

# *Organizing for Sex Worker Rights in Hong Kong*

*The Global-Local Interaction*

Adelyn Lim

香港亞太研究所



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Adelyn Lim

Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong  
Shatin, New Territories  
Hong Kong

### **About the Author**

Ms Adelyn Lim is a PhD scholar at the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University.

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# **Organizing for Sex Worker Rights in Hong Kong**

## **The Global-Local Interaction**

### **Introduction**

Local cultures and societies in diverse parts of the contemporary world are interconnected and intertwined with global cultural and social processes. This is a world in which economic and geographic mobility has increased, and indigenous self-consciousness has strengthened. These processes compel women activists “to engage internationally, either through involvement in transnational networks and social movements, or by incorporating understandings of the ‘global’ into ‘local’ and ‘national’ practices” (Lyons, 2004:149). At the same time, women activists must pay particular attention to the roles played by national governments in defining the boundaries of local and transnational practices. It is “part of the very nature of modern notions of citizenship and political activism that the nation-state constitutes the horizon and the boundaries of political action” (Mackie, 2004:243).

This paper illustrates the global-local interaction within the Hong Kong women’s movement. This interaction is especially compelling because of the concerted efforts of Hong Kong non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to localize priorities and activities in reaction to China’s resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong. Hong Kong activists often insist on a Hong Kong identity as opposed to a mainland Chinese identity to counter the potentially colonizing activities of the Chinese government. Despite this emphasis on localization, it is evident that cross-border and transnational issues are central to the concerns of several Hong Kong women’s NGOs.

This paper examines the initiatives of Action for REACH OUT 青鳥 (AFRO) and *Zi Teng* 紫藤, two women’s NGOs organizing for sex worker rights in Hong Kong. My understanding of AFRO

and *Zi Teng* is based on participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis.<sup>1</sup> I argue that organizing for sex worker rights broadens the scope of issues within the Hong Kong women's movement. Both AFRO and *Zi Teng* have attempted to create a space for sex workers, the majority of whom are migrant women, to play an active role in their distinct initiatives. In so doing, both NGOs are going beyond the concerns of Hong Kong women to address the concerns of migrant women. It is also apparent that both AFRO and *Zi Teng* do not perceive organizing for the rights of sex workers to be activities isolated from the pursuit of the rights of other members of Hong Kong society. I discuss how organizing for sex worker rights forces Hong Kong activists to question the traditional feminist analysis of sex work. I also discuss the growing recognition of sex work as trade work within the Hong Kong women's movement. This paper illuminates the interaction of various forces of globalization — cross-border movements, economic restructuring, and shifting identities and transnational subjectivities — and their relationship with the changing nature of the Hong Kong women's movement.

The first part of this paper outlines the emergence of transnational feminist activism in the present era of globalization. This is followed by a discussion of the local women's movement in the socio-political context of Hong Kong in the 1980s, as well the global-local interaction within the Hong Kong women's movement in recent years. In the second part, I provide an overview of sex workers in Hong Kong and discuss the impact of the global-local interaction on women's NGOs organizing for sex worker rights in Hong Kong. I conclude with a discussion of the issue of sex work within the Hong Kong women's movement.

### **Transnational Feminist Activism**

The processes of globalization have affected the organizing activities of women's NGOs in various societies around the world. Women's activists, in turn, have aimed to influence the direction and parameters of globalization processes (Eschle, 2001). The increasing integration of the world through electronic communication and

information technology, international trade, and migration has had major implications for gender relations and the status of women. Globalization “allows for the subversive possibility of women seeing beyond the local to the global” (Eisenstein, 1997:167) as “exposure to geographically disparate influences and to issues framed in a global context can encourage the reflexive scrutiny of localized traditions and behaviour patterns and lead to the construction of new social relationships” (Eschle, 2001:147).

Although the nation-state is still the sphere in which policy decisions are made and implemented (Mackie, 2004), global forums, such as the United Nations (UN) world conferences, and transnational economic structures, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, have become more significant in women’s lives. Hence, the involvement and intervention of women activists and women’s NGOs are required in these areas (Robinson, 1998). Moreover, the “parallel processes of Islamic fundamentalism, communalism, and similar forms of identity politics in the South, along with Reaganism and Thatcherism and the post-Keynesian shift in the North, [have] led to a convergence of sorts and a shared vocabulary between women activists in developed and developing countries” (Moghadam, 2005:87). Hence, the common context among women of struggle due to common domination and exploitation across the north-south divide is leading to transnational solidarity (Mohanty, 1997). This emerging form of organizing among women is an outgrowth of globalization, as well as a critical response to it. It is observable in the UN conferences on women and their accompanying forums for NGOs (Basu, 1995; Fischler, 2003; Moghadam, 2005), as well as in the multitude of ongoing interactions among local women’s NGOs and transnational feminist networks that address regional or global concerns (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Moghadam, 2005).

