

How to Avoid the Centre: The Strategies of a Small Feminist Workshop in Rural China⁺

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Abstract

The spectre of state intervention constantly looms above all activist organizations in China. In order to avoid the detention of activist leaders or group members, most organizations have adopted a strategy of partial appeasement of the party-state. This has often taken the form of the appropriation and use of state-sanctioned discourse and terms, together with attempts to develop or sustain corporatist links with the state apparatus. This article argues that it is possible, perhaps preferable, to develop activist strategies which avoid “the centre”. The article uses the example of a “women’s workshop” in rural Guangxi, which provides support to sex workers, homosexuals, and other sexual minorities, to justify this argument. Despite its small size and geographical isolation, this workshop has developed “glocalized” networks of activists, relying on the juxtaposition of a highly localized group of supporters with an international network of interested parties who provide funding and intellectual support. Furthermore, the style of discourse used by the group has very little in common with official state discourse. In promoting a form of “sex-positive” feminism uncommon in China, and through the partial framing of the work as an artistic project, a conscious attempt has been made not to engage with the language and style of public engagement of the party-state. Ultimately, these strategies play both an offensive and defensive role, allowing supporters of the workshop to make a substantial critique of the state while at the same time not attracting its immediate opprobrium.

Keywords: *activism, rural China, the Chinese state, sex work, social movements*

JEL classification: *K42, N35, P37, Z13*

1. Introduction

All public activist movements in China must engage with the state in some way. The development of activism in China would not have been possible without the gradual retreat of the state from the minutiae of its citizens' daily life, but the state still constantly "patrols the boundary of social activism" (Lee and Hsing, 2010: 8), monitoring and punishing activists in a wide range of ways.

This somewhat paradoxical situation – an effectively high level of freedom of communication and access to information on one hand, but a substantial risk of persecution and punishment on the other – has led to the development of a very diverse strategic landscape of activism. Organizationally speaking, economic decentralization has led to the development of "cellular" networks of activists, highly localized but with well-developed networks of contacts with other similar activist groups (Lee and Hsing, 2010: 8). From a strategic point of view, social activists now use extremely diverse methods to promote their ideas and resolve their disputes. They have moved from appropriating and modifying the techniques used by government and quasi-government organizations such as the Communist Youth League and the All-China Women's Federation, as tended to happen in the 1990s and early 2000s (Benney, 2012; Lee, 2007; Milwertz, 2002). Social activism strategies are now tailored to particular localities and situations and designed to appeal to the general public, as well as facilitating the formation of networks (Wang, 2010: 110-113). The growth of new media has played a significant role in this: to give just one example, over the past few years there has been an explosion of public and scholarly interest in the use of blogs, particularly so-called "microblogs" like Twitter and Sina Weibo, in activism (Leibold, 2011; Benney, 2011).

In this article I examine and juxtapose these two perspectives – the threat of state intervention, and the increasing strategic sophistication of activists – in examining one case study, of a "women's workshop", located in Bobai county (*Bobai xian* 博白县) in rural Guangxi province, the main aim of which is to advocate for sex workers¹. I suggest that two particular qualities may be abstracted from this case. One is the balance between two types of networks: personalized and localized networks of activists and clients, through which the workshop addresses its practical aims, and internationalized networks of like-minded activists, primarily online, through which the workshop develops and reinforces its broader social and political aims. The other is the advocacy, by the workshop collectively and by its leader individually, of an attitude towards sex and sex work that might be best labelled using the Western term "sex-positive feminism".

Both these qualities, I argue, have the effect of "avoiding the Centre". By this I mean that the workshop is, whether consciously or not, choosing to use

strategies which distance their activism from the active supervision and the discourse of certain key parts of the party-state. I take the idea of “the Centre” from O’Brien and Li (2006), who use the term to signify the apparatus of the central Chinese government, together with the ideas and the style of discourse that emanate from it. Avoiding the Centre, I argue, may have positive effects for the sustainability and the campaigns of local activist groups such as the one I describe below. Beyond this, it provides a distinct contrast with the many activist groups who have used the discourse of the Centre and who have attempted to cultivate links with the state apparatus. Simply ignoring the Centre, I suggest, may be just as fruitful an activist technique as attempting to engage with it, or indeed directly opposing it.

In this article I draw on fieldwork and interviews conducted in Guangxi during 2012, together with materials produced by the women’s workshop and media coverage, as a means of assessing the perspectives of the organizers of the workshop and its clients, as well as considering how it is viewed in its local community, in China, and in the world as a whole. I do not intend to argue that this individual case study is necessarily representative of a trend in Chinese activism as a whole, although that is definitely possible. Nor do I intend to make a polemical or policy-based argument about the practice of sex work in China. Rather, I intend to shed light on what appears to be a relatively viable strategic approach to carrying out potentially controversial activist work, and one that might usefully be juxtaposed with existing scholarship on the interaction between local social movements and elites.

2. The Riddle of State Intervention

Gries and Rosen (2004) rightly emphasize that the Chinese “state” is not monolithic. Nor is the “society” to which it is often paralleled. Rather, the complexities of Chinese life and the multiplicity of different stakeholders in any given situation give rise to various relationships of power; such relationships between political and non-political actors create many different “states” and “societies”, which apply in different ways in different situations. (Gries and Rosen, 2004: 5-6) For social activists, whose campaigns often cross geographic and linguistic borders and conceptual frames of reference, the problem of negotiating these different states and societies is an especially acute one.

However, even if we look at the problem in the simplest possible way, and examine how *any* form of state intervention has affected activists, the state-society relationship is still extremely confusing. This is because there is no clearly observable trend to state intervention in activism, regardless of whether the state, at any level and in any form, is intervening in order to repress the activism and punish the activists, or in order to cooperate with

the activists to facilitate their desired outcomes. Cases of state responses to activism have included:

- violent state repression, such as in the state's victimization, arrest, and imprisonment of well-known lawyers and legal campaigners such as Teng Biao 滕彪, Xu Zhiyong 许志永, and Chen Guangcheng 陈光诚 (Fu and Cullen, 2011);
- relational approaches, where local state officials develop relationships with activists in order to resolve their disputes, whether practically or financially, or prevent them from escalating their complaints. Li, Liu, and O'Brien (2012) illustrate how the state has used a range of relational methods as part of its negotiation with petitioners, and the response to the well-publicized protests in Wukan 乌坎 has also been characterized as relational (Deng and O'Brien, 2012; Fewsmith, 2012); and
- *laissez-faire* approaches, where the state allows activists to communicate their messages, even through protest, without immediate intervention or repression. Such approaches are most commonly used where the state lacks the capacity to make substantial interventions (for example, in the administration of the Internet, where state intervention, despite being elaborate and well-funded, can only censor some of the material published), as well as in certain cases of medium-scale public protest of low risk to the central government. Hassid (2012) describes the "safety valve" argument: that the state's non-intervention in public communication (such as on the Internet) lets citizens vent their dissatisfaction with life, allowing for emotional catharsis even if not for practical outcomes.

