Article

Sisters, Bottoms, and "Exotic Combo": Homonormative Misogyny and Respectable Masculinity of Middle-Class Gay Sex Workers in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This article brings together queer studies and masculinities studies to discuss how middle-class gay sex workers in Hong Kong manage the stigma of same-sex sex work. Based on 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a gay erotic massage parlor in Hong Kong, I examine how middle-class gay sex workers in Hong Kong deploy locally specific notions about gender, class, and border to mitigate their anxiety about sex work and to establish a form of gay masculinity. The middle-class gay masseurs claim a respectable self through narrating multiple disrespectable others—women streetwalker, bottom masseur, and lower-class migrant sex worker. In everyday banter, satire, and bawdy jokes around these three figures, masseurs invoke homonormativity through misogynistic discourses about migrant women, femininity, effeminacy, and penetration. In so doing, they simultaneously produce gay masculinity and gay misogyny, a process I term "homonormative misogyny." In neoliberal Hong Kong, this form of gay respectability politics is emergent in an increasingly gentrified sexual economy.

Keywords

gay masculinity, gay misogyny, homonormativity, same-sex sex work, Hong Kong

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Introduction

Recently, Hong Kong has seen increasing participation of university-educated, middle-class aspiring gay men in sex work due to shrinking space for class mobility in the formal economy. In a multiply stigmatized MSM (men who have sex with men) sexual economy, these middle-class gay men nevertheless deploy various discourses of class, gender, cosmopolitanism, and citizenship to manage the stigma of same-sex sex work and to claim a respectable form of gay masculinity. Through studying various strategies of stigma management, I reveal an emergent gay respectability politics that is discursively mediated in misogyny, effeminophobia, and homonormativity. I call it "homonormative misogyny." It is a value system invoked by middle-class gay men to claim respectability in a stigmatized sexual economy. These gay men discursively deflect and redirect the stigma of sex work to other marginalized figures based on existing hierarchies of class, gender, and citizenship. In doing so, they establish a form of class-based masculinity at the expense of demeaning women's sexuality and sexual passivity among men.

In this article, I delineate three disrespectable "others" against which my informants, who are middle-class and gay-identified MSM sex workers, construct a respectable self—women streetwalker, bottom hooker (the penetrated role), and migrant Chinese sex worker. I seek to offer a non-Western framework to understand the construction of gay masculinity—through the combined lenses of gender, sexuality, class, and mobility—in the context of Hong Kong, a postcolonial cosmopolitan city in China. Combining queer studies with masculinity studies, I show that homonormativity has powerfully (re)structured the respectability politics vis-à-vis gender and sex at the margins of a developed neoliberal economy—sexual economy, thereby giving rise to homonormative misogyny. By homonormative misogyny, I refer to the way middle-class gay men refashion and reinscribe homonormativity through misogynistic discourses about migrant women, femininity, effeminacy, and penetration in a sexual economy. They draw upon local stereotypes about gender, border, and class to manage their anxiety about sex work, producing both gay masculinity and gay misogyny. I argue that homonormative misogyny oppresses queer politics because (a) it gentrifies a sexual economy that used to be a relatively safe haven of working-class and queer bodies, desires, and practices; (b) it reinforces middle-class cosmopolitan gay men as the most, if not the only, respectable subject in an urban sexual economy; and (c) it further limits the room for economic survival of working-class migrant MSM sex workers.

MSM Sex Work in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, men's sexual services are mostly discreet; massage parlors are one of the major venues of local sex work by men (Kong 2009). During the 2000s, Hong Kong saw an increase of men sex workers for two reasons (Kong 2009)—(a) more local low-skilled men entering the sex industry due to economic restructuring as well as economic

downturn after the 1997 financial crisis and the 2003 SARS epidemic; (b) a notable influx of young men from mainland China to Hong Kong because of the relaxed border after the end of British colonial rule in 1997. A local survey conducted in 2007 and 2008 reported that men sex workers from mainland China were more likely to work independently in hotels and rented apartments as "freelance workers" in Hong Kong; they also made less money than their local counterparts (Wong, Leung, and Li 2012, 340). In fact, this resonates with my ethnographic data collected from 2018 to 2020. During the NGO outreach services, I observed that many mainland Chinese masseurs in Hong Kong worked independently in rented rooms in run-down buildings with exposed wires and stained walls. Their working environment notedly contrasted with my major fieldsite— LaCasa, a massage parlor that animated a strong middle-class ambience with Jo Malone candles, Marshall music players, jazz music, and Aesop handwash. LaCasa has a clear market position, targeting middle-class and upper-middle-class clients with its luxurious experience. Compared with migrant Chinese sex workers, LaCasa represents a different form of MSM sexual services in terms of class and modes of operation, which has become increasingly popular in the late 2010s.

