This is a fascinating ethnographic study of the politics of sex as practiced in the myriad karaoke bars of the northern Chinese port city of Dalian. The author, a native of the city, spent two years working with the hostesses in three different karaoke establishments, of “high, middle, and low class” (28) and spoke to about 200 such sex workers in the process of her field work, as well as many clients, owners and other staff of the bars. Zheng embarked on her research expecting to study migrant workers, and in the process of cultivating her connections with local officials in the hope of finding a field site, realized that most of the hostesses in the karaoke lounges were migrants, although they generally tried to conceal this fact. Despite many warnings that she was embarking on a dangerous topic and initial hostility from the hostesses themselves, Zheng ended up becoming embedded in her field work locations, including sometimes entertaining clients herself and living on site.

There are two main parts to the book: the first focuses on the male clients and how their sexuality has been shaped by Dalian’s history. Zheng’s account describes the historical evolution of prostitution in Dalian and the “emasculcation” of Chinese men there in both the colonial period and the post-revolutionary era. In the first half of the twentieth century Dalian was first under Russian and then Japanese control. This colonial link saved the city from the devastation of the Japanese occupation, yet made its inhabitants politically suspect in the eyes of the communist rulers. Zheng argues that seeking sexual dominance through controlling the bodies of hostesses represents a response of Dalian men to this experience. Yet she also views this search for masculinity as an embrace of global modernity and a key aspect of building trust among men for business ventures. Ironically, this drama of masculinity is played out in a cultural context that is an import from Japan: the karaoke bar.

The second part of the book focuses on the hostesses, exploring their working conditions, their performances in the bars, how they resist discriminatory attitudes due to their rural origins through consumption and bodily practices and how they compensate for their transgressions against conventional morality by an exaggerated filial piety. Here the study is unabashedly partisan, as Zheng came to feel a deep sympathy and concern for the hostesses, particularly due to the violence they face at the hands of clients, employers and agents of the state. “Working and living with them, witnessing, experiencing, and writing about their everyday struggles [has] been emotional and disconcerting for me,” she writes (34).

Zheng sees the abuses suffered by the hostesses as part of a state system of exploitation of them as rural dwellers and women. The poverty that drives
them from their rural homes to the city is a result of the state-created rural-urban divide, which also forms the context for their marginal status in the city. She shows how this status distinction is also played out when rural men enter the bars as customers. Yet she highlights the strategies of resistance of the hostesses, expressed through their instrumental use of their own bodies to gain economic rewards and make connections with powerful men, and through consumption practices that make them trendsetters in the city.

The ethnographic richness of this book is not fully matched by analytical or theoretical insights. One reason seems to be that Zheng takes on so many aspects of her story: history, political-economy, sexual politics, consumption and body culture. One area this reader found unsatisfying was the extensive attribution of the conditions she found to the state. Yet aside from her account of the engagement of the police in the bars—both in raids and as a major client base—the state remains largely disembodied in Zheng’s account, an entity that acts without being located in any specific form or place. For example, there is no discussion of how the legal framework for prostitution operates in this context.

This book will be of interest to many readers, and useful for various types of courses. Versions of many of the chapters in the book have been previously published as journal articles or in edited volumes. The chapters are thus largely discrete and could be used separately.

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