

# New Comers of the Nightclub: Transformations and Negotiations amongst Hostesses in Hong Kong

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## **Abstract**

The subject of nightclub hostesses is not common in daily conversation; even people working in the industry often try to conceal the nature of their job, as it is rare to find people who are not condescending towards such workers. Indeed, what the general public knows about this industry is mainly constructed by the media such as films and gossip magazines that portray these girls as having a limited competitiveness in Hong Kong's commercial and capitalist society. They are often labeled as having lower educational qualifications or associated with "other" nationalities. Nonetheless, there are some university students studying in the top universities of Hong Kong that too work as hostesses. Despite their level of education, or socioeconomic class, these girls face very similar challenges as new comers to the nightclub. This paper discusses the transformative process the new comers go through, and shows the ways in which this transformation changes their subjectivities.

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## Introduction

In the widely available books that introduce and offer information on careers to young people, we find various descriptions of a diverse range of occupations. The job of a nightclub hostess, however, is always missing. Often, the major reasons for this omission are the immoral and negative images attached to the occupation, which, along with the work place—nightclubs—are often portrayed as alluring, dangerous and dirty in Hong Kong's mainstream discourse on morality.

Despite being a taboo, there are still many women who decide to pursue careers as hostesses in order to earn a living or make quick money. The impact of this job on these women's daily lives, however, is often negative and can be far more profound than one might initially imagine. New comers often suffer from physical and mental health problems even when they quit work after a short period of time or work infrequently.

This paper focuses on what women, who are starting off as hostesses, and who are new comers to nightclubs need to go through in order to become a proper hostess. The data for this paper was collected from fieldwork based on participant observation carried out in a nightclub, as well as from interviews other informants; the data was used to understand the process of becoming a hostess.

Many scholars have studied such phenomena and have used similar methodology and have hence given me a lot of inspiration for my fieldwork. Firstly, Ally Allison's, *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club* (1994), gave me an understanding of the hostess industry in Japan. Allison, having worked as a hostess for the purposes of her research, describes some of the interactions among the people involved in the running of the nightclub. This book broadened my horizon on how nightclubs in Japan are different from the one I worked in. Indeed, at the beginning of my project, I often compared her accounts with my own experience. Our projects, however, differed in terms of focus and perspective. My research, for example, looked at the transformation process from an ordinary girl into a hostess, while Allison focused more on the function of hostesses in a patriarchal hierarchy. Furthermore, unlike this study, her focus was more on the customers, the *saraiimen* (salary men; Japanese professional workers), and how they performed their corporate masculinity in the nightclub.

In fact, much scholarly work related to such night work, hostess businesses, or women working in bars, focuses on gender issues, and on the suppression of women by economic, cultural and social elements. My aim, instead, has been to carry out the research from a micro-perspective—to study the hostesses themselves, particularly the changes new comers experience as a result of their interaction with their social groups, both inside and outside the nightclub.

Fang Gan's work, *Men Who Sell Sex to Women: A Study of Masculinities* (2009), similarly looks at the issues from a micro perspective, analyzing male hosts' mental and ideological changes, focusing on the construction, destruction and reconstruction of masculinities. Both Fang's study and mine, in this sense, consider the transformation of ordinary persons into hosts or hostesses, respectively. However, where his book mainly focuses on how the masculinities change throughout the transformation process, this study looks at the factors that inspire and facilitate the hostess' change.

## **Methodology**

In order to better understand their subjectivities, I found part-time work as a hostess, serving customers in a nightclub. I did not offer sexual services, but nonetheless, this experience allowed me to better engage in participant observation.

Indeed, it is not difficult to find work as a hostess. One can simply buy a local tabloid newspaper or gossip magazine, such as *Face*, which usually contains two to four pages of job postings for hostesses. Advertisements adopt different titles and descriptions. The most commonly used terms are: “waitress”, “female bouncer” (a particular term for females who play finger-guessing games and drink alcohol with customers in bars), “P.R.” (female staff who serve and talk with the customers), “DJ”, “promoter” (usually referring to female staff who promote alcohol and who actually need to serve and drink with clients to raise the sales of drinks and thus earn commissions), “people who sing karaoke with clients”, “hostess” and “people who lead clients to the rooms”.

Nonetheless, without access to relevant networks or sufficient information about this industry, it is somewhat difficult for potential applicants to distinguish between the different classes and styles of the nightclubs with similar descriptions in the ads. Thus, it often comes down to a random decision by the girls when applying for a job. In Hong Kong, the class and style of nightclubs is generally categorized according to district. For instance, the nightclubs in Wan Chai usually hire females from South East Asia and target foreign customers. The customers visiting nightclubs in Tsim Sha Tsui are usually classified as “better and nicer”, as they are perceived to have better manners and are assumed to be white collar workers. This is probably related to the fees for their services compared to other districts like Mongkok or Jordon. It is perhaps also the safest option for hostesses to get into a large-scale, high-class nightclub in Tsim Sha Tsui. Still, in the above-mentioned job postings, not all nightclubs actually list their names and some not even their locations; instead, most of them simply claim to be “large and safe”. In order to prevent any potential applicants from feeling intimidated, most of the job descriptions are very straightforward and claim that no sexual services are included and that the jobs simply involve serving drinks.

