

Kong, Travis S.K., University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Transient Queer Labour: The Challenges and Negotiation of Urban Citizenship among Rural-to-urban Migrant Male Sex Workers in China

Abstract: As part of a massive rural-to-urban migrant population of more than 100 million in contemporary China, rural male migrants in their early twenties are increasingly joining the sex industry which offers same-sex sexual services to other men. These young men, who are known as “money boys”, form a new urban subject. However, for a number of reasons such as state laws restricting access to permanent urban residency, the hard-line government policies on same-sex prostitution, the short life-cycle of the sex industry, and the rural homophobic culture, they are transient queer labor. These money boys move back and forth from one occupational setting to another, from sex work to other occupations, from one city to another. They live in the queer time of non-reproduction, work outside the logics of labour, and stay in queer places such as parks, brothels, and massage parlours that do not and never will belong to them.

Based on continuous ethnographic research since 2004, this article examines how these young men are caught up in the web of domination and power due to the three interlocking identities of rural migrants, prostitutes and men who have sex with men. By viewing their coping strategies as a citizenship-making process, this paper explores the way they negotiate a notion of identity under the confines of the dominant ideal of urban citizenship.