



# Imaginary Frontiers and Deferred Masculinity:

## Singapore Working Class Men in Batam<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper looks at Singaporean working class men who travel to the Indonesian island of Batam for cheap sex, food and shopping. It presents Batam as a space particular to the metropolis-hinterland relationship that Singapore shares with the Riau islands. Such a space is conceived as an “imaginary frontier” where the hinterland is imagined by the metropolis as a peripheral site that accommodates its desires and is, consequently, malleable to the economic, emotional and sexual needs of men who go there to find what they cannot obtain in the metropolis. Like all frontiers, Batam also sees an asymmetrical power relationship between the visitors and inhabitants of this space, thus allowing for the romanticisation and eroticisation of the Indonesian island. The paper attempts to tease out distinctions between Batam and other domestic red-light districts to uncover the socio-cultural contours of the men who visit the Indonesian island. It examines activities such as friendships and gift-giving from male clients to Indonesian sex workers, together with the treating of the latter with food and drinks, as meaningful actions that suggest the need to rethink the trans-border nature of masculinity. It is argued that the diminished economic status of Singapore working class men compels them to ‘defer’ their masculinity from the metropolis to the Riau island hinterlands, and that sexual consumption must thus be analysed as but one of an array of meaning-making activities performed by working class Singaporean men as they negotiate their masculinity.

**Keywords:** Growth triangle; sex tourism; Batam; Singapore working class men; imagined frontiers; deferred masculinity

### Introduction

The emergence of so-called ‘growth triangles’ from the late 1980s is a fertile space to examine the global dimension of masculinity. Global forces like imperialism, labour migration, neo-colonialism and globalisation have connected and animated a multiplicity of local gender orders (Connell 2005), while constructs of masculinity in global institutions ‘are rapidly becoming the dominant global hegemonic model of masculinity, against which all local, regional, and national masculinities are played out and to which they increasingly refer’ (Kimmel 2005:415; see also Cashmore and Parker 2003; Kubrin 2005). Scholars have argued that the globalisation of masculinity should not lead to the intellectual fossilising of global masculinities. For example, the notion of a global masculinity is almost invariably a western construct without due consideration to the cultural hybridisation processes that go into the formations of such global masculinities (Kam 2003). Furthermore, rigid definitions of global masculinities may obscure the breadth and depth of diversity among masculine identities in different cultures while underestimating the resistance and power of marginalised masculinities (Hibbins 2003).

The trans-border nature of growth triangles has

seen new spaces carved out by states, multinational corporations as well as transportation and communication infrastructures that have, in turn, accelerated and influenced global masculinities. After all, '[b]orders are an integral part of identities and, since people continually construct their identity, they are also continually engaged in bordering processes' (Madsen and Naerssen 2003:72). The growth triangle made up by the city-state of Singapore, and the larger hinterlands of Johor in Malaysia and the Riau islands of Indonesia is one such space. Known as the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMS-GT), its relationship has been characterised as the 'metropolitan spill-over' effect (Chia and Lee 1993; see also Lee 1991). Singapore is the metropolis endowed with good infrastructure, high skills and strong industry sectors that spills over into the adjacent hinterland for its abundance of land and cheap labour in order to maintain international competitiveness. This core-periphery power relation also sees the development of the 'pleasure periphery' (Parsonage 1992) whereby cheaper beach resorts and idyllic settings in the Riau islands are seen as ideal tourist destinations (Grundy-Warr and Perry 2001).

However, the metropolis spills over more than just capital, skills or tourists, but sexual desires and masculine identities as well. The growth triangle has been useful for image-conscious Singapore to purge itself of inconvenient desires where marginal, even deviant, identities may be expelled to the hinterland. The complex relationship between the metropolis and hinterland also means that sexual consumption is hardly always the only reason for cross-border travel. Men travel to the hinterland for cheaper food, weekend getaways, consumer goods, alcohol, male-bonding, as well as sex. As such, existing terms like 'sex tourism', often defined as a narrower category of the broader sex industry 'which involves destinations that provide a wide array of establishments and services to which consumers travel for sex' (Nagel 2000:165), may not be adequate in describing Batam. Are 'sex tourists' only motivated by sex to travel? How does 'sex tourism' account for the shopping, eating and sight-seeing that 'sex tourists' also indulge in? Are such activities erased from analysis? Are businessmen

considered tourists if they travel for both business and pleasure?

