

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Touching intimacy: Bodywork, affect and the caring ethic in erotic gay massage in Taiwan

**Bo-Wei Chen** 

Department of Applied Sociology, Nanhua University, Chiayi, Taiwan

**Correspondence**

Bo-Wei Chen, Department of Applied Sociology, Nanhua University No. 55, Sec. 1, Nanhua Rd., Dalin Township, Chiayi County 62249, Taiwan.

Email: chenpowei6967@gmail.com

**Funding information**

Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan, Grant/Award Number: 103-2410-H-343-013-MY2 102-2410-H-343-015

This paper explores the relatively unexamined topic of interactions between corporeal and affective dimensions in male sexual labour, focusing on the role of intimacy in the bodywork of erotic gay massage in Taiwan. Feminist perspectives on bodywork and affective embodiment are used to analyse how intimacy is lived out during commodified same-sex engagements. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 34 self-identified gay masseurs, I examine two prominent servicing features of male-for-male massage: crafted intimacy and unscripted care. Whereas the former refers to the 'boyfriend experience' built up through tactile encounters, the latter regards erotic services as caring practices for the socially vulnerable, adding a moral dimension to the cultural significance of gay sexual commerce in Taiwan. This paper concludes that corporeal and affective dimensions are inseparable in understanding gay massage. Further research can benefit from more attention to somatic affection in the interplay between bodywork and intimacy in male sexual labour.

**KEYWORDS**

affective embodiment, bodywork, erotic gay massage, intimacy, socially vulnerable bodies

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper unpacks the bodywork of erotic gay massage in Taiwan, examining the underexplored intersection of corporeal and affective dimensions in research on male sexual labour. While previous studies of male sexual labour focused disproportionately on social control of street workers and their deviant behaviours, a growing literature has begun to explore the experience of workers outside the deviance framework, including strippers, porn stars, male-for-male online escorts and companions in transnational gay tourism (Collins, 2012; DeMarco, 2007; Escoffier, 2003; Morrison & Whitehead, 2007). This literature represents a conceptual departure from an emphasis in earlier studies on characterizations of male sexual labour as pathological and workers as vectors of disease transmission. Within this literature, the bodywork of male sexual labour and its 'body/emotion management' strategies (Gimlin, 2007, p. 360) have begun to be well documented, helping to legitimize the profession. Alternatively, intimacy as an analytical stance has been deployed for questioning the binary positioning of sentiment and economic rationality in market transactions. Until recently, sociological inquiry into male sexual labour has been slow to feature the interplay

between bodywork and intimacy in the intermingling of affection and monetary gain in male sexual commerce (Walby, 2012).

In this paper, I show how erotic gay massage provides a clear window into the neglected interactions between bodywork and intimacy in exploring male sexual labour. I analyse two prominent servicing features of gay massage: crafted intimacy and unscripted care. The former refers to the 'boyfriend experience' and the seemingly authentic mutuality built up through tactile encounters. As a spa-owner succinctly advised new entrants to the profession: 'don't treat the client like [CPR] "Annie" but like your "honey"'. It is providing intimacy that defines good service and captures the bodywork of gay massage. Good erotic services also include caring practices for the socially vulnerable that undo dominant scripts about access to intimacy and the social negativity commonly associated with aged and disabled bodies, indicating the creative meaning-making of tactile encounters and potentially meaningful relations beyond strict sex-for-money exchange in market interactions. This paper brings together the scholarship on male sexual labour that has primarily attended to either bodywork or intimacy in commodified sex. By grappling with the nuances of the entwinements of body, sexualities and intimacy that shape gay massage, this study demonstrates the inseparability of the corporal and affective dimensions of male sexual labour.

Despite the high level of professionalism and care involved, erotic gay massage in Taiwan is portrayed by the media as degrading work done by unsafe masseurs who spread the HIV contagion. These stigmatized representations are, first of all, the result of the close association of male-with-male sex with sexual deviance in Taiwan, and the characterization of its practitioners as psychological misfits who threaten common decency and societal harmony (Chao, 1998). The outbreak of the AIDS epidemic further reinforced disparagement of the male homosexual for his presumed promiscuous lifestyle, indiscriminate sexual activity and social irresponsibility (Huang, 2011). Second, since 2011, the sex industry in Taiwan has been governmentally licensed and legal only in red-light districts. However, reluctance to provoke moral backlash makes local authorities unwilling to enforce legal provisions (Chen, 2014), resulting in the quasi-criminalization of sexual labour that renders the work of selling sex illicit and outside the bounds of respectability.

As a counterpoint to this pathologization of gay male sexual behaviours, I approach the controversial but little understood profession of gay massage as a legitimate form of labour. Building on the non-pathological male sex work literature, I contend that the role of intimacy in the bodywork of gay massage in Taiwan is a previously ignored domain for inquiry. Inspired by feminist analysis of bodily and affective interactions that constitute and complicate the labour construction of commodified intimacies (Boris & Parrenas, 2010), I argue that a framework grounded in a feminist bodywork paradigm and complemented by affective embodiment provides a promising direction for an embodied sociology of male sexual labour. I conceptualize bodywork in sexual commerce as comprising intimate and embodied forms of labour that satisfy physical and affective needs of others (Wolkowitz, Cohen, Sanders, & Hardy, 2013). In approaching affective embodiment during tactile encounters, I ask: What can a body do? And how can it affect and be affected? (Blackman & Venn, 2010). Research on (sexualized) massage work, which is relatively well documented mainly in heterosexual contexts, accentuates the boundary-making techniques of workers for mapping out sociality and propriety in gendered labour practices (Hancock, Sullivan, & Tyler, 2015; Oerton & Phoenix, 2001). My focus on same-sex engagements extends studies on what Paterson (2007, p. 162) terms the potentially 'empathetic and transformative capacity' of touching in massage work and the provision of alternative intimacies for the marginalized outside normative gay desire. By extending feminist insights into an under-researched dimension of male sex work, my work contributes to an emerging literature on intimate and embodied labour in sexual commerce and meaningful relations in male-for-male sexual transactions (Collins, 2012; Hoang, 2015; Walby, 2012). Also, by situating the cultural significance of gay sexual labour in Taiwan and framing it as a righteous practice through popularized Buddhist rhetoric of 'merit accumulation' (*zuò gōng dé*; Ting, 1999, p. 177), my ethnographic study extends scholarly understanding of societal forces that regulate the male sex industry into underexplored social-geographical locations and sociocultural variations outside a western setting.

In the following sections, I first introduce the analytical framework for conceptualizing male sexual labour by bringing both bodywork and intimacy into focus. Following an overview of the research setting and method, I explicate crafted intimacy and unscripted care as the servicing features of gay massage most salient to an exploration of corporeal and affective interactions of male-for-male sexual labour. Finally, I contextualize this research culturally in

Taiwanese masseurs' evocations of Buddhist virtue as a strategy for negotiation of the stigma and sociocultural limitations they may encounter.

