Villages of Heterosexual Desires: Practices, Discourses, and Customer Demographics at Filipina Hostess Pubs in Postcolonial Singapore

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Abstract

This article explores the author's observations, over the 2010-2019 period, at a sample of eight (8) Singapore hostess bars/pubs. The research method is participant-observation of practices, discourses, pricing models and customer demographics, backed up by knowledge gained from conversations with hostesses, bar managers, customers and musicians. It explains how surplus-value is extracted in the production process via the high prices of ladies' drinks, the hard work required because of the quota system (in relation to ladies' drinks), the high prices of customers' drinks (to a lesser extent) and long working hours. The article explains how alienation is involved in delivering heavily racialized and gendered services in an atmosphere where commissions and quotas on ladies' drinks put pressures and constraints on hostess's behaviour. Unruly and disrespectful customer conduct is another source of alienation, guilt and sadness for hostesses who are under pressure to act and talk in a (hetero)sexualized way.

1. Introduction

This article is a study of practices and discourses at Singapore hostess bars employing Filipina bar hostesses as 'entertainers'. Somewhat controversially, it brings out into the open and fully reflects my perspective as a white British man who had two earlier stints of working full-time in Singapore of two years each when I was in my mid-twenties and early thirties. I was inspired by gay Singaporean Roy Tan's (2012) historical study of Singapore's gay venues.

At this point, I should cite a definition of hostess bar: 'young women at bars who are paid to engage in conversation with men, light their cigarettes, sing karaoke, and sometimes dance- with a strict policy against men touching the hostesses or making sexual propositions.' This is a popular definition taken from a Case *File: True Crime Podcast* on the murders in Japan of hostesses Carita Ridgway and Lucie Blackman. Lieba Faier (2014, p. 991) defines hostess bars as 'a range of establishments in which men pay to be served drinks, entertained (usually by talking, flirting, and dancing, and singing karaoke), and sometimes go on "dates" with female hostesses.' Paid dates outside the bar (in Japanese: *dōhan*) would not be normal in Singapore. I am only aware of one pub, in Duxton Road in Singapore's Downtown Core, with a literal 'no touching' policy, but pubs range on a scale from no-touching to a few pubs which are more sex-oriented (extending to manual stimulation) than conversation-oriented. Some hostesses work on entertainer visas, while others, especially Vietnamese hostesses in Joo Chiat Road, are on tourist visas and receive tips in the pubs without being employed by them. This article is only about hostess pubs and not the KTV-lounges featured in Lim (2010). Compared to Filipina hostess pubs in Japan, as presented in Parreñas (2011), the Singapore pubs appear to have far fewer rules about hostess's location and circulation within the venue.

There has been no or very limited research on Singapore hostess pubs, as prior research by Parreñas (2011) focused on Filipina hostesses in Japan; Cheng (2010) studied Filipina hostesses in South Korea; while Hoang (2015) studied Vietnamese hostesses in Vietnam.

2. Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions: (1) How do pricing policy, owner/manager preferences, customer demographics, location, pub culture and other factors determine means of surplus-value extraction and, in turn, either empowerment or alienation of the worker? (2) How do lack of a citizenship pathway and marriage rights, as well as exclusion from the hegemonic nationhood narrative, add to feelings of precariousness and anxiety for hostesses? (3) How does heartland-versus-downtown location influence pub culture? (4) How could a customer with an ethical awareness make a difference in terms of pub culture, in the short-term? (5) How do practices differ between restrained, moderate, and wild pubs?

Parreñas (2011, p. 169) terms the 'moral régimes' at Filipina hostess pubs in Japan, as morally conservative, moral in-between, and amoral, and notes that customers gravitate towards pubs that match their own moral boundaries.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: Section 3 introduces the theory frameworks, including the idea of moral panic; Section 4 is a brief literature review; Section 5 explains research approach; Section 6 is a Findings section, which considers hostess bars in Duxton Road and Joo Chiat Road; Section 7 concludes; Section 8 sets out study limitations; while Section 9 suggests possibilities for future research..

3. Theoretical Frameworks

3.1 Marxism and Related Concepts

In terms of Marxist theory, surplus-value is both created and expropriated in the production process, since surplus-value is defined as unpaid labour time (Marx, 1974, chapters 6-9). While raw materials and depreciation of fixed assets, called constant capital (c), simply transfer their value to the finished product, labour-power, called variable capital (v), not only transfers its own value to the finished product, but also creates surplus-value (s), which is an extra addition of value to the finished product. Surplus-value is created because the capitalist business owner buys the time of the workers for a certain number of hours per day, but does not need to pay the full value their labour contributes to products. It follows that a proportion of the value and surplus-value created by the workers is paid for in wages, while another part of the value and surplus-value, roughly speaking, is the employer's profit. In a competitive economy, Marx argues that v will decrease to the level needed to replenish and reproduce the worker and his/her family at the basic subsistence standard required by cultural and historical standards. Wages will then fluctuate around v. The remainder of the value of the finished product is made up of the surplus-value (s). Historically, trade unions have urged workers to unite and aim to claw back part of the surplus-value. Marxism is a system theory meaning economic necessity and the survival mechanism, along with demand and supply, determine economic behaviour in aggregate. Kind bosses may make a subjective difference to their workers' perceptions of job satisfaction or discontent, but exploitation is rooted in the mode of production rather than in the harshness or kindness of individuals. If an employer is too kind then that business will struggle to remain competitive in a competitive industry. If we take a quote from Marx from the preface to the German first edition of *Capital* volume 1, this point can be clearly seen:

I paint the capitalist and the landlord in no sense *couleur de rose*. But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personification of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests. My standpoint … can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them (Marx, 1974 [1867], p. 10).

