

“To Be a Little More Realistic”: The Ethical Labour of Suspension among Nightclub Hostesses in Southeast China

Jiazhi Fengjiang

ABSTRACT

This article explores the “ethical labour” of suspension—the conscious effort of deferring one’s ethical judgement and reflections in order to avoid irreconcilable ethical conflicts between one’s present activities and long-term goals. While people engage in ethical judgement and reflections in everyday social interactions, it is the laborious aspect of regulating one’s ethical dispositions that I highlight in the concept of “ethical labour.” Although it cannot be directly commodified, ethical labour is a form of labour as it consumes energy and is integral to the performance of other forms of labour, particularly intimate and emotional ones. This formulation of ethical labour draws on my long-term ethnographic research with a group of young women migrants working as hostesses in high-end nightclubs in southeast China. Many of them perform socially stigmatized work with the goal of contributing to their family and saving money for a dignified life in the future. Ethical labour is essential to their hostess work because it enables them to juggle multiple affective relationships and defer the fundamental ethical conflict. They express ethical labour through the phrase “to be a little more realistic,” making sure that they obtain what they want at a particular moment. But ethical labour does not simply mean pushing ethical questions aside. It is sustained by conscious effort and is overshadowed by fears of ageing and failure to achieve long-term life goals. Prolonged ethical labour often fails to resolve ethical conflict and may intensify one’s stress. My analysis of these women migrants’ situation contributes to the sex-as-work debate regarding women’s agency in work and their subjection to exploitation.

Keywords: ethical labour, mobility, emotional labour, hostess, sex work, gender, familism, China

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When I visited Lanlan in 2018, she had recently moved from Mu town on China's southeastern coast to the nearby industrial town known as Hu town to work there in a new high-end nightclub as a hostess.¹ She showed me around her new residence—a rented room as tidy and plain as the one she had rented in Mu town. This move, according to her plan, was to earn “the last bucket of gold” in a nightclub before making a full retreat back home to her newly formed family in a village where her husband, parents-in-law, and daughter were waiting for her. Lanlan's target was numerical: she hoped to save at least RMB250,000 (equivalent to USD38,000) in a year, which she saw as the minimum start-up-funds to open a shop in her husband's hometown. This project was so far the most intense and challenging one for Lanlan, both physically and mentally, as she had only two acquaintances in Hu town, women who had been her co-workers in Mu town's nightclub, and therefore she had little social support. But she felt compelled to move because she had just turned 26—the age considered the ceiling for hostesses in high-end nightclubs. She felt her time of being economically productive as a hostess was coming to an end. Lanlan was hopeful that by posing as a virginal 20-year-old newcomer to Hu town she would be able to use her old strategies for soliciting gifts from new customers and thus achieve her goal in one year. To get ready for this project, she had new plastic microsurgery done on her nose, and she started to apply her own makeup to save money. She conceded that she had to “be a little more realistic” (*yao xianshi yidian*) and needed to “compromise her dignity” (*fangxia zizun*).² Otherwise, she feared that she would never be able to escape the nightclub industry.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I found that many young women were like Lanlan—looking forward to quitting hostess work for a targeted dignified life in the future, a life with “economic independence and individual autonomy,” as they put it. This hoped-for life would also be a life free of the memories of their present occupation. There is, however, a seemingly irreconcilable ethical contradiction between their need to compromise their dignity in the present and their hope for a dignified life in the future. How do these young women navigate the liminal space between their present occupation and their long-term goals? Drawing upon Xiang's notion of suspension (*xuanfu*, literally hanging and floating) outlined in the introduction to this special issue, this article explores these young women

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¹ Names of places, organizations, and people have been changed to protect the confidentiality of my research participants.

² Lanlan, interview by author, in person, 9 April 2018.

migrants' experiences, feelings, strategies, perceptions, and structural conditions in navigating this liminal space.

My exploration draws upon my ethnographic research with a group of young women migrants who were working as nightclub hostesses (*yechang xiaojie* in vernacular terms) in Mu town, an industrial county seat in Wenzhou on China's southeastern coast.³ The majority of the young women were born in rural inland provinces and had worked as typical migrant waged labourers before they started working as hostesses in their late teens or early twenties in Wenzhou. They all lived in rooms rented by the month in the same neighbourhood within a 15-minute walk of their workplace—one of the two high-end, beautifully decorated nightclubs in the town. During my fieldwork from 2015 to 2017, I got to know them in their major daytime social space—a beauty salon in the neighbourhood—through Wang Bing, a businessman, and his wife Xiaoling, the salon owner and beautician. During this period, about 15 to 20 young hostesses were regular customers of this salon, and they visited the salon on a daily basis to get made up before going to work. Most of them had been friends and acquaintances of Wang Bing and Xiaoling for many years. I spent long hours in the salon with the couple and these young women. I also spent time with the young women outside the salon space in their rental rooms, nightclubs, shopping streets, and dinner places. I became closest to Lanlan and another young woman, Dan, whom I spent much time with, sometimes with the salon-owning couple whom they had known since they started working in the nightclubs. In 2018 and 2020, I returned to the area for short field visits with my key interlocutors. Long-term participant observation and casual conversations were my main methods. Given my interlocutors' diverse experiences, this article does not attempt to tell a representative story of the entire population of young women who work as nightclub hostesses in China. Indeed, reducing them to a homogeneous group would erase their structural vulnerability on diverse and multiple levels. Instead, this article attempts to highlight the prominent experiences of a number of my interlocutors for whom the question of how to navigate between their present occupation and their long-term goals had become a compelling preoccupation in their daily lives.

In fact, the kinds of contradictions central to the experiences of my interlocutors are also widely documented by research on bar/nightclub hostess in other places in Asia. On one hand, several ethnographies highlight women migrants as desiring subjects who are able to appropriate gendered imaginations to achieve a certain degree of agency or autonomy via sex and hostess work. For instance, Zheng's ethnography on hostesses in Dalian, China, shows how underclass rural young women may subvert "the gender

³ The term *xiaojie* is a vernacular term that refers to the hostesses' profession. See Ding for a review of the popular use of *xiaojie* in China. Ding Yu, *Tashen zhiyu: Zhushanjiào liudongrenkou shequn teshuzhiye yanjiu* [Desire: Transitions and new possibilities for sex work in the Pearl River Delta area] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2016).