My fieldwork was based in one of the biggest nightclubs in Hong Kong that mainly served white-collar or middle-class men aged between 30 and 60. Despite the reports about a hostess that did not offer sexual services getting raped in this nightclub two years ago, it seemed to be a relatively safe place for my fieldwork. I chose this nightclub based on an advertisement found in a magazine; after a single phone call involving only a casual conversation and no formal interview, I was invited to work for a “trial period”. I was told to provide some personal information and was informed of the detailed work procedures at the nightclub. Being told to work for a trial period, my personal resistance against the profession, and worries of working as a hostess, were erased as I justified to myself that a trial was just a trial, not really formal work as a hostess.

Other staff and especially the clients only called us hostesses by our nicknames. Girls usually made up a nickname to create a fake identity, and were also assigned a call

number.<sup>2</sup> This number would be used to take attendance and keep a record of where the girls were at any given moment in the nightclub. This new nickname and number, usually together with the number of the group a hostess belonged to, also helped to establish the new identity of the girls as hostesses.

By working in this field, when I was on duty, I was able to see how the hostesses, managers and clients acted and reacted to everyday dealings. When not serving any clients, we usually waited in the communal area, sitting with girls of the same group or other groups if the particular table was already occupied. This gave me an opportunity to observe the working environment as well as how other staff, such as managers, Mami's-junior managers-and other hostesses and waitresses interacted with one other.

In addition to the behavior of others and interactions observed in the nightclub, my personal experiences and feelings also offered a first-hand record of how a girl is transformed into a hostess and what new comers to nightclubs usually had to face. Throughout the whole project, I conducted both casual and formal interviews with my informants. Casual conversations were often conducted within the nightclub itself while we were waiting to serve the clients. Besides my colleagues, my key informant by the name of Dee, worked part-time in two different nightclubs and provided me with a more emic perspective. I managed to obtain some exclusive data that I perhaps would not have been able to get from other hostesses through Dee.

## **The Nightclub and the Hostesses**

My field site was the upper floor of a nightclub decorated in a traditional Chinese style. The golden curtains, red carpet with yellow flowers, and bright yellow lights at the entrance gave an impression of grandeur in contrast to the nightclub on the lower floor, which was dimly lit, conveying a more modern, stylish and trendy atmosphere. Both nightclubs featured a large dance floor surrounded by tables located in the centre of the main communal area near their entrances, as well as karaoke facilities.

Each room was equipped with rows of sofas along three of its walls and a large teapoy in the centre. When customers entered a room, the waiters usually brought in a fruit platter, a few bowls of nuts, some handle-less cups with dice for dice games, and a big container with cans of beer on ice or some bottles of alcoholic drinks. There was also a karaoke set with two to three microphones connected to it.

The general duties of hostesses were all related to serving and entertaining the customers, including pouring drinks, playing dice games, arranging or singing karaoke, responding to any additional requests, and pleasing the customers by means of conversation or some initiating behavior or interactions.

It was also the duty of the hostesses to always keep their Mamis informed as to when they arrived at work, their exact location and what they were doing, ensuring that they could quickly be found to serve the customers or if there were other urgent matters. The hierarchal relationships between the managers, Mamis and hostesses had to be respected and maintained at all times.

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<sup>2</sup> My group number, 237, belonged to my Mami, who paid for the advertisement I had responded to. My own number was 31. Each time I arrived at the nightclub, I told the staff that I am "237-31"; this served as a record to mark my attendance and calculate my salary.

Since the hourly rates of the nightclub varied throughout the day, the hostesses were also subject to different hourly wages.<sup>3</sup> In order to encourage hostesses to arrive at work early and to ensure that a sufficient number of hostesses being available during earlier shifts, hostesses were offered \$500 for 3 hours if they chose to work before 9:30 pm, but only \$400 for the same period of time after 9:30pm. Also, the hostesses were offered dinner from the nightclub's kitchen if they started work before 9:30 p.m.

The nightclub also had a resting room for the hostesses and managers at the back of the venue where they could eat, smoke, put on make-up, watch TV and take a rest. This room was also be seen, by many, as a shelter for the hostesses, who came here whenever they felt unwell or needed a break. Indeed, the nature of the job harmed their health as they often suffered from mental or physical exhaustion brought on by both, customers and other staff.