The sex industry in the Riau islands has not only grown but diversified in tandem with maturing economic ties to the metropolis. From the early years of catering to the needs of the male labour force in the Batamindo Industrial Park and the Karimun Marine and Industrial Complex, the sex industry underwent a change in the early 1990s with the sprouting of bars, discotheques, massage parlours and karaokes lounges, in addition to traditional *lokalisasi* (brothel compounds). By the mid-1990s a strong supply of low- to mid-range hotels, together with shopping malls, had been established in Batam to cater to the increasing number of tourists. Meanwhile in Karimun, the town centre of Tanjung Balai Karimun saw a growth in hotels from 2000 onwards because of the sex industry. While Indonesian laws do not explicitly prohibit sex work, it is illegal to participate in the trade of women or to live off the earnings of sex workers although such laws are seldom enacted (Sulistyarningsih 2002).

Nevertheless, the scholarly attention on women sex workers is far greater than on men who buy sex. This is because such men, notoriously shy and elusive, are the invisible subjects of the sex industry (Marttila 2008). With interviews and participant observation, this paper examines the phenomenon of Singaporean men visiting Batam, an island 45 minutes from Singapore by ferry. It begins by describing Batam as an 'imagined frontier' where the desires for the consumption of sex, food, and shopping spills from the metropolis into the hinterland. Such an imagined frontier in the hinterland is structured and imagined differently from other red-light districts in the metropolis. Furthermore, not only are such desires manifested in the spill-over effect, but specific negotiations of masculinity as well where the imagined frontier is seen by working class men as a space in which they can express their masculinity. From interviews conducted with men who travel to Batam for sex, the paper offers the narratives of two Singaporean working class men, one Chinese, one Malay, in order to tease out the socio-economic and cultural impulses that drive them to Batam. From these narratives, the paper argues that there is a need to move beyond the popular notion of

hegemonic masculinity that signifies “the ‘naturalness’ of male domination” (Jackson 1991:201) which frames the client-sex worker relationship as exploitative. Instead, any attempt to explain the cross-border movement of Singaporean working class men into the Riau islands must be layered by what may be called ‘deferred masculinity’, that is, the disposition and self-awareness of these men who can only realise their masculinity in this territorially or culturally imagined frontier.

### The Riau Islands as Imaginary Frontier

Amy slides up to a Singaporean Chinese customer seated at a darkened corner in The Last Pub, Nagoya, Batam. She leans towards him in her body-hugging T-shirt and denim shorts, giggling at his joke barely audible over the 90s dance music. She places her hand on his thigh and, with her other, empties the rest of the bottle of beer into his mug. Amy is from Bandung, a province in West Java. She quit her job at the Batamindo Industrial Park six months ago because factory work was dull and her pay just did not cover the high cost of living on the island. Working as a waitress at the pub and moonlighting as a sex worker, Amy now has enough money to rent a terrace house with some of her friends as well as send some money home to her two children who are being taken care of by her mother.<sup>2</sup>

In May 2012, there were a total of 136,794 visitors to the Riau islands of Bintang, Batam and Karimun, about half of which - 68,048 - were Singaporeans (Central Bureau of Statistics 2 July 2012). Many of these visitors stayed for short periods. Those who stayed at higher end hotels stayed an average of 1.72 days, while those in lower end hotels stayed an average of 1.42 days (Central Bureau of Statistics 1 May 2012). These visitors come for a variety of purposes such as work, shopping, family holidays, food, and sex. According to some, half of the clients of sex workers in the Riau islands are Singaporean men, almost all of whom are over 30 years of age, and the majority are well over 40 (Ford and Lyon 2008). The sex workers, on the other hand, come almost exclusively from Indonesia, namely, Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, but mostly from Java. Given the nature of the work it is extremely difficult to pin-point the exact number of sex workers on the islands. This is not only because

sex workers are understandably reluctant to identify themselves as such, but also because many have formal employment in the day and freelance or work part-time as sex workers at night. Estimates range from conservative figures such as 9000 (*The Age* 30 April 2003) to 40,000 in Batam alone (Peachy *et al* 1998).

Batam and the rest of the Riau islands may be seen as ‘imaginary frontiers’, that is, territorial or cultural spaces formed and nurtured by the particular power asymmetry between the metropolis and the hinterland. It is imaginary because the strength of the Singaporean dollar allows the metropolis to imagine the hinterland as a peripheral space that accommodates its ever-shifting needs and desires. The Riau islands is a construct of the metropolis’ imagination, existing in various spatial forms for cheap labour, factories and workers’ dormitories, a second wing for the Singapore’s economic growth, beach resorts, cheap shopping, and of course, women. It is imaginary because of its conceptual malleability to the particular needs of the men who go there to find what they cannot obtain in the metropolis. This imagination is tinged with nostalgia too where the economic disparity between metropolis and hinterland accentuates ethno-national fantasies of Third World idyllic life complete with a simple and simplistic non-materialistic people living in easy contentment. Whether it is the Singapore government seeking industrial expansion, the Indonesian political elite in Jakarta extracting financial revenue, middle class families from the metropolis in search of weekend holidays, or young Indonesia men and women from various provinces looking for employment, the imaginary frontier is an emporium of diverse and contradicting ambitions and hopes.

