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## Five

# ANTI-TRAFFICKING CAMPAIGN AND KARAOKE BAR HOSTESSES IN CHINA<sup>1</sup>

**Tiantian Zheng**

### **Abstract**

This article discusses the adverse effect upon sex workers of China's abolitionist policy that focuses on forced prostitution and launches anti-trafficking campaigns. The argument developed in this paper is based on over twenty months of fieldwork between 1999 and 2002 in Dalian. I will discuss first the karaoke bar industry and China's policy of anti-trafficking campaigns. I will then demonstrate the impact of this policy on hostesses in karaoke bars. I will follow it with an account of how, unlike the government's perception of forced prostitution, hostesses voluntarily choose their profession and actively seek sex work in countries such as Japan and Singapore.

### **Introduction**

The heavy thud of techno-music drums rumbles from the entrance of a karaoke bar. Three tall and beautiful young women dressed in identical red cheongsams bow elegantly to all entering customers and usher them inside the bar. The entryway spills out into an expansive lobby of glossy marble and ceiling-high mirrors. Over a hundred seductively dressed women are gathered on the left side of the lobby. They sit on three rows of benches, like the audience at an invisible performance. In fact, however, they themselves are the ones being observed. A camera installed on the ceiling provides a live feed to monitors installed inside each private room. Customers can select their escorts from the comfort of couches in these suites. Madams will bring these selected escorts to the customers' private rooms for their companions of the night. The stairs leading to the private rooms on upper floors are lined with two teams of waitresses, all of the same height and with the same hair style, dressed in the same dark embroidered mini skirts, their breasts half exposed and their hips scarcely covered. They greet customers in chorus, "Good evening!"

The upper stories are divided into five sections (A, B, C, D, E) of ten karaoke rooms each. A dressing room for hostesses also serves as a hideout during police raids. None of the activities inside the karaoke rooms can be seen from the outside. Each karaoke room is equipped with a complete set of karaoke equipment, including a 29-inch television set that continuously plays excerpts from erotic Western videos. Each karaoke room is provided with an air-conditioner, rosewood furniture, beautiful window drapes, wallpaper, car-

peting, magnificent dim ceiling lights, a big couch, and an end table. There is a space between the television and the end table where clients can dance with hostesses. They can dance either to each other's singing or to the dance music chosen from a song booklet. The couch can be unfolded into a bed at the request of clients. Many karaoke rooms have adjunct secret bedrooms separated by a curtain camouflaged in the same texture and color as the wallpaper. This is designed to prevent discovery in case of a police raid.

In the dimly lit karaoke room, an eighteen-year-old hostess was sitting next to her client, singing a song titled "Why Do You Love Other Women Behind my Back?" (*weishenmo ni beizhe wo ai bieren*) in a provocative voice. As she sang, her fingers were nestled in her client's crotch, she fondled him, leaned her whole body over him, and coquettishly asked him, "My husband (*laogong*), why do you make love to other women behind my back?"

These paragraphs describe an upscale karaoke bar, one of the three principal karaoke bars where I conducted my research in the port city of Dalian, in Liaoning Province. In 1984, following the promising results of more liberal economic policies in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen, the State Council granted Dalian the status of "special economic zone" (SEZ) in 1984. By the late 1990s, municipal propaganda boasted that Dalian had developed into the "Hong Kong of the North," the "International Transportation Hinge," an "Advanced Industrial Base," a "Modern Environmental City," and the "Center of Finance, Trade, and Tourism in Northeast Asia."<sup>2</sup>

The rapid growth of the city from a fishing village in the nineteenth century to a metropolis with a population of 5 million has made Dalian a magnet for labor migrants.<sup>3</sup> By the year 1998, the most conservative estimate placed the number of the floating population in Dalian at around 300 thousand.<sup>4</sup> Institutional (household registration policy) and social discrimination force the vast majority of these migrants into the lowest rung of the labor market. Migrants commonly work as construction workers, garbage collectors, restaurant waitresses, domestic maids, factory workers, and bar hostesses.

A substantial fraction of female migrants finds employment in Dalian's booming sex industry. Karaoke bars can be found almost every few steps throughout the whole city. Jian Ping, a reporter for the *New Weekly* magazine,<sup>5</sup> calls the whole city "a gigantic sauna salon or KTV bar."<sup>6</sup> According to one of the city's police chiefs, Dalian is currently home to 4,000 nightclubs, saunas, and KTV bars. This same police chief estimated that, as of 2001, 80 percent of the total population of migrant women works as hostesses in the nightclub industry.<sup>7</sup> The ratio provided by the police chief sounds astounding. He might be exaggerating a little, but his figure suggests that a high percentage of migrant women works as bar hostesses.

China's sex industry emerged in the wake of economic reforms. During the Mao era, prostitutes were sent to labor camps for education. In 1958, the CCP proudly declared to the world that prostitution had been eradicated, and this success was a symbol of China's transformation into a modern nation.<sup>8</sup>

Since the economic reform of 1978, the state's more lenient stance has opened the way for the reemergence of nightclubs and other leisure sites. In order to avoid any residual negative connotations left over from the Mao era, nightclubs in the current post-Mao period are referred to as karaoke bars, KTV plazas, or *liange ting* (literally, "singing practice halls"). Visitors to these bars are mainly middle-aged businessmen, male government officials, entrepreneurs, the nouveau riche, policemen, and foreign investors. Clients can partake of the services offered by the hostesses and at the same time cement social ties (*ying chou*) or *guanxi* (literally, relationships) with their business partners or government officials. Hostesses—mainly rural migrant women—play an indispensable role in the rituals of these male-centered worlds of business and politics.<sup>9</sup>

The companions or hostesses are referred to in Chinese as *sanpei xiaojie*, literally young women who accompany men in three ways. This is generally understood to include varying combinations of alcohol consumption, dancing, singing, and sexual services. Generally between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three, these hostesses provide services that typically include drinking, singing, dancing, playing games, flirting, chatting, and caressing. Beyond the standard service package, some hostesses offer sexual services for an additional fee. Their monthly income ranges from the lowest of 6,000 yuan to tens of thousands of yuan. Hostesses first emerged in modest numbers at the end of the 1980s. Their numbers expanded rapidly in the mid-1990s as karaoke bars became favored sites, not just for male recreation, but also for networking between male businessmen and the local political elites.<sup>10</sup> It was roughly estimated that in 1991, more than 800,000 hostesses were involved in sex work.<sup>11</sup> Karaoke bars and the hostesses they employ are controlled and regulated by the state at the same time that they are used by the state and its agents, many of whom comprise the ranks of the karaoke-bar customer base.