## **Becoming a Hostess**

As new comers, the girls usually needed to go through a transformation process that turned them from ordinary girls into "real hostesses". Being a hostess was not just an occupation, but also an identity, influencing the girls' appearance, values, interpersonal relationships and mental state. In the beginning, most girls were not familiar with the dress code and had no knowledge of the function, structure and rules of the business. They were often confused with regard to what they should or should not do and how to perform their roles properly, as they lacked the specific cultural knowledge of working in nightclubs. Thus, their probation periods at the nightclub were often spent acquiring this knowledge from different portrayals in the mass media, by observing others and from their own experiences during this period.

### *Appearance and Attractiveness*

A lot of the new comers, including Dee, some of my colleagues and myself, felt self-conscious about our appearance and attractiveness and were often made to feel depressed at the beginning of the probation period. Firstly, new comers felt extremely pressured and anxious to become genuine hostesses, and thus many of the girls tried very hard to imitate the more experienced hostesses by carefully following new trends in fashion and beauty magazines.

Secondly, many new comers closely observed other hostesses and staff and took to heart how others commented on them. Indeed, comments and criticism by others would need to be taken very seriously if the girls planned to continue working as hostesses in the nightclubs; not only because the new comers were able to learn how to appear more attractive, but also because it was an indicator as to whether they were being recognized by others. If there was little obvious improvement within a few days, other people's attitude would be notably worse and less friendly. More experienced staff would not only repeat and reinforce their comments and criticism, they would also ask other staff to agree with their comments to impose even more pressure upon new comers and urge them to become what they defined as appropriate or better.

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<sup>3</sup> Morning (早場套餐): 1:00pm - 5:00pm \$120/hr; Afternoon (茶舞套餐): 5:00pm - 9:00pm \$330/hr; Evening (歡樂套餐): 9:00pm - 1:00am \$550/hr; Night (晚舞套餐): 1:00am - 6:00am \$220/hr.

The social learning process suggested by Albert Bandura takes place in this initial stage; appropriate behavior is learned observationally through modeling (Culatta 2012). New comers establish an idea of how they should behave and perform by observing others. This coded information would usually be remembered, and later both consciously and unconsciously guide and influence their behavior. The rationale behind the reproduction and reinforcement of the behavior of others in this context is recognition by others so as to be able to earn money in the nightclub, as well as avoid non-physical abuse such as criticism by other members of staff.

In general, new comers tried to look like hostesses in the first step of transformation, imitating how other girls dressed and did their make-up. They also listened and asked for advice from others on their appearance. For instance, their hair style, the clothes and shoes they wear, as well as their make-up in details like the shape of their eyebrows or how much eye shadow they should put on.

Sometimes the Mamis or other hostesses would give advice voluntarily. Generally, however, women working in the nightclub policed each other; the new comers especially faced constant pressure from other staff. My female manager, who we called Grandma as she was older and more senior than Mami, for example, disliked the shape of my eyebrows, which she thought resembled the Chinese character for eight (八) and thus made me look sad. She often suggested that I change their shape. Even after I had done so, she did not see any improvement, and went as far as suggesting taking me to mainland China where she believed she could give my eyebrows the proper make-over. In a nutshell, the “advice” given to the new comers would be repeated and reinforced until they met the standards and requirements of being nightclub staff.

Because beauty standards especially were so abstract and difficult to master, new comers usually decided to be obedient; it was easier to just follow the advice so as to avoid trouble. Yet, by giving this so-called advice and by policing others, the women, from managers to other hostesses as well as general staff, made the new comers feel inferior and lifted themselves into a position of higher status, making use of the new comers’ lack of cultural capital vis-à-vis their appearance and beauty standards. They managed to gain “face” by simply using obedient new comers, and managed to claim back the self-confidence that they lost when they themselves had started working in this undesirable industry. The new comers similarly showed their modesty and obedience so that others would accept, approve and recognize them.

Furthermore, criticism and reactions from customers also pushed and urged the hostesses to constantly try to change their appearance. Simply, since the customers had paid a lot of money for the hostesses, they often had high expectations and sometimes expressed their feelings of appreciation or dissatisfaction in a straightforward manner. Sometimes, customers teased hostesses by asking questions like, “how come your hair is shorter than mine?” or “what are you doing here?” or even, “how long have you been working as a hostess?” in order to challenge the qualifications of the hostesses, implying that they did not consider them sufficiently attractive.

Over the course of my field work, I learnt what to wear and how to change my appearance, for example, by losing weight, by wearing tops to conceal my breasts to make me look slimmer, by using contact lenses and fake eyelashes, and by wearing high heels to make me look taller with thinner legs. These changes started to also extend to my daily life as I established the habit of wearing make-up and contact lenses even when I was not working as a hostess. Without make-up and contact lenses, I began to feel less confident about my appearance.

