



A look at Singapore hostess bars through the lens of Negri and Chakrabarty

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Open Access Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, 2024, 07(01), 012–021

Publication history: Received on 24 November 2023; revised on 31 December 2023; accepted on 03 January 2024

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53022/oarjms.2024.7.1.0001>

Abstract

This article, written in a confessional, autoethnographic style, explores the author's experiences over a number of years with Singapore hostess bars/pubs. The research method is participant-observation of practices, discourses, pricing models and customer demographics, and knowledge gained from hostesses, bar managers and musicians. The law aspect of the article is critiquing the lack of citizenship rights and marriage rights for foreign workers in Singapore such as pub hostesses and construction workers. It also looks at the working conditions and cultures of the pubs, and describes the alienation and emotional labour involved in delivering heavily racialized and gendered services. Neither Filipina/Vietnamese hostesses nor Europeans have established places within the Singapore citizenship narrative or in government policy, which relies upon the hegemonic CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) Model. Filipina and Vietnamese pub hostesses do not fit neatly within this model and are hindered by the power of the narrative.

Keywords: Filipinas; Gender; Hostess bars; Ladies' drinks; Moral panic; Race and class; Singapore

1. Introduction

This article is my attempt to understand Singapore hostess bars in a way which brings out into the open and draws upon my experiences as a white British guy, who grew up in Australia, and who identifies as heterosexual/straight. I had two earlier stints of working full-time in Singapore of one-and-a-half years each when I was in my mid-twenties and then early thirties. As such, I know and am familiar with aspects of Singapore geography and office culture while, at the same time, other local practices stand out as difficult to access.

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. Academic author 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 bar, in Duxton Road in Singapore's Downtown Core, with a literal 'no touching' policy, but bars range on a scale from no-touching to a few bars 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 bars without being employed by them. This article is only about hostess bars and not the KTV-lounges featured in Lim (2010). Compared to Filipina hostess bars in Japan, as presented in Parreñas (2011), the Singapore pubs appear to have far fewer rules about hostess location and circulation throughout the venue.

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

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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. He also noted how, in his days in postcolonial Calcutta, he had encountered the prevailing view among local historians that Marxism was a universal and unchangeable truth combined with the perspective of historicism (Chakrabarty, 2008, p. xiv) that things keep their essence over time while heading in the direction of progress, in the same way that Gramsci had been waiting for the 1789 bourgeois revolution to come to Italy. 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, suburban, white-Australian worldview of the dying days of the legacy of the White Australia Policy (rather than the policy itself) which kept my school 95% white until 1985.

Another key idea here is Ranajit Guha's (1983, chapter 2) criticism (cited by Chakrabarty, 2008, pp. 11-13) of the 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, demon, 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. 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 too could not help but bring my European-Enlightenment orientation into my early perceptions of Singapore hostess bars - 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 that workers' rights were weaker in Singapore than Australia. Interestingly enough, 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.

The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- How do pricing policy, owner/manager preferences, customer demographics, location and other factors determine pub culture and, in turn, either empowerment or alienation of the worker?
- 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?
- How does heartland-versus-downtown location influence pub culture?
- How could a customer with an ethical awareness make a difference in terms of pub culture, in the short-term?
- 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 2 introduces the theory of moral panic as expanded by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009); Section 3 explains research approach; Section 4 looks at hostess bars in Duxton Road area, Section 5 describes Joo Chiat Road hostess bars; Section 6 provides discussion; while Section 7 concludes.

2. Theory framework: 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]eightedened 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. These authors emphasized the power of a media-crusader alliance in continually keeping an issue in the spotlight, creating in Cohen’s (2002, p. xxviii) words, a ‘resonance’ of disproportionality.

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.

In Singapore, hostess bars 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 bars 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 ‘illiberal pragmatics of survival’ (Yue, 2012, p. 7).

Gerrie Lim (2010, p. 178) reports that the Blue Star Pub in Joo Chiat Road was raided by police one evening in January 2004 at 10:00 p.m. In multiple raids on the one night, 100 girls were arrested throughout the island, including 60 at Paramount Shopping Centre, Katong.

Lim (2010, p. 178) makes some interesting and worthwhile points here. In Lim’s words: ‘the subject matter [Asian hostesses and sex workers] is still largely debased and vilified on its home soil.’ He says that the Western fantasy produced the ‘exotic’ Asian woman, but this image is promulgated and reproduced today by Asians in Asia, especially in terms of how Singaporeans, citizens of a developed country, view certain women from the poorer countries of the region. He goes on to say that: ‘[y]et in Asia those stereotypes and myths are actually promoted, even distorted, through the prism of what passes for public knowledge.’

3. Research approach

In terms of qualitative writing technique, I use the traditionalist realist style combined with the confessional style (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, pp. 155-158). I also use an autoethnographic approach. 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).

