

On the Moral Geography of Cities: A Case Study of Three Singapore Hostess Pubs in a Suburban “High Street” Setting

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Abstract

We study three hostess pubs on Joo Chiat Road, Singapore—a “Vietnam pub” and two “Filipina pubs”, utilizing the concept of “assemblages” based on Böhling’s work on Copenhagen nightlife. We compare and contrast the customer demographics of each Night-Time Economy (NTE) establishment, and the resultant culture, which is a product of the race/ethnicity of the hostesses, the race/ethnicity and ages of the patrons, the policies and ethos of the owner/manager, and the pricing model whereby hostesses get financially rewarded. The Filipina pubs rely upon “ladies’ drinks” whereas the Vietnam pub fosters a tipping system. While the ladies’ drinks model suggests a hyper-capitalist business setting, the tipping model has feudal, honour-based, and debt-based elements. These observations derive from Marx’s historical materialism theory where aspects of feudal or pre-capitalist practices linger into the capitalist epoch.

Keywords

Assemblages, Historical Materialism, Hostess Pubs, Joo Chiat Road, Ladies’ Drinks, Marx, Night-Time Economy, Singapore

1. Introduction

1.1. General Introduction

Singapore’s business model has been to rely upon foreign capital from the Global North and foreign labour, from the less-developed countries of the region, so as to maximize surplus-value (Tremewan, 1994; Trocki, 2006). During the nineteenth century, and up to about 1920, it was a male-dominated seaport, full of

Chinese and Malay dockworkers, and the prostitution industry thrived as young women were brought into Singapore in big numbers to cater to the resident dock-worker population (Warren, 2003). The Singapore “business model”, stated above, has remained essentially unchanged since the foundation of modern Singapore by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles in 1819 (Trocki, 2006). As the saying goes, “only the faces ever change”, as well as the gender balance, the ethnic mix (to some extent), and the district which each ethnic group chooses as its home base. For example, the Hainanese and Japanese settled in the Middle Road area in the two or three decades prior to the 1942–1945 Japanese Occupation.

This study focuses on three hostess pubs (“bars” in American terminology) on Joo Chiat Road, a 1.8-kilometre “linear activity corridor” (Shaw & Ismail, 2006: p. 189) in the Katong area of eastern Singapore, a Vietnam pub (“S Box”, hereafter S-Box) and two Filipina pubs (“Angel” and “Obsessions”, which have the same owner). 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”. This definition is fine, except for the fact that, in the three Joo Chiat Road pubs, we studied, customers and hostesses rarely go on official or sponsored “dates” outside of the pub. Workers don’t usually leave the pub’s premises during business hours as they are making money for the pub, on a minute-by-minute basis, by sitting with customers and pouring them drinks. An important missing element in the definition is that female hostess substitute, in the minds of male customers, for female customers, the absence of which is a key visual impression created on entry to these places. Some suburban Joo Chiat Road hostess pubs (e.g. Angel, Obsessions) also have “regular” clienteles, who play pool and interact among themselves, rather than with the hostesses, whom they often completely ignore.

This research was inspired by the injunction of Jayne, Holloway, and Valentine (2006: p. 457) for Social and Cultural Geography researchers to “unpack the differences in drinking practices of different cities (and spaces and places within cities)”. Furthermore, Shaw (2014: p. 93) suggested that we move beyond actual city centres to look at night-time life in suburban areas such as Singapore’s Katong. Bell and Valentine (1995: pp. 10, 12) state that, at least, at the time of their writing, little research had been carried out on geographies of sexualities in non-Western settings and, strangely enough, in heterosexual contexts. McDowell (1995) suggests three areas for future research as follows: 1) how the interaction between grounded embodiment, the discourses of sexuality, and institutionalised power (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 1993: p. 260) operates in various localized contexts; 2) the relationship of women’s bodies to the workplace; and 3) masculinity and femininity in a range of service occupations.

Böhling (2015), based on his work involving the concept of assemblages in relation to drunkenness, points to areas needing further research as follows: 1) the “aesthetic, embodied, nonhuman and affective dimensions shaping drinking practices” (p. 133); and 2) “the manipulation of drinking practices, applied in order

to generate profit” (p. 140). This second topic is a key feature and highlight of the present article. We return to Böhling’s work later on.

This article also follows up on various points made by Jayne, Valentine, and Holloway (2008) about potential research topics within alcohol studies as follows: 1) research that “pursue[s] connections, similarities, differences and motilities between geographies of drinking practices” (p. 221); 2) research into “conceptual connections between spaces and places, by tracing general relations, practices and processes in order to identify those that are common (and unique) ‘on the ground’” (p. 223); 3) research into “how the life course affects drinking patterns” (p. 224) (customers at S-Box are relatively older and more restrained than those at Obsessions); 4) research into how “contemporary socioeconomic conditions can shape place-specific drinking cultures” (p. 224) (hostess pubs rely on big-spending individuals whereas hostesses are from the poorer countries of the region); 5) research into “the interpenetration of political[,] economic, social, cultural and spatial practices” (p. 224) (we explore community attitudes towards “Little Vietnam”, aka Joo Chiat Road, and government attitudes towards the race/ethnicity and immigration-status of hostesses); and 6) studies into the emotional life of Night-Time Economy (NTE) participants.

