

# Producing Affective Performance and Capital: Lao Migrant Women in the Sex Industry along the Thai-Lao Border

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## Abstract

This article examines the production of affective performances by Lao migrant sex workers in dealing with clients, employers and state authorities. The study applied ethnographic research, by collecting information from the lived experiences of Lao women sex workers, aged 18-27, working in karaoke bars in a border town of Ubon Ratchathani province, Thailand from June 2014 to May 2015. The study positions Lao women sex workers as “emotional labor” who actively use crucial strategies in accumulating various types of capital in their commercial sex work. The article argues that these women have actively created a space of negotiation working through the production of emotional labor. Although they are exploited by informal employment and controlled by patriarchal sexual norms, they strategically employ erotic capital (body, emotional labor, sexuality) and cultural capital (gender and language), which they exchange for economic capital so as to elevate the social and economic status of their family. Additionally, their strategy in classifying clients and building long-term relationships with regular clients or Thai boyfriends has contributed to various types of client support. However, such intimacy carries the risk of unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

**Keywords:** emotional labor, Thai-Lao border, commercial sex, Lao women, capital, cross-border migration

## Introduction

Over the past two decades the Thai-Lao border along the Mekong River in northeast Thailand has become sexualized because of the availability of Lao women's sex services in entertainment establishments. The cross-border migration of Lao women, particularly young rural women, into Thailand's sex industry has been increasing for two reasons: high demand from Thai male clients, and the efforts of women who are socially and economically disadvantaged by the Lao government's unequal development policies to fulfill their dreams for a better life and their family's well-being.

Since 2005, an increasing number of karaoke bars have sprung up around border towns of Ubon Ratchathani province, offering the sexual services of Lao migrant women. In the border towns where I conducted field research, there were ten karaoke bars and about 200 Lao women migrants<sup>1</sup>. Aged 16-28, these women had crossed the border and worked as waitresses and chose to sell sex to clients in the karaoke bars without being coerced. While they consider selling sex a kind of work, they refer to themselves in Lao as "*phu sao karaoke*" or karaoke bar girls, rather than sex workers, in order to avoid the stigma associated with prostitution. They realize that with their low educational level and low social status they have limited economic choices, but working as sex workers in karaoke bars in Thai border zones provides them better opportunities to accumulate economic capital and experience modern life compared to other labor jobs.

The selling of sex in karaoke bars by Lao women appears to be a form of "open-ended prostitution" (Cohen, 1996), which is characterized by the free choice of sex workers in entering sexual services, the self-employment of sex workers, and long-term personal relationships between sex workers and clients, involving both emotional attachment and economic benefits. In this case, sexuality and emotion play an important role for Lao women in building intimate relationship with clients who can provide them with financial support and other kinds of

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<sup>1</sup> Information supplied by the program manager of the Health and Share Foundation in June 2014.

assistance. However, while “open-ended” sex work offers Lao women more economic opportunities than labor jobs, it also presents more risks and dangers, such as social stigmatization, sexual violence, legal consequences and health problems. This situation raises interesting questions about the role of women’s sexuality, emotion and intimacy in relation to economic capital accumulation in the sex trade.

Previous studies of Lao migrant women in Thailand’s sex industry have focused mainly on two aspects. The first is the exploitation and sexual violence that Lao women sex workers encounter in Thailand’s sex industry, and the second is the subjectivity and agency of Lao women sex workers through different tactics and strategies, such as screening clients, using lies to avoid servicing clients, and insisting on condom use (Taotawin, 2006a; Taotawin, 2006b; Taotawin, 2008; Panthaloet, 2013). But these studies do not account for women’s emotional and intimate relationships in terms of negotiation in prostitution. When I look at the lived experiences of my informants, I feel that these two approaches are not adequate to understand how these women use sexuality, emotion and intimacy to negotiate with clients or the complex relationships some of them have with clients in “open-ended” cross-border commercial sex because emotion is a part of human life and consists of value as well as meaning (Jaggar, 2009: 57).

Therefore, I want to highlight the roles of Lao women’s emotion in cross-border commercial sex. Following Hochschild’s (2003) concept of emotional labor, this article explores the employment of Lao migrants in karaoke bars, the emotional labor they perform in sex work, and the strategies they use to negotiate with their clients. I argue that by examining the relationship between emotional labor and the production of capital, we can better understand how sex, body and emotion are controlled by patriarchal capitalism and employed by these women as the capital or power with which to struggle in the transnational sex industry.