Like all frontiers, the imaginary frontier is embedded with an asymmetrical power relationship between visitors and its inhabitants. The imaginary frontiers of the Riau islands often conjure up nostalgia for a past that may, in turn, be romanticised and eroticised for metropolitan visitors to indulge in, whether in the form of family holidays or commercial sex. It is attractive to the metropolitan imaginary because its alternative form of structuring and ordering is perceived as ‘wild’ or *liar* (Lindquist 2009), thus making it an erotic and exotic destination, enough to entice the

metropolitan visitor but not too much that it becomes inaccessible or overly forbidding.

As a frontier for cheap sex the Riau islands are marked by a varied landscape catering to different budgets and tastes. Karaoke lounges and discos are meeting points for clients and sex workers. The sex worker may be a hostess in a karaoke lounge or a patron in a disco. Sometimes pimps (or 'papis', as Singaporean men call them) will approach clients and introduce them to the girls. Sex workers in karaoke lounges and discos are typically younger and deemed more attractive than those in brothels. The women who work in bars and pubs, on the other hand, often double up as barmaids or waitresses. They get off work at about 1am-3am. The client can pay a 'bar fine' of RP150,000 (S\$20) to take the girl away before her working hours end. The price ranges from RP250,000 to RP500,000 (S\$33.5 to S\$67). Massage parlours typically have cubicles separated by walls or curtains. A perfunctory massage is given and the massage fee goes to the parlour owner. The girl makes her money by providing extra services which takes place in the parlour.

The *lokalisasi* (sometimes referred to as 'sex farms') are brothel compounds that function like small villages. Here, sex workers live in semi-rural neighbourhoods. Markers of distinction include a local clinic which displays posters on sexually transmitted diseases and condom posters outside some houses. *Lokalisasi* are legal and recognised by the local government. There are also compounds that are not recognised by the government and do not have clinics or sex health reminders. These compounds usually do not allow transactions to take place there (see also Ford and Lyons 2008). There is also more to the imaginary frontier than just commercial sex. Singaporean men are also known to have 'second wives' in Batam. This 'second wives' phenomenon may include women with whom these men have married, having undergone religious rituals or ceremonies, as well as 'rented wives' who are, in reality, long term mistresses (*Straits Times* 16 April 2000). These 'second' or 'rented wives' of Singaporean businessmen may be found in the Penuin, Tiban or Baloi Emas areas (Grundy-Warr and Perry 2001).

Commercial sex between Singaporean men and Indonesian women in the Riau islands are often cultural-sexual encounters which, at their core, are ethno-national tensions that fuel notions of masculinity and femininity in ways that define and depend on each other for meaning and power. The stronger economic position of working class Singaporean men, in contrast to the Third World status of Indonesian women, together with the ethnic politics between the fairer-skin Singaporean Chinese and the darker-skin Indonesian women make sexual transactions in the Riau islands a culturally complex encounter. Certainly, the darker skins of Indonesian women and their highly visible presence in Singapore as foreign domestic workers swiftly assign them to the lower ranks of the global racial hierarchy of superiority and subordination (Kempadoo 2004). The Singaporean men, together with Malaysians, South Koreans, Filipinos and other nationalities<sup>3</sup>, are travellers to the imagined frontier who explore, exploit and find emotional fulfilment in cultural-sexual encounters, such that the border is as much an imaginary barrier as it is an instrument for meaning-making.

### Differentiating the Imaginary Frontier from Red-light Districts in the Metropolitan

Red-light districts have been conceptualised in a variety of ways. Viewed pragmatically with the objective of containment and regulation, they are seen as 'toleration zones' (Hubbard 1997). Conversely, they may be conceived as an organic part of the broader city because their activities relate to other economic and social functions of the city (Ashworth *et al* 1988). They may also be viewed as patriarchal sites for straightforward exploitation or as a space of constant negotiation between sex workers and residents (Tani 2002). It is crucial to note that the different entertainment and leisure structures embedded in these spaces see very different socio-economic patterns and relations. There are several red-light districts in Singapore. The Singapore government prefers a containment and regulation approach, making domestic red-light districts 'toleration zones' that are regulated by way of frequent

raids from the anti-vice police who arrest foreign sex workers for the offense of soliciting and/or working while on a social visit pass, as well as regular medical checkups for sex workers working in licensed brothels.

