

The Bro Code

Booze, Sex, and the Dark Art of Dealmaking in China

JAMES PALMER 02.04.15

<http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/postcard/bro-code>



Mark Leong—*Redux Pictures*
A developer parties in the private rooms of his club.

Turning down an after-dinner invite to a brothel is always a social minefield. But the city's Party Secretary, a 50-something man with baby-soft hands, had been gently fondling my thigh underneath the banquet table for the past 45 minutes, making me even more eager than usual to make my excuses and leave.

Perhaps the spa in the small-town Shandong hotel where I was dining with a cluster of businessmen and officials was an entirely legitimate establishment, and I was misreading the nature of the invitation. But the neon sign outside advertising the “Health Body Center” (康体中心) had replaced the upper strokes in the character 心 with flashing red hearts. “Health Body” is an approximation; I was sloshed on *baijiu*, the **near-undrinkable** spirit ubiquitous at social events, and my memory of the evening is dubious. I had been doing the rounds of provincial cities as my boss’ token foreigner for the whole summer, though, pitching training courses to the dim children of the rich so that they could study at foreign universities, and the routine of hard drinking followed by a group excursion to a brothel was becoming a familiar one. My status as a foreigner was enough to excuse me from the sex itself after only a light barrage of gay jokes from the others, but not from the social obligations around it.

That was in 2004, but the routine of much interaction between businessmen and officials has remained the same over the past decade. An initial banquet and heavy drinking provides social lubrication, until, at about 10-11 pm, the party shifts to a KTV, a spa, or a club. Another two or three hours are spent in a shared social space, either accompanied by hostesses making professionally flirtatious conversation, or naked together with other men in a hot bathtub. By 2 am, some of the party collapse in bed, and some retire with the girls.

Prostitution is illegal in China, but also ever-present, masked in varying degrees of ambiguity. Sociologists Yingying Huang and Pan Suiming have **highlighted the multiple layers** of sex work for women in China, describing seven types that range from “factory girls” and “street-walkers” patronized chiefly by poor migrant workers, to “massage girls” and “beauty parlor girls” who work out of small parlors. At the top are “second wives” and “courtesans,” who are younger, better-educated, and charge far more. Businessmen mix at the higher end of the scale, especially with Pan’s third-ranking type, “karaoke dancing girls.” The KTV, a form of karaoke parlor, comes in two flavors, sometimes mixed in the same establishment. One is bawling “**Mice Like Rice**” with

friends, the other involves socializing,

Brothel visits are not the be-and-end-all of business relationships, but for many years, they've been as essential a part of Chinese business culture as golf was in 1960s America.

and occasional singing, with “hostesses” expected to provide sexual services later in the evening. Similarly, a spa that offers family discounts during the day may well be a *de facto* brothel at night. In 2004, I saw the same framed print, apparently sold to every reputable and disreputable establishment across Northern China, about a dozen times; it showed a demurely sexy young southeast Asian woman. In the restaurants, a tied white top covered her breasts; in the brothels, they were perkily exposed. Brothel visits are not the be-and-end-all of business relationships, which require far more expensive gifts, shared entertainment, outright bribes, and even long trips together paid for by one party. But for many years, they've been as essential a part of Chinese business culture as golf was in 1960s America, albeit with slight shifts over the last decade toward more “sophisticated” tastes, such as the rise of foreign spirits or wine in preference to *baijiu*.

Some of this may be a thing of the past, at least for officials. Before this year, periodic crackdowns on the sex trade would close down businesses for a couple of weeks or months, before all went back to business as normal. The ongoing purge of officials and “**anti-corruption campaign**” under President Xi Jinping, however, has put a freeze on what was once standard business practice. The fall of many high-level leaders has been accompanied by recitations of their moral failings, especially their keeping of mistresses. While shared brothel visits were once the norm, officials, especially policemen, are now terrified to be seen at clubs, KTVs, or even expensive restaurants.

