

Massage (*àn mó*) and Related Services as Popular Culture: New Consumption and Fluid Sex Hierarchy in China

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Abstract

With the rise of affordability Chinese people are now focusing on new forms of consumer products and services, such as massage. Today, massage and related services have become one of the most popular forms of consumption in China, and are available in the five star hotels of mega cities as well as in small township shops, catering to the needs of various social classes. This paper examines how massage and related services have increasingly become popular in townships, with adults of both the sexes as ready consumers. Under this development, mainstream sex stereotypes have been reproduced, where young females provide services to male clients, reinforcing traditional sex roles. At the same time, female clients have also engaged in this new consumption through receiving services from young male providers, breaking the mainstream sex hierarchy. However, the patterns of service that are consumed by members of the two sex categories are not the same: male clients have overwhelmingly consumed body massage, shoulder massage, etc., while female clients have consumed hair care, face massage, and foot massage. This paper concludes that massage and related services have become popular culture in China through catering new consumer products and through reinforcing and/or breaking the mainstream sex stereotypes and hierarchy.

Keywords: *massage, sex, popular culture, consumption, client*

1. Introduction

Like other ancient medical practices in Asia, therapeutic massage has been used as a form of treatment – in traditional Chinese medicine – since ancient times. Many other medical systems worldwide have promoted the practice of massage, such as those of the Egyptians, Greeks, Indians, Japanese and

Romans, for therapeutic reasons (Cavaye, 2012: 43). Late 19th and early 20th century massage literatures reveal that massage was practised by doctors and nurses as an “orthodox medical therapy” (Goldstone, 2000: 69). However, massage achieved its modern therapeutic form from the hand of Pehr Henrik Ling, a late 18th to mid-19th century Swedish physical therapist who used massage in association with exercises and specific movements such as medical-gymnastics (Holey and Cook 2003). As a continuation of this development, massage had become an acceptable medical therapy by the early 20th century “when the focus of care moved to biological sciences” (Cavaye, 2012: 43; Saks, 2005). The Chinese medical classic *Huang Di Nei Jing* (the Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor) discusses the development and importance of massage as a therapeutic method (*Huang Di Nei Jing*, 2009: 271-72). According to the *Huang Di Nei Jing*, massage originated in central China, in relation to the patterns of disease. The text denotes that the landscape in central China is “flat and damp, and living things are produced in abundance” by heaven and earth, and people eat a “wide variety of foods” and are not “overworked” (*Huang Di Nei Jing*, 2009: 272). All these characteristics are related to their disease patterns, such as common atrophy, chills and fever, and massage is considered suitable to treat these diseases (*ibid.*). Today, massage is no longer the mainstream healing method to treat chills or fever for the Chinese people. With the rise of globalization and rapid economic development, massage has been transformed into a new form of consumer product.

This study examines to what extent massage and related services have become popular consumer products in contemporary China. What are the driving forces behind this development? Can such development be called popular culture? To what extent are sex stereotypes involved in this development? And finally, under what circumstances does the development of massage and related services make the existing sex hierarchy more fluid?

The development of massage in various parts of the world could be seen as an outcome of gender bias, as “sexuality or sexual stigma” associated with prostitution and sex work (LaPointe, 2000: 1), health rejuvenation, a rise in sub-health conditions, and a rise in the number and interest in relaxation therapies, etc., with male clients consuming the services of female service providers. However, I understand the development of massage and related services in contemporary China to be caused by the rise of “self-centred consumer capitalism”, apart from the above causative factors. One of the major theoretical frameworks used in this study is that of “consumptive capitalism”, which was introduced by Paul Heelas. In his latest volume Paul Heelas claims that new age spiritual movements are simply a product of self-centred consumer capitalism (Heelas, 2008). The development of massage in China is a part of self-centred consumer capitalism and has been promoted

by the private sector and supported by the government. The emerging middle class in China have taken on an array of technical, management and professional occupations that demand not only their skills but also long hours of commitment on the job. The result has been that many suffer from burn-out syndrome at both mental and physical levels (Islam, 2012). Massage and related services are consumed by the middle classes for physical and mental relaxation, rejuvenation, stress reduction and relief from physical pain. The touching of the body of members of the opposite sex may also be seen as an important motivation behind this development, as clients and service providers are usually of the opposite sex.