## 2 | RE-EMBODYING INTIMACY IN MALE SEX WORK

In recent decades, a rich body of literature has documented the bodywork of female sex workers. Central to the feminist bodywork paradigm is rejection of the characterization of prostitution as an inherently male exploitation of women's bodies in favour of its recognition as a legitimate and potentially empowering form of labour (Boris & Parrenas, 2010; Ho, 2000; Wolkowitz et al., 2013). Inspired by Debra Gimlin (2007), I conceptualize sexualized bodywork in conventional labour market terms, entailing: (i) work-on-body that requires workers to look right for the job; (ii) work-with-body that makes clients feel cherished; (iii) body/emotion management that establishes appropriate boundaries while preserving dignity during stigmatized encounters; and (iv) body/emotion transmission that integrates corporeal and affective interconnections between workers and clients. As discussed next, these four analytical dimensions are complementary, and female sex work research addresses more than one aspect in order to complicate notions of agency and constraint during sexual transactions.

Scholars using bodywork as an explanatory framework have discerned variations in the social organization of sexual commerce and its effects on workers and clients (Chang, 2011; Weitzer, 2009). For example, self-employed middle-class female workers utilize body/emotion transmission for making what Bernstein (2007) describes as 'authentic [if fleeting] libidinal and emotional ties with clients' (p. 103), whereas their working-class counterparts deploy body/emotion management mechanisms for resisting stigma (Oerton & Phoenix, 2001). In terms of work-on-body, the aesthetic labour of these middle-class workers may give their nonconformist bodies a positive image in clients' and their own eyes (Bernstein, 2007), in contrast, for example, to strippers in upper-tier clubs, who conform to rather than transform gendered expectations of women's appearance (Bradley-Engen, 2009). It should be noted, however, that the commodified intimacies between strippers and clients can vary from illusory to genuinely mutual (Frank, 2002). In a strip club space for black same-sex desiring women, intimate engagements during erotic encounters promote a sense of community, which Frank and Carnes (2010) argue, help women clients 'transcend everyday experiences of racism, sexism and homophobia' (p. 120). The reciprocal interactions in lesbian erotic dance further complicate heteronormative ideals of female sexualities (Pilcher, 2012). Kimberly Hoang's study (2015) of Vietnamese female sex workers elucidates how bodywork intersects with intimacy and economic rationality in the global sex industry. In the transnational marketplace, workers' different expressions of body/emotion management reflect social positionings of clients, and their diametrically distinct forms of work-on-body respond to racialized desires. By acknowledging the multiplicity of the trade, a feminist bodywork paradigm guides us to rethink intimacy in sexual commerce as relational work that is socially situated and corporeally lived out beyond degradation (intimacy corrupted by money) or a 'nothing but' (coercion or economic exchange) logic (Zelizer, 2000, p. 826).

But while the interaction between bodywork and intimacy in female sex work has been explored in much more depth, male sex work research has generally focused on only one dimension at the expense of the other without consideration of the complexity of multiple dimensions interacting. To date, studies have focused primarily on workers' body/emotion management strategies for: (i) coping with stigmatized encounters and potential health hazards; (ii) asserting professionalism in devalued occupations; (iii) negotiating power struggles over personal boundaries; and (iv) protecting stereotypes of manhood of heterosexuals by justifying their same-sex engagements as merely commercial (DeMarco, 2007; Kong, 2009; Minichiello & Scott, 2014; Padilla, 2007). Body/emotion management further requires scripted 'personas' for heterosexual men performing in gay pornography to sustain convincing homoerotic acts (Escoffier, 2003, p. 543). Additionally, scholars have documented how workers tend to emulate appearances and practices that resonate with celebrated masculinities (Logan, 2010; Minichiello & Scott, 2014), though preferred body styles can vary by culture (Özbay, 2010) and demands from niche markets (Walby, 2012). Overall, disproportionate attention has been paid to certain aspects of the bodywork of male sexual labour (work-on-body and body/emotion management) while other aspects (work-with-body and body/emotion transmission) have been neglected. A

critical analysis of intimate interactions between workers and clients and the unanticipated meaning-making of bodily encounters can enrich exploration of male sexual labour.

To challenge the opposition between affective and economic activity in gay sexual commerce, a small but growing body of research has postulated intimacy as a conceptual tool, exemplified by Dana Collins' (2012) notion of desiring labour among working-class Filipino gay men. Excluded from gentrification, they perceive 'gay hospitality' as neither sexual nor commercial labour but as identity-enhancing work that enables them 'to become a new kind of urban "gay"' (p. 539). Noelle Stout's (2014) study of the city lives of gays and lesbians in contemporary Cuba further questions the boundaries between labour and love. Although the relatively class-privileged protagonists in Stout's study disdained sex workers and instrumental intimacy with foreign tourists, they were themselves drawn into 'the very types of tactical relationships that they belittled' (p. 72) for hard currency, enacting the constant internal negotiation between money and love that characterizes urban queer Cubans in the global erotic economy. In Povinelli's (2006) terms, such studies illustrate the linkages between the 'micro-practices of love' and the 'macro-practices of the political economic systems' (p. 191), in which inclusion and exclusion are enacted through commodified affections. Rather than bodywork per se, these studies focus on the convergence of intimate relations and monetary transfer within a political economic frame, suggesting the need for interrogation of intimacy and its embodied dimensions.

While bodywork and intimacy comprise much of the male sex work literature, the interplay between body and affection in male sexual labour remains understudied. As a noticeable exception, Kevin Walby (2012) has documented physical and affective interactions between online male-for-male escorts and their clients, centred on how meanings and practices of bodies are understood and transformed during touching encounters. For example, he argues that while escorts perform regulated work-on-body by keeping their bodies 'smelling and feeling aesthetically pleasing' (p. 144), it is important 'not to overstate the case about body regulation' (p. 147) as clients of Internet escort services may seek body types that deviate from mainstream expectations. Moreover, Walby highlights such bodily in/determinacy in concurrent open and closed tendencies during scripted sexual acts that can 'mutate through gestures and touch' (p. 30) into unanticipated care and compassion.

While Walby's (2012) theorizing of bodily in/determinacy involves interactionist interpretations from a poststructuralist perspective, it '[does] not enter the discussion of the haptic' (p. 187). I suggest, however, that embodied knowing is affectively invoked, lived and situated through the corporeal sensation of tactile encountering. Thus, I extend Walby's conceptualization of bodily encounter and unanticipated intimacies with the notion of affective embodiment (Blackman & Venn, 2010), which refers to the corporeal relationality and affective attunement that can occur when the self opens to the influence of others during tactile encounters. Here, the body is perceived as a knowing subject with self-agency, to be understood by analysing the corporeal in terms of co-constitution and care rather than separated and affectively constrained interactions.