Each of these approaches represents a conscious choice by the Chinese state, the overall capacity of which is sufficient to intervene in many cases where it does not. The deeper problem is the lack of discernable pattern to the application of these approaches. Each of the state strategies above has been applied in cases of varying political controversy, of varying size, and of varying location, which makes it difficult for scholars and activists to predict what the state's reaction to a given activist project will be.

It would be naïve to suppose that this lack of predictability was not one of the state's strategies to make activists less confident in their work. But, even if this is set aside, the case of the Bobai women's workshop lends particular weight to two arguments about state intervention in activism. One is the idea of "segmented publics"; the other the importance of the Centre as a source of supervision, appeal, and discourse for activist movements.

The multiplicity of states and societies which I describe above may also be reframed as a multiplicity of publics. Michael Warner (2005) develops a notion of fragmented "publics" and "counterpublics". In their composition,

these publics might be similar to the “states” and “societies” which make up China’s population: that is, they are composed of various stakeholder groups which share some kind of social, geographic, or identity-based similarity. One key aspect of Warner’s conceptualization, however, is the significance of publics in *communication* (Warner, 2005: 65-66). Information, whether it comes from the state-run media or from informal sources, is directed from particular publics to other publics. Publics, then, are “worldly constraint[s] on speech” (Warner, 2005: 72), “social spaces created by the reflexive circulation of discourse” (Warner, 2005: 90). It follows from this that certain publics have the support of “dominant social groups” – often the state or similar authorities – whereas others do not. These latter publics, whether their members can be considered subalterns or whether they are merely “structured by different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying” (Warner, 2005: 119), can be described as counterpublics.

Post-socialist China is undeniably pluralist in many respects, and, to use Warner’s terms, contains multitudes of publics and counterpublics. The interaction of publics and counterpublics is naturally a significant part of the development of social movements, but the question arises: how, in China, to what extent do these various publics interact and overlap with each other, and what structures of power are embodied in this interaction? Sophia Woodman (2012) develops a notion of “segmented publics” which goes some way to resolving this question. Her suggestion – which draws in particular from Warner, from Habermas’s concept of the public sphere (1989), and from Cheek’s “pluralized publics” (2007) – is that discussion of contentious issues, while often restricted in a general sense, may be allowed or even facilitated within particular discrete and isolated segments of society. The “lines of inclusion and exclusion” for these segmented publics are drawn, explicitly or implicitly, on the basis of the degree of expertise of the participants and their levels of affiliation with party-state bodies or with influential individuals. Such publics, in Woodman’s analysis, include academic think-tanks and discussion groups as well as grass-roots residents’ and village committees. These segmented publics may be juxtaposed with “oppositional publics” which situate themselves outside the system of state control and thus become targets of the victimization of the state, as well as being excluded from public discourse.

Grass-roots activist groups such as the Bobai workshop do not really fall within Woodman’s label of segmented publics. But even in oppositional publics such as these, the basic principles of segmentation allow for issues to be discussed in greater depth and with greater security than in cases where discourse is created by unaffiliated individuals and is merely attempted to be disseminated to the general public. The most important of these fundamental

principles are first, the creation of coherent collective groups (which I consider in the Bobai case under the heading of “glocalism”), and second, a less well-discussed issue, the necessity of “distance” from the supervision of the party-state.

Sufficient distance from the party-state allows discourse to be developed without intervention and excessive supervision. This distance can take various forms. Woodman, for example, suggests that residents’ committees and villagers’ committees create distance because they are self-governing: a kind of structural distance that might also potentially apply to bodies like academic organizations and internationalized non-government organizations. Geographic distance from the state is also significant: the cases of rural activism described by O’Brien and Li (2006) demonstrate that dissenters have greater flexibility to act the further they are away from sources of state power, or, in a quite different way, one could cite the methods by which activism within China is facilitated by bodies outside of China. Conceptual distance from the state also plays a role. I consider this in more depth below, but it is clear that there are certain issues and certain styles of communication which regularly fall under the purview of the state and others which do not. In the academic sphere, for example, legal and political academics are much more likely to be persecuted and closely monitored than academics in other fields; while it is inherently necessary for the state to endorse a particular stance on democracy or social organization, it is not necessary for it to have a set opinion on Shakespeare or on the Higgs boson.

But distance from the state is not always possible or desirable. The single most frequent strategy for public complaint in China is to appeal to the state in some way. However, since most protests involve some criticism of leadership or government, these appeals have a tendency to be strategic and abstract, rhetorical rather than practical. O’Brien and Li (2006) provide the useful label “the Centre”, which draws from the Chinese idea of *zhongyang jingshen* 中央精神 (“spirit of the centre”), and encompasses a wide range of ideas and discourse: it signifies not just official pronouncements and laws, but also the rhetorical style of leaders and the propaganda image of the party-state which emanates from the central government (O’Brien and Li, 2006: 6).

Appeals to the Centre are seen repeatedly in different forms of resistance. In localized protests they are especially obvious. Even in serious mass protests such in Wukan in 2011, where the apparatus of local government was brought to a complete standstill, protest banners still read “*Zhongyang jiujiu Wukan* 中央救救乌坎” (Central government, please help Wukan) (Gong, 2012: 1). In a different area, that of legal and political activism, the Charter 08 movement demonstrates an appeal that “echoes existing PRC constitutional doctrine” (Potter, 2011: 123); the charter attempts to validate the claim made in the Constitution, that the state “respects and preserves

human rights”, while at the same time suggesting ways in which this stated aim might be practically facilitated.

While it is not wholly impossible that the Centre will intervene on behalf of protesters or respond to their demands (with the case of SARS often cited as an instance where this did happen), the relative infrequency of any form of visible response from the Centre in protest means that the strategic appeals to the Centre are functionally directed just as much, or even more, at local officials. From a historical perspective, Perry suggests that the Chinese tradition that local problems should be dealt with by local officials means that the Centre tends not to intervene in matters relating to property disputes or complaints which are confined to particular areas (Perry, 2001: 167-168). Furthermore, the pressure that the central government has put on local governments over the past decade to decrease the number of petitions to the central government (Li, Liu and O’Brien, 2012: 323-325) also indicates that the Centre itself has little interest in acting as a universal problem-solver.

