

## Rethinking Queer Value: Money Boys and Value Struggles in Shanghai

Ben Chia-hung Lu

(The Chinese University of Hong Kong)

### Abstract

From *quantity to quality*, the new politics in post-socialist China has shifted from controlling the *number* of the population to the *value* of its citizens. For this intense social transformation, one critical project of the Chinese state today is to fashion its citizens to become better, higher-qualified selves for global capitalism. Chinese citizens in this critical moment are versed in how to self-govern and market themselves to become desirable laborers to the market and state authority. Given this new politics of human value in China today, this article aims to reexamine the intimate relationship between value and sexualities. Inspired by recent scholarly works on queer values and their explorations of how queer labor can or cannot be measured and evaluated, this paper offers three stories of rural-to-urban “Money Boys” (male-male escorts) in Shanghai to discuss how their marginal struggles interpret and make values. I argue that the Money Boy’s labor is profoundly patterned by their marginal social positions, so the game of value for them is more about struggling than self-performance. I also stress that Money Boys can still interpret and perform values they defend as vital. This value making is also about dealing with material struggles in urban Shanghai. The article concludes with the suggestion to fathom Chinese queer experiences from their dialectical and material relationships with values; thus, we can better capture how queer values are also configured from China’s radical social transformation: rural and urban stratification.

**Keywords:** value, Money Boys, neoliberalism, China, queer theory

*The topic of value is particularly compelling in light of the momentous social transformations taking place in China during the last quarter of the twentieth century. In the movement from a planned to a market economy, the representation of value has undergone a reorganization in the realm of the biopolitical in which human life becomes a new frontier for capital accumulation.<sup>1</sup>*

*If our current models for understanding personhood are premised on theorizing subjectivity from a 'subject of value' perspective, such as 'the entrepreneurial self' (du Gay 1986), 'the reflexive self' (Giddens 1991), 'the risk self' (Beck 1992), or 'the postmodern self' (Featherstone 1991), how do we understand those who cannot access the resources necessary for these self formations? How do we account for those who do not materialize on these figurative radars, who appear to be living life beyond the theoretical imaginary and empirical reality of exchange-value?<sup>2</sup>*

### **Introduction: Queer Value, Global Exchange, and Beyond**

Much discussion and debate have recently taken place concerning the meaning of value. Theorists are now asking questions about the ways in which human lives are imagined, evaluated, and then performed in and through different ideas about value.<sup>3</sup> In this account, value can be roughly understood as having two aspects: the first refers to the quantity of money (capital); and the second is the plural form, "values," with more lucid and yet not precisely definable ideas about how people imagine and justify what is important to them and what they think is worth pursuing. In this way, as David Graeber explains, one can thus view value as a critical tool for gauging how certain social actions become desirable to different subjects. Or, as Lawrence Grossberg says, one can rethink how value "appears across the entire spectrum of human life."<sup>4</sup>

Drawing upon the importance of value for the evaluation, or, in Grossberg's terms, the "commensuration" of modern life, Gayatri C. Spivak shifts questions of value to the field of sexualities, contending that it is time to examine queer value:

I now think that the use of value-form is mysterious, because of the thing in term of which other things are made commensurable. People do not look into this. When Euro-US queer theory is imposed worldwide, this becomes important. In terms of what do you measure sexual preference? Marx thought that the value-thing lost substantiality. How does that figure?<sup>5</sup>

Spivak's inquiry into the global application of queer theory has inspired some Western queer theorists to investigate the sort of material situations that need to be in position before queer performance can take place and have value.<sup>6</sup> Here Meg Wesling's analysis of queer value is particularly imperative, because she situates Spivak's query of queer value within the context of neoliberal politics and cosmopolitanism, taking into account the uneven distribution of labor and resources internationally. Wesling argues:

Queer value addresses what Gayatri Spivak has identified as the 'necessary complicity' between the cultural and the economic that allows the feminist critic to register the effects of her investments in seemingly benign value-systems within uneven global distribution of resources and division of labor. It is, to use the comparison Spivak offers, to see within the schemes of evaluation the domination of some values over others, the workings of exploitation.<sup>7</sup>