Out of the two hundred hostesses I worked with, only four were natives of Dalian. Most of the others came from rural villages in other parts of China, mainly from the northeast. During my research, I encountered several laid-off urban female workers who were married and in their thirties. It did not take them long to realize that they had entered a market too competitive for them. The younger rural women were much more favored by the clients. Seldom chosen by the clients, the urban laid-off women eventually disappeared. Rural migrant hostesses were extremely averse to exposing their rural origins. At the beginning of my field research, they reported that they were from large metropolitan cities, such as Dalian, Shanghai, and Anshan. It was only after we had become close friends that they confided to me that actually, they were from rural areas on the outskirts of these cities.

Erotic services take place in various establishments that include karaoke bars, hotels, saunas, hair salons, disco and other dance halls, small roadside restaurants, parks, movie houses, and video rooms. Among these establishments, karaoke bars demand the most stringent criteria for the women's height, facial beauty, figure, and such social skills as singing, dancing, flirt-

ing, drinking, and conversation. Unlike what is provided by many other establishments, where only intercourse is offered, karaoke-bar hostesses' services are far more encompassing. Only a few of the karaoke-bar hostesses would accept strangers' request for intercourse, for which they charge twice as much as is charged in many other environments except for a few five-star hotels targeted at Japanese clients. Because only the beautiful and skilled can be chosen as company for the night, numerous young women could not survive in the karaoke bar and skidded to other places, such as sauna salons.

Karaoke-bar hostesses often expressed their contempt of women in other establishments whose work involves nothing but sex. At one time, when all sauna bars were closed in Dalian because of a local water shortage, sauna hostesses flocked to karaoke bars. The hostesses commented to each other in low voices, "Look at their gray faces! It's from daily sex work [*dapao*]." Sauna hostesses told me that they could not compete with the karaoke hostesses because "here clients are too particular about your looks and figure. It's different from sauna bars. In sauna bars, appearance is not that important because clients' goal is simply to have sex [*dapao*]." Karaoke-bar hostesses are aware of this difference. They rate their own status second only to foreign hostesses (French and Russian) in renowned hotels.

This chapter unfolds in five parts. First, I discuss my fieldwork in Dalian. Second, I focus on the reasons for hostesses' entry into karaoke bars. Third, I contextualize hostesses' lived experiences in the material and power structures of the karaoke-bar sex industry. Fourth, I discuss hostesses' subjective understandings of sex work. In the last section, I conclude the chapter by exploring hostesses' future plans and aspirations.

### Fieldwork

The argument developed in this paper is based on some twenty months of fieldwork, between 1999 and 2002, in Dalian. My research sample includes approximately two hundred bar hostesses in ten karaoke bars. However, I was intensively involved with three karaoke bars in particular, respectively categorized as high, middle, and lower class. The criterion of classification is based on the location of the bar, its organization and management, the level of the hostesses' physical attractiveness, and consumption standards. In this chapter, I mainly focus on the low-level karaoke bar, although I constantly draw on the other two karaoke bars as well. I was introduced to the karaoke bars by a friend who is an official. For a number of reasons, my initial attempt to interact with hostesses was not very successful. They did not have time to listen to me because their eyes were all fixated on each entering client, and they concentrated on the selection process (*shitai*: try the stage). Furthermore, my cultural style marked me as an outsider. They referred to me as "glasses" and "a college student." They ridiculed my student attire, my glasses, and my inability to understand or participate in their sex talk and jokes, and they refused to admit me to their circle. They did not believe in my ability to under-

stand their lives, especially their inner turmoil, simply because I was not “in their shoes.” They were also extremely wary of their own security from assaults by the police, hooligans, and others in their dangerous environment. They were also cautious in dealing with each other because any hostess might have some network with VIPs in the city that might harm them. For instance, some hostesses were kept as “spy hostesses” by some local police or officials for self-protection. They might report on other hostesses’ prostitution and have these hostesses incarcerated or severely fined. Each hostess therefore used a fake name, a fake hometown, and a fake personal story. To overcome these barriers, I decided to spend more time with the hostesses. I handed in the rooming fees to the bar owner and lived with the hostesses in the karaoke bars. From then on, I was intensely involved in every aspect of their lives. A typical day in the field was as follows. We got up around three o’clock in the afternoon and ordered a light meal from a nearby restaurant. The remainder of the afternoon was free for shopping or visiting the beauty parlor. We ordered dinner at around six o’clock. Around that time, the first customers would begin to trickle into the bar. While waiting to be chosen, we sat in the bar lobby watching video compact disks (VCDs) or television and chatting. Around midnight, we ordered breakfast and went to bed between two and three in the morning.