However, the young Karl Marx (Marx, 1994 [1932]). in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, provided some sort of an answer to this theoretical dilemma. His theory of alienation looked at the capitalist production process *from the viewpoint of the worker*. His famous fourfold theory of alienation claimed that alienation, just as much as surplus-value creation, is objectively rooted in the capitalist production process. For the young Marx, the worker is alienated in four ways, i.e., from: (1) the product produced, (2) the act of production, (3) her/his true nature and (4) other workers (Marx, 1994 [1932], pp. 62-64).

Chakrabarty (2008 [2000]) criticizes the idea of Hardt and Negri (2000) that all local cultural practices and idiosyncrasies are simply surface manifestations of the rule of capital, and the relationship between capital and labour. He also questions Negri's related idea that longing for a culturally-specific experience merely shows that one is the victim of a sophisticated marketing ploy. Chakrabarty, in his criticism, says that he wishes that this were so as then he could simply buy the experience - he was writing as someone who had spent his childhood and youth in India and then departed to Western countries. Therefore, there may be unique aspects of the hostess pub experience for customers, and possibly also for hostesses, which are valued and cannot be found in any other

contexts. Yes, the services are paid for, but, in many parts of the world, they cannot be found and one's money will not make any difference to this reality. Chakrabarty found that, when he applied the terms of Marxism to things and people he knew in India, it sounded comical at the time, as he began to realize that every term and idea carries with it the time and place of its first creation and utterance. (Note that he did not go to the other extreme and reject all Marxist and liberal insights.) Even Enlightenment ideals, often thought of as having universal validity (Conrad, 2012), carry the hallmark or residue of the time and place they came from. As a result, my prior understanding and perception of the world represented a middle-class, white-British worldview since I (first author) had grown up in a district which was then 95% white.

Another key idea here is Ranajit Guha's (1983, chapter 2) criticism (cited by Chakrabarty, 2008, pp. 11-13) of Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm's (1978, pp. 2-3) understanding of India's masses at independence as 'prepolitical' due to their ongoing belief in magic, gods, demons, and suchlike. To capture Hobsbawm's meaning and intention, we could add terms like 'feudal' or 'premodern', reflecting the European Enlightenment idea that belief in gods and demons was part of a premodern 'remnant' and would naturally come to be replaced by modernity and its prized virtues of rationality, progress, the secular, and the distinction between public and private realms. Marx essentially held on to these ideas in his theory of historical materialism, where he expressed the stages as feudal, capitalist (modern), socialist, and communist. Hobsbawm's understanding was that education must come first before voting rights, but newly independent India put instant citizenship first. Chakrabarty argues that it is a mistake to view the Indian masses as 'prepolitical' in that era because it takes Western and Marxist ideas of rationality and progress and places them on to a vastly different cultural context. In India, he says, there was a capitalist economy in a modern nation-state, but there was no Indigenous bourgeoisie that could create its own hegemony over society (Chakrabarty, 2008, p. 15). The masses too could not be said to be prepolitical simply because magic and gods were part of their everyday worldview; the religious worldview should not be viewed as 'remnant' or 'anachronism'. I (first author), too, could not help but bring my European-Enlightenment orientation into my early perceptions of Singapore hostess pubs - sometimes I found the settings confusing, complex, in terms of hidden and embedded meanings and ethical norms, 'premodern' and of course pre-feminism and women's rights, due to both the behaviour and dress demanded from hostesses and their subpar and claustrophobic working and living conditions. As China, Japan, Korea, Haiti and others have wrestled with Enlightenment ideas, within their own modernization processes (for example, the impact of the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1759 upon the Haitian Revolution) (Conrad, 2012, pp. 1013-1014), it is better to say only that workers' rights were weaker in Singapore than in Britain, rather than being obsessed about classifying things as premodern or modern. Interestingly, in 1990, Featherstone (1990, p. 12) posed the question as to whether Japan was in premodernity, modernity or postmodernity, which shows some degree of acceptance of these 'Eurocentric' (Conrad, 2012, p. 999) categories. Therefore, hostess pubs should not be maligned as feudal 'leftovers' or 'remnants', despite the fact that they appear to reflect ancient, patriarchal ideas about gender identities and relationships. Hostesses and customers are fully caught up in the movements of global capital and labour and, to some extent, hostess pub interactions are self-conscious role-play, like stage acting.

3.2 World System Theory

For Wallerstein (1990, pp. 35-38), the six contradictions in the global capitalist system are as follows: (1) The capitalist world economy is constructed by integrating a geographically vast set of production processes. The contradiction is that the predominant economic processes are international, but political power rests with nation-states; (2) The world economy goes through alternating periods of expansion and contraction, with the two phases combined lasting fifty to sixty years. The expansion phases push the world economy from Europe out into the world. The second contradiction is whether newly incorporated groups should see this as a process of modernization or of Westernization, which implies giving up their own culture; (3) Capitalism requires the greatest possible accumulation of capital and the greatest possible extraction of surplus-value. The third contradiction is that making people work harder and for lower wages runs up against the pursuit of self-interest; (4) Maximum accumulation of capital requires rapid circulation of goods, capital, and labourers. There is a fourth contradiction between the virtue of newness and the issue of legitimacy/authority which even Mao wrestled with; (5) Capitalism is a constantly expanding system, but also casts people into socially-polarizing roles. The fifth contradiction is between increased wealth and increased impoverishment; and (6) Capitalism, like any system, must eventually collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. When in transition, the uncertainty is exhilarating, but also depressing. Should we focus on demise or on expansion/rebirth? These dynamics are evident in the push and pull factors which supply Filipina workers to the vagaries and opportunities of the global marketplace.