Such appeals, therefore, serve largely as a means of promoting the causes of resisters in politically acceptable language, and of attempting to spur local authorities into action by framing the protest as an appeal to the Centre, whose actions are deemed to be inevitably appropriate and correct, against villainous local organizations and officials; a tactic referred to as “exploiting the gap” (O’Brien and Li, 2006: 25) or driving a “wedge” (Benney, 2012: 104) between the local and central authorities. Even if the Centre does not intervene, the chief benefit of this strategy is that it gives protesters extra time to disseminate their message by reducing probability of immediate local intervention. In Wukan, for example, appeals to the Centre warded off the violent intervention of the state apparatus; had the protesters directly attacked the central government, it would be far more likely that there would have been an immediate and violent response, namely the mass introduction of police or military forces. A strategic approach which upheld the Centre and excoriated the local allowed the provincial government to intervene after the protest had gone on for some time (Zheng, 2012: 30).

To return to the original premise of this section, then: although the question of *when* (and specifically *how*) the state will intervene in the work of activists and social movements is still far from resolved, and may be impossible to resolve, the conceptual frameworks of segmented publics and of distance from the Centre do shed light on the nature of the relationship which is negotiated between state and society in cases of protest and dispute resolution. In particular, these frameworks facilitate an understanding of two concepts crucial to the case study below: first, that it can be possible for an interest group to “segment” itself from society in general, which can act as a means of protection against the intervention of the state; and second, that, especially in view of the increasing trend towards localized dispute resolution

and decreased involvement by the Centre in local disputes, it is possible to negotiate different strategic relationships with the Centre. One of these forms of relationship can be a conscious avoidance of the Centre, rather than the appeal to the Centre traditional to localized citizen activism or the explicit opposition to the Centre characteristic of, for example, democracy activists. The following sections substantiate and assess this strategy of avoidance.

3. The Development of the Women's Workshops

Zheng Yongnian rightly labels China in the early 2010s as an “angry society” (Zheng, 2012: 30-33). His justification for this label is largely empirical: the amount of unrest has increased dramatically over the past decade, both in the sense that there are more individual events of unrest and that they are spread across China more diversely. The rights activist Yu Jianrong 于建嵘 (2009) extends this empirical analysis by suggesting that China is suffused with “a kind of ‘abstract anger’” (*yizhong “chouxian fennu”* 一种“抽象愤怒”). The anger, he suggests, is abstract because it is not inherently directed at particular targets or concerned with particular problems. Rather, it is concerned with violations of human dignity and with the frustration that arises when people cannot express their discontent sufficiently. Lack of self-expression, therefore, is identified as a key source of this abstract anger, as distinct from structural problems such as representation and inequality.

One way in which this sense of abstract anger manifests itself is through the language of “injustice” (*yuan 冤*). This word, used frequently in protests – often as a single character on banners, unconnected with any statement of claim – is, as Eva Pils suggests, a manifestation of traditional beliefs, linked with emotion, as distinct from modern, legalistic ideas such as rights:

[A]s a traditional moral concept, *yuan* is analogous to the concept of rights in modern political settings because it captures the ruler's political responsibilities towards the ruled. Rights-assertion via the courts and protests against injustice via the petition system thus share the same moral and rational core. However, *yuan* is different from rights in that it adopts a distinctive view of the moral obligations of victims of injustice. In modern China, people with grievances typically engage in both practices simultaneously; they draw on both tradition and modernity to articulate their grievances.

(Pils, 2011: 287)

One must, however, juxtapose this analysis with the state's retreat from petitioning and from the concept of rights. In a milieu where the Centre is often unsympathetic to petitions and where dispute resolution is increasingly personalized and localized, it is reasonable to hypothesize that social movements in China might be moving away from formalized, organized

styles of dissent and trending towards informal strategies which emphasize the emotional engagement of the dissenter and on communicating narratives of injustice.

The case of the Bobai women's workshop lends some weight to this hypothesis. Its history, and the personal narrative of its founder Ye Haiyan 叶海燕, is characterized by emotional expressions of injustice. The way in which Ye frames herself and her work² is part of an attempt to make her appear empathetic and socially aware, but at the same time distant from society and social norms. Although the workshop's strategies do aim to challenge the state on a legal basis, much more of its discourse is based on an attempt to engage with the public in a visceral sense.

Ye Haiyan's personal narrative is complicated and unorthodox³. She chose the name "*fuping* 浮萍" (duckweed) for the women's workshop, believing it to be a plant that is strong and resilient but which also floats independently from place to place (Mooney 2012); this analogy is a conscious reflection of the way in which she frames her personal struggle. When asked to outline this personal narrative at an interview, her first sentence was "I reached junior high school." (*wo dushu dedao chuzhong* 我读书得到初中。) The listener is first supposed to read into this that she did not study any further (a matter which she later described in depth), and second is supposed to understand that not having finished high school and qualified for university is generally a source of shame for Chinese individuals and their families, and indicates that she might be seen as an individual lacking worth or from a poor background. This opening strategy reflects the desired impression she wishes to create in the public: a sense of struggle against the odds and of disconnection from the mainstream of Chinese society. That the narrative is focused so explicitly on her and her personal emotional landscape also supports Yu Jianrong's argument about the role of self-expression in the framing of discontent in China.

Ye is from a small village near the very large city of Wuhan in Hubei province. She was born in 1975, so her life has been lived almost entirely during the Chinese reform period, with the constant social and economic changes that that implies. Her family was extremely poor, and she was forced to start work at the age of fourteen for minimal wages. After returning to her village and working as a primary school teacher for a time, she failed to further her studies once again. Unable to develop her interest in literature, she then became preoccupied with becoming rich and improving the livelihood of her village and her family. She travelled southwards looking for work and gradually became involved with sex work, working in a karaoke club, as a masseur, and eventually hiring women to provide sexual services. From 2001 onwards, she also began to describe her experiences in a blog, using the pseudonym "*Liulang Yan* 流氓燕" or "Hooligan Swallow".

Ye's economic imperative to become involved in sex work gradually overlapped with a sense of moral distress and obligation. She claims that, unlike some of her peers, she never saw sex workers as being less human than others or less deserving of other rights: she spoke of others wiping down seats on which prostitutes had sat, apparently fearing the transmission of STDs. As she was economically involved in the sex industry herself, she saw the industry pragmatically, viewing prostitutes as economic actors rather than victims or immoral people: "people asked us repeatedly to provide an erotic service (*seqing fuwu* 色情服务), and there were girls (*xiaojie* 小姐) willing to provide it." The harsh treatment of sex workers by police and by local government gradually led her to become a more active advocate for sex work. By the mid-2000s she had divorced from her husband and moved to Nanning in Guangxi with her young daughter, looking for work: by this time she was writing about the victimization of sex workers at the hands of police.