## **Methods and Data Collection**

My analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork of collecting data from the lived experiences of Lao migrant women sex workers, aged 18-28, who are engaged in commercial sex in the border towns of Ubon Ratchathani province next to Laos, PDR. I emphasize how their life experiences are constructed by different sets of power relations and I recognize them as both subjects and as agents (Corrin, 1999: 14). The fieldwork was conducted from June 2014 to May 2015.

During my field research, I conducted unstructured interviews with 13 Lao karaoke bar women (six Khmu and seven Lao women, with 2-5 years of sex work experience) and I conducted in-depth interviews with seven women out of 13, as well as three male clients, local officials, employees at the local NGO, and four karaoke bar owners. All of the interviews with Lao women and local people were conducted in Thai-Lao or Thai Isan dialect as I am a native of northeastern Thailand. I regularly participated in activities organized by a local NGO for sex workers in these bars, and two birthday parties of Lao women sex workers. Moreover, I regularly joined Lao women in daily life activities at the Rose Karaoke Bar [Pseudonym] and shared meals in order to interact with them and observe their interactions there. I also visited two of the villages from which the Lao women had originated in Luang Prabang province in order to see how these women have changed the social and economic status of their families as well as their relationships with them.

## **The Concept of Emotional Labor and the Production of Capital**

Since the 1990s, feminist debates on prostitution have tended to become polarized between two dichotomous discourses. One is a version of radical feminism which sometimes includes elements of Marxist feminism; the other is a libertarian or prostitutes' rights discourse which includes elements of both liberal and postmodern feminism (Jaggar, 1997). The radical feminist discourse views prostitutes as coerced by

economic need and gender discrimination and as a feminized form of exploitation reflecting male-dominant norms of sexuality (p. 13); while the libertarian side regards prostitution as the expression of individual rights, and therefore a legitimate profession, and asserts the agency of prostitutes (p. 15). However, recent studies on prostitution in Southeast Asia attempt to go beyond this dichotomy and take women's voices and experiences into account, while at the same time challenging the stereotype of Southeast Asian women as powerless or as victims of socioeconomic constraints. This literature emphasizes how women have been articulated as active agents even while they are subordinate to male domination in commercial sex (Veerakulthewan, 2003; Faier, 2007; Wisetpholchai, 2016).

In addition, there has been a growing body of literature about the role of women's emotion and intimacy in prostitution since Hochschild (2003) coined the term "emotional labor" in order to conceptualize labor in the service industry. Hochschild explains the definition of emotional labor as follows:

I use the term *emotional labor* to mean the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*. I use the synonymous terms *emotion work* or *emotion management* to refer to these same acts done in a private context where they have *use value*. (p. 7)

According to Hochschild, emotional labor requires the display or suppression of feelings by workers in order to sustain facial and bodily display that produces the proper state of mind in others. This kind of labor needs "a coordination of mind and feeling" and draws on a source of inner self and individuality. However, she points out that there is a negative side of intensive use of emotional labor in terms of alienation or estrangement from the self (p.7).

It is worth noting that this concept contributes to a new understanding of emotion and labor production because emotional labor is viewed as a commodity with exchange value and as an asset or

resource in the service industry. Although Hochschild uses this concept to understand the production of emotional labor in middle-class service jobs, such as female flight attendants, this concept can also be applied in studying emotional labor in other service jobs such as sex work.

Veerakulthewan (2003) demonstrates that Thai bar women perform emotional labor in three different emotional management roles: emotional supporter, emotional provider and love seeker, while being emotionally distant in relation to their experiences in sex work. Open-ended prostitution offers them the opportunity to use love and long-term relationships with foreign men as strategies to sustain their economic security and social mobility. She argues that in sex work, Thai bar women are not passive victims of socioeconomic constraints; rather, they exercise agency through emotional management and thereby give meanings to their multiple selves.

This point also resonates with Faier's study (2007) of the migration of Filipina women to Japan in order to work as "entertainers" at local Filipina hostess bars. Faier argues that Filipina migrants adopt different meanings of love in the transnational service industry and that this plays a major role in shaping their new transnational subjectivities through global economics.

To sum up, in the sexual service industry, women are required to perform emotional labor in various ways, but they can use emotion and relationships to exercise their agency and negotiate with male clients for both material gains and emotional attachment. Following the concept of emotional labor, I examine how Lao migrants in karaoke bars use emotion as a strategy to achieve economic goals and elevate their social status.

Apart from the concept of emotional labor, the production of various kinds of capital is an important aspect of how people struggle in fields of power by employing different kinds of capital. Here, I want to follow Hakim's concept of erotic capital in order to understand how Lao migrants in karaoke bars are able as subordinates to accumulate capital in order to negotiate with clients.