The global cultural ideologies, universalism and racism/sexism, either by themselves or in combination, and whether in an overt or hidden way, can be used to explain and justify the six contradictions of the global capitalist economy, which centre on the inequalities in the system despite its promise of continued wealth and expansion. Culture in the first sense (usage I) - the culture of a group - can be subverted or exploited by the 'high' culture (second meaning or usage II) of a ruling-class. And a majority can be exploited and hence be the victim of the second type of culture (usage II) - as with the black Jamaicans. Blackness then becomes a legitimate rallying cry for them, or the negation of the negation, as in Sartre's essay *Black Orpheus*.

Based on these arguments, universalism stands as the justification for the workings and effects of the global capitalist system where inequalities are rampant. However, Filipina hostesses have no straightforward pathway to Singapore citizenship and cannot marry citizens. Universalism is not attained in this case, but the pull of moving to a First World country to work and the strong Singapore dollar attracts pub workers in any case - racism/sexism puts them discursively within their assigned 'place' once they are in Singapore, and justifies the strict laws upon foreign workers. However, educated foreign workers are treated more favourably.

Bergesen (1990) criticizes Wallenstein for the world-system theory idea that nation-states and global production processes existed before the capitalist world-system. Bergesen claims that this is because the world-system model was based on the historic sale of primary commodities from Poland to Western Europe where it was demand and supply differentials which determined who got most of the surplus, but Bergesen argues that colonialism in most of the world was an act of political force and that colonies were not (independent) nation-states. Colonies do not *create* unequal exchange-relations, *global property relations* are based on force. Extracting most of the surplus-value by the core countries was rooted in colonial political power. This does not concern us so much as the model works well here to explain the production process involving Singapore and the Philippines, which is based on demand and supply across two existing nation-states - the Philippines has never been a colony of Singapore. Beer revenues in Singapore minus the production costs including costs of Filipina hostesses growing up in the Philippines provinces create sufficient surplus-value overall to render individual pubs and the whole industry viable.

3.3 Moral Panic

The concept of moral panic was introduced by Young (1971) and Cohen (2002 [1973]) and was first applied to the public anxiety and dismay associated with the weekend of fighting between Mods and Rockers at Brighton Beach in England in the 1960s. Young (1971) defines moral panic as: '[h]eightened concerns about some behaviour or group and this also involves or results in increased hostility toward the group concerned.' For Cohen (2002 [1973]), each moral panic episode will have its own specific folk devil or devils. The concept involves media and public panic about an alleged societal issue, whereby people fear an escalation of the problem and possible threats to their lives and livelihoods or at least way-of-life. The degree of panic often reflects an overreaction to a possible threat and this can be very often clear in hindsight or when viewed from a more remote location. The panic can continue for a long time after the initial threat subsides and can be reinvented and continually brought back by media outlets acting in their own self-interest. De Lint and Dalton (2021, p. 724), in their study of moral panic around gay hate crimes in Sydney, Australia define a 'retrospective panic' as a panic that is repeatedly returned to at certain apparently opportune moments.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) changed the direction of the criminological literature to some extent by focusing on the role of the public in fomenting moral panic rather than the roles played by media and politicians. Their key point is that the media and politicians cannot effectively exploit an issue unless there is already fear and worry about the issue in the public's mind. Hostess pubs are the source of moral panic among the Singapore middle-class, especially when located close to schools and residential areas as is the case with Joo Chiat Road.

4. Literature Review

Kimberley Kay Hoang (2015), in an important piece of relatively recent ethnographic research into hostess pubs in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam, studies four pubs which she puts in a kind of social hierarchy with each having a different customer base, ambience and set of underlying customs and values. She argues that the hierarchical ranking of the pubs mirrors contemporary (and past) economic and social developments in Vietnam and the region. In the highest-ranked pub, wealthy ethnic-Vietnamese local businessmen parade and trade on their wealth and business connections by inviting similar executives from other Asian nations to share in the pub experience, and the hostesses confirm the high status of the businessmen now that economic power is widely seen as having shifted to Asia. The second-highest pub caters to a different demographic of ethnic-Vietnamese, the *Việt kiều*, or Overseas Vietnamese, back in the country for short trips. Although many are still wealthy, there is a sense that their time has passed. The third pub is where, according to Hoang, Europeans working in

unremarkable jobs in Vietnam try to recover a failed white masculinity by meeting and financially providing for dark-skinned village girls which fulfill their stereotype of Vietnamese women. The women darken their skins to satisfy the demand for clichéd appearance. The demands of often working for Vietnamese bosses means that masculinity issues arise where the customers need to reassert their masculinity by acting out colonial-era stereotypes and ways of relating. By contrast, the last pub is for white backpackers, with no other ties to the country, and this pub functions more as a meeting place for pairing-up rather than a true bar or pub where conversation over extended sessions on the premises is what is sought after and practiced.

