

Visiting mainland businessmen, and rich mainland men who have permanent residences in Hong Kong, are generous patrons of the Hong Kong entertainment industry. They all prefer their fellow northern girls and appreciate their professional service. One madam said: “Each time I send out a local hooker, they’d have her replaced, disparaging her for her lack of professionalism, poor conversation, average looks but not-so-average price. So to cater for mainland customers around each national holiday, I have to try and stock up with a few extra local hookers willing to work for the price of northern girls.”

Since Hong Kong financial secretary Antony Leung married Olympic medallist beauty Fu Mingxia, who was born in Wuhan, local customers have developed a sudden craving for Wuhan women. Many northern girls play on this and tell customers they are from Wuhan. A one-woman brothel simply put up a signboard reading “Hubei Fu Mingxia”, which was later changed to the name of a movie star: “Hubei Zhang Ziyi”, then to “Xinjiang Heat”, then simply “Mongolian Slut”. This type of promotion indicates that northern girls not only sell their beauty cheaply, but also understand the attraction of exotica.

Although under fire from northern girls, local hookers are still preferred by some local customers. Those with a taste for northern girls might prefer to travel to the mainland to enjoy the wider choice on offer. They believe northern girls in Hong Kong, under pressure from their short visas, may take risks for a quick buck, which is associated with a higher chance of encountering an STD. Some customers are put off by the overly professional, almost cool, manner of northern girls, which lacks the pathos they have come to associate with prostitutes.

Giving business to a girl with a pitiful story flatters the beneficence of the customer, and some find this is a significant part of the pleasure.

A girl from Sichuan told me that the earliest wave of modern Chinese prostitution began just at the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Sichuan peasant women, who were desperately short of food, travelled to other provinces to sell their sexuality and fertility. Some went to Fujian, where they found business was easier than elsewhere. The cheapest way to inform their hometown sisters they had struck paydirt was to send a telegram containing the minimum number of words: “good money, men [meaning Fujian men] stupid, come quickly”.

Another girl from the northeast, named Happy, told me a similar story but emphasised that the six-word telegram was sent from Guangdong to Liaoning. It is not important who sent the telegram, where from and where to. The point is that telegram gossip reflects a particular aspect of the development of prostitution in post-Mao China.

Happy had longed to experience life in a big city, but had to accept the boredom of growing up in a rural family in a county of Liaoning Province. Finishing junior high school, she finally found her chance to leave when she met Little Cai, a young man from the city of Shenyang. She immediately dumped her childhood sweetheart, packed little more than a toothbrush, and left.

Arriving in Shenyang, she found that Little Cai had spun her a story and was in fact a migrant with no permanent urban residence. She had no choice but to join the floating population. On their first night, poverty-stricken Little Cai could not find anywhere comfortable to stay, so the two squeezed into a single bed in a doss-house next to the train station.

The next day, they began to search separately for some way to survive. The slightly more sophisticated Little Cai had no provincial accent and knew how to deal with urban residents, so he found a job as a waiter in a restaurant.

Happy would hang around on the street, watching everyone passing by, excited at the hustle and bustle. She quickly adapted to the local style of dress and speech and copied the methods of girls working the streets. She followed their example to solicit single men. Coily, in Shenyang dialect, she tried: “Want to have sex?” Her first catch was a big success; not only did the man respond, but answered in pure Mandarin: “I’ve only got 100 yuan. Is it enough?”

After two months working at the train station and in big hotels, she made enough to rent a house in which to live with Little Cai. Out of gratitude, he took good care of her and looked after the house. He would work till late into the night while she walked the streets. They would both return home at around the same time for their midnight snack. He was amazed to see how much she was earning, and now realised that he had chanced upon a superstar when he met Happy. He became more and more in love with her and helped her work by ensuring her health and picking up extra condoms for her at the government birth control centre.

She spent money on clothes and make-up, and managed to double her price. After six months she had changed her dialect into Mandarin with a southern accent. Picking on northern guys, she would pretend to be a Hong Kong tourist who had the misfortune to lose her purse. The ruse was successful and gave her a lot of business.