Bourdieu (1979) points out that for women, body and physical properties can function as capital and the more body capital women

have, the greater the profits they obtain in the market. However, he does not account for emotion in the production of capital. Hakim (2010) coined the term “erotic capital” as a fourth personal asset, which consists of six to seven distinctive elements, one of which has been characterized as ‘emotional labor.’ Hakim argues that erotic capital is as important as economic, cultural, and social capital for understanding social and economic processes, social interaction, and social mobility. It is essential for analyzing sexuality and sexual relationships (p. 499). Erotic capital is also inflected by gender dimensions because women tend to have greater erotic capital than men and this gives them a significant potential advantage in negotiations with men (p. 505). However, the concept of erotic capital, consisting of gender and sexuality, does not include other cultural factors such as language, ethnicity, and race. Therefore, the concept of cultural capital is complementary to the analysis of capital production in capitalist society.

In addition, Lyttleton (2014) points out that neoliberalism and the freedom of individuals emboldens the role of human capital in the processes of self-making. This is to say that human capital in the neoliberal environment involves the ways in which individuals perceive and optimize their self-worth or values as tools of exchange (p. 36). Cultural factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, and sexuality are considered elements of human capital which workers can use to maximize their value through self-exploitation.

To sum up, I examine how the relationship between emotional labor and the production of capital operates within a nexus of power relations in the sex industry and enables constraints on and opportunities for Lao migrants sex workers to exercise agency. This approach will help us go beyond the dichotomy of sexual victim and sexual agent.

### **Informal Employment in the Rose Karaoke Bar**

Rose Karaoke Bar [Pseudonym], an outdoor karaoke bar, first opened in 2012 as a family business run by a couple whom I will call “Mae Rose” [Pseudonym] or Mother Rose and “Pho Phol” [Pseudonym] or

Father Phol. It is located a considerable distance from the nearest community and surrounded by rice fields, cassava fields and woods because the owner wants to avoid causing any trouble for people in the community with loud noise and surveillance by the state. During my research period there were about 10-15 Lao migrant women. The bar is composed of four zones: 1) the housing areas of the owner and the sex workers, 2) the rental rooms for sexual services, 3) the kitchen and the karaoke bar, and 4) rice fields and cassava fields. This spatial arrangement shows that the separation of the workplace and private lives of the sex workers is ambiguous. The shared living quarters of the employer's family and the sex workers builds a fictive kinship as the employers present themselves as surrogate parents and use their family values, which are characterized by sharing, generosity and dependency. Therefore, the karaoke bar women are required to contribute to this fictive family by obeying the surrogate parents and sharing labor, food, and other things like a motorbike and a refrigerator.

Employment at the bar is flexible and informal since there is no contract, but only an informal agreement between the employer and the workers. If the workers cannot follow this agreement, they will be fired. Therefore, the sex workers at Rose Karaoke Bar must obey the following guidelines. Initially they do not receive a salary, but they can earn money by selling drinks, getting tips from clients, or selling sex. Second, selling sex is a "free choice" of the workers and they can negotiate the price with clients, but they must pay a bar fine to the owner (250 baht for a leave of 1-4 hours, or 350 baht for a one-night leave) if they are taken out by a client. For the safety of the sex workers, the bar provides a room for their sexual services for no additional charge. But if the sex workers decide to go out with the client, the client must pay for the room. Third, they must serve and entertain the clients, clean the bar and wash dishes. They are required to look sexually attractive as well as to have a service mindset because these are the bar's selling points. Finally, work hours are flexible and depend on the clients because the opening and closing times are relative to the client's arrival and departure.

Although the bar must close before 1 a.m. according to the law concerning entertainment places, the workers must work longer without overtime pay if the clients want to stay longer.

It is noted that the combination of informal employment of sex workers and family ethics brings about subtle exploitation and control of the former in two ways. One, while working in the karaoke bar, Lao migrant women need to do various types of work, including serving clients and selling sex, in exchange for little payment (an average of 100-200 baht/night depending on the number of clients). This level of income is insufficient to cover their expenses, and thus, sex work is becoming a major source of income. Lao migrant women inevitably choose to sell sex even though some of them do not initially intend to do so. This situation prompts them to become self-employed workers. And the more sexual services they provide for clients, the more money they obtain (and the more they pay in bar fines). It is an incentive for these women to sell more sex more and to exploit themselves more, whereas the employer accumulates capital from the profits derived from their labor as workers in the bar and as sex workers. In another form of exploitation, living with the employer's family, they need to do physical labor such as cleaning the bar and washing dishes, as well as planting and harvesting rice in exchange for the owner's protection. They perform this extra labor because of the family's values, which require them to be obedient and grateful to their surrogate parents. Thus, they unwillingly accept unfair agreements determined by the employer, such as receiving low wages for their labor in the bar, working overtime for free, and providing sexual services for the owner's colleagues.

