

News from Australia and the Pacific *continued*

Accounting for the future: masculinity, sex and work in urban Indonesia

Benjamin Hegarty

IN THE MAINSTREAM Indonesian comedy film *Arisan Brondong*, a group of rich Jakarta women tempt a group of young, innocent adolescents with payment for sexual services. These rich 'aunties' [*tante-tante*] start a racy version of the community lotteries [*arisan*] found at all levels of Indonesian societies. In their *arisan*, they put the money collected each time towards payment for sex with adolescent men [*brondong*]. The young men, who covet consumer goods like mobile phones and new clothes, are naïvely willing to transgress moral boundaries in order to attain superficial wealth. On the other hand, the women are unable to control their bloated consumer and sexual desires, which spill out as a corrupting force on masculine youth. That the adolescents are poor and the women rich suggests how gender and sexuality intersect with class in contemporary Indonesia. In this way *Arisan Brondong* is a moral tale, common in Indonesia, which warns of the corrupting influence of consumer desire on masculinity, contrasted with the danger of wily femininity.

During the course of PhD fieldwork in Jakarta and Yogyakarta in 2014 and 2015, I met many *brondong* similar to those depicted in the film. Certainly not all *brondong* sell sex, but I did understand it as a category used to refer to attractive male-bodied adolescents. The term is not used to describe oneself, like gay or *waria* is, but rather one that is used to describe others. *Brondong* seemed to be an ubiquitous feature of urban life in Indonesia; young men, no older than twenty, always unmarried, sometimes studying, often working in poorly paid jobs in the services and informal sectors. They almost always had migrated from a smaller city to a larger city in order to study and work. I met *brondong* most often in the course of fieldwork with older *waria* (roughly male-to-female transgender or male-bodied femininity).



My interest in *Arisan Brondong* thus stems from the rare insights it offers into markets for transactional sex and forms of intimacy which are often rendered invisible. There are various reasons for this, but the most important one is the way that gender serves as a code for directionality both of desire and, in the case of transactional sex, payment. This unqualified assumption is that masculine individuals buy sex, while feminine individuals sell sex. While I have no doubt that this is certainly one type of exchange that takes place in markets for sex, the presumption that this is the natural order of things upon which all others are based tends to obscure other forms of desire and gender. During my research, I observed complex and variegated modes of economic exchange for sexual services in which the same person might buy sex as often as they sell it.

In *Arisan Brondong*, the sexual aspects of the film are opaque, and the boys are represented as adroitly avoiding having sex. During ethnographic research I found that *brondong* skillfully and willingly engage in transactional sex. They do so not as their sole occupation, but as one mode of making money, among others. Most often, *brondong* I met during fieldwork told me that they started transactional sex in the context of other kinds of work. For example, one *brondong* from Sumatra explained to me that he had moved to Yogyakarta and had started work as a tea seller on a major intersection. There, he met a number of other young men who sold sex to gay men for approximately 300,000 Indonesian rupiah (approximately USD\$30). As a result, he started to concentrate on sex work economies; after all, selling tea only brought in 50,000 Indonesian rupiah a day. He asked me: Which would I choose? Even as he makes this comment, however, it is not enough to see this young man in terms of instrumentalist or rational decision making. As he entered this market, he grew to realise his attractiveness and in turn his relationship to gendered subjectivity and desire shifts with it.

The category *brondong* thus becomes meaningful only when placed into its context with work, migration and ageing. This allows for a perspective that understands that after a particular age, *brondong* are no longer attractive. In line with this, most told me that they were looking forward to the day that they would be able to marry – in many respects, become an adult and a normative citizen in Indonesian society. They called an aspiration to belong to the 'normal world' [*dunia normal*]. However, some *brondong* delayed this occasion in favour of commercialising their attractiveness for "just one more year". As a result, they had become old *brondong*. What was especially poignant about these men was the way that *waria* would care for them; in fact, sometimes older *waria* were the only friends that they found they had. Like *waria*, they had become members of Indonesia's growing underclass, even as they aspired to belong to its middle class.

Benjamin Hegarty is a PhD candidate with the School of Archeology and Anthropology, Australian National University (benjamin.hegarty@anu.edu.au).