Following from the *commensurable* dynamics in the value system proposed by Spivak, who brings about complicity between culture and the economy, Wesling proposes her idea of queer value in order to take Marxism back into accounts of sexualities for a reconsideration of the material grounds of desires. Wesling reasons that existing queerness is being formatted by capitalist investment, and it is gradually being characterized in terms of identity politics, which she sees as limited and excluded. To reverse this queer identity and to go beyond identity politics, she gives the reasons for retooling value in Marxism to reread sexuality:

As I hope to have shown, the question of value reminds us of the imbricatedness of sexual desire and gender identity with material practices of production, accumulation, and exploitation, and helps us resist the temptation to see queerness as necessarily resistant to or outside such practices. On the contrary, it is by wishing to make queer desire do the work of extricating us from capital's exploitative capacity that we miss the opportunity to explore such possibilities as they arise.<sup>8</sup>

Queerness in Wesling's view, therefore, needs to be critically examined through challenging the hierarchy that lies within value productions and reproductions where some values are valuable but others are not. For me, that the author brings queer value into labor performance can help us realize how it is ratified from materiality. So one cannot only capture how queer subjects can negotiate with capitalism, but also become aware of how sexual or intimate labor (for instance, sex work) is related to movement of the capital. Taking this cue of the *materiality* of sexuality as applied to my research on queer experiences in China, this article asks how the marginal, that is, Money Boys (male-male escorts) make and perform values. More critically, for those who have quite limited social resources, how are they able or unable to struggle to perform values considered crucial to their lives?

But before moving to my data analysis, it is necessary to understand queer values in the Chinese context; Petrus Liu's theory on queer Chinese Marxism<sup>9</sup> and Lisa Rofel's<sup>10</sup> ethnography in China will be discussed here. Both authors employ the materialist analytical strategy to reframe Chinese queer politics. Hence, I will review their theoretical framework to rethink issues of queer Chinese, discussing why through the Money Boys' experiences, queer value in China is more about basic material needs than becoming a cosmopolitan or political radical subject as Liu and Rofel emphasize. I insist on this view of social class in the reconsideration of Chinese queer values.

## Queer Marxism in China

*The labor theory of value forms the kernel of Marx's concept of human as well as the basis of his communalism; I suggest that the labor theory of value is also the basis of proto-queer theory of the constitutive links between the formation of the self and unknowable Others that anticipates contemporary theoretical efforts to redefine gender and sexuality as 'ek-statis,' as 'modes of being dispossessed, ways of being for another or, indeed, by virtue of another.'*<sup>11</sup>

By situating sexualities under Cold War politics, queer theorist Petrus Liu takes a political angle to retool queer values. In his analysis of queer politics in China and Taiwan, Liu condemns those Western-centric, liberalist, queer discourses that now are accepted by Taiwanese and Chinese civil societies, which he provocatively refers to as the “Two Chinas.” Liu declares that Eastern liberalist queer discourses continuously promote conservative values such as monogamy, marriage, liberal human rights, multiculturalism, and family values. These values, for him, work as a limited middle-class-centric ideology,<sup>12</sup> excluding those bodies who are not evaluated as *valuable* or *profitable*, including sex workers, transgender bodies, migrant workers, refugees and so on.

Liu particularly asserts that it is “Cold War ideologies” which enlivened and still facilitate this liberal queer politics today in Taiwan and China, working with the “state apparatus” to discipline and silence sexual dissent. Besides, in his analysis, the vigorous competitions in scientific, military, and medical developments between the US and communist regions have shown the ways in which Cold War politics have been propagated globally, and they continue to affect the world today. For instance, Liu argues that Cold War ideologies set the “medical and pathological” as a guiding ethics, which were adopted by the Chinese state to deal with HIV; in this way, one can observe a “scientific empiricism” that treats issues of sexualities through the framework of psychological inferiority or malbehaviors.<sup>13</sup> In short, Liu begs a new “Chinese queer Marxist politics” to confront American empiricism and capitalism. For Liu, this new politics is radical, connecting all the marginal groups and maintain-

ing a critical stance toward American imperialism.