and social hierarchy” in an oppressive system in pursuit of a modern and autonomous subjectivity through sex work.⁴ In a similar vein, Hoang’s ethnography on hostesses in high-end nightclubs in Vietnam suggests the possibilities of young women converting money they earn into social status and respect in their home villages through gift giving.⁵ Ding and Ho’s ethnographies on hostesses in the Pearl River Delta highlights women’s everyday tactics of expressing their desires⁶ as well as enhancing their self-esteem and emotional capacity through sex work.⁷ On the other hand, these young women also constantly evoke the moral devaluation and stigma attached to sex work in the broader society. In fact, almost all of my interlocutors carefully hid their work from their family and friends outside the nightclub circle and pretended they were doing a different type of job because they were explicitly concerned that their social circle would see their work as “shameful” or leading to a “loss of face” or revealing a “loss of self-respect.”⁸ They also cried when they were rejected by their relatives and friends who had discovered they were engaged in sex work.⁹ My interlocutors’ evocation of their “compromised dignity” echoes with studies elsewhere that link sex work to low self-esteem, depression, and negative emotions such as guilt and disgust.¹⁰

While these contradictory imaginaries of sex work are central to many women’s motivation for working in the industry and their desire to quit the stigmatized industry for a dignified life in the future, they are largely taken for granted and rarely analyzed. This article takes up this analytical stream by focusing on sex workers’ daily navigation of these contradictions. Based on my ethnographic research, I will show that these young women invest in the “ethical labour” of suspension in navigating the space between the present and the future. By ethical labour of suspension I am referring to the conscious effort of deferring ethical judgement and questions about one’s own activities in order to avoid the irreconcilable ethical conflict between one’s present activities and one’s long-term goals.¹¹ As my interlocutors put it, this conscious effort of navigation is captured by the phrase “to be a little more realistic,”

⁴ Zheng Tiantian, *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Post-Socialist China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 12.

⁵ Kimberly Kay Hoang, *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

⁶ Ding, *Tashen zhiyu*.

⁷ Ding Yu and Petula Sik Ying Ho, “Sex Work in China’s Pearl River Delta: Accumulating Sexual Capital as a Life-Advancement Strategy,” *Sexualities* 16, nos. 1–2 (2012): 43–60.

⁸ See also Susanne Y. P. Choi and Ruby Y. S. Lai, “Sex Work and Stigma Management in China and Hong Kong: The Role of State Policy and NGO Advocacy,” *China Quarterly* (2021): 1–20, 8.

⁹ See also Hoang, *Dealing in Desire*, 166.

¹⁰ Teela Sanders, “‘It’s Just Acting’: Sex Workers’ Strategies for Capitalizing on Sexuality,” *Gender, Work, and Organization* 12, no. 4 (2005): 319–342.

¹¹ My conceptualization of ethical labour benefitted enormously from my conversations with Ka Kin Cheuk, who offered the initial inspiration and suggestions for this article, and with Xiang Biao, who helped me articulate the concept in a new light.

which means making sure that they get what they want in the particular moment. This often involves compromising their dignity to perform acts that are morally questionable or immoral at the social level. The ethnographic findings therefore also contribute to the long-standing sex-as-work debate regarding women's agency in work and their subjection to exploitation. In light of the ethnographic materials, this article first outlines my interventions in the sex-as-work debate. It then offers an overview of the ethical labour of suspension. It continues by examining how the ethical labour of suspension has become critical in the context of the nightclub economy, its varied manifestations, and the consequences of ethical labour. Finally, I will flesh out young women migrants' structural condition in the broader political economy.

Sex as Work: Empowering or Exploitative

Two major paradigms dominate the sex-as-work debate in academia. Briefly, the first research paradigm highlights the exploitative nature of sex work. This is often based on assumptions that sex workers are victims of human trafficking, coercion, drug addiction, and alcohol abuse and therefore need intervention.¹² In the Chinese case, these assumptions corroborate the socialist state's official discourse that constructs sex work as a forced and illegal occupation that necessitates rescue and rehabilitation by either the state apparatus or the voluntary sector. The second research paradigm challenges these widespread assumptions of victimhood by foregrounding the autonomous, empowering, and desirable aspects of sex work.¹³ Researchers such as Pan Suiming, Huang Yingying, and Li Yinhe and activists such as Chi Susheng and Ye Haiyan have been vocal in seeking legal and social recognition in China of sex work as proper work and of "sex workers" (*xing gongzuo zhe*) as workers who deserve equal labour rights.¹⁴ These efforts are primarily based on findings that criminalization of and police raids on sex workers exacerbate the exploitation of women.¹⁵ Politically, I stand with the efforts to decriminalize and destigmatize sex workers and hostesses because this is important to improve their working conditions. However, I learned that for many of my interlocutors, their main concern was quitting their work for a socially recognized livelihood, rather than seeking social, legal, and familial recognition and rights related to their current occupation. Like Lanlan, they constantly emphasized their desire to be "washed white"

¹² For example, see Shaobing Su et al., "Social-Context Factors, Refusal Self-Efficacy, and Alcohol Use among Female Sex Workers in China," *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 20, no. 8 (2015): 889–895.

¹³ See, for instance, Zheng, *Red Lights*; Hoang, *Dealing in Desire*; Ding, *Tashen zhiyu*.

¹⁴ Pan Suiming et al., *Xiaojie: Laodong de quanli* [Female sex workers: The rights of labour] (Hong Kong: Dadao Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Zheng Tiantian. "The Plight of Sex Workers in China: From Criminalisation and Abuse to Activism," *Made in China Journal* 4, no. 1 (2019): 86–91.

(*xibai*) with “proper work” in the future—a future unclouded by their current experiences. Hence, it is important to recognize the diverse demands and experiences of hostesses/sex workers in the industry rather than foregrounding one kind of demand featuring social recognition and legal protection in the battle to destigmatize sex work.

For instance, as Ding points out, the term “sex workers” could be problematic as some hostesses may refuse to be labelled as “sex workers” precisely because such an identification comes with more stigma than recognition.¹⁶ Ding suggests that her interlocutors prefer the Chinese term *xiaojie*, as it connotes being urban, young, virginal, and modern.¹⁷ It also grants the young women the agentive identity to construct their work as a form of “play” and rejects the mainstream “work” narrative embedded in the term “sex worker.” In alignment with Ding, I do not refer to my interlocutors as “sex workers.” This is because they themselves explicitly distinguish themselves from the sex workers on the streets or in indoor massage parlours. Sex work, using the broad definition as “the exchange of sexual or sexualized intimacy for money,”¹⁸ is precisely what my interlocutors attach stigma to and strategize to avoid. In fact, several of them had never engaged in sexual acts with customers. My interlocutors sometimes referred to their work as “doing public relations” (*zuo gongguande*), emphasizing the relational and interactive aspects of their work as well as consciously demarcating themselves from their imaginaries of stigmatized sex work.