I further highlight the social and cultural dimensions of affective embodiment by recognizing how bodies are valued differently (Hemmings, 2005). Specifically, while examining the empowering potentials of gay massage as care for marginal members of society, I consider the gay world's corporeal standards of desirability and its hierarchy of sexual appeal. Thus, affective embodiment, functioning as a prism, disentangles the intimate entwinement of affect, legitimacy and bodily interactions in commercial gay sex that accommodate creative inventions and social interventions.

To sum up, this study, framed in a feminist bodywork perspective with additional insight from affective embodiment, extends male sex work research in three ways. First, I expand the scope of male bodywork scholarship by considering the underinvestigated tactile servicing labour of gay massage, including work-with-body and body/emotion transmission. Second, this focus provides a clear window into the neglected interactions of body and affections in male sexual labour, in which corporeal and emotional boundaries can be both maintained and crossed. Third, in approaching affective embodiment during tactile encounters, I reveal the bodily inflexibility of normative gay desire while indicating how its contours may be redefined by commodified same-sex intimacies. More broadly, a feminist perspective on bodywork reconciles the corporeal and affective dimensions involved in conceptualizing male sexual labour. Affective embodiment captures the distinctive features of how it feels and what it means to be in bodily contact with others in a relation that dynamically entails both regulation and transformation.

### 3 | SETTING AND METHOD

In Taiwan, erotic gay massage is a burgeoning form of gay sexual commerce, often promoted through online advertising. During the writing of this paper, 211 massage parlours posted online advertisements on GAYSPA.<sup>1</sup> Because these were located mainly in metropolitan areas, participating masseurs were recruited primarily in Taipei, Taichung and Kaohsiung. Compared to the female sex industry, which is the target of gendered assumptions of morality and policing of female sexuality (Hsu, 2013), male-for-male sexual commerce draws less attention from public authorities. Nevertheless, gay massage parlours can still be subject to police clampdowns, leading proprietors to deploy certain tactics to legitimize transactions, such as displaying legal certificates of registration as beauty salons, notifying clients (through informed consent) that illicit activities are prohibited on the premises, and advising employees to always wear underwear and make sure there is never direct evidence of sexual activities (e.g., used condoms) in case of raids.

Erotic gay massage services can be broadly categorized as either with or without sexual intercourse. In the former, massage techniques are not essential. The latter, known as male-for-male massage, involves many tactile techniques and sexual intercourse becomes optional. In fact, to avoid legal complications, business-owners discourage sexual intercourse in male-for-male massage, though masseurs might be willing to provide free sex to sexually attractive clients. But in general, masseurs tend not to have intercourse with clients, as it can degrade work reputations and complicate services, although a 'happy ending' (hand-job) is still a standard final act to complete the service.

The current study is part of an ongoing investigation into the commodity culture of gay massage, which began in the winter of 2012. I conducted in-depth interviews, lasting on average two hours, with 34 masseurs, 27 clients<sup>2</sup> and eight spa-owners.<sup>3</sup> All participants are self-identified gay men. Initial contacts with the masseurs were made through John and Samuel, whom I knew through my social network (e.g., LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] rights organizations) and who introduced other participants through the snowballing strategy (Patton, 1990). Because the services they and other participants provided did not require sexual intercourse, this study focuses on workers who offered male-for-male massage. My sample was necessarily limited by my social network, and I am aware of the methodological challenges of such convenience sampling (Shaver, 2005). Nevertheless, it was sufficient for me to examine the underexplored interactions between bodywork and intimacy in existing male sex work research. Specifically, I looked into meanings of the ways bodies come together, how masseurs understand their work and their own bodies in relation to other work and other bodies, and, following Walby (2012), how such understandings are 'mediated by the touching of encounters' (p. 164). Comparing insights provided by clients and spa-owners helped me to develop a fuller understanding of the serving features of gay massage.

Of the masseurs I interviewed, the average age was 27 (ranging from 22 to one who was above 40) and were mostly ( $N = 28$ ) from economically disadvantaged backgrounds with such parental occupations as refuse collectors, farmers and workers on constructions sites, and/or low-income households that qualified for economic benefits. Around half were working full-time for a relatively good income.<sup>4</sup> Their average time in the business was four years, with three having worked more than seven years. The main incentives for the part-time masseurs were flexible working hours and financial gains in addition to their full-time jobs, which included administration, public service, postgraduate study and nude art modelling. Their time working as masseurs ranged from several weeks to two years. The diversity of the sample allowed me to examine the skills masseurs needed to develop and the obstacles they had to overcome to provide good service.

The athletic and muscular body types and youthful appearance of interviewed masseurs validated the physical norms of the commodity culture of gay desire in Taiwan (Lin, 2009; Tan, 2016), which are reflected in the questions potential employers ask, including 'Do you enjoy working out?' and 'How often do you go to the gym?' Such hiring preferences suggest that masseurs do not enjoy the same bodily liberty as self-employed online escorts. Additionally, the physical labour involved in body building is construed as a personal hobby and valued in the hierarchy of gay desire. Thus, employers do not need to pay for masseurs' work-on-body, which is promoted as part of the urban gay lifestyle. Online forums for clients' reviews of gay-spas further suggested that bodily features such as muscular chests, strong

arms and abdominal six-packs are highly sought after; and a large penis is considered a welcome bonus. There is a smaller market for merely lean and slender bodies, while men with surplus weight have to struggle for commercial acceptance, as do those with older features. My extensive research supports these claims (also see Logan, 2010).<sup>5</sup>

All of the participants agreed to participate in my research after being informed about the aims of my research and the necessity of audio-recording for accuracy of transcripts and my translations from Mandarin into English. I informed the interviewees that they could terminate the interview or stop the recording at any time if they wished. None objected to being recorded in full. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms. Participants received 1000 NT dollars (about US\$33) remuneration for each interview, an amount equivalent to a masseur's earnings for a two-hour session. During the interviews, I was often asked why I did not contract a gay massage myself to recruit interviewees and obtain first-hand observations. My rationale was that I wanted the participants to have the power to say no and to end the conversation if they became uncomfortable, which would be difficult in a masseur–client relation. I am well aware of the professional authority accorded me as a researcher. I treat these power dynamics with caution and respect.

Through the interviews, I learned how masseurs use certain patterns and mechanisms for providing the 'boyfriend experience' and how their services can go beyond feigned performances. I created labels to capture the distinctive massage servicing practices and their meanings, including both the crafted intimacy and bodywork of erotic gay massage and its unscripted care and embodied caring ethic.