While the organizing activities of women’s NGOs have become increasingly global and transnational in nature, Basu (1995) has cautioned against assuming that there is a universal commonality in women’s oppression and activism. This critique arises from Morgan’s (1984) conceptualization of a “global sisterhood”, which suggests that women share a “common world view” because they share a

“common condition” (Basu, 1995:3). This assumption ignores the theoretical conceptualization and practical application of issues that divide women, in particular the relation between gender and class, nationality, race, religion, and sexuality. Instead, women’s concerns have to be negotiated within the specific local context in which they arise.

Tohidi (2002:854) has argued that the concerns of women have to be addressed in “the historicized particularity of their relationship to multiple systems of subordination and oppression: patriarchy and/or male supremacy at local levels (family, community, and nation) and international sexism and economic hegemony at the global level”. While emphasizing the local origins, nature, and concerns of women’s movements, we should also consider the significant role of global factors that interact with the local in shaping the objectives, priorities, and strategies of women’s movements in any given context (Wesoky, 2002; George, 2004). In other words, it is necessary to analyse locally and nationally oriented activism and intervention around specific concrete practical agendas, as well as the significance of coalition-building across borders.

## **Emergence of a Local Women’s Movement in Hong Kong**

In the 1980s, Hong Kong entered a phase of transition. The British and Chinese governments reached an agreement in 1984 to return sovereignty over Hong Kong from the former to the latter on 1 July 1997. Hong Kong was to be governed as a special administrative region under the arrangement of “one country, two systems” and “Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong”. The aim of such an arrangement was to preserve Hong Kong’s capitalist system under Chinese sovereignty. This period was a time of political polarization, as Sino-British conflicts over the issues of democratization, human rights, and political liberties destabilized and divided Hong Kong society (Lau, 2001). The British government was under pressure by the British public and the international community to maintain Hong Kong’s prosperity, sovereignty, and stability (Sing, 2000). The Chinese government, for its part, seemed to feel that the continuing



success of capitalism in Hong Kong depended on an authoritarian political system combined with a non-interventionist economic doctrine (Lee, 2003).

This period of political transition created new opportunities for civic intervention in the sphere of electoral politics and in the process of designing the future political structure of Hong Kong (Lui and Chiu, 2000). Several issues permeated the political agenda of local social movements. First, there was the issue of national identity. The identity that the Chinese government has imposed on Hong Kong — that of an economic city that defers patriotically to China's national interests — has led to tense relations between mainland China and Hong Kong and stimulated efforts to delineate a Hong Kong identity that is distinct from that of the mainland (Mathews, 2000; Cheung, 2005). Second, the promise of "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong" has elicited discussions over the structure of the future political system, as issues of democratization, human rights, and political liberties are being heatedly debated (Lee, 2003).

The rise of a local women's movement in Hong Kong was also part of the political transition, as women activists defined the role of the women's movement within the movement for democracy (Ho, 1990). In the 1980s, there was an emergence of grassroots-oriented and rights-based women's NGOs (Lai et al., 1997). These NGOs represented a nascent, local feminism with indigenized interpretations of autonomy and local nationalism (Tsang, 1995; Fischler, 2003). Moreover, the feminist agenda was expressed in terms of gender equality and women's rights instead of familial and maternal welfare (Ho, 1990; Lee, 2000).<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting the issues on the political agenda of local social movements, women activists were concerned about the identity and direction of the local women's movement after 1997. During the political transition, there was greater interest in the development of mainland China and issues concerning Chinese women, and a possibility that the Hong Kong women's movement could become entwined with the Chinese women's movement instead of being a strictly local movement. Hong Kong women activists found this a threat to the indigenous nature of the women's movement, as the

problems women in Hong Kong face may not be the same as those faced by women in the mainland. Consequently, Hong Kong women's NGOs have stressed the indigenous nature of their organizations by striving to represent the voices of Hong Kong women (Choi, 1998).

There was also the threat of the local women's movement becoming engulfed by "macro" politics. Demands for greater democratization of the Hong Kong political structure, in response to the state authoritarianism of the Chinese government, have resulted in deep political cleavages in Hong Kong society. While the woman's movement emerged in the wake of the movement for democracy, the feminist agenda may potentially be overshadowed by the mainstream political struggle for democracy. Given the close link between the women's movement and its political context, it may be difficult to separate the ideological bases and strategies of the women's movement from those of the wider democratic movement (Choi, 1998).