Attractiveness, on the other hand, is much more difficult to master compared to appearance as it refers to intangible traits such as being sexually appealing or sexy. According to Wang's (2004) *Body, Sexuality and Xinggan: Research on Chinese Women's Daily Lives*, sexual attractiveness is an inherent trait, whereas sex appeal (*xinggan*) comes when women become more mature and socialized. *Xinggan* also refers to feminine characteristics of an individual woman, whereas sexual attractiveness refers to the attraction between two people, usually of the opposite sex. To be a hostess in a nightclub, it is crucial for new comers to obtain the intangible traits of both sexiness and sexual attractiveness in order to gain recognition from others. Some hostesses, who would be considered to be prettier than others might have had fewer customers due to their lack of attractiveness. Others might not have been as thin or beautiful as per the harsh requirements of the nightclub; yet, they still attracted customers to hire them after a 10 minute trial period by utilizing their attractiveness and by making use of their skills in dealing with the opposite sex. Apart from the customers, all other staff in the nightclub also judged new comers with regard to their sex appeal. For example, when I dressed in a supposedly childish way or wore glasses when I arrived at work, my colleagues looked at me in a dissatisfied and demeaning manner, even though I had intended to change clothes in the nightclub. New hostesses could tell from the attitudes that others exhibited toward them whether they approved of their attractiveness or not.

Being sexually attractive in order to be recognized by, or to draw the attention and evoke the interest of male customers was relatively more important for new hostesses. Indeed, once a hostess was able to attract many customers and bring in a relatively high income, she would receive much less criticism from her colleagues and managers, and gain recognition and respect from others. The ability of the hostesses to attract and please customers as a means to obtain wealth was the main determining factor for how others would recognize and respect the new comers as successful or suitable hostesses. Even if some hostesses were not sexy or attractive enough compared to other girls, they would still be respected and treated nicely if they could ingratiate themselves with the customers. Determining factors here were related more to how they managed to convey their femininities and establish a sense of intimacy with the customer. This included acceptable or appropriate use of feminine gestures and activities dictated by the cultural norms (Lockford 2004). These traits were, however, believed to be difficult to obtain, but could be acquired via socialization. For example, many new hostesses in the nightclub became sexually appealing over the course of many years; it was a question of personal experience and how much knowledge they possessed about the desires and needs of their customers. Hence, women who were slightly older were usually considered to have higher sexual attractiveness than new hostesses who were not as experienced in communicating or dealing with customers.

After becoming a hostess, the new comers' sexual attractiveness did not only have impact in the context of the nightclub, but also in their daily lives. My informants and I felt that we tended to attract more men, including friends and strangers, compared to the before we worked as hostesses. Many hostesses also mentioned that these changes were indefinite and the consequences were very apparent. Most of my informants agreed that they went through the process of transforming their appearance and attractiveness to become a hostess with great difficulty, but they could not identify clearly how exactly they had achieved it. In the end, most of the women indicated that they were constantly hard on themselves with regard to their appearance, even when they were no longer working as hostesses or when they were off work. At the same time, they would be proud of themselves when they received approval or praise from others,

“like a rebound of self-confidence after all those harsh comments”, as my informant Dee phrased it.

### *Mental Changes*

One of the main mental changes that new comers underwent during the process of becoming hostesses is the decline in their self-confidence. The new working environment, especially one considered to be as mysterious and dangerous to the general public as a nightclub, also results in anxiety and insecurity amongst the new comers for whom these feelings often turn into stress and depression. My informant Dee, for example, mentioned that she had lost confidence in her appearance, and had begun to doubt her femininity. After her first few days at the job, she had to quit for a month to avoid further criticism in order to safeguard her self-confidence.

I also lost much of my self-confidence in my appearance when I started to work as a hostess and wanted to leave the nightclub to escape from all the negative comments such as, “you are too fat”, “you don’t wear makeup well” and “you are dressed inappropriately”. My colleagues, including hostesses, Mamis and managers of other groups, constantly gave advice, and sometimes even ordered me, to lose weight. Even after losing considerable weight, I was still told, “lose more pounds” or “you are still too fat”. It was not only people who were senior to me that pressured me, but also other staff, such as the promoters in the streets or the women working in the storage areas of the club. They would all comment on the attractiveness of new comers and gossip both in front of them and behind their backs.

Most hostesses could only count on very little support from the people in the nightclub. Yet, not all of them could seek or receive support from people outside the nightclub either, because of the cultural stigma attached to the occupation. Thus, new comers had no choice but to endure the attacks on their self-confidence alone. Once they made it through all these challenges and withstood the mental pressures, however, they often became outstanding and attractive hostesses, whose self-confidence and self-image would heavily rely on their appearance.