The most well-known red-light district is Geylang located on the eastern side of the island. It is divided by different *lorongs*, or roads, on which a range of sexual services are offered. There are terrace houses along *Lorong* 18, 20 and Westerhout Road doubling up as licensed brothels in which sex workers, usually Thai, Malaysian or PRC Chinese, sit behind glass panels with number tags charging up to S\$150 per session. There are also rooms off darkened alleyways where older sex workers or Indian women charge from S\$20 per session. Along the pavements are highly visible streetwalkers, usually Chinese nationals, who typically charge around S\$100 per session. This sum does not include payment for transit hotels which charge by the hour instead of by the day (see also Ng 2011). In contrast to Geylang, commercial sex in nearby Joo Chiat Road, another red-light district in the eastern part of the island, contains different entertainment structures, thus resulting in different social patterns. Here the bars and karaoke lounges are sites for encounters between clients and sex workers, the vast majority of whom are Vietnamese girls who double up as lounge hostesses. The client is often compelled to purchase drinks at these karaoke lounges or bars, pay for the taxi to take him and the sex worker to a nearby transit hotel, which he too has to pay for. This could easily cost S\$250 and above. Unlike Geylang, which sees a mixed ethnic clientele, the men in Joo Chiat Road are predominantly Chinese.

In downtown Singapore, at the start of the Orchard Road shopping belt is Orchard Towers, internationally known as the 'four floors of whores'. Pubs and bars with a variety of sex workers from Thailand, Vietnam, and Eastern Europe fill the building catering primarily to US servicemen and tourists. Again, clients are expected to be tourists or businessmen who have ready hotel rooms or are willing to pay for these rooms. At the other end of the scale is Desker Road and Rowell Road in Little India where older sex workers, some of them transvestites, charge around

S\$20. Rooms are located just off alleys and cul-de-sacs, many of them with stained bed sheets and poor lighting.

While male clients are woefully understudied, the different entertainment and leisure structures embedded in different red-light districts give rise to specific socio-economic patterns and relations between clients and spaces. For spaces like Geylang, Joo Chiat and Orchard Towers, procuring the services of a sex worker often involves either the purchasing of accoutrements such as expensive drinks (for both client and sex worker), transportation and/or hotel rooms. The respondents interviewed often could not afford such spaces over a sustained period. Many of them refused to patronise cheaper (and older) sex workers in Geylang or Desker Road because they are perceived to be dirty or diseased, and believed to service only foreign construction workers from Thailand or Bangladeshi. Most important, they were concerned with being seen by friends, colleagues or relatives in such metropolitan spaces. The imaginary frontier of the hinterland, on the other hand, was preferred because the act of border-crossing accentuates its separation from the metropolis and home, thus giving the impression of distance and freedom. Furthermore, while Thai, Vietnamese, or PRC Chinese sex workers in Singapore cater to a variety of men across the economic spectrum, payments in Singapore dollars reduce the economic superiority of the working class client.

Interestingly, however, while the sex tourism literature notes that men from affluent societies often imagine that women in the Third World find them physically attractive (Enloe 1990; Manderson and Jolly 1997), many of the foreign sex workers in Singapore reject local men from ethnic minority groups. According to Malay male respondents, it is not uncommon for PRC Chinese and Vietnamese sex workers to service only Chinese men, refusing Malay or Indian clients ostensibly because of 'communication problems'. This suggests that the cultural politics of ethno-national sexual encounters are more likely to be influenced by the geo-politics of Third World spaces rather than the ethnicity of the client or sex worker. These Malay respondents also note that Malay sex workers, at least those who freelance,

decline to take Malay clients because the ethnic community is so small that the likelihood of meeting someone you know is high. The imaginary frontiers of spaces like Batam thus become more vital for working class men from ethnic minority groups who are rejected by Third World foreign sex workers in the metropolis.

### Deferred Masculinity: Expressing Maleness in the Imaginary Frontier

There are several clear patterns surrounding the cultural politics of men who engage in sex tourism. They are usually from a more affluent country; of a different ethnicity from the sex workers hence the pleasure of sex with the exotic other; and imagine that sex workers, or women in the Third World in general, find them physically attractive (Enloe 1990; Manderson and Jolly 1997). These traits buttress conventional notions of hegemonic masculinity and follow traditional patterns of exploitation. However, while such observations are important, equally crucial are the reasons why such expressions of masculinity, hegemonic or otherwise, have been exported across the border. In such cases, the man's desirability has been held in abeyance in the metropolis, suspended by the economic limits of his working class status, and deferred to the hinterlands. Here 'deferred masculinity' refers to the disposition and self-awareness of working class men who can only realise heteronormative masculinity in another space, whether territorial or cultural, in the search for acceptance and recognition.