It was not my initial intention to research hostess-client dynamics by directly servicing clients as a hostess. However, objective circumstances mandated that I wait on clients. My personal profile fits within the range of hostesses’ typical characteristics. I am Chinese and female. My fieldwork was conducted when I was twenty-eight and twenty-nine years old, which put me in the “autumn” years of a hostess’s career span. This meant that a customer who saw me sitting in the KTV bar lounge would naturally assume that I was a hostess. I was also obliged to minimize the disruption of my research on the bar’s normal business operations. According to KTV bar convention, a hostess can legitimately refuse to perform genital or oral sex acts with her customer. Although refusal can and often does spark conflicts between hostesses and clients, these incidents are considered a normal part of business. For a hostess to refuse to wait on a customer, however, is simply unheard of. This meant that if a customer chose me to wait on him, it would have been very difficult for me to refuse.

To avoid clashes with customers, I took certain precautions. I nevertheless became embroiled in several conflicts with customers. This was especially true during my fieldwork in a low-tier bar that is located in Dalian’s crime-plagued red light district. Living in the karaoke bars, hostesses and I had to maintain constant vigilance against police raids and attacks by thugs from competing bars in the city (including other bar owners and some frequent clients). At night, three hostesses and I slept on the couches in one of the private rooms rented by customers during operating hours. Every morning before going to sleep, we pushed a couch against the door in case gangsters attempted to break in. At times of danger, we held our breath and turned down

the lights, making the room look unoccupied. We escaped danger several times. Experience of common adversity gradually brought us together.

It took the combined efforts of bar owners, bouncers, and hostesses to keep me out of harm's way. I am indebted to them for their advice on safety measures and, at crucial moments, their direct intervention. To extricate me from precarious situations, owners and bouncers incurred the wrath of more than one irate customer, whose outbursts disturbed regular business operations. Hostesses also expended attention and energy that they would have otherwise spent on profit-making matters in order to look after my well-being. Without their sacrifices, my research in the bars would have been too dangerous to continue.

### **Karaoke Bar Industry and the Anti-Trafficking Campaign**

In 1984, the first dance hall appeared in Dalian. It featured a band of six singers and had a capacity of three hundred patrons.<sup>12</sup> It was not until 1988 that the first karaoke bar emerged. Named "Tokyo 898," the bar was financed by a Japanese businessman and run as a Sino-Japanese joint venture. It is said that the bar's karaoke equipment was imported brand-new from Japan—an almost unheard-of extravagance at that time in China's economic development. Customers of the bar included foreign travelers and sailors, government officials, and the nouveaux riches.

After 1988, new karaoke bars mushroomed throughout the city. They became the most fashionable male recreational and commercial activity; closely associated with Western audio and video technology, splendid exterior and interior furnishings, neon lights, high prices, and beautiful hostesses. This drastically different from the previous dance halls, which were organized by work unit, karaoke bars aroused tremendous social curiosity. They suited rich people's desire to experience a "modern" form of consumption, display their vocal talents, and display power and wealth. Patronizing luxurious karaoke bars became a lifestyle, a modern and prestigious symbol often only afforded by such wealthy clients as foreigners, officials, and local nouveaux riche. Blue-collar urban men and migrant workers occasionally visited low-tier karaoke bars to imitate this life style.

Beginning in 1989, with the appearance of karaoke bars, the state has launched periodical nationwide anti-prostitution campaigns to ensure "security and state control." The campaigns are aimed at "cultural purification" and "spiritual civilization." The "erotic company" of hostesses, pornographic television shows, erotic performances, and prostitution within karaoke bars are condemned as "cultural trash" that "destabilize state rule and the socialist system." Restrictions stop short of an outright ban; rather, they intend to bring KTV bars into line with state-defined socialist culture.

China adopts an abolitionist policy that deems prostitution a form of violence against women. Over the past decades, China has published a number of laws to ban prostitution and the third party's involvement in prostitution.<sup>13</sup>

This abolitionist policy is predicated upon the belief that no women would choose prostitution voluntarily and that prostitution strips women of their “natural” and legal rights. These series of laws include the first criminal Law in 1979, the 1987 Regulations, the 1984 Criminal Law, the 1991 Decision on Strictly Forbidding the Selling and Buying of Sex, the 1991 Decision on the Severe Punishment of Criminals Who Abduct and Traffic in or Kidnap Women and Children, the 1992 Law on Protecting the Rights and Interests of Women (Women’s Law), the Revised Criminal Law of 1997, and the 1999 Entertainment Regulations.

Underlying these laws is the ideology that prostitution humiliates and commodifies women, and that unless prostitution is outlawed, women’s position would not be advanced. Because the government holds the belief that women would not choose a profession that violates their own human rights, the purpose of these laws is to prohibit the third party from organizing prostitution, engaging in illicit relations with a prostitute, and trafficking women into prostitution.

The “erotic service” (*sejing peishi*) found in karaoke bars is deemed to go against “socialist spiritual civilization.” The exchange of sexual services for money is an “ugly social phenomenon” associated with capitalism and should be wiped out to maintain a healthy socialist cultural environment and “civilized consumption.” The main responsibility for administering state policy regarding karaoke bars is divided between the Bureau of Culture (BC) and the Public Security Bureau (PSB). These two agencies respectively represent the government’s dual strategy of soft and hard administrative measures. The Bureau of Culture is responsible for ensuring that karaoke bars are managed according to socialist standards of civility and morality. It accomplishes this task through a variety of administrative and regulatory measures. First, BC maintains detailed records on bars’ business location, name, proprietor, exterior and interior design, audio and video machines, and other information. Second, strict approval procedures were introduced to reduce the number of karaoke bars. Third, bar owners are required to attend monthly classes organized by the Bureau of Culture to study state policy and law. Those achieving high test-scores are awarded “Civilized Karaoke Bar” plaques that can be displayed inside their bars.<sup>14</sup> Fourth, karaoke bars should have “Chinese” and socialist characteristics. In particular, they should provide mainland Mandarin songs, “healthy and inspiring” revolutionary songs, Chinese-style wallpaper, Chinese paintings, Chinese-style bar names, and Chinese food and snacks. Lurking not far behind these regulations is a palpable sense of crisis induced by the idea that Western influences has begun to erode Chinese culture. As a BC official explained to me: “The imported Western culture in China is like an aircraft carrier—high quality, durable and powerful. Chinese culture, however, resembles a small sampan, only able to float a hundred miles. We need to develop a singing-and-dancing business with Chinese characteristics to attack the foreign cultural market in China.”