### **Global-Local Interaction within the Hong Kong Women's Movement**

Despite the localized concerns of women activists, global economic forces and demographic processes have major implications for Hong Kong women's NGOs. The permeability of the borders between mainland China and Hong Kong has led to economic and geographic mobility and, consequently, an increase in the migrant worker population. China's integration into the global economy has brought increased prosperity to the country, but the uneven shift to a market-based economy has created large disparities in material wealth. This has spurred a massive amount of internal migration from the countryside and remote rural interior regions to industrialized urban areas, in particular to provincial-level cities and the Special Economic Zones of the coastal provinces. As outsiders in the cities, rural migrants suffer discrimination and are exploited as a cheap and flexible source of labour (Jacka and Gaetano, 2004). These migrants perform work that locals shun and are expected to be in the cities only "temporarily"; hence, they occupy marginal positions in the public sphere (Huang and Yeoh, 2003; Yeoh et al., 2004). In particular, a

hierarchical power relationship between the urban and the rural has been formulated by repudiating rural migrant women as the “other” (Sun, 2004; Zheng, 2004). Rural women are stigmatized as being either sexually promiscuous or prudish (Zheng, 2004). The visibility of rural women in urban spaces, with their “uncivilized body and sexuality” (Zheng, 2004:85), is often a source of anxiety, fear, and moral panic. Indeed, the Chinese government frequently calls for rural women to return to their hometowns (Sun, 2004).

These state and popular discourses confine rural women to marginalized identities, affecting their participation in education, employment, and social relations (Zheng, 2004). Among the jobs available to rural women, most are in labour-intensive industries that offer meagre wages (Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005). Sex work has become an attractive option for rural women, who migrate from agricultural areas and smaller cities to domestic economic centres like Guangzhou and Shanghai, and then onwards to Hong Kong and Macau (Tam, 1996; *Zi Teng*, 2000; Ming, 2005). Indeed the migrant sex worker is an element of the global economy as the opening up of China to economic globalization and the permeability of borders has allowed her to pursue a lucrative form of employment. It is a chance for young, poor, non-college educated women to improve their standard of living in a rapidly industrializing China. Moreover, the sex worker’s “boldness, determination, [and] willingness to cross boundaries” is comparable to “the qualities of the newly imagined, transnational Chinese male entrepreneur extolled in popular and state mainland Chinese media” (Ming, 2005:44).

In Hong Kong, there is growing anxiety about the increase in immigration from mainland China. The Hong Kong government’s approach to the “right of abode” issue has served to strengthen these anxieties.<sup>3</sup> The fear is that mainland immigrants will put intolerable pressure on employment, public services, and social welfare in Hong Kong.<sup>4</sup> Government representations of the new migrants as a burden to society have circulated widely in government and media reports. These have appealed to the sense of Hong Kong identity among the people and reinforced the sense of prejudice against the new immigrants (Ku, 2001).

Mainland women in particular are often perceived as threatening to Hong Kong women. Mainland female sex workers are commonly known in Hong Kong as *beimei*, the girls of the north.<sup>5</sup> *Beimei*, the term denoting “perverted Chinese female bodies”, are imagined as “younger, fresher, more lush and virginal, and therefore they were more sexually arousing and desirable, easily disrupting the patriarchal order of the society” (Pun, 2005:141). Hence, the *beimei* are considered an enticement to Hong Kong men and a disruption to family life. As such, sex is not only inscribed with inequalities between male and female but also marked by social discrimination between and among females.

Much feminist theorizing on the Hong Kong women’s movement has focused on issues at the local or national level, including in the 1960s the practice of polygamy (Lee, 2000); in the 1970s the War-on-Rape campaign (Cheung et al., 1994); in the 1990s unequal rights of inheritance in the New Territories (Lee, 2003); and in recent years democratization and political reform (Choi, 1998). This paper seeks to incorporate an analysis of global processes, such as cross-border movements and economic restructuring, in the examination of the Hong Kong women’s movement. In particular, it addresses the practices and initiatives of AFRO and *Zi Teng*.