In similar fashion, to remark on a different queer politics in today's China, Lisa Rofel adopts a more positive strategy. She argues that same-sex desires in China today are different compared to the past. By claims of being cosmopolitan, that is, through the ability to connect to universal culture and politics, Rofel argues that queer Chinese citizens today can express and exercise global values such as cosmopolitanism and human rights of their own. In doing so, queer Chinese citizens craft a space of negotiation with Western values and capitalism when their desires of global connection are continually communicating with global civil societies and markets. "Neoliberal experiments" is the term Rofel uses to address the ways in which Chinese citizens learn to negotiate with cosmopolitanism after China's return to the market. In the 1990s, for example, she interviewed some local gay men in Beijing, whose explanations of personal desires to speak out their own feelings and sexualities enabled Rofel to consider how and why young Chinese queers are keen to self-express their identities:

With strong conviction in his voice, he asserted that it was absolutely human to express one's 'personal feeling' (ziji xinli hua) and 'personal affairs' (geren shi). He said he likes to tell people in his personal story, that this is the right way to communicate. He saw the expression of wishes, yearnings, and aspirations as a 'skill.' He declared that all over the world people were quite capable of expressing what was in their hearts and that, in order to be part of the world, to be properly cosmopolitan, Chinese people needed to express themselves in that way as well.<sup>14</sup>

In Rofel's analysis, personal desires to express or speak out one's sexual identity, to make it legitimated and recognized by global society (though human rights discourse) have been gradually considered as essential—along with China's re-opening to the capitalist market. Rofel concludes a new kind of gender politics occurs in China where young citizens tend to ignore or forget the bitter socialist past. To welcome a new social space that their sexual desires can accommodate, young citizen's bodies can be

visible in public and their identities can be recognized. For me, although Rofel is aware that this “game” of being cosmopolitan might be available only for those who have more resources (material and symbolic), she still insists this new cosmopolitan sexual politics is emerging in China.

Given Liu’s political and Rofel’s cultural claims of new Chinese queer politics, my case study of Money Boys in Shanghai, however, presents another queer story, though perhaps less positively. The stories of Money Boys I will discuss are more about struggling than self-identification. From their rural-to-urban migrant status and working class background, my interviewees’ life experiences and values they are making are very much about material needs and security. This is the reason why below I will iterate that queer value is differentiated and styled by material inequalities. Different queer subjects thus have quite distinct value stories. The following three stories of Money Boys and their defenses and interpretations of family values and cosmopolitanism will prove how values are differentiated through class.

### **Struggling for Values: Three Stories of Money Boys**

*If the ideal citizen is a self-enterprising one who is economically entrepreneurial, law-abiding, autonomous, patriotic, and sexually normative, the Money Boy is definitely not the self-determined subject/citizen that the state would like to cultivate.<sup>15</sup>*

#### **Xiao Xue’s Queer Labor and Performance**

*Today no one cares about whether you live or die, as you are a nobody in this country ... I think it is better to be practical. Very simple, fighting to survive, to get a bowl of rice...this is life isn't it? ... Just be practical in whatsoever way... I want to make enough money and move somewhere far away from Shanghai, have a small business with my boyfriend, well, begin a happier life.*

It was a humid rainy afternoon of Shanghai. I went to meet my friend

Ray in a local restaurant where Xiao Xue was going to perform. When I arrived at the loud and boisterous restaurant, nearly a hundred people were there, enjoying the food and the show. The location is an annual local community assembly where the seniors, parents and children are from the local neighborhood. And all of the performers are middle-aged males who are dressed in drag. A man who was wearing a beautiful red *qipao*, a traditional Chinese lady's gown, was singing (dubbing) a Cantonese pop song from the 1980s—yet I doubted anyone in the audience was able to speak Cantonese or knew this old-fashioned Cantonese song. Later, a young man dressed as Cat Woman from the Hollywood movie *Batman* stylishly danced on the stage. Then another man performed some Chinese Opera as the female character (*dan*), gracefully singing the songs and winning the audience's applause.

It was there that I met my interviewee Xiao Xue, an on-and-off Money Boy and freelance performer who gave the audience one of his new performances: the Bollywood India Dance. The audience enjoyed the performance, judging from their frequent applause. Though some middle-age men showed withdrawn smiles, they are not the most important people in the audience. In fact, some of the women in the audience were the coordinators of this drag show. One friend told me that two ladies, key persons in the local community (*danwei*), decided who could perform, and which restaurants would be chosen for holding this big community gathering. In short, the powerful pair decides where the money goes. So the performers need to be keen to socialize with and sometimes to flirt with those powerful ladies. I saw a lady giving food to one of the leading performers from whom Xiao Xue was trying to take attention away. In this situation, Xiao Xue refused to sit at the same table as that performer. In fact, they shuffled tables, tossing back drinks and socializing with their fans separately. When Xiao Xue came to sit by my friends and me, he could not help but complain about his opponent: "I just cannot like him at all," he muttered.