PSB serves as an “Iron Great Wall” (*gangtie changcheng*), providing the muscle behind state policy. The main vehicle for PSB intervention is the anti-pornography campaign (*saohuang dafei*), itself a part of a wider comprehensive attack on social deviance known as “crackdowns” (*yanda*—literally, to strike severely). These campaigns last for spurts of three months at a time, to be repeated three times a year, strategically centering on important holidays (National Day and Army Day) and events (the APEC conference). Crackdowns target a potpourri of social ills, ranging from unlicensed video game arcades (said to corrupt the minds of youth), to undocumented rural migrants (said to disrupt urban management).

The combination of prostitution and pornography is a mainstay in the list of crackdown targets. It covers pornographic media (magazines, laser discs) and performances (striptease). The behavior that receives the most organizational resources and labor, however, is the “erotic services” conducted in KTV bars and other commercial establishments (saunas and hair salons). PSB employs a complex system of raids to attack karaoke bars. The techniques are self-described as “guerrilla warfare” (*da youji*), in reference to the heroic efforts of the Communist revolutionaries against the Japanese invaders and nationalists. Raids are divided into several types: “regular raids and shock raids, timed raids and random raids, systematic raids and block raids, daytime raids and night raids.” Those PSB units and individuals that perform well—measured in the number of arrested hostesses and amount of fines levied—receive high honors and cash bonuses from their municipal government.

### Impact on Hostesses

*Local Officials:* State policy is problematically translated into reality. The complex interactions between sex industry participants on the one hand and state agents on the other lead to a gap between the “theory” of policy and the “practice” of enforcement. State policy is distorted and even derailed by the self-seeking behavior of local officials. Karaoke bars are an important source of extralegal income. As one PSB official candidly remarked, “Karaoke bars and hostesses are our sources of livelihood. We basically cannot live without them.” Because these officials have the arbitrary power to arrest and fine the hostesses, hostesses are extremely apprehensive when they are chosen by an official. In such instances, they must obey the officials’ demands including sexual services.

Officials extract economic benefits from karaoke bars through a combination of bribes and fines. State policy is hijacked in the service of officials’ personal economic interests, but local officials’ exploitation of hostesses are not limited to economic benefits. PSB officials maintain a group of “spy hostesses” (*xiaojie jianxi*) who report on bar conditions as well as acting as these officials’ personal harem. In exchange for their services, hostesses gain immunity from police sanctions. Hostesses allow corrupt officials to get rich, contribute to regional economic development, and enhance officials’ political career advancement. There seems to be substantial pressures that push local

government into tolerating if not absolutely embracing the karaoke-bar sex industry. I was told that a leader of a sub-region had turned the area into what became heralded as the “largest pornographic sub-region in the province.” He built an extravagant mansion and hired hostesses to entertain visiting officials. His “brilliant achievements” eventually satisfied his superiors and gained him high awards, reputation, and promotion.

*Bar Owners:* While local officials are manipulating state policy to exploit bar owners and hostesses for their personal gain, bar owners have their own strategies. The owners I worked for improvised creative maneuvers to counter local officials.

The owner of the upscale bar—one of three karaoke bars in which I conducted fieldwork—was a well-known local gangster. His karaoke bar opened in 1998 and since then has been the most prosperous bar in the city of Dalian, housing over a hundred hostesses. I came to this karaoke bar in June of 1999. Just beginning my research, I did not know anything about the anti-prostitution campaign until July 1, the anniversary of the birth of the Communist Party. I went to work in the evening as usual that day. I was very surprised to find that all the hostesses’ seats were unoccupied—only two hostesses came to work.<sup>15</sup> Not having the faintest idea what was going on, I was immediately led by the madam to the dressing room upstairs and advised to hide there instead of waiting in the hall downstairs. The madam told us to tell whoever saw us that we were salesladies selling beer here. Only after the madam left did I learn from the hostesses that an anti-prostitution campaign started this month, and that police would be raiding this place at some time tonight. Police raids meant that any hostesses in sight would be taken in and arrested. I was told that once you ended up in the police station, it took thousands of yuan to get out. The other two hostesses were in the same situation as I was—all newcomers and completely ignorant about this event. I was very frightened because I did not have a temporary-resident card, and my passport would definitely get me in trouble.<sup>16</sup> Luckily when a couple of men (policemen wearing civilian clothes) came in and asked us a few questions that night, to my surprise, our answer that we were selling beer worked. Later I learned from the madam that our escape was due to the fact that the owner had paid off these policemen. During the last few days of the campaign months, I was living with another hostess. Every midnight, when we took a taxi home from the bar, she instructed me to bend over and hide under the back seats to avoid being seen by policemen. She told me that during the campaign months, numerous policemen patrolled the streets looking for bar hostesses. In China, hostesses fall into a gray area—although the law does not clearly identify them as either illegal or legal in everyday practice, it is recognized that “hostesses” are “sex workers” who provide illegal erotic services and hence are the major subjects of anti-prostitution campaigns.

The bar owner, furious at the loss of business and local officials’ restrictions, asked the madam to summon 130 hostesses to a meeting. He expressed

his anger and antagonism toward the “unreasonable people working in the government” and listed his tactics to cope with the state policy. Angry as the bar owner is, he utilized nonconfrontational maneuvers—that is, converting illegal bar hostesses into legal employees through shifts of title, dress, identity, work sections, and so on. Such a strategy not only left him some leverage at this critical point of the political campaign, but also allowed him to impose more severe regulations and discipline on the hostesses, who used to operate in a laissez-faire manner.