Nonetheless, in contrast to Ding’s interlocutors, who prefer a “play” narrative to “work,” show little interest in finding alternative stable jobs, and have vague or no long-term goals,¹⁹ both work and long-term goals are central to how my interlocutors navigate their present and construct a moral imaginary of their work. It is precisely their framing of themselves as a labouring subject working hard to accumulate for a long-term goal that helps them cope with the stigma associated with their work. In fact, one major moral accusation that I heard often in the group was that someone was being “indulgent in play.” It is the labouring subject instead of the desiring and sexually pleasing subject that is the moral source that sustains their present occupation. Therefore, my proposition is that we should not conflate the diverse imaginaries and concerns of sex workers and hostesses into one group. This article focuses on some of the hostesses in high-end nightclubs who recognize sex work/hostessing as work and aspire to quit their hostess work for a socially approved livelihood in the future. A deeper understanding of this group’s concerns and imaginaries would help to better match the

¹⁶ Ding Yu, “Beyond Sex/Work: Understanding Work and Identity of Female Sex Workers in South China,” *Social Inclusion* 8, no. 2 (2020): 95–103.

¹⁷ Ding, “Beyond Sex/Work,” 100–101.

¹⁸ Susan Dewey and Zheng Tiantian, *Ethical Research with Sex Workers Anthropological Approaches* (New York: Springer 2013), 3.

¹⁹ Ding, “Beyond Sex/Work,” 100.

efforts of the researchers and activists with the interests of these women migrants.

As such, this article's analytical approach goes beyond the aforementioned two major paradigms. Rather than foregrounding either the empowering or exploitative dimensions of sex and hostess work, this article draws on the approach Xiang proposes in this special issue, one that develops suspension as an "emic-etic term" through participatory research.²⁰ It attempts to explore nightclub hostesses' navigation of the contradictions from both their own perspectives and from an observer's perspectives, including their unsettling yet hopeful feelings, their agentive strategies of deferring present concerns to the future, and their experiences of feeling trapped as well as their limited capacity, conditioned by their structural positions, to achieve the social mobility they have aspired to. Thus, my analysis mainly relies on the data collected from long-term participant observations and casual conversations with my interlocutors. This article contains direct quotes from my interlocutors, but I do not take their statements at face value as representing "what they think." Rather, I try to present them as how they make sense of and represent their experiences through particular narrative forms in a particular conversational context that involves identity performance and meaning making.²¹ I also acknowledge that my interactions with my interlocutors and my analysis are influenced by my own positionality as a young Chinese woman. However, discussing my emotions and my reactions to my interlocutors in a reflexive manner is not the subject matter of this article.²²

Most of the research on bar hostesses in China has been done in larger cities, where rural young women are represented as "brokers of modernity" who have escaped rural familial life in search of a modern life in the cities.²³ This article takes into account the specific cultural-economic settings of county-seat towns that contribute to the local set-up of the high-end nightclub industry.²⁴ It shows how these young women's more conformist attitudes towards familism and gendered norms become perpetuating drivers for them to engage in hostess work and how the family becomes an ultimate circle of relations that pushes them to quit their hostess work. They are hence trapped in suspension.

²⁰ Xiang Biao, this issue, 233-250.

²¹ For reflections on this, see Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 75-78; Harriet Evans, *Beijing from Below: Stories of Marginal Lives in the Capital's Center* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 4.

²² Cf. Dewey and Zheng, *Ethical Research*.

²³ Zheng, *Red Lights*, 5.

²⁴ See also Pan et al.'s comparative research in northeast and southeast China, which offers insights into different sex industry arrangements: Pan et al., *Xiaojie*.

The Ethical Labour of Suspension

My formulation of “ethical labour” draws insights from the concept of emotional labour and the recent “ethical turn” in anthropology. Emotional labour, in Hochschild’s original definition, “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.”²⁵ An important theoretical insight of emotional labour rests on the distinction Hochschild makes between emotion work and emotional labour, corresponding to managing the private and social side of emotions. Emotion work is directed by individuals at governing their emotional exchanges in the private sphere. It is when one performs emotion work as a paid public act that is directed by “rules of feeling” monitored by others that one performs emotional labour. In the case of sex work, women need to perform intensive emotional labour to negotiate the commodification of their body and of intimacy,²⁶ which often involves “separating the body from the self.”²⁷ As Sanders’ study shows, one of the emotion management strategies women use is to create a “manufactured identity”—drawing clear boundaries between sex as private romantic relations and sex as a business strategy for financial gain.²⁸ It is this form of “acting,”²⁹ “performing,”³⁰ or playing the “role”³¹ of a sex worker that enables women to separate their self from their manufactured identity in the work setting.

While such strategies are also commonly found among my interlocutors, I suggest that this strategic separation of the self from work involves not only intensive emotional labour but also ethical labour as they are consciously managing and deferring their self-reflections while acting or performing a manufactured identity at work. Here, we may also draw an analytical distinction between the private and social sides of ethics to help formulate the idea of ethical labour as distinct from ethical work. The recent ethical turn in anthropology is particularly helpful here. A growing number of anthropological studies are attempting to move away from the Durkheimian perspective that views morality as a collective compilation of rules and values exclusively derived from social life to alternative paradigms that foreground individual ethical life.³² A particularly insightful development in this debate

²⁵ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 7.

²⁶ See, for example, Sanders, “It’s Just Acting.”

²⁷ Maggie O’Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism: Towards a Politics of Feeling* (London: Polity Press, 2000), 89.

²⁸ Sanders, “It’s Just Acting,” 323.

²⁹ Sanders, “It’s Just Acting.”

³⁰ O’Neil, *Prostitution and Feminism*, 84.

³¹ Gillian M. Abel, “Different Stage, Different Performance: The Protective Strategy of Role Play on Emotional Health in Sex Work,” *Social Science & Medicine* 72, no. 7 (2011): 1177–1184.