While Singapore's journey from colonial port to global city status is often narrated as a success story, there have been several socio-economic consequences. The country's Gini coefficient has risen from 0.454 in 2001 to 0.473 in 2011, one of the highest in the world. Meanwhile incomes at the lower end of society have been slow to rise. For example, while Singaporean workers' real median incomes rose 13 per cent from 2006 to 2010, those at the bottom 20 per cent only saw an increase of 11 per cent in their income (*Business Times* 11 April 2012). This widening income equality has led to a 'crisis of masculinity' among working class males in Singapore as a result of re-

trenchment and the downgrading to lower income jobs, as well as the perceived failure to adequately play the role of provider (see also Levant 1996). This is certainly not unique to Singapore. It has been argued that neocapitalism's global spread strongly associated with the crises in community, youth and masculinity because of the greater accentuation between of the winners and losers in society (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), often manifesting itself in the western gender terms like the 'angry white man' syndrome (Levant 1996).

The subordinated masculinity of working class men foregrounds the peripheral status of these men and is also 'central to the social experiences of gay men, men from non-English speaking backgrounds or other marginalised groups' (Hatty 2000:182). For one, many Singapore working class men have been finding it harder to marry local women. As a result, many of these men have had to resort to foreign brides from neighbouring countries like Vietnam, Thailand, or China. Marriages between Singapore citizens and non-citizens made up 40.8 per cent of all marriages in 2010, up from 30.7 per cent in 1999. More pertinently, '[t]he vast majority of these, 78 per cent, were between Singaporean grooms and foreign brides, most of them Asians' (*Asiaweek* 3 July 2010). Singaporean men marrying foreign brides were more likely to be older (35 per cent over the age of 40) compared to those who married Singaporean women (10 per cent over the age of 40) (National Population Secretariat 2009). Furthermore, Singaporean men who married foreign brides were more likely to be lower educated with 34 per cent with only secondary school education (ibid.).

Two recurring feelings often surface when speaking to Singaporean men who travel to Batam. Firstly, the feeling that they were being pushed or squeezed from the metropolis, and; secondly, that seeking new spaces – both territorial and cultural - is necessary to regain their sense of self. Illustrative of the first feeling are remarks like 'it's hard to make a living in Singapore'; 'if you're not rich [in Singapore], forget it...'; and '...I'm not a foreign talent *lah*, so cannot make it'. Many of these respondents go on to talk about the Riau islands as a much needed space away from the

unforgiving metropolis. '[I come here to] relax and enjoy, or else go crazy' says one. He goes on to reveal that, 'go there [Batam], can *cheong* [Hokkien meaning 'to seek pleasure'] until *peng san* [Hokkien meaning 'to faint']'. This is consistent with observations of Batam as an alternative space for working class Singaporean men to forget their marginal status in the metropolis. 'Working-class Singaporean men, increasingly marginalised in the new economy, can lead a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption, with sex and drugs available at bargain prices, outside the gaze and the grasp of the Singapore state' (Lindquist 2008:223).

Such men are compelled to defer their masculinity to an imaginary frontier when challenged by economic realities and/or systematic institutional marginalisation in the metropolis. After all, all spaces are coded with socio-political norms and rules which individuals learn to either abide by or disengage from. The gay schoolboy may be compelled to defer his masculinity to more conducive spaces such as the library or art class instead of more hostile spaces such as the football field or the gymnasium. Individuals learn to read the specific norms and rules of spaces, and adjust accordingly, the inability of which may result in them seeking new spaces with more advantageous norms and rules. This is especially prevalent in sex tourism where traditional gender roles in Third World hinterlands are often offered in response to metropolitan men who have subordinated masculinities. Sex tourism then becomes 'an escape into the fantasy of men-as-men and women-as-women, an uncomplicated distribution of roles which provide a refuge from life, because nobody has to step outside the prescribed exchanges and dialogues' (Seabrook 1996:36). The following sections look at the different ways in which working class masculinity is deferred to the imaginary frontier.

### 'They are my friends': Creating Scenarios of Affection

Dan is a 48 year old bespectacled Chinese warehouse supervisor who has been going to Batam, and occasionally Bintan, for commercial sex for about 10 years.<sup>4</sup> The frequency of his trips varies from once a

week to once every three months, depending on work commitments and financial constraints. He is married with two teenage daughters who, he admits, are closer to his wife than they are to him. Dan confides that he and his wife have little in common except for 'watching Chinese movies', having grown apart through the years. He earns about S\$2500 a month, only patronises massage parlours and returns to Singapore in the evenings, hardly ever spending the night away from home. Dressed neatly in short-sleeved well-pressed shirts and trousers, Dan prefers to go to Batam alone and dislikes pubs and discos because 'they are too loud and noisy, very *luan* (messy)... Massage is more relaxing, and got special afterwards, no need to move around... it's more convenient'. After the massage Dan may bring the girl out for lunch if he enjoys her company. According to him:

Most of [the female massage parlour workers] come here on contract basis, usually [for] one year. They are employed by the joint to provide massage. Some joints are 'clean' [Dan names a few places], some are not. Those who are in 'clean' business will have uniform, and they work long hours. Tips are usually given to them, as they earn about RP20,000 per customer. No hanky panky. Usual time is about one and a half hours onwards. Some offer aromatherapy, which costs more, but still much cheaper than Singapore... Those [women working in] hanky panky types earn less, mostly from 'specials'. The joints' entry fees are lower and you can opt for one hour, usually going [for] about RP40,000 an hour onwards. There the gals have to survive on special services. Some of them go by contract basis [and] are recruited by their friends, and others come [on freelance] basis... I know some who worked in factories and got retrenched and end up in massage joints. Not much of a choice, since they have to feed their family back in *kampung*.

The transient nature of the girls has not prevented relationships and emotions from developing in the imaginary frontier. Over the years, Dan has formed a series of friendships with girls lasting for as long as they remain in Batam, some of whom he patronises regularly. 'Sometimes I visit three [girls] in one day... three massages! [By the] last [massage] cannot perform already... what to do? They are my friends. I visit them to see if they are okay... Sometimes when they go back home [to their home province] I feel sad.

I will give them an *ang pao* and tell them to take care of themselves.’ Dan’s feelings of friendship suggest that the sexual encounter, though premised on power and ethnicity, may be characterised by more than just ‘libidinal bonds’ (Nagel 2000).

The power asymmetry is writ large in the relations formed in the imaginary frontier. On one hand, Dan’s desire to demonstrate his care and concern has been purged from the metropolis and has spilled over into the hinterlands. The imaginary frontier has allowed the sexual encounter to develop into a more socially complex relationship where money purchases the opportunity for men like Dan to display certain traits like care and concern which may otherwise not be required from his emotionally-distant wife or busy teenage daughters. Certainly, this intertwining of money and intimacy has been shown to be much more widespread in social relations than previously thought (Zelizer 2005). Brief visits to the imaginary frontier allow men like Dan to (re)create scenarios of affection whereby real or imagined relationships with these women are often negotiated with the harsh realities of the latter’s vocation. In such cases, these scenarios of affection are intense and temporal, filled with physical contact like hand-holding, cuddling and playful teasing, but suspended when the man leaves the imaginary frontier in a mutual understanding that the woman’s sex work must continue until he arrives on the island again. For Dan, there is no question of imposed exclusivity, only the belief that she has a special place in her heart for him.

These scenarios of affection have been beneficial to sex workers who enjoy treats and gifts from men like Dan. Indeed, the phenomenon of sex workers developing and nurturing relationships with their multiple long-distance clients is not new. Sex workers are often prepared to turn purely commercial encounters into more protracted liaisons that comprise a mixture of sentimental attachment and pecuniary interest where the long-distance boyfriend-client is a source of emotional and financial support. ‘Indeed older girls often purposely nurse a series of such liaisons with different men, and then derive their main support from remittances, rather than from regular work in prostitution’ (Cohen 1986:116). These scenarios of affec-

tion allow men to play out certain emotional needs and familial desires while the sex worker may willingly subject herself to such personal imaginations either because of the rewards at stake or because her own imagination of a caring, perhaps even lovelorn, boyfriend offers a comforting counterbalance to the uncertainties and dangers in her profession.

### *‘As a man, you must pay lah’: Playing Provider in the Hinterland*

Khairun is a 31 year old Malay Singaporean. As a contract worker with an emergency response team for a private company his income is not stable, averaging between S\$1800-S\$2200 a month. Although single, he has other financial commitments like supporting his diabetic mother and younger sisters. Khairun has been making the trip to Batam for about six years. He has had occasional Singaporean girlfriends though the relationships have never lasted long because, in his words, they ‘always want more’. Like Dan, he frequents massage parlours but also patronises pubs and discos with his friends over the weekends. In small groups of two or three, Khairun and his friends will dance and drink at discos, chat up girls who approach them, and bring them back to their hotel rooms for the night. According to him:

After booking the girl [you] must pay for their food, cigarettes if she smokes and drinks such as beer and liquor. The total cost is around RP700,000 to RP900,000 rupiah. Depends how many bottles and food she orders. As a man, you must pay *lah*.

Whether you want to impress her is another thing... but I think you feel better inside when you can treat her, right? But usually, S\$200 is enough for two days and one night, inclusive of the *cewek* [‘girl’]. But this is not inclusive of the two-way ferry way.