2. Research background

This research is based on fieldwork. The fieldwork was conducted in Tangjiawan Township of Zhuhai City, Guangdong Province, the People's Republic of China. Tangjiawan Township is located at the north of Xiangzhou District in Zhuhai City, and has a total population of 100,000, among which 29,000 people are permanent residents. With an area of 130 square kilometres, Tangjiawan faces Zhongshan City to the north and is composed of three parts: Tangjia, Jingding and Qi'ao. The survey and participant observation were conducted mainly in the Tangjiawan market area and included places such as Tangjiawan Ying-Wu Hair Salon, XinLi Lu Hair Salon, JuLong FaYi, ShangYi Hair Salon, YanZi Foot Massage, Jie Mei Bao Jian Zhongxin, Dragon Union Foot Massage Center, and Dragon Union Hair Salon. Dragon Union Foot Massage Center and Dragon Union Hair Salon are located within the same complex with common ownership but different operations.

There are 18 massage and related service centres in Tangjiawan market (an area of approximately one square kilometre): 4 massage centres, 9 salons, 4 beauty parlours and 1 spa. The massage service centres provide a range of services such as body massage (*quán shēn àn mó*); various forms of Chinese and herbal medicine foot treatment (*zú bù àn mó*), including Chinese medicine foot treatment, Tibetan medicine foot treatment, foot treatment for kidney health, hot spring foot massage, foot massage for beriberi, cupping, etc. Salons also offer a broad spectrum of services including hair wash with head and shoulders massage, Thai hair wash + ginger juice + face wash, Thai hair wash + water therapy + face wash, Thai hair wash + ice therapy, face therapy (to take away blackheads, and to moisturize and apply whitening mask), fire treatment, haircuts, and non-professional head and shoulder massage and massage for whole body. Beauty parlours provide services such as face therapy, massage for back, arm, hand, and shoulder, and face massage.

Data were collected in July 2010 and January-February 2011. Primary data collection techniques employed in this study were survey with structured

questionnaire and participant observation. There were two types of sample: clients who had consumed massage and related services, and service providers. The total number of the sample was 100 – 50 clients and 50 service providers. The sample was chosen through a simple random sampling method. Majority of the samples were found from Ying-Wu Hair Salon, XinLi Lu Hair Salon, JuLong FaYi, ShangYi Hair Salon, YanZi Foot Massage, Jie Mei Bao Jian Zhongxin, and Dragon Union Hair Salon. Remaining samples were found from other institutions providing similar services in Tangjiawan market. This paper also includes some data based on the personal experience of the researcher during participant observation.

Of those clients and service providers surveyed in Tangjiawan market, all the service providers were migrant workers with relatively low education whereas the majority of the clients came from Guangdong Province and had higher educational backgrounds than the service providers. The majority of the service providers came from the neighbouring provinces, such as Hunan, Jiangxi, and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and this exemplifies the relatively higher economic development of Guangdong Province. Table 1 will help the reader to get a comprehensive picture of the socioeconomic background of the clients and service providers I surveyed.

3. Massage as Popular Culture in China

Popular culture generally refers to mass culture or mainstream culture made popular by the media for mass consumption. Popular culture is not static and constantly changes over time and circumstances. Contemporary popular culture has no boundary and is always hanging, and this makes popular culture a random collection or clutter. Raymond Betts has perceived contemporary popular culture as about “seeing things”, “about buying and having”, and/or “about being distracted and entertained” (Betts, 2013: viii). Robert Hewison defines popular culture as “collage culture”, with some forms of popular culture invisible or random (Hewison, 1986).

Over the decades, numerous and diverse forms of popular culture have been developed in Asia. The Chinese media author Anthony Fung has categorized Asian popular culture in his recent volume into four categories: most forms are mainly connected to the global production process; a few “culturally indigenous forms” distinguish themselves and “stand out in the global market”; many hybrid forms “lie within the continuum of global-local production and circulation networks”; and finally there are some “elaborate cultural forms and products that can be converted to something global for certain situations” (Fung, 2013: 1-2).