1.2. The Moral Geography of Cities

The moral geography (of cities) is the study of how bodies, place, space, alcohol, and commerce interact in the NTE, so as to create pleasures, connections, and opportunities. It also looks at the impact of various types of regulation upon activities in the NTE, and the effects of regulation on the rhythms of the night, both inside and outside of entertainment venues. The regulation and monitoring of bodies may also occur due to social pressure and not only through laws/by-laws.

Studies from the last twenty to twenty-five years have aimed at understanding more about the moral geography of cities by focusing on “the relationship of prostitution to cultural/historical ideas of morality and place” (Domosh, 1999: p. 430). Here, we contrast Joo Chiat Road, a suburban location of “heartland” morality, which locals see as being contaminated by a foreign Vietnamese presence, as a new “Little Vietnam”, with the Duxton Road area, near Singapore’s Downtown, which is seen as an unashamedly cosmopolitan area. Hubbard (1997, 1998, 2002), in his work on prostitution in England and Wales, argues that the prostitute is a primary figure around which the community structures its debates on topics of morality, respectability, and citizenship, and this is a process dating back to Victorian times. The city is “spatialized” (Domosh, 1999: p. 430) with “prostitutes” shepherded into prescribed and well-defined red-light areas, which are then stereotyped in discourse and culture as both dangerous and thrilling. As Hubbard, Matthews, and Scoular (2009: p. 186) write, “There is an emerging literature that explores the use of zoning and planning powers as a means for displacing commercial sex, typically shifting it away from wealthier and Whiter areas”. The prostitute is then seen as the embodiment of social evils and inextricably linked

with the districts into which they have been shepherded. Our case study discussion reveals Singapore government ideology, now being practised even by online opposition supporters, adhering to a model, the “Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others” or “CMIO Model” (Shaw & Ismail, 2006: p. 191), which reifies the ethnic-mix at Singapore’s independence. This model is sometimes presented as some type of normative ideal state that can ensure future social stability. Filipino and Vietnamese hostesses, bartenders, and musicians do not fit neatly into this model and hence, this provides a further ideological basis for their continued marginalization.

Western scholars have argued that the word “prostitute” should be removed from academic discourse, and replaced by “sex work”/“sex worker” (Delacoste & Alexander, 1998; Hubbard & Sanders, 2003) due to the “moralistic overtones of this word” (Faier, 2014: p. 979) and its use in stigmatizing vulnerable sections of the population. Hoefinger (2011) suggests that, in Asian countries, the term “professional girlfriend” best describes the relationship that a hostess pub worker and the customer may create together. However, Faier (2014: p. 983) suggests that the term “boyfriend” is used in Filipina hostess bars in Central Kiso to indicate nothing more than a customer choosing to sit with his favourite hostess each time he visits a certain pub. Arguably, in the Singapore hostess pub context, no relationship exists beyond employee-customer since, in the vast majority of cases, no “relationship” exists beyond the pub walls. The whole hostess pub concept, as Faier’s (2014) definition alludes to, invokes for many the concept of “role-playing”, which introduces an added level of complexity to both real-life and academic analysis. Clearly, aspects of “role-playing” are involved, but it is not *only* role-playing, as extensive opportunities for agency (Yea, 2005) on the part of customer and hostess do exist, and give flavour and character to how each one plays out his/her “role”.

Following on from Hubbard, conceptually, McClintock (1995) proclaims that the Western, modernist view of culture presumes a hierarchy, essentially still the hierarchy of imperialism, whereby women of colour are positioned close to the bottom of the earth, as the least civilized and rational, and hence as the most bodily and sexual of all body types. Under imperialism, the colonized women were in an ambiguous position and one very different from colonized men—they had to negotiate both the power relations of their own pre-colonial society and the demands of imperialism. However, they rarely held any real power or reaped significant rewards. Tyner (1996, 1997), among others, sees the role of Filipinas as transnational global “entertainers” within this perspective, they perform this function within hyper-capitalist global industries based increasingly in global metropolises, including, of course, Dubai, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Not only are these images of Filipinas absorbed and reproduced within the sex industry, but also by NGOs which reproduce the same images whereby the “helpless victim[s]” (1996, p. 89) are still portrayed as helpless and “defined solely by [their] sexuality and sexual parts” (1996, p. 89). The local population needs to be “pro-

tected” from these deviant sex workers, according to modernist views of the city (Faier, 2014). For Murray and Robinson (1996), racialized sex workers are “scapegoats” (p. 58), and are further marginalized from the “imagined general population” (p. 50) which is assumed to be uniformly innocent, morally upright, family-oriented, and hard-working. However, studies in *Wife or Worker?* (Piper & Roces, 2003) show how “wife” and “worker” are aspects of a complex identity that a woman may take on, either together or separately, and in either order, as part of a goal to transform her personal and family life in accordance with certain objectives (see also Faier, 2014; Yea, 2005).