For Khairun, activities like drinking, smoking and relaxing are intertwined with sex. They are a collective experience that can only be consumed in the imaginary frontier and to isolate sexual activity as an example of hegemonic masculinity or exploitation of women would be uneven in analysis. Interestingly, Khairun’s ability to ‘treat’ the girl to meal, drinks and cigarettes in Batam is a simultaneous reminder of his *inability* to do the same in Singapore. Slightly plump and casually decked in jeans and T-shirt, Khairun is



clearly cognisant of his fluctuating economic status on either side of the border. In Singapore 'it's very hard... you buy drinks and cigarettes, that's it. No more money. What are you going to tell the girl? Game over, bro. For Batam, with the same money, you can enjoy more things [sic.], and longer some more [sic.]. He goes on to talk about the cost of marriage. 'Seriously getting married in Singapore is costing a bomb... you can cry trying to save up money just in order to marry someone... Do you know at Batam [you can] just throw S\$2000 [and] you can get married with grand ceremony?' Khairun gets to play the role of material provider in the imaginary frontier because of the strength of the Singapore dollar; a strength that is often neutralised in metropolitan sexscapes like Geylang, Joo Chiat or Orchard Towers for working class men. The border thus signifies the promise of masculinity for Khairun because it restores his ability to provide. The men who flow back and forth across the border experience constant loss and redemption, and undergo cyclical acts of castration and endowment. For these men, the border is simultaneously violent and restorative.

### *Simultaneous Sources of Pleasure and Danger*

As the cases of Dan and Khairun show, Batam is not only a site for the exploitation of sex workers or the fulfilment of hegemonic masculine fantasies as some have suggested (Williams *et al* 2012), but a complex space. This is not to deny male fantasies of female availability and submission. As mentioned above, while it is accepted that men from affluent societies pursue the belief that women in the Third World are available and find them physically attractive, it is only true to the extent that it does not include the complex multicultural politics in the metropolitan. In other words, what happens when Third World women who arrive at the metropolis for sex work go against the stereotype of being submissive? Indeed, the influx of PRC Chinese into Singapore has led to stereotypes. According to Dan: 'As for PRC women, they are so materialistic. But Indo gals, they are easily satisfied. For PRC women, I believe you have heard enough stories of their untrustworthi-

ness, and arrogance. Indo girls are more submissive and more willing to please you with feelings.' For Khairun, '[t]he *ceweks* are friendly. You don't have to do much investment... We just order a drink and they come and talk to you, bro, very friendly. In my opinion, Singapore gals will look at guy's status. Is the guy's career well paid?[sic.] Secure? Able to provide expenses? Well not all gals are like that in Singapore but mostly. All women are materialistic bro... the *ceweks* are materialistic too but they are also more sincere and friendly'.

There is also self-awareness among these men. Given their working class status, they are more wary of being fleeced or taken for a ride by Indonesian women. Indeed, sex workers are often simultaneous sources of pleasure and danger (Hamilton 1997). Khairun warns against letting one's guard down with Batam girls: 'With money, they treat you well. As we know, they work in this line to find money in order to clear off their debts. Some of the Batam girls try to cheat your money. But [you] must think and be aware of their movement [and] tracks. Do not fall too deep into their feelings. Well like I said, not all the *ceweks* are the same. If encounter a good gal, you are lucky.' It is thus important to layer generalised observations of expressed hegemonic masculinity in the sex industry with more nuanced interpretations. Accompanying the undeniable exploitation of sex workers are feelings of vulnerability and the need for constant vigilance on the part of working class men in the imaginary frontier.

### *Imagined Cultural Affinity: Push-Pull Dynamic of Global Flows*

Another key conclusion from the deference of masculinity to Batam is the need to rethink conventional reasons for sex tourism. For some, sex tourism exoticises local women (Enloe 1990; Brennan 2004). For others, sex tourism depends on the eroticisation of the ethnic and cultural Other (Davidson and Taylor 1999). Typically, '[s]ex tourists' fantasies about particular women in a particular place often arise out of association between nationality and race which are rooted in colonial racist discourses, and, more recently, fuelled by media depictions and Internet

discussions and photos' (Brennan 2004:33). This is no doubt true for many 'sexscapes', as Brennan (2004) terms them.