### **Producing the Desired Body and Emotional Labor in Commercial Sex**

When I asked Lao karaoke bar women whether selling sex is an easy job, nearly every one gave me a similar answer which reflected the use of labor, body and emotion such as:

People who look down on this job say we get money just because we sell our bodies. But it's hard to get money from them [clients]. It's like if you go to work on a farm, if you don't use your labor, if you don't sweat, you don't get money...As I do this job, if I don't work hard, I don't have money....If I don't use my body in exchange for money, if I don't use my labor or sweat, if I don't do this, I don't have money.... (Nong [Pseudonym], 2015)

According to the quotation above, it is important to note that commercial sex is viewed by Nong [Pseudonym] as a kind of job because those employed in it need to use not only their body but also their labor, effort and patience more than in other occupations, such as factory work, because their work is different from other wage labor work since it involves the intrusion of others into the intimate/sexual part of the self. This meaning of commercial sex reveals the attempt of sex workers to reject the prostitution stigma (as an easy job for money).

In the service industry, emotional labor has become a prominent form of labor which has exchange value. Hochschild (2003) suggests that emotional labor means “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*” (p. 7). She also points out that when emotional labor is put into the marketplace, it acts like a commodity and the demand for it increases or decreases depending on the competition within the industry (p. 14). Thus, service jobs require the emotional labor of workers for corporate and personal use. In particular, sex work intensively employs not only sexual labor but also emotional labor; sex work is not an easy job but one which requires women's labor (sex, body, emotion) and skills to make clients happy or pleased in exchange for money. In this section, I examine how these sex workers manage their bodies and produce emotional labor to serve clients and how they accumulate different kinds of capital through this process in order to have economic opportunities and reduce risks in the sex industry.

**Management of Body: Beautiful, Clean, Slim, Sexy**

All of the Lao migrant women whom I interviewed in the karaoke bars come from poor families in rural villages in different provinces of Laos. Their parents are farmers and they need to help them in the field. These women have diverse social and cultural backgrounds in terms of sexuality, ethnicity, age, education, sex work experience, and marital status. Most of them are Lao Lum or lowland Lao but some are Khmu, an ethnic group who live mainly in the mountains. Some women are divorced with children, but some are single. Most of them have finished primary school but a few have finished secondary school. Besides that, the Lao Lum women have had experience in sex work in Laos before crossing the border to work in Thailand. The Khmu women, by contrast, entered into sex work for the first time in Thailand, not having wanted to break Khmu sexual norms, but being indirectly forced by the low wages in the karaoke bar to sell sex to clients. Despite their different social and cultural backgrounds, all of these women chose sex work in Thai border's karaoke bars for financial reasons, mainly to help their families and to save money in order to start their small businesses. Thus, in order to achieve their goals, working in karaoke bars requires their effort, money and time to manage their desired body as determined by the clients and employers.

The beauty, youth and care of Lao women sex workers are crucial selling points of the sex business in karaoke bars. These characteristics are used for grading karaoke bars by the clients and these can help guarantee good incomes for the bar women and the growth of the sex business because there is a high demand among Thai male clients for sex from beautiful, young and caring Lao women sex workers in karaoke bars. Therefore, the karaoke bar women are required to manage their bodies and emotions at work in order to attract clients as well as to create desire in clients to buy sexual services.

Beauty is one of the most important qualifications for sex workers because clients tend to like beautiful women and this influences the clients' decision to purchase sexual services from sex workers. The dominant discourse on beauty in Thai society defines beauty as

whiteness, slimness and a beautiful face with large eyes, a high-bridged nose and long hair. Lao women also internalize this standard of beauty through the media and modify their bodies to conform to the dominant discourse by having rhinoplasty (commonly known as a “nose job”) or breast implant surgery, taking whitening supplements and/or lotion, losing weight and having orthodontic treatment.