## 4 | CRAFTED INTIMACY: THE BODYWORK OF EROTIC GAY MASSAGE

*Unprofessional masseurs treat you in a half-hearted manner ... I met a great looking masseur with a fantastic body. But the way he treated me was as if I was a 'dead body': very cold and distant! Although good-looking faces and fit bodies are important for masseurs, it is the physical pampering and emotional attentiveness that makes a [erotic gay] masseur popular. Unless it becomes intimate, the massage itself becomes like eating at McDonald's when you are hungry – convenient but nothing exciting. A good masseur will pamper you like a boyfriend. He takes great care of your needs, makes you feel desirable and seems to enjoy himself as well. (Tim, client)*

'What makes an erotic gay massage "good"?' was the guiding research question of this study. Before carrying out this fieldwork, I inferred, from the half-naked male bodies ubiquitously exhibited in Internet advertisements for gay-spas, that a masseur with a fine physique who worked for clients' sexual pleasure could provide good service. But during the fieldwork masseurs and clients constantly reminded me, as one said, that 'to be a good masseur is to be a lover for the client, making him feel pampered and cared for'. Specifically, the erotic interactions of the service should provide the intimacy of the 'boyfriend experience' as well as sensuous gratification. The following analysis delves into masseurs' work-with-body and body/emotion management, showing how the 'boyfriend experience' develops through the pampering and erotic labour during intimate encounters.

### 4.1 | Embodying intimacy through (de)sexualizing massage

For gay massage, the erotic element is a double-edged sword. It signifies intimate links between workers and clients. However, if implemented too quickly, it might sever the emotional connections being cultivated. In order to bestow the reward of making the client feel pampered and cared for, masseurs need to withhold sexualization at the beginning of service and progress with increasing intimacy. Hence, pacing is a key element:

*... You need to know what to do, when and how ... The client would feel very strange if you start titillating him as soon as he lies down on the table. It makes you [appear] unprofessional, just wanting to rush to the end, or acting like a 'nympho', who can't wait to get laid ... (Ricky, masseur)*

To turn a first-time client into a regular takes more than just a fine physique. Rather, what is essential is the pampering labour of gay massage – the masseur's work-with-body that makes clients feel cherished (Kang, 2003; Sharma & Black, 2001):

*A good masseur needs to be attentive to the client's body ... By taking care of his body, the client can feel that you care about him. Pure lust cannot turn one-off clients into regulars. What brings them back is your warmth and attentiveness. (Allen, spa-owner)*

Most importantly, pampering labour does not necessarily involve eroticization, especially not at the beginning of the service, and masseurs can be criticized as unprofessional for being overly sexualized. By initially desexualizing the service and showing concern for taking care of their clients' bodies, masseurs can earn their trust. Moreover, this initial desexualization allows the later more sensuous service to appear spontaneous and authentic:

*... when we bring in sensual touching, we do in an unexpected way ... Since this happens when you are massaging [rather than titillating] him, the client will have more room for imagination: What does that touch mean? Does he [the masseur] also fancy me? (Simon, masseur)*

The art of providing intimacy that is experienced as spontaneous rather than purchased, as if a true connection has occurred, requires professional techniques that go beyond physical manipulation. For example, rather than only caressing the client in a way that might 'mislead him into sex only', Luke (masseur) precedes caresses with deep-tissue massage 'to let the client know that what I do is massage even though the ending is more sensual'. Before directly touching the client's chest, which might appear sexually aggressive, Luke would place a towel on the client's shoulder to form a sense of boundaries 'until he rests peacefully on my arm'. Luke continued to explain:

*... good service is to make the client have the feeling of falling-in-love, through your body temperature and attentive hands. This is built in gradually and camouflaged with professional techniques. If you don't do this, you can't release his stresses and he can't feel pampered and then close to you ...*

Similarly, Peter (masseur) addressed the importance of achieving a harmonious bodily rhythm, making the client feel cared about:

*... I need to follow attentively his breathing rhythm, allowing his body movements to guide my hands.... The synchronization between his body and my hands is important, letting him feel that my hands are working with rather than against his body, being responsive to what his body needs ...*

However, the rhythm should not be mechanical or 'it becomes like singing without emotions'. To convincingly 'charm the client with the "chemistry" the service creates', improvisations are important:

*... I spontaneously bring in unexpected yet suitable techniques for that specific sequence, sprinkling the massage with a bit of flirtation; ... this is exciting for the client since he is not sure about what will happen next and this keeps him yearning for [it] ... The improvisation shows that I am not bored with his body and I enjoy what I am doing....*

The above extracts illustrate the fine balance masseurs draw between desexualization and sexualization in their tactical combination of pampering techniques and sensual touching. Fostering a feeling of mutuality is crucial. Rather than quick sexual release, clients prize intimacy. As Paul, a client, stressed, 'bad service gives you a sense of emptiness [as if] the only way you can get this is by paying for it'. Or as William, another client put it, '... a good masseur makes you feel special, someone he really fancies, not treating you in a cold business-like manner or just for the sake of courtesy'. Furthermore, the dexterous oscillation between massage techniques and emulating authentic mutuality sets a convincing tone for the erotic labour that comes into play next.

## 4.2 | Erections speak louder than words

In order to convey a genuine feeling of mutuality, a masseur needs to visibly show that he finds the client desirable with his own erectile performance:

*... getting an erection is important. It's a sign of showing you are 'genuinely' interested in him [the client], you are not turned off by what you see ... No erection, no return client! (Roger, masseur)*

*... your body needs to show the clients you enjoy what you are doing. For them, seeing is believing, erections speak louder than words. (Lee, masseur)*

However, unlike facial expressions, genital erections cannot easily be faked, especially when masseurs find their clients sexually unattractive, usually those who are 'overweight, overage and unappealing' (Michel, masseur). Hence, the masseur often needs the help of emotion management (Hochschild, 1983) to be able to evoke feelings of mutuality:

*The top three tips [for getting a genital erection when you fail to get one] are to use imagination, imagination and still imagination. To think about what you really fancy doing for sex, or imagine scenes from gay porn. (Ryan, masseur)*

*... try to find something about him [the client] that makes you aroused ... If you like strong hairy legs, just look at the legs. If the legs are not attractive, just look at the hairs only. Don't look at his whole face, only the part between nose and chin and it helps you more easily to imagine him as someone else. (Victor, masseur)*

To 'reassure their male partner of his potency', female sex workers can perform the crafted orgasm by making 'a spectacular and noisy performance during intercourse' (Jackson & Scott, 2007, p. 106) to manipulate the erotic experience of male clients (Chen, 2006; Sanders, 2005). Men's orgasms, on the other hand, are dependent on genital erection, which is deemed as 'natural' (Potts, 1998, p. 164). In gay massage, where their erectile failure would be read by clients as lack of interest, if not rejection, masseurs have few alternatives when they encounter sexually undesirable clients but to engage in what Hochschild (1983) describes as deep acting or scripted personas in Escoffier's (2003) terms, to sustain the illusion of arousal by mobilizing their own erotic fantasies. In this effort, the gay masseur's experience of his erotic labour, while it varies with each client, is more like that of the professional female sex worker, who capitalizes on her sexualities and deploys deep acting to feign intimacy as a business strategy (Sanders, 2005), than that of the female middle-class sex worker, who is more likely to experience commodified sex as mutually enjoyable (Bernstein, 2007). In short, erotic labour prioritizes clients' gratifications over masseurs' pleasures. It is precisely this ambiguous, if not conflicting, relationship between masseurs' seemingly authentic embodied experiences of pleasure and their genuine desires where erotic labour claims its professionalism (for lesbian workers with male clients, see Shrager, 1999).