In their daily lives outside work, many of my informants said that they did not like wearing make-up as it reminded them of their identity as hostesses. Yet, because they had become used to wearing heavy make-up, they felt uncomfortable and incomplete applying a little bit of make-up. And where some refrained from putting on excessive make-up outside working hours, others could not quit doing so because their self-confidence had become directly linked to the idea about appearance and attractiveness constructed and supported by the way they dressed and did their make-up in the nightclub. Without make-up, some said they lost their confidence and were afraid of negative responses from people as had happened at the beginning of their careers as hostesses. In extreme cases, the hostesses considered themselves attractive when they wore make-up, but felt unattractive and ashamed to be in front of others without it. Their confidence towards their “real” selves, in other words, was erased and came to entirely depend on how well they could construct an artificial, beautiful “self”. Even girls who preferred not to wear make-up in their daily lives, often felt unattractive when they were around other people; thus, despite disliking it, they chose to wear some make-up when going out to meet friends or on potential dates.

Emphasizing a Foucauldian perspective (2004, 2005), Bartky (1990) states that women such as these hostesses actually became “self-policing [subjects] and a self committed to relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to

patriarchy.” Lockford (2004) also argues that this phenomenon reflects and reveals these women’s consciousness that they are the bodies or objects designed to please or to excite males.

These women, as a matter of fact, accepted being under the gaze of men and voluntarily became sexual objects for them when they decided to use their body as well as their femininity as a means to earn a living. Their thoughts and values towards their own bodies and femininities, in other words, changed as these traits were isolated and alienated from the hostesses and became the means of production in the service industry of Hong Kong’s capitalist society (Churchich 1990).

### *Recognition and Response by Others*

As described above, the responses of others played a significant role in turning an ordinary girl into a hostess. The hostesses considered themselves successful and completely transformed when they were fully recognized by the others. Firstly, this meant that they received less criticism and negative comments from other hostesses, Mamis and managers. Also, other staff members in the nightclub were more friendly, kind or intimate in their general interactions with the hostesses. The new comers would then define themselves as members of the nightclub and feel a stronger sense of belonging.

Secondly, the key to defining and identifying new comers as hostesses is measured by their ability to attract customers and earn money. New comers were able to identify themselves as hostesses once they gained appreciation and recognition from customers. In profit-oriented nightclubs, once new comers showed their money making potential, the staff would show their respect and recognition for the hostesses as well; in this case, even though they might continue to be displeased with hostesses’ appearance or behavior, they would not usually pressure the hostesses as they once had.

Finally, reactions from those who knew about the women’s job as a hostess outside the nightclub also played a key role. My friends and acquaintances who knew about my fieldwork, for example, labeled me as a hostess, even when the people inside the nightclub or I did not make such an identification. It was ironic that I was no longer an ordinary university student but also not yet a hostess in the nightclub. I had lost my original identity before I had even successfully obtained a new one.

## **Hostess versus University Student**

Having two identities as a hostess and a university student, gave me an opportunity to study how people perceived these two identities, which are often regarded to be very different from one another.

In Hong Kong, for example, it is often believed that studying hard and getting good academic qualifications is the key for most individuals to earn a high income, raise their living standards and social status. The jobs university students are hired for are usually professional and better paid than those of high school graduates. Because of the high competition and limited places in Hong Kong universities, people usually show high respect for university students.

Being a hostess, on the other hand, is seen as a failure of virtue, and women who work in this industry are considered immoral and deviant. They are often perceived as

incapable of studying, and neither zealous nor hard working. Thus, they are looked down upon, criticized and marginalized in Hong Kong society.

In the following section, I draw a comparison between how I acted according to my identity as well as the context I was in, taking into account how people reacted towards me in these different contexts.

### *The “Hostess-Me” in the Nightclub versus the “Student-Me” at University*

As a new comer in the nightclub, I was always obedient, friendly and showed my deference and respect to almost all members of staff in order to establish my social network in the unfamiliar environment. I took people’s advice seriously or at least pretended that I had tried but failed in cases where I did not want to follow orders. At the nightclub, I, as well as a few of my informants, felt a strong notion of being inferior to almost everyone in the club. My own opinions and thoughts were not entertained by the others, but I had to always follow other people’s advice. People did establish personal relationships with others in the nightclub, but this was only common amongst people who had been working there for a longer period of time, or as full-time staff. Usually, the hostesses did not engage in much conversation even when they sat together in the communal area doing nothing but waiting. They were not too eager to build up personal relationships with other hostesses as it neither brought them economic benefits, nor could they be long lasting friends, as they preferred not seeing people from the nightclub in their daily lives. Indeed, I did not receive much support when I faced challenges in the nightclub; instead, others imposed pressure and a heavy mental burden.