Such readings, however, should not ignore the possibility of regional cultural affinity between customers and sex workers especially given the proximity between the metropolis and the hinterland. Some respondents have expressed cultural affinity, imagined or otherwise, with Indonesian women. When asked for reasons why they preferred the Riau islands instead of patronising PRC Chinese and Vietnamese sex workers in Singapore, price difference was usually accompanied by feelings of greater understanding of Indonesian women because of the similarities in food, language and culture. According to Dan who is an ethnic Chinese Singaporean:

PRCs, Vietnamese [women], are different from our mindset, our thinking, and in almost all ways, even food wise, as you can see. We been eating a lot of [regionally] local food, and our customs are rather similar to [Indonesian girls'] also. We share much similar thoughts on family. [Between] Singaporeans and Indonesians, [we share] common points. We share much more similarities than with PRCs. We use words and have common identity about the clothing like sarongs, batik, food, language, festivals, supernatural stuff like hantus, black magic, as well. Settle down in Indonesia? I guess so, the life here is not so stressful and living cost is much lower. Ultimately, it is one own feeling of belonging. If you ask me if I want to settle down in China, no way.

Dan may be guilty of romanticising the Indonesian way of life as idyllic and stress free. He may also be using cultural affinity with Indonesian women as either a face-saving excuse for not being able to afford the more expensive sex workers in Singapore on a regular basis or to forestall feelings of guilt. Nevertheless, with foreigners making up one quarter of the 5.3 million population, resentment and unease over new immigrants have figured prominently in public discussions. Although Malaysian Chinese continue to make up the largest number of immigrants into the country, their language, accent and cultural habits make them almost indistinguishable from Singaporean Chinese. Instead, the unwelcomed faces of immigrant woes are either PRC Chinese or Indian nationals.

Dan's aversion to PRC Chinese women and his proclaimed cultural affinity with Indonesian ones are part of the broader push-pull dynamic of global flows. The inflow of PRC women have pushed working class men like Dan to the hinterlands, while the (imagined) familiarity of Indonesian culture and the promises of submissive women have hastened the flow of men into the Riau islands. Such dynamic flows of people and desires into different spaces are influenced by both external factors as well as internal ones. For Dan, his dislike for PRC women and his imagined cultural familiarity with Indonesian women, like two sides of the same coin, are equally important for his deferred masculinity.

## Conclusion

The emergence of global masculinities should not obscure the formations of local and regional masculinities. Unlike global masculinities that are invariably premised on international institutions or influenced by neo-capitalist prescriptions, local and regional masculinities continue to be defined by the nation-state, its politics as well as the specific tensions with surrounding borders. This paper has shown that the metropolitan spill-over effect on the hinterland goes beyond capital, skills and infrastructure, but includes desires and identities as well. Batam is a specific construct of the metropolis-hinterland relationship that Singapore has with the Riau islands. It is an 'imaginary frontier' where the hinterland is imagined by the metropolis as a peripheral site that accommodates its desires and needs. Specifically, it is an imaginary frontier that is malleable to the economic, emotional and sexual needs of working class men who are increasingly marginalised in the metropolis by the same global forces that have made the hinterland more accessible. As an imaginary frontier, Batam exhibits an asymmetrical power relationship between visitors and its inhabitants, often resulting in the romanticisation and eroticisation of the Indonesian Other.

From playing out scenarios of affection with Indonesian girls, playing the role of provider, and imagining a shared cultural affinity, working class Singaporean men have appropriated the imaginary

frontier for their own needs. Such appropriations have not been voluntary but, instead, are the result of their economic and cultural marginalisation in the metropolis. This marginalisation, framed as subordinated masculinity, compels them to defer their masculinity to the imaginary frontier. Deferred masculinity is a particular act of simultaneous repression and concession, with the border serving as the double-barrel signifier of working class castration and endowment. This deferred masculinity may not necessarily express itself in hegemonic forms as the narratives of Dan and Khairun have shown. Perhaps more important is that any examination of global, or even regional, masculinities cannot be assumed to take on globally popular forms without a clear examination of the cultural politics embedded in the different sites between which such global masculinities traverse.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for the Floating Frontiers Project at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

<sup>2</sup> Field journal 19 July 2012

<sup>3</sup> Behind Singaporean visitors came Malaysians (22,922 visits), South Koreans (5573), Filipinos (5158), Indian nationals (4799), PRC Chinese (4141), Japanese (3063), British (2469), Australians (1894), Americans (1724), and Others (17,003) for the month of May 2012 (Central Bureau of Statistics 2 July 2012).

<sup>4</sup> The names are pseudonyms. Respondents were first approached through the online forum [www.sammy-boyforum.com](http://www.sammy-boyforum.com). The author contacted contributors to the thread entitled "Batam Info Thread" with private messages. A total of 20 contributors were contacted. Only eight responded, resulting in interviews through private messages and emails. Of these eight, four agreed to meet up with the author face-to-face for further interviews. Two of these respondents introduced the author to another three respondents who travelled to Batam and Bintan for commercial sex. The interviews were conducted from July to November 2012.

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