Wu’s (2019) article shows the slow, but relentless, suburbanization of Guangzhou and indicates that significant movement of people from the downtown area has occurred, and that some suburban areas have very heated investment property markets. But problems include environmental degradation and pollution in the suburbs, poor public transport, car congestion on the roads, threats to Aboriginal settlements and lack of affordable, low-cost public housing. Despite these problems, which can be overcome, suburbanization is a positive thing overall as it prevents overcrowding of the inner city and the subsequent drain on service provision. Jiang’s (2013: p. 117) words, in *Selected Works*, Volume III, seem instructive here: “The fundamental aims of reform are to adapt the relations of production to the development of the productive forces, [and to] adapt the superstructure to the development of the economic base”. Solutions include corridors of extended suburban development, as in Perth, Australia, and the New Town model of Great Britain where farmland specifically surrounds New Town development (e.g. East Kilbride in Scotland). Joo Chiat Road and Katong became popular suburban areas (Siglap District was formally incorporated into the city’s boundaries in 1928) and were characterized by a convivial relation between the *Peranakan* (a fusion of Chinese and Malay races and cultures) and Eurasian residents (Shaw & Ismail, 2006: p. 189). It is a conservation area since 1993 and development is limited to four stories (Shaw & Ismail, 2006: pp. 192, 193). Private, low-density, and upper-middle-class housing surround Joo Chiat Road at the front and back. Being far from a train station and, with the road being one-way for half of its length, limits the flow of people into the area. In the daytime, peace and quiet is an important amenity. The hostess pubs bring outsiders into the area at night, meaning that the night and day characters of the area are very different. The hostess pubs are not always popular with residents, but it may be a positive thing that they are grouped together in a relatively obscure, hard-to-reach area such as Joo Chiat Road’s middle section.

2. Materials and Methods

As a customer, I (first author, Kevin, name changed) found the atmosphere at 86 Street (hostess) pub (now closed) on Neil Road especially welcoming and enjoyable as there was a resident rock band that played heavy metal songs on request. This was in the first half of 2010. The band had a shaven-headed Filipino drum-

mer on a short-term visa (Arnold) and two male Malay-Singaporean musicians who played bass and guitar respectively. Before my visits, I was told that Arnold's wife used to be the singer, but now they operated as a three-piece. Around this time, I began to become interested in hostess pubs, from a sociological perspective, and took special notice of how the pubs operated and the overall types of behaviours and practices observed.

A number of years later, at the beginning of 2018, I decided to embark on the research project officially. I had come to perceive that the cultures and dominant practices at the Vietnamese pubs and the two Filipina pubs on Joo Chiat Road were significantly different and that this point was worthy of further investigation and commentary. I decided to focus primarily on three Joo Chiat Road pubs to give the study a clearer focus and also because suburban, heartland locations had not been frequently studied before in the NTE literature.

Being infused with the sociological imagination, and being generally interested in history, in its localized and working-class incarnations, I had previously asked hostesses and the owner/manager of Seventeen pub on Duxton Road about their memories of the closed 86 Street Pub. It was recalled as an important local landmark which existed for a number of years.

During the interval 5-9 December 2018, my co-researcher, Ronald (name changed for purposes of peer review) visited Angel and Obsessions (both Filipina pubs with the same owner/manager and similar culture). He also participated in participant-observation and conducted an online interview, by exchange of emails, with one hostess after she had returned to the Philippines.

During May 2019, I decided to attend evenings at S-Box, Angel and Obsessions, viewing these as representative of those two types of pub in that street (Vietnamese and Filipina, respectively). I spent significant time during several evenings at both places, and these added to experiences gained before the project formally commenced. On one occasion, I sat with just one hostess at Obsessions, and drank only soft-drink for a few hours. I told her of the research project and she made a number of interesting observations to me throughout the night. Ronald had met her previously and so I had asked for her by name.

In conclusion, we secured one formal written autobiography from an ex-hostess, sent by email to Ronald. This life-story was over two thousand words long. The remainder of the primary data consists of observations of practices, discourses, pricing models and culture, obtained by both authors, using the participant-observation method. Information was also received via conversations with many people including owner-managers (such as the owner/manager of Seventeen pub on Duxton Road), hostesses, pub customers, pub musicians (including Arnold, the drummer at 86 Street Pub), taxi drivers and personal friends and colleagues. I wrote field notes on the evenings of each pub visit in May 2019 or, more commonly, I wrote these the following day. In the writing up, I studied the field notes and my memory for major themes, and the Results and Discussion sections are divided according to theme. Although I wrote the final article, my online chats with Ro-

nald about his pub experiences were very useful, as they confirmed some things, and added new insights.

Both researchers are white Anglo-Australian men, now aged in their fifties, of Irish descent. Obviously, all of our observations and conclusions are based on our own subjective understandings and bound by our interpretations. They are, undoubtedly, informed by and influenced by our political perspective, but also by our age, gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and past life experiences. We were both hampered by our lack of foreign-language skills. Because the Filipina hostesses spoke fair-to-good English, this was a factor which facilitated and encouraged our interaction with them. There may have been cultural dynamics which we missed or failed to completely understand because we are not Chinese-Singaporeans. Hostesses and researchers were also all foreigners in Singapore (without long-term visas, residency or citizenship). This allowed for some bonding to occur, as we all viewed the city through foreigners' eyes, and could grumble together about Singapore culture, Singapore bosses and Singapore materialism. I (Kevin) had some familiarity with all these things, beyond the superficial, as I had worked full-time in Singapore previously, in 1993-94 and 2001-02.

3. Results

3.1. Pricing Model Divergence and Cultures

The main pricing model divergence is that the Filipina pubs (including those in the Duxton Road area near the Singapore Downtown) adopt a "ladies' drink" model (Yea, 2005) whereas the Vietnam pubs utilize a tipping system. On the nights of my May 2019 visits, the customers at S-Box were nearly all ethnic Chinese-Singaporean men, with ages varying from twenties through to sixties. By contrast, at Angel and Obsessions, the customers were from a variety of ethnic groups (Chinese-Singaporean, Indian-Singaporean and white European) (and this was even more so the case for the Duxton Road pubs). Furthermore, the Chinese-Singaporean patrons at Angel and Obsessions were younger than those at S-Box and spoke better English.