Contrastingly, as a student of anthropology at university, where our thoughts or perspectives towards issues discussed in class were respected, I felt confident and did not feel inferior even when talking to senior students and staff in the department. Meeting others on university campus was also enjoyable, as most students welcomed or were eager to make friends with each other as friendships could be expected to last a relatively longer period. Support and care, in other words, was not hard to find at university.

### *A Hostess at University*

When people at my university came to know that I worked as a part-time hostess, they always looked shocked and puzzled. They were curious about this “mysterious and dangerous” industry, but usually felt too shy and embarrassed to ask. The most common questions were about what my fieldwork involved and what data I had obtained. Nonetheless, what most of them were concerned about, but did not usually ask about, were the first-hand experiences I had gained, and if there was anything dangerous or extraordinary about the business, and whether I had been sexually molested by the customers. In comparison to others who are of the same age as me but who were mostly obedient and reserved, I was portrayed as a flirty and deviant girl who was easy-going in regards to sex and relationships because of the perceived difference in our boundaries towards initiating physical contact or relationships with men.

Because of this mistaken perception, I was sexually molested by a schoolmate who knew about my fieldwork. He had taken the stereotypes surrounding hostesses for granted and thought that I was often sexually harassed by customers and thus, what he did would not be of much harm to me. Also, to many men, it was an excellent excuse to

approach me, as I was relatively open-minded compared to other more reserved girls at the university. This was very different from what I experienced in the nightclub. As I was only one hostess among many, the customers did not put focus on me much. Moreover, the physical contact between a customer and a hostess who does not offer sexual services is less intimate than the classmates that I interviewed had expected. The customers had never and indeed were not supposed to be sexually intimate with me. What my classmate had done to me was far more serious than any physical contact I had in the nightclub, although he had expected that I had dealt with more abuse in the nightclub.

#### *A University Student in the Nightclub*

As a new comer in the nightclub, I was considered to be a humble and unimportant hostess. People, including customers and Mamis, generally did not pay much attention to me, as I was not different from other hostesses. Nonetheless, once they found out that I am a university student, especially studying in a famous university, they began to entertain very different attitudes towards me.

A Mami who usually sat next to me in the communal area seldom talked to me as the turnover of hostesses was high in the club. She sometimes brought an electronic dictionary with her, checked many words and phrases in English and Japanese and wrote them down in her notebook. The phrases were relevant to maintaining conversations with foreign customers like, "can you give me a gift?" or "can you tell me about your country?" as it is common for the club to host Japanese clients, or English-speaking Western and South-east Asian customers. When she saw me doing some reading, she realized that I am a university student, and her attitude toward me changed a lot, from not saying anything to me to taking an active role in talking to me; she even offered to share her snacks with me. It was obvious that she wanted to acquire more knowledge and was eager to meet and make friends with people with higher academic qualifications. Thus, she had totally different attitudes towards me as a university student, which was rare in her social circle and work place.

In fact, other hostesses also changed their attitude towards me when they learnt that I am a university student. Normally, they made suggestive comments about my appearance with the belief that I should obey and follow their standards because of my lack of cultural capital, as well as their status and power there. Nonetheless, when they met me as a student, they admired me for the ability and opportunity to study at university, which is something they longed for. One of my informants who had graduated in form seven told me that she had actually been working hard to pass the university entrance exam for two years. Another informant told me that her background as an immigrant from Mainland China only gave her limited educational opportunities due to the poor financial conditions of her family. She needed to work to help raise her younger sisters. She had given up her dream of studying in university for her sisters, as she thought that it was more important to improve their financial condition in order to raise the social status of her family. Customers were always in a superior position, whereas hostesses were perceived as thoughtless bodies to fawn over or arouse their sexual desires. They also didn't expect to encounter any hostesses that were smart or fluent in English. A customer who had initially ignored me, for example, constantly used well pronounced English terms while conversing. To draw his attention, I decided to have the entire conversation in English. Because of the usual stigma of hostesses having poor educational background, he was surprised and inspired by my proficiency in

English. He had not expected people with good educational qualifications to work in this supposedly inferior job. Indeed, much of our conversation was geared towards satisfying his curiosity about my educational background as a hostess.

Unlike him, customers that would not believe that I was really a university student often asked me to provide evidence. No matter what I said to show my understanding of university life, they did not trust that I had an identity that actually encompassed a higher social status than their own. My identity as a student could only be proved by my student identity card; what I actually said did not count. In addition, to confirm my identity as a student, I was further interrogated and asked questions that matched the stereotypes and images that customers had of university students. One person, for example, inquired about the price for tutoring his high-school aged son.