## **Sex Workers in Hong Kong**

The Hong Kong commercial sex industry predominantly serves the local community; Hong Kong is not a sex tourist destination (Pearson and Yu, 1995). The number of sex workers in Hong Kong was estimated at 20,000 in 1993 (*South China Morning Post*, 3 May 1993; cited in Emerton, 2001).<sup>6</sup> A significant number of sex workers are non-residents, the majority of whom are mainland Chinese women (Emerton, 2001).<sup>7</sup> Cross-border movements for sex work appear to be circulatory or short-term.<sup>8</sup> Sex work may not be a steady activity, but may be undertaken alongside other forms of income-generating work or be part of an annual cycle of work. Consequently, few stay in the sex industry for their entire working lives (Kempadoo, 1998). The

majority move on to other occupations, start their own businesses, or return home to marry (Ming, 2005).

Sex work is not illegal in Hong Kong, but as is the case elsewhere, sex workers are continuously plagued by social discrimination, legal ambivalence, police harassment, physical abuse, and occupational health hazards. First, sex work remains a taboo subject in contemporary Hong Kong and is absent from public discourse and sex education efforts. Many public misconceptions of sex work have resulted in social discrimination against sex workers. Unjust legislation imposed on sex workers seldom arouses dissent from the public. During the 2004 legislative elections, political candidates were able to lobby for public support and gain votes by pledging to eradicate sex work (*Zi Teng*, 2000-2005; Kong and *Zi Teng*, 2003). This point emphasized by the director of AFRO:

If I may use the word “normal” women, they do not like sex workers because they think these women are ruining their families. It’s their moral conception. And also maybe that of some religious organizations as well; it is what sex workers do that is against their beliefs. They use their own moral standards and then impose them on other people. As for those organizations, parties, and individuals, when anything goes against their beliefs and moral standards, they will try to use all other means to attack it, to stop it. That is why we said that some people even use criminal law to oppose it because this is against their own moral standards.

Second, sex workers function in a grey area of the law. Sex work is not illegal in Hong Kong, but there are several laws that restrict sex work (Pearson and Yu, 1995; Emerton, 2001).<sup>9</sup> The majority of sex workers who are incriminated are coerced into pleading guilty, either because they are ignorant about their right to receive legal aid or because they believe this will bring them a more lenient sentence. They often suffer prejudice and are mistreated during both the investigation and the legal proceedings. Third, sex workers are often subjected to physical abuse by agents, clients and, sometimes, police officers. Due to the stigma attached to sex work, they often do not report the abuse, as they are

perceived by the legal enforcement system as not credible or reliable witnesses. Finally, some sex workers have little or no knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS and about how to avoid becoming infected (*Zi Teng*, 2000-2005; Kong and *Zi Teng*, 2003).

Migrant sex workers, especially illegal migrants, are often ignorant of Hong Kong laws. While mainland women enter Hong Kong legally, they are violating the conditions of their visa by working. When the police conduct raids in brothels, massage salons, or nightclubs, Emerton (2001) has observed that there rarely appears to be any investigation into whether the women are victims of trafficking. Instead, they check for illegal migrants and for non-local women overstaying their visa and/or working in breach of their conditions of stay. Hence, migrant sex workers are vulnerable and risk exploitation by their agents and by the policemen who arrest them.

### **Organizing for Sex Worker Rights in Hong Kong**

Given their experience within the local women's movement and the wider social movement in Hong Kong, several women activists have become involved in issues concerning the rights and welfare of sex workers. AFRO was formally registered as a charity organization in 1993. AFRO was established to assist women working within the commercial sex industry in Hong Kong, including women coming to Hong Kong from other countries, as there were then no support services for sex workers in Hong Kong.<sup>10</sup> One of the volunteers with AFRO then established *Zi Teng* in 1996 to raise the public profile of the situation of sex workers. Like AFRO, *Zi Teng* is concerned about the basic rights and interests of local and migrant sex workers in Hong Kong.<sup>11</sup>

Both AFRO and *Zi Teng* view sex work as an income-generating form of labour for men and women (Kempadoo, 1998). This conceptualization of sex work emphasizes its similarities with other forms of mental and manual labour that involve particular types of skills and specific parts of the body that working people make use of to sustain themselves and their families (Truong, 1990). Based on this

conceptualization, the exploitation of sexual labour is similar to the kinds of liabilities and pressures faced by those performing any other form of waged labour. Hence, organizing for sex worker rights can be considered within the context of the broader women's movement, as a basis for mobilizing to fight for the recognition for women's work, for basic human rights, and for decent working conditions (Kempadoo, 1998). Consequently, both AFRO and *Zi Teng* have adopted a rights-based approach to their initiatives, and have focused the issue of sex worker rights on the following interrelated objectives — rearticulating sex work as a form of trade work; removing social discrimination against sex workers; advocating improvements in the rights and working conditions of sex workers; and establishing a support network for women working within the sex industry in Hong Kong.