³² See, for example, James Laidlaw, “For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8 (2002): 311–332; Michael Lambek, ed., *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology Language, and Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

is the concept of “ordinary ethics.”³³ The ordinary ethics approach recognizes both the universality of the question of “how one ought to live” and the particularity of how such self-questioning takes place in different contexts.³⁴ In this view, ethics is pervasive; it is *not* a practice distinct from other everyday life practices, nor does it operate in the same way everywhere. Furthering the debate on ordinary ethics, Stafford and his collaborators show in a collection of ethnographies about China that “explicit” or “conscious” ethical judgements, reflections, and decision making constitute routine and ordinary “aspects of human life.”³⁵

Following Stafford’s approach to ordinary ethics, my formulation of ethical work and ethical labour also addresses the explicit or conscious rather than the implicit or embodied ethical practices that are acquired through socialization. We may use the term ethical work to refer to explicit or conscious ethical practices in private realms, the kind that are well examined by anthropologists of China and are particularly evident in forms of the “divided self” struggling between diverse moral frameworks.³⁶ I use ethical labour to refer to the conscious ethical practice involved in regulating one’s ethical judgement and self-questioning, which functions as a backstage enabler for other forms of commodified labour. This focus on an explicit or conscious ethical practice also draws from Keane’s critical insights into the interactional foundation of ethical life.³⁷ Keane’s postulation that ethical reflections only arise through social interactions is critical here. Although people engage in ethical judgement, reflections, and dilemmas in everyday social interactions, it is the laborious aspect of regulating one’s ethical dispositions in social interactions that I highlight in the concept of ethical labour. Although ethical labour is not a form of labour to be sold or bought as a stand-alone commodity, it is labour inasmuch as it consumes energy, enacts physical activities, affects actors’ mental and physical health, and, most importantly, is integral to performing other forms of labour, particularly the intimate and emotional. It is precisely this backstage nature of ethical labour that makes it invisible and susceptible to the process of exploitation.

In the case of nightclub hostesses, ethical labour is a critical component of emotional labour and enables the commodification of the intimate, the sexual, and the emotional. Ethical labour involves explicitly managing one’s ethical dispositions—the pervasive judgements and evaluations of one’s own

³³ Veena Das, “Ordinary Ethics,” in *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, ed. Didier Fassin (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 133–149; Lambek, *Ordinary Ethics*.

³⁴ Lambek, *Ordinary Ethics*, 2–3.

³⁵ Charles Stafford, ed., *Ordinary Ethics in China* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 5.

³⁶ See, for example, Arthur Kleinman et al., *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Liu Xin, *In One’s Own Shadow: An Ethnographic Account of the Condition of Post-Reform Rural China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Hans Steinmüller, *Community of Complicity: Everyday Ethics in Rural China* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).

³⁷ Webb Keane, *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

acts. The ethical labour of suspension is a particular form of ethical labour which involves consciously deferring one's self-judgement and reflections on the self. It has several dimensions.

First, women hostesses see some of their practices as ethically questionable at the social level. As mentioned earlier, they usually hide their actual work and tell their families they are working as waitresses, managers, or saleswomen who are selling alcoholic drinks in nightclubs. They typically sort their WeChat friend circles into several groups so that certain posts are only visible to certain groups and are hidden from others.

Second, most of them do not contest or attempt to subvert the mainstream stigmatization of their work. At the same time, their current socially unjustifiable practices become ethically justifiable when they understand these practices as a necessary step towards the dignified future life that they aspire to. For instance, they often refer to "economic independence" and "individual autonomy" as the social standing they will gain in the future. Unlike the individualized neoliberal subjects embodied by Korean sex workers in the US,³⁸ some of my interlocutors invoked a gendered ethics of sacrifice and care that conforms to familism. This involves fulfilling obligations or making sacrificial contributions to their natal family as filial daughters, to their children as caring mothers, or to their husband's family, which they draw upon as the basis of their ethical justification of their current sex work and the coping strategies they use to manage the stigma.³⁹ As the following section shows, in their long-term goals, family—whether it is their existing family or the family they wish to have—occupies an important place in their lives. Gendered roles in the family feed into their imagination of the future, which reproduces the gendered hierarchy in some cases and subverts it in others.

Third, in the present moment they have to struggle constantly in order to defer self-questioning and self-judgement. Accordingly, the ethical labour of suspension is an active and conscious effort that involves self-care and self-persuasion ("to be a bit more realistic") and is targeted at seeking social recognition not in the present moment but after this temporary period of suspension. This is most evident when they need to juggle multiple relations through physical mobility and temporal demarcations, which is explored in the following section.

Finally, ethical labour is not simply pushing questions aside. The labour is sustained by conscious effort and is overshadowed by fears about ageing and failure to achieve long-term life goals. Similar to emotional labour, which is often found to be labour-intensive and effort-intensive,⁴⁰ ethical labour is

³⁸ Sealing Cheng and Eunjung Kim, "The Paradoxes of Neoliberalism: Migrant Korean Sex Workers in the United States and 'Sex Trafficking,'" *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 21, no. 3 (2014): 355–381.

³⁹ See also Choi and Lai, "Sex Work."

⁴⁰ Ronnie J. Steinberg and Deborah M. Figart, "Emotional Labor since *The Managed Heart*," *Annals of the American Academy* 561, no. 1 (1999): 8–26.

often experienced as taxing, stressful, and painful. Due to its taxing nature, women usually start with a “quick in, quick out” approach to shorten their hostessing careers. As the final section shows, similar to emotional labour that induces a deep sense of alienation on multiple levels, prolonged ethical labour often fails to resolve ethical conflicts and may intensify mental stress.

Ethical Labour in the Context of the Nightclub Economy

As an important glue in private business deal making, the contemporary rise of the nightclub economy in Wenzhou goes hand in hand with the growth in private industry, the increased human mobility, and the accompanying informal rental room infrastructure since the 1980s. Since the economic reforms towards privatization and marketization in the 1980s, China’s southeastern coast has enjoyed development from below. The local private economy is mainly composed of small- and medium-sized enterprises that are mostly buttressed by a close-knit social network of private financing and *guanxi* (social connections) that merges formal and informal economic practices.⁴¹ These private enterprises attract a large inflow of migrant workers from other provinces who work as waged labourers and businesspersons. Some of these sojourning migrant workers, both men and women, end up working in the nightclub industry, and they all reside in monthly rental rooms which offer them the flexibility and anonymity needed for continuous mobility. Unlike the formal rental market, monthly rental rooms operate in a legal grey zone without rental contracts and identification card registrations. These monthly rental rooms are usually located within a typical family house and thus are well hidden from outsiders, and their precise addresses are never advertised to the public. Tenants may stay for less than a month or up to ten years, on and off. Whatever the length, rents and leases are always calculated and paid monthly in cash.