For instance, Nong [Pseudonym], a Lao Lum woman of 19 when I met her, had engaged in commercial sex in karaoke bars in Thai border towns for more than two years. She comes from a poor family living in a rural village in Khammouane province, Lao PDR. Her elder sister and some of her friends in the village dropped out of school to work as sex workers in Thailand and they sent a lot of money to their family. This influenced her decision to become a sex worker instead of studying in high school because she realized that if she continued studying, she would end up in poverty and farm work due to limited access to job opportunities for rural women in Laos. She finally decided to quit school and worked as a sex worker in Pakse before coming to Thailand. Although her white skin and youthful appearance are attractive to Thai male clients, the clients often teased her about her low-bridged nose and suggested that she should have a nose job. Consequently, she felt concerned about her beauty as she mentioned:

When I came to work in Thailand, I saved money for a nose job and orthodontic treatment. In work like this, beauty is essential. I used to be very ugly because I had a low-bridged nose and a wide face. So, I intended to have nose surgery for the first thing... When I had money, I wanted to make myself beautiful... Recently, I just had orthodontic treatment because I was told we should have it if we want to have a narrow face. (Nong [Pseudonym], 2015)

Most Lao women sex workers are also concerned about cleanliness because they believe that having sex with many men makes their body “dirty” in a biological and symbolic sense. In mainstream Lao culture, virginity is an essential symbol and value of femininity.

Women's having sex with many men for money, especially in the case of single and young women, is considered as an act of breaking sexual norms and destroying the attribute of a "good woman." Thus, many young girls who sell sex in karaoke bars view their bodies as "dirty" and then have negative feelings such as guilt towards themselves, as Lilly [Pseudonym], a 19-year old Khmu woman from Luang Prabang province said: "Working like this, it's difficult to find a man to marry us because they think we have had sex with many men" (Lilly [Pseudonym], 2015). Like other Khmu women who do sex work in karaoke bars, Lilly dropped out of school when she was 15 years old because her family could not afford it and she needs to help them by working in a karaoke bar in Thailand. She confirmed to me that she had never done this job before and she would have never done it in Laos. Yet, she does not tell her parents and siblings about sex work and she just tells them that she works in a restaurant in Thailand because women's selling sex is prohibited by Khmu culture (Lyttleton & Vorabout, 2011; Thongchinda, 2013).

Cleanliness is not only related to physical appearance but to reproductive hygiene because sex workers' bodies are viewed as "diseased" in the medical discourse on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), particularly HIV/AIDs. Lao women sex workers usually use condoms with clients and have pelvic examinations as well as blood tests for STDs and HIV. These practices help reduce the risk of STDs as well as unplanned pregnancies. Consequently, Lao women sex workers attempt to present their bodies as clean in terms of physical appearance and reproductive health.

Moreover, the karaoke bar women need to have a slim figure since most clients are attracted to slim women. Therefore, these women try very hard in many ways to keep their body slim since eating and drinking alcohol with clients every night can make them gain weight easily. Some take pills or supplements sold in the markets to lose weight. Some fast every other day. Some not only take weight loss supplements but also fast. These practices affect their health directly.

In addition, in order to be sexually attractive in their work, they need to change the way they dress. Knowing how to dress attractively is important for competition in karaoke bars because dressing up can make women appear more beautiful and seductive. When they live with their family in Laos, their parents do not allow them to wear short-shorts, mini-skirts or short dresses, but only traditional skirts or *phasin* or sometimes jeans. After they move to Thailand, every week they go to a flea market in town to buy fashionable clothes and sexy dresses for their work.

### **Production of Emotional Labor**

When working in the karaoke bar, most of my informants do not intend to enter into long-term relationships with Thai male clients nor to become the minor wife of a Thai man because learning from their clients, they think that “Thai men are womanizers and they aren’t serious about us [karaoke bar women]” (Fa [Pseudonym], 2015), and they plan to return home, start small businesses and marry Lao men. Yet, working in the karaoke bar offers these women opportunities to build intimate relationships through the production of emotional labor. However, Lao migrant sex workers, who have never had any experience in sex work, need to learn how to employ emotional labor through socialization and their own experiences. But those with sex work experience are more capable of employing emotional labor. According to my key informants, there are three types of emotional labor in the karaoke bar: hospitality, sympathy and caring, and love and affection.

The first form of emotional labor in sex work is to show hospitality, which refers to friendly and warm reception and entertainment of the clients. Lao karaoke bar women need to talk nicely, smile, be gentle when serving food and drinks, and when singing and dancing to entertain their clients. These are basic qualifications required by the employer for karaoke bar women. When a new worker begins at the bar, the employer will tell her about the bar’s regulations and her duties. The employer will highlight the role of good service.