## Expectations versus Reality

There are numerous portrayals of hostesses in the mass media. These offer the easiest ways for the general public to obtain information about nightclubs and hostesses, as a major proportion of the audience have never come in contact with this industry. These portrayals also provide the means to raise one's cultural capital in such environments. However, based on my observation in this particular nightclub, these portrayals are not as accurate as many have thought. After seeing adult media, people often have imaginations of hostesses in sexy uniforms that expose most parts of their bodies. But in reality, most hostesses in my nightclub were dressed casually and did not look much different from girls strolling around the city's shopping streets. Only hostesses who offered sexual services dressed in clothes that exposed their bodies to attract male customers.

Contrastingly, when I did not need to work, I sometimes dressed in revealing tank tops. My classmates who saw me in these outfits always assumed that I was going to work that night. However, my Mami did not allow me to wear tops that exposed my breasts, as she felt that they made me look fat. Instead she required me to wear shirts with high collars and necklines. So in actual fact, while I was not working, I wore clothes with deep necklines to compensate for the taboos and constraints I faced in the nightclub, as well as for the loss of confidence in regards to my appearance. The inability of my classmates to correctly guess when I worked came from the discrepancy between their imaginations and the reality in the nightclub.

Still, there were some occasions that reflected the portrayals of hostesses in the mass media. In the summer, for example, hostesses are required to wear bikinis; for Chinese New Year, they wear a *Qi Pao*, a traditional Chinese dress. At these times, the hostesses dressed exactly how people usually expected them to—in sexy outfits aimed at arousing men's sexual desires. Furthermore, people normally expected the hostesses to be very active and enthusiastic when they served customers. However, based on my observation, perhaps only 20% of the several hundreds of hostesses took a very active role in luring customers. Most of those 20% were hostesses who offered sexual services. Meanwhile, most hostesses who did not offer sexual services were less active and did not reflect the images constructed in the mass media. In fact, hostesses were more likely to be engaged in submissive servitude, pouring drinks for the clients, ordering the songs for them or calling waiters. They also acted like girlfriends, holding their customers' hands and sitting close to them or leaning against their shoulders or backs. However, these hostesses did not try to arouse customers' sexual desires, as this might cause

trouble for the hostesses' safety. Indeed, my Mami often emphasized the restrictions in Hong Kong law regarding physical contact between hostesses and their customers. Actual physical contact between customers and hostesses, therefore, was a lot more subtle and less intimate than commonly believed.

## **Challenges and Costs of Being a Hostess**

### *Concealed Work*

Due to the unfavorable reputation of hostesses as well as the nightclub industry, hostesses seldom revealed their jobs to others, especially their families or partners. One of my informants who offered sexual services lived alone and did not return home every day until late night or dawn. She had moved out of her parents' home to escape the gossip in her neighborhood that would bother or bring shame to her family.

Furthermore, it was very common for hostesses to hide or lie about their work and job to their partners because they found it too shameful and embarrassing to reveal. Some of my informants who had been dating for years were still lying to their boyfriends, telling them that they worked in an office or a bar that did not offer sexual services. Indeed, revealing their true profession to their close circle could potentially have very serious consequences. The lowly and promiscuous image of hostesses, along with the associated social pressures could easily be extended to their family members. Thus, most hostesses decided to hide their jobs from most people.

### *Pressure from People Outside and Inside the Nightclub*

The hostesses had to constantly endure different kinds of pressure, from people working in the nightclub and those in their social circle outside the nightclub. In cases where the hostesses revealed their profession to others, people outside the nightclub, including their family, partners, friends, or other colleagues, gave the hostesses serious pressure, as most could not accept that a girl they knew so well would pursue a career as a hostess. Even in cases where the hostesses refrained from revealing their true identities, the anxiety to disclose their job, the guilt from lying, as well as the worries about the potential harm towards their interpersonal relationships if others found out was a huge mental burden, directly affected their daily lives.

The constant vigilance and commenting on the hostess' behavior and performance by the nightclub staff also subjected them to a lot of pressure. In fact, the different values regarding the hostess' behavior and performance held by different individuals in the nightclub, for example, as well as their power relationships or the conflicts also brought the hostess stress and unwanted troubles, illustrated in the case below.

My Mami always showed respect towards Grandma in front of her, but often disclosed her negative feelings behind her back. For example, once, Grandma had complained about my shoes, and later replaced them with a pair that she had originally bought for herself. When my Mami saw them on my feet, she asked me to change them. I told her that it was a gift from Grandma, but she told me harshly that they were really old-fashioned and could potentially stop me from making money. She insisted that I change back to the shoes I had worn before and told me what to use as an excuse should Grandma find out. When Grandma later noticed the change of shoes, I explained that

they hurt as they were new. Despite a manager stating that I could protect my feet with some band-aid, I did not change back to the pair of shoes Grandma had given to me because of the pressure from Mami. It was obvious that Grandma was dissatisfied with my disobedience.