The two pricing models (or remuneration models, if viewed from the hostesses' perspective) create two very different dynamics and feed into helping create the cultures of the three pubs. The pricing model used is a product of the pre-existing preferences of the owner/manager and the customer-base and hence the policy allows each pub to reproduce itself and its customer-base over time in terms of maintaining a certain type of culture. The links between pricing policy, culture and customer-base reinforce each other, and hence the resultant combination only gets more entrenched over time. As Shaw (2014: p. 92) explains, "[e]ntrenchment, meanwhile, are those practices which function to tie an atmosphere more closely to a particular place". We might call the ladies' drinks model a standard example of hyper-capitalist exchange relations, which is very suited to those wealthy and advanced capitalist countries with low social capital and high alienation. The hostesses are part of exchange relations; they share in

the proceeds of ladies' drinks (i.e. drinks bought by the customer for the hostess) according to a pre-arranged formula (Yea, 2005: p. 462). By contrast, the tipping model (which effectively means that payment is delayed until after the service is rendered) is honour-based and debt-based.

With S-Box's debt-based tipping system, the customer has an identifiable and culturally-recognized moral (but probably not legally-enforceable) debt as soon as he has consumed the services of the hostess. This honour-based or debt-based system has feudal or pre-capitalist aspects and requires that a complex set of cultural norms be in place for it to operate properly, customers must agree that a debt has been created and other customers and the hostesses must be willing to "enforce" and "collect" the debt through culturally-accepted means of pressure and persuasion which, nonetheless, allow for a certain amount of face-saving. These observations about feudal leftovers derive from Marx's Historical Materialism Theory (Marx, 1964, 1976; Marx & Engels, 1972) whereby remnants of feudal or pre-capitalist practices "linger" on into the capitalist era. They linger on because it is deemed cost-beneficial to keep them, and, in this instance, the Marxist "superstructure" demonstrates its "relative autonomy" (Althusser, 2001: p. 91, 2005: pp. 111, 240) and "reciprocal action" (Althusser, 2001: p. 91) *vis-à-vis* the (capitalist) economic base. Feudalism and patriarchy are inseparable, as shown by Marx and Engels (1972: p. 86), when they placed the words together in a description of pre-capitalist society. Deng (1984: p. 333) declared feudalism as more dangerous to China than capitalism, and warned that it had been in China for thousands of years and was very resistant to being dislodged (p. 330). The giving of tips is a patriarchal/feudal leftover, not being incorporated into formal exchange-relations and allowing, as it does, for the tipping patron to feel kind and benevolent. To quote *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away; all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify" (Marx & Engels, 1972: p. 87).

In *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, Marx (1964: pp. 98, 195, 109, 111, 116) explains the way the master-apprentice system worked in the towns during the feudal Middle Ages, under the guild system. Here, the master was a skilled craftsman artisan who owned his own means of production and had autonomy in his work. He had one or more apprentice journeymen who would share in his pool of consumption (meals, etc.), rather than live on wages, and they would go on to be masters themselves. The goal here was production of use-values, not exchange-values, and so we did not yet have capitalism. Marx points out that, for capitalism to arise, a pool of free labourers, torn from their means of production is needed, where these people have nothing to sell but their labour-power. He talks about how guild and capitalist production existed *side by side* (p. 116, emphasis original), for a time, in transition societies. We argue that tipping in a pub such as S-Box is a feudal remnant since, in effect, the women share in the pool of consumption, created by the men and brought into the pub, or looked at another

way, created by the pub community. The tip, even though its conventional amount is S\$30, is not a market price or exchange-value, but is a share in the consumption pool. Hence, relations between customers and hostesses have a large feudal element because we just have a swapping of use-values.

The body language and style of the S-Box hostesses is flexible and, in the case of an exiting non-tipper, the demeanour switches to one of restrained hostility until an acceptable sum of money changes hands. This can often occur during the dusk hours of 7:00 pm to 7:30 pm. Being the recipient of a hostess's forthrightness out on the pavement (the "sidewalk" in American English) can be an embarrassing experience for the non-tipper (and for the tipper but for other reasons). At S-Box, an S\$30 tip was the standard, in May 2019, and a hostess might (and usually would) follow an exiting non-tipping customer outside the pub and put a hand out for payment. If there were language problems, or the hostess was busy, another hostess might place demands upon the exiting customer for the tip and the money would go back, when received, to the original hostess. One advantage of the tipping system is that a non-tipper might be able to "escape" once, or even several times, without any reputational damage, especially if he chooses to visit on busy nights. This non-tipping is probably accepted by the management as a "face-saving device" for poorer customers who nonetheless buy their own drinks from the bar.

The concept of debt at S-Box can be compared with the concept of debt invoked by the Filipina community in Central Kiso, rural Japan (Faier, 2014: p. 987). At S-Box, the debt is short-lived, temporary, more symbolic in nature, but we argue that it is still real in its essence. There is a real debt, culturally-speaking, and we assert that real honour is at stake too. Customers, as well as hostesses, are judged by their perceived behaviour, and deemed to be either morally righteous or deviant (according to the culture of the pub).