According to a city official, 1995 marked a change in relations between hostesses and bar owners, from the contract system to an exploitative system. Before the police crackdown in 1995, hostesses were hired by the hundreds on contracts with bar bosses. According to the contract, hostesses received fees from the customers for their services. In addition, bar owners awarded them a percentage of the customers’ bills. This contract system was brought to an end in 1995. To explain this change, we must start in the early 1980s.

With the rise in popularity of karaoke bars in Dalian, a red-light district sprang up in the center of the Zhongshan district. At some time around the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, a number of karaoke bars were opened on Stalin Road. By all indications, the scope of business must have been considerable. Hostesses were recruited by the hundreds. Every night they scoured the city’s seaport for tourists and brought them back to the bars to engage them in sexual activities. During this period, bars and hostesses prospered.

One morning in 1994, a foreigner was seen running out of the area wearing only his underwear. A group of Chinese men followed him, shouting curses and flourishing clubs high in the air. It was said that the foreigner could not afford the tab for the previous night’s sexual encounter. Managing to escape with his life, the foreigner subsequently brought charges against the bar’s proprietor for exploiting him. The matter quickly escalated into an international conflict between the two affected embassies. The incident even made front-page headlines in the Hong Kong Gazette (*Ta Kung Pao*) in an article titled, “Dalian Red-Light District on Stalin Road.”

Fearing that the image of the socialist regime would be tarnished by the scandal, the CCP Central Committee took immediate action by ordering that the area be cleaned up. After overcoming tremendous difficulties in breaking up patron-client ties between local officials and bar owners, the police finally cracked down in 1995.<sup>17</sup> To erase the global and national memory of the incident, the name of the street was changed from Stalin Road to People’s Road.

This extreme police crackdown disrupted the previous system by which the bars operated and brought an end to the contract system and the percentage award from bar owners. Ever since, bar hostesses and owners have been under the strict control of local government. Owners view themselves no longer as dependents but as the saviors of the hostesses because they housed the hostesses for security and offered jobs. Ever since 1995, owners started requiring hostesses to turn in 10 percent of their fees to them.

In the particular upscale karaoke bar where I conducted research during the anti-prostitution campaign, the owner extracted additional profit from the hostesses by charging more for their uniforms than they were actually worth. He also seized this chance to record every hostess' biological data. He asked all the hostesses to hand in their duplicate hometown IDs and Dalian temporary residence cards (TRC). He urged those who had not yet purchased or renewed their TRC to do so quickly. He claimed that he would compile a book with a record of their pictures, names, and photocopied TRCs, through which hostesses would be transformed into formal employees working as waitresses. He also effectively controlled their mobility and behaviors. Prior to the crackdown, hostesses were brought to any karaoke room for selection. After the crackdown, hostesses were grouped in tens and assigned to different sections of the bar (ten karaoke rooms in each section). Instead of standing together in the entrance hall, hostesses now only gathered at their designated sections, waiting to be chosen. Every hostess was required to wear the uniform dress with a name card on her chest, in different colors for different sections. Hostesses had to report to the directors (madams) if they were going outside the bar (*chutai*, to offer sexual services in hotels) with clients. They were ordered to be present at the bar at precisely 7:30 p.m. every day and not leave until 12 a.m. unless they went out with clients. Hostesses coming late or leaving early were fined 600 yuan. They had to request a leave or a night off from the director, a request that, in principle, was not granted. The bar owner also demanded that hostesses' walking and speaking manner and singing skills be trained and disciplined. All these new demands, controls, and restrictions on hostesses were produced at this moment of conflict between bar owners and officials. The bar owner ensured the prosperity of his business by manipulating hostesses and maneuvering ways around state policy.

Local implementation of the state's anti-prostitution policy failed to reach the propagated objective of eliminating prostitution; it only aggravated hostesses' working conditions. Police raids of karaoke-bar hostesses made them legally and socially vulnerable. Hostesses' illegal identity forced them to face an exploitative, risky, and violent working environment. If some clients were to disclose their sexual services to the police, they would be subject to extreme humiliation, arrest, handsome fines, and incarceration. Because of this potentially horrifying outcome, hostesses do not disclose their real identity, and this ruse makes it easier for men to be violent toward them and even to murder them. It was reported that in the city of Shenyang, more than 100 hostesses were murdered in 1999.<sup>18</sup> In Dalian, hostesses' bodies were found murdered on the street, but the police could not identify them.<sup>19</sup> When I accompanied my best hostess friend, Wu, to her hometown, I asked her mother if she was worried about Wu's safety in Dalian. At my question, her mother's face sank with distress and torment. She kept silent for a long time before plucking up the strength to tell me that she had believed that Wu had been murdered in Dalian. She said, "I did not hear from her for three months. She did not call me. I did not have her phone number. . . . I really thought she was

murdered. You know, it's so common in Dalian. I always heard the news about hostesses' dead bodies found there. I believed Wu was one of them. I was worried sick. I got so sick that I couldn't get up. I thought I was never going to see her again."

### Violence

In the upscale bar, the main task of the security guards in green pseudo-military uniforms is to keep the hostesses from leaving before midnight to ensure that clients pay hostesses' tips, and maintain bar security. Occasionally, a team of security guards rushes upstairs like soldiers to quell fights in the karaoke rooms. The suppression of disturbances itself always involved violence and blood. Unarmed or armed (with beer bottles, knives, and glass), fights between drunken clients and between clients and hostesses are daily occurrences. At times, hostesses come downstairs, crying from their injuries: their legs, arms, and breasts black and blue from the hard pinches of some clients. Some hostesses chose to endure whatever abuse they are subjected to, but some opted to quit and consequently received no tips for the time they had put in. Those who clenched their teeth to see it through with big bright smiles held back their tears and complaints for later, when they sent off the clients and returned to the crowd of idle hostesses.