Popular culture has been described in mainstream literature as “mass-produced images changing their forms in seconds, popping up as advertise-

Table 1 Population Characteristics of Clients and Service Providers (percentage)

<i>Background Indicator</i>		<i>Clients (n = 50)</i>	<i>Service Providers (n = 50)</i>
Education	College/University	50	6
	Middle school ¹ or lower	24	70
	Other forms or levels of formal education	26	24
Residence or home town	Zhuhai City	18	Nil
	Other cities, impoverished towns or countryside of Guangdong Province	50	34
	Neighbouring provinces	32	66
Monthly income	RMB 3000 or below	46	66
	RMB 5000 or above	10	6
	Income levels between RMB3000 and RMB5000	Unknown	28
Age	30 or below 30 years	44	78
	Above 30 years of age	56	22
Sex	Male	56	22
	Female	44	78
Marital status	Married	66	38
	Single	32	62
	Unknown	2	Nil

ments” on television, computer monitor, i-pad and i-phone screen, and others. Mega-malls to cyberspace, automobiles to movies, tourist destination to airports, Walt Disney to theme park, all venues and arenas are included in this fray (Betts, 2013: viii). China is not an exception, as it is the country in which the world’s largest number of online users, as well as many automobiles users and airport users, live – partly because she has the world’s largest population.

Some scholars see popular culture as revolutionary, and the revolution “takes place primarily in the global commodity market as a deviant by-product of the mass consumer culture” (Bowman, 2013: 45; Kato, 2007: 2). The rise of massage as popular culture, particularly in China, is a relatively new phenomenon that symbolizes a new form of revolutionary consumerism under which many people consume massage and related services.

4. Contamination and Consumer Capitalism

Popular culture is often criticized by various non-mainstream groups that deem popular culture to be superficial, consumerist and corrupted. The shift of massage from a medicated therapeutic method to a product for relaxation and rejuvenation in contemporary China represents a new form of consumerism. Over the last two decades, there has been a “massive expansion of consumption in China”, clearly represented by the development of niche markets not only for luxury goods but also for food, recreation, health products, personal products, healthcare, pharmaceuticals, etc. (Ciochetto, 2011: 92). Consumption has been defined in mainstream literature as “the process by which consumer goods and services are created, bought, and used” (McCracken, 1990: xi); and as an “historic artifact” which has resulted from many years of “profound social, economic, and cultural change” (*ibid.*: 3). In the modern world, “culture and consumption have an unprecedented relationship” (*ibid.*: xi). China is not an exception: “consumption has to be seen as a fundamental component of contemporary Chinese cultural practices” (Latham, 2006: 231). Several decades of economic reform since the 1980s in China have successfully transformed the nature of contemporary “Chinese capitalism” and have created a new consumer market directly linked to “globalization and transnational cultural interaction” (*ibid.*: 231-33). This makes Chinese consumerism associated with “urban popular culture” (Evans, 2006: 183-84). Indeed, a large portion of contemporary Chinese consumers are the inhabitants of urban areas, while the rural population still lags behind in participating or sharing the cake brought by globalization and economic reform. However, the nature of consumption in China is also “constantly changing itself” and “constantly participating in other areas of cultural change” (Latham, 2006: 232).

Historically, however, massage techniques have been used as one of the foundations of Chinese medical theory and practice. Various techniques, such as moving the body’s protective *qi* by pressing, kneading, pinching, rubbing, tapping, and brushing areas between the joints, and using the thumbs, fingertips, and knuckles, etc. are used in massage therapies. After the communist revolution and formation of the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, massage became a popular practice, “whereas ‘tuina’ refers to the medicalized therapeutic massage” that has eventually become a part of the curriculum in the schools of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Although *Tuina* was generally taught through the apprenticeship education system and some practitioners still learn through direct transmission from a family lineage or apprentice master, various educational institutions accredited by the relevant authority in China offer more institutionalized and professional *Tuina* courses for their students (Zhan, 2013: 327) .