Age is another factor that intersects with class and modes of operation in differentiating erotic masseurs. Similar to LaCasa, many newly established massage parlors in the late 2010s and early 2020s mainly marketed younger masseurs in their 20s and 30s. Some masseurs in their 40s and 50s would gradually leave massage parlors. These senior masseurs might open their massage parlors and become spa owners; those who managed to retain a pool of regular clients might open a one-man spa, vernacularly known as a "workshop." At the same time, an increasing number of younger, entrepreneurial-minded masseurs in their late 20s and early 30s also opened their own massage parlors with the financial help of their clients-turned-partners (see Tsoi 2023). Thanks to the increasing education opportunities in Hong Kong from the 1990s to 2020s, on average local masseurs in their 20s and 30s have higher education attainment than masseurs in their 40s and 50s do. Thus, there is also a loose relationship between age and class background among masseurs—that younger masseurs possess more middle-class cultural capital (mainly in the form of taste) (Bourdieu 1984), which I will explain is crucial for them to distinct themselves from older masseurs whom they consider working-class.

Gay Masculinity

In earlier masculinities scholarship, gay masculinity is associated with femininity and rendered a form of subordinated masculinity in the relational framework of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995). However, this framework of hegemonic masculinity might limit the analytical scope of the wide range of men's practices and aspirations in everyday life as well as in a globalized setting (Beasley 2008; Moller 2007). In fact, as middle-class gays and lesbians have increasingly assimilated into mainstream society as an economically contributing but depoliticized constituency (Duggan 2002), the relationship between gay masculinity and hegemonic masculinity becomes more

entangled. Some straight men selectively appropriate gay aesthetics and subordinate masculinities to perform hybrid masculinities (Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014), though it does not remedy the "structural inequalities between straight and queer men" (Barber and Bridges 2017, 41). Likewise, while Connell (1992) had predicted that gayness as a form of sexual dissent might relax the binary gender system, more recent research shows that gay masculinity, especially under neoliberal regimes, does not necessarily "queer" hegemonic masculinity but instead reinforces conventional gender roles (Kong 2021). Similarly, Butler (1995) argues that the psychic formation of gay men subjects is complicated by melancholic gender identifications, which involves "the doing of misogyny" (Hale and Ojeda 2018). Thus, some forms of gay masculinity become complicit with hegemonic masculinity in reproducing the patriarchal structure of gender (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). These studies suggest that gay masculinity is sometimes co-opted in reproducing patriarchy; however, how exactly gay masculinity is structured around gender-based privileges and violence in everyday life remains unclear.

The rise of queer studies in the 1990s has turned our attention to the mismatch and messiness of desire, sex, and gender (Jagose 1996; Manalansan 2015; Warner 1991). Researchers have shown that the heterosexual–homosexual binary is inadequate to understand masculinity, considering the varied permutations of sexual practices and sexual identities in real life (Persson et al. 2019). Queer scholars have documented that straight-identified men, who engage in non-heterosexual behavior in same-sex sex work (Escoffier 2003) and in other social contexts (Silva 2021; Ward 2015), manage to retain their heterosexual masculinities. For instance, Padilla (2008) describes how straight-identified sex workers in the Dominica Republic adopt an economic narrative to explain their same-sex behavior; Robinson (2023) argues that cis straight men find a sense of masculinity in their paradoxical sexual desires for trans women. Following these queer scholars, I destabilize the heteronormative binaries, including straight–gay, men–women, to suggest that gay masculinity is not built upon a singular gay identity. Instead, its construction is a gendered and sexed process that discursively draws on multiple traits and expressions across the gender and sexuality spectrums. I argue that the construction of gay masculinity operates at the intersection of misogyny and penetrative sexuality, and eventually reproduces patriarchal and phallocentric dominion of men's penetrative sexuality over women's sexuality and sexual passivity among men.

Gay Misogyny

From a feminist lens, Manne (2018) considers misogyny not simply as individual or sexist resentment against women, but as a distributed form of discipline to subordinate women and non-men within institutional and socio-moral systems of patriarchy. The lens of gay misogyny sheds light on how gay men are implicated in multiple processes of gender oppression. As Bersani (1995) notes, gay men and queer women are not necessarily united by the shared identity as sexual minorities; rather, their relations are

contingent upon their respective relationship with hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy. Following Bersani, Martino (2006) cautions against romanticizing gay sexual politics as inherently queer or transformative, since gay men could be complicit in "misogyny, internalized homophobia, and a reclamation of hegemonic masculinity" (p. 59) as they seek to maintain patriarchal privileges. To conceptualize this, Maddison (2000) follows Sedgwick's work (1985) to propose masculine homosociality as "a coercive mechanism through which men acquire cultural and social power"— a system built upon the "active production of misogyny" (p. 74). The "co-opted" gay men must consistently and publicly display misogyny to prevent themselves from being cast as the "faggot-other," and to maintain the otherwise unstable homosociality with straight men (Maddison 2000, 74).

Importantly, gay misogyny manifests not only as hostility towards women as individuals, but also as repulsion for femininity and effeminacy (Bergling 2001; Richardson 2009). The latter helps discipline the misalignment of gender and sexualities (e.g., a feminine boy) in heteronormative social settings. Richardson (2009) argues that the underlying force of homophobia is effeminophobia—a term coined by Sedgwick (1993). Effeminophobia is a form of social regulation that preserves heteronormativity. As an example, teenage boys who display feminine traits at schools are bullied and labeled as "fag" in the US (Pascoe 2005). An effeminate boy could provoke social anxieties because he interrupts, and thus weakens, the homosocial circle of men's gender privilege; his performance and embodiment of femininity reveal the "plasticity of gender," therefore "mak[ing] *Gender Trouble*" (Richardson 2009, 529; emphasis in original).