The low-class bar "Romance Dream" is located in the crime-plagued red-light district. The staff includes three multifunctional waiters (madams/doormen/janitors), two bar managers, approximately twenty-seven hostesses, and a barkeep/security guard (*kan changzi de*). As with the high and medium-level bars, blood ties link the bar proprietor and management into a relatively cohesive group. Each bar on this street has to hire a thug as the barkeep. This barkeep has to be a good fighter, otherwise the bar will be forced to close down as a consequence of harassment by roaming gangsters and thugs who roamed the streets. During my research in the bar, I witnessed numerous bloody fights between the barkeep, Bing, and bar waiters and gangsters, clients, and passers-by. I saw Bing and waiters throw heavy stones and chairs at clients and at some passers-by's heads until blood streamed down their heads onto their faces. The bar owner told me that Bing, after having killed and severely injured many men in previous fights, was once sentenced to death. The bar owner spent a great deal of money to finally get Bing out of prison before hiring him as the bar guard. The mere presence of Bing in the bar kept many gangsters and thugs away. According to the owner, if Bing were not in the bar, it would definitely be a disaster: all of the hostesses would flee in fear, and everything would be plundered by gangsters. She entrusted me to Bing and the bar managers to look to my safety.

Gangsters and other bar owners often came to visit. They were all local. When they saw pretty hostesses, they dragged them upstairs and raped them. When they saw less pretty hostesses, they slapped their faces and beat them up. Hostesses were extremely apprehensive about some of the toughest gang-

sters and thugs. They would run as fast as they could to escape them. Once I fled along with the other hostesses. We escaped by climbing onto the overpass built over the bars, losing our shoes and cutting our feet in the process. It was a very unpleasant experience. Most of the bar hostesses have been raped one or more times by gangsters. Twice the gangsters came in and started to pull me into a karaoke room. Luckily, they were stopped by Bing and the bar managers, who said, "She is not a hostess here. She is my friend." That assurance saved me from imminent danger, but the lingering fear remained.

To protect themselves, almost all the hostesses were connected with one or two street gangsters to gain protection. When a gangster came in, the hostess who was connected with him or to a thug in his group did not need to escape. My best friend, Wu, did not like the bar bouncer of a neighboring bar, but he favored her strongly. Wu had to develop a relationship with him. She told me, "In my home town, nobody dares to touch me because I have a wide network of friends. It's so different here. Here I don't have anyone. No one cares if I am bullied. He is a thug, and he is local. I have to be good to him. I need someone to turn to when I encounter trouble on this street." When Wu was harassed by someone in a different gangster group or by drunken clients, she would call the barkeep for help. On a couple of occasions, the barkeep, upon Wu's call, led a few gangsters into the bar to beat up the drunken client. Wu also hooked up with a bar owner in the city. She told me that these were the key people she turned to when she needed help. Like Wu, other hostesses were connected with a bar owner, a bouncer, or a skilled street fighter. They frequently joked, "We hostesses are relatives of the underworld."

### **An Exploitative Environment**

Hostesses are expected to encourage customers in their consumption of beer, hard liquor, and snacks to boost bar revenues. Known as the minimum charge, these requirements create an onerous burden for hostesses. Hostesses are held responsible for ensuring that customers' expenditures reach the mandated level. To stimulate customers' consumption, hostesses themselves have to continuously consume, especially alcohol. This problem is especially pronounced in the upper-level bar, where the minimum charge is set at 400 yuan. The bathroom is always full of hostesses vomiting into the toilet before returning to their clients to continue drinking. Because of this daily alcohol overdose, most hostesses not only put on weight (which leads to other self-destructive weight-loss practices), but also develop stomach problems that, in severe cases, result in hospitalization.

### **Hostesses' Struggle**

After a while, hostesses develop ways to cope with this inequity. When clients come to the bar looking for hostesses to go offstage, few hostesses consent. It leaves the outsiders with the false impression that few hostesses in this bar go

offstage. In reality, however, almost all of the hostesses do, although behind the scenes, to save the entire tip for themselves. One hostess said, “Why should we earn the money for the bar managers? We have established a settled relationship with our clients. We schedule a time outside of the bar to do it. We keep the money in our own pockets. Who needs them as the mediators? Actually, everyone in our bar goes offstage, but secretly.”

The bar managers and owner are stingy not only with the hostesses, but also with their steady clients. Wu told me, “Bar business should rely not only on us, but also on the steady clients. However, the bar managers exploit these clients even harder!” Aware of this situation, on the one hand hostesses face pressure to order more food and drinks in karaoke rooms, and, on the other hand, they secretly establish relationships with clients. As their connections are set up, hostesses request that their clients take them out for dinner. In such cases, they not only earn the tip of 100 yuan, but also help their clients save money from the bar overcharges.

Some hostesses sit on several stages at the same time (*cuantai*). For instance, Wu managed to sit on five stages at one time. She said, “The key is: Do not let yourself be seen by your clients when you are sitting on different stages. Once I heard that five of my steady clients were coming on the same night. I was sitting in the first client’s karaoke room until it was time for the other clients to come. Then I said, ‘I have been feeling really sick these days. I feel really uncomfortable now. Can you leave now and come back some other time?’ He agreed and left, offering me a tip. Then, the other clients came one after another. I went into the second client’s karaoke room and said, ‘Look, my sister has just arrived here in Dalian with a friend. I really have to go to the train station to pick her up. It will take me about an hour or so. I will be back for sure.’ Then I left and went into the third client’s karaoke room and said, ‘Look, my sister will come over to be a hostess. I need to rent her a room, buy her some clothes and merchandise for everyday use. When she starts working here, she will earn money and return the loan to me. Can you give me some money?’ He gave me 200 yuan. See, the tip is already in my hands. ‘Thanks so much! I am sorry that I have to leave, but I will definitely be back in about forty-five minutes.’ Then I repeated the same story in the other two karaoke rooms and promised to be back in, respectively, forty and thirty minutes. After that, I returned to the first karaoke room and said, ‘Sorry I am back so late. Oh, I am feeling so exhausted and sick.’ Then I stayed there for a few minutes before asking them to leave. They gave me the tip. Then I returned to the other three karaoke rooms, in turn, and repeated the same story.”