Today, Tuina and other forms of massage therapies such as foot massage, head massage, shoulder massage, leg massage, foot trimming, hand trimming, Thai massage, Tibetan massage, etc., can be found from mega-mall to small streets in China. All, or most all, of the three to five star hotels in various cities in China offer a large selection of massage choices, from full body massage of various kinds to different kinds of foot massage, and everything in between (Herzberg and Herzberg, 2011: 61). Advertisements for every kind of imaginable massage therapy can be found in the hotel lobby or just next to the front desk. In recent years, massage services are provided by blind people, and there are more than 40,000 professionally qualified blind masseurs providing services in hospitals, clinics and hotels across China (Yu, 2003). The China Disabled Persons' Federation launched a nation-wide project in 1997, which aims to nurture a healthy market for massage by blind people by setting up a system involving training, exams for professional qualifications and registration of clinics (*ibid.*).

Various forms of massage have been developed and used in China as therapeutic methods to heal diseases. They are provided by trained and/or skilled professionals. Medication and health needs were the key reasons for offering and receiving massage therapies in the past. However, massage has been transformed into a product for relaxation and rejuvenation, and beauty products in contemporary China are offered by unskilled providers and serve the purpose of profit within unregulated consumer capitalism. Such change is linked with the change of other socio-economic and cultural factors, such as the growing possibility for accumulation of disposable income among urban citizens, the marginalization of rural areas from which most of the massage service providers come, the inspiration for an increased fluid sex boundary according to Western norms and values, etc. Massage services are offered in small townships of contemporary China such as Tangjiawan by providers without significant training backgrounds. Statistics from my survey reveal that many massage providers are unskilled migrant workers who choose this profession to make a living, as it is easy to get a job in the massage industry. Of those service providers surveyed, 44 per cent chose the job to make a living and because it is easy to gain skill in massage. Others chose this profession for various other reasons, including personal fascination, the chance to meet different types of people, higher income, etc. A majority of them had gained their skill either through observing workmates or through short-term (not longer than a week) training organized by the employers. Only 42 per cent of those surveyed had gone to a training school to gain professional skills, though none of them were graduates from a Chinese Medicine university or college.

There is clear paradox between perception and reality among clients and service providers about the need for professional training for massage

services. Both clients and service providers acknowledge the importance of training and skill for providing massage. However, the vast majority of clients do not have any idea about the professional qualifications of their service providers. Many of them simply do not care, as long as their service providers can satisfy their needs.

5. Case: Dragon Union Foot Massage Center

Dragon Union Foot Massage Center is one of the biggest and most popular massage centres in Tangjiawan market. There were 37 massage service providers – in total, 35 females and 2 males – on duty during our visit in July 2010. The centre provides services that include foot massage and body massage, KTV, brothel, etc. Working hours start at 11:30 a.m. and continue until 3:00 a.m. in the late night, although the busiest period starts after about 8:00 p.m. The foot massage centre provides membership cards that can be purchased for RMB60, with a validity period of six months and which can be renewed. A member can enjoy a discount of about 30 per cent for ordinary foot massage. Dragon Union foot massage centre also offers various packages – Package A costs RMB108 and includes whole body (including planters) massage (60 minutes) plus back care with milk bath salts (60 minutes) that enhance body resistance, relieve muscle stress and promote rejuvenation. Package B costs RMB98 and includes whole body care with milk bath salts (90 minutes), which effectively improve skin problems caused by the polluted environment.² Relaxed skin, prevention of bacteria, enhancement of permeability of capillaries, and healthy, naturally white and perfect skin are advertised in the materials and flyers distributed by the foot massage centre. The centre also provides foot washing and massage with Tibetan medicine, planters moving cupping, skin scraping with oil essence for leg nerves, etc.³

Miss Huang⁴ from the Dragon Union Hair Salon offered me a hair wash during participant observation. She was in her early twenties and had been

Figures 1 and 2 Advertisement Pictures of Dragon Union Foot Massage Center



Source: These photos of a flyer distributed by the Dragon Union Foot Massage Center were taken by the author.

working in this profession for three months. She left her two year old daughter under the supervision of her mother in the countryside near Zhanjiang City, an impoverished area of Guangdong Province. Her husband had disappeared for a year and there was no other wage earner in the family. She had completed middle-school education before entering the job market. She found it easier to gain skill in hair washing and head massage and so got this job. She learned the skill from her co-workers, who had been working longer than she had. She hoped she could quit this job as soon as she could find another job, although her income washing hair would be higher than other jobs she might find. However, her employer gave her a basic salary which was very low – the rest of her income depended on the number of clients she could entertain.