The peculiar social and economic circumstances under which Ye, an intelligent woman skilled at writing and public speaking, had become involved in sex work rather than pursuing the expected path of education – and, in parallel, more expert at making emotional narratives than legalistic statements of claims – made her an unexpectedly valuable advocate on a local scale. It was the Internet, however, that was able to provide her with the two qualities which form the core of the workshop's strategic approach and thus of this article. First, she was able to use the Internet to form networks of supporters and interested parties; second, through browsing the Internet, she was able to educate herself about discourses of feminism and thus develop a broader understanding of the global understanding of sex work, and indeed of the aesthetics of sexual protest.

"Things have changed a lot in the past few years. The first time I encountered feminism was in 2005. Someone said to me, because I'd written an essay, that I was a feminist. I had no idea about that. I hadn't defined myself as any particular type of person. After that, I started to search for things connected with that word; once I had read de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, I felt I really was a feminist." (Interview, February 2012)

These influences allowed previously informal networks to become more formalized and to develop increasingly coherent ideological standpoints. Ye's first important connection was with Yim Yuet-lin (*Yan Yuelian* 严月莲), a prominent sex worker and sex work advocate in Hong Kong, and leader of Ziteng 紫藤, an organization advocating for the rights of women and specifically sex workers (see Yim, 2007). Ziteng's influence is particularly obvious in the sense that Ye has subsequently attempted to fulfil one of Ziteng's chief aims – changing the public mindset about sex work (Yim, 2007: 7) – and that she has adopted, almost entirely, its rhetoric about sex

work, namely that it is a form of work like any other and one which, in this reasoning, should consequently be legal. (In fact, Ye goes so far as to extend Ziteng's language and advocate for *jiquanzhuyi* 妓权主义 or "prostitutism" – a word, coined on the model of *nüquanzhuyi* 女权主义 or feminism, which few if any people have used before her.)

Ye has put these ideas into practice by setting up what she has termed "workshops" (*gongzuoshi* 工作室). Under the banner of health promotion and women's rights, these workshops have aimed to provide grass-roots support to sex workers and, at the same time, agitate for the defence of the rights of women and sex workers. One specific aim is to target and defend against AIDS. The first of these workshops was the Chinese People's Women's Rights Workshop (*Zhongguo minjian nüquan gongzuoshi* 中国民间女权工作室), which Ye set up in 2006, after her first contact with Ziteng. This workshop was situated in Wuhan in a red-light district, and provided physical and telephone support to sex workers. As time went on, it also organized various public events and demonstrations. The best-known of these was a "red umbrella" demonstration, carried out on 29th July 2010, where workshop members, carrying red umbrellas, marched in a busy pedestrian area of Wuhan in a campaign for the legalization of prostitution. This gained the attention of the national and international media and led to the informal detention of Ye in the subsequent month (*boxun.com*, 2010).

In tandem with these organizational strategies, it is important to note that Ye's work has always been characterized by a transgressive and performative aspect. As I describe below, her attitudes towards sex and sexuality are unconventional by Chinese standards in that they are extremely liberal and even prurient. Challenged by Yim Yuet-lin about whether she would consider providing sexual services herself, rather than just facilitating them, Ye began, from 2006 onwards, to have sex with clients, often for very low cost. At the same time, her public exhibitionism was becoming well-known across the Chinese Internet. In 2005, she began to post pictures of herself posing naked on the popular forum website Tianya, under the heading "My Body Image"; these attracted a great deal of attention, with many public commentators criticizing her everyday appearance (Farrer, 2007: 23-24), but also endeared her to the artistic community. Ultimately the so-called "Liumang Yan incident" seemed to be beneficial to her: in 2006, she published a book, *Xiahua, Jinguo* 夏花·禁果 (Summer Flowers and Forbidden Fruit), which discussed her views and experiences on sex and relationships, and later, in 2010, she appeared naked with the famous artist Ai Weiwei 艾未未 and three other women in an art project named *Yi Hu Ba Nai Tu* 一虎八奶图 (A Portrait of One Tiger and Eight Breasts) (*boxun.com*, 2011). All of these experiences have enhanced her notoriety and her credibility in the Chinese anti-government, transgressive, artistic circles which are conceptually centred

around Ai, and which are linked with the world outside China through non-government organizations, academe, and the media.

4. The Work of the Bobai Workshop

This background brings me to the specific case of the Bobai women's workshop, formally known as *Bobai Xian Fuping Jiankang Gongzuoshi* 博白县浮萍健康工作室 (Bobai County Duckweed Health Workshop)⁴. Ye Haiyan moved to Bobai, a town near Yulin in Guangxi province, in 2011. She had previously worked in Yulin during the 2000s. The population of Bobai county, of which the town of Bobai is the main settlement, was 1.7 million in 2009, of whom 1.54 million were classified as "farmers" (2010 *Nanning Yearbook*, 2010: 466-467). The area is thus mostly agricultural; the town of Bobai itself is not large by Chinese standards, the county's population has a low growth rate, and it could reasonably be considered relatively isolated and backward (by road it is about four hours from Nanning, the capital). Despite these factors, the sex industry is quite substantial. Sex work takes place in "salons" (*falang* 发廊) which are more or less devoted to the provision of sexual services, in karaoke bars where most profits are made from clients' payments to sex workers, and in a range of other smaller outlets such as masseurs.

There are, then, quite a number of sex workers who have come to Bobai to work, although the precise number is unclear. While there were a number of male supporters of the workshop, whom I discuss below, there were few if any male sex workers⁵; the sex workers were collectively and individually referred to as *xiaojie* (meaning "Miss" or young woman). The majority are internal migrants: few, if any, seemed to have come from countries other than China. It would be misleading to depict all of these people as highly vulnerable and totally without agency. Some members of the workshop were actively able to express their discontents and to use the language of rights and injustice, at least in the relatively safe environment of an academic interview. A substantial proportion were natives of Guizhou province, the province immediately to the north of Guangxi. The Guizhou diaspora, and in particular the Guizhou-style restaurant in Bobai, was one focal point for sex workers to meet and socialize. The existence of these networks suggests that word of mouth plays a role in recruitment and thus that the people involved in sex work should not be assumed to have been trafficked without knowledge of the work that they would do when they arrived.

Despite these mitigating factors, the sex workers in Bobai experience constant risk of harm and considerable actual harm. The prevalence of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases is high, and is exacerbated by the cost of health care and by the many clients who do not use condoms. Clients are often violent to the sex workers, or refuse to pay; there is no legal recourse

when these things occur. At an interview, workshop members spoke of being tied to beds and beaten by clients, then having their goods and money stolen. When the police or the courts were approached, they were either hostile or uninterested in resolving such disputes. Aside from these practical risks, the damage to mental health and self-esteem which comes from the stigma linked with prostitution (as described in general terms by Paoli and Scambler, 2008, and in China by Zheng, 2009a: 209) can be considerable, particularly given the smallness of the town that the sex workers live in and the necessity that they are outwardly identifiable as offering sexual services.