This book is interesting and significant, based on extensive immersion in the field. The positionality of Hoang as an American Vietnamese-origin woman adds a unique perspective and allowed her to have long conservations on the premises with customers, hostesses, and pub owners. Women felt less threatened and men like talking to young women anyway so she was successful. If her study had been done by someone else, the findings and emphases and types of understandings gained may have been different. She was especially sensitive to the difference between local Vietnamese and American Vietnamese (*Việt kiều*), and this difference may not have been picked up on by a non-Vietnamese author on short research trips, or its dynamic may not have been fully understood. On the other hand, some people might prefer talking to a man and/or foreigner and men and hostesses naturally get to converse because of the nature of the business model. Looking at Singapore creates different dynamics as the hostess women are not citizens and it attracts foreign workers based on its wealth and image. We also offer a white foreigner's perspective, for better or for worse. This is taken up further in Limitations.

Filipina hostesses in Korea's apparent preference for American men reflects what Sealing Cheng (2010, pp. 10, 134) terms 'the political economy of desires' or 'politics of desire'. Imperialism, colonialism, and the sale of the American Dream, via Hollywood and pop/rock music, have created hierarchies of objects of desire that dwell in and motivate the subconscious of desiring subjects. There is also the feeling that if one's life is caught up in the pub world, and is exposed to its risks and brutalities, then one's rewards should also come from that realm (as in the biblical saying 'a worker deserves her wages'), including romantic and migration possibilities not easily accessible from home. The rewards of escaping poverty in the Philippines by marrying a man from a Global North country is often at the back of a hostess's mind and may be a motive for seeking out hostess work in Singapore or elsewhere.

5. Materials and Method

The main research method used is participant-observation at eight Singapore hostess pubs, spanning the period 2010-2019, with my role being closer to the 'observation' than to the 'participation' end of the continuum. The research involved a close study of practices, discourses, pricing models and customer demographics, backed up by knowledge gained from numerous conversations with hostesses, pub managers, customers, pub musicians and taxi-drivers. I recorded my observations in detailed field notes compiled on the evening of or day after my visits. Of these eight pubs, six were in the Duxton Road area of the Downtown Core, while two were in the suburban 'heartland' area of Joo Chiat Road. Duxton Road was chosen as it is the acknowledged centre of Filipina hostess pubs in Singapore. Joo Chiat Road was chosen to provide a contrast as it is a middle-class, 'heartland' district. Only pubs with Filipina hostesses were studied to ensure the comparison of like-with-like. Adler and Adler (1994, p. 377) state that '[f]or as long as people have been interested in studying the social and natural world around them, observation has served as the bedrock source of human knowledge.' Rose-Grippa (1979) points out that two-thirds of communication is done non-verbally while one-third is done verbally. Parahoo (2006, p. 349) suggests that observations are most useful for studying 'interactions, communication and performance', along with other non-verbal activity, while interviews and questionnaires are most suited for studying 'knowledge, attitudes and beliefs'. With observations, researchers 'can see and interpret behaviour', while not necessarily having access to the meanings participants give to their own behaviour. One online interview by an ex-Joo Chiat Road Filipina hostess was sent to the third author by email and is quoted here.

Following Hoang's (2015) book, and an online personal communication from Dr Hoang (dated 8 July 2021), I reaffirmed my original decision to utilize a 'comparative' approach, focusing on discourses, practices, cultures and the demographics of the patrons at eight pubs. This article does not cover the Vietnamese hostesses pubs, as they are qualitatively different.

In terms of qualitative writing technique, I use the traditionalist realist style combined with the confessional style (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, pp. 155-158). According to Sparkes and Smith (2014, p. 155), the traditionalist realist style adheres to the following conventions: *experiential authority*, *the participant's point of view* and *interpretive omnipotence*. These conventions, as a package, tend to foreground the voices of interviewees and allow the

reader to gain insights into their perceptions of events. The 'theoretical framing' of these voices by another 'disembodied' voice (the author) has its critics, but is in line with most conventions of qualitative reporting (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 155). By contrast, the confessional style takes readers behind the scenes of the research process and appeals to the personalized authority of the researcher as professional scholar. The phenomenon of the 'missing researcher' is solved as the researcher emerges to fill the gap and 'problematise and demystify' aspects of the research process, i.e., the disembodied voice of the author is replaced by the personal voice of the author (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, pp. 156-157). The Introduction and Findings sections, in particular, utilize the confessional style (as in Tan, 2012), and the realist style is used there and elsewhere.

