CHAPTER FOUR

OUT OF PLACE WHEN STUDYING CHINA'S SEX INDUSTRY

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In the summer of 2006, I was in St. Petersburg, Russia, carrying out preliminary dissertation fieldwork. At the time, my PhD research was going to be a comparative study of the regulation of prostitution in China and Russia. In St. Petersburg, I volunteered with a sex worker outreach organization, and in the early evenings, we would hop into their community outreach van to drive around various neighborhoods where streetwalkers would solicit clients. The social workers would introduce themselves to new women in the area, reconnect with those they knew, give them condoms, and let them know about the various health and other support services that the organization provided.

One such day, we were parked along a large avenue on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, talking to a sex worker who regularly solicited there. As we were checking in with her, someone parked their car a few meters in front of us. A man – visibly drunk – got out of the driver's side, walked over to us, grabbed the sex worker by the arm, and tried to pull her into his car. She resisted, and as the social worker pleaded with him to let her go, he turned towards us, asking who we were. The social worker instructed me to get back into the van, introduced herself and her organization, and told him that I was a visiting researcher from the United States. As I watched from the window, I saw the man pull out a gun, punch the sex worker in the stomach so that she keeled over in pain, try unsuccessfully once again to drag her into the car, and then drive off. As I exited the van and assisted the social worker in tending to the sex worker, they told me that he was an off-duty police officer.

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I returned to Russia for more research three years later, this time to Vladivostok, in the Far East, and just a short flight away from my temporary home base in Beijing. I had been carrying out fieldwork in China for almost a year at that point, making inroads that were far deeper than what I had imagined might be possible, including ethnographic observation in brothels and red-light districts, shadowing the police, and setting up surveys of sex workers and law enforcement officers. A week into the Vladivostok trip, whose goal was to lay the groundwork to create similar access in Russia, it became clear that the incident I had previously witnessed in St. Petersburg foreshadowed obstacles that would prevent me from immersing myself in the regulation of the sex industry in Russia to the extent I had in China.

I am a white woman with blond hair and blue eyes. I blend into Russian society. If someone saw me in a brothel or in an area where sex workers solicit, they could assume I was a sex worker. Being a foreigner in Russia in the early 2000s did not bestow privileges: if pimps or organized crime networks were displeased with my presence, they would do what they wanted with me. Not so in China, a country where I cannot conceal my outsider status, and which is often more protective of foreigners than Chinese citizens. In practice, this meant that I encountered fewer obstacles when immersing myself in China's sex industry – I did not have to worry about attracting the unwanted attention of drunk, gun-wielding off-duty police officers. It is this reality that eventually led me to drop the comparison with Russia and focus my project entirely on prostitution in China.

Ultimately, it is precisely because I was so out of place in China's sex industry that I was granted the space to immerse myself in it. In fact, while I was carrying out my fieldwork, I sought to embrace my outsider status, rather than tiptoe around it, in my efforts to connect with respondents in ways that would provide me with the richest possible insights into prostitution. This observation leads me to a broader claim. In all sorts of ways, being out of place closes doors to the creation of scholarship and the halls of academia more generally, and is associated with experiences of marginalization, weakness, and challenges that must be overcome. Yet it can also be a source of strength. When it provides access to realms that are usually impenetrable, it allows researchers to bring to light substantive areas of inquiry that are more often hidden from view. In so doing, it can expand scholarly boundaries, to carve out space for both topics and methodological approaches that are traditionally considered peripheral to one's chosen disciplines.

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In my case, I delved into the study of China's sex industry as a political scientist and a legal scholar. This is a topic more often explored by sociologists and anthropologists, and, regardless of the disciplinary approach adopted, it is generally studied through the lens of gender and feminist theory. By situating my approach in other literatures, I show how prostitution is a topic that lies at the heart of central questions in politics and law, and that qualitative research methods were an essential tool for me to pursue my inquiries. In the process, I saw how being out of place allows scholars to push disciplinary boundaries. For instance, I learned about the different ways in which sex workers – all of whom are participating in an illegal activity in China – experience the law depending on the type of prostitution in which they engage. I also discovered how individuals upon whom legal power is bestowed – mainly police officers and public health agents – frequently find themselves in positions of surprising precarity and weakness as they navigate their professional responsibilities to implement prostitution policies.