I had an opportunity to go backstage to speak to the performers. All of them were freelance performers. I asked Xiao Xue where he found the Bollywood songs for his performance and he told me that he had researched on the internet and he had then taught himself the style, the



dress, the lyrics, and the emotional expressions that Bollywood dance requires. While I mentioned that some Money Boys I met were spending fortunes on luxuries or paying fees for gym memberships, Xiao Xue suddenly became silent for a few moments (at that time he had not yet implied to me he was also selling sex) and said, “Well, life is all about ‘gain and loss’ (*De Yu Shi*). When you are too desperately looking for something, you are losing another thing at the same time right? But this is life, isn’t it? “You know what I mean?” Xiao Xue’s response let me contend again about the issues of values for Money Boys through a more complex and material angle: when he mentions the interplay between “getting and losing” something. In my view, he is not criticizing those Money Boys who spend money on expensive things, those who are in fact “losing something,” such as dignity. Moreover, Xiao Xue is implying endeavors for “measuring” life’s costs have now become important for everyone including himself. Indeed, living in a more marginal position in Shanghai, or in the sex industry, Xiao Xue is well aware of the difficulty of “getting something,” by which he means money, since he is in his late forties and without a face charming to the mainstream or a fit physique. He has to ascertain what could bring him greater “gains” and to keenly find who and what could help him to secure his life. This means that he can at least have basic material goods, such as a room and food for surviving in expensive Shanghai. So he has learned the new Bollywood dance from the Internet and also how to fawn on the powerful ladies in the community.

All of this, for me, is not merely about manipulation—it also sheds important light on the ways in which the socially marginal in this new Chinese society have to learn how to maximize their capacities in order to meet their basic material needs. However, with his gender shifting according to his situation, Xiao Xue once again indicates that these experiences are deeply conditioned through material struggles such as the possibilities of valuation or devaluation. This is also the reason why I disagree that queer value can be best understood from the perspective of transnational exchange or cosmopolitanism. As for Xiao Xue, having researched global trends such as Bollywood on the internet, and then digested and re-enacted it in his performance, for

me, his labor performance yet is less about generating social values. His performance, or the social values he is making, is also less about affecting the community or making transnational connections, as exemplified in Wesling. It is, however, more about struggling for survival in the city.

One might notice that recent research on queer drag performance often recognizes that the queer performance is a gesture for communicating with local communities or social history,<sup>16</sup> or for representing that performers are Global Divas because of their capacity to generate local and global values from their diasporic backgrounds.<sup>17</sup> Also, they often explain how drag performance enables queer citizens to challenge the local gender order or racial norms. For example, in Taylor and Rupp's American case, one drag performer creatively related the "drag" to when gay men were "dragged out" by the police in the Stonewall event in 1969, this creative reflection on "drag" was declared by Taylor and Rupp to explain why "dragging" is always a *political performance* even if it comes from entertainment value.<sup>18</sup>

But in the context of contemporary China, I view Xiao Xue's performance as not entirely about raising social awareness. In fact, his gender performance and communication with local people in the restaurant was, from my point of view, more about making enough money to pay for his needs. Most drag performers tour throughout Shanghai or in nearby cities to earn as much money as they can. Besides, the performers will not be hired for their next performance if they or their performances are not appreciated enough by those female organizers. This is why Xiao Xue has to learn something new or trendy to keep him continuously attractive to the organizers. In this manner, once again, I see that his performance, that is, his labor, is a struggle for value instead of the way to legitimate his selfhood or identity. Lotus, another interviewee, gave me another story of queer value. I will show how Lotus makes a huge effort to seek a better life, a better future of which he has a rough idea. As a MtF (male-to-female) transgender Money Boy, Lotus also tries to earn money to have sex-change surgery, but the money she makes always falls short of enough to support her work on his body. It is through Lotus's life story that I restate the importance to see how materiality meditates their life, their work on values

### Lotus' Dream to Leave China

*One day I went to a nice department store to purchase some lovely pants to make my butt look better. But, just as I had finished asking that crazy saleswoman –‘How much is it’- she did not respond to me at all! What she did was run away with a terrified face (Laugh). And then I decided to chase her out of rage. I chased her to her staff room, and then shouted: ‘Why did you run away?’ I kept asking her but she was too scared of me so could hardly answer for a while then she said, ‘I just have to make a phone call.’*