For example, Ormsin [Pseudonym], a 27 year-old Lao Lum woman at the time I interviewed her, had been working as a sex worker for five years. She started to do sex work in Laos and just came to Thailand for the first time with her friend who works in Magnolia Karaoke Bar [Pseudonym]. Because of her sex work experience, she knew how to take care of clients as she explained when I asked her about her techniques to attract clients:

My techniques are talking with clients, pleasing them, taking care of them ... If you are very beautiful but when you sit with your client and you don't let them touch you, you don't talk with them, they don't like you. If you aren't beautiful but you take care of clients, they won't care about the beauty, they will choose you ... For me, I never show any dislike to clients. If I have personal problems, or if I feel unhappy, I won't show these feelings. (Ormsin [Pseudonym], 2014)

A second type of emotional labor is caring and sympathy. Listening attentively to clients and feeling sympathetic towards their problems is another way that karaoke bar women perform emotional labor. In karaoke bars, clients not only want to buy sexual services but they also want to find someone to listen to their problems. Sometimes, they cannot talk about these problems with their wife because it might affect their relationship. Lilly is a good example of one who has developed her skills in taking care of clients and she use these skills to build long-term relationships with them. She revealed her technique to attract clients, as follows:

I care about the clients and talk nicely with them when they come here. I don't make them angry. Some of the clients want to build a relationship with me because they choose a woman who makes them feel happy when they talk with her. Sometimes they come here to talk about their problems with me. (Lilly [Pseudonym], 2015)

Third, Lao karaoke bar women need to display love and affection for their clients. This is a crucial part of the emotional labor of sex work because clients will be satisfied with the sexual service if sex workers express love and affection verbally and physically for them. This kind of emotional labor requires them to hug, kiss, touch clients and let clients perform these acts on them. As for professional sex workers, they can suppress their true feeling and use surface acting to perform love and affection for all kinds of clients. But for non-professional sex workers, particularly in the case of new workers, they choose to employ love and affection only with clients whom they love. If they gain more sex work experience, and become accustomed to the work, they will develop the skill to display love and affection towards any client.

For instance, Nong, who intended to do sex work since she was 16 years old, highlights her techniques of displaying love and affection towards her clients:

Sometimes when I have sex with a client whom I don't like, I want him to finish quickly but I can't say to him directly, "Hurry up, hurry up." I keep it secret...I try everything to please him and make him have an orgasm. I talk sweetly and compliment him about his sexual ability. "Older" clients, especially, they like compliments. The more we give them sweet words, the more they are pleased. If we say, "hurry up, hurry up," they lose their sexual desire. (Nong [Pseudonym], 2015)

By contrast, Nan [Pseudonym] did not to intend to do sex work in Thailand but she was deceived by her friend into working as a waitress in the karaoke bar. As a waitress, she earned very little compared to the women who sold sex. Eventually, this situation prompted her to sell her virginity to a client at a price of 10,000 baht. Since then, she has continued to do sex work in the karaoke bar and she revealed that in order to employ love and affection in her work, she chooses to provide sexual services only for clients whom she loves. "I feel happy when I go out with my clients, she said. "If I don't like them, I won't have sex with them. I can't do this with those I don't like." (Nan [Pseudonym], 2015)

The karaoke bar women employ love and affection not only in their sex work but also in private life, and they often talk on the phone with clients whom they love. Sometimes these clients take them out of the bar to go shopping, dining, or traveling. This freedom offers the women opportunities to develop their relationship with these clients.

To sum up, body and emotional management are essential elements of sex work, as the examples of Lao karaoke bar women above show us how they attempt to modify their bodies as well as suppress feelings to produce desirable bodies and emotional states of clients. In so doing, as sex workers, they are required to act like a loving and caring wife and at the same time an attractive and desirable woman. The more they are capable of employing their sexual attractiveness, hospitality, and sympathy as well as love, the more they are able to accumulate capital and power to negotiate with clients and compete with other sex workers in the sex industry.

### **Production of Capital and Negotiating Strategies of Lao Women Sex Workers**

In transnational commercial sex, it is found that Lao women are able to capitalize on their body, sexuality and femininity since Thai men desire young, attractive, friendly and caring sex workers. Consequently, Lao women sex workers use age, body, sexuality, emotion and femininity in terms of erotic capital (Hakim, 2010) to maximize their profits from men and to compete with other sex workers since these properties have value in the sex market. First, they invest effort in transforming themselves to be modern and beautiful as defined by modern discourses of women's body through cosmetic surgery, consumption of supplements, cosmetic uses, as well as attire, as I discussed earlier. As such, beauty and attractiveness are major elements of erotic capital (Hakim, 2010: 500). Second, Lao migrant women in karaoke bars employ social skills such as dancing and singing skills, and talking and listening skills, which constitute an element of erotic capital. Lilly highlights this by claiming that showing care, talking nicely and listening attentively to clients'

problems are her techniques in taking care of clients, and this encourages clients to build relationships with her. Third, sexuality is an essential part of erotic capital, referring to “sexual competence, energy, erotic imagination, playfulness and everything that makes for a sexually satisfying partner” (Hakim, 2010: 501). The case of Nong can exemplify this point because she is able to stage artificial love and affection to satisfy older clients while providing sexual services and performing authentic love and feelings when having sex with other clients whom she loves.