Putting myself in situations where I felt out of place was a deliberate choice. It was my decision to carry out fieldwork in China, study prostitution, and approach the topic ethnographically. While I did not always anticipate all the implications of doing so, or the extent to which I would feel that I did not belong, I was conscious that I would not fit in. From my roots in the academic realm of law and politics in China, I was committed to a research project that would allow me to shed light on individuals whose experiences of injustice are overlooked. Sex workers fall squarely into that category. This is not happenstance: each additional layer of out-of-placeness described in this chapter provides one more reason for a researcher to direct their attention elsewhere – in a place that is a bit less unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Yet that is precisely where I was committed to be. In short, by studying how sex workers in China experience law and politics, I had put myself in exactly the right place for my own research goals and values.

As pertains to studying the regulation of China's sex industry, my out-of-placeness is threefold. First, I am a foreigner in China. Second, I am an outsider to the regulation of the sex industry: I do not engage in prostitution, nor do I regulate it. Third, the ethnographic study of prostitution in China lies at the methodological and substantive periphery of my academic disciplines – law and political science. In the pages that follow, this chapter elaborates on these three dimensions. In so doing, it highlights four characteristics of being out of place. First,

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it can help to think of the concept as one that is fluid, rather than fixed, over the course of fieldwork, the life of a research project, and one's academic career more generally. Second, this fluidity is tied to a distinction that exists between the researcher's internal feelings that they are out of place, versus outsiders' perceptions that they do not belong. And of course, these two angles can be mutually constitutive. Third, there are at least two different communities in relation to whom scholars must navigate being out of place – their research subjects, who provide them with the data that defines the content of their scholarship, and the academic communities that evaluate the work produced based on that content. Finally, being out of place is draining to the core. In my case, it took me years to feel excited about returning to China and think of other similarly immersive projects that I might conduct. While the exact nature of the intensity of being out of place might differ across individuals and projects, I have seen that the same out of placeness that can result in boundary-pushing scholarship also takes an emotional toll on the person carrying it out.

THE PROJECT AND THE FIELDWORK

My experiences of being out of place are rooted in a study I conducted on law, society and the state in an authoritarian regime. As pertains to society, it explores how the law shapes the everyday lives of citizens who are engaged in behavior that is illegal. With respect to the state, it delves into the experiences of government officials on the frontlines who are responsible for implementing the policies that regulate the lives of those individuals who are breaking the law. I explore these issues in China, with a focus on the regulation of prostitution.

The project began as a doctoral dissertation. I conducted most of the fieldwork in 2008 and 2009, along with shorter trips in 2005, 2011, and 2014. The study focused on the regulation of female commercial sex work in urban areas. I carried out the bulk of data collection in Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Dongguan, Shanghai, Harbin, Shenyang, Changsha, and some smaller cities in Hebei and Hubei provinces. Throughout that time, I used three methodologies: interviews, surveys, and ethnographic observation. The interviews were with actors from both society and the state. They included sex workers, madams, pimps, clients, staff of both domestic and international nongovernmental organizations, and local and central-government officials working in policing, health, and other state agencies. I also conducted two

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surveys – one of sex workers in a Beijing red-light district, and another of police officers in southern China.

The heart of this project rested in ethnographic observation. In Beijing, I spent my days in the lounge area of a sex worker grassroots organization that was in the center of a red-light district in the city.[1] Women would come by throughout the day on their way to and from the venues where they worked, or during breaks. They would pick up condoms, seek out medical advice from the on-site doctor, surf the web on one of the center's computers, or just sink into a seat on one of the couches in the lounge area, striking up conversation with other sex workers or staff members. I spent a lot of time on that couch, listening to the conversations of women around me, engaging them myself, and observing their interactions with each other. In a red-light district in Shenzhen, Mei Jie, a madam who ran a brothel out of her apartment, took me under her wing.[2] She shared one of the rooms with her husband and, on weekends and holidays when he was back from his boarding school, their seven-year-old son. The second room was rented to a businessman from Hong Kong who spent most weekdays in Shenzhen and who appeared to have unlimited access to Mei Jie's sex workers. These women used the third bedroom for sexual transactions with other clients. The sex workers' own living space was in the apartment's common room. They slept in one corner of the room in a large bed that was surrounded by a makeshift curtain, and they would sit on the couch or at the computer table in between visits from clients. When these men arrived, I would hide behind the curtain – Mei Jie would have had to explain the presence of a foreign woman if they saw me, and she worried that they might decide not to purchase sex if they knew a researcher was in their midst, or suspected that I was a journalist. I would also stroll around the neighborhood with Mei Jie, observe her interactions with members of the community, soak up as much as possible from those exchanges, and follow up individually with people to whom she introduced me. She would link arms with me, to visually signal the closeness of our relationship to anyone who saw us. Association with a foreigner generally elevates one's social status in China, all the more so when the Chinese person in question has low standing, as is the case for a madam such as Mei Jie.