Autoethnography is where the researcher is an integral part of the studied community, and so she/he actively subjects her/his own observations and interactions to analysis. Chang (2008, p. 13) offers an important conceptual framework for autoethnography, which relies upon four key assumptions: (1) culture is a group-oriented concept by which the self is always connected with others; (2) the reading and writing of self-narrative provides a window through which the self and others can be examined and understood; (3) telling one's story does not automatically result in the cultural understanding of self and others, which only grows out of in-depth cultural analysis and interpretation; and (4) autoethnography is an excellent instructional tool to help out not only social scientists but also practitioners gain profound understanding of self and other and function more effectively with others from diverse cultures. Clearly, if a researcher believes in the validity of these tenets then she/he will be well disposed towards autoethnography.

Observation, especially revered in nursing research, was used extensively by the present author, in conjunction with informal conversations with hostesses, bar managers, bar staff, and bar musicians. 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.

This project formally commenced in May 2019, although before that I had been a regular patron at hostess bars and I had tried to make sense of what was going on through applying various theories and concepts to observation and conversation. Following Kimberley Kay Hoang's (2015) book, and an online personal communication from her (dated 8 July 2021), I decided to continue with a 'comparative' approach, focusing on discourses, practices, cultures and the demographics of the patrons at various pubs. This article does not cover the Vietnamese hostesses bars, as they are qualitatively different.

4. Findings: Hostess bars in Duxton Road area

Hoang (2015) in an important piece of relatively recent ethnographic research into hostess bars in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam, studies four bars 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 bar experience, and the hostesses confirm the high status of the businessman 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 as a true bar or pub where conversation over extended sessions on the premises is what is sought after and practiced.

At the bottom of Duxton Road in the Downtown Core 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. Roy Tan (2012, p. 144) writes of the broader Tanjong Pagar area as follows: 'At the turn of the century [1999-2000], 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, chap. 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. 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 shaved-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 – they were there for the job, pure and simple; their 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 and this did not seem to fit into any kind of 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 bar. 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 (at least as at 2019, pre-COVID lockdowns). There are several middle-of-the-road pubs as you proceed up the slight incline, including Seventeen and Bottoms. These have large 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 after the pub shut, clearly with the owner/manager's approval. Another time, a very drunk Canadian customer, possibly in his thirties, talked with me and I bought a jug of beer for us to share. Before he could return the favour, he had disappeared, either to go off with a hostess or out the door. I held no bitterness against him, as in that drunk state and in that atmosphere, people's behaviour can be very wayward and unpredictable. 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 happiness 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 as I had had in Singapore before him. By this time I was in my mid-forties. Earlier, one night at 86 Street Pub, a young Chinese-Singaporean man, alone and in office clothes (visiting pubs alone in that area is common) asked me what I was doing in Singapore. I responded: 'Researching.' He asked: 'Researching pubs?' I said: 'Now that's a good idea.' His humorous question was the initial seed of an idea which grew, and later, I did turn pub visits into this research project

On another occasion, I visited Seventeen pub many times during the course of a week. I think this was the same visit as when I was spending the Australian fifty dollar notes. One of the hostesses had a boyfriend who was a Malay-Singaporean and a member of a well-known Singapore black metal band. His job was as a night-time security guard. This story was vouched for by the owner/manager and by another Singaporean black metal scene identity whom I knew through a research project on metal music. So this shows the real connections hostesses can sometimes form beyond the pub, and her boyfriend was ethnically similar, but of a different religion and citizenship, showing the cosmopolitan and transnational possibilities of pub work. On the other hand, I expressed interest in meeting the boyfriend, but this never happened, suggesting that the hostess wanted to keep her working and nonworking spheres of life separate.

As you go further up the hill on Duxton Road, waling 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 than that then you might. This is Superstar Pub. 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 expansive tray(s) of shots. At the end of the process, you will head sheepishly to pay the single male barman, under fairly bright lights. He will process the bill, which can set you back over four hundred dollars. The expectation then is for you to leave the premises. It might be possible to drag out the conversation and stay longer depending on the mood and determination. In no way does this resemble a British pub where the main purpose is socializing and conversation.

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 Superstar, and, located where it is, this pub offers a welcome respite if you are heading from Neil Road, although, if you are coming in 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.

5. Findings: Hostess bars 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 as richer than the HDB (government housing estate) areas.

Joo Chiat Road is commercial for most of its length, with hostess pubs making up a high percentage of the total 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 an everyday occurrence).

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 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 terms of Marxist theory, surplus-value is both created and expropriated in the production process, which, from the viewpoint of the worker, is the cause of alienation from: (1) the product produced, (2) the act of production, (3) her/his true nature and (4) other workers (Marx, 1994 [1844]). 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. 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, and I do not like this aspect of the culture since drinking from the same beer jug can create sociality and would save the customer 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 night at Angel, hostesses did not need to wear any particular type of dress or uniform, and a more relaxed atmosphere predominated. It appeared to me that hostesses were awarded more freedom in their interactions that night - they were just 'kind of' on the job.

6. Discussion

6.1. Politics of desire

Filipina hostesses in Korea's apparent preference for American men reflects what 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 (as in the biblical saying 'a worker deserves her wages'), and is exposed to its risks and brutalities, then one's rewards should also come from this realm, including romantic and migration possibilities not easily accessible at 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 another overseas location.

