

Photo: KY Cheng



SEX CHANGES

Travis Kong knows a lot about sex, and now the university lecturer is using his research to reform Hong Kong's sex industry. Yasmin Ghahremani investigates

FOR THE

SEX CHANGES

Travis Kong knows a lot about sex, and now the university lecturer is using his research to reform Hong Kong's sex industry. Yasmin Ghahremani investigates

FOR THE average passer-by, the placards and postcards covering the door and walls of Travis Kong Shiu-ki's office at Hong Kong Polytechnic University may seem provocative. Sure, some – such as the posters from Kong's favourite movie, *In the Mood For Love* – are merely colourful. But less conventional material abounds: photos of HIV-positive orphans in China; a safe-sex postcard showing the naked torso of a man, his finger pointed toward the camera, demanding, "I do, do you?"; and a poster for the Hong Kong Gay and Lesbian Film Festival that hangs behind Kong's desk with the word "OUT" written in big pink letters.

It's hardly your typical university office. But then, there's not much that's typical about Kong. As a lecturer on sexuality and culture in the school's department of applied social sciences, he challenges entrenched ideas, posing questions that make even some mainstream sociologists uncomfortable. His academic research focuses on people whose sexual behaviour falls outside everyday norms. "If people hold different ideas, they are often marginalised and stigmatised," says the amicable 35-year-old. "But through marginal groups you see a totally different perspective on society."

Those margins include prostitutes. Kong has spent the past couple of years studying female sex workers. His research, which was detailed in a journal article titled, *What It Feels Like For A Whore*, breaks new ground in its sociological examination of sex for hire in Hong Kong. In conjunction with an advocacy group called Zi Teng, Kong surveyed 150 prostitutes who work in so-called one-woman brothels, meaning they use newspaper advertisements to solicit clients who visit them at a private apartment. These women are one step above streetwalkers in Hong Kong's rigid hierarchy of female sex workers. Women who work in massage parlours, karaoke bars and nightclubs all outrank them.

Through in-depth interviews with 13 of the one-woman brothel prostitutes, Kong created a qualitative snapshot of their lives. His findings are somewhat surprising. The women he interviewed entered the profession willingly and some even like it. It is a real job to them, including an unwritten contract to perform certain services for the client in a prescribed order (first a shower, then fellatio, then intercourse). They have also developed specific job skills, for which some of them feel a fair amount of pride.

"They would say things like 'I can finish a man off in five minutes if I want to,'" recalls Kong. Along with physical techniques, the women

have mastered what Kong calls "emotional labour" – smiling, massaging their clients' egos and even counselling them on marital or work problems. The prostitutes feel shame not from the job itself but from the social stigma attached to it. They are looked down on by mainstream society, as well as by other prostitutes higher up in the hierarchy. All of the interviewees lie about their profession to their families, including husbands and children if they have them.

An even bigger challenge for them, however, is the constant hassle they receive from police, landlords, and triads demanding protection money. Prostitution itself is legal in Hong Kong but almost everything associated with it is not. For example, it is illegal to solicit clients, to live off the earnings of someone who is a prostitute or to lease someone an apartment to be used for prostitution. Police tip off landlords, who then evict the women. "They have to just change flats all the time," says Kong.

Kong wants to use his research to come up with some suggestions

busy with teaching. His course, *Love, Intimacy and Sexuality*, examines how sexual norms have evolved. It questions everything from the meaning of "masculine" to what constitutes pornography. In one class, Kong uses films to show how people can be erotic even when fully clothed. "There doesn't have to be a naked body for something to be considered obscene," he says. "Society focuses too much on genitals. For me the whole body is a sex organ."

Kong also covers more practical sexual topics such as how to put on a condom, but his unconventional tactics include asking students to demonstrate the procedure on a dildo. "The response from my students is generally positive," he says. "They always say that they never got sex education in primary or secondary school. They got biological instruction but never anything about what it means to be in a sexual relationship."

All this interest in the unconventional wasn't bred into Kong. He had a traditional upbringing in a New Territories public housing estate.

ing only a towel and told Kong bluntly that she wanted to have sex with him. "I was like, wow – she's so direct," he recalls. "Why can't we talk about sex like that?"

Kong's interest in alternative lifestyles grew when he met members of an experimental performance group through research for his Master's thesis back in Hong Kong. He found their unorthodox views and non-traditional jobs fascinating, and began working with them in his spare time.

Today he is still involved with the avant-garde art scene – even though he is not an artist – and he's about as different from the married mahjong player as you can get. That's just the way he likes it. His friends do too. "Travis is a promising, up-and-coming scholar," says Ho Sik-ying, an associate professor in social work and sociology at the University of Hong Kong and a friend of Kong's. "But more than that he's supportive and humorous. He's very pleasant at parties."

Given how serious and dry academia can be, that is provocative.

"The response from my students is generally positive. They always say that they never got sex education in school. They got biological instruction but never anything about what it means to be in a sexual relationship"

for legal reforms to improve the lives of sex workers. He also hopes to devise programmes to help prevent sexual health problems.

He is also embarking on a new project, this time looking at male sex workers. Compared to their female counterparts, male prostitutes have it fairly easy. They are paid more and have a better working arrangement, going through agents who set up appointments for them at hotels. That means there are none of the hassles associated with streetwalking or leasing a brothel apartment, nor the dangers associated with working in triad-run massage parlours and nightclubs. Kong wants to combine the findings of his sex-worker studies with research he's carried out on gays as well as future projects he'd like to carry out about HIV patients and youths, and write a book about the sexual politics of marginal groups.

Outside his research, Kong keeps

His father ran a Chinese medicine shop and his mother was a housewife. In accordance with long-established gender roles, Kong's three older sisters had to cut short their education to earn money for the family while he and his brother went to university. But Kong says even when he was young he never wanted a conventional lifestyle. The idea of getting married, settling down and playing mahjong. Even Hollywood movies made him yawn. He preferred artsy European fare.

His notions about marginalisation developed further in Britain, where he earned first a Master's degree and later a PhD. As an ethnic minority, he felt marginalised. "There were subtle forms of racism," he recalls. "Mostly comments about 'cultural differences'."

But life overseas also exposed him to more liberal attitudes about sexuality. One day, his female flatmate came out of the shower wear-

Welcome to somewhere you can find an individual who won't judge you.

Seymour is a sophisticated man of letters.

Just as the slogan for the smart crowd: open to your problems. So go on, glad you did.

Dear Seymour,

My wife has left me for my chalet with my mansion on the Peak for real-life detective stories. Late evening ages in my library, plotting going mad, because I've caught and stroking my hatchet collection pic of my ex.

What should I do?

Gomez on the hill

Dear G.O.T.H.,

First, bury the hatchet – oops!

Second, since you're chauffeured like phat red. Swap the detector China Morning Post. On the hotspots, as well as getaway attitude, and soon you'll be

Yours for smart solutions,

Seymour

NEWSPAPER DIVISION OF