[1] I use the term "red-light district" to refer to an area with a high concentration of prostitution.

[2] I use pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

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The ethnographic research for this project also involved shadowing public health workers and police officers. I gave out condoms and educational pamphlets to sex workers alongside public health officials in several cities, and I observed how these state actors interacted with managers of entertainment venues to access the sex workers harbored within those spaces. For example, in one red-light district, as I was chatting with a local health official in a public park, a pimp from a neighborhood brothel wandered over, and the two started debating the merits of legalizing prostitution in the context of contemporary politics, economics, and society in China. In another city, I went karaoke singing with police officers, watching them select hostesses to entertain them throughout the evening. I also observed their daily routines in police stations, listening to them banter amongst themselves. In yet another town, where I was spending time with sex workers in the community and had no connection with local law enforcement, I witnessed police officers arrest several women suspected of engaging in prostitution.

In all these spaces, it was at least partly because I was out of place that someone in the community chose to welcome me into their life. Most often, the person doing so was a madam, a sex worker, a client, a police officer, or a public health official. Their motivations were likely manifold. Some might be self-serving. Mei Jie, for instance, momentarily improved her standing in the community when she showed that a respectable foreign researcher was interested in her. When a former police officer brought me back to his hometown and introduced me to his law enforcement colleagues from his policing years, he was showing them that in his new line of work, his professional success was attracting the attention of foreigners. My contacts also called upon me to tutor their children, nephews, and nieces in English. Other motivations for welcoming me as a foreign researcher were rooted in intellectual and advocacy commitments and, more specifically, a belief in the importance of the issues I was investigating. Curiosity, tied to both my outsider status and interest in their lives, usually played a role in their initial willingness to hear me out, and establishing a personal connection helped sustain our relationship over time. Across the board, these were individuals willing to incur the risks associated with welcoming me into a place where I did not fit in, and whose roles were necessary for me to overcome the obstacles that being out of place presented in the field.

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OUT OF PLACE IN CHINA

As a foreigner, I do not belong in China. This observation holds regardless of whether I am there as a researcher, in another professional capacity, or as a tourist. It also remains constant irrespective of the specific topic of academic inquiry in which I engage in China. Like all foreigners who are not ethnically Chinese, it does not matter how many years I live in China, or how well I speak and read Mandarin: most Chinese citizens will always consider me to be an outsider because I do not look Chinese.[3] Throughout my fieldwork, two characteristics of Chinese politics and society served as a constant reminder of my outsider status. First, China is an authoritarian country. Second, it is a society that both views itself as conservative, and, in contrast, perceives the Western world to be more open.[4]

As a foreigner carrying out research in an authoritarian regime, I knew that at any time, I could get into trouble with the state. More importantly, I knew that anyone who spoke with me could suffer retribution from the state. The stakes for me were, in the grand scheme of things, relatively low – the most likely worst-case scenario would be expulsion from China, and blacklisting that would prevent me from returning in the future.[5] At the time, contemplating such an outcome felt incredibly consequential: I was paralyzed at the thought of being unable to complete my dissertation for lack of data, and having to abandon my professional aspirations as a scholar of contemporary China, after ten years devoted to living there and studying the country. The stakes for my informants, however, were much greater. There are

[3] More seasoned China hands concur. The writer Ian Johnson (2020), who had lived in China for twenty years and had to leave the country when his journalist visa was canceled in early 2020, noted the following: "China wasn't an easy country to call home. It is the original land of genetic determinism; you cannot really become Chinese unless you look a certain way. You can be a sixth-generation Chinese American, speak only 'ni hao ma' [*which means hello*] and know little more about the place than General Tso's Chicken, but to China (and to many Americans in the United States) you are Chinese."

[4] In general, my informants would view "the West" and "Westerners" as a unified category with which to contrast China, without considering variation that might exist within this unit.