So far I have discussed masseurs' work-with-body and their body/emotion management strategies in order to illustrate how the 'boyfriend experience' is crafted through bodily techniques, fulfilling the quest for intimacy in gay sexual commerce. In what follows, I will introduce another prominent servicing feature of gay massage, the body/emotion transmission between clients and masseurs where erotic services can mutate into unanticipated care as empathetic touching and affective incitement are enacted during tactile encounters.

## 5 | UNSCRIPTED CARE: EMBODYING A CARING ETHIC IN GAY MASSAGE

*... massage is very magical, I barely know him [the masseur], but his hands make me feel so secure and cared for, just like a baby ... no one really cares about me in such a way except my parents ... Through his massage I felt the warm and delicate care from his hands, soothing my pain. Suddenly, I feel I could completely open up and am surprised that he could understand me so well ... he seemed to understand my pain, the pain*

*that is more than muscle aching, the pain of hiding myself and my desire for men. His massage creates a space for me to be myself and makes me feel accepted and understood.* (Eric, client)

Crafted intimacy captures only part of the massage service; beyond erotic manipulation, masseurs can also provide the experience of unscripted care. This becomes clear if we examine how body/emotion transmission through tactile sensations can generate affective intercorporeality between masseurs and clients. The following analysis focuses on the sense of being-with between masseurs and clients that can arise spontaneously when the masseurs' hands become knowing providers of care and compassion.

## 5.1 | Caring for disabled bodies

While masseurs may find their clients undesirable if not repugnant, paradoxically, it is these repellant bodies that induce masseurs' unscripted care during commodified interactions. Referring to a married client with a disabled arm, John (masseur) explained why massage was an 'unfortunate necessity' for some: '... leading a "double life" is hard enough ... it's worse if you have disabilities.... Gay men are judgmental; no wonder he needs us to assist his sexual relief.' During the service, John felt the client 'thought so low of himself' and was 'too timid to touch me'. Such a sense of inferiority made John wonder: 'How much burden does he need to carry? Why does he look so troubled when he has already spent lots of money but doesn't dare enjoy it?' Though few words were exchanged, touching the client's unfortunate body evoked John's compassion:

*... there was a scar on his thigh ... it was so bad that just looking at it made me feel as if I could have witnessed him being run over by a truck. While touching the scar, I was wondering why such a terrible thing could happen to someone that marked his life forever. I felt I could understand the hard time he had been through. I was trying my best to massage his thigh, to relieve his suffering. I wished his miseries could just end here ...*

Samuel (masseur) shared a similar experience when he served a client with kyphosis and muscle atrophy:

*... his muscles were completely wasting away to the point that his body had little flesh and fat left, with his bones seemingly covered by skin only. I felt sorry for him, for the extremely difficult life he led ... Utterly helpless and abandoned! I was much more attentive than usual. I felt I could read his pain through touching his fatigued body, and I hoped he could feel from the massage that I cared about his suffering ...*

Having a body means learning to be affected (Despret, 2004). These testimonies explain how bodies can serve as conduits for compassion so that, as Butler (2004) described, boundaries between self and others are 'periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded' (p. 28). Sharing a disabled client's perspective, Thomas, who had lived with polio from a young age, described how his disability made it difficult for him to fit into the intolerant gay community that prizes fit and healthy bodies. Yet, receiving gay massage enabled him to 'feel comforted and connected', particularly when the masseur stroked his paralysed legs without any sign of aversion:

*... his caring touch was both physically and emotionally comforting. I always worried if someone would be disgusted seeing my naked body ... Through his touching, I felt less lonely, and he was not withdrawn into his own space.... For a 'stand-up' [non-disabled] person, this [bodily touching] might be too trivial to cross the mind, but for me it is too much to ask for and too rare to take for granted ... Through his touching, I was treated as a normal person rather than a cripple ...*

Whereas conventions of bodily and sexual intelligibility frame what is considered acceptable within a particular horizon of physicality (Butler, 2004), gay massage offers seemingly unintelligible opportunities for those considered unacceptable to live their desires. Through tactile sensation provided by attentive hands, their embodied selves, including memories and miseries, may unfold to the empathetic masseurs who themselves become open to the unfortunate

bodies of these clients. Through affective touching, the hands of the masseur comprehend what the body of the client expresses, and for the time of the service they share a social world in which the vulnerable body is understood and cared for. The practice of massage becomes the practice of caring, attuning masseurs to a sense of 'what it is to be [like] the other' (Despret, 2004, p. 128). The caring ethic arises from the understanding that the individual is not self-contained, but continually reconstructing a reflexive understanding in relation to others in specific contexts (Chao, 2015). As Walby (2012) observes, such mutual awareness is expressed in the creative meanings of tactile sensations that are not scripted but are affectively attuned to participants' learning 'what they can do with each other's bodies' (p. 30), and how their bodies make each other feel and care. It further illuminates otherwise obscured connections between micro-practices of affective embodiment and broader, hierarchical social relations resulting in inequalities of intimacy for the marginalized as discussed next.

## 5.2 | Caring for aged bodies

*... When my friends talk about gayness, they refer to a certain type of gay men, who have gym-built bodies and attract much admiration in the gay parade ... My job allows me to see many different types of bodies, the old, disabled, and ugly bodies that you don't often see in the gay community ... If you tease out the individual differences amongst gay people and pile them one on top of the other, it would be higher than Taipei 101 ... (Samuel, masseur)*

In the affective landscape of the happy queer, happiness is defined by those who have been allowed in, but queer spaces welcome some bodies more than others and are not equally accessible to all, so the unwelcomed bodies of the aged and imperfect are pushed to the margin where they cannot disturb the happiness promised by gay pride (Ahmed, 2010). The burgeoning demand for gay massage appears to be a triumph of gay visibility, but this same visibility defines the invisibility of those excluded from the hooray-for-gay parade.