What is important too is that the hostess pubs use foreign-workers, many but not all on tourist-visas, who lack both economic and social power *vis-à-vis* the pub owner/manager and a large segment of the clientele. Being a rich country, Singapore-born women, and even Malaysian-born women, if they enter the entertainment or commercial sex industries, they will gravitate towards the high-end of the trade (Anonymous, 2020). All of the usual issues facing low-paid foreign workers in Singapore impact upon these hostess women, who invest and expend "emotional labour" (Hochschild, 2012; Urry, 2002: p. 62; Walsh, 2007: p. 511) to, ironically, make Singapore citizens feel better about themselves and less lonely in a country where they (the hostesses) will probably never achieve full citizenship rights. According to sociologist Urry (2002: p. 61), "the 'service' partly consists of a process of production which is infused with particular social characteristics, of gender, age, race, educational background and so on". Probably it is the customers who should be helping the hostesses feel better about themselves, rather than vice-versa, and Yea's (2005) research into Filipina hostesses and American GI customers in Korea shows that this does happen, in some cases to remarkable

degrees, such as a man paying for a woman for one “overnight stay” in order to rescue her from having sex with another customer.

Faier (2014: p. 981) makes it clear that the Filipina pub hostesses in modern Japan do not identify themselves as “prostitutes” because of the stigma associated with such work (Cheng, 2010; Parrenas, 2011); because actual sexual intercourse does not occur (Cheng, 2010; Law, 2000; Parrenas, 2011; Yea, 2005); because bar-work is only a temporary part of their lives and senses of self (Law, 2000); and because these women perceive their work to be about “love”, “romance” and “foreign relations” (Cheng, 2010; Law, 1997; Roces, 2009; Yea, 2005). The same would apply to Filipina hostesses in Singapore, although they are very aware of stories about which pubs allow or encourage more sexually-intimate practices and often express a preference (even to customers) to avoid working for such pubs. Angel and Obsessions (which have the same owner and their hostesses can follow customers from one to the other), on Joo Chiat Road, are relatively mild places, in part due to their suburban “heartland” location.

One feature of many Singapore hostess pubs is that the hostess and customer rarely leave the pub together (during business hours) or start any type of relationship. This statement is purely based on my observation, pairing up might occur at the end of the night, but it’s uncommon to see hostesses leave the pub during working hours. Often a bus or vehicle takes the hostesses back to their cramped shared accommodation, when work ends. This is the case with some Filipina pubs, so it is hard to fit a romantic partner into these settings. Outside the three pubs studied here, the situation might be different. Usually, a “relationship” is bounded by the pub walls and the night-time atmosphere (Shaw, 2014). A big-spender on one night who has little to spend the next night will generally be ignored by hostesses or given a patronizing smile as she glides past. The washing out of the inside and outside of pubs in the daytime signals not only a boundary of the NTE (Shaw, 2014: pp. 92-93), but an *erasure* of the events of the previous night, thus strengthening the effects which the hostess system fosters in this direction anyway.

3.2. The Inside/Outside Dynamic

I observed an interesting dynamic at one Filipina hostess pub on Neil Road, Tanjong Pagar around 2010-14 before this research project commenced. It highlighted the contested and dynamic nature of territorial space and power and the fact that role-playing can be a very self-conscious acting-out. At this pub, there was a service-road behind the back-door of the pub which ran alongside a narrow canal. The canal and service-road both ran parallel to the major road which the front door of the pub opened out onto. Hostesses would sometimes bring favoured customers, whom they respected and trusted, out for chats, while the hostesses smoked, on this back service-road, which rarely attracted any traffic at nights. We sat on cheap, makeshift chairs and boxes. The dynamic outside was totally different, we were there on the hostesses’ invitation, and only because

we had gained their conditional approval. It was their “back-office” work-space, a feminized space belonging (not literally) to the hostesses rather than to the customers. Conversation and banter continued out-the-back in pairs or in larger groups of hostesses and customers. The hostesses were in charge, they had the power, it was their space, and the owner/manager was not watching. As Connell (1995: p. 233) points out, “politics of social justice needs to change body-reflexive practice, not by losing agency but by extending it”.

Once we went back inside, we immediately reverted to our “inside” *hostess-customer roles* and the power-balance swung back in favour of the customer (as long as he was spending money). Nevertheless, the undercurrent of the relationship changed irrevocably, for the better, because of the time spent outside, at least from my viewpoint. It had a reality to it, a more meaningful connection to “real-life” in the outside-world beyond the pub. What went on inside the pub became more obviously, and self-consciously, role-play, as the “boss” was watching and this was a revenue-earning space. Mutual respect was heightened, after the time spent outside, and both customer and hostess saw themselves as somewhat unified, in the face of capitalist control, as reflected in the persona of the “boss” (manager) and her/his petty rules and expectations. “Real-life” had begun to break into pub-life in a way which, at least for some customers, was beneficial as they enjoyed connecting to the hostesses in the outside environment without air-conditioning, in the oppressive Singapore humidity, and under bright, public lighting. We see here what Tan (2013a: p. 719) refers to as “the innovative strategies that individuals undertake in performing [gender and (hetero)sexuality] beyond a certain mould”. Both hostesses and customers take risks in going outside, beyond the conventional role-playing arena and system, to a place where harsh lighting and ambiguous status changes pose possible threats to a person’s existential security. There are costs involved in “being real” and “going live”, as the song by Fleetwood Mac picks up on: “Players only love you when they’re playing”.