6. Findings

6.1 Hostess Pubs in Duxton Road Area

At the bottom of Duxton Road is Neal Road - the area is full of restored Chinese shophouses in a conservation area. While long-ago a place for working-class Cantonese (Teo, Yeoh, Ooi, & Lai, 2004, p. 113), it is now thoroughly gentrified with upmarket bars and restaurants, niche boutique hotels, wedding shops, hairdressing salons and other upmarket establishments which have largely replaced the simple hawker-style restaurants and motorcycle and bike repair workshops. Tan (2012, p. 144) writes of the broader Tanjong Pagar area as follows: 'At the turn of the century, Tanjong Pagar became developed as a locale for the preservation of heritage and culture in Singapore', as one of the four initial approved conservation areas referred to in Teo, Yeoh, Ooi, and Lai (2004, chapter 7). One typical development was replacement of a traditional and simple Chinese restaurant, a place once popular for hostesses after work and customers on their way elsewhere or to home, on the corner of Craig Road/Tanjong Pagar Road, in the middle of the 2010s, with a gentrified Korean restaurant. (The GUIGA Korean BBQ Restaurant, at 134 Tanjong Pagar Road, maintains on its website that it opened in November 2017.) In March 2010, a popular and respected pub was the 86th Street Pub (at 86 Neil Road) which had a resident rock band playing nightly sets and heavy metal music songs on request. The place was small and narrow, and had a customer-hostess ratio of one-to-one, which worked very well. The band had a shaven-headed Filipino drummer, Arnold, who later went to work in the entertainment industry in China. The band had two Malay-Singaporean men on guitar and bass/vocals. Arnold's wife used to sing, but she had left the country by this time. The atmosphere at this pub was relatively restrained and respectful – the band members appeared to be watching over proceedings and they were a restraining influence. The rhythm of the pub (Schwanen, van Aalst, Brands, & Timan, 2012; Walkowitz, 2012) followed the sets and the breaks in between rather than the ordering-and-drinking process. Occasionally, during daylight hours, buffet dinners would be served free-of-charge on the pavement outside for hostesses and customers. There was a unique ambience where it appeared or felt like the band members were 'watching over' the hostesses - like a mixed-gender group of young South East Asian adults socializing together. This produced overall a more restrained atmosphere, added to the fact that customers and hostesses were small in number (six or eight of each on average) and they would 'pair up' for part or all of the evening. The Malay-Singaporean guitarists changed the atmosphere subtly, their Muslim and citizenship identities separated them somewhat from all others, and they were there for the job, pure and simple. Their Singapore citizenship status put them above the others, except for some of the customers, but their Muslim identification added some point of difference or strangeness to the mix. My overall impression was that they did not seem to fit into any kind of obvious hierarchy whatsoever, but did symbolize difference and restraint. This pub closed in the early to mid-2010s, but was remembered by people at other pubs for a number of years, including by the manager at Seventeen. Sometimes hostesses circulate from pub to pub, on different visas, over a number of years. This creates a kind of limited collective historical memory in the area.

As you cross the road, and proceed uphill on Duxton Road, which has a park on the right, and extends for about three hundred metres, there are hostess pubs dominating the space and occupying at least half of the business spots. There are several 'middle-of-the-road' pubs as you proceed up the slight incline, including Seventeen and Bottoms. These have larger numbers of hostesses and mood can vary significantly according to time of night, day of the week and the number and type of customers present. All or nearly all hostesses are Filipinas on entertainers' visas and they earn commission from 'ladies' drinks' where a customer buys overpriced ladies' drinks for the hostesses and they later receive a fixed percentage of the purchase price. In the mid-2010s, they typically cost $30 and $50 Singapore dollars for different types of beer or pre-mixed drinks bottles. Often the women would not be interested in the drinks and they would be left untouched, which was wasteful. A cardinal rule in nearly all pubs in Singapore is that hostesses must not share in the much cheaper customers' drinks.

A handful of experiences are worth recounting. Once at Seventeen pub, I only had Australian fifty dollar notes to spend and the moneychangers were closed. The owner/manager let me spend the notes in the pub but only at an exchange rate of literally one-for-one so he was gaining from the arrangement. As a thank-you, three hostesses

took me to a free dinner at the previously-mentioned Korean restaurant (GUIGA) after the pub shut, clearly with the owner/manager's approval. This shows some flexibility in arrangements within an overall capitalist setting.

Another time, a younger white man in his twenties was there and, after talking, we had a meal at the Chinese restaurant (prior to its change to the Korean restaurant). He was enjoying the hostess pub experiences slightly too much and, because he was living in Singapore, he couldn't just have an unrestrained week of leisure and then depart. I tried to play a calming and mentoring role to him as he seemed obsessed with the pubs and seemed to have anxiety and identity issues in Singapore as I had had before him. By this time I was in my mid-forties.

As you go further up the hill on Duxton Road, walking in the direction of Craig Road and away from Neil Road, you come to the wildest pub along that street, which would be wild by anyone's definition. This pub is luxuriously furnished, has a long bar on the right, but once you enter you are surprised by the small number of hostesses and the near total lack of customers in such a big space. If you arrive early on a weeknight, such as 8:00 p.m., you might not think the lack of people surprising, but if you arrived later then you might. This is Manila Nights Pub (name changed). After a short while, one or two hostesses will talk with you, get fairly intimate, and then end with manual stimulation. Towards the end of the 'process', you will be encouraged or coerced to buy expensive tray(s) of shots. At the end of the process, you will head sheepishly to pay the single male barman, under fairly bright lighting. He will process the bill, which can set you back over four hundred dollars. The unspoken expectation then is that you will leave the premises. It might be possible to drag out the conversation and stay longer depending on the mood or your determination. In no way does this resemble a traditional British or Irish pub where the main purpose is socializing over extended sessions.

Walking on in the same direction, as the road starts a slight downwards incline, and before you reach Craig Road, there is, or was up to at least 2019, a small, narrow pub with four or five hostesses. This pub has its bar on the right hand side as you go through the door. As a hostess explained to me, it is very conservative and there is a literal 'no-touching' policy. Once, as the hostess told me, a group of Mainland Europeans had come to the pub once and been very surprised, calling it an 'innocent pub'. These people must have previously been to Manila Nights, and, located where it is, this pub offers a welcome respite if you are heading from Neil Road, although, if you are coming from Craig Road, it might seem a little tame. It does aspire or try to operate as a genuine local pub where there are 'regulars' and conversation is a highlight of your visit. Once I told the barman I had just that day come back from Indonesia where pubs were closed for Ramadan. He called a local regular, an Indonesia aficionado, who came down, and we had a worthwhile extended conversation about Indonesia while seated at the bar.