Gay misogyny often intersects with cis-normativity and the dominance of white gay culture. Scholars have argued that trans-misogyny is rooted in sexism against women and femininity (Chamberland 2016; Serano 2007). For instance, Balaguera (2018) identifies gang violence faced by *chicas trans* (trans girls) in Central America as a form of "collective performance of hypermasculinity" (p. 645); Robinson (2023) argues that cis-men's sexual desires for trans women could be a form of "transamorous misogyny." On the other hand, Hale and Ojeda (2018) suggest how white gay culture reinscribes gender and racial hierarchies that marginalize queer femininities. These scholars offer intersectional analyses of race and gender to highlight the impact of gay misogyny on queer bodies, such as trans women, queer of color, and effeminate men, in the Western contexts. However, there are fewer studies adopting class as a central analytical scope to examine gay misogyny. I suggest that a class critique would illuminate how gay misogyny impinges on working-class women *across* the straight-queer spectrum. To fill this gap, this article examines the entanglements between homonormativity and gay misogyny through the intersected scopes of class, social origin, and migration status, which are important but overlooked factors in shaping the sexual and gender politics in a neoliberal Hong Kong marked with high cross-border mobility.

Respectability Politics Among Hong Kong Gay Men

The changing socioeconomic conditions in Hong Kong have largely influenced the formation of local gay masculinity. In a poverty-stricken post-war Hong Kong (1950s–1960s), masculinity was about fulfilling familial responsibilities as fathers, husbands, and sons; and this "breadwinner masculinity" was prevalent among local gay men in that era (Kong 2021, 71). As Hong Kong underwent neoliberalization in the 1980s and 1990s, gay masculinity was gradually marked by "individual competence and material success through entrepreneurship and upward mobility in the realm of education and work [...]," which Kong (2021) termed "neoliberal entrepreneurial masculinity" (p. 74). Importantly, this "neoliberal logic of self-enterprising" increasingly structures the respectability politics among local MSM sex workers (Tsoi 2023, 16). The emphasis on *self* resonates with Duggan's (2002) notion of homonormativity in the American context—that is, a "privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (p. 179). In Hong Kong, following the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1991, as well as accelerated neoliberalization after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, a middle-class cosmopolitan lifestyle has emerged as the key to gay respectability. This article will discuss how middle-class MSM sex workers invoke a locally specific homonormative order that is organized around notions of class, social origin, and cosmopolitanism in the sexual economy.

In "Thinking Sex" (1984), Rubin suggests that "good sex" is discursively constructed through layered distinction from "bad sex;" the former is designated by a "charmed circle" comprising heterosexual, monogamous, domestic (marital), non-commercial, and reproductive sexual practices. Rubin (2011) later notes that the stigma of sex work even exceeds this sex hierarchy because its stigma is not only about sex, but also labor (i.e., work). In Hong Kong, the stigma against MSM sex work is institutionalized in the local legal system, which originated from British colonial laws and continues to uphold Victorian sexual morality.[1] As such, local MSM sex workers, who practice homosexual, polygamous, and commercial sex, face multiple legal and moral constraints. Nonetheless, this article shows that local MSM sex workers' anxiety about sex work is partly resolved through invoking misogyny, effeminophobia, and classism. They construct a form of masculinity that on one hand draws upon existing homonormative politics, and on the other refracts the "whore stigma" (Pheterson 1993) to three disrespectable others: women streetwalker, bottom hooker (the penetrated role), and migrant Chinese sex worker. I will delineate how my informants negotiate on the margins of the normative gay respectability circle as they construct their gay masculinity; and in this process, how they mobilize and unavoidably reproduce multiple forms of social stratification based on gender, class, and migration status.

Methods

This research draws on two bodies of ethnographic data collected in Hong Kong—(a) preliminary research in a gay advocacy group between August and December 2018,

and (b) 11 months of ethnographic field research in a gay massage parlor in 2019 and 2020.

In the preliminary research, I worked as a part-time volunteer in a gay advocacy group in Hong Kong for 5 months in 2018. I joined outreach services for local same-sex sex workers, a local protest for sex workers' rights, and an invited visit to a police station to learn about the situation of sex workers in custody. Thanks to the advocacy group, I established connections with two massage parlor owners and six masseurs. After 5 months of informal conversations with these informants, I designed the roadmap for my fieldwork.