[5] I carried out my research when Hu Jintao was in power. The stakes might be higher had I been carrying out this research under Xi Jinping, an era marked both by increased repression within China and greater tension between China and other countries.

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no limits to the atrocities the state in China will commit when it comes to individuals whom it perceives are threatening its stronghold on power.[6] These realities provided me with powerful and anxiety-producing reminders that I was out of place in China. The democratic states that I have at various times considered home (France, the United States, and Canada), and where I generally feel a sense of belonging, are also guilty of outrageous violations of the rights of individuals living both within their borders, and beyond them. Yet a variety of checks and balances exist in those places that can serve as sources of possible redress. In China, I have no viable recourse against state interventions into my life or that of participants in my research.[7]

The likelihood that I would actually attract unwanted attention from the state was low, and in fact, to my knowledge it did not occur. Prostitution is a sensitive topic in the sense that it is against the law, but it does not raise alarm bells to the extent that occurs with respect to research on China's most politically charged issues.[8] Yet, the fear I sometimes felt on the ground was real, and at times overpowering. I remember during one particularly stressful period realizing that the watch I had left on the bedside table of my Beijing apartment had stopped working, and being surprised that the battery had not lasted longer. I convinced myself that a state agent had entered my apartment and tinkered with my watch in order to mess with my mind and send a signal that I was being observed. Lest this anecdote be interpreted

[6] Human Rights Watch (2021, 8) notes that "[t]his has been the darkest period for human rights in China since the 1989 massacre that ended the Tiananmen Square democracy movement."

[7] While I can reach out to my embassies in the event that I encounter a problem, they are limited with respect to the assistance they can provide. As a prominent example, two Canadian citizens – Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor – were detained in China from December 2018 to September 2021 on dubious charges. The situation was widely viewed as retaliation against Canada for arresting Meng Wanzhou, a Chinese business executive facing fraud and conspiracy charges in New York, at the request of the United States. In this situation, the Canadian embassy in Beijing was very limited in its ability to assist Kovrig and Spavor.

[8] Examples of the latter include protests, which raise questions about the long-term stability of the CCP, and internment camps in Xinjiang, which lie at the heart of human rights concerns that have garnered significant attention abroad. China is the world's most populated and fourth largest country, and it has finite amounts of state capacity. It cannot keep track of what all foreign researchers are doing on its territory, and I made many inroads by simply staying under the radar of the state. And when I was interacting with officials, it likely helped that prostitution was not at the very top of their list of hot-button issues.

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solely as providing insight into my own idiosyncrasies, other foreign China researchers have shared similar types of reactions. I once had a house guest who was staying with me because he feared that the authorities were trying to kidnap him, and he did not want to be alone. One morning a tile fell from the bathroom ceiling while he was brushing his teeth, and he rushed out, convinced that someone from the security bureau had loosened the tiles and rigged them to fall as a warning sign. These types of reactions provide vivid illustrations of how overpowering feelings of being "out of place" can be in an authoritarian regime.

This first characteristic of China – that it is an authoritarian country – creates an out-of-placeness that has the potential to affect foreign researchers regardless of their substantive area of investigation. In fact, it can play a powerful agenda-setting role as scholars try to ascertain not only the feasibility of a particular topic, but also the likelihood that it might lead to sanctions that could cut short one's professional aspirations. By reminding us that we are out of place, the Chinese state, and the fear it induces, shape knowledge production about many aspects of the country.

I turn now to an observation that is specific to the study of prostitution in China, as well as other similarly situated topics, but that is not necessarily shared across all substantive areas of inquiry. Specifically, the predominant perception in mainland China is that it is a socially conservative society, and that, in contrast, the West is more open. As pertains to prostitution, this view translated into two related assumptions that I encountered repeatedly over the course of my fieldwork: first, that Westerners are more sexually permissive than the Chinese and, second, that prostitution is legal throughout the West. These were views that a variety of individuals expressed, including sex workers, clients, police officers, other local officials, and members of the general population without particular ties to the sex industry. These assumptions shaped the interactions I had with people in China in countless situations, and regularly made me feel not only out of place, but also, at times, quite uncomfortable.