During my fieldwork in Mu town, two officially registered nightclubs occupied the highest end of the local nightlife/sex industry in the new development area where my interlocutors were working. Unlike typical sex work, where workers offer sexual services for money, nightclub hostess work is ambiguous in terms of selling sexualized intimacy for money and involves complex boundary-crossing negotiations. This ambiguous boundary crossing also puts their work in a legal grey zone, or what they themselves understand as “playing the edge ball”; it is neither illegal nor completely legal. On one hand, they are officially registered at the local police station as “public

⁴¹ Xiang Biao, *Transcending Boundaries Zhejiangcun: The Story of a Migrant Village in Beijing*, trans. Jim Weldon (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Zhang Li, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China’s Floating Population* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994).

relations workers.” On the other hand, any commercialized sexual acts performed in the nightclub space or outside of it are in theory punishable. Furthermore, these boundary-crossing negotiations are an important means for hostesses to raise or maintain their “body price” (*shenjia*)—a common term that refers to the prospect of commercializing one’s body, contributing to a hierarchical valuation of hostesses in the nightclub circle. Usually, the more hostesses hold back from agreeing to commodified sexual acts with customers, the higher they are ranked. Giving ready consent to commodified sexual acts makes them second-class hostesses in the circle. Such ambiguity in hostess work necessitates the performance of ethical labour as a part of emotional labour.

Another factor that feeds into the enactment of ethical labour is the initial motivation of the women who take up hostess work in the industry: to earn money. Except for one local woman, most of my interlocutors were second- or third-generation migrants who were raised by grandparents in villages while their parents were working as migrant workers elsewhere. The majority were in their early twenties and were unmarried. But several married women maintained close contact with their young children who were being raised in their husbands’ villages. A number of them had had several years’ experience working in nightclubs and karaoke bars in cities of the Pearl River Delta before coming to Mu town. They told me that the hostess work in these towns in Wenzhou was more profitable than in larger cities, and they felt they had better prospects of marrying a local businessman in towns than in larger cities. Those who had not worked in nightclubs before usually had a history of working in laborious waged work before being introduced to work as hostesses.⁴² They described their initial entry as due to the allure of how easily nightclub hostesses seemed to make money. Sometimes a hostess’s one-night earnings might exceed their own income for an entire year of waged work.

For some of the women, the urgent need to earn money became a preoccupation at some point due to incidents related to family members (usually their extended family, including the husband’s family if they were married). Despite the varying degrees of urgency, all the young women shared an imagined future out there *after* this period of working as a hostess, which created a liminal space between the present and the future they aspired to. Most of my interlocutors adopted a “quick in, quick out” strategy with a clear target of termination of their hostess work. Some were only there for several months with a clear date of exit. Their present unceasing work was aimed at earning the target amount of money until the day they quit the nightclub so that they might embark on a conventional family life and secure

⁴² This is similar to Pan et al.’s findings in southeast China, where migrant women chose to progress from factory work to sex work in hopes of more financial gain and less physical labour. Pan et al., *Xiaojie*.

a better social-economic standing for the next generation. Their ethical labour of suspension was a necessity in this race against time.

Furthermore, the particular setup in the high-end nightclubs also offered them flexibility and the hope of reaching their target within a relatively short period of time. Although nightclub hostesses usually worked in one nightclub for a long, continuous period of time, all of them were self-employed. Unlike the transnational migration of sex workers in Asia that is heavily mediated by brokers,⁴³ the high-end nightclub industry in Mu town does not rely on brokers for the recruitment of hostesses. This is also very different from the way the high-end hostess industry is organized in larger cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. In these larger cities, high-end hostesses or escorts are often employed by agent companies registered as “public relations” or “model” companies. These agent companies broker and allocate hostesses’ daily work. Being self-employed means that hostesses in Mu town need to broker for themselves. In order to develop relationships with reliable and generous customers and have a higher income, they need to cultivate close working relationships with the assistant managers (*lingban*) who are employed by the nightclub and are responsible for helping customers book rooms and commission hostesses. Involved in such mutually beneficial relationships, hostesses and *lingban* often socialize together, and hostesses only change *lingban* when one of them is no longer working in the nightclub.

Being self-employed also means that the women earn the full amount of the cash transferred from their customers without mediation, and their performance of emotional labour is crucial to receiving higher fees from their customers. In the nightclub, *lingban* set up standard hostess fees for each hostess, a minimum amount of cash that the customer must pay to the hostess directly for her company in the nightclub room. This part is not included in the bills the nightclub charges the customer. In 2017, the fees were in two grades: RMB550 and 650. Yet, a customer could pay a hostess as much as tens of thousands of RMB if he wished. With the help of *lingban*, some popular hostesses could earn a minimum of RMB2,000 in hostess fees each night working from one room to the next. An average monthly income for a hostess could easily be three to ten times what the average waged work paid in town.

In order to shorten their careers as hostesses, most of the women worked every day as long as they could in order to maintain a continuous income. Days they did not work were commonly called “days that are wasted.” For instance, many of them only took one trip a year back to their hometowns. This annual trip occurred around two weeks before the Chinese New Year,

⁴³ Cf. Sverre Molland, “Safe Migration, Dilettante Brokers and the Appropriation of Legality: Lao-Thai ‘Trafficking’ in the Context of Regulating Labour Migration,” *Pacific Affairs* 85, no. 1 (2012): 117–136; Johan Lindquist, Xiang Biao, and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, “Introduction: Opening the Black box of Migration: Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility, and the Changing Political Economy in Asia,” *Pacific Affairs* 85, no. 1 (2012): 7–9.

and they had to rush back to work before the holiday started. The Chinese New Year is the busiest season for the nightclub industry for county-seat towns like Mu town, when all the businessmen return home. During the annual busy season from New Year's Eve to January 15 in the lunar calendar, all the prices at nightclubs are doubled. In order to maximize financial gains, nightclub companies pre-pay every worker and hostess about RMB50,000 for them to take home for a family reunion on their annual visit home so that the workers are ready to work nonstop in the busy season.

The journey of my key interlocutor Lanlan into the industry is a typical case. Lanlan was born in the early 1990s in rural Yunan. She had been working as a street vendor selling tea and blankets in Jiangxi. After she moved to Mu town, she worked on the shop floor in a local factory and then as a restaurant waitress before being introduced to work at the nightclub. She started working in the nightclub in 2010, first as a *lingban* with a monthly salary of RMB3,000 and then, very soon, as a hostess. In 2012, two years into her hostess work, Lanlan went back to Jiangxi for a blind date and married her husband in rural Jiangxi, and she gave birth to her daughter in 2013. Several months after Lanlan returned to Mu town, her mother-in-law had a stroke, and she then felt a much stronger urgency to earn quick money. She had to send the majority of her earnings back home, and she became “thoughtful” (*dongshi*), meaning she became more “realistic” about earning and saving money to prepare for adversities in life. Because of the urgent needs of her family, she stayed longer in the hostess work and was not able to take a “quick out” as she had planned. Lanlan was used to calculating her savings and spending; having her daily account in mind fuelled her daily work. Each month, Lanlan would send at least RMB3,000 to her husband. She also sent RMB50,000 to her natal family in Yunan as a contribution to their building of new houses.