In the following year, I performed 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a local gay massage parlor called LaCasa from August 2019 to June 2020. LaCasa was hidden in a low-end commercial building in a bustling working-class district in Hong Kong. When I first knew LaCasa's owners, the business was still under preparation. Therefore, I had the opportunity to witness the recruitment and renovation processes of LaCasa. To target a middle-class clientele, LaCasa's owners, Adrian and Ben, invested in expensive equipment and decorations, wrote their official webpage in English, and mostly recruited well-groomed, well-educated, and young masseurs. I conducted participant observation first as a masseur trainee and then as a janitor. I joined training sessions with newly recruited masseurs, spent time with them in the staff room, and partook in their various after-work social activities. At the beginning, I came to know Adrian, one of the two LaCasa's owners. Through Adrian's network, I gradually met more masseurs. Eight of my key informants were native-born-and-raised Hong Kong men in their mid to late twenties. All of them self-identified as gay.[2] They had bachelor's and/or associate degrees. They mainly spoke Cantonese, the dominant language in Hong Kong. Our similar age and sociocultural backgrounds facilitated rapport building and eased my entry into their social life beyond working hours. I spent time with them in diners, shopping malls, gyms, nightclubs, and hotels. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, massage parlors in Hong Kong had been periodically affected by official lockdowns. Hence, LaCasa's owners had arranged a replacement for masseurs to work in hotel rooms. The hotel thus became another important field site. In my fieldwork, I met thirty-five masseurs, four spa owners, and twenty clients, among which eight masseurs and two spa owners became key informants.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Key informants were informed about the research design and objectives. All ethnographic data in this article are drawn only from my key informants, whose identities are protected by pseudonyms and minor revisions of their backgrounds. Three informants have read parts of the original drafts and offered suggestions, which I have incorporated into the final draft.

"Sisters Downstairs" and the "Whore Stigma"

> In the staff room, I was talking with Martin, a 23-year-old "Red-card [a vernacular term for popular masseurs]." He was sharing with his fellow masseurs how to be a popular masseur. The 31-year-old LaCasa's co-owner, Adrian, also a former Red-card, interrupted Martin: "What's the matter with you? Proud of being a whore?" Later, Martin and I had dinner. He addressed Adrian's insults: "That was rude and offensive. We all do the same kinda work, offering sex for money. Perhaps Adrian thought I was too cocky to 'lecture' others on how to become popular. [...] But I am not proud of being a sex worker. Why would I?"
>
> –Excerpts of field notes, October 2019

Adrian the spa owner invoked the stigma of sex work to publicly shame Martin—asking him if he was "proud of being a whore." Ironically, Adrian enjoyed recounting his "good old days" as a Red-card himself. His proud proclamation of being a popular sex worker strikingly contrasted with the way he shamed Martin. These conflicting attitudes of pride and shame towards being a sex worker were shared by many other LaCasa's masseurs in their playful identification as a "whore"—and also their denial of being a *true* "whore," as I will show below. Adrian and Martin's story shows that the way masseurs managed the stigma of sex work could be an emotionally taxing process. Nevertheless, in managing the stigma of sex work, LaCasa's masseurs often invoked another group of sex workers in the neighborhood—"sisters downstairs."

Ten floors below LaCasa, women streetwalkers with detailed makeup, see-through tops, denim jackets, and leather miniskirts flanked the street to catch the attention of potential clients. Masseurs in LaCasa jokingly called these streetwalkers "sisters downstairs." Hayden, a 24-year-old masseur, asked Adrian:

> **Hayden**: Don't you think we are similar to the streetwalkers?
>
> **Adrian**: [shocked and spoke hastily] Of course not! You are making much more money. You are not serving construction workers. And you are not standing on the street!

For masseurs, streetwalkers were more than a subject of entertainment; they were considered the "real" sex workers—working-class migrant women from rural China who targeted lower-class men in Hong Kong. It is against this "real" sex worker image that masseurs managed the stigma of their participation in sex work. Inspired by the "sisters downstairs," my key informants playfully called themselves "sisters from the same clan." In everyday life, masseurs also half-mockingly called each other "whore," "streetwalker," and "sister." They found these labels—all signifying the stigmatized figure of a woman sex worker—amusing. I suggest that, in calling one another "sisters," masseurs recognized the stigma of sex work, and discursively deflected it towards an unsophisticated and raunchy figure of a migrant woman sex worker. I will examine these discursive processes through which masseurs deployed and reproduced social

hierarchies of gender, class, citizenship, language, the private/public, and urban/rural divides.

Notably, masseurs comically associated themselves with women sex workers 雞 [*gai1*] rather than men sex workers鴨[*aap2*]. This reveals their gendered ideas about sex work. Historically, women have been more susceptible to being shamed for performing sex work than men, due to the more stringent discipline on women's sexuality. Gail Pheterson (1993) coined the term "whore stigma" to describe the sexist control and demonization of women's sexuality, which legitimizes scrutiny, stereotype, and violence against "bad girls." A woman sex worker is the representative of all bad girls because she rejects the patriarchal constraints over her body. She deploys her sexuality in the public sphere (i.e., the market), which violates the confinement of her sexuality in the domestic sphere. Ralston (2021) termed "whorephobia" to capture the "hatred of and discrimination against sex workers" (p. 5). Whorephobia, or its more popular name—slut-shumming, is sustained through a sexual double standard—that is, women's sexuality is intrinsically bad and unruly and thus warrants policing, whereas men's sexuality is natural and *naturally* pleasure-seeking which requires no such restraints (Ralston 2021).