Most other pubs do not have the physical architecture and layout to allow such inside/outside dynamics to occur. As Urry (2002: p. 64) says, “The delivery of many services is interconnected with aspects of the environment and especially with the nature of design and architecture”. In one sense, here, the commodity (Tan, 2013b: p. 31) was the time spent inside playing “conventional roles”, while, in another sense, it included that special combination of “inside-plus-outside-plus-inside-again”, which, for me at least, was, by far, the more valuable item.

The “social fabric” of the “Kuba” nightclub studied by Böhling (2015) offers, during the course of an alcohol-infused evening, the “courage and inclinations to transgress some of the barriers [but never all, as we shall see] existing between people” (p. 137). In terms of our inside/outside dynamic, the “outside” time is transgressive with respect to normal hostess pub culture. However, the “inside” time is “transgressive” (Tan, 2013b: p. 26) with respect to the mainstream Singapore culture, outside of the pub-environment, because of the hostesses’ pres-

ence; the “sexualized atmosphere” (Kavanaugh, 2013: p. 21; Nicholls, 2017: p. 268; Tan, 2013b: p. 36); the heavy drinking; and the fact that the immigration-status of hostesses is not regarded as something which the customers should concern themselves with.

Following on from the discussion in Tan (2013a: p. 729) on flirting, touching that is marginal and borderline can be as equally ambiguous as flirting, it can be charged or not. Touches of this type, which frequently occur in Singapore hostess pubs, include the following: 1) sensual, polite touching of bodies in order to create space to move through; 2) hands placed on shoulders as one walks through (almost fraternal); 3) leaning against someone so as to get closer to a third person seated slightly further away, such as across a table; 4) bodily touching because many people are around a table, especially as bodies sway; and 5) real or faked drunkenness leading to exaggerated displays of falling or leaning against someone (of a different gender).

3.3. Drunkenness and Assemblages

Böhling (2015) provides an analysis of the events and dynamics created by and through drunkenness in his case-study of a Copenhagen, Denmark nightclub called “Kuba”. Using Deleuze’s (1995: p. 25) theory of assemblage, he explains how mood and outcomes are created by a mix of agency, alcohol, bodies, architecture and music. He theorizes drunkenness as “an *embodied practice* which (constantly) evolves *in relation* to a specific drinking context to transform the drinking subject’s emotional, psychical, physical, social and sexual capacities and action potentials” (p. 132, emphasis original). He moves away from the traditional negative view of alcohol as ethically problematic to look at how alcohol empowers people to open up new social situations and create more favourable outcomes. The mix of the physical dancefloor (see Walsh, 2007: p. 515), culture and the interaction of moving bodies, each with desires, aims and preferences, is a moving series of events (an assemblage), which are bounded in terms of possibilities, but always open and contingent. He draws upon a definition of assemblage provided by Deleuze and Guattari (1998: p. 476) as follows: an “amorphous collection of juxtaposed pieces that can be joined together in an infinite number of ways”. My own definition would be: *a moving series of events and interactions which come into being as bodies interact with other bodies, alcohol, space, place, sensations and affects, one of an infinite number of permutations of the unfolding of events*. Later in the article, Böhling (2015: p. 140) returns to the negative effects of alcohol (Hobbs, Winlow, Hadfield, & Lister, 2005: p. 169), grabbing a woman’s ass may be a pleasurable act for the grabber but unwanted and threatening for the owner of the ass (see also Tan, 2013a: p. 721). Not every touch is a good touch (Paterson, 2009: p. 782). We see the same, in our case study, where bodily contact is pleasurable, in context, and sensually pleasing, but the usual outcome of initial sexual and social connection is absent, only very rarely do hostesses and customers leave the pub together. Also, hostesses are

culturally conditioned to accept intrusive and unwarranted groping and kissing of a type that precedes and/or is out of all proportion to any connection and rapport which has built up organically between hostess and customer. Given that a customer making intrusive advances to a hostess may have been drunk from visiting other pubs, he is often given the benefit of the doubt in terms of intention and this attitude goes on to reinforce the problem of abuse (Yea, 2005: p. 457) going unpunished within the confines of the pub. S-Box seemed to be relatively free of these types of problems, meaning that its culture and self-policing were operating effectively. S-Box's more suburban location (compared to the Duxton Road pubs) and its relatively older, nearly exclusively Chinese-Singaporean customer-base (compared to both Angel/Obsessions and the Duxton Road pubs) tended to create a more restrained attitude towards hostesses.

3.4. Postcolonial Context and Sexual Attitudes

Some of the white customers, especially in the Duxton Road area pubs (a short walk from downtown), act with excess and grope the hostesses the minute they walk in the door. This shows some learned feeling of "entitlement" which is both historical and cultural. Yea (2005) notes how hostesses in Korea distinguish between "good" and "bad" customers and "honest" and "dishonest" customers; and they prefer American GIs over South Asian customers, in a manner reflecting subconscious internalization of Hollywood "values" and the logic and hierarchies of imperialism. Their attitude towards South Asians suggests some type of racism at work, although Yea (2005) doesn't mention this point. Whether a customer's behaviour is deemed as worthy of censure depends on the atmosphere and cultural rules of the pub as well as the hour (Nicholls, 2017: p. 263) and night of the week. Some understand that the customers are tourists and are not likely to return and so excesses are pardoned. Faier (2014: p. 984) argues that the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour is decided by the hostesses in the pub at any particular time. There is more than an element of truth in this comment, but we must also consider the role of the owner/manager and, in the context of suburban Joo Chiat Road pubs, how "regular" customers respond. Big-spending customers are permitted more excesses, but a customer who visits more than once must respond to pub culture and etiquette.