### **Hostesses’ Aspirations**

In this section, I will illustrate that hostessing is not only a lucrative profession for the hostesses, but also a profession that offers them independence and

a sense of self-esteem. Their life experience goes contrary to the state rhetoric of forced prostitution and a need for rehabilitation.

Rural women face limited employment opportunities in the city. First, in post-Mao China, there is a lack of a private sector for jobs. Second, as migrants, they often lack the social connections essential for job searching in the already over-saturated urban labor market. Their ability to find work is further hindered by a discriminatory government policy that denies migrants equal status with urban residents. Among the jobs that are available to rural women, most are in low-paid, labor-intensive industries. Under these circumstances, hostessing is a highly attractive employment option. The attractive features of hostessing are many.

Hostessing holds out the allure of high incomes in the least amount of time. Hostesses typically entertain a customer for one to two hours and earn an average tip of 200 to 400 yuan—the equivalent of, and often more than, other rural migrants' monthly wage and almost half the average monthly wage of an urban worker. Working as a hostess provides rural women access to a wide network of influential male figures in the city's business and political sectors. Hostessing requires a minimal upfront investment. Newly arrived hostesses typically borrow money from other hostesses or friends to purchase the clothing and accessories worn while servicing clients. Because of the high profitability of hostessing, the borrower can typically settle her debt with the earnings from one or two sessions with clients. Thus, rural women who lack economic resources can nonetheless enter the workforce as hostesses.

Migrating to countries such as Japan and Singapore to conduct sex work is a dream for many hostesses. During my research, three hostesses managed to travel to Japan and Singapore as sex workers, and they were the models for many other hostesses. Each of these three hostesses turned in 20,000 yuan and passed the interview before being permitted to go through the visa process. They returned to Dalian after having worked in Japan and Singapore for a year. They expressed that it was their ambition to return to these countries and continue working as sex workers.

#### **Learned Urban Cultural Styles**

Karaoke bars, as flourishing new cultural spaces in the city, are the places where rural migrant women can achieve a certain degree of self-esteem through the sense being accepted and desired by the urban men who choose them as companions for the night. The karaoke bar is also the place where these women can find secondary socialization by mingling with urban clients, where they feel "urban and cosmopolitan," both culturally and socially. Hostess Ying migrated to the city, and during the mid-1990s, she worked in a private factory, where she was even named the model worker. Eventually, the factory went bankrupt and closed down. Ying was laid off and left without financial sources. Her women friends took her to a dance hall to accompany men. To make a living, she followed them.



I thought nobody would dance with me because of my low quality (*suzhi*) and rural origin. However, to my surprise, some urban men invited me. A man from the Labor Bureau even liked me a lot. Once, I ran into him on the street, and he asked me to have dinner with him in a restaurant. I refused his love but I did go to the restaurant with him. I was such a foolish cunt (*sha bi*)—I was completely ignorant of a restaurant, let alone of all the eating or talking etiquettes. I was such a foolish cunt, so stupid, you mother fucker. I did not know how to eat or talk. I was a peasant. When had I ever seen a restaurant? You know at that time [during the mid-1990s], nobody in my village had ever been to a restaurant. Very few had even heard about it. As a factory worker, I only earned 400 yuan a month. When on earth had I ever seen this amount of money and the atmosphere of the restaurant? After that event, I was so shocked by my incongruity with the urban people. I started working as a dancing companion. Two months later, I went back home with loads of money, several thousand. At that time it was a lot of money. Nobody had ever seen so much money before. The money I earned meant a lot to everyone.

For Ying, living an urban lifestyle affirms an equal status with urbanites; being chosen by urban clients in karaoke bars confirms her self-worth.

### Independence

Hostesses' experience of rape and abandonment in the city teaches them not to be duped by men's romantic words, to embrace independence through hostessing. They commented, "Dalian men try to cheat both our bodies and our emotions. Without spending a cent, they get what they want from us." Hostess Guang served as a domestic maid in an urban family before hostessing. Within two months, she was raped three times by her male employer. Hostess Min worked as a restaurant waitress when she was raped and then abandoned by an urban customer. She said, "Urban men take advantage of us both emotionally and physically. We cannot be too innocent (*tai chunjie*) or devoted; otherwise, we will be tricked, used and abandoned. Only women who are not pure can protect themselves."

Han worked as a hairdresser in the city. She lived with an urban man for three years in his home. During this time, she suffered from all kinds of physical and verbal abuse from his aunt and mother. For instance, they accused her of stealing their jewelry and associated her "thieving habits" with her rural background. All this abuse was targeted at her inferior rural background. Han exerted every effort to endure all this inhumane treatment. However, her urban boyfriend also worried that her rural family would become a bottomless pit, eventually draining all his money. He abruptly abandoned her, saying, "Our social status just doesn't match." Devastated, she believed that she would never find happiness unless she became the social and economic equal of the urbanites. She started working as a hostess. Five years later, she was very successful. She possessed two household registrations—one urban and one rural. She purchased two houses, one in her hometown for her parents

and one in Dalian for her siblings. She supported her two younger sisters and a brother through school. She paid for the weddings of her four older brothers and sisters, and so on. She is now married to the financial director of a prestigious hotel chain.