This highly gendered "whore stigma" is not universal; it is morphed ecologically and variedly across different time-spaces (Hallgrímsdóttir et al. 2008). In Hong Kong, the "whore stigma" has been informed by the history of discrimination against "new immigrant 新移民," in particular women, from mainland China. After 156 years of British colonial rule, Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997. However, as the border between Hong Kong and mainland China relaxed in the early 2000s, various socio-cultural and economic conflicts between local Hong Kongers and new immigrants from mainland China flared up (Mathews, Ma, and Lui 2008; So 2011). Particularly, due to the melodramatic portrayal of the "second wives" phenomenon in local media and popular culture from the mid-1990s to 2000s (Lang and Smart 2002; Tam 1996), mainland Chinese women were stigmatized as hypersexual, morally suspicious, and a threat to local marriages in Hong Kong (Choi and Lai 2021). Furthermore, in Hong Kong, mainland Chinese women were socially imagined to be an ethnic *other* based on their visible differences in clothes, hairdo, language, and habits (Lee 2005); borrowing Luna's (2020) words, these migrant women are "phenotypically and sartorially [...] pinned down"(p. 48–9). As such, working-class migrant Chinese women in Hong Kong were labeled as unsophisticated outcasts.

In LaCasa, this sexist and classist gaze against migrant Chinese women was directed at the "sisters downstairs." It resembles what Schein (1997) called the "internal orientalism" in post-Mao China—that is, urbanized men who live in cities exoticizing rural Chinese women. In Hong Kong's mass media, women sex workers from mainland China have been portrayed as "ignorant, desperate and deceptive" and "vector[s] of the diseases" responsible for the influx of HIV (Ming 2005, 35–8). These morally charged stereotypes were reinscribed in masseurs' everyday parody of streetwalkers. Gordon the masseur often mimicked the streetwalkers by holding an invisible cigarette with two fingers as if he was smoking on the street. As a parody of soliciting, another masseur

intimately leaned onto Adrian with three fingers pointing upward, and asked eagerly: "HK$300, okay?" Masseurs also put on a fake Mandarin accent to mock the streetwalkers, drawing on the wider linguistic discrimination against Mandarin in postcolonial Hong Kong (see Li and Liu 2022). Notably, masseurs tended to speak with a Mandarin accent when they talked about something sexual: "I got to serve the customer now"; "It felt so good"; "How are you doing, Mister?" Most tellingly, they pronounced the Cantonese word "sucking"含[*ham4*] with a Mandarin accent as [*han4*].

In Hong Kong, the whore stigma has been fixated on the image of a migrant Chinese woman. This allowed masseurs in LaCasa to play with the stigmatized "whore" image from a safe distance along the hierarchies of gender, class, and social origin. In their caricature of "sisters downstairs," they nevertheless remapped the stigma of sex work onto local hierarchies of migration status, linguistics, class, and gender. The following dialogue shows how masseurs distanced themselves from the "whore stigma," while ironically calling themselves "whores."

> **David**: It seems that you often address yourself and others as "whore 雞[*gai1*]." Do you actually see yourself as one?
>
> **Gordon**: Don't be silly! Of course no, I am not a whore! After all, I am a university graduate, and I have overseas working experience.

To ward off the "whore stigma," Gordon invoked his social status, education attainment, and international working experience—all middle-class social markers in Hong Kong. As masseurs played with the "whore" label, their privileged positions as local-born, well-educated, and cosmopolitan men shielded them from the "whore stigma" that is highly classed and gendered. In this way, masseurs could mediate their shared anxiety about sex work in their lighthearted identification as "whore" without being tainted by the stigma.

Masseurs also reinforced class and spatial hierarchies to subordinate women streetwalkers. These hierarchies were based on (a) clienteles of different classes, and (b) different work locations. To establish a class hierarchy, masseurs emphasized their clients' (upper-)middle-class backgrounds, including their cultural capital and purchasing power. In the staff room, masseurs would proudly recount how wealthy, successful, and well-traveled their regular clients were: "Mr. Leung owns several properties on Hong Kong Island"; "Mr. Wong just returned from a business trip in New York"; "Mr. Chan has a man of high quality質素 [*zat1 sou3*, which correlates with *Suzhi* 素質in Mandarin (see Kipnis 2006)]." Following Bourdieu (1984), Oselin and Barber (2019) document that men of color who practice street sex work borrow "fleeting material and symbolic privileges" (p. 219) from their clients who are usually white and well-off. Similarly, masseurs temporarily borrowed a higher status and certain cultural capital from their (upper-)middle-class clients. At the same time, they looked down on their "sisters downstairs" who often relied on working-class clients.

Besides cultural capital, masseurs also emphasized their clients' higher purchasing power. Adrian often used the streetwalkers as a comparison: "The sisters downstairs have to do it all [to offer intercourse] to make HK$300. They are poor. You guys are lucky." Masseurs on average made HK$500 with a full-body massage and a hand job. For intercourse, masseurs made anywhere from HK$1,000 to HK$3,000, depending on one's popularity, sex role, negotiation skills, and personal relationship with the client. Adrian's words might be intended to make masseurs feel content with their working conditions and remuneration. His words nevertheless reinforced a sense of superiority in masseurs who already constantly looked down on streetwalkers for offering more services but making less money.

Furthermore, Adrian invoked a spatial hierarchy of sexual labor based on the public/private divide. He told masseurs: "[...] You are not serving construction workers. And you are not standing on the street." He rendered streetwalkers less respectable for soliciting in public. This spatial hierarchy of sex work emerged as sexual labor became increasingly privatized in postindustrial societies (see Bernstein 2007). In LaCasa, masseurs discursively constructed their superior status over streetwalkers through everyday banter, satire, and bawdy jokes. In so doing, masseurs discursively directed the "whore stigma" towards streetwalkers through multiple stratifications of class, gender, social origin, language, and space.