6.2 Hostess Pubs in Joo Chiat Road

Joo Chiat Road is a 1.8 kilometre 'linear activity corridor' (Shaw & Ismail, 2006, p. 189), a straight stretch of road, one-way for half its length, which links East Coast Road with Geylang Road/Changi Road. It has also experienced gentrification over the past twenty years, *Straits Times* journalist Serene Goh says that Katong, often held to include Joo Chiat, and a mythical place for Singaporeans and the Diaspora, is now a place for 'emotional yearning' as much as it is a 'physical space' (cited in Duruz, 2016, p. 152). Katong is seen as a place of heartland food, characters, experiences and values all wrapped up in an architecture and a history perceived to be richer than that of the HDB (government housing) estates nearby.

Joo Chiat Road is commercial for most of its length, with hostess pubs making up a high percentage of the business establishments. These are all housed in restored Chinese shophouses as it is a conservation area. It also serves as the traditional shopping strip for the residential streets behind it on both sides. Most of the hostess pubs have Vietnamese hostesses and these have a very different ambience, culture and demographic base (for customers) than do the Filipina pubs. The only pubs with Filipina hostesses I was aware of, as at May 2019, were Angel and Obsessions, located near that end of the street closest to the intersection with East Coast Road. They are a handful of metres apart (say, thirty), and have the same owner. Because of this, hostesses are permitted to follow customers from one pub to the other. By Duxton Road standards, they could be termed middle-of-the-road like Seventeen or Bottoms, and the suburban setting, which infuses everyone's subconscious mind, limits possibilities and induces some measure of restraint. They attract a unique customer demographic - younger, more ethnically-diverse, and better English-speakers - compared to the Vietnamese hostess pubs whose customers are nearly exclusively Chinese-Singaporean men aged from twenties through to sixties. By contrast, Angel and Obsessions attract more Indian-Singaporeans and white customers (although the latter are not a regular or established part of the demographic).

Angel is a much larger pub than Obsessions with a bar on the right hand side as you come in. It has three or four hostesses whereas Obsessions is smaller, and narrower, but has more hostesses, up to twelve or fifteen at one

time. Both pubs have a number of regular customers who do not interact much, if at all, with the hostesses. These two groups literally share the same physical space but have no interest in or interaction with each other. The regulars either drink at one end of the bar together and/or, at Angel, play pool at the table at the front of the pub. Although they keep to themselves, the 'regulars' change the atmosphere and, at least at Angel, create an atmosphere tending towards restraint. These regulars are almost certainly men from the local area. I do not know whether they might interact with the hostesses on those occasions when they have more money to spend.

Once, at Obsessions, a strange event occurred when an older Indian-Singaporean man came in, dressed in office clothes, and revealed to me that he was a gangster leader. After conversation, we went off in a taxi, he bought me a drink at a Downtown Core bar, and then left for me to make my own way back. Whether he *was* a gangster leader or not is unclear. He rebuked me for mentioning portraits of the Queen at Glasgow Rangers FC-oriented pubs in Glasgow, mistakenly thinking that I was promoting them rather than just describing them.

Appadurai (1990) explains how the women who go to work in dance clubs in Bombay or Kerala are 'displaced', as are the bar customers in Kerala back from the Middle East with money and a warped sense of how to treat women. By taking me out of the Joo Chiat Road heartland pub and dropping me into the Downtown Core, the Gangster Man had decentred and displaced me from my surroundings and showed himself to be more of a cosmopolitan transnational than I was, which is a kind of global irony as he was a Singaporean and I was (apparently) a tourist. I liked to cling to *my version* of the local, with the Filipina hostesses of Joo Chiat Road a controlled fragment of exotica/difference both with respect to me and with respect to the setting.

In Appadurai's (1990, pp. 296, 297) framework for the five dimensions of global cultural flow, Filipina hostesses are part of the ethnoscape, i.e., 'the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups and persons [which] constitute an essential feature of the world, and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree' (p. 297).

Most aspects of the forces and relations of production are clearly visible, including the contractual and social relation between hostesses and the owner, and the commercial and social relations between customer and hostess. What is not visible to the customer is the woman's life in her home country, the process by which she arrived at her present workplace, and her life outside of the pub (unless she chooses to reveal it). 'Production' begins in the Philippines' provinces (where the women are from and grew up), while the 'consumption' takes place in Singapore, an enclave of the First World in Southeast Asia. For Appadurai (1990, p. 307) then, there would be two types of alienation involved here: the usual social type and the 'spatial dynamic' of a transnational production process, called 'the fetishism of production' by Appadurai. The women's life histories can only be either imagined or repressed by the customers, and even their recruitment into Singapore stays invisible The reasons for their movement are either because of 'the realities of having to move, or the fantasies of wanting to move' (Appadurai, 1990, p. 297), and both these aspects may operate at the same time. Appadurai (1990, p. 303) goes on to talk about 'the brutal mobility fantasies that dominate gender politics in many parts of Asia' - the choice to move may be emotion-based and not capture all negative consequences of the move in either the desired or original location, which is often dismissed as 'provincial'

In terms of Marxist theory, the worker under the capitalist mode of production is alienated from: (1) the product produced, (2) the act of production, (3) her/his true nature and (4) other workers (Marx, 1994 [1932]). Filipina hostesses work long hours, 7:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. on weekend nights, and most pubs are open seven nights a week. Typically, the hostess is dependent financially upon commission money earned from ladies' drinks. Hence, they pressure the customer to continually order ladies' drinks in order to earn commission and to fulfill their personal quota. If he does not, they will surely switch attention to another customer. The worker's alienation thus leads to actions which may create alienation for the customer who may end up drinking alone. Money spent by that customer on a previous night counts for little and this is one way where hostess pubs differ from regular pubs. Sometimes hostesses are under pressure by bosses or themselves to chat in a naughtier way and get more physical so that the customer keeps buying ladies' drinks. This can compromise the hostess's integrity, and is part of the dynamic of capitalism creating alienation from one's true nature. Hostesses are not allowed to share in the much cheaper customers' drinks (to maximize the rate of surplus-value extraction). I do not like this aspect of the culture since drinking from the same beer jug can create sociality and would save the customers money too. About living conditions, I have been told by hostesses that sometimes they share rooms in a detached house in a suburban area, several women to a room, and their movements are carefully monitored and controlled with a minibus taking them to and from work. On Sunday nights at Angel, hostesses did not need to wear any particular type of dress or uniform, and a more relaxed atmosphere prevailed.