From the beginning, AFRO adopted a “low-profile policy” on the protection of sex workers because the sex industry was, and still is, a controversial issue in Hong Kong. If women appeared to be acquainted with AFRO, members of the public would be able to identify them as sex workers. The founding members believed that this would make such women very vulnerable. Thus, the organization did not “expose” itself and very few members of the public knew of its existence. Instead, staff members and volunteers have worked on building relationships with sex workers and gaining their trust. Consequently, part of the NGO's activities focus on their “women's centre”, a drop-in centre that offers a variety of support services and workshops.<sup>12</sup> AFRO's main objective is to help sex workers develop a self-support network. The director explained how the women's centre is a space for sex workers to be actively involved in organizing themselves:

So that is why we have something like a women's centre here. We look at them as women and also as workers. We understand that besides sex work, they also have other roles as ordinary women. They are housewives, they work part-time or full-time elsewhere, they have family, children, everything. But we go beyond that. We always emphasize self-empowerment, so that they know that they also enjoy certain human rights, and how

they are supposed to exercise them. And if they do not look down on themselves, if they feel good about themselves, they will more readily stand up when the time is ready for them to ask for equal rights.

Corresponding to its low-profile policy, the organization has adopted a non-confrontational approach to advocacy. It monitors government legislation, policies, and practices pertaining to the Hong Kong sex industry, and also provides information to the health authorities, urging them to pay more attention to the healthcare needs of sex workers.

*Zi Teng* is much more visible than AFRO. It has adopted a high-profile approach to achieve its objectives. For this reason, it emphasizes advocacy as opposed to the provision of services. In June 2005, approximately 80 mainland women “suspected of prostitution” were rounded up and interned in a “cage” in full view of the public. Various photos in the press depicted the women lying on bare ground, without visible toilet facilities, privacy, or food and with male police officers standing by. AFRO responded by sending letters to the immigration department, the media, and the police, while *Zi Teng* held a demonstration outside a police station protesting against the powerlessness, visible shame, and vulnerability of the women, and demanding their release.

Complementing its advocacy efforts are the high-profile public events organized by *Zi Teng*. Towards the end of 2003 until the beginning of 2004, *Zi Teng* organized a photo exhibition, *My Sex Life*, at several public places.<sup>13</sup> The organizers made a conscious effort to include the voices of sex workers in the exhibition, 36 of whom were invited to take photos of their living and working spaces to introduce their daily life to the public. A volunteer at the exhibition explained the purpose behind this:

Actually, they are really, really no different from other women. How they see themselves is very different from how other people see them. That’s why we want to educate other people to know more about their situation because there is a very strong stereotype. When other people take pictures of them, they are



gambling or smoking or wearing a lot of make-up and sexy clothes. But when you see the pictures of their lives, they are just like other people.

Photos at the exhibition included those of their children, a simple bed and soft green curtains, Tung Chee-hwa on television,<sup>14</sup> and a Chinese painting hanging on the wall.

### **Transnational Networks and Cross-border Initiatives**

*Zi Teng* has also been able to establish transnational links and form strategic alliances with regional NGOs to bring about collective action on sex worker rights. In December 2005, *Zi Teng* organized an exchange programme in Hong Kong for local and regional sex workers and sex workers' rights organizations from Cambodia, Japan, mainland China, Macau, and Taiwan. Participants described government legislation, policies, and practices surrounding their respective sex industries and shared their working experiences with one another. The majority expressed concern about violence from customers and abuse by the police. *Zi Teng* also arranged outreach activities for the participants, so that they would be able to further understand the working experiences of local sex workers. In line with *Zi Teng*'s confrontational approach, the participants commemorated the 3rd International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers with a demonstration outside a police station to raise public consciousness of violence against sex workers.<sup>15</sup> They then joined the demonstrations at the 6th World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference to show solidarity with other workers around the world.

Through various conferences, seminars, and workshops, the network of sex workers from different regions has strengthened. These transnational networks have allowed *Zi Teng* to improve its understanding of the situation of sex workers outside Hong Kong, and to obtain updated information for migrant sex workers who are interested in working in other countries. More importantly, these networks are enabling *Zi Teng* to understand current discourses on migration and sex work and to develop appropriate programmes for migrant sex workers.

In relation to these transnational networks, *Zi Teng* is involved in ongoing cross-border initiatives in Macau and mainland China. It has established outreach programmes and support services in Macau, Qingdao, Shanghai, and Yunnan. It aims to set up service models for organizations that provide services for sex workers, so that such organizations can eventually run the programmes independently and, consequently, improve their organizational skills, obtain their own medical and referral services, and generally improve on the programmes and services that they offer to sex workers.