The Bottom-Hooker Shame

In LaCasa, the 30-year-old Karl was a six-foot-tall muscular masseur with contrastingly feminine mannerisms. His sturdy physique attracted many clients who preferred masculine men. However, other masseurs often ridiculed his feminine demeanor, calling him "Ar Je [the elder sister]." Although Karl stressed numerous times that he was a top (the active role), others found a feminine top amusing, and playfully addressed him as "Yat Je 一姐 [the 'top' sister]."

In the local gay parlance, the active sex role is called "1/top [the active role]," the passive role "0/bottom [the passive role]," and those who are flexible "10/vers [versatile]." In LaCasa, each masseur's sex role was an open secret; clients could find this information from the spa owner or even online prior to reservation.[3] A masseur's sex role often induces certain stereotypical expectations of one's gender expression among peers. While not all gay men practice anal sex, this categorization of gay men has transformed from a bedroom code into shared stereotypes in quotidian life—that tops are masculine and bottoms are feminine (Lau 2004). As shown in the way Karl, a top masseur, was teased for being feminine, these stereotypes informed the notion of masculinity within LaCasa.

Since its opening days, anti-femininity had prevailed in LaCasa. During training sessions, LaCasa's owners repeatedly instructed masseurs to "act" masculine—from hand gestures to voice. They urged masseurs to build muscles and enhance their testosterone levels through weightlifting and cardio exercises. These instructions to disembody femininity were business-oriented: most local clients prefer masseurs who

are masculine, athletic, and muscular, rather than feminine or "diva-ish." The anti-femininity setting in LaCasa was also shaped by the wider phenomenon of effeminophobia in the Hong Kong gay community. For some local gay men, masculinity is attained through discursively effeminizing, othering, and taunting those in the passive sex role—bottoms. In the following, I will show how effeminophobia is closely organized around the notion of penetrative sexuality among masseurs.

In LaCasa, sexual passivity connoted effeminacy. Feminine epithets, such as "Big Sis 阿姐," "Little Sis 阿妹," "Beauty 阿美," "She-elf 妖精," "Singing Lady 歌女," were exclusively imposed on bottom masseurs. In Brazil, the gender system of trans sex workers is contingent upon penetrative sex; while the penetrator remains a man, the penetrated is considered a *viado*, a fag (Kulick 1998). Similarly, masseurs developed a gender system based on penetrative sex. Bottom masseurs were called feminine names; this naming process stems from a popular belief among local gay men—being penetrated *effeminizes* a man. As such, bottom masseurs were discursively effeminized.

Noteworthy is that these labels were mainly used by top masseurs to tease and humiliate bottom masseurs. This process of effeminizing thus involves the transferal of the stigma of sex work from top masseurs to bottom masseurs. Hayden was a very popular masseur and generated a considerable profit for LaCasa. Still, Hayden faced everyday ridicule by other masseurs and even LaCasa's owners because he was a bottom. He just finished a massage session and went back to the staff room. Several masseurs were chitchatting whilst enjoying tofu pudding as dessert. Hayden's close friend Gordon started teasing him: "Babe, was it fun being used by Mr. Leung [Hayden's regular client]?" Drowned in bubbling sniggers, Hayden did not respond. Another scornful voice rose: "I saw you take lots of condoms and lubricant before you entered the room. All used up?" While both top and bottom masseurs would bring protections to work, it was often the bottom masseurs who faced mockery. Then, Adrian framed Hayden as a feminized prostitute: "You Little Sis [i.e., Hayden] is a tender southern bird流鶯 [a euphemism for women sex workers in Chinese literature]. He got special skills for men." Adrian discursively effeminised Hayden, teasing his sexual passivity and emotional sensuality. In this scene, Hayden's sexual passivity and sexual labor were openly discussed. The top masseurs made it clear that they were not offering compliments, but borderline derision. As such, they directed the stigma of sex work to bottom masseurs.

Hayden's story also demonstrates another form of stigma transferral—the stigma of homosexuality. It was mainly top masseurs who ridiculed Hayden. This mirrors a broader phenomenon in the local gay community—that bottoms disproportionately bear the stigma of homosexuality, which is evident in the language. The term "dead slutty bottom 死淫零" is used to insult bottoms for being promiscuous. However, there is no similar slut-shaming term for tops.[4] In contrast, the term "brute top 猛一" is used to praise a top's sexual prowess. These labels glorify *penetrative* sexuality and demean *penetrated* sexuality. They were widely used by masseurs in LaCasa to project the stigma of homosexuality towards bottom masseurs. Meanwhile, top masseurs also projected the stigma of *sex work* towards bottom masseurs. Together, the double

stigmas of *homosexuality* and *sex work* were unevenly distributed based on sex roles in LaCasa. I term these intersected stigmas of homosexuality and sex work imposed upon bottom MSM sex workers "bottom-hooker shame."