Indeed, though my Mami did not want Grandma to dislike me and taught me to respect her in order to avoid trouble, she also did not like me to maintain a good relationship with her. For example, one night, I had asked Mami for permission to leave earlier, as I had an appointment early next morning. She told me to wait for about 10-15 minutes until she came. This was a common practice to make hostesses stay longer in case any new customers arrived. While I was waiting, Grandma walked by and when I told her that I had an early class the following morning, she urged me to leave. I told her about Mami's reaction and later saw her calling Mami, telling her, "the new girl needs to leave. She has to wake up early tomorrow morning... just let her leave." Within 5 minutes, my Mami came back and allowed me to go home. She even walked with me and told me that she was going to take me to the accounting department to get my wages, as it was my first time to get paid. She showed me all the procedures and smiled, but grumbled, "I just asked you to stay for a bit longer. Are you in such a hurry? I need to show you how to get your wages, right? Otherwise, you cannot get the money you earned, then that would be a problem, right?" I explained sincerely again that it was Grandma who had insisted that she did not want me to stay longer. However, Mami was not satisfied and thought I was using my good relations with Grandma to give her pressure to be nice to me and let me off from work early. It was important for her to take control of her hostesses, as well as to maintain her status and having strong relationships with managers such as Grandma brought the possibility that the hostesses had the social capital that allowed them to be disobedient to the Mamis. Such interpersonal conflicts are one major sources of the stress that hostesses suffer from.

### *Effects on Physical and Mental Health*

As most hostesses generally worked from 9 pm to about 3 am, drank a lot of alcohol when serving customers and ate less to control their weight, many of them had worsening health conditions after working in the nightclub for some time. They often suffered from stomach problems, but their skin, throat, kidney and other organs were also seriously affected.

Influenced and shaped by the beauty standards of mainstream culture, people in the nightclub also preferred the hostesses to be as thin as possible. I was criticized for being too overweight by most of the staff, and was told many times that I needed to lose weight. They would scold or tease me whenever they saw me eating in the resting room. I was also recommended names of doctors and pills that could help me lose weight by my Mami and other hostesses. Because of the short period of time I had intended to spend there for my research, I was unable to lose much weight and thus had to endure their criticism. Giving up to the strong pressure imposed upon me to control my weight, I began to take medicine to suppress my appetite which subjected me to various side effects that affected my digestive system. Eventually I realized that there was no point in continuing the efforts to lose weight, as the others never seemed to be satisfied. Even after I had lost 15 pounds, most people simply said "good job, but you need to continue and lose more pounds."

The mental health of new hostesses was also negatively affected. As mentioned throughout this paper, new comers were under constant pressure to adjust to their new

working environment to be recognized by others in the nightclub industry. Several of my informants lost their self-confidence and self esteem in regards to their appearance, as well as their social skills, influencing their daily lives. Some went into long term depression and complained about feeling dejected and sad whenever they were at work. One girl who had already quit her job as a hostess confided that she was still living under the pressure of others finding out that she was once a hostess and that her self-confidence was still very fragile.

### *Risks of Accidents*

The nightlife industry, especially where sexual services are offered, has always been portrayed in the mass media as dangerous place, ridden with and crimes like rape and assault. Indeed there were times when the actuality of the situation also reflected this portrayal.

Investigating my field site, I found that a rape had taken place inside the nightclub I was working in just two years before my employment. The victim had not been offering sexual services but the customer had gotten drunk and raped her in the room. It was reported that a waiter had passed by during the incidence but did not interrupt or stop the man. Moreover, one of my informants also told me that she was once raped by a customer when she was working at another bar. She recalled that once she had gotten drunk after playing dice games with her customers who had later raped her. She had not called the police, but the incident has severely affected her both physically and mentally.

## **Conclusion**

This study was based on my own experiences and those of other hostesses. It was, in a way, surprising to find how similar our experiences were in the process of transforming into a hostess. It is not my intention to generalize, essentialize or create stereotypes and the data I collected may indeed vary from other cases described by scholars on nightclubs in different districts like Tsim Sha Tsui and Mongkok, or countries like Japan. Nonetheless, it has been insightful to discover the similarities in the experiences of my informants who were going through the same processes of being transformed into hostesses.

Although the experiences we had as new hostesses were similar, different hostesses often had different responses and reactions to them. Some either quit or changed their attitudes toward the job, the nightclub, or themselves, and conformed to the norms of the nightclub by acquiring the necessary cultural capital to survive. Interestingly however, despite the hardships most hostesses had gone through themselves, many I interviewed did not tend to help the new comers. By doing so, they maintained a higher social status in relation to the new comers. Helping others without gaining any benefit in return was not perceived to have an adverse affect on their own careers; the nightclub was a profit-oriented place and kindness was valued less than tangible monetary returns. Thus, it is clear that the nightclub is involved in a recurring cycle, where new comers suffer at the hands of those who had once endured exactly the same hardships.

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