Low-wage Chinese migrant men in Singapore

Sylvia Ang



DESPITE THERE BEING a growing body of research focusing on male migration – especially low-wage migrant men – it still shows a certain bias in which work (and economics) is seen as central to the men's lives. Yet migrant men are not just workers, but also fathers, husbands, lovers, boyfriends. A small field of research is now emerging, among it my own work, which is looking at migrant men's various positionalities and specifically, heterosexuality. Focussing on the heterosexuality and sexual desires of migrant men can bring some clarity to how masculinities transform with migration.

Above: Chinese male migrant workers at their construction work-site. Photo by Jason Tan.

Through migration, masculinities are challenged and transformed by hegemonic ideologies encountered in the host country. A review of the current literature on Chinese masculinity and migration shows two things: firstly, Chinese men's masculinity is highly tied to work, and thus Chinese masculinity cannot be discussed without reference to the (global) economy. Secondly, the link of Chinese masculinity with the global economy has produced hegemonic masculine ideals in which economic power is proof of virility. As such, while many low-wage Chinese migrant men are likely to have already been subordinated to hegemonic ideals of masculinity in China due to their socio-economic status, it is likely many feel their subordinate positions even more intensely in destination countries such as my field site, Singapore.

Low-wage workers are subjected to multiple restrictions while working in Singapore. Their stay in Singapore is transient – up to a maximum of two years – and is subjected to renewal according to the employers' decision. They are not permitted to marry a Singaporean citizen or permanent resident. They are also not allowed to bring their wives or families into Singapore. Loneliness is a recurring theme in interviews with low-wage migrant men. Furthermore, low-wage workers often find themselves in tightly-surveilled environments where they are subordinate to male supervisors who may physically or verbally abuse them. Low-wage workers, especially those in the construction sector, are often forced to live in unsanitary conditions, such as in shipping containers. My informants complained of over-crowded rooms, in which up to sixteen people would sleep in bug-infested beds.

Many low-wage Chinese male migrants live on-site, with imposed curfews and limited free movement. To gain access to them I used the mobile phone application *WeChat* (commonly known in Chinese as *Weixin*). This application is used among friends, but more often by men looking to get to know women; it allows the user to 'find' people in his/her physical proximity and to initiate a 'chat'. Through *WeChat* I was able to have conversations with many Chinese migrants, nearly all of whom were male. My research showed that I was often the first (and only) Singaporean woman most of my low-waged Chinese male respondents had spoken to. This undoubtedly reflects their marginality in Singaporean society.

Since economic status is a key marker of Chinese masculinity, many of the male workers who migrate

to Singapore to take on low-wage jobs are likely to be considered "losers of modernization".¹ Encountering a marginalized economic and social status in Singapore, is then to be associated with "failed masculinity".² To be a Chinese man with a low socio-economic status is perceived as not just falling short of masculinity but also *Chinese* masculinity.

While migration scholars should certainly continue their research on female migrants, as I have done myself,³ scholars in the field of gender and migration will do well not to neglect male migrants – an understudied group relative to female migrants. The literature on Chinese masculinity has been limited and has become dated. Moreover, while work on Chinese masculinity in the field of migration has been emerging, it is small and concentrated on rural-urban migration within China. In 2015, 61% of 978,000 Chinese emigrants were male.⁴ This is a phenomenon research needs to catch up with. I have found that researching low-wage Chinese males contributes not just to an understanding of the gendered subjectivities of the migrant worker, but also of how the intersection of ethnicity and class can work to subordinate him.

Sylvia Ang is a recent PhD graduate from the department of Anthropology and Development Studies, University of Melbourne. She has published in *Gender, Place and Culture* and *Cultural Studies Review*. Her current research interests are international labour migration, intersectionality, ethnicity, gender, class, and local modernities (sylvia.s.ang@gmail.com).

References

- Lin, X. 2013. *Gender, Modernity and Male Migrant Workers in China: Becoming a 'modern' Man*. Routledge.
- Cheng, Y.E., Yeoh, B.S. & Zhang, J. 2015. 'Still "breadwinners" and "providers": Singaporean husbands, money and masculinity in transnational marriages', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 22(6):867-883.
- Ang, S. 2016. 'Chinese migrant women as boundary markers in Singapore: unrespectable, un-middle-class and un-Chinese', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23(12):1774-1787.
- United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. 2016. International Migration Report 2015: Highlights, p.29 (accessible from <https://tinyurl.com/report2015highlights>).