jobs wherever they appear. Take advantage of opportunities to work in various fields, and make yourself relevant to interdisciplinary pursuits. I've almost always had to combine archaeology with some other field, including rural development. Take advantage of any opportunities to do research when they arise, even if they are only salvage excavations. Learn a local language, and develop relations with local informants. Communicate as much as possible in a form that the general public can understand.



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"As a man, you must pay lah": playing provider in the hinterland

Khairun is a 31-year-old Malay Singaporean.⁶ As a contract worker with an emergency response team for a private company his income is not stable, averaging between S\$1800-S\$2200 a month. Although single, he has other financial commitments, like supporting his diabetic mother and younger sisters. Khairun has been making the trip to Batam for about five-six years. His occasional Singaporean girlfriends never last because, in his words, they "always want more". According to him: "After booking the girl [you] must pay for their food, cigarettes if she smokes and drinks such as beer and liquor. The total cost is around RP700,000 to RP900,000 rupiah. Depends how many bottles and food she orders. As a man, you must pay lah. Whether you want to impress her is another thing... but I think you feel better inside when you can treat her, right?"

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 is clearly cognisant of his deflated economic status on either side of the border. In Singapore "it's very hard ... you buy drinks and cigarettes, that's it. No more money. What are you going to tell the girl? Game over, bro. For Batam, with the same money, you can enjoy more things [sic.], and longer some more [sic.]. He goes on to talk about the cost of marriage. "Seriously getting married in Singapore is costing a bomb ... you can cry trying to save up money just in order to marry someone ... Do you know at Batam [you can] just throw S\$2000 [and] you can get married with grand ceremony?"

Sources of pleasure and danger

Men like Dan and Khairun are, however, not naïve. Given their working class status, they are more wary of being fleeced or taken for a ride by Indonesian women. Indeed, sex workers are often simultaneous sources of pleasure and danger.

Khairun warns against letting one's guard down with Batam girls. "With money, they treat you well. As we know, they work in this line to find money in order to clear off their debts. Some of the Batam girls try to cheat your money ... Do not fall too deep into their feelings. Well like I said, not all the *ceweks* are the same. If encounter a good gal, you are lucky." Male fantasies come complete with feelings of vulnerability and the need for constant vigilance in the imaginary frontier.

The cases of Dan and Khairun show that Batam is not merely a site for the exploitation of sex workers or the straightforward fulfilment of hegemonic fantasies, as feminist scholars are quick to suggest. It is also a space in which scenarios of affection can be played out and the ability to provide can be exercised. The marginalisation of working class men in Singapore compels them to defer their masculinity to the imaginary frontier. Their deferred masculinity is the cyclical act of economic castration and endowment of the male working class.

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- 1 *Asiaone*. 3 July 2010. 'Foreign brides the answer for Asian men'. <http://tinyurl.com/asiaone-asianbrides> (accessed February 2014)
- 2 National Population Secretariat. 2009. An Occasional Paper on 'Marriages between Singapore citizens and non-Singapore citizens: 1998-2008', <http://tinyurl.com/NPS-Marriages> (accessed February 2014)
- 3 Seabrook, J. 1996. *Travels in the Skin Trade: Tourism and the Sex Industry*, London: Pluto Press, p.36
- 4 Interview with author; name changed.
- 5 Cohen, E. 1986. 'Lovelorn *Farangs*: The Correspondence between Foreign Men and Thai Girls', *Anthropological Quarterly* 59(3):115-127 (p.116)
- 6 Interview with author; name changed.