Erotic gay massage, nevertheless, provides the rejected body a space in which it does not feel out of place. For example, Allen (spa-owner) commented that because 'coming-out' was not an option for mature married clients, when they have fulfilled their family obligations, they want to find someone with whom to share their lifelong secrets. But while the gay world, which celebrates youthfulness, does not always welcome older men, 'here [in a gay-spa] they feel comfortable being themselves ... They have got stories to tell, and we care to listen.' Brad (masseur) referred to his service as caregiving for mature clients, especially those who suffer from impotence and for many of whom 'hand-jobs are not enough to make them come ... you need to use your mouth'. This becomes more challenging when dysfunction is combined with chronic illnesses:

*one of my regulars is obese with diabetes ... perhaps because of his illness his dick is very stinky no matter how many times he washes it. Without being paid for it, few would do this [fellatio] for him.*

The following extract is Brad's rationale behind his work:

*... I watched a documentary and one of the protagonists was an old transgender, who was not accepted by her family and lived alone ... [After her lung collapsed] she needed friends to take care of her so she could return from the hospital to her home, the only place she felt most comfortable in her own skin.... So some came in to clean the house and others cooked for her.... I see myself as a long-term care-giver for mature clients; ... they come to see me because this part of their lives relies on me, lives that are unknown to their families. I provide the care that makes them live comfortably with themselves, care that their family cannot offer....*

By referring to his work as alternative care that provides mature clients with emotional security and physical comfort, Brad reveals how the caring ethic in gay massage makes suppressed lives more liveable. It also suggests the notion of 'families of choice' (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001) among gay men and lesbians, referring to friendship networks

that are forged when conventional kinship ceases or withholds its support. Nevertheless, to call gay massage a caring practice is not to suggest that it is free of charge, and the economically disadvantaged are unlikely to be granted access. Neither does it suggest that masseurs feel comfortable with all the bodies they care for. But while they regularly deploy techniques of pampering and erotic labour to conceal their discomfort, the simulated performances ebb away as masseurs' care comes into play. Moreover, in the era of the happy queer, which promotes certain forms of body, feeling and intimacy while excluding those viewed in Sanger and Taylor's (2013) words, as 'lacking, failing and falling behind' (p. 16), the service provides comfort and care that are not always accessible to the socially vulnerable. Being unaware of or discounting this function of the stigmatized activity prevents one from perceiving the hidden dynamics by which multi-layered physical and economic inequalities are accommodated in the compulsory happiness of queer existence.

When mature clients feel it is safe to expose their feelings, their aged and discredited bodies may prompt masseurs to rethink the meaning of intimacy outside the sanctum of homogenized gay desire. Nick (masseur) explained that his work allowed him to cultivate a bodily sensibility for hearing what the aged body tries to communicate:

*... in the gay community where you are what you desire, old bodies are something you ought to deny ... as if you should 'naturally' find them disgusting ... my work requires me to serve different bodies and this enables me to tell the difference between their [clients'] touching, the touch that feels lonely or simply sexually degrading ... [and] bodily touching [that] makes one feel less lonely; they [mature clients] want more than just sex ... they desire acceptance rather than isolation or rejection ...*

Daniel (masseur) provided a similar account for mature and severely disabled clients:

*... rather than sexual interactions, they [mature clients and the severely disabled] seek intimate confirmations, relations with persons that make them feel accepted ... [massage] services for them are not anchored by sex or erection alone, instead, they want to be touched and recognized as the way they are ....*

Whereas touching from the aged body can have diverse meanings that include sociality and social connecting, such meanings are ignored, if not completely silenced, by the normative gay desire and its marginalization of elder LGBT lives. Willingly working with mature clients leads some masseurs to develop a more complex understanding than that encoded in dominant scripts (Jones & Pugh, 2005). Serving old and rejected bodies may further disorientate masseurs in the closed circuit of the gay world and its monopoly on defining intimacy, as the notion is redefined through two bodies coming together in an aura of compassion (Walby, 2012). Without questioning the highly sexualized normative description of intimacy, one might overlook the caring ethic of gay sexual commerce that allows masseurs and devalued bodies to dismantle hierarchies and claim dignity, at least temporarily, in the affective economy of the happy queer.

### 5.3 | Negotiating stigma through caring ethic

Erotic masseurs face a paradox of identity within the gay community. On the one hand, their fine physiques, which exemplify gay male attractiveness in Taiwan, qualify them for the higher 'tiers of desirability' (Green, 2008, p. 32). On the other hand, masseurs are stigmatized as sexually promiscuous and vectors of disease. Ryan (masseur) described his work as a barrier to forming a stable relationship: '[gay] people think I am easy and fuck everything that moves for money, ... treating me as a contagious disease that is disqualified for love'. Ken (masseur) complained he was asked to get an HIV test when his boyfriend accidentally discovered his profession:

*we both slept around before being together and were honest about this; ... everything was fine ... and then suddenly, my sex becomes an issue and I am a potential health hazard for what I do for a living, and his sex is safer because it is not for sale?*

Scholars have suggested that the stigmatization of male sex work encourages workers to develop an ethic of safer sex (Bimbi & Koken, 2014; Kong, 2009), a claim confirmed by my extensive research. Yet, despite precautions against unprotected sex at work, masseurs have little success transcending the bias against gay sex workers: 'our "dirty work" makes [the prospect of] sex without condoms alarming for us, but we are assumed to be more "dangerous" for what actually keeps us safer ... how ironic!' (Simon, masseur). It is worth noting that despite being open about their gay identity, many interviewed masseurs reported being reluctant to disclose their occupation to friends, partners or families (also see Kong, 2016). Silencing their work-identity signalled the masseurs' compliance with rather than challenge to the social stigmatization of sexual labour which was confined to what John (masseur) called 'the closet of gay sex workers'. Not only the stigma of pathology ascribed to their work but also their internalization of it curtailed masseurs' ability to form stable intimate relationships. Within the gay community, masseurs' image as vectors of disease, reinforced by the general society's view of homosexuals as a danger to public health, keeps them low on the hierarchy of gay desire, in which the commodification of sexual pleasure is disparaged.

Recasting their erotic services as virtuous caring practices that ease the sufferings of sexual pariahs was one way the masseurs counteracted the stigma attached to their profession:

*... I met a guy who was too obese to wash himself properly and there was a layer of disgusting yeasty dead skin covering his perineum. While trying to wipe it off, a pungent smell rushed into me, a fermented smell that was saturated with sweat, poop and urine ... he felt embarrassed by what he had no control over.... I was disgusted by what I smelt, but felt sympathetic toward him as well ... to be obese is sorry enough, and why one needs to suffer more from the filth that results from the illness ... misery likes company and misery has brought him to me ... my service makes a less-human person a human again ... I 'accumulate merit' [zuò gōng dé] from my 'disgraced work' ... (Alvin, masseur)*

*... we are not filthy sex workers ... we are 'living bodhisattvas' [ròushēn pú sà] who take care of the misfortunates ... (Monkey, masseur)*

These comments reflect the popularized Buddhist notion of merit accumulation in Taiwan, to which sex workers refer in order to evoke respectable social roles such as the good mother (Dewey, 2011), the responsible household-provider (Padilla, 2007) or the filial son (Kong, 2009). Specifically, my work suggests that merit accumulation has become a culturally sanctioned rationale by which masseurs try to reconstruct their work-identity from prostitution to compassionate helping (Ting, 1999, p. 177), what Salguero (2013) characterized as 'the reward reaped from planting seeds in the "field of merit" [fú tián]' (p. 342), which will yield a greater harvest. Yet, as the agricultural metaphor suggests, much labour is involved in turning good intentions into praiseworthy results. Such labour in gay massage can be viewed as both demeaning and dignified. It is demeaning because of the social stigmatization of gay sex work and its direct contact with repugnant bodies (Twigg, 2000), and dignified and even honourable because it provides the rejected with comfort and care. Whereas merit accumulation is conventionally understood as a spiritual investment strategy for seeking social recognition, the religious virtue of compassion allows masseurs to reframe their censured practices as morally good deeds that relieve human suffering. Thus, the caring ethic allows masseurs to value their practices as meaningful work, which gives gay sexual commerce a moral dimension.