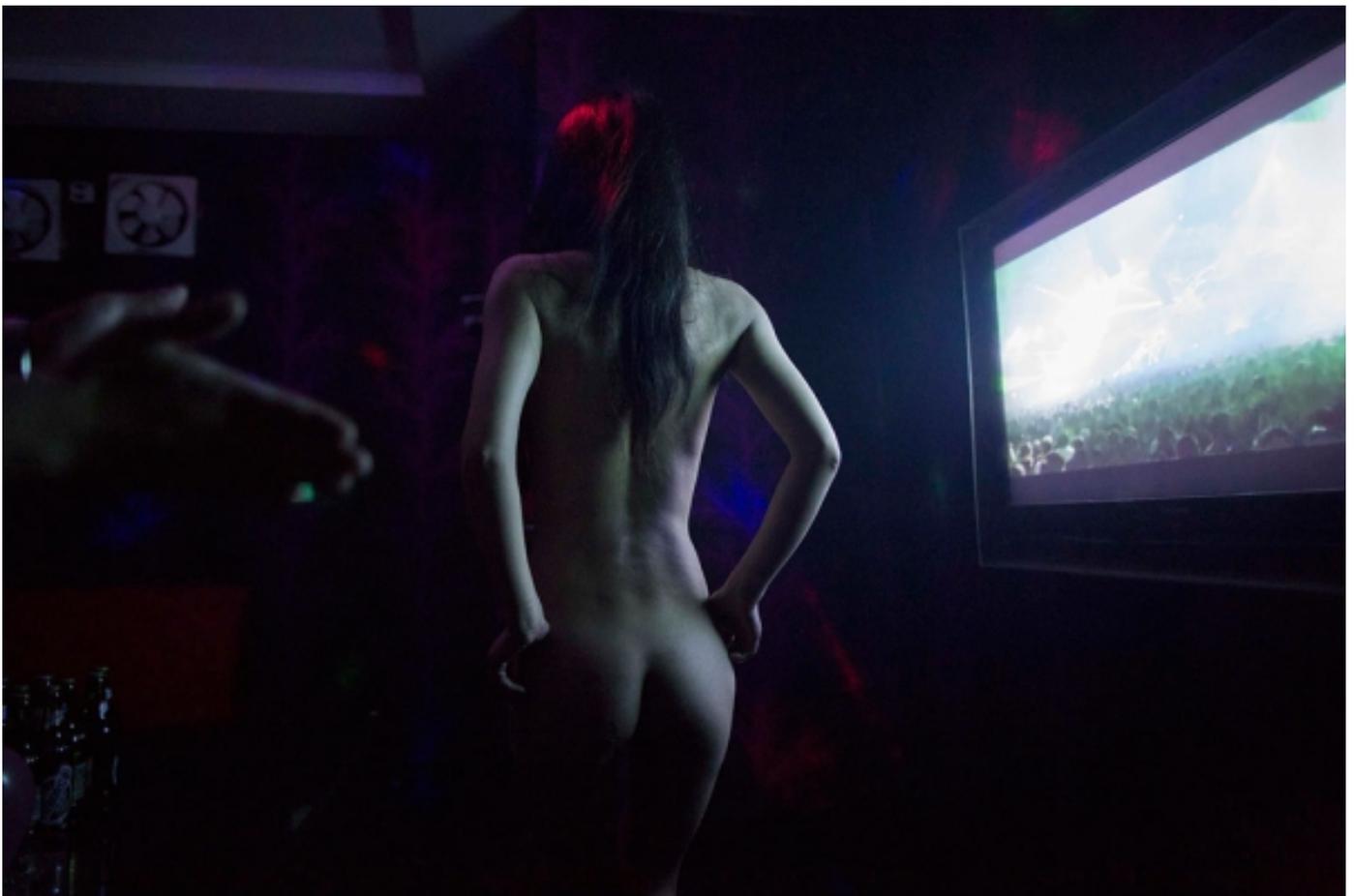
Regulations against “adultery” are being **enforced** for the first time in decades. A mild transgression has become a serious offence. And with lower-level officials, especially within China's bloated State-owned enterprises, taking fierce advantage of the “anti-corruption” campaign to

snitch on their superiors and open up their posts, the game is no longer worth the candle.

In late 2013, a series of police raids, public closures, and new instructions to officials began to shut down spaces previously essential to business. I assumed, at first, that the crackdown efforts would be limited to Beijing and Shanghai, like many other campaigns, and to a few other key towns like Dongguan, long infamous for the sex trade, which saw a **massive raid** last February.