There is a common tendency among workers to entertain as many clients as possible to boost their income and that presents them with a potential health risk, because of the long working hours. The average turnover in this profession is very high. Of those service providers surveyed, the majority had been working in this profession for a relatively short period – less than three years – and only a little more than a quarter of them had been working for more than five years. However, more than half of the service providers preferred to continue in this profession, as decisions to do so depend on various other factors such as availability of expected job, working satisfaction, job location and income. Most of the service providers encountered common challenges, such as that of entertaining a larger number of clients (an average of ten clients each day), that many clients were too demanding and that it was difficult to satisfy the diverse needs of the clients, that of a harsh working environment, etc. Service providers also encountered occupational health risks, including tiredness, pain in their fingers, unexpected body contact with the clients, etc. As no health insurance or protective mechanism is available for the service providers, they have to silently tolerate all these circumstances. Most of these shops do not buy health insurance for the workers, and so occupational health risk is a potential challenge. The suggestions the workers made to improve the situation were: arrangement of professional training by the employers; use of better consumable products such as massage oil, cream, wash shampoo, etc.; improvement of the monitoring system by the government and other regulatory agencies; the ensuring of licensing; and the development of a better quality control mechanism. Many shops offered unauthorized massage services and their businesses were not regulated by the governing agencies. We did not find any shop during our participant observation which could provide us with an invoice (tax slip) for the payment we made for their services, simply because they were not authorized to issue any invoice.

The rise of consumer capitalism under the development of massage and related services in China is another key break to understand this new consumption. Those clients surveyed in this study had consumed one or more

Figures 3 and 4 Billboards Advertising Massage and Related Services



Sources: Photos were taken by the author from billboards hang on in various location of Tangjiawan market area.

of three categories of services. The largest group had consumed various forms of massages such as body massage, foot massage, shoulder massage, etc., the second largest group had consumed hair related services and these included hair wash, hair design and hair care, and the third largest group had consumed face related services such as face wash and facial beauty. Most of the clients who receive hair related services do so in association with finger, hand and body massage. For example, at the Dragon Union Hair Salon we were also offered hand, finger, and shoulder massage after hair wash with shampoo. This is commonly included in the hair wash package, although it is all called *xǐ tóu fǎ* in Chinese (hair wash with shampoo).⁵

Most of the clients at the Dragon Union Hair Salon were regular consumers of these services, and half of them consumed these services at least once a month. The major reasons appeared to be: for relaxation and rejuvenation, stress reduction, health benefit, beauty and body building; and for the quality of service, convenient location, affordable price, etc. The majority of the clients were satisfied with the quality of services relative to price, and many of them spend less than RMB50 for each session.

6. Reproduces Sex Stereotype and/or Fluid Sex Hierarchy!

It was an early summer evening. I was walking on a small road inside Tangjiawan market with two of my final year students. They were working as my interpreter and research assistant, respectively. The narrow road was without road light but full of red light signs. We suddenly stopped after seeing a big foot massage poster. A middle-aged lady in a black suit and enlarged breast costume came forward and said “hello” to me, with a smile. When my students introduced me to her and explained our goal to stop at her shop, she insisted we go inside. Perhaps, however, she had not understood our objectives: she informed us that many foreign teachers from surrounding areas

visited her shop. After getting inside we noticed that it was not as small as we had thought. There was a big room with a number of foot massage chairs, surrounded by several small rooms with beds for body massage. She described the quality of service and how foreigners were satisfied. We found a man and woman sitting side by side consuming a foot massage provided by two young women. We realized that our only option for staying inside longer was to have a foot massage, which might help to build a rapport with the owner. Mid-aged men were entering frequently and heading to those small, dimly-lit rooms, where well-dressed young women were readily available to entertain them. We couldn't see what exactly was happening inside the room but we got to know from our foot massage providers that most of the clients were regular customers. The owner was kind enough to allow my students to talk with some of the customers and service providers. She hoped that more foreign customers from the surrounding universities would visit her shop in future.