During the political transition in the 1980s, several women activists within the Hong Kong women's movement were concerned that, as Hong Kong would no longer be viewed as a separate entity, the attention being paid to women's issues would be directed to mainland China (Choi, 1998). However, a feminist academic and activist has observed that *Zi Teng*'s transnational networks and cross-border initiatives have allowed the organization to consolidate a support network among local and regional sex workers and organizations that focus on the rights of sex workers:

The interesting thing is, after 1997 the founder of *Zi Teng* has been working with Oxfam Hong Kong and maybe one or two other kinds of organizations within China itself,<sup>16</sup> but that doesn't mean they are diverting their attention away from Hong Kong. It's more like they're working closely with sympathetic individuals in China. So you might say in the case of *Zi Teng*, they are broadening their vision, they are broadening their sphere of activity, and their activities in China are not at the expense of what they are doing in Hong Kong. So this return to China hasn't got a negative impact. Rather I think it's more of a positive impact, a broadening.

### **The Issue of Sex Work within the Hong Kong Women's Movement**

Feminist activists and theorists hold conflicting viewpoints on the social origins and effects of sex work, as well as its moral status and

social meanings (Shrage, 1994). These views have ranged from the condemnation of sex work as a form of victimization or a product of capitalism to its validation as an empowering activity. Radical feminists see sex workers as victims who were forced into the sex industry, while Marxist and socialist feminists view sex work as a product of capitalism. Sex workers are perceived as having been coerced into joining the sex industry by agents and traffickers and/or by the economic forces of capitalism; or as female subjects of male power who have become commodities exchanged in the market. These feminist discourses advocate an end to state tolerance and regulation of sex work and instead support the criminalization and/or eradication of the sex industry. However, the criminalization and stigmatization of sex work may render sex workers more dependent on agents and traffickers, as well as deny them the legal and political rights that might help them to evade exploitive forms of control under agents and traffickers (van der Veen, 2000).

When *Zi Teng* was first established, staff members and volunteers organized dialogues and forums to raise awareness of the situation of sex workers within the Hong Kong women's movement and to build networks with Hong Kong women's NGOs. The issue of sex work evoked intense debate and discussion among the women's NGOs, reflecting the acute differences on this issue within the international women's movement. The Association for the Advancement of Feminism (AAF) was among those women's NGOs that participated in these dialogues and forums.<sup>17</sup> A founding member revealed the personal opinions and sentiments that she held at the time:

I had studied in China for a few years, and when I came back in 1996, I participated in one of the group discussions organized by *Zi Teng*. At that time, I was speaking from my 1980s mind. I said, "I support the sex workers, but I think finally if there are opportunities for women, for example the employment situation has improved, then maybe these women will not choose to work as sex workers but in other kinds of jobs." At that time, I said that I opposed sex as a commodity, but later I was criticized by the younger generation. So I have gone through a similar

reflection on sex workers with other AAF members from the so-called first generation. We had to rethink what we thought in the 1980s, like how to look at our bodies.

The dialogues and forums on the situation of sex workers in Hong Kong have, to a certain extent, permeated the women's movement as well as the wider civil society in Hong Kong. In December 2003, AFRO retreated from its low-profile policy as the women were now "more comfortable" identifying themselves as sex workers in the public sphere. AFRO decided to "raise the profile" of the organization by building up its networks and becoming more visible in the media. While its initiatives remain relatively low-key, it has become a member of the Hong Kong Women's Coalition on Equal Opportunities (HKWCEO) and the Hong Kong Coalition of AIDS Service Organizations (HKCASO).<sup>18</sup> Its participation in the HKWCEO has led to a growing movement against the criminalization of sex work, with Hong Kong women's NGOs supporting AFRO in the latter's demands that the industry be decriminalized and subject to the same regulations as other independent contractors and employers.

The HKCASO and AFRO have also joined forces to place pressure upon the health authorities to confront the issue of HIV/AIDS in relation to sex workers. Since April 2003, non-residents have been subjected to a fee increase at social hygiene clinics that offer anonymous and confidential STDs and HIV/AIDS tests. While local residents receive free medical services, non-residents have to pay HK\$700 (approximately US\$90) for medical services. A considerable number of sex workers are non-residents but are highly vulnerable to STDs and HIV/AIDS, and the fee increase discourages them from using this service. The HKCASO has written several times to the health authorities to strongly oppose the increase.