Like Lanlan, many hostesses race against time to accumulate savings to meet their targeted long-term goal. Instead of having the objective of escaping from and negating rural life, rejoining family life back home in villages and towns is the desire that these young women have to defer for the present and yet try hard to realize in the future. Hence, achieving the desired state of “economic independence and individual autonomy” in the future ironically necessitates enormous ethical labour to defer judgement about their present work.

Ethical Labour between Multiple Relations

In this race against time, the ethical labour of suspension becomes most evident in the hostesses' strategies for juggling multiple relationships and roles. These relationships are spatially spread out and are temporally clearly demarcated: one-night customers versus temporary local boyfriends versus permanent family relations. The wisdom of the phrase “to be a little more realistic” entails deferring the hostesses' ethical self-questioning so that they

may draw a clear boundary between roles that are private and roles that are staged for financial gain.

To begin with, the night-time hostess work required the most intense performance of ethical labour and emotional labour. In a normal day, my interlocutors worked from around 7:30 p.m. until 2 or 3 a.m. in the clubs. They were paired with male customers to encourage them to consume more beer and do more singing in club rooms that resembled luxurious karaoke rooms. They engaged in intensive emotional labour to induce a certain feeling in their customers that would result in higher hostess fees. After escort work at the nightclubs, they might be approached by customers who wanted to perform sexual acts with them. At this point, they needed to strategize the negotiation and either reject the proposal or agree to it for a very high fee. Any sexual acts also ideally needed to be negotiated in the name of romantic relations instead of commercial relations for higher escort fees. I heard of cases where hostesses offered gifts to the *lingban* for a collaborative setup (*ju*) to allure customers to offer a much higher overnight escort fee that amounted to hundreds of thousands of RMB.

At the same time, the hostesses needed to carefully maintain their relationships with their long-term customers-turned-boyfriends, who were usually local married middle-aged businessmen. This is because the income they earned outside of the nightclubs from their intimate interactions with their local boyfriends, with or without sexual acts, comprised a major proportion of their income. Many of my interlocutors received gifts in the form of iPhones, jewellery, perfume, assistance paying bills, and cash gift via WeChat transfer from their customers, their pursuers, and their boyfriends on various occasions and on days of celebrations. Therefore, they needed to carefully plan birthday parties and strategize whom to invite to pay for which bills without causing conflict between their pursuers and their boyfriends. Similar to Tsang's findings about high-end sex work⁴⁴ these long-term intimate relationships also helped them to demarcate themselves from the stigma associated with sex work.

In order to juggle these multiple relationships, the hostesses needed to maintain a high degree of physical mobility. The common rule in the industry is that one should work in a region far away from home and therefore protect oneself from exposing the hostess work to one's hometown social circles. In addition, in order to prevent boyfriends, customers, pursuers, and co-workers from running into to each other unexpectedly, the hostesses typically shared the rent of an additional monthly rental room with a close friend who was also a hostess. For instance, Lanlan and one of her hostess friends had their own sleeping rooms in one place and co-rented another room at another location a ten-minute walk from their residences. They coordinated with

⁴⁴ Tsang Eileen Yuk-ha, "Neither 'Bad' nor 'Dirty': High-End Sex Work and Intimate Relationships in Urban China," *China Quarterly* 230 (2017): 444–463.

each other who would stay overnight in the room they co-rented in case of an unexpected visit from their boyfriends. Furthermore, some of the most mobile hostesses made Mu town their base camp and spent some days in another neighbouring town and some days in a city such as Shanghai. Such continuous spatial mobility allowed them to earn a much higher income by staging themselves as newcomers and yet also carried a higher risk of violence when they had little social support in a new place.

At the same time, the hostesses needed to strategize the engagement and disengagement of the self in multiple relationships and roles. Take Lanlan's experience as an example. One of the merits of hostess work, in Lanlan's view, was to accumulate "observations about all sorts of men."⁴⁵ After a couple of conversations with a man, she would quickly classify him into a type and strategize her engagement with him. She selected boyfriends from her pursuers who were businessmen who genuinely adored her and who did not have multiple sexual relationships. What's more, unlike other hostesses who maintained multiple relations with several local boyfriends at once, Lanlan usually kept one relatively long-term relationship with one local boyfriend at a time and only occasionally accepted requests for overnight escort from her customers. This was to maintain her "body price" at a high level since a single romantic relationship made her more "genuine" and "pure" by reputation than the other hostesses who kept multiple boyfriends. In Mu town, Lanlan had maintained a relationship with a married entrepreneur, Mr. Lin. Mr. Lin had been gifting her RMB2,000 per month for several years. Whenever he came to her nightclub room, she would receive an additional 3,000, which was many times her standard fee. Lanlan told me that Mr. Lin was someone who understood her and someone she felt "very close to." They would have lengthy conversations about many aspects of their lives that they would never share with their own spouses. They sometimes talked overnight without having sex.

Meanwhile, Lanlan was more rational than other hostesses in separating her life at home from her hostess work in Mu town, enabling her to maintain her image as a virtuous daughter, mother, and wife in the rural villages of Jiangxi and Yunan. Lanlan held daily WeChat video chats with her daughter while working in Mu town. The relatively large amount of the remittances she sent home also translated into a respectable position within her husband's family. Each time she went back to the village, usually once a year, she would be treated "like a queen" by the large family. That one week of the year was lived in a drastically different temporal rhythm than her life in Mu town. Unlike the late-night work schedule in Mu town, she would get up early and go to sleep early in her home village. Her husband and her mother-in-law would cook three big meals for her every day and discourage her from doing household chores. She would wear comfortable clothes and shoes and would

⁴⁵ Lanlan, interview, in person, 9 August 2016.

not wear makeup. She would play with her daughter and go for hikes in the nearby mountains.

We can see that temporal demarcations and spatial mobility enabled the hostesses to juggle multiple relationships and roles. They needed to consciously make an effort to disengage the self when at work and to demarcate their commercial relationships from their romantic ones. Failure to make this effort commonly led to increased emotional distress. Indeed, in the beauty salon, one of the favourite topics among the young women was about each other's "good" and "bad" boyfriends and customers. Their stories of passionate and romantic love were always coupled with stories of abortions, illness, violence, betrayals, abandonment, and even suicide attempts. In these conversations, they would invoke the phrase "to be a little more realistic" to express the self-protective strategy of never investing oneself in romantic fantasies.