After this reply, Lotus however cannot stop shouting at her: “But why did you run away? Why you r-u-n a-w-a-y!” I was so furious that I asked her this again and again.” When I met Lotus for the first time in Shanghai, he had just had silicone breast implantation surgery, which was still causing some pain, so he had to massage his breasts all of the time to sooth the pain. Being a street prostitute, Lotus’s life style included going to trendy clubs in Xing Tian Di (“New World” Shanghai’s exclusive clubbing and restaurant centre) and five-star hotels to cruise for potential clients, particularly those from the West. As one of our mutual friends, Ray, teased Lotus: “Gosh, Lotus just cannot stop showing off that s/he can speak English!” Indeed, Lotus is very much into meeting foreign clients, but he said the reason was not only to practice English, but also to be in a different place in the future. Thus Lotus sometimes reveals her desires to leave China, “looking for a new life.” During our interview, Lotus once asked me a question: “Could people like me live in the UK?”

Lotus asked this question because some of her Money Boy friends did find western partners and have complete sex reassignment surgery in Singapore. This does make Lotus consider the possibility of leaving China one day. Despite the fact that Lotus showed me his desires for a better life with a hint of cosmopolitanism, I am under no illusions that for Lotus, an escapee from a deprived rural hometown to the bustling metropolis of Shanghai, life is still challenging. Lotus has numerous daily challenges she has to deal with; the confrontation with that saleswoman

in the department store was just one of the unpleasant daily routines. I remember, for instance, how a local middle-aged man gazed at Lotus spitefully and kept “checking” her gender and body by noticing her rural accent and so-called “mannish voice” when we were chatting in a lift. Not least, I do not see Lotus as a victim. Lotus understands his life is harsher than others.

But Lotus keeps negotiating the power that dominates her life through her body. I also learn that Lotus takes “desires” quite seriously with a dream of leaving China, living a different and better life abroad, being seen equally, and having her sex changed. Lotus does know (after conducting research) which country has the best surgical options and which locations are more open-minded towards individuals like him. For instance, Singapore, as a bilingual state, seems to be a desirable place for Lotus to pursue his first step of living abroad. In short, Lotus is preparing for the future through the imagined possibilities of cosmopolitanism.

Compared to Rofel’s gay male interviewee in Beijing who flags cosmopolitanism to demand the human rights and the justice of sexual identity, Lotus’s cosmopolitan practices reveal a more precarious situation. Floundering between material insecurities and everyday discriminations from society, Lotus did not tell me a story of identity but of how difficult it is to survive in Shanghai as a marginal queer. So, to extend my argument, the last case of this article below will show how Money Boys employ family values to respond to their moral struggles with being sex workers. I shall discuss why filial piety, as the most significant value that shapes Chinese social mores and orders of kinship, has such a critical effect on Faye’s value practices and daily struggles.

### **Faye’s Gold Necklace**

It was early summer when I went to Faye’s home in northern Shanghai. Faye can be termed a *Yao* (妖), which means a male-to-female transgender escort in Chinese. When I met Faye, he had recently undergone plastic surgery for breast implants. Faye often works on the streets and sometimes recruits his clients on the internet. His clients are mostly migrant workers, lorry drivers, and those working on construction sites.

Coming from the northeastern part of China, Faye went to Shanghai around 2006 and worked in restaurants, hotels, and other service sectors. But like other young rural migrants in the cities, it was almost impossible for him to save money under rough working conditions. With his boyfriend Jo, he eventually decided to start their sex work business on the street. To reach a bigger heterosexual market, they decided to do drag and recently Faye had surgery.

We began our conversation regarding family issues by discussing a quarrel that Faye was recently involved in. It was caused by a client's furious wife who visited him in order to argue about her husband cheating on her. He told me, in an incensed tone, that the angry wife almost used physical violence, not to mention a very threatening language. Faye was quite angry while relating memories of this drama, which happened the previous week. When we began to talk about his family, however, Faye's anger abated, and he told me why he is the one who takes care of his family, particularly his parents. Besides sending money back home, Faye was proud to explain how generously he treated his mother when she came to visit Shanghai for the first time:

When my mother came to Shanghai for the first time, I brought her to Nangjing Xi Road (a noted rich district in Shanghai) for sightseeing. I bought her some clothes and gold rings and gold necklaces!...Tell you, I spent more than thousands, almost my life savings! My mother has never been to Shanghai, she never left our hometown, but she was so pleased. I think I really gave her a lot, as much as I could.