Two of the most vivid experiences I had with these assumptions in fact took place years before I was carrying out the fieldwork for this project. The first occurred in 2001, when I was teaching English in a Chinese primary school in the city of Ningbo. A few months into the job, I took a four-hour bus ride to Shanghai for the weekend. At the time, I spoke hardly any Chinese, and the man who took the seat next

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to me struck up a conversation in English. When I asked him why he was headed to Shanghai, he nonchalantly explained that he lived in Ningbo with his wife and child, but that he was going to Shanghai to visit his mistress. He then explained to me that while such an arrangement was considered inappropriate in China, he felt comfortable telling me about it because I was from the West, a place he noted was much more open about such relationships. This is a misconception on at least two levels. First, there is no evidence that extramarital relations are more common in the West than in China. Second, regardless of relative prevalence, during my fieldwork I saw men in mainland China who were quite comfortable being public with their extramarital affairs. They discussed their sexual affairs not just with harmless-seeming foreigners like me, but also with their friends and colleagues. The Chinese women with whom I discussed male marital infidelity were generally resigned to such behavior, rather than outraged or prepared to leave their marriage on account of it. The exchange on the bus has remained ingrained in my memory; it was my first window into an aspect of Chinese society that would eventually become my academic area of inquiry.

Another particularly indelible encounter pertaining to Chinese perceptions of Western sexual permissiveness occurred a few years later. I was in Beijing for the summer as an intern for a prominent women's rights nongovernmental organization (NGO). I headed to work one hot and humid morning, dressed in a tank top and ankle-length skirt, like many of the other female commuters heading to work that day. A man grabbed my chest as he walked past me in the opposite direction on the sidewalk. When I arrived at the office a few minutes later and told my female colleagues what had just happened, one of the staff lawyers told me that I brought this upon myself because my shirt was, to her, too revealing. What has stuck with me over the years is not so much the man's behavior, unpleasant as it was. Rather, it was the realization that a lawyer with one of the country's most progressive women's rights NGOs blamed me for the assault. Both this experience, as well as the bus conversation, occurred because as a visible foreigner I was seen as "out of place" from mainstream views of gender, sexuality, and morality in mainland China.

Likewise, assumptions about sexual permissiveness in the West shaped the opening tone of many exchanges I had in China over the course of my fieldwork. Police officers assumed I was an advocate for legalizing prostitution. I learned to phrase my research in a way that

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highlighted similarities between US and Chinese prostitution policies, noting that sex work is criminalized in most places in the United States. I was also careful to note that in Singapore, much closer to China, the exchange of sex for money is not an offense, even though activities such as pimping and public solicitation are against the law. As pertains to clients, I was careful to not disabuse them of their perceptions: like my bus companion, they would share freely with me, feeling safe and comfortable in their views that, as a Westerner, I endorsed and understood their behavior. They would actually go out of their way to interact with me, rather than hide from me. At Mei Jie's apartment, a client's gaze once landed upon me when he entered the apartment before I had the chance to hide behind the living room curtain. After Mei Jie clarified my status as a researcher rather than a sex worker, he made himself comfortable and opened up about his life, family, and experiences as a client. He did not, however, actually stay to have sex, instead telling Mei Jie that he would return another time. Another time, an informant introduced me to his friend, Tang Ming, who had recently been released after six months of incarceration for purchasing sex. Tang Ming was outraged by his sentence – he claimed that the state obscures the possible sanctions to which a client can be subject, and that while everyone knows sex workers can be incarcerated for prostitution, the state does not clearly communicate the fact that clients can also be institutionalized, instead only emphasizing that they can be subject to fines. In both of these encounters, clients seemed interested in engaging with me precisely because I was a foreigner – as though they assumed that I was a sympathetic ear who understood how China's policies and culture around sexuality unfairly stifled their daily lives. Sex workers similarly were quick to open up to me: their misconceptions that prostitution is not stigmatized in the West led them to share freely with me the personal pathways that led them to sell sex, and their experiences as sex workers, in ways that would have been more difficult if I had been a Chinese national.

OUT OF PLACE IN THE SEX INDUSTRY

In addition to feeling and looking out of place studying prostitution in China because I am a foreigner, I am out of place because I am neither an actor in nor a regulator of the sex industry. This aspect of my outsider status would apply in any country in which I might study prostitution. Yet it is more pronounced when combined with my status

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as a visible foreigner, which led most people, upon seeing me, to immediately identify me as neither a participant in the sex industry nor a state actor. There were occasional exceptions to this observation. In some situations, people asked me if I was a Russian sex worker, as there are entertainment venues in various cities throughout China that cater to the demand for non-Chinese sex workers, and that draw from neighboring Russia, amongst other countries. A woman who solicited in a Shenzhen brothel asked me if I was a sex worker from Xinjiang – she realized that I was not Han Chinese, but thought I bore a resemblance to her image of Uyghurs. In another instance, a sex worker wary of my presence thought that the state had sent me in as an informant, musing out loud about the length to which the government would go to crack down on illegal activities such as prostitution, going so far as to hire foreigners to investigate the criminal behavior of its citizens. Yet by and large, most respondents assumed I was neither a sex worker nor a state regulator of prostitution, regardless of whether they were societal or state actors.