Reaching out to contacts in Chengdu, Chongqing, Tangshan, Shijiazhuang, and Harbin I found the same story: officials were terrified of being seen at establishments where they had previously been welcome guests. A long-established business norm was now, at least for anyone with ties to the government, a dangerous hobby. But what had drawn them there in the first place?

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An erotic dancer performs for clients inside a KTV in Gejiu, Yunnan province.

Alcohol, food, and sex are fun. But in China, the culture of banquet and brothel has become largely joyless, a business tool chiefly directed at transactional relationships with other men.

It comes with a sniggering puerility, even though the majority of the men involved are well into middle-age. Drinking games, groping, crude jokes, and the bullying hunt for weakness, whether over drink or women, are the norm. Anthropologist John Osburg spent several years mixing with the rich in Chengdu, Sichuan province for his book *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality Among China's New Rich*. “These events are like a junior high school party—but with booze and hookers,” he told me. In private conversation, many businessmen confirm that the process is often a chore. (I include gangsters, the prime subject of Osburg’s research, in the general category of businessmen here; crime, business, and government are often effectively indistinguishable in China.)

Especially outside of the metropolises, few of the establishments involved are particularly seductive. Instead, there’s a sweaty griminess of wipe-down sheets and 1970s floral wallpaper, as these **photos** from one small-time scandal show. In classier establishments, Western pin-ups hang in gold-tinted frames. And endless going out is physically wearing; my old boss would take the train, rather than the plane, because travelling “soft sleeper” gave him a rare chance to rest after two or three nights of “entertainment” for work.

But the purpose of these visits isn’t a good time. It’s to cement business and personal ties, binding men together through the power of taboo and mutual self-exposure, or at least the pretense of it. It lets them judge that the others involved in a potential deal are men of the same stripe. Guo (a pseudonym), a friend’s cousin, greeted me ebulliently this May when we met in a smoky restaurant in the outskirts of Beijing. He works as a salesman of industrial-sized air conditioners and purifiers, mostly to local governments at inflated prices. “You know until now,” he told me in enthusiastic English, “I want to do business, I take a guy [from the

government] out, we have drinks, we go to somewhere good, we find girls, he thinks I'm cool guy, I know he's a guy likes girls, we're friends. Business!"

In part, the power of the experience comes from the mutual pleasure of shared transgression, the feeling of a shared secret. Like schoolboys' playing hooky, being bad together moves a relationship along fast. As one saying that went rapidly around the Chinese Internet in 2011 put it, "It's better to do one bad thing with your boss than a hundred good things for your boss."

Chongqing Officials Mired in Web of Sex, Lies and Video



<http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/caixin-media/chongqing-officials-mired-web-sex-lies-and-video>

Over time, this can extend to an actual exchange of what criminologist Diego Gambetta in his pioneering *Codes of the Underworld* calls "hostage-information," mutual knowledge of each party's sins that acts as a powerful guarantee neither will break their agreements. But brothel visits in and of themselves give only slight leverage over the other party. These ties can be deepened through more serious offences, like sharing drugs, most popularly **ketamine**. There are cases of blackmail over visits to sex workers, but these are done **through hidden cameras** and the gathering of secret information, well outside the social sphere. Sex workers sometimes threaten to expose a man to his wife or make a scene at the office, but for another businessman to do it would be completely outside the pale.

But vice serves as a kind of screen, weeding out the rare few who might have moral qualms about future dealings. It tells both sides that they're

playing by the same rules. In contrast with the embarrassment of being caught re-gifting in the West, a businessman's handing over "gifts" often highlight that he is already part of a network of giving. A standard phrase is "This is just a little something, *somebody else gave it to me.*" Refusing to play the game, on the other hand, comes at a sharp cost. Businessmen who convert to evangelical Christianity and make a commitment to avoid vice or bribery describe sharp **business losses** as a result, as former partners turn away from them, fearful of their newfound probity.