In summary, the lives of the sex workers in Bobai do not differ substantially from that described in other academic work on the subject. The difficulties they face affect their mental, physical, and economic well-being; their negotiation of these problems and their understanding of their situation is shaped by the prevailing cultural attitudes towards sex, gender, and prostitution, just as Tiantian Zheng has described in her study of prostitution in northeastern China (Zheng, 2009b: 1-26). The workshop, then, has three major functions: immediate assistance, community formation, and campaigning. Each of these functions aims to assist the sex workers of Bobai, but the latter two in particular have broader social aims.

In terms of immediate assistance, the workshop is positioned in what could be called the red-light district of Bobai. It occupies a tiny rented shopfront, about three metres square, directly opposite a strip of salons and karaoke bars. It is open as often as it can be staffed, and functions as a drop-in centre for anyone who might be interested. It provides free condoms to sex workers and their clients, along with some basic medicine and sanitary products, in particular a self-testing kit for AIDS, which are sold at low prices. All of these health products have been donated by *wangyou* 网友 or “online friends”: people with whom Ye Haiyan has previously made contact or who have heard about the workshop online. A group of workshop members – about ten people, including sex workers as well as interested volunteers from the local community – attempt to staff the workshop to provide advice and company for anyone who has problems. When the workshop is closed, people can also chat on online group, hosted on the instant messaging service QQ, and accessible both on computers and smartphones. The workshop also has a collection of printed materials on sexual health, the law, and prostitution, which it distributes to anyone who is interested.

The formation of a community of workshop members is a natural consequence of this process of assistance. Newcomers to the county can meet others from similar backgrounds and thus share experiences, support, and gossip. This characteristic of the sex industry has been noted elsewhere (Zheng, 2009a: 97) but aspects of the community formation in Bobai are more novel. First, the workshop attracts a number of members with no connection to

the sex industry apart from an ideological commitment to the activities of the workshop. These fall into two overlapping groups. A small number of young gay men are among the most loyal members of the workshop. While this is commonplace in organizations specifically devoted to AIDS (Zheng, 2009b: 57-59), there are few if any instances of this recorded in broader women's NGOs. In the Bobai case, the gay men find that the workshop provides a supportive social network because of its ideological commitment to a liberal view of sexuality and, to a lesser extent, because of the worldliness of its other members, who are generally from other provinces. Providing practical support to sex workers is one *quid pro quo* that these men provide in exchange for the friendly and supportive social network that Ye Haiyan and the *xiaojie* can provide them.

The community also consists of a number of people who might be called political agitators. These range from people who publicize themselves as "rights defenders" (*weiquan renshi* 维权人士) in the local region to others who keep their political opinions to themselves but who are sufficiently dissatisfied with the situation in China to seek out and assist independent local organizations with a political emphasis. The dissatisfaction of these individuals is sweeping, and their political orientation is not theoretical. It is concerned mainly with opposition to the Chinese state; at interview they made no attempt to support China or its government in any form. While their criticisms of what was happening in Bobai tended to concentrate on criticisms of what is often described as the neo-liberal aspects of the Chinese party-state – the increasing cost of education and health care, for example – their support of well-known democracy activists like Ai Weiwei, and their interest in liberal societies (in their view, normally epitomized by America), together with their support for the workshop, suggest that they should not be described as left- or right-wing but rather anti-state, a point which I discuss further below.

The people above are members of the local, grass-roots community centred on the workshop. They provide practical, physical support. However, the workshop is also closely affiliated with a virtual network of people: those people across China and the world who hardly ever visit Bobai but who support and follow its work, normally online. Ye Haiyan has adroitly used microblogs – in her case, Twitter and Tenten Weibo – for the past four years. She mainly uses Twitter, which is not freely available on the Internet in China; this indicates how consciously she is directing her descriptions of her work towards the world outside China and towards that minority who are able to circumvent the blocking of Internet sites in China, rather than the majority of the Chinese population⁶. Because of its unconventional ethical standpoint and promotional techniques, the workshop has attracted the attention of a number of foreign journalists and academics (I count myself among them). Hence, this geographically diverse and ideologically independent group of

people have been able to promote the workshop widely and to reinforce its unorthodox viewpoints.

The “audience” of the workshop’s campaigns is therefore split between a small group of local clients and supporters, who desire practical support and are mostly communicated with in person and a larger but more intangible group of “online friends” who support the workshop in that they discuss it and promote its work to others. Public acts organized by the workshop therefore must often achieve many simultaneous aims. In an ideological sense, they aim to be consistent with the actual beliefs of the workshop without alienating either its local or its global community of supporters (by being either too extreme or not engaging enough). They must balance practical aims (attracting financial support for the group) with policy aims (campaigning for changes to the laws regarding prostitution or against maltreatment of sex workers) and with conceptual aims (campaigns which aim to change the public’s point of view regarding sex work).

The public campaigns of the workshop have therefore taken many and varied forms. They have ranged from protests in public spaces (like the “red umbrella” march in Wuhan, mentioned above) to campaigns centred on the workshop itself, such as AIDS testing days. Of particular interest are what might be termed performative protests. During mid-2012, for example, Ye Haiyan has begun to work in and promote “10-yuan brothels” where sexual services can be obtained for about USD1.50, or even without any payment at all. She acts herself as a temporary volunteer in these brothels, along with a number of mostly older prostitutes (Mooney, 2012). In terms of the workshop itself, it is clear that Ye Haiyan is the linchpin of all these campaigns. Although the local group of volunteers provide administrative and practical support, Ye organizes all the campaigns, works out what they will involve, promotes them, and is normally the main participant – sometimes the only participant. At an interview she spoke of a public march for which t-shirts had been printed with the text “I’m a sex worker and I’m proud” in both Chinese and English (although no member of the workshop can speak English); she was the only one who was willing to wear the t-shirt in public.

One key strategy in public campaigning is avoiding the worst effects of the state’s opposition to any form of public protest, and particularly protests with a legal emphasis. The workshop members spoke of three notable sources of state punishment: the local police (*jingcha* 警察), the national security apparatus (*guobao* 国保) and the stability maintenance office (*weiwenban* 维稳办). The experience of Ye Haiyan and the workshop bears out Flora Sapiro’s suggestion that local “para-police”, which aim to monitor and supervise Chinese citizens from a local level, are increasing in significance (Sapiro, 2010: 141-142); this is demonstrated by the occasional raids on the workshop (Mooney, 2012). In October 2012, the local authorities began a

saohuang 扫黄 campaign, a well-known label for activities which aim to “sweep away the yellow” (that is, sexual service and other activities deemed immoral). This may be linked to the imminent arrival of the 18th Party Congress (Gao, 2012). As part of this process, the workshop and its members were increasingly harassed by police and other government employees, and Ye indicated on Twitter that she felt she was being forced to leave Bobai.