Happy's skin was fair and delicate. Little Cai knew her complexion was a real asset and was worried that it could be aged by the weather if she continued working the streets, so he did his utmost to have her recommended into the best companion dance hall in the city, but she quickly found she was intimidated by the brash arrogance of the customers and superior attitude of the other girls. To give her more confidence, Little Cai taught her a few English sentences he had learned during his time in the restaurant. But again she returned home downhearted. In comparison, the other girls were much more worldly and cosmopolitan and her handful of English phrases could not help her save face.

Little Cai tried to comfort her: "They are more experienced, so what? They sell sex just the same as you. If we don't have the ability to compete as equals, let's just think about making money. You can tell them you are working to pay tuition fees for overseas study." The very next day, she learned the meaning of the English word 'happy', and took it as her name. With this special English name, Happy felt much better. Soon, her glamorous looks and easygoing charm were to impress the madam owner, who was willing to promote Happy to senior hostess.

Happy truly matched her name, enjoying a happy and successful career in prostitution. After a few years in the city she had been transformed from naive village girl to confident young woman. During her time with Little Cai she learned to smoke, to dance, and how to dress. She had become street smart and knew how to deal with strangers. She even learned about modern interior decoration. She became happier and happier and divided all her income into four: one quarter for her

clothes; one to send home; one for Little Cai to look after daily expenditure; and one for her savings.

Happy and Little Cai held a lavish wedding ceremony in her home village and treated the whole village to a feast, distributing cash gifts to each guest. She installed air-conditioners and heaters at her middle school in the name of Little Cai, and won the gratitude of the whole village for her generosity. Her fellow villagers prayed for her good fortune and blessed her marriage.

The couple returned to the city and continued to earn more and save more. Happy was able to send more money to her middle school to buy new chairs and tables. She felt her good deed was truly recognised when her son looked exactly like Little Cai, which was a relief, bearing in mind her work. Happy had returned to her village for the birth, and after the baby's full month celebration the couple went back to the city, leaving the baby with Happy's mother. Little Cai continued his job in the restaurant and Happy went back to the dance hall.

After giving birth, Happy noticed her nipples had enlarged considerably and customers were pleased to fondle them, but her breasts were also tender and swollen. Happy found the extra attention her breasts received to be uncomfortable, so she took a pragmatic decision and allowed customers to suckle her milk for a price. As her breasts were emptied, her purse was filled. Soon after, she was fully recovered from the birth, and went to bed with the director of a colliery. She realised that she no longer had the tight pussy of a young girl, and thought of her client's coal mine.

She knew she could not continue as before and would have to find

another source of income. The mayor of her village told her in a letter that there was a vacancy for her at the elementary school as deputy headmistress. A pimp had also offered her a business opportunity in Shenzhen, which Little Cai convinced her to accept, while he put himself forward for the school position. He could look after their son himself and she could have a chance to broaden her horizons in Shenzhen. Before departure, he bought her a sex health book, telling her to practice chi kung to strengthen and tone her vagina.

Three months as a hostess in Shenzhen made her almost fluent in Cantonese. Because Little Cai was not by her side, she worked day and night: at a little brothel during the evening, in a hotel lobby during the middle of the day, at a foot massage house in the afternoon for a few cheap customers, and part-time in a sauna in the early evening. Except for occasionally treating herself to good food and brand-name clothes, she sent the rest of her money home. She filled every minute she could with customers and felt her time was wasted if she was not working. Although some customers appreciated her slackened vagina, she spent almost all her spare time exercising to tighten its muscles. Her one abiding rule throughout was to use a condom at all times, regardless of price.

Happy made another generous donation to the school in her village, which helped Little Cai improve the school further, and later led to his promotion to the region's political consultative office. He raised their child and turned their large house into a little palace.

After a while in Shenzhen, Happy met up with a Hong Kong pimp who arranged a three-month return visa to Hong Kong for 20,000RMB. She teamed up with some top-class northern girls for the trip and quickly