While not yet widely accepted in the larger society or even the gay community, this interpretation of disparaged work as morally commendable may yet open up a space for masseurs to renegotiate the status of their profession. The extent to which masseurs might be able to transcend society's pathologized view of sexual labour as morally reprehensible, however, remains in question (O'Neill, 2001). The quasi-criminalization of sex work and the general public's abhorrence of male homosexuality in Taiwan are formidable barriers to gay masseurs' gaining social acceptance and positive recognition.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

This paper explores the understudied intersection of corporeal and affective relations in male sexual labour, focusing on the interplay between bodywork and intimacy that constructs the labour of gay massage in Taiwan. Applying a framework grounded in a feminist bodywork paradigm and complemented by affective embodiment revealed how intimacy is lived out through commodified same-sex encounters. This study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, it illustrates how physical and affective dimensions are inseparable in understanding male sexual labour and the merging of intimacy and trade in male-for-male sexual commerce. While crafted intimacy characterizes the bodywork of gay massage, examples of unscripted care document how intimacy may be situated beyond the logic of economic exchange or affectively constrained interactions of sexual transactions.

Second, this study's focus on affective embodiments discloses the social meanings of the purchase of same-sex intimacies and reveals the otherwise obscure connections between the rejected body and the social world of the happy queer. While the subordinating forces of the hierarchy of gay male attractiveness marginalizes the intimate lives of those who are socially vulnerable due to age, disfigurement and disability, and economic status, the caring ethic of gay massage potentially recalibrates intimate equalities outside normative gay desire. My focus on the empathetic and transformative capacity of touching further contributes to the literature on sex work as caring labour for the marginalized (Brents, Jackson, & Hausbeck, 2010; Kulick & Rydström, 2015; Walby, 2012). The social and cultural analysis of affect embodiment also sheds light on the growing interrogation of the compulsory affective landscape of normative gay desire that excludes the intimate lives of the socially vulnerable (Ahmed, 2010; McRuer & Mellow, 2012).

Third, the popularized Buddhist rhetoric of merit accumulation offers masseurs a way to reinterpret their stigmatized services as righteous practices of the caring ethic extended to the sexually marginalized, which highlights the moral dimension and cultural significance of gay massage in Taiwan. Conceptually, a feminist bodywork approach provides a critical engagement with the intersection between bodywork and intimacy in male sexual labour without losing sight of complex corporeal and affective interactions during sexual transactions. Affective embodiment contributes to a growing theorization of the body as a dynamic and contested site in sexual commerce where social regulations and corporeal transformations are enacted during intimate engagements (Walby, 2012). The findings presented here also urge reconsideration of legislation related to commercial sex and its effects on workers and socially vulnerable clients. Future research on the sociology of embodied male sexual labour will benefit from more attention to somatic affection in the interplay of body and intimacy in male-for-male sexual commerce.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For excellent advice and helpful feedback on early drafts of this article, thanks to Chin-fen Chang and Wei-hsian Chi. For the conceptual initiation of affective embodiment, queer studies and the ethic of care, thanks to Antonia Chao. For intellectual inspiration, thanks to Mei-hua Chen who makes this research possible. I extend appreciation to the men who agreed to participate in the study. My appreciation to Robert Good and Sharon Pugh who proofread this article.

## DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

## FUNDING

This work was supported by the Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan [NSC 102-2410-H-343-015; MOST 103-2410-H-343-013-MY2].

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The major Taiwanese commercial website for erotic gay massage.
- <sup>2</sup> Although established gay-spas in Taipei are likely to have websites in English and/or Japanese, suggesting an international clientele, the masseurs in this study served mainly Taiwanese clients, so I excluded overseas clients. While research on this group can provide important insights into how sexualities intersect with race, ethnicity and class in shaping masseurs' services, it is a topic beyond the scope of the present study.
- <sup>3</sup> Rather than interfere with the client–masseur relationship by seeking referrals from masseurs, I recruited all client interviewees except those with physical disabilities from Internet message boards. Clients with disabilities contacted me voluntarily after attending my talks on this project, as did four spa-owners, who generated referrals for two additional owners (and the remaining two spa-owners were introduced by interviewed masseurs). This response demonstrated that one value of sharing my research challenging the stigmatization of gay sexual commerce with non-academic audiences has been to draw the interest of potential participants.
- <sup>4</sup> The full-time masseurs in this study averagely earned 45,000–50,000 NT dollars, almost twice the average monthly salary for a recent university graduate.
- <sup>5</sup> While the present study focused on the bodywork of mainstream gay massage, it should be noted that a niche can exist for middle-aged father-figure masseurs with softer shapes.

## ORCID

Bo-Wei Chen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9711-6373>

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bernstein, E. (2007). *Temporarily yours: Intimacy, authenticity, and the commerce of sex*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bimbi, D., & Koken, J. (2014). Public health policy and practice with male sex workers. In V. Minichiello, & J. Scott (Eds.), *Male sex work and society* (pp. 199–222). New York, NY: Harrington Park.
- Blackman, L., & Venn, C. (2010). Affect. *Body & Society*, 16, 1–5.
- Boris, E., & Parrenas, R. S. (Eds) (2010). *Intimate labors: Cultures, technologies, and the politics of care*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bradley-Engen, M. (2009). *Naked lives: Inside the worlds of exotic dance*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Brents, B., Jackson, C., & Hausbeck, K. (2010). *The state of sex: Tourism, sex and sin in the new American heartland*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London, UK: Verso.
- Chang, C.-f. (2011). *The sociology of work*. Taipei, Taiwan: Chengchi University Press.
- Chao, A. (1998). Invisible power: Epistemology of discourses on unconventional sexualities in Taiwan's newspress. *Mass Communication Research*, 56, 135–153. (In Chinese)
- Chao, A. (2015). Ethics of caregiving on the deathbed: A case study of governing elderly veterans' remaining life. *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies*, 100, 53–90. (In Chinese)
- Chen, M.-h. (2006). Labor, the body and sexuality: Women sex worker's negotiation of public and private sex and work. *Taiwanese Sociology*, 11, 1–55. (In Chinese)
- Chen, M.-h. (2014). Governing sex work and the politic of exclusion. In Y.-H. Chen (Ed.), *A White Paper on women in Taiwan: 2014* (pp. 343–380). Taipei, Taiwan: Fembook. (In Chinese)
- Collins, D. (2012). Gay hospitality as desiring labor: Contextualizing transnational sexual labor. *Sexualities*, 15, 538–553.
- DeMarco, J. (2007). Power and control in gay strip clubs. In T. Morrison, & B. Whitehead (Eds.), *Male sex work: A business doing pleasure* (pp. 111–127). New York, NY: Harrington Park.
- Despret, V. (2004). The body we care for: Figures of anthropo-zoo-genesis. *Body & Society*, 10(2–3), 111–134.
- Dewey, S. (2011). *Neon wasteland: On love, motherhood and sex work in a Rust Belt town*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Escoffier, J. (2003). Gay-for-pay: Straight men and the making of gay pornography. *Qualitative Sociology*, 26, 531–555.
- Frank, K. (2002). *G-strings and sympathy: Strip club regulars and male desire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Frank, K., & Carnes, M. (2010). Gender and space in strip clubs. In R. Weitzer (Ed.), *Sex for sale: Prostitution, pornography, and the sex industry* (pp. 115–138). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Glmlin, D. (2007). What is 'body work'? A review of the literature. *Sociology Compass*, 1, 353–370.