For many businessmen, an evening out also acts as a kind of test of character. "If you go out together, you really get to know a guy," explained Tao, a factory-owner visiting Beijing from Baoding who would give me only his family name. "You see how he handles his drink, you see how he deals with women." I felt that I was getting to know Tao slightly too well, as he was drying his saggy balls with a towel in front of me at a hotel spa. His companion, heavily tattooed and with the build of a thuggish Buddha, nodded. "I wouldn't trust a man I didn't drink with," he said.

In a society where **trust of strangers is minimal**, contract law is fragile, contracts themselves regarded more as guidelines than binding commitments, and the civil courts largely swayed by personal influence rather than legal right, the shared fraternity of the night out is one route to trust between partners. It may not, as businessmen admit, be a particularly effective or reliable way, but it's all they've got to work with. Amid businessmen, just being somebody's "friend" (*pengyou*) isn't that close. Casual acquaintances and uncertain contacts are "friends." A "brother" (*xiongdi*), on the other hand, is somebody inside the circle, a man who can be trusted. "It's like the distinction between 'a friend of mine' and 'a friend of ours' in the mafia," explains Osburg.

The punishing alcoholism of Chinese banquets is a ripe chance to judge the other side of a business deal. Partially this is the simple belief that *in baijiu veritas*, though experienced businessmen guard their tongues closely when drunk. Drinking often takes on a competitive edge, pitting each side against the other in round after round of toasts. Lacking the numbers to compete is a basic error; one of my sources was unsympathetic after an American friend, working with a sole colleague,

was on the brink of hospitalization following a banquet with Hunanese officials. “What an idiot,” she said, “Bringing only one other person to drink with the government!”

Many institutions, especially State-owned enterprises, maintain staff whose job is effectively to be professional drinkers, sacrificing their livers for the sake of the firm. One of my near-neighbors in the hutong of central Beijing holds down this post for a major energy company. But the drinking phase of the evening isn’t just about pure endurance. It’s also a chance for the host to show off a particular kind of leadership, guiding the conversation and the drinking so that everyone is having a “good time”—and most importantly, so that everyone is taking part.



(China Photos/Getty Images)

Women hide their faces during a police raid on a suspected prostitution business in Beijing.

The evaluation continues in the confines of the brothel. Zheng Tiantian, an anthropologist who spent several years working as a KTV hostess as part of her Ph.D., notes the importance of the “proper” treatment of sex workers in her book *Red Lights*. “[M]en’s ability to dominate these jaded women with the force of their personalities and charm is seen as a demonstration of a man’s prestige, power, and status.” This is as subject to artifice as everything else in mainland business deals. “Shi [one of Zheng’s sources] bragged to his business partner that he played the hostesses without paying them. It was a flat lie because I knew that Shi’s mistresses [...] had gleaned a great deal of money from them.”

And, of course, the evening’s costs have to be covered. If dealing with officials, footing the bill for a night of sex is a relatively small sum compared to the volume of bribes that the business side is likely to fork out over the course of the relationship, and even smaller compared to the rewards the bribes can reap. If dealing with other businessmen, however, it’s a chance for one-upmanship and evaluation of “generosity,” like paying at a restaurant. It also gives a chance to see who’s important, and who isn’t, in the other side’s hierarchy; I once came downstairs in the early morning to find my boss beating one of his underlings around the head while holding the bill, verbally abusing him for having the effrontery to include himself and another of his low-ranking buddies in the night’s expensive entertainment.

As Zheng details in her book, getting overly sentimental or romantic toward women is seen as a sign of weakness and lack of masculinity. If a businessman is unfortunate enough to love his wife or girlfriend, using it as an excuse to avoid sex is a massive faux pas. I’ve seen some instead plead tiredness or drunkenness, a more acceptable excuse, or use everyone’s 2 am exhaustion as a chance to slip away. Yet it’s not unknown, according to sex workers, for men who have retired with the girls for the night to pay for “special services” the next morning that they never received, instead spending the night watching television or sleeping chastely.

Perhaps that’s why some bosses demand a more public performance. The ultimate are what participants describe as frequent forays into group sex,

often with more male than female participants. Sharing women appears to bring men closer to each other, in a perversely familial fashion. As one northeastern saying goes, “Once two men share a woman, they’re brothers.” And when it comes to building up mutual trust, the photos often taken during these miniature orgies provide a rich source of mutual blackmail material that can prove explosive if exposed, as in the 2007 photos of one group of pasty officials leaked [online in 2012](#).