In LaCasa, the bottom-hooker shame was further reinforced in the narrations around sexual organs—penis and anus. Masseurs with a large penis are called "Big-cards 大牌." In LaCasa, when a top masseur received a friendly joke about being a Big-card, he would smile then politely deflect the compliment: "Not really." A large penis is a sexual capital among gay men (Green 2011) and an embodiment of hegemonic masculinity for both gay and straight men (Simpson and Adams 2017). In LaCasa, a big anus however induces the opposite—shame. In the staff room, masseurs were excitedly gossiping about the Big-cards. Ben, one of LaCasa's owners and also a top, pointed his finger at Hayden and two other bottoms: "You three Little Sis also have the largest, just not at the front." Clearly amused, another top masseur relayed Ben's insults: "Their butts must be so adaptable since they practice it 24/7." The three bottoms responded to the room of laughter in cold silence.

The above example shows how masseurs deployed the "penetration discourse" (Fair 2011) to structure their masculinity. Fair (2011) observed that American high school athletes called each other "pussy," through which "normative masculinity is constructed [...] in opposition to a penetrated, feminized 'other'" (p. 502). For masseurs, hegemonic masculinity is established in the dialectic between penetrative masculinity and penetrated effeminacy. If a large penis symbolizes penetrative masculinity, then a large anus is the corollary of penetrated effeminacy. As masseurs complimented a big penis and derided a big anus, they discursively invoked a hierarchy of the penetrative over the penetrated. They claimed a homosocial form of penetrative masculinity by way of showing hostility towards penetrated effeminacy. As illustrated, this form of hostility is multi-layered; it comprises homophobia, effeminophobia, and the stigma of sex work. And it was unevenly directed to the penetrated role, forming the "bottom-hooker shame."

LaCasa's Outcast: The "Exotic Combo"

A-Ming, a 33-year-old masseur, originated from mainland China and spoke Cantonese with a Mandarin accent. Before joining LaCasa, A-Ming was a Siu Mei 燒味 chef—a Cantonese-style charcuterie serving various roasted meats such as barbecue pork and roasted duck. In Hong Kong, the Siu Mei chef job is stereotypically for middle-aged, working-class men; Siu Mei is considered a food culture that is exclusively local, affordable, and grassroots. A-Ming once used a picture of four roasted ducks as his profile picture on social media. This caused merciless mocking among other masseurs behind his back. Barely holding his vicious laughter, Adrian shoved his phone in our faces, showing A-Ming's profile picture: "Look at the grease dripping from the ducks!" Since then, Adrian started calling A-Ming "Exotic Combo 風味餐." Other masseurs found it hilarious and soon secretly addressed A-Ming as such. They also laughed at A-Ming's Mandarin accent:

> Yesterday, A-Ming said that he was having 'goat 山羊[*San Yeung*]' for lunch. We were confused. After he repeated several times, we realized he meant a restaurant called Sam Yeung.
>
> —A masseur's snide remark about A-Ming

As a mainland Chinese migrant, A-Ming's Mandarin accent was subjected to mockery. Similar to the linguistic discrimination against women streetwalkers from mainland China, the linguistic discrimination facing A-Ming is rooted in the longer history of discrimination against new immigrants from mainland China.

The implications of the sobriquet "Exotic Combo" are twofold. First, "combo" indexes A-Ming's commodified status—that is, a sex worker on a menu. A-Ming was the only masseur discursively dehumanized as "combo," which hints at other masseurs' contempt for him. Second, and more importantly, the adjective "exotic" indexes A-Ming's position as an outcast within LaCasa, since he was considered undesirable on three levels — (1) his appearance (body, fashion, skincare, etc.); (2) his background as a working-class Siu Mei chef; and (3) his migrant Chinese status marked by his Mandarin accent. The following excerpt of field notes from March 2020 demonstrates the way LaCasa's masseurs differentiated themselves from A-Ming:

> I was drinking with eight masseurs in a bar without A-Ming. Adrian brought up a client's complaint: "Mr. Leung was pissed that I referred the Exotic Combo [i.e. A-Ming] to him. He called me after the massage service: 'How could you introduce this guy to me? Clearly, he doesn't have what it takes to be a masseur—the look!'" Other masseurs then associated A-Ming with his infamous profile picture of roasted ducks. While everyone was laughing, Martin took a sip of his apple martini, then told me: "Little Sis, we didn't work much today. We spent the day like socialites貴婦. I went to Lane Crawford [a luxury chain store] with others. Hayden bought a pair of Balenciaga. [...] Then, we enjoyed an afternoon tea."

I borrow Bourdieu's notion of distinction to examine masseurs' construction of class. In LaCasa, class was not only about economic status; rather, class differentiation was mediated through *distinction* based on the combined forms of cultural capital and economic capital. Martin, the self-crowned "socialite," was the opposite of A-Ming, the "Exotic Combo." Martin joyfully recalled his middle-class experiences at luxury stores and fancy restaurants. Similar to Martin, many other masseurs claimed respectability through conspicuous consumption. In LaCasa, it was not unusual to see a few masseurs glued to a laptop, feeding on fashion news, excitedly sharing where to find good bargains for brand-name wallets, coats, and shoes. Even underwear became a site of class distinction. In the changing room, a masseur was spotted wearing Bossini's briefs (around HK$20-30), and another masseur in Emporio Armani (HK$150 up). The former was advised: "You should work harder, Little Sis!" Kong (2023) termed this emergent masculinity within contemporary Chinese societies that centers on consumption and cosmopolitan lifestyle "homonormative masculinity." The following story further shows how these aspiring middle-class "socialites" teased A-Ming.