Consequences of Prolonged Suspension

Although the ethical labour of suspension enabled these young women to make boundary-crossing negotiations and juggle multiple affective worlds, it did not stop their self-reflection and did not eliminate their stress. A temporal fear—the fear of losing their youth—created tremendous anxiety about the likelihood that they would fail to achieve their long-term goals. In order to maintain a younger look, many of them regularly received plastic microsurgery because they would not be able to work in a high-end nightclub if they appeared more than 25 years old. At the same time, the demands of ethical suspension went somewhat against their instincts as they were inclined to judge, evaluate, and reflect on their customers', pursuers', and boyfriends' acts in order to protect themselves from potential harm. The continuous strain of pushing themselves to be more realistic and of practicing the ethical labour came at a cost. Instead of resolving the ethical conflict, prolonged ethical labour often intensified the women's stress. This section elaborates on the consequences of prolonged suspension.

To begin with, although these young women dressed glamorously, were able to earn a much higher income than local average waged work, and spent much money on drinking, food, and clothing, there was also a bitter aspect to their daily life. During the daytime, they had to spend a high proportion of their income and time to sustain their physical bodies so they could do their hostess work at night. Common bodily reactions to their long-term disordered diet, sleep, alcohol consumption, and stress included enteritis, stomach aches, diarrhea, menstrual cramps, no menstruation, and high fever. A range of illnesses often kept them in their rental rooms taking a nap, visiting local clinics, or, in the worst cases, taking days off work, thus demarcating their daily life as "daytime intravenous injection, night-time singing" (*baitian diandi, wanshang chang*), a sarcastic phrase Dan, one of my

interlocutors, shared with me when I was accompanying her to a local clinic for an intravenous injection. Indeed, conversations about health concerns and WeChat posts exhibiting photos of a clinic's injection room were among the most popular topics of conversation when they gathered in the beauty salon to get ready for their work at night. Although physical violence and drug addiction were rare in this circle, deteriorating health due to long-term illness was one of the factors that prevented them from working more than ten years in nightclubs.

Furthermore, although these young women were in a race against time to shorten their time hostessing, their sense that they never had enough money and the difficulties of transitioning to alternative livelihoods prolonged their stay in this work, giving them the growing sense of being trapped. Lanlan had tried hard to defer her ethical judgement, and yet her occasional resistance to “compromising” her dignity dragged her, as it did her co-workers, to overstay their time as a hostess:

Once you stay for too long, it takes you over and transforms your spirit, personality, and values about marriage. You have to be more realistic and take whatever means necessary to achieve your goals [of earning money]. Only this kind of person is fit for the nightclub work. People like me are just wasting the time and not earning enough money.⁴⁶

“Take whatever means necessary to achieve your goals” is another expression concerning ethical labour. It involves compromising one's dignity by soliciting money, accepting the alluringly high amount of WeChat transfers offered by male customers, and manipulating multiple affective relationships for one's own interests without investing much personal emotion, as well as being willing to agree to perform sexual acts. The ambiance of earning money and calculating how much they earned every day with a deliberate effort of ethical suspension could become a heavy strain on some hostesses' mental and physical health. A common way they coped with the stress was by indulging in strong-tasting food and drinking even more after work despite knowing that the beer they consumed in nightclubs was mostly adulterated alcohol that was harmful to their health. Occasionally, hostesses would throw a banquet where most of the food was wasted. Then, they would drink heavily and cry together in a group. Those who were very depressed drank and cried each day after work. Not consuming enough carbohydrates (in an attempt to stay slim), coupled with daily heavy drinking, subjected some of them to severe mental health issues.

I heard Lanlan and several other hostesses talking about quitting nightclub work several times. Yet, exiting fully was difficult. Lanlan's target was clear when she moved to Hu town in 2018, but such targets were not always easy

⁴⁶ Lanlan, interview, in person, 9 April 2018.

to reach. Earning the “last bucket of gold” before quitting was always easier to dream of than to attain. Even after reaching a partial target, they were often faced with a new need to earn a certain amount of money and hence deferred the day when they would quit the nightclub work. Some of them successfully accumulated several million RMB and yet were not able to quit the nightclub as they had hoped and lost their money to their boyfriends, who cheated them. The target, and hence the day they would quit the nightclub, kept moving. Even though some of the hostesses had quit for one or two years and transitioned to waged work, they came back to the nightclub work after some time. For instance, Lanlan worked as a salesperson in a wine shop in Hu town for about a year in 2019 and had a monthly income of about RMB10,000 to 20,000, which was three to six times the local average for wage work. Yet, she found the work more mentally draining than hostess work as she had to attend banquets with officials every night and drink a lot of wine. She became severely depressed in 2019. She told me she could not stop crying every night. Luckily, some of her friends comforted her and took her to hospital. After medication, she gradually recovered. Then, for several months she had a series of health issues, from pelvic inflammatory disease to acute gastroenteritis, that prevented her from working. This lasted until 2020 during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Lanlan spent a long time resting at home in her husband’s village, and she returned to Hu town immediately after the lockdown in March 2020. Yet, she had to take another week’s treatment to properly recover and be ready to work. When I visited her after the lockdown had ended, she had just resumed her hostess work in Hu town. She was thinner and was smiling much more than before. “Everyone is telling me that I smile much more. Do you know what it means to smile more?” Lanlan asked me. She paused. “In psychological theory, it means I am more confident.”⁴⁷ She told me that her long forced rest and disengagement from the nightclub life made her more appreciative of staying alone and being confident about her plan of quitting the nightclub and finding “proper work.” “Actually, the biggest motivation for me to quit was my daughter,” Lanlan told me. The unexpected lockdown during the pandemic allowed her to spend the longest time she had ever had at home with her daughter. She told me that she could feel that her five-year-old daughter needed her physical company much more strongly than when she was younger. At the same time, she also found out during the lockdown that her husband had been having an affair with a village neighbour. This sent her a signal that “it is time to quit” before the family became broken from within. “Between family and money,” she said, she chose family. Family was something “a woman must have.” She added, “If a woman doesn’t have a family, she doesn’t have a place of belonging,

⁴⁷ Lanlan, interview, in person, 9 June 2020.

just like a wild ghost.” I heard this expression of the value of family repeatedly, spoken by many hostesses who planned to exit the nightclub industry and have a dignified life. However, family, in their terms, usually did not entail expectations about a romantic marriage relationship with their husband.