However, often the state opposition to the workshop does not come from any identifiable source. Uniformed police are not the main source of trouble for the workshop; those people who have interrupted the work of the workshop, and indeed who have arrested and detained Ye Haiyan on two occasions, are difficult to identify, other than to say that they evidently have the state capacity to deprive people of their liberty. (On one occasion when I was in the workshop talking with some of its members, one middle-aged supporter stood out in the street, wearing a thick blue coat against the cold and watching us impassively. One of the workshop members called out playfully to him: “You look like a *guobao!*”)

It follows from this that the workshop has not attempted to develop alliances with any state body or registered non-government organization. Its connections with other people and organizations, whether local, national, or global, are highly informal and flexible. In one sense this approach seems to be successful. Both the local aims of the workshop – to benefit the health and welfare of the sex workers in Bobai – and its broader aims – to promote sex work in a positive fashion and to defend the rights of sex workers in general – are, within reason, being achieved. While the state clearly has the capacity to intervene and destroy the workshop entirely, or to arrest Ye Haiyan and others for a long period of time, it has not, and it has not prevented the workshop from doing the work that it intends to do. The state’s strategy seems to be to force Ye to be so stressed and fearful that she quits her activist work; although Ye is clearly an exceptionally determined woman, her networks of followers have greatly mitigated against this risk. Further, the workshop has been allowed to arrange campaigns which have been well publicized in the international and unofficial Chinese media. Ye’s blogs are still freely accessible in China, and her Twitter account is steadily gaining followers. In the next section, I attempt to generalize about the strategies that the workshop is using, and to assess their validity in the longer term and in a broader geographic context.

5. Avoiding the Centre

I suggest that the key features of the Bobai workshop’s strategic approach may be generalized under two headings: glocalism and transgressiveness. These two approaches share an important characteristic, which is that they fail to

engage with the party-state and particularly with the rhetoric and apparatus of the central government. This is to say that the workshop is not just anti-state. It is also consciously non-state and separate to the state, in its organization, its discourse, and its aesthetic approach. This may be contrasted with many other NGOs and public activists in China. Glocalism and transgressiveness are common strategies in public activism in the West, particularly in response to perceived oppression by states and corporate bodies. They are correspondingly rare in China, and so the question arises whether the workshop's approach is a genuine outlier or a vanguard for future activism in China.

It is difficult to trace the precise origins of the terms "glocalism" or "glocalization". What is immediately clear, though, is that such terms were used furiously and somewhat indiscriminately in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a means of responding to the then widespread trend of activism, most famously the protests against the World Trade Organization, that opposed a range of things and processes that were called "globalized" or were deemed to represent "globalization". The trends and language of this type of activism have moved on, however, and the best-known activist movements of the late 2000s – the Arab Spring revolutions and the Occupy movements – displayed very little tendency to demonize the global *per se*; whereas the Seattle protests of 1999 were framed as an attempt to curb the tendencies of globalization, in the Occupy movements roughly the same targets were labelled differently, as the "one per cent".

I make this point to illustrate that my use of the word "glocalism" draws less from those sources, generally published in the wake of these anti-globalization movements, which demonstrate how the state can intervene and mediate the relationships between the local and the global (of which Brenner (2003) is a good example), and more from those sources which – particularly drawing from Ohmae (1999) – posit that glocalization may in fact curb the effects of the nation-state and nationalism (Hempel, 1996: 152-153). Furthermore, my use of the term emphasizes flows of capital relatively less (although, of course, these are acutely relevant to the sex industry itself, they make less of a contribution to the strategic approach of the workshop activists) and more flows of culture and information. In particular, Wellman (2003) provides a prescient analysis of how glocalized networks function, in which "boundaries are more permeable, interactions are with diverse others, linkages switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies are both flatter and more complexly structured". (Wellman, 2003: 11) This analysis is prescient because it predates the advent of Web 2.0 and the online social networks which have facilitated the transfer of the vast majority of information about the workshop.

I emphasize glocalism as a structure for understanding the workshop first because no other term emphasizes so strongly the juxtaposition of the local and the global in its strategy and development. To return to Warner's language

of publics, the workshop members understand themselves as members of a local, practical public and of a global, conceptual public. As for the potential publics at an intermediate level that they might engage with – in particular, their identities as citizens of Guangxi or of the People’s Republic of China – these are either consciously abandoned or merely ignored.

Apart from the anti-state discourse discussed in the previous section, Ye Haiyan has cultivated a political standpoint which cannot genuinely be aligned with any conventional political sector of the PRC. In a recent series of Twitter posts⁷, she explained that she favoured the right-wing sides of Chinese political discourse over the left, attacking the left for being obnoxious and violent and attacking ordinary people under the banner of patriotism and mindless support of government, and favouring the right because of their perceived support of democracy, regulation and the law; even so, she acknowledged the limitations of the right and said that she supported them only on balance. This content is similar to the types of posts which were one factor in the detention of citizen activists like Zhao Lianhai 赵连海 and Teng Biao, but the tone is fundamentally more dismissive of state power – it is the abstract analysis of an outsider rather than someone who is involved closely in the political system. Despite suggesting that she preferred the right because of their support of courts and laws, for example, Ye Haiyan’s real-life experience is one in which every apparatus of the state, including the courts, are more or less hostile to their aims.

This type of abstract attack on the Centre is perhaps characteristic, in its nihilism, of the *liumang* (hooligan, a label which Ye has appropriated for herself) tendency in Chinese literature and art of the 1980s and 1990s, of which Wang Shuo 王朔 was the most famous proponent. It also draws from the wave of critical artists, bloggers and authors of the 2000s, of which Han Han 韩寒 and Ai Weiwei are the best-known. But what is much rarer is to see this type of language used by an uneducated rural woman who is the representative of a social organization. Unlike lawyers and academics, who have spent many years being educated about the state in facilities run by the state, and unlike people of the previous generation to Ye, who generally had first-hand experience of the “iron rice bowl” welfare system provided by the state and its system of work units, Ye, and the sex workers she represents, have had relatively less engagement with the state, other than as a violent and punitive force. Their opposition to the policies of the Centre is mixed with a fundamental lack of engagement with what the state does – a manifestation of the effects of the “retreat of the state” from economic activity (Perry and Selden, 2003: 12) during the reform period, but of the maintenance of state power in law enforcement.