For Faye, the "donation" to his mother was nothing about sacrifice. In fact, it was "something that has to be done." The statement that "something that has to be done" was actually quite complicated. For me, it relates not only to filial piety but also to his personhood. Because for Faye, to give money is a way of soothing the anguish that he has to deal with for being a street escort, including rows with unpleasant clients or angry wives. Besides, it is about giving material support to his family. So Faye can thus proudly say that he can do more than other people who

cannot sufficiently help their family. In short, filial piety is a core value that generates material reciprocity for two generations.

Furthermore, like most young people from the countryside who have moved into the city to achieve a “better” lifestyle, their ambition is to raise their quality of life from, for example, that of a prostitute, to running a small grocery retail business in the future. Many researchers have demonstrated how young Chinese people who have left a rural hometown and worked in factories take filial value quite seriously even if they are in an abusive labor situation or if they earn very little.<sup>19</sup> For Faye and other rural-to-urban migrant workers in the cities, sending money to their parents and supporting their families as much as they can should for me be understood as a way of showing their ability to survive in the cities.

It is also to prove that they have become adults in their own right.<sup>20</sup> But family reciprocity also works along the lines of class in contemporary China. For the newly urban-rich families, filial value is about the exchange of emotional capital. Harriet Evans examines how urban middle-class families, especially the mothers and daughters, learn and practice “emotional communications” (*go tong*) for making a more “democratic” family.<sup>21</sup> Within this novel style of family intimacy, Evans emphasizes that now the practice of filial value is more about sharing, communicating, and understanding between the generations.

In short, for the middle class, the exchange of emotional capital is vital and necessary; emotional capital is being modified as a kind of *value* about sharing, communicating, and mutual understanding. Money stays behind the curtain of exchange. However, for those who have less, filial value is about direct reciprocity, whilst money is used and exchanged directly, as with Money Boys. This explains why I restate that values are quite differently and even unequally practiced through people’s material positions—at least to judge from my case study. This is also why capital—symbolic or material—is the result of competition instead of being self-given.<sup>22</sup> It reveals that the ability to exchange capital is determined by how much one has. Put succinctly, exchange is a classed and materially distinguished game.

Given this understanding of unequal exchange when rethinking

queer value, under the unequal game of global capitalism, I claim the importance of bringing queerness into the account of materiality. One thus can better realize that queerness is not singular and self-given, but rather it is a contested politics, one that is created by different queer bodies in different social positions. Particularly in post-Maoist China, where the new desirable citizens (the urban middle-class consumers) are desired but where some are excluded, considered as unqualified or of low quality (*suzhi*).<sup>23</sup> We therefore need a more grounded view to reframe the daily life of the sexually marginalized, where their bodily and sexual experiences are based on their day-to-day material labor. Nevertheless I do not see the Money Boys I interviewed as victims, swept aside by a neoliberal economy and unable to (re)produce and define social values. Rather, for the more material method offered in this article, there is a need to learn how marginal queers can equally express and perform the values so one can capture the complexities of values productions and reproductions.<sup>24</sup>

By and large, through Money Boys, the questions of values and queer politics in post-Maoist China are decidedly patterned on the redistributions of materiality. Values that Money Boys make or struggle for reveal the ways in which Chinese society is rebuilt along the lines of class, urban and rural re-separation.

### Conclusion: Re-evaluating Queer Value in Contemporary China

*Moreover, what should be recognized—indeed, what must be recognized for the sake of any politics of resistance—is that the same logic that governs the body of value also governs the body that lacks value. Both live under constant threat, although their struggles for survival are clearly unequal in terms of the risks of failure (bodily dismemberment and possibly death for the body without value).<sup>25</sup>*

British sociologist Andrew Sayer aptly remarks that when one contends about how values matter to and are exercised by people, it is vital to see the “middle evaluation” between the binary of “is” and “ought.” What is

behind people's actions in daily life, for Sayer, is a process of unremitting evaluation between those values that people identify as "are" or "ought to be" good or bad, important or unimportant, and the tension between the two fronts in his account. Sayer articulates a dialectic account to probe into worth and its relationship to value because making values is a mutual evaluative process. It is about how human decisions and practices are deeply related to the struggles of others. So, for Sayer, the *evaluative self* is the modern self, denoting who we are today, while living daily with many value choices and practices made along the way. An ethnographer who has worked in mainland China for decades, Arthur Kleinman sees this as a *value turn* of postsocialist China where neoliberal logic is calling middle-class citizens by promoting and promising a new way of life that is seen as worth having. People now are learning to reflect on themselves and their life of choices and the meaning of "worthy life" from reminiscing upon and then devaluing the bitter memories of the Cultural Revolution.