## **Conclusion**

This paper illustrates the complexity of the interaction between global processes and local responses. The processes of globalization can provide significant measure of exogenous influence on local social

movements, even if such influences are ultimately mediated by local economic, political, and social forms. This paper demonstrates how global and social processes of economic and geographic mobility and indigenous self-consciousness have impacted upon the Hong Kong women's movement, with particular attention on women's NGOs that organize for the rights of sex workers. From their "local" perspective of the Hong Kong women's movement, women activists in Hong Kong now apply their insights on the nature and impact of global processes to their local concerns and activities.

Despite similar organizational aims and objectives, AFRO and *Zi Teng* have undertaken different approaches to addressing the situation of sex workers in Hong Kong. AFRO's approach to change is essentially non-confrontational, while *Zi Teng* has gained much public attention with its exhibitions, demonstrations, and street marches. *Zi Teng* has also been active in forming transnational links and strategic alliances with regional NGOs to bring about collective action on sex worker rights. However, both NGOs have attempted to create a space for sex workers to play an active role in their distinct initiatives. In so doing, both NGOs are addressing the concerns of mainland women and challenging the various stereotypes of these women.

It is also evident that both AFRO and *Zi Teng* do not perceive organizing for the rights of sex workers to be activities isolated from the pursuit of the rights of other members of Hong Kong society. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender organizations, legal and human rights activists, healthcare workers, and labour unions are potential allies in the struggle to transform sexual labour into work that is associated with dignity, respect, and decent working conditions. These coalitions will continue to bring new meanings to feminist discourse as well as to the Hong Kong women's movement.

## Notes

1. I visited the administrative centres of AFRO and *Zi Teng* and was involved in various activities at both organizations, so I was able to make detailed observations of the settings in which women activists work. I also conducted unstructured

interviews with women activists who were involved with the two organizations. Documentary research was conducted using the following materials: pamphlets, internal newsletters, and other publications of AFRO and *Zi Teng*, government documents, books, magazines, newspapers, and scholarly journals.

2. From the immediate postwar years up to the 1970s, women's concerns were voiced by prominent individuals rather than from a solid organizational base. Despite the significant contributions made by these women activists, there were three major areas of dissension among them. First, women as "victims" formed the basis of campaigns concerning abuse and rape, and the underlying issue of patriarchy was ignored (Tsang, 1995). Second, the non-confrontational approach of these women activists was perceived as insufficiently forceful for advocating women's rights and welfare (Tsang, 1995). Finally, there was the practical inability to speak the language of grassroots women, as the women activists were mainly elite local and expatriate women (Ho, 1990). For the history of the Hong Kong women's movement, see Tsang (1995).
3. The mini-constitution of the Basic Law, which came into effect upon Hong Kong's return to China on 1 July 1997, guarantees the right of abode to all persons of Chinese nationality born to Hong Kong residents regardless of their place of birth. The controversy was raised immediately after 1 July 1997, when hundreds of mainland Chinese-born children of Hong Kong residents made a public claim to their right of abode, and the Hong Kong government responded by redefining and restricting the rights of these people through a legal amendment. Although in January 1999 the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal (CFA) affirmed the constitutional right of abode of all mainland-born children of Hong Kong residents, the Hong Kong government resorted to asking the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress to reinterpret the Basic Law (Leung, 2005).
4. In April and May 1999, the Secretary of Security and various policy bureaux released two sets of figures showing that under

the CFA ruling an estimated 1.67 million people might cross the border, costing taxpayers HK\$710 billion (approximately US\$91 billion) in ten years in the areas of education, health, housing, and social welfare, and pushing the unemployment rate to as high as 18% (Ku, 2001).

5. Hong Kong lies on the south coast of mainland China.
6. The absence of empirical studies and statistics prevents us from accurately determining the number of sex workers, recruitment agencies, or sex service-providers involved in the Hong Kong sex industry today.
7. Women from the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand form the next largest group of non-local sex workers.
8. Most mainland Chinese women enter Hong Kong legally. These women appear to receive assistance in coming to Hong Kong, and are recruited either through an informal network of relatives and friends or through an agent. They enter via a two-way permit, granted for the purpose of visiting relatives in Hong Kong and allowing them to stay in Hong Kong for three months. Those who do not have any Hong Kong relatives may enter using a visa to another Southeast Asian country, allowing them to stay in Hong Kong for seven days in transit each way. However, these women are violating the conditions of their visa by working.
9. These include laws against soliciting for an immoral purpose or loitering for the purpose of soliciting, living off the earnings of the prostitution of others, permitting premises to be used for prostitution, and putting up signs advertising prostitution.
10. AFRO believes that every woman has the right to fair and just treatment under the law, regardless of her educational, social, religious, or occupational background; every woman has the right to have the terms of her contract honoured and not changed without her prior consent; every woman has the right to be free from violence and coercion; every woman has the right to safeguard her own health; and every woman has the right not to be used as a commodity (<http://hkaims.med.cuhk.edu.hk/reachout/>).