Similarly, another hostess, Hong, broke up with her client boyfriend when he failed to offer her the amount of money she expected. She commented, "I myself can earn 100,000 yuan a month from hostessing. To exchange this for his several thousand yuan—so little money—I have to obey everything he says. Who will do that? He thinks I am fresh from the countryside, so I can easily be cheated. With so little money, he wants me to be his second wife and control me as his possession by tying my arms and legs. That's impossible. I want to earn money for myself and spend it happily as I want. There is no way for me to spend his little money at the price of abiding by whatever he has to say."

If rural origin and cultural inferiority is the root of the hierarchical relationship between rural migrant women and urban men, then hostessing offers an opportunity to escape this subordination. As paid work, hostessing represents an act of defiance against the androgynous urban men who freely exploit the women's bodies and emotions. At the bar, men have to pay a high price to hostesses in exchange for even approaching them. This transaction transformed the situation that existed when migrant women were available to men as free dinner at the men's whim.

Hostessing allows the women to gain an economic profit, and therefore independence from men. In the monetary transaction, hostesses attain a certain equality with the urban men by taking advantage of the men's resources. Having financial resources at their disposal brings the women power and confidence otherwise unavailable. Many hostesses who are married or are kept as second wives sneak out of the house to work. Setting up their own separate account allows them to spend their own money at will and secretly support their natal families. The economic power brought by hostessing earned Han and Hong a great degree of independence and equality in social and gender status in both familial and spousal relationship with urban partners.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I discussed how the state's anti-prostitution policy is manipulated and usurped by local officials and bar owners for their own ends, leading to a violent working environment for the hostesses. Working amid such exploitative labor relations, hostesses struggle to reallocate male clients' socio-economic resources into their own hands and subvert the urban-rural hierarchy. Far from the state rhetoric of forced prostitution and their need for rehabilitation, the hostesses consider hostessing an expedient route to achieving a certain degree of social mobility and detest the violent working environment induced by the state policy.

From this ethnographic research, I argue that the intensive anti-trafficking and anti-prostitution campaigns deprives the hostesses of their rights, and patronizes them as victims. I argue that the state's focus on forced prostitution ignores the larger context within which force is used. That is, the global inequities of capital and labor that robs women of viable options and forces them into sweatshop labor or lucrative sex work. The state's moralistic campaigns against sex trafficking are intended to eradicate all forms of sex work and construe sex workers as sexual victims. Issues such as poverty, hunger, and low wages are disregarded in the trafficking discourse. Indeed, across the globe, sex workers' rights movements vehemently challenge the victim script in the trafficking discourse.

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## Notes Chapter Five

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been published in *Working in China: Ethnographies of Labor and Workplace Transformation*, ed. Ching Kwan Lee. Routledge. 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Gu 2000; Zhang 2001.

<sup>3</sup> This is the official figure of the city's population (in the four central districts).

<sup>4</sup> Zhang. (2001) 142. Municipal officials interviewed estimated a floating population in Dalian of one million people, from all over China.

<sup>5</sup> *News Weekly*, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Jian 2001; Khan 1998: 44.

<sup>7</sup> Interview conducted in 2001.

<sup>8</sup> See Hershatter 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Although karaoke bars are legal, they have always been one of the government's main "culture purging" targets. It is claimed that they work against the state's cultural logic in three aspects: (1) Socialist business should prioritize the needs of people and serve the people. It should be different from the commercial system, where the pure objective is to pursue and procure sudden huge profit. Many bar bosses operate their business by cheating customers and providing erotic services. (2) "Erotic company" (*seqing peishi*) is illegal and immoral and runs counter to socialist "spiritual civilization." Such "ugly phenomena" associated with capitalism should be wiped out to maintain the healthy and inspiring socialist cultural environment and "civilized consumption." (3) Juxtaposed against socialist recreations enjoyed by the masses, karaoke bars are more individually based, places where individuals pursue and express their "repulsive and hideous" desires to show off their performing talents and satisfy their sexual demands. In view of these reasons, karaoke bars regularly undergo a purging process to become part of "spiritual civilization." Frequent police raids are part of this process.

<sup>10</sup> Male dominance of the business world in China is reinforced by the use of karaoke bars to entertain clients. While I heard that occasionally female businesswomen entertained male clients, I never witnessed such an arrangement myself.

<sup>11</sup> See Pan 1999: 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> Reconstructing the history of karaoke bars in Dalian proved to be exceedingly difficult. A combination of official denial and embarrassment has ensured that no publicly open records were kept on the subject, and the same attitude undoubtedly dissuaded any interested parties from prying. To piece together the story, I was therefore forced to rely entirely on the oral accounts of government officials in different divisions of the municipal Bureau of Culture.

<sup>13</sup> See Jeffreys, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> This policy is designed to boost the bar owners' sense of pride as contributors to the socialist culture market. Inculcated with this new thought, bar owners will take the initiative to transform their bars into civilized spaces, where clients' lofty sentiments can be nurtured.

<sup>15</sup> This is in the upscale karaoke bar where hostesses were not living in the bar. I lived with the hostesses in the low-tier karaoke bar in the red-light district.

<sup>16</sup> After I received a visa to the United States, the government withdrew my ID card. The only ID left me is my passport. A passport without an ID card indicates that the person in question does not reside in China.

<sup>17</sup> This information is taken from my interview with the political officials in the municipal government.

<sup>18</sup> “*Sanpei xiaojie de Falu Baohu Wenti*” (Legal Protection of Hostesses). *Shenzhen Fazhi bao* (Shenzhen Law Newspaper). 25 June 25 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Sun, Shaoguang. “*Dalian E Mo Ba Xiaojie Fenshi Shiyi Kuai*” (A Man in Dalian Divided a Hostess’ Dead Body into Eleven Pieces). *Dongbei Xinwen Wang* (North-eastern News Net), 12 December 2003.