Anne McClintock (1995), in *Imperial Leather*, looks at the nineteenth century relationship between working-class woman Hannah Cullwick and aristocratic man Arthur Munby, and their S&M practices. S&M (except when it becomes involuntary abuse) empowers by revealing that power relations embedded in institutions are comical, contingent and unnatural, hence they are reversible. The role-play either mimics or inverts standard power relations, but as a carefully-scripted role-play based on mutual co-operation. S&M came to fruition at the end of the eighteenth century and it is not a coincidence that this was the new age of imperialist modernity (Foucault, 1993 [1961]; McClintock, 1995, pp. 142-143). The Victorian age also featured the *cult of domesticity* within the context of the stark separation of public and private realms, which S&M aims to critique (as do hostess pubs). The hostess in the hostess pub potentially functions as everything in that environment - 'embodying in one person' (McClintock, 1995, p. 145) girlfriend, sister, woman friend, mother - by her actions of pouring drinks, tidying away empties, and echoing encouraging and cheerful words. By showing kindness and reciprocating, the customer subverts existing hierarchies, as in the Cullwick-Munby case. There may be a mental wish to abolish or at least critique the class system, but this is impossible since these things are determined in society as a whole. Hence, like S&M activities, which nearly always feature role-play, the practices must be continually repeated. The ideas expressed in these first two paragraphs may appear contradictory, but both exist: hierarchies created by the politics of desire and the subversion of hierarchies in order to act out a level playing-field within a specific, bounded cultural-space.

6.2. The Enlightenment - or not?

As mentioned earlier, Featherstone (1990) posed the question of whether the Japan of 1990 was in premodernity, modernity or postmodernity. From a European perspective, there can be an overwhelming *perception* that Singapore appears to have gone through the Enlightenment but hasn't. While this perception has some immediate appeal, it leaves itself wide open to a critique similar to Chakrabarty's (2008 [2000]) criticism of Hobsbawm. Enlightenment thought can never be fully detached from its origins to become universal or neutral, but other societies have their own rich cultural traditions, which involved encountering and wrestling with Enlightenment ideas at key moments in their history when they were faced with a changing world and the pressure to modernize. Europeans might link their 'they never had the Enlightenment' view with cynical comments about Singapore's politics, and the lack of a two-party system, where the ruling-party continually gets 60% or more of the total vote. They might see this as evidence of a feudal mentality of lords-and-serfs within a capitalist state, whereby the People's Action Party rulers act in the capacity of feudal overlords. There are younger members of Singapore's opposition community that adopt this view, including some within the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP). James (2022) offers something of a critique of this view where he compares the electoral success of the Workers' Party of Singapore, with its roots in left-wing Chinese trade unionists of the 1960s such as Lim Chin Siong, with that of the SDP and its liberal-democratic, Western-style discourse where Singapore constantly 'falls short' on every indicator other than money-making.

To the me of twenty years ago, during my last living and working stint in Singapore (2001-02), the colonial-era buildings reassured, reminded, mocked, and confused me, depending on my mood and immediate situation. There was a subconscious depression when I remembered the colonial-era (not literally, I was too young) - I realized that the authority, the charm, and all the actual British people had gone, leaving behind only the buildings, which may mock as a false façade (and sometimes it is literally a false façade with a newer building behind it). But the buildings haunted my subconscious and became like a veil of misery which increased loneliness and alienation - local citizens would have interpreted them differently; they speak in different ways. Hence, I felt that my interpretation could not be discussed with others as they would not understand it or would view it as racist. I would walk among the old buildings, as the sun was setting, during our evening dinner breaks at the business school (where I lectured), and almost start to believe I was a nineteenth century British man in colonial times. It was almost like a haunting. I was just trying to make sense of my surroundings and trying to find for myself an identity within them. Like many Singaporeans and residents in Singapore, at least back then, my identity was heavily racialized, which I now see as a huge millstone in a multicultural city, which changes at a rapid speed, architecturally as much as in other ways. I felt a sense of loss for 'my' community - that the colonial project had ended and had been judged a disappointment. Chakrabarty (2008 [2000]) talks too about missing India, after moving to the West, its festivals and its colour, how election days in India are days of festivity, whereas, in Australi,a the locals see them as solemn days where they 'do their duty' by 'exercising their democratic rights'. Years later, by visiting hostess pubs in the restored Chinese shophouses of Duxton Road and Joo Chiat Road, and through the drinking and socializing with hostesses and sometimes regular customers, managers and musicians, I was able to experience some kind of mental healing in the city where I had felt so alienated before, although I avoided the Middle Road district of my previous employment.

7. Conclusion

In an article by Vélez-Torres, Hurtado, and Bueno (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, Hurtado, & Bueno 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.

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 sustenance. 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, to Singapore (Chua, 1995, p. 59), East Asia and the Middle East.

And potential patrons 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.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Rex John Walsh (Western Sydney University) for his advice and help with data collection.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

I declare that I have no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise.

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