11. *Zi Teng* is the Chinese translation of the acorus calamus plant, which grows and flourishes quietly and unnoticeably, and whose leaves and stems are used for making baskets, household furniture, and ropes. These features reflect the strength of character of sex workers. *Zi Teng* believes that all women, regardless of their profession, social class, religion, or race, have the same basic human rights; that they are equal and entitled to fair and equal treatment in the legal and judicial system; that nobody should suffer oppression; and that all people should live with dignity ([http://www.ziteng.org.hk/aboutus/aboutus\\_e.html](http://www.ziteng.org.hk/aboutus/aboutus_e.html)).
12. These include counselling, health services, legal services, part-time employment, peer education training, and rights education.
13. These include the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, the Hong Kong Arts Centre, the Shanghai Street Artspace, and the Second Floor Gallery Café.
14. Tung Chee-hwa was the first Chief Executive (1 July 1997 to 12 March 2005) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.
15. December 17 is the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers. Each year, sex workers' rights organizations in different parts of the world organize different activities to commemorate sex workers who have been abused or killed, and to raise public consciousness of the human rights of sex workers.
16. Oxfam Hong Kong was established in 1976 as an independent development and relief agency. It aims to resolve problems of poverty through long-term development programmes, policy advocacy, and public education. It has also supported various projects by local women's NGOs.
17. The AAF was established in 1984. It aims "to promote understanding and concern about problems faced by women and to eliminate discrimination against women; to fight for women's rights and to promote women's welfare to ensure the free development of women's personality, potential, and full opportunities in social participation; [and] to work for the



conscientization and for the advancement of feminism to help bring about equality for both sexes” ([http://eng.aaf.org.hk/iso/article\\_listing.adp?category\\_id=2&subcategory\\_id=1](http://eng.aaf.org.hk/iso/article_listing.adp?category_id=2&subcategory_id=1))

18. The HKWCEO was established in 1996. Its members consist of feminist and women’s organizations involved in advocacy and/or the provision of services. It is a platform for member organizations to raise public awareness of women’s issues that are common to all member organizations and to work to resolve them.

The HKCASO was established in 1998. Its members consist of agencies that deliver ongoing HIV/AIDS programmes and services or that have a particular interest in supporting people with HIV/AIDS and vulnerable groups. It exists to facilitate communication between its member agencies and to work on policy issues relating to HIV/AIDS in Hong Kong (<http://www.hkcaso.org.hk/>).

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## **Organizing for Sex Worker Rights in Hong Kong The Global-Local Interaction**

### **Abstract**

This paper illustrates the global-local interaction within the Hong Kong women's movement. This interaction is especially compelling, because of the concerted efforts of Hong Kong NGOs to localize priorities and activities in reaction to China's resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong. Despite this emphasis on localization, it is evident that cross-border issues are central to the concerns of several Hong Kong women's NGOs. In this paper, I examine the initiatives of Action for REACH OUT and *Zi Teng*, two women's NGOs organizing for sex worker rights in Hong Kong. I argue that organizing for sex worker rights broadens the scope of issues within the Hong Kong women's movement, as women's NGOs go beyond the concerns of Hong Kong women to address the concerns of mainland Chinese women. I also discuss how organizing for sex worker rights forces Hong Kong activists to question the traditional feminist analysis of sex work.

## 為香港性工作者爭取權利 全球性與本地化之交流

林麗萍

(中文摘要)

本文敘述香港婦女運動中全球性與本地化之交流。在香港，這種交流特別棘手，因為政府的管制，促使香港的非官方機構將精力用於本地的議題與活動。儘管本地化被強調而成為主流，但顯而易見，許多香港非官方婦女團體仍然非常重視跨邊界的問題。在本文中，我將探討青鳥及紫藤這兩個為香港性工作者爭取權利的非官方機構的主張。我的論點是：為性工作者爭取權利，將擴大香港婦女運動涉及問題的範圍，因為香港的非官方婦女團體必將超越本地婦女面對的問題，去關心有同樣問題的內地中國婦女。我也會探討香港為性工作者爭取權利的積極份子，如何在爭取的過程中，被迫使質疑傳統女權主義對性工作的分析。



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Director: Yeung Yue-man, PhD(*Chic.*),  
Research Professor

Associate Director: Sung Yun-wing, PhD(*Minn.*),  
Professor, Department of Economics