**Title**: “Why Do You Think You Are Any Different?”: Reflections from Working with Men Who Sell to Men in Contemporary Urban China

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**Abstract:**

In her classic essay *Writing against Culture*, Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) asks, “What happens when the ‘other’ that the anthropologist is studying is simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, a self?” (468). As a response to the influential volume *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), Abu-Lughod points out that the volume ignores two kinds of anthropologists: the feminist and the “halfies”—“people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage” (466).

This is precisely the question/critique that guides this paper, a reflection from my fieldwork with Chinese men who sell sex to other men in Shanghai, People’s Republic of China, as a “halfie” anthropologist. Anthropologists have long realized theoretical, methodological, and ethical issues with representation of the “Other” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). In sex work research, representation is a particularly important question, and much has been written about how to “reduce the gap between researcher and research subject” (Dewey & Zheng, 2013: xi). In this paper, I argue that this presumed “gap” between the anthropologist and people who sell sex could be misleading and need to be critically examined. As a queer man born and raised in China, I contend that when doing ethnography with individuals who sell sex, it is necessary to reflect on one’s assumptions on sameness and differences, notions of the self and the other, and pay close attention to the complex meanings, subjectivities, and sexualities that emerge however transiently, from the encounters and interactions with our interlocutors, instead of assuming firm differences between “us” and “them.” I suggest that this kind of attentiveness is necessary not only to bring research on commercial sex further, it is essential for a commitment to truly ethical practices in transactional sex as well as anthropological research writ large.

**Works Cited :**

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