Since women from Laos and Thai men in northeast Thailand are both part of the Lao language speaking group, the similarity of their languages enables Lao women to communicate with Thai men. Accordingly, Lao women are able to talk with Thai men, sing Thai songs, and understand Thai language. This ability determines a source of Lao migrants’ cultural capital. Nong reveals that communication with clients is her major reason for selling sex in Thailand instead of in Laos because when she worked in Pakse, Laos, there were a lot of Chinese and Vietnamese clients who cannot speak Lao or speak it only poorly. Thus, it is difficult for Lao women to negotiate with them.

In Pakse, if I met clients who couldn’t speak Lao, I would never go with them. Once I went out with a Chinese man and I found I had my period. I told him that I couldn’t have sex with him but he forced me to do it. This man didn’t understand Lao. He didn’t know what I told him. So to avoid this kind of problem, I would not go out with clients who cannot speak Lao. (Nong [Pseudonym], 2015)

These forms of capital (erotic and cultural) are used to trade for financial gains and forms of support from clients. The volume and intensity of erotic capital in terms of emotional labor is determined by the types of relationships which Lao women have with clients. Through their experience, Lao women in karaoke bars classify clients widely into three categories: normal clients, regular clients and boyfriends. This classification determines how they negotiate over the prices they charge for their sexual services, what services they offer, and whether condoms

will be used, as well as support. For normal clients<sup>2</sup>, there are certain rules, such as fixed prices, limited hours of sexual service (no longer than one hour or one night), type of sexual service (only sexual intercourse, no kissing on the lips, no nipple sucking) and condom use. As for regular clients or boyfriends<sup>3</sup>, no fixed rules are determined, and the price, sexual services and condom use can be negotiated. For instance, the price of sexual service depends on satisfaction of regular clients or boyfriends. Lao women sex workers are not concerned about the money paid for sex from regular clients or boyfriends because they can ask them for money or other things when they need it. Regular clients or boyfriends can touch on any part of their bodies and negotiate for not using condoms. The sex workers utilize more erotic capital with regular clients and boyfriends than with normal clients because relationships with Thai men offer them financial support and protection.

For example, Nong describes the support she received from her Thai boyfriend, who is 36 years old and married with two sons:

Sometimes, if I need money, he gives me more than the sexual service charge. If he doesn't have money, he may give me 400-500 baht. Once, I told him "Give me 2,000 baht" and he gave it to me. When there was a police raid in karaoke bar, if I had not had him to take me out of the bar, I would have hidden in the forest...It would have been hard if I hadn't had a boyfriend. (Nong [Pseudonym], 2015)

After an intimate relationship with this man that lasted over three years (at the end of my field research), she decided to stop working in the karaoke bar and became his minor wife because she loves him and saw that he could take care of her. She finally moved out of the karaoke bar and stayed in a room, the rent of which her husband paid, in a nearby village.

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<sup>2</sup> Normal clients are those with whom Lao women sex workers have had commercial relations but do not extend the relationship after sexual services.

<sup>3</sup> Regular clients are those with whom the sex workers have developed relationships after sexual services but they do not have love for them; boyfriends are those with whom they have developed emotional attachment and intimate relationships after sexual services.

Another example, Fa [Pseudonym], who has been working in Rose Karaoke Bar for two years, has a regular client, aged about 40, who runs a logistics business in a nearby town. He usually gives her financial and material support when she needs it. Thus, she has had a long-term relationship with him. After two years of sex work in the karaoke bar, she collected enough money to build a beautiful new two-story house for her parents, which is one of the biggest houses in the village. She and her sister, who also works at Rose Karaoke Bar, bought a piece of land in Luang Prabang city together because they plan to run a business there and she will open a hairdressing salon.

“I want to study hairdressing in Vientiane because my friend is studying there.”

“How much will you pay to study?”

“20,000 baht. I will save money and it will take me about three months.

“Where will you plan to open the hairdressing salon? In your village?”