Nick was a local-born, university-educated, "socialite"-type of masseur. In an online chatroom used by LaCasa's masseurs, Nick openly addressed A-Ming:

> **Nick**: [Forwarded a post about the COVID lockdown of local restaurants.] The catering industry is collapsing! *@A-Ming* [tagged A-Ming] Add oil 加油 [a local slang for showing support]!
>
> **A-Ming**: You guys add oil too.

Other masseurs and I agreed that Nick intended to openly tease A-Ming's role as a Siu Mei Chef, which contrasted with what LaCasa's masseurs aspired to—classy, glamorous, and cosmopolitan. As Bourdieu (1984) notes, "[t]aste (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference" (p. 56). Masseurs constructed their middle-class identity through discursive and embodied performance of having the right *taste*; at the same time, they refused and ridiculed A-Ming's working-class cultural capital—his knowledge and aesthetics about Siu Mei (e.g., roasted ducks).

This contrast between "socialites" and "Exotic Combo" reveals the encroachment of a locally specific homonormative order in the sexual economy in Hong Kong. In contemporary Hong Kong, degree inflation and the familial wealth gap have made it more difficult to achieve class mobility in the formal economy (Wong and Koo 2016; Wright and Lee 2019); this phenomenon has driven some university-educated gay men to sex work for bigger economic returns in the 2020s. Nevertheless, their "incursion" into the MSM sexual economy has ideologically and economically gentrified a sexual economy that once belonged to "the abject and the queer" (Warner 1999, 66)—in this case, the working-class migrant Chinese and local sex workers who have made up the majority of the MSM sex worker demographics since the late 1990s (Kong 2009). As such, the "socialites" have extended the homonormative policing based on class, social origin, and cosmopolitanism to an already socio-legally marginalized illicit economy, and further marginalized the lower class, migrant, and less privileged gay men.

Conclusion

By homonormative misogyny, I describe how middle-class gay men deploy misogynistic discourses regarding migrant women, femininity, effeminacy, and penetration to invoke and reinscribe homonormativity as a stigma management strategy in the sexual economy of Hong Kong. Unlike Western queer politics, homonormative misogyny is not exactly an identity-based politics that targets a particular community with shared vulnerabilities. Rather, homonormative misogyny is a politics of prestige through which middle-class MSM sex workers deploy existing class-, gender-, and citizenship-based stigmas to manage their anxiety about sex work and to claim a form of gay masculinity. It operates through discursive constructions of multiple others, including "sisters downstairs [streetwalker]," "Little Sis [bottom sex worker]," and "Exotic

Combo [migrant Chinese sex worker].” In this process, MSM sex workers deploy notions of misogyny, effeminophobia, xenophobia, and classism to (re)distribute the stigma of sex work along existing hierarchies of class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship.

Importantly, the increasing entry of middle-class gay men into queer sex work saw the encroachment of homonormativity at the margins of the queer community in Hong Kong. This marginalizes queer forms of desire. Middle-class gay sex workers have reinforced a desirability politics in favor of literally the ripped, the educated, and the cosmopolitan. As such, this highly exclusive politics marks other bodies as less desirable or even undesirable. It also reduces the already limited space for the working-class, the migrants, and the “undesirable” to mobilize their erotic currency for economic survival. I call this phenomenon “homonormative gentrification of sexual economy.” This gentrification process affects the economic and sociocultural conditions of sexual commerce; it is enabled by the combined forces of neoliberal desire for cosmopolitanism as well as homonormative discipline of queer bodies.

For MSM sex workers, the construction of masculinity is a *gendered* and *sexed* process. Their masculinity is attained through demeaning women’s sexuality and framing sexual passivity among men as effeminizing. In these processes, gay sex workers produce a specific form of gay misogyny. This form of gay misogyny is situated in the gender and sexual landscapes that are highly contingent on cross-border migrant mobility in postcolonial Hong Kong. At the same time, this misogyny is also highly functional because it enables masseurs to deflect the stigma of sex work (by demeaning “sister”) and to claim hegemonic masculinity (by demeaning the bottom hooker). Overall, this article offers a contextualized analysis of how gay misogyny intertwines with homonormative oppression at the margins of the neoliberal economy in Hong Kong. It contributes to scholarships of queer Asia and masculinity studies by offering a class-based analysis of gay misogyny in a postcolonial Chinese society.

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Notes

1. For an overview of socio-legal constrains facing Hong Kong MSM sex workers, see Tsoi (2023).
2. Beside my key informants, rumor has it that two LaCasa's masseurs were bisexual, had wives and children.
3. A masseur's sex role was sometimes discussed on gay forums and private chatrooms among clients. This effectively prevents a mismatch of sex role between a masseur and a client.
4. "USB" refers to men with multiple sexual partners and of the penetrative role. It might have negative connotations, depending on the context. But it does not connote the same level of shame as "dead slutty bottom."

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