The person who "grope" may or may not have been drunken; he may have been visiting other pubs previously. He brings an "outside" dynamic "inside". Schwanen, Van Aalst, Brands, and Timan (2012) theorize about the rhythms of the night and how they impact on, and are impacted by, spatiotemporal inequalities in the NTE. They argue that "cities or parts thereof are constituted by intricate mixtures of rhythms, and questions about the factors which produce rhythmic conformity are central to understanding nighttime economies" (p. 2066). They use the concept of "entrainment", which explains how some rhythms of life dominate over others and force others to adapt and adjust in response to a confrontation by rival or alternative rhythms. Factors such as opening-hours, licens-

ing laws and police surveillance create and reinforce various rhythms which impact upon who goes where, at what times, and how they behave. When a drunken customer comes in, in a boisterous mood, and begins groping the hostesses, the pub dynamic instantly alters, and this change in mood may be either welcomed, repelled or forced into the pub's darker recesses. As Shaw (2014: p. 93) writes, "The night-time city centre is thus vulnerable to sudden shifts", i.e. "The hold of assemblage over place is...fragile". The change in mood as a boisterous group or individual enters is usually swifter and more unsettling than the "natural" change-over in demographics as one part of the day or evening morphs into the next.

3.5. Summary of Results

In our study of three Joo Chiat Road hostess pubs, S-Box, Angel and Obsessions, we found that: 1) the pricing policies, cultures and customer-base of S-Box (Vietnamese hostess pub) diverged substantially from Angel/Obsessions (Filipina hostess pubs); 2) the pricing policies made sense given the customer-bases; and 3) the pricing policies and customer-bases both reproduced the existing pub cultures over time. The Vietnam pub utilized an honour-based and debt-based tipping system, which allowed some customers to "save face" by making a sneaky exit, without tipping. This practice was more likely to be achievable during busy times. By contrast, Angel and Obsessions had a ladies' drinks policy, which meant that hyper-capitalist exchange-relations dominated all substantial interactions and the hostess-customer relationship progressed on a commercial basis without any need to recourse to either debt or honour. Clearly, this was a simpler and less risky policy for the owner-manager, but it requires a substantial customer base, with high average spending power. The problem is that ladies' drinks often go unfinished as the hostesses don't want the drinks *per se*, but the commission money. And the inside/outside pub had unique architectural and spatial features which allowed for systematic disruptions to the conventional hostess-customer role-playing scenario to occur.

4. Discussion

Singapore: Official Pragmatism, Capital Accumulation and the Policing of Difference

The ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) key values have always included the twin peaks of meritocracy and multiracialism (Hill & Lian, 1995: pp. 4-5; Rahim, 2010: p. 4; Trocki, 2006: pp. 129, 130, 138, 152). The PAP, in power continually since Singapore's independence in 1965, has walked a fine line by pursuing economic growth and social stability at the same time while never, at least officially, giving one priority over the other. Arguably, the focus shifted to economic-growth primacy when two casino licences were awarded to private consortiums in 2010 (Da Cunha, 2010). Multiracialism has been seen as consistent with cultural conservatism as the three main ethnic groups, Chinese (74%), Malay (13%) and

Indian (9%), are all Asian peoples with strong links to long-established religious and cultural traditions. It has generally been viewed favourably by the electorate. The PAP sees culture in essentialist terms and there is presumed to be a one-on-one correlation between all three of biological race, culture and language (Tremewan, 1994: p. 140). Therefore, the three main ethnic groups are effectively treated as zero-one binaries where you either have the associated essentialized culture in full or you don't have it at all. As mentioned previously, this policy is known as the "CMIO Model" (Shaw & Ismail, 2006: p. 191), where O refers to the "Others" who are the minorities within the minority. Although there have been some recent attempts to handle mixed-race individuals, the basic ideology behind the model, and many of its practical consequences, still apply.

Vietnamese and Filipinas are never fully accepted or viewed as "true-blue Singaporeans", even by opposition-party activists, because they don't fit neatly into the CMIO Model. (Hard as it may be to believe, opposition activists often use the term "true-blue Singaporean", in non-ironic fashion, in online discourses. For example, on 13 August 2020, activist Bernard B.L. Suen made the following post on Facebook: "DBS [formerly the Development Bank of Singapore] said that 90% [of its workforce is] made up of Singaporeans and PRs. Exactly how many are true blue Singaporeans? There may be many PRs here... We want to talk about hiring local Singaporeans, please!") Clearly these exclusionary views are distressing and depressing for many people, both Singaporeans and others. Joo Chiat Road has been dubbed "Little Vietnam", due to the proliferation of Vietnamese pub hostesses and the Vietnamese cafes which have sprung up in part to cater to them. A significant segment of the citizen population now refuses to believe that people who do not fit neatly into the CMIO Model can ever become "true-blue Singaporeans", in either the cultural or civic senses, and even recent immigrants from China and India are often tarred with the same brush. (The "Other" category is simply viewed as a reference to the long-established and small Eurasian community.)