Lanlan was realistic about the possibilities for work and the difficulties of the transition after a full exit. She recognized that she did not have any “educational qualifications” (*xueli*) and hence would not be able to “understand professional terms.” But her strength was that she had “social experiences” (*yueli*) and was able to “help connect resources and mediate public relations.” There were several options in her mind. At one point, her favourite option was to open a beauty salon in her husband’s hometown. To achieve this, she needed to get training in makeup, plastic microsurgery, tattooing, nail art, massage, etc. This was a big decision because an apprenticeship in the beauty industry meant that she would not be able to earn money for one to two years. She could not train and do the hostess work at the same time as she would not be able to focus or think well in the daytime after heavy consumption of adulterated beer in the evenings. Furthermore, the recent pandemic had made her concerned about the financial risks of opening a beauty salon because several beauty parlours in Hu town and Mu town had gone bankrupt during the lockdown. She recently told me her new plan: “The best work I want to find is to work for someone on a stable salary of around RMB3,000 to 4,000 per month. Very uneventful and very good!”⁴⁸ In fact, she had figured out that the process of being “washed white” was quite straightforward—registering as an employee of a private enterprise and paying social security contributions for about two years.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to leave everything behind and find the kind of formal and stable employment that Lanlan hoped to have in her husband’s hometown. Indeed, as Pan et al.’s comparative studies also demonstrate, these young women’s underclass position in the larger political economy contributed to their limited chances for social mobility and decent work opportunities in the labour market.⁴⁹ In fact, it is also a common finding that hostess work does not necessarily improve women’s economic conditions as much as they had hoped.⁵⁰ Wang Bing and Xiaoling recalled that over the past decade, only two of the many young women they had been acquainted with had succeeded in accumulating enough capital and landing a good marriage through a short career as a nightclub hostess. The rest of them were trapped in a state of being unable to exit or of being downgraded to second-class hostesses as they aged.

⁴⁸ Lanlan, interview, in person, 9 June 2020.

⁴⁹ Pan et al., *Xiaojie*; Pan Suiming, and Huang Yingying, “Zhongguo donbei diqu laodongli shichangzhong dxing xingongzuoze” [Women sex workers in China’s northeastern labour market], *Shehuixue Yanjiu* 3 (2003): 51–63.

⁵⁰ See also Ding and Ho, “Sex Work.”

The Predicament of the Ethical Proletariat

In conclusion, many hostesses working in high-end nightclubs navigate the space between their present occupation and their future goals through performing the intensive ethical labour of suspension. Instead of approaching hostess work as “play” or as a way to subvert the patriarchal hegemony,⁵¹ work and long-term goals were central to many of my interlocutors’ daily navigations between the present and the future. They raced against time in order to shorten their hostessing careers and made an effort to leave the hostess work behind in order to transition to the life they aspired to in the future—one that would conform to mainstream familism to varying degrees. As stressful as it could be to perform ethical labour, there were many forces that prohibited them from making a quick exit. Gendered familial obligations played a paradoxical role here. On one hand, a conventional family life with sufficient material wealth and social recognition with stable “proper work” back in their hometown provided the strongest impetus for most of them to sustain their ethical labour of suspension. On the other hand, their concerns about maintaining their marriage and securing a better future for their children also made them seek various ways to quit the nightclub and be “washed white.”

This paradox meant that their ethical labour ultimately often failed to resolve the fundamental ethical conflict between their present activity and their long-term goals, despite their intentions. They were like Xiang Biao’s description of the hummingbird in his introduction to this issue: “struggles hard but moves nowhere ... incapable of landing.”⁵² For many of them, their years of nightclub hostess work had a tremendously detrimental effect on their mental and physical health as well as their future family life. It was only when they were too ill to work and were forced to rest that they started to smile a bit more.⁵³ Moreover, the ethical labour they performed rested upon a particular gendered ethics of sacrifice and care. As underclass young women, the family that they had been contributing to might turn against them at any time once their husband or parents-in-law discovered their hostess work. Recently, Lanlan’s husband divorced her when the family found out the source of her huge remittances, leaving her with little savings. The filial daughter and caring mother once again became the object of moral blame in the patriarchal hegemony. She had not been able to see her daughter since the divorce, and she had to start working again for her last bucket of gold. These women migrants’ predicaments remind us that

⁵¹ Cf. Ding, *Desires*; Ding, “Beyond Sex/Work”; Zheng, *Red Lights*.

⁵² Xiang Biao, this issue, 233–250

⁵³ This is similar to what Ralph Litzinger has discussed in his paper on mine workers with black lung disease, which was presented at the “Suspension” workshop in Oxford on 17 September 2018, organized by the University of Oxford.

alongside our efforts to destigmatize and decriminalize sex work, we should also direct our efforts to tackling deeper levels of inequality.

Finally, I wish to extend the discussion of ethical labour to the wider political economy. In her classic thesis, Hochschild insightfully exposes the alienating effect of emotional labour and the exploitation of feelings in contemporary global capitalism. Following Hochschild, Macdonald and Sirianni refer to the frontline service workers and paraprofessionals who are under much more monitoring and external instructions than white-collar workers as the “emotional proletariat.”⁵⁴ Similarly, ethical labour takes varied forms, is critical to work in other contexts, and is performed by both men and women. For instance, the studies in this special issue, particularly the ones on female Chinese workers in Singapore⁵⁵ and on unskilled labour outmigrants in northeast China,⁵⁶ show people’s conscious holding back from ethical reflections. It is particularly labour intensive for those who need to monitor and regulate their ethical questioning in order to sell their labour as a commodity. We may call them members of the “ethical proletariat.”

Admittedly, people who are in a higher social-economic stratum may also perform ethical labour in certain contexts, but it is usually the underclass of a society, who have few alternatives for social mobility, who perform the most intensive ethical labour to the extent that it drains them mentally and physically. Rather than being caught up in ethical struggles in the context of the ongoing diversification of moral frameworks in China, these underclass young women migrants, who are primarily concerned about their material life and a dignified social standing, are prone to holding much stronger moral judgements and evaluations than the educated middle class. It is precisely their conformist attitudes towards certain moral values such as familism that make them less likely to seek to subvert the mainstream moral values and hegemony. It is also their strong moral judgements that make their conscious suspension of their ethical judgement labour intensive and energy draining. Accordingly, these members of the ethical proletariat are exploited not only in terms of their physical, emotional, and intimate labour, but they are also, and perhaps more fundamentally, exploited in terms of their own ethical labour to suspend judgement and self-reflection.

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom, March, 2021

⁵⁴ Cameron Lynne Macdonald and Carmen Sirianni, eds., *Working in the Service Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 3.

⁵⁵ Yang Wei, this issue.

⁵⁶ Xiang Biao, this issue, 233–250