Although sex work and prostitution are officially illegal in China, it is an underground industry conducted under the guise of massage and related services. It has become increasingly clear that the "social construction of sex and gender are centrally important themes" in the development of massage and related services (LaPointe, 2000). China is not an exception to this social construction of sexuality functioning under the development of the massage industry. Of the services providers and clients surveyed in our study, the majority of the clients were above 30 years of age, while the service providers are below 30 years old. The majority of the clients are male but their service providers are female. For example, statistics from the Dragon Union Foot Massage Center reveal that nearly 95 per cent of their service providers are female. Apart from this, a majority of the clients are married, while the majority of the service providers are unmarried. It is thus undeniable that masculinity and femininity are central features in massage and related service industries, and that age, sex and marital status are important factors for the service providers. It is also evident that sex and gender variables, as well as outright discrimination, are involved, as young female service providers touch the bodies of older men, who consume the body work and touch of younger females.

However, a large group of the clients are female, although fewer than the males, and that most of their massage and related services are provided by young males. These statistics clearly illustrate that "importance of sexuality and interest in bodily appearance" (Gottschang, 2001: 89) is increasingly a concern for urban Chinese women, particularly for those who have face massage, hair wash with shampoo through head massage, and forms of beauty treatment that require massage-related body contact. Contemporary Chinese women's magazines play an important role in publishing articles on topics related to "(the cultivation of) beautiful pale skin, exercise to keep the body slim and supple, and massage to keep breasts in shape" (*ibid.*: 90).

During participant observation at Dragon Union Hair Salon, I sat on a sofa located next to the main entrance. A group of young female and male service providers were standing in order outside, in front of the main gate. Whenever, a female client entered, a male service provider came forward and approached her, or she approached him. They moved very quickly and came inside the room where service beds were available. While having a hair wash at the Dragon Union Hair Salon I asked my service providers why male service providers did not approach male clients. She smiled and did not answer my question. Today, a large group of urban professional Chinese women consume massage and related services as often as men do, with more or less similar objectives, and this helps to make the existing sex hierarchy fluidity hypothesis in China.

In July 19-25, 2010, I made observations for about 14 hours, at different times of the day, and saw 71 clients visit the Dragon Union Hair Salon, more than half of whom were male. The frequency of visits varied from time to time, with most of the clients visiting the hair salon in the early evening, particularly from 7:00–9:00 p.m. The majority of the male clients had a wash (hair wash with shampoo/*xǐ tóu fà*, which comes with a finger, hand, shoulder and back massage) and all of their service providers were female. Some of the male clients also consumed face washes, haircuts and body massage. At the same time, the majority of the female clients had hair washes with shampoo, and most of their service providers were male. The other services female clients consumed included haircuts, hair colourings, hair treatment, hair straightening and hair marcel, hair dressing and scalp massage, and facial treatments with massage. This trend of sex segregation, on the one hand, represents the mainstream perception and stereotype of sex involvement in the development of massage and related services, where male clients consume the touch of the female body and vice-versa. However, this also makes sex hierarchy fluid, simple because a large number of female clients are involved in this process of “body touch” consumption given the fact that nearly half of our randomly chosen surveyed clients were female.

7. Government Policy and Suggestions for Systematic Development

In China, therapeutic massage is regulated by the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine under the Ministry of Health. At this moment there are several pioneer educational institutes such as Beijing University of Chinese Medicine and Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine that offer education and training programs on Massage therapy and *Tuina*. However, the regulatory authority is aware that some institutions are conducting business through offering “Chinese massage”, “Chinese medicine massage”, “Chinese medicine health care”, “Chinese medicine foot massage”, “*Gua sha*

(scrapping)”, and “*Tuina*” in the name of therapeutic effect without following appropriate protocol which mislead consumers and damage the reputation of Chinese medicine. In order to strengthen the management of Chinese medicine massage, *gua sha* (scrapping), *Tuina*, etc. and safeguard the people’s health on the basis of the professional medical act, the authorities had noticed three major issues on September 2005: firstly, Chinese medicine massage, massage, *gua sha*, cupping method, belong to the medical activity that must be carried out in medical institutions; secondly, medical institutions have to carry out Chinese medicine massage, massage, *gua sha*, and other activities by their own health technicians and outside technicians should not be borrowed to carry out such activities; and thirdly, except for medical institutions, other institutions should not carry out Chinese massage, massage, *gua sha* and other activities through using medical terminology and titles such as “Chinese medicine”, “health”, “treatment”, “disease”, etc. (Liu, 2005).