The glocalism paradigm may also begin to provide an answer to the question of why the Centre has not attacked Ye Haiyan in force. An absence

of engagement with the state, in the sense that there has been no attempt either to form alliances with the state or to attack particular individuals or groups connected with the state, may allow the workshop to “fly under the radar” of state intervention, in that there is no particular state body which would be so directly affected by the workshop as to spend time and resources on opposing it. When the workshop *is* attacked, it is either because of the whims of individual law enforcers or as part of broad campaigns like the *saohuang* campaign which do not target it especially. To use Woodman’s analysis, the publics inhabited by the workshop are segmented from those of the state in that there is little overlap in personnel between them.

On the other hand, as Bruno Latour suggests, one result of glocalization is that “every global view [is] firmly localized into one specific site” (Latour, 2005). Ideas which are understood in principle in the global sense – in this case, the global discourse of feminism and sex work – are lived out in practice in the local. This brings us to the second key characteristic of the workshop’s strategy – that it can gain benefits from adopting an ideological stance which is contrary to mainstream Chinese culture. I label this stance “transgressive” because its focus on a liberal attitude to sexuality and on the individual’s prerogative to negotiate his or her own identity in opposition to cultural hegemony appears to share qualities both with the Western “transgressive art” movement and the provocative, individual-focused “identity work” of sexuality activists in the West. Furthermore, the use of this stance allows members of the workshop to go beyond conventional state discourse and hence create new spaces for the formation of identity.

The work of the workshop, in particular the leadership and role modelling provided by Ye Haiyan, generally adheres to the paradigms described by Snow and Macadam (2000) relating to the role of identity work in the growth of social movements, namely that participation in social movements generally involves the development and negotiation of changes to the identities of individuals (Snow and Macadam, 2000: 46), that participation in activist communities often results in “identity convergence”, where participants take on similar qualities of identity as they participate (Snow and Macadam, 2000: 47-48), and that identities are appropriated from existing solidary networks (Snow and Macadam, 2000: 49). In the case of social movements where the participants are engaged in activities that are commonly disapproved of by mainstream society, in particular activities regarded as being sexually “deviant”, a common model is one where participants make use of the sense of group solidarity to move from a sense of shame in their identities to a sense of pride. (Britt and Heise, 2000)

The work of the Bobai workshop explicitly aims to increase the “emotional capital” of its clients. It uses the language of pride in sex work, and as can be seen from the English language t-shirt mentioned above, it is a

deliberately internationalized discourse. The workshop sells sex toys and manuals along with its health products, and its use of the language of rights, together with the sexually provocative art produced and endorsed by Ye Haiyan, frames the work of the workshop as embodying a broader ideology – of people’s right to pursue pleasure and enjoy sex – as well as its practical concerns for health and welfare.

Consciously or unconsciously, Ye Haiyan uses her talent in communication to facilitate the emotional transfer described by Britt and Heise: using the rhetoric of anger as a means of “activating” a transition from shame and fear to pride and pleasure in their work (Britt and Heise, 2000: 265). This paradigm has had effects broader than might have originally been intended, as the recruitment and support of young gay men demonstrates: at interview, Ye Haiyan suggested that the group would also be open to people identifying with other alternative sexualities, such as the BDSM movement – despite the unsurprising absence of diverse cultures of sexuality in the rural Bobai region.

Although the ideology has been handed down from person to person in a rather informal way, the Bobai workshop can therefore be said to be engaging with a thread of discourse that can be called “sex-positive” or “pro-sexuality”, specifically originating from the reaction against those “second-wave” feminists who criticized pornography and sex work as being a manifestation of the oppression of women, and which endorses free sexual expression and a liberal attitude to the promotion of sexual minorities, focusing therefore on “all women’s right to explore and define [their] own sexuality” (Queen, 2001; Ahmed, 2011: 228-231). The sex-positive discourse has spread from the sphere of feminism to the promotion of sexual minorities in general. The debate about the philosophical and political validity of sex-positive feminism, and particularly about the place of a sex-positive discourse in sex work, is extremely complex and substantial and I do not intend to engage with it here. However, what is particularly important to note is that the workshop is endorsing an ideology and a style of communication which runs against the grain of Chinese culture.

As a general rule, sex-positive feminism attempts to confront and criticize the moral and political standards of mainstream sexuality: it is a “quest for a politically incorrect sexuality that transgresses movement standards” (Glick, 2000: 21). As such, it is a consequence of the movement that it is placed in conceptual opposition to the ideas on sexuality normally promoted by governments. This applies in China, but the ideological placement of the workshop is complex. While sex work is illegal and is officially condemned, sexual services are readily available across China. As Elaine Jeffreys suggests, “the CCP is as implicated in the creation of spaces for sexual entrepreneurship and consumption as it is in the policing of these spaces.” (Jeffreys, 2006b: 13)

That is to say, the construction of legal sex shops, for example, demonstrates an entrepreneurial attitude towards sex and its consumption (McMillan, 2006) which is shared by the illegal side of the sex industry.

As an activity and a concept, however, sex in China is not officially framed as an inherent right or something which should be pursued as a means of gaining pleasure or expressing oneself. Rather, the state and its collaborators are grappling with the increased liberalization of sexual behaviour in China by attempting to link sex and sexuality with virtue as defined by the state. For instance, McMillan describes how sex shops are framed as health care centres, where attendants dressed in white coats promote the use of “health products” such as vibrators and blow-up dolls (McMillan, 2006: 131-135). Sigley demonstrates that the state attitude towards sex and the sex industry is influenced both by the belief that sexual liberalization may have undesirable political effects and by the desire to link sexual behaviour to the repressive and authoritarian tenets of “socialist morality” and “Chinese tradition” (Sigley, 2006: 48). Although the trend is towards sexual liberalization, there is still little engagement from the party-state in discourses of sexual rights and freedoms: the aim is social engineering and control.

The Bobai workshop does engage with two of the three conceptual structures mentioned above. Its practical aims necessarily mean that it is a health organization and that it must work in an environment of sexual entrepreneurship. Its policy aim of law reform is controversial, but is not wholly incongruent with legal discourse in China⁸. But there are many aspects of its work which use provocative sexual discourse to engage its members and to help shape their identities. I would argue that the state has little idea of how to react to these aspects. Users of the state discourse have few responses when confronted with material which takes a sex-positive approach but is not actually pornographic and therefore illegal. Transgressive materials which suggest that one should be proud of one’s alternative sexualities, or which put forward the argument that any form of consensual sexual expression is an inherent good, are not conveniently understood under the paradigms of facilitation of health or of public socialist morality. Cadres and other government officials may of course engage with these ideas on a personal level, but they do not fit neatly into government discourse.