My position as an obvious outsider to the sex industry served me in ways that were similar to my status as a foreigner in China: respondents who opened up to me tended to do so precisely because I had no connections to their daily lived experiences. The societal and state actors with whom I spoke all knew that I personally had no stake in their experiences with the regulation of prostitution. As such, they were at liberty to reveal themselves in ways that were much less guarded than would occur if they felt that I was somehow part of their community.

Sex workers, for example, are frequently in situations where they are in competition with each other. If they related to me as a colleague, they would thus be unlikely to share their vulnerabilities, or even provide me with basic information such as the amount they earn per sexual transaction, or the number of clients they have on any given day or week. If I had been a man doing this research, and if they had perceived of me as a potential client, they would have presented me with a narrative aimed at seducing me and eliciting pity, in order to earn as much as possible. This might involve stories about their personal struggles, and a decision to sell sex tied to victimhood, rather than agency. If over the course of my research clients had viewed me as a sex worker, the substance of our conversations would likely have been very different. For instance, they would likely tell a different narrative about their family life, other experiences with the purchase of sex, and

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attitudes towards prostitution. Finally, had state actors viewed me as a participant in the sex industry, our interactions would have revolved around their regulatory responsibilities, which would have resulted in a very different type of research experience: police officers would have arrested me, and public health workers would have carried out various outreach and testing activities with me.[9]

OUT OF PLACE IN ACADEMIA

I now turn away from the field and the feelings of not belonging that emerge from the researcher's interactions with research subjects, to instead examine experiences of being out of place that emerge from my engagement with the academic environment, particularly because the object of my scholarly inquiry is sex work.

The study of prostitution is generally perceived as peripheral to mainstream questions in legal and political science scholarship. Authors of such research tend to approach it through lenses of feminist legal theory and gender politics (e.g., Kotiswaran 2011; Outshoorn 2004), which are subfields that are not viewed as part of the canons of law and political science. And even as they explicitly connect their projects to issues that are understood as central to the study of law and politics, they continue to be relegated to the sidelines.[10] In addition, ethnography is a methodology that is not central to either of these disciplines. When it comes to empirical research, quantitative and experimental methods are held up as the gold standard. Law also

[9] To be clear, I am not suggesting that being a visibly foreign woman who is external to the sex industry and its regulation are all prerequisites for gaining in-depth access to this world for academic study. I aim simply to reflect upon the elements of being out of place that I personally experienced in this substantive area of inquiry. For instance, the author Tiantian Zheng (2009), was a Chinese PhD student in anthropology at an American university when she carried out an ethnography of the sex industry in the northern city of Dalian, during which time she lived with hostesses and worked alongside them. In the opening paragraphs of her book, she describes hiding from the police along with twenty-five hostesses in one of the entertainment venues where she was carrying out her fieldwork.

[10] Remick's (2014) work on the regulation of prostitution in Chinese history and Majic's (2013) research on sex worker health-service organizations are both examples of political science research that convincingly ties the issue of sex work to mainstream disciplinary issues: state-building and social movements. For further discussion on the marginalization of the study of prostitution in political science, see Ferguson (2015).

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privileges doctrinal studies of legal codes, rules, and case judgments. Over the course of this research project, I have often been told that I am out of place (in a political science department, in a law school), and then instructed upon where my place actually is (sociology, anthropology, gender studies). These attempts by gatekeepers to the profession to put me in my place have serious implications for knowledge production: they impoverish our understanding of law and politics by placing artificial barriers around the types of issues and research methodologies that are considered acceptable in the discipline.

A second issue tied to being out of place in academia also plagues women who carry out research on female sex workers: while scholars frequently immerse themselves in topics in which they have no personal experience as participants, when it comes to sex work, one of the questions that often lurks not very far beneath the surface is whether the researcher engaged in prostitution as part of their project. The question that is being asked, in this context, is the extent to which the researcher was actually "out of place," or whether they were instead fully immersing themselves in the lived experiences of their research subjects.