- Green, A. (2008). The social organization of desire: The sexual fields approach. *Sociological Theory*, 26, 25–50.
- Hancock, P., Sullivan, D., & Tyler, M. (2015). A touch too much: Negotiating masculinity, propriety and proximity in intimate labor. *Organization Studies*, 36, 1715–1739.
- Hemmings, C. (2005). Invoking affect: Cultural theory and the ontological turn. *Cultural Studies*, 19, 548–567.
- Ho, C.-j. (2000). Self-empowerment and 'professionalism': Conversations with Taiwanese sex workers. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 1, 283–299.
- Hoang, K. (2015). *Dealing in desire: Asian ascendancy, Western decline and the hidden currencies of global sex work*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: The commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hsu, Y.-f. (2013). Sterilizing society: Social order and policing sex work in Taiwan. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 14, 272–286.
- Huang, T.-m. (2011). *Queer politics and sexual modernity in Taiwan*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Jackson, S., & Scott, S. (2007). Faking like a woman? Towards an interpretive theorization of sexual pleasure. *Body & Society*, 13(2), 95–116.
- Jones, J., & Pugh, S. (2005). Ageing gay men: Lessons from the sociology of embodiment. *Men and Masculinities*, 7, 248–260.
- Kang, M. (2003). The managed hand: The commercialization of bodies and emotions in Korean immigrant-owned nail salons. *Gender & Society*, 17, 820–839.
- Kong, T. (2009). More than a sex machine: Accomplishing masculinity among Chinese male sex workers in the Hong Kong sex industry. *Deviant Behavior*, 30, 715–745.
- Kong, T. (2016). Sex and work on the move: Money boys in post-socialist China. *Urban Studies*, 54, 678–694.
- Kulick, D., & Rydstrom, J. (2015). *Loneliness and its opposite: Sex, disability, and the ethics of engagement*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lin, C. (2009). Becoming a 'bear': Identity formation and sexual/gender/bodily performativity among the Taiwanese gay bear community. *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies*, 12, 57–117. (In Chinese)
- Logan, T. (2010). Personal characteristics, sexual behaviors, and male sex work: A quantitative approach. *American Sociological Review*, 75, 679–704.
- McRuer, R., & Mellow, A. (Eds) (2012). *Sex and disability*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Minichiello, V., & Scott, J. (Eds) (2014). *Male sex work and society*. New York, NY: Harrington Park.
- Morrison, T., & Whitehead, B. (Eds) (2007). *Male sex work: A business doing pleasure*. New York, NY: Harrington Park.
- O'Neill, M. (2001). *Prostitution and feminism: Towards a politics of feeling*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Oerton, S., & Phoenix, J. (2001). Sex/bodywork: Discourses and practices. *Sexualities*, 4, 387–412.
- Özbay, C. (2010). Nocturnal queers: Rent boys' masculinity in Istanbul. *Sexualities*, 13, 645–663.
- Padilla, M. (2007). *Caribbean pleasure industry*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Paterson, M. (2007). Affecting touch: Towards a felt phenomenology of therapeutic touch. In J. Davidson, L. Bondi, & M. Smith (Eds.), *Emotional geographies* (pp. 161–176). Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pilcher, K. (2012). Dancing for women: Subverting heteronormativity in a lesbian erotic dance space? *Sexualities*, 15, 521–537.
- Potts, A. (1998). The science/fiction of sex: John Gray's Mars and Venus in the bedroom. *Sexualities*, 1, 153–173.
- Povinelli, E. (2006). *The empire of love: Toward a theory of intimacy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Salguero, P. (2013). Fields of merit, harvests of health: Some notes on the role of medical karma in the popularization of Buddhism in early medieval China. *Asian Philosophy*, 23, 341–349.
- Sanders, T. (2005). 'It's just acting': Sex workers' strategies for capitalizing on sexuality. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 12, 319–342.
- Sanger, T., & Taylor, Y. (2013). *Mapping intimacies: Relations, exchanges, affects*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.
- Sharma, U., & Black, P. (2001). Look good, feel better: Beauty therapy as emotional labor. *Sociology*, 35, 913–931.
- Shaver, F. (2005). Sex work research: Methodological and ethical challenges. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 20, 296–319.
- Shrage, L. (1999). Do Lesbian Prostitutes Have Sex With Their Clients? A Clintonesque Reply. *Sexualities*, 2, 260.
- Stout, N. (2014). *After love: Queer intimacy and erotic economies in post-Soviet Cuba*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Tan, K. K. (2016). Gaydar: Using skilled vision to spot gay "bears" in Taipei. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 89, 841–864.

- Ting, J.-c. (1999). 'Merit-accumulation' behavior in cultural contexts: An example from participants in Taiwan's Buddhist Tzu-chi Association, with implications for cross-cultural studies on helping behavior. *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology*, 85, 113–177. (In Chinese)
- Twigg, T. (2000). Carework as a form of bodywork. *Ageing and Society*, 20, 389–411.
- Walby, K. (2012). *Touching encounters: Sex work and male-for-male Internet escorting*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Weeks, J., Heaphy, B., & Donovan, C. (2001). *Same sex intimacies: Families of choice and other life experiments*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Weitzer, R. (2009). Sociology of sex work. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35, 213–234.
- Wolkowitz, C., Cohen, R., Sanders, T., & Hardy, K. (2013). *Body/sex/work: Intimate, embodied and sexualized labor*. London, UK: Palgrave.
- Zelizer, V. (2000). The purchase of intimacy. *Law and Social Inquiry*, 25, 817–848.

**Bo-Wei Chen** is Associate Professor of Sociology at Nanhua University, Taiwan. His current research has two streams. The first looks at Bourdieusian feminism and the intersection of class, gender and sexualities. The second provides the sociological investigations on body and affect in commercial gay sex. His publications have appeared in *The Sociological Review*; *Families, Relationships, Societies*; and *Taiwanese Journal of Sociology*.

**How to cite this article:** Chen B-W. Touching intimacy: Bodywork, affect and the caring ethic in erotic gay massage in Taiwan. *Gender Work Organ*. 2017;1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12215>