This strategic approach may be compared to that taken by non-government and quasi-government organizations such as the All-China Women’s Federation and Women’s Watch-China. Such organizations engage closely with the state apparatus: they recruit academic support, discuss laws, hold formal meetings, attempt to register themselves as NGOs, and in general seek to use the language and discourse of the state. This is demonstrated by the discourse which permeated the attempts in 2012 to reform the law

which separated “child prostitution” from “rape” and thus put children at the risk of arrest and punishment. The “Special Seminar on Crime of ‘Whoring Underage Girls’”, organized by the Zhongze Women’s Legal Counseling and Service Center (众泽妇女法律咨询服务中心) in June 2012, was reported and promoted in the official “mainstream media”; it involved representatives from the National People’s Congress Internal and Judicial Affairs Committee, the Supreme People’s Court, the Supreme People’s Procuratorate, the Ministry of Justice, and the All-China Women’s Federation, together with experts from eight universities and a number of interested members of the public (Women’s Watch-China, 2012: 5). The assembled experts debated for a day and came to the conclusion that the law needed reform and made several recommendations.

The case of the Aizhixing (愛知行) Institute, a non-government organization which has advocated for AIDS sufferers since the early 2000s, also illustrates the discourse style common to discussions of sex: while its aims are far more controversial than the quasi-government organizations above and the institute and its leaders have been persecuted by the party-state, its methods are still based on the discourse of government and of academia. As I suggest above, the Hong Kong organization Ziteng has been a model for the Bobai workshop: in contrast to the mainland organizations, it prioritizes outreach and public promotion over research and liaison with government.

There is nothing particularly extraordinary about the above two instances of political and legal reform and consultation processes in China, but they do demonstrate the formalized, structured, and government-centred way in which sex and sex work is normally discussed in China. The academic and legal experts who discuss these issues are a segmented public of their own; the Bobai women’s workshop provides an alternative type of forum in which the people who actually participate in sex work can express their sense of injustice, reinforce their identities, and feel pride in their work, none of which are provided in governmental discourse. It is therefore a distinctive and valuable space, and one which is using its separateness from the state to positive effect.

6. Conclusion

Some years ago, in considering an online rights promotion forum, I suggested that the discourse of the forum, its aesthetic style and the language it used, had “offensive” and “defensive” functions (Benney, 2007: 443). The offensive function allowed the forum to promote its actual aims, whereas the defensive function attempted to prevent the adverse interference of the state. Normally the defensive functions of Chinese social movements have been characterized by appeals to the Centre and appropriations of mainstream Chinese political

language. Those social movements which opposed the state have had little or no defensive function (normally by definition), and appear to have been at a higher risk of state intervention.

The workshops organized by Ye Haiyan demonstrate a modification to this paradigm which may prove viable in the long term. The Bobai workshop is essentially an anti-state organization which makes no attempt to engage positively with state discourse and which forms close links with many highly controversial individuals. Nonetheless, it has been able both to perform useful practical work at the grass-roots level and to sustain an engaged community of supporters at the global level. It has done this by using strategies which may be characterized as “non-state” as much as “anti-state”.

Localized rural social movements have generally used appeals to the Centre as one of their promotional strategies. This has not necessarily stopped them from being censured and punished by regional as well as local authorities. There will never be a long-term answer to the question of when the state will intervene in social movements until the legal process in China is made transparent and effective, but the case of the Bobai workshop demonstrates that social strategies which juxtapose the local and the global, and which take on unorthodox social philosophies, are both readily available to the average Chinese activist and demonstrate significant potential for the future.

Notes

- + I offer my thanks to Ye Haiyan and my other anonymous interviewees. I also thank Andrew Cheng for his assistance with the transcription of interviews.
 - * Dr Jonathan Benney is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the National University of Singapore’s Asia Research Institute, and a graduate of the University of Melbourne. His research and previous publications concentrate on rights discourse, activism, and the use of new media in China. His first book, *Defending Rights in Contemporary China*, was published in July 2012. Before coming to NUS, he worked as a lecturer, tutor and researcher at several Australian universities. <Email: arijdb@nus.edu.sg>
1. In this article I am using the term “sex work” to cover a wide range of acts, ranging from the “accompaniment” of men by women in such places as karaoke bars, to hired long-term mistresses (or *ernai* 二奶), to the hiring of prostitutes, both male and female, for specifically sexual purposes in “beauty parlours” (*falang* 发廊) and other *de facto* brothels. Over the course of more than a decade, Jeffreys (1997, 2004, 2006a and 2006b) has described the development of this industry from its beginnings in the early 1980s to its current widespread and sophisticated form. Huang *et al.* (2004) concentrate specifically on southern China and demonstrate the commonness of sex work, the various forms it takes, and the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases among sex workers (for example, 10.6 per cent of sex workers in Guangxi in 2000 were found to be HIV positive).

Zheng (2009a and 2009b) provides anthropological and ethnographic analyses of groups of sex workers and hostesses, illustrating the formation of communities and the development of relationships with the state. There is a plethora of other material on this subject, but my aim in this article is to concentrate on the strategic approach of the women's workshop and its campaigners, rather than to engage substantially in the debate about the rightness or wrongness of various approaches to regulating sex work.

2. Here I use Goffman (1974)'s idea of "frame analysis" as a means of reading and analyzing the texts and utterances produced by Ye Haiyan and the workshop. My previous work drew on the idea and the sociological methodology of frame analysis as a means of analyzing rights discourse (Benney, 2012: 32); here I am simply applying the same technique to the parallel language of emotion and injustice.
3. I am synthesizing this narrative from the interviews I conducted with Ye Haiyan and other workshop members in February 2012 and from the material contained on her website (<http://www.chinese38.com>), as well as a number of journalists' reports, the most substantial of which are Mooney (2012) and Branigan (2010).
4. The name of the workshop differs when it is published in different sources, sometimes including words like "women's" and "rights". When spoken of it was always just called "the workshop" (*gongzuoshi* 工作室). In this article I call the people who regularly use the workshop and who are involved in its activities "members". This should not be taken to imply that there is a formal structure for registration or membership. Rather, it is intended to convey a greater sense of agency and ownership over the workshop than words like "participant" or "client".
5. While working in Wuhan, Ye worked with and interviewed various male sex workers; at one stage videos of these interviews were available on her website.
6. I discuss Ye Haiyan's use of Twitter further in my 2011 article and 2012 conference paper.
7. Microblog posts are relatively short, so this argument was mounted in a series of posts made on 20th August 2012, the first of which is recorded at <http://twitter.com/#!/liumangyan/status/237194512315842560>.
8. A few members of Chinese legislative bodies have made a largely symbolic effort to lobby for reform to prostitution laws: Chi Susheng 迟夙生, a deputy to the National People's Congress from Heilongjiang, has been a prominent campaigner for law reform, and has put several motions for the legalization of prostitution before the Congress. (Shek, 2012)

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