One of our interviewees, 'Angela,' age 28, an ex-Joo Chiat Road Filipina hostess explained her alienation as follows:

> I'm very excited to see new place country ride in airplane coz it's my first time it's feels like innocence ..so I arrive Singapore very nice country clean but so expensive...food things..but I enjoy it..inside my work so hard sometimes coz I cannot earn money if I don't have drinks so I need talk the man, get naughty to him, to give me more drinks ...not so easy coz sometimes they have a man so naughty, no respect to the lady, coz they thinking I'm a bar girl no need to respect maybe he want, I thinking to myself, I'm very dirty person coz I working in bar.. But I feel nothing…so my 6 months contract finish already; now I'm here Philippines…with my family...I spend quality time with them now, but I want go back overseas again ..so my story is cut for now coz I don't know next what [will] happen hahaha (source: online email sent to third author).

This quote reveals the pressure placed on Angela to talk and act in a naughty way, beyond the boundaries of her own moral compass. The nature of the job is that sometimes this is the requirement before the customer will buy ladies' drinks. But she still wants to return overseas on another work contract, so life prospects may not be that good in the Philippines either. Singapore continually attracts, with its cosmopolitan allure. Angela continues as follows:

> [B]ut I'm lucky sometimes coz they have a very nice man [visiting the pub], so kind, talk to me; he understand my situation…and heard for talk…he respect me…even I cannot flirt him, he buy me drinks..so I feel safe with him...but I control myself to fall in love…to him, coz I know he is not going to serious [with] me coz I'm a bar girl and he is foreigner…I'm not deserve to him...this is why I never make myself fall in love again…even he said he like me he feel love [for] me, but I'm not believe…he come back to his country when I'm 5 months in SG coz he only tourist..he keep chatting me even [after] he [went] back [to] his country (source: online email sent to third author)..

The above quote indicates that she met a foreigner (probable meaning: white person) and they built up a strong connection and friendship. But she didn't feel worthy to pursue any relationship, and the man returned to his home country. This illustrates the internalization of colonial-era hierarchies, and is a sad case indeed. Cheng's (2010, pp. 10, 134) theory of 'the political economy of desires' or 'politics of desire' seems apt here too.

In Singapore, hostess pubs have created a certain amount of steady *moral panic*, with occasional descriptions of scantily-clad women sharing the pavements with schoolchildren in the late afternoons and early evenings. Most attention has focused on suburban 'heartland' areas, such as Joo Chiat Road, in middle-class, 'family-friendly' (Lim, 2010, p. 156) Katong. Sometimes large throngs of customers and hostesses gather on the pavements together talking and smoking, and blocking easy pedestrian access. Occasional police raids occur, especially in the suburban areas. The focus of police attention has tended to be illegal immigration, which merges the moral panic about commercial sex with the moral panic about immigration. Joo Chiat Road, with its heavy Vietnamese presence, including many Vietnamese cafes and pubs with Vietnamese hostesses, is sometimes blamed as being akin to a foreign ghetto since the government's longstanding CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indians, Others) Model (Shaw & Ismail, 2006, p. 191; Yue, 2012, p. 7) has been accepted by a large proportion of the population (Mathews, 2017). This model implies that keeping the three main ethnic groups at the same percentage levels as at independence is the key to future social stability. Furthermore, the essentialized logic behind the CMIO Model presumes that there is a precise one-on-one correlation between all three of biological race, culture, and language (Tremewan, 1994, p. 140). Vietnamese and Filipinas do not fit into the CMIO Model, or the associated hegemonic narratives of nationhood and citizenship, since Malays are *defined* as a Muslim community and 'Others' means Eurasians.

However, local men often enjoy the escape to a different 'world' when they interact with foreign hostesses, from the Philippines or Vietnam, suggesting that the services offered are very much racialized and gendered services. Pub doors in Joo Chiat Road sometimes have signs, in English and/or Vietnamese, saying that those without valid immigration permits must not enter, but these signs seem to be generally ignored. Amateur 'policing' of such signs *by customers* would not be well received, expected, or normal conduct within the context of the industry's and the nation's 'illiberal pragmatics of survival' (Yue, 2012, p. 7).

7. Conclusion

In an article by Vélez-Torres and colleagues (2021), small Columbian rural farmers of illicit crops in remote areas hoped that a Peace Accord between the government and guerillas and the legalization of the drug in Canada would allow for issuance of licences or crop substitution schemes for marijuana growers. In the end, the scheme never worked effectively and most licences were issued to foreign-backed companies in areas with less recent guerilla activity, and individuals connected to the government had formed co-operatives or taken over

jobs in the industry. Poor farmers in remote areas were excluded on all counts as not economically viable and too hard a problem to solve. Vélez-Torres et al. (2021, p. 522) conclude that:

> As analyzed from a capitalist world-system perspective, in this asymmetry, we recognize that flows of capital, labor, and resources in the cannabis industry create ostracized peripheries, marked by environmental degradation and social deprivation - and the reproduction of inferior, irrelevant and marginalized rural subjects.