In line with "moral panic" theory, police regularly patrol the hostess pubs of Joo Chiat Road looking for illegal immigrants. Regulated brothels are tolerated by the Singapore government only within the Geylang red-light district (Anonymous, 2020; Lim, 2010: p. 21). This is close to, but does not include, Joo Chiat Road. As Hubbard, Matthews, and Scoular (2009: p. 185) write, "[o]f all the possible uses of urban space, it is sex that remains one of the most contentious". For example, Lim (2010: p. 178) recounts how the Blue Star pub was raided by police at 10:00 pm one evening in January 2004. By putting the focus on illegal immigrants, the distinction between "true-blue Singaporeans", on the one hand, and undesirable foreigners, on the other is maintained; and everyone walks away satisfied and happy (or at least those Singaporean local residents and pub-owners who vote in elections walk away happy). Hostess pubs put up signs on their doors (which often are not rigorously enforced) saying that non-visa holders will not be admitted. Clearly then, "the proactive regulation of adult entertainment

involves a complex spatial politics in which various constituencies attempt to order urban space according to their particular interests” (Hubbard, Matthews, & Scoular, 2009: p. 189). Hubbard, Matthews, and Scoular (2009) explain that the Westminster City Council (London) regulates Soho by licensing of sex-related establishments, with lap-dancing clubs being licensed under the pub (entertainment) category, in a way which regulates and controls bodies and activities. By avoiding overt criminalization, and policing of criminal law, the authorities can still maintain a liberal façade. Foucault (1991: p. 95) can be invoked here: the local state has “employed tactics rather than laws using laws themselves as tactics to arrange things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved”.

Churches on the literal border between the NTE-strip of Joo Chiat Road and the suburban streets surrounding it, such as the Holy Family Church on East Coast Road, the Church of our Lady Queen of Peace on Tanjong Katong Road, and the Maranatha Seventh-day Adventist Church on Dunman Road, serve as literal and symbolic boundary-markers between the cosmopolitan/perverse and the local/religious/moral (Hubbard, 1997, 1998, 2002). The Malay-Muslim enclave in Geylang Serai, which borders Joo Chiat Road, serves a similar function. They symbolically “stand guard” in a determined attempt to safeguard the morals of everyone but especially of the young. A walk through an alleyway from Joo Chiat Road takes you into a different (suburban) world as the Haig Girls’ School compound lies directly opposite the alleyway’s eastern entrance. Meanwhile, the restored *Peranakan* shophouses of Joo Chiat Road and surrounding streets now symbolize gentrified urban prosperity, while concealing their perhaps more interesting pasts. One irony is that *Peranakan* was a historic, organic mixture of Malay and Chinese races and cultures (Shaw & Ismail, 2006: p. 189), whereas the modern Vietnamese influence in the area is now viewed as inassimilable.

5. Closing Comments

In our study of three Joo Chiat Road pubs, S-Box, Angel, and Obsessions, we found that: 1) the pricing policies, cultures, and customer base of S-Box (Vietnamese hostess pub) diverged substantially from Angel/Obsessions (Filipina hostess pubs); 2) the pricing policies made sense given the customer-bases; and 3) the pricing policies and customer bases both reproduced the existing pub cultures over time. The Vietnam pub utilized an honour-based and debt-based tipping system, which allowed some customers to “save face” by making a sneaky exit, without tipping. This practice was more likely to be achievable during busy times. By contrast, Angel and Obsessions had a ladies’ drinks policy, which meant that hyper-capitalist exchange relations dominated all substantial interactions and the hostess-customer relationship progressed on a commercial basis without any need to recourse to either debt or honour. And the inside/outside pub had unique architectural and spatial features which allowed for systematic disruptions to the conventional hostess-customer role-playing scenario to occur.

Hubbard, Matthews, and Scoular (2009: p. 188) mention that “the character of the owner” is one factor used by Westminster City Council in its decision-making processes about which establishments to grant licences to, and under what conditions. Here, too, we point out that the ethos of the owner/manager is a key determinant of pub culture and practices, both directly and indirectly via the influence of “regular” customers who themselves are attracted by a certain type of owner/manager and culture. The “regular” customers we are thinking of are those that frequent the hostess pubs while always, or sometimes, ignoring and “blocking out” the hostesses.

According to Böhling (2015), it is the combination of dancing, young people, alcohol, and the architecture of the physical space which allows for sought-after possibilities and outcomes to emerge and then (sometimes) be brought to their hoped-for conclusions. In our case study, we see the importance of pricing policy, and its dialectical interaction with pub culture, and we see the significance of race, gender, class, age, and immigration status in forming the assemblages that play out each night in the various pubs in a kind of eternal drama, each night offers the possibility of transcendence, but each night is effectively a repeat of the night before.

Jayne, Valentine, and Holloway (2008: p. 225) suggest that Social and Cultural Geography researchers pay special attention to the role played by emotions in the NTE. We have looked briefly at some in the present article: 1) discouragement when “yesterday’s drinks don’t mean shit”, and a customer without new money to spend is ignored by hostesses; 2) happiness and pride at being selected to go “outside” at the Neil Road pub; 3) a hostess’ worry about being groped and being at the beck and call of an “entitled” customer; 4) the feeling of power which such groping might engender for said customer; and 5) the pleasant feelings of conviviality when hostess and customer build organic rapport and reduce their loneliness in the mega-city.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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