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This Is Awkward: The Politics of a Chinese Orgy

EVAN OSNOS

Orgies are back in the news in Beijing, but this time it’s the Communist Party that has found itself in an uncomfortable position, and it is now praising the virtues of privacy. A leaked batch of photos swept across the Chinese internet this month, depicting a festive gathering...

New Yorker

While never explicitly stated, such activities often seem to push the homosocial into the homoerotic. Sam [a pseudonym], a handsome American in his early 40s, is married to a Chinese multi-millionaire. He told me of an incident earlier this year. “One of her friends was opening this new cinema, and we [the men] all headed out after dinner to celebrate. We went to a top-class brothel, and these girls, man, you wouldn’t *believe* how beautiful they were. So these two guys—I can’t stand either of them, but they think I’m their buddy—go ‘Sam, pick one. Pick any of them. And then we’ll watch you with her.’ I said ‘Hell no! I’m not going to cheat on my wife, and even if I was, I wouldn’t want you to watch.’”

Group sex can also directly demonstrate a man’s relative standing in the group. A friend’s husband, formerly involved in the coal business in Shaanxi province, described this. “You’re there [in the KTV] with these jumped-up thugs. One of them picks a girl, and then he fucks her, and everybody else has to watch. The most important boss there goes first. At least it’s over quick.” Other members of the group then have to follow the bosses’ lead with the woman. Those who can’t perform in front of other

men, he added, are mocked.

In these social spaces, the young women involved are props in a ritual directed mostly at other men. The conversational element of their work protects them from some forms of abuse, as well as ensuring that they only see one or two partners a night. For straight sex, it's regular practice for them to be referred to only by number, not name. ("I'm number 16, please ask for me again next time.") When hostessing, however, they assume *nom de guerre*, usually a "cutesy" name associated with the sexy childishness some cultivate, doubled-up ("Lili," "Maomao") or "Little (xiao) X" (Xiaoxue, Xiaohua) or even in English.

But group sex strips away those protections. "We hate being with more than one guy," **Shanshan**, a former KTV girl, explained to me, "The more guys, the less safe the girl is. When there are other men in the room [for sex], it's like the men are competing with each other, and they get rougher, so the girls can get really hurt. Two girls, one man is much better. Then you get the same money for half the work." Even with two women, attention is strictly directed at the man.

"Perverted!" Shanshan said when I asked. "We don't touch each other, and the men don't ask for it. But the two of you can talk and make faces at each other when he isn't looking. That's why the girl will always say 'Oh, why don't I go get my friend? The two of us will treat you just like an emperor!' Or you go in and the mama-san says 'Why not have two girls, a rich man like you, twice as good!'"

Some group activities exclude women altogether, creating purely male and weirdly childlike social spaces. "Sometimes everyone strips off and you lie around naked together in comfortable rooms. The lower ranking members of the group then serve the other ones food and drink. On other occasions, we got high together, took off our shirts, and danced around in a circle holding hands," one Western observer commentated, preferring anonymity.

Whatever the iteration, for many Chinese business owners the brothel is not optional. Every country has its own corrosive intersections of money and power, illegal or otherwise. But in China colluding with officials is a

necessity, not an anomaly. For local businesses, a connection with the government is vital to protect themselves from predatory officials exploiting the country's haze of regulations. Regular pay-offs are as ubiquitous as income tax elsewhere.

My friend Yiping, now living in Australia, used to run a small but profitable IT training school in Shijiazhuang. "On a regular basis" she told me, "people from the government would try to shake my business down. I was paying off the dean of my graduate school and a high-ranking official at the local labor bureau that I had made contact with through my parents, so when other officials came to try their luck, I could refer them to my protectors and they would back off."

"But to maintain relationships, I had to go out for regular evenings with officials," Yiping explained, "Because I was just 22 and a girl, though, I could only stay till about 10 pm. Instead, I had to hire male students from my university, and pay them to go out with the officials to the KTV, so that the officials would trust me."