This article, however, complicates this value turn by inspecting value as not merely about self-recognition or performance but also about distribution and material inequalities, at least in the case of the Money Boy. Followed by two critical queer theorists' views on value, this article complicates the ways in which values, whether material or social, are all generated through and facilitated by capital movement. I also explained why and how queer values are about competition, identifying the inequity of material distribution in postsocialist China instead of merely focusing on sexual liberation and attempts at self-legitimization.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, I argue we can better capture diverse and usually contested queer experiences in today's China.<sup>27</sup>

Returning to Spivak's question posed at the beginning of this article, how are we to scale, then evaluate, global "queer value" today, with the various styles of sexualities and sexual practices spawned in the neoliberal marketplace? My answer, through this research on Money Boys, concerns how materiality (capitalism) creates contesting and intricate queer values. So, people make values differently given their class position. This value production and reproduction are therefore more about competition and struggles instead of self-performance



and self-display, while social inequalities are rocketing in postsocialist China.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ann Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*)," *Public Culture* 16, no. 2, (2004), 189.

<sup>2</sup> Beverley Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 486.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the following: David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality"; Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2008); Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Max Haiven, "Finance as Capital's Imagination? Reimagining Value and Culture in an Age of Fictitious Capital and Crisis," *Social Text* 29, no. 3 (2011): 93–124.

<sup>4</sup> Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, 152.

<sup>5</sup> Spivak, *Other Asias*, 253.

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Amy Villarejo, *Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Meg Wesling, "Queer Value," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no.1, (2012): 107–25.

<sup>7</sup> Wesling, "Queer Value," 107.

<sup>8</sup> Wesling, "Queer Value," 123.

<sup>9</sup> Petrus Liu, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Liu, *Queer Marxism*, 165.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Rofel, *Desiring*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Travis Kong, "Reinventing the Self under Socialism: The Case of Migrant Male Sex Workers in China," *Critical Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2012): 303–05.

<sup>16</sup> Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Taylor and Rupp's fieldwork in Florida, United States vividly captures how a drag club and dragging performance flags an important meaning in terms of cultural representations and social resistances to homophobia, contributing important values to the local community.

<sup>17</sup> Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Taylor and Rupp, *Drag Queens*, 189–90.

<sup>19</sup> Tamara Jacka, *Women's Work in Rural China: Change and Continuity in an Era of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Development, Migration, and Women Workers in China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Ngai Pun, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 241–58. Bourdieu's classic theory of capital is an important reminder of the logic of capital here.

<sup>23</sup> See Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality," and the preface in *Narratives of The Chinese Economic Reforms: Individual Pathways From Plan To Market*, ed. Dorothy Solinger (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), i–iv. Also see Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*, for Yan's important account of sushi and the labor force in the Chinese working class.

<sup>24</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). American queer theorist Lee Edelman's queer critique on family and children is referred to here.

<sup>25</sup> Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality," 201.

<sup>26</sup> David L. Eng, "The Queer Space of China: Expressive Desire in Stanley Kwan's *Lan Yu*," *Positions* 18, no. 2 (2010), 459–87. Eng's discussion of Money Boys captures how capitalism has shaped same-sex intimacy in today's China.

<sup>27</sup> Tiantian Zheng, *Tongzhi Living: Men Attracted to Men in Postsocialist China* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). This to some extent responds to Zheng's recent ethnography of gay communities in Northeastern China where she documents how middle-class Chinese gay men embrace the neoliberal individualist values that normalize the dominant state ideology.

<sup>28</sup> Ching Kwan Lee. "Precarization or Empowerment? Reflections on Recent Labor Unrest in China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 2, (2016): 317–33. Ching Kwan Lee's recent study on China's labor movement reiterates dramatic social stratifications.