This present article describes how surplus-value is extracted in the production process via the high prices of ladies' drinks, the hard work required because of the quota system (in relation to ladies' drinks), a zero or insufficient basic wage for hostesses, the high prices of customers' drinks (to a lesser extent) and the long working hours. The article describes how alienation is involved in delivering heavily racialized and gendered services in an atmosphere where commissions and quotas on ladies' drinks put pressures and constraints on hostesses' behaviour. Disrespectful customer conduct is another source of alienation, guilt, and sadness for hostesses who are under pressure to act and talk more sexually than they might prefer.

The hostess pub industry relies on the local and tourist/expatriate demand for racialized and gendered 'exotic' services. At its best, it creates environments of sociability, hospitality, and even authentic community (e.g., 86th Street Pub). But Filipinas are a global, cosmopolitan *proletariat* who want to work overseas to escape abusive relationships, a mundane life or poverty. Poor working and living conditions in Singapore, including the lack of a pathway to legal citizenship and marriage, put formidable obstacles in their way and create working and nonworking lives characterized by alienation where forces of commodification both trade upon and eat away at their existences. Fleeting connections and relationships with customers, co-workers and bosses, and the thoughts of a family left behind, may be the only sources of solace. With only 30% of Filipino children having both a mother and father at home (Hochschild, 2012, p. xiii), they are also impacted by the logic of global capitalist expansion in the modern era and the incentives it creates to push and pull capital and labour in a variety of directions, including, most obviously, toward Singapore (Chua, 1995, p. 59).

And potential customers should be aware that there exist a wide variety of hostess pubs, with cultures ranging from restrained through to moderate through to wild, even in the same three hundred metre stretch. Only experimentation and/or grassroots word-of-mouth will match pubs with patrons in terms of services provided and services demanded. It is good to approach the pubs with as ethical an attitude as possible since 'groping', entitled customers only add to the alienation and misfortune of the hostesses. When someone is paying, they can always get away with a lot, which is where and why self-policing enters the picture.

8. Limitations

One limitation of the study is that it is in large part autoethnography, meaning that it involves the researcher reflecting upon events in her/his own life. Here, the early observations were gained in my capacity as pub customer before any formal research project had commenced. No interview quotes from this time period are used here. Although autoethnography is still controversial, it is now generally accepted as a valid research approach, especially in the sociology of sport and physical exercise (e.g., Allen Collinson, 2008) and feminist sociology (e.g., Fox, 1996; Muncey, 2005) where detailed discussions of one or a few individuals' lives often occurs and suggests a use for autoethnography. One of the few textbooks in the field is Chang's *Autoethnography as Method* (Chang, 2008) and a lengthy explanation of and justification for autoethnography can be found in the Method section of James and Elliott (2023). Another limitation is that we went on short trips to Singapore, rather than living there for a period of months or years. Therefore, the level of understanding reached may be relatively weak or underdeveloped in certain areas and linkages or connections to other realms of social life may have been more clear to us had our stays been longer. Also, access to interviewees would have been improved and longer periods of observation may have yielded new information and deeper understandings. Our observations and interpretations are those of straight white and Indonesian men and results should be understood with this in view. Lastly, although intimate acts can sometimes occur, these pubs are not brothels, and should not be stigmatized as such. Common practices and cultures vary significantly from pub to pub, and night to night, and even hour to hour, even within a three hundred metre stretch of road.

9. Suggestions for Further Research

Future research could study other regions of Singapore, as well as countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia (including Batman as a unique case), Hong Kong, China, and Japan. Although very difficult to access interviewees, it would be worth trying to interview one or more of pub customers, owners, hostesses, musicians, residents, shopkeepers of nearby businesses, MPs, NGO workers, priests, and taxi-drivers. Surveys of customers might also be possible, either through online or a single survey sheet handed out and collected at the pub or at

nearby venues such as cafes and hawker centres. It would be interesting too to read work from different positions and perspectives including books and articles by women authors, Singapore citizens, and foreign hostesses. Autoethnography, of an academic type, and popular-style confession memoirs should also be encouraged. It is worthwhile trying to identify different practices, customs, customer bases, pricing models, discourses, and techniques of surveillance, control, and discipline, and explain these in sociological terms, including their racial, class, and gender aspects. Efforts could be made in researching historical studies of the Chinese hostess venues that have now disappeared, apart from one venue that allegedly still exists in the Katong area. Explaining discourses and materialized practices by linking them to culture, historical and political forces, race, class, and gender would be illuminating, as would further exploration of the feudal-modern-postmodern framework derived from Marxist historical materialism theory and postmodern theory. Is that too Eurocentric a perception of society and history to adequately serve as a theoretical structure for this type of work? What practices, if any, reflect feudal or premodern understandings of concepts such as honour and benevolence? Prospects for change and growth in the industry, as well as changes in public opinion, would be an interesting avenue to explore. Lastly, the Indian pubs of Singapore that feature Indian hostesses and mostly Indian ethnic origin customers are not studied here, but would be a good area of comparative study where results could be compared with those reported in this article. The broader topic area, including one or more aspects of the topics suggested here, could be studied at PhD level.

Dedication

Dedicated to Debbie (86th Street Pub) who passed away from potassium deficiency in 2017.

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