The world of bonding through vice is especially difficult for women to negotiate, especially with their reputation intact. Female entrepreneurs in China are often believed to have used their sexuality for business advantage, a problem worsened by the strategies needed to negotiate the homosocial world of vice. As well as solutions like Yiping's, Osburg says, "some successful younger businesswomen play a dual role. They act like the men during the banquet, drinking and joking, but then if they accompany them to the KTV, they switch into the role of hostess. They start flirting with the men and playing up their femininity."

Older businesswomen sometimes assume a semi-joking role as a "mamasan" negotiating between the hostesses and their male colleagues, or instead mandate that younger female colleagues attend the KTV as part of their work duties. While this usually stays only on the level of flirting or bawdy talk, arranging a date with a "nice girl" from your own firm for a business colleague provides a powerful bond, especially if she then becomes a permanent mistress.

"Such relationships are valued much more highly than those with former

sex workers,” Osburg noted. But the incentives offered are often still financial. My friend Wu, a young and stylish Beijing PR representative, escorted a visitor from Shanghai to dinner at her boss’ request, only to have to fend off his groping in the cab afterward. A week later, he offered, via her boss, a 40 percent pay rise if she moved to Shanghai to work with him.

The values of business culture can extend into personal life. Sam’s wife made her own fortune, and “is a better shot than me. She’s fierce.” Yet “the first thing she said after we got married,” he told me, “was ‘I don’t mind if you sleep with other women, but only as long as you’re always paying them.’” Wives sometimes visit psychologists asking for help accepting their husbands’ womanizing, seeing their failure to cope with the cheating as a flaw in themselves, not their husbands, according to one U.S. psychologist working in Beijing.

A few female entrepreneurs, however, explicitly reject the values pushed by businessmen. “One of my husband’s business friends got married just two years ago,” explained Li, in her early 40s, who co-owns a steel business with her husband, “We went to his wedding. But when we hosted an event last year, he came with a young girl who was obviously his mistress. I told my husband that if he cheats on his wife only after a year, he will cheat us. He said no way, he’s a good guy, we can trust him!” She looked a little smug. “Now this man owes us a lot of money that he won’t pay.”

The current anti-corruption campaign has had a chilling effect on some of the high-end sex trade in the metropolises. On online forums, punters lament the shut-down of favorite haunts or the sudden disappearance of services. “This is why I only do business with foreigners now,” explained “Bianca,” a Beijing mama-san, to me over the phone, lamenting the instability of government clients. “No Chinese! Nobody cares if foreigners see girls.”

But whether business as a whole has suffered or not from the campaign is hotly debated. There’s no doubt that certain sectors—liquor, luxury, high-end hotels, the travel industry—have been **severely hit**. Yet even as businesses find it harder to strike new deals, they’re also enjoying

something of a relief period from the predations of officials. The impact on the entertainment sector, while visible, may have been lessened since in many cases services were expected to be provided for free to officials, who would regularly run up massive, never-to-be-paid tabs in restaurants and clubs **alike**. “Karaoke bars and hostesses are our sources of livelihood,” one police officer told Zheng Tiantian, “We basically cannot live without them.”

But efforts to permanently change the conditions that produce corruption, and its attendant vice, such as higher salaries, a free press, or interdependent watchdogs, are being actively discouraged by the authorities. Instead, lectures on Marxism and **reminders** that officials should be “noble, pure and virtuous persons who have relinquished vulgar tastes” are expected to override officials’ greed or lust.

And while officials are scared away for the moment, businessmen themselves seem as keen to head to the KTV as ever. Paid sex remains trivially easy to find at all levels. Even in Dongguan, the hardest target of the campaign, some brothel owners are maintaining their girls on the books, often shifting to less visible locations for favored and trustworthy clients. Outside my workplace in Beijing, prostitutes leaving the nearby hotel, who vanished for a few months during the most recent crackdown, are once again grabbing up the taxis at half past midnight.

Guo, the enthusiastic air-conditioning salesman, got gloomy at the prospect. “Right now I can’t make new friends. The old ones, ok, they trust me, maybe we can’t go out for fun together, but we can still do business. But nobody new. Fuck!” He brightened up. “But one year, everything gets back to normal.”