As the findings from this research shows, massage services offered by the foot massage centres, hair salons, body massage shops are unregulated and an underground industry where the service centres and providers do not have any medical certification. This trend, however, could pose a serious challenge to people’s health. Perhaps, China could learn from some affluent countries experience of offering therapeutic massage services and run massage industries such as the US or Canada. In the US, massage services are regulated by the individual state law and those regulations are governed by the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA). AMTA has clear regulation on credentials for the massage therapy profession which include four steps: licensing, national certification, education and training with an accredited school, and membership in a professional association. Most states in the US regulate the massage therapy profession in the form of a license, registration or certification. Some cities, counties or other local governments also may regulate massage. National certifications in massage therapy in the US are administered by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB). AMTA recommends a minimum of 500 hours of supervised, in-class initial massage therapy training, which must include the study of anatomy and physiology, the theory and practice of massage therapy, and elective subjects as education and training credentials for practice massage therapy in the US (AMTA, 2015). The duration of education and training, however, may vary from state to state. For example, New York requires minimum 1000 hours of training in an accredited school whereas Alabama requires 650 hours from board approved massage therapy school.⁶ Membership in a credible professional association is another important credential in the massage therapy industry in the US which indicates professional preparation and accountability.

In Canada, massage therapy is regulated by the provincial governments and each province has its own requirements to become a massage therapy

provider. The Massage Therapy Alliance of Canada (MTAC) is the nationwide body for the massage therapists and all the provincial associations are affiliated with the national body. Different provinces in Canada have different training requirements to become a registered massage practitioner. For example, British Columbia requires a massage therapist to undergo a minimum 3000 hours educational curriculum before getting a registration whereas Ontario requires 2200 hours regulatory health care curriculum (MTAC, 2015). China can learn from the experience of the US and Canada and decentralize the regulatory power and handover to provincial governments and/or city governments. Local governments including the provincial and city levels can also introduce a minimum hours of training program for the massage therapists who are offering services under the table and without any official license or registration.

8. Conclusion

Today, massage and related services have become popular, not only in the mega-cities but also in the small townships of China. They cater to various income groups. People are consuming massage and related services, as well as other consumption products. Historically, massage was developed in China for medical and therapeutic need and used to be a part of the Chinese mainstream healing process. However, contemporary massage and related services have changed direction and been transformed into popular culture for mass consumption. People are not considering massage as a healing process to cure disease or infirmity, but as a way of relaxation, rejuvenation and body consumption. Popular culture is a weighty “tool for understanding ourselves, our cultures, and our values and ideologies” (Bly, 2013: xiii), and massage and related services have become an integral part of the urban culture in China. People are consuming massage and related services without considering the medical or therapeutic background of the providers or the potential health benefits of the process.

As I have mentioned, massage and related services in small townships of China are an unregulated and underground industry, and people are consuming these services without consideration of their legality. It is a matter of demand and supply. As long as there is consumer demand, service providers are readily available. Professional qualification, accreditation or quality control is not very important in this development. Perhaps, China can learn from some developed countries such as the US and Canada to regulate the massage industry and ensure the quality of service and safeguard people’s health. At the same time, this development has reproduced the existing sex stereotypes, where the majority of the clients are male but service providers are female. The social construction of gender and the biological construction of sex play

an important role here. However, the development of massage culture has also challenged the existing sex hierarchy, as a large group of female clients are demanding services from male providers, making the sex hierarchy fluid.

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Notes

* Write-up for Md Nazrul Islam

1. Nine years of middle school education is compulsory in the People's Republic of China.
2. Some of this information was collected from a flyer published and distributed by the Dragon Union Foot Massage Center as part of their advertisement.
3. This information was collected from a billboard hang on the gate of the Dragon Union Foot Massage Center during our visit.
4. Original name has not been used.
5. Some clients consume several services during the same visit.
6. Accessed 6 March 2015 from <<http://www.amtamassage.org/regulation/detail/6>>.

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