I have not personally been on the receiving end of this inquiry, most likely for two reasons. First, this question comes up less often in my disciplines of political science and law than in sociology and anthropology, simply because scholars of politics and law spend less time thinking about both ethnography and prostitution. Second, other China experts would be well aware that, unless mine was a study that was specifically about relationships between foreign sex workers and Chinese clients in China, my own engagement in prostitution would not be particularly informative with respect to the experiences of Chinese sex workers. That said, it is an important question to address from the perspective of principle. First, it includes salacious undertones, reserved for researchers working on the subject of prostitution, as opposed to topics that are not socially stigmatized and morally controversial. Second, it is gendered, and racialized: as pertains to my area of research, it is much more likely to be asked of a woman who is ethnically Asian than a white man. Another way of phrasing this point is that it is directed at researchers who are considered "out of place" in academia more generally. As Hoang (2015), a Vietnamese American, notes, in relation to her study of the sex industry in Vietnam, she "always wondered if male urban ethnographers were regularly asked if they partook in acts of violence, engaged in drug activity, or

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participated in sex work with and around their research participants" (20). She notes, furthermore, that:

> [c]ertain close relationships developed in the field are subject to greater scrutiny than others, depending on the gender, race, and class background of the research subjects and the researcher herself. The types of relationships that I had to develop in the field receive far more scrutiny than the types of relationships that other ethnographers develop, because of my gender and racial-ethnic background as well as those of my research subjects.
>
> (20)

A certain type of researcher engaging in "cowboy ethnography" – male, and most often white – is often heralded as a hero for studying "dangerous or hard-to-reach pool populations," and for enabling "readers to go on voyeuristic journeys with them as they detail their heroic efforts to break into dangerous field sites" (21–2). Yet researchers who are marginalized in academia instead face higher levels of scrutiny for engaging in such substantive areas of inquiry.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have examined being out of place in the field, as a foreigner in China and an outsider to the sex industry and its regulation. I have also reflected upon my experiences of not belonging in my academic disciplines for this project, specifically connected to my methodological approach and substantive area of inquiry. I conclude here with some broader reflections on these two aspects of out of placeness.

First, it is worth thinking about being out of place as a concept that is relative, and in flux, rather than an immutable characteristic of a researcher's relationship to their object of study and their academic communities. For instance, my own experiences of being out of place were much more pronounced towards the beginning of my fieldwork. The more time I spent in China talking to sex workers and police officers, the less uncomfortable I felt, and the more comfortable others seemed to be around me. My most vivid recollection of this transformation occurred one day when I was in Mei Jie's brothel, about eighteen months into my fieldwork. A client walked out of the room where he had been having sex, wrapped in nothing but a towel, strolled past me, and hopped into the bathroom to take a shower. When I wrote up my

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field notes that evening, I almost forgot to discuss that moment. And then I remembered how many pages of notes I wrote the first time I spoke at length with a sex worker, and how overwhelming it felt to just spend a few hours in a karaoke bar with her. The differences as reflected in my field notes, and my emotional recollections of the two events today, are stark. More generally, the difficult stories I observed and heard about over the course of my fieldwork weighed on me much more towards the beginning of my research than the end. This realization was disconcerting – I worried at times that I was becoming numb to the human suffering to which I was exposed. One of my dissertation advisers told me that I would know when I was done with my fieldwork because I was no longer getting any new or surprising information from my informants. Yet perhaps another way of answering this question is instead to say that our fieldwork is complete when we no longer feel out of place. The concept of fluidity can also help understand being out of place in academia. Disciplinary proclivities change over time, even in part tied to the work that some of its misfits carry out and that sometimes succeeds in convincing others of how certain marginalized methodologies and topics should in fact be considered central to the discipline. This observation opens the possibility that a project initially considered peripheral could be viewed as more mainstream over the years, thus changing definitions of what is considered out of place.