“No, my village is located in the countryside. People hardly go to the hairdresser’s. I’ll open it in the city. I need to accumulate money. If I have my shop, I will stop working like this.”  
(Fa [Pseudonym], 2015)

These two examples demonstrate the way Lao migrant women, who are viewed as marginalized with little or no economic capital, attempt to accumulate capital through the production of intimate relationships with Thai men. In so doing, they are able to struggle and maximize profits in the sex market by employing erotic and cultural capital. Lao migrant women’s strategy of using erotic and cultural capital in exchange for economic capital in the service sector resonates with the study of Singkul (forthcoming) on Lao women’s use of sexuality and emotional labor as erotic capital, as well as that of Lyttleton (2014) on Dai women from China employing their human capital (sexuality, ethnicity and femininity) to build intimate relations with Malay/Chinese businessmen in order to accumulate enough capital to start their own businesses.

## Conclusion

I have argued that my key informants have chosen to sell sex in karaoke bars without coercion and have had freedom in selecting the clients to whom they want to sell sex, but that they need to exploit themselves through affective performance in the dimension of emotional labor and body management in order to be desired by clients. Although they are exploited by the employer and controlled by the power of clients, they strategically employ erotic capital (body, sexuality, emotional labor) and cultural capital (language and gender) to trade for financial profits and various kinds of support from Thai men. Through my accounts of their experiences I have articulated Lao migrant women both as sexual victims and as sexual agents in complex ways. According to libertarian feminists or prostitutes' rights activists like Shannon Bell (Bell, 1995 cited in Jaggar, 1997), and Judith Walkowitz (1996), who regard sex workers' agency as freedom of choice and sexual rebellion against patriarchal sexual norms, Lao women sex workers' independent choice of working as sex workers in karaoke bars and their autonomy in dealing with clients exemplifies the exercise of women's agency in prostitution. Cohen (1996) also argues that women who work in open-ended prostitution are not passive victims, but rather, active "entrepreneurs" who have more opportunities to maximize benefits than those working in forced prostitution.

However, in the case of Lao karaoke bar women, if we consider women's agency only via freedom of choice and women with the autonomy to deal with clients, we will overlook social as well as economic factors, and the exploitative aspects of sex work. It is obvious that their choice of sex work has been shaped by social and economic inequalities and that in the sex market they have encountered exploitation and subordination through the exploitation of emotional labor and management of the body. Thus, Lao women sex workers are victimized by socioeconomic constraints as well as by the capitalist sex industry. This resonates with the arguments of anti-prostitution feminism which views prostitution as women's exploitation and institutionalized male

domination (MacKinnon, 2011). But considering Lao karaoke bar women's experience in cross-border commercial sex, although they are subordinated by patriarchal sexual norms and the power of Thai men, they are able to use their femininity, emotion, intimacy and sexuality through various strategies so that they can negotiate with Thai men for their own benefits and a better life for their family.

Studies on the roles of women's emotion in commercial sex tend to focus on how sex work offers women opportunities to shape subjectivities and identities (Veerakulthewan, 2003; Kong, 2006; Faier, 2007; Lyttleton, 2014; Singkul, forthcoming) but there is less discussion about the role of capital for sex workers in negotiating with men (with the exception of Singkul, forthcoming) despite an emphasis on the role of women's emotional labor. Yet, inspired by Hakim's notion of erotic capital, it is found that the sexuality, emotion and intimacy of Lao migrant women can be used both as commodity and as capital. Hakim argues that erotic capital has value in the labor market, including the sex market, and that it can obviously play a role in occupations in the entertainment or service industries (Hakim, 2010: 509). Arguing against Hochschild's notion of the exploitation of women through emotional labor in the service industry, she points out that certain service jobs, including sex work, allow women to exploit their erotic capital and get commercial value from it (Hakim, 2010: 509-510). Thus, the concept of erotic capital helps us to better understand how Lao migrant sex workers can accumulate economic capital to support their families and elevate their social and economic status, as I discussed in the previous section. However, Hakim dismisses the dimension of other social and cultural factors such as class, status, race, and ethnicity to elaborate erotic capital (Hakim, 2010: 510). For migrant women sex workers, social class, race, and ethnicity play a role in determining capital accumulation. Women of different social classes, ethnic groups, and cultures have different degrees of erotic capital and different capacities to use it in the global market. Therefore, Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital is useful in bridging this gap. In the case of Lao migrants in karaoke bars, Lao language and gender can function as cultural capital.

In brief, I suggest that to study the situation of Lao migrant women working as prostitutes at the Thai border, we should analyze how the international migration of sex workers capitalizes on the eroticization of foreign women and the symbolic meanings that sex with women from different countries and cultures has for their clients, especially meanings involving national power and dominance (Kempadoo, 1996 cited in Jaggar 1997). At the same time, we should focus on how Lao migrant women are able to capitalize on their emotion, intimacy and sexuality in order to compete with other agents in the transnational sex industry.

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