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Author(s)	Kong, T
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Money, Desire and Citizenship: Negotiating Urban Citizenship among Rural-to-Urban Male Migrant Sex Workers in China

Author: Travis Kong

Institution: The University of Hong Kong

Country: Hong Kong

E-mail: travisk@hkucc.hku.hk

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As part of a massive rural-to-urban migrant population of more than 100 million in contemporary China, rural male migrants in their early twenties are increasingly joining the sex industry, offering sexual services to other men. This paper seeks to understand how these male sex workers (in the local parlance, "money boys") suffer from multiple levels of discrimination and stigmatization both from society at large and the gay community in particular. In-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted in Beijing and Shanghai, China. Informants were recruited through referral from an NGO with a strong men who have sex with men (MSM) network, and using snowball technique. Between 2004 and 2005, thirty "money boys" were interviewed (Beijing, n514; Shanghai, n516). Respondents were mainly single, young, homo-sexual, rural migrants with a secondary education. They employed various strategies - conforming, performing, rejecting, escaping - in handling three major interlocking stigmatized identities: rural migrants, sex workers and MSM. They struggle under a "hierarchy of citizenship" along the lines of class, work, gender, sexuality, origin of birth, etc., in order to survive. By viewing their coping strategies as a citizenship-making process, this paper argues that they negotiate a notion of identity under the confines of the dominant ideal of urban citizenship. This paper thus contributes to recent debates on citizenship by enhancing our understanding of a neglected group in cities, whose marginality does not fit within the dominant ideal of (urban) citizenship.