Second, and relatedly, from whose vantage point should we be thinking about whether we belong? This question touches on the difference between our own feelings of being out of place, and the perceptions others have of what our place is. These two perspectives can influence each other: we can act in ways that make others think we do, or do not, belong; and others can similarly engage with us in ways that make us feel in or out of place. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that our personal feelings and the perceptions of outsiders might not be aligned. I sometimes forgot, in Mei Jie's brothel, or in the Beijing outreach center, that a newcomer would likely be startled by my presence. And while I have always felt that anyone who is training to be a lawyer needs to learn about how China might shape both the world and their own practice experience, the small number of law schools who have faculty members specialized in Chinese law are a constant reminder of how in that view, I am a minority. Similarly, it seems obvious to me that ethnography brings immense value to the study of politics and law, and that the study of prostitution lies at the heart of mainstream questions in those disciplines: I do not feel like

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I should be out of place asking these questions, in these ways. Yet academia relentlessly reminds me that it does not agree.

As pertains specifically to my fieldwork, it is not always possible to identify whether feelings and perceptions of not belonging were driven by the fact that I am out of place in China, out of place in the sex industry, or out of place in any other number of ways that I have not even addressed in these pages. And while I have provided separate examples of being out of place in China versus in the sex industry, many of them would likely belong in both categories. When it came to my own feelings about a specific situation, I often felt it was the combination of these two characteristics of my identity that were coming in to play. I imagine my informants would also experience a similar thought process and would not necessarily be able to identify whether they were opening up to me because I was foreign to China, or because I was external to the sex industry.

Yet regardless of why respondents perceived me to be out of place, I believe that the reason I was able to get in-depth access to actors within the sex industry and the state was because I embraced these outside identities. For example, regardless of whether I was reaching out to a sex worker or a police officer, I would tell them that I wanted to learn about their lives precisely because they are so different from mine. That type of framing would often open the door to all sorts of information about their daily experiences and opinions. What I sought to do was to accept these two characteristics of my identity as an outsider as a given, and then use them as strengths. Of course, it did not always work. I was not welcome everywhere. I had interviews that lasted only a few minutes, with informants who had no desire to be forthcoming. It took many months to develop strong enough ties in a sufficient number of communities to get the access I needed. Yet it paid off, in the sense that on a regular basis, I felt I was establishing meaningful connections with the individuals who shared their stories with me. More often than not, after I thanked respondents for talking with me and letting me into their lives, they thanked me. They noted how refreshing it felt for someone to ask about their lives, thoughts, and feelings – not only sex workers and clients, but also local police and health officials. They repeatedly mentioned how the questions I asked allowed them to reflect on aspects of their lives that they did not feel they could talk about with members of their own professional and personal communities. It was precisely *because* I was such an outsider

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that they felt comfortable sharing these experiences and thoughts with me.

The last point I want to make is to highlight the exhaustion that accompanies feeling out of place in one's fieldwork and scholarship. Living and conducting research in China, I was stressed, depressed, and deeply unsettled on a daily basis. I spent a lot of time in dingy, dark, and loud brothels. Sometimes, only a thin wall separated me from a sexual transaction that was occurring. I witnessed clients, madams, police officers, and health workers abuse sex workers emotionally, verbally, and physically, and also witnessed sex workers mistreat one another. I heard stories of sadness, violence, and harm. I also saw interactions characterized by warmth, care, and empowerment. But the dark ones wore me down.

When I left China after nineteen months of fieldwork, it took me several years to feel excited at the idea of returning and carrying out other, similarly immersive projects. And while I can remedy my feelings of being out of place in the field by returning to places where I may feel more at home, it is harder to escape feelings of academic displacement. The years I have spent contending with my data and, in particular, trying to show its relevance to disciplines that may not see value in it, have been tiring in other ways. In fact, while it was hardly a conscious decision, the project in which I embarked following this study protects me from many of the feelings of displacement that emerged in my work on prostitution in China. While substantively, the issue area is similar (human trafficking), it is centered around large-scale quantitative data collection. Instead of being the individual who interacts with research subjects on the ground, I have outsourced that experience to survey firms. And since this second project uses survey and field experimental methods, it fits squarely within the confines of mainstream political science and empirical legal research. There are significant tradeoffs that come with such a project, when compared to the qualitative, immersive research that is the focus of this volume. Yet I highlight what might be my own unconscious coping mechanism here so that other individual researchers who experience the toll of being out of place might consider ways in which they can similarly protect themselves from some of its most draining aspects while still engaging intellectually with issues they care about. The alternatives, including writer's block and burn out, might prevent their findings from ever seeing the light of day, and deprive academic discourse of voices that struggle the most to be heard.

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