

Bordering Work and Personal Life: Using “the Multiplication of Labour” to Understand Ethnic Performers’ Work in Southwest China

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ABSTRACT: This article explores how “the multiplication of labour” can be used as a theoretical lens to make sense of the blurred boundaries between work and non-work spheres. It does so by drawing on the experiences of ethnic performers in Southwest China. Ethnic performance becomes a site of border struggles, as performers struggle with their desirable performance and undesirable presence, as well as work’s colonising effect over their personal lives. “The multiplication of labour” points to work’s diversification, meaning that performers are expected to do multiple aspects of labour at the same time, many of which are unrecognised and unremunerated. It also captures work’s intensification, which is shown not only through the prolonged working hours but also in how work intrudes into the most intimate areas of performers’ personal lives. In resistance, ethnic performers engage in a more playful and reflexive self-making, which is nevertheless constrained by ethnicity and gender.

KEYWORDS: The multiplication of labour, ethnic performance, work-life intersection, bordering, intimacy, rural-urban migration, agency.

Introduction

Despite increased academic recognition of the blurring boundaries of work and non-work spheres, there is a lack of specific language to articulate and systematically examine this tendency, which goes beyond the framing of “work-life balance.” While the borders that contain work and life have been called into question (e.g. Weeks 2007; Gregg 2013; Adkins and Dever 2016), the specific processes that enable the blurring boundaries between work and non-work spheres are rarely treated as the centre of the inquiry. The tendency for work to dominate lives has also been less discussed in the context of rural-urban migrants’ experience in China, although it has been well documented how migrant workers’ existence in the cities largely rely on their work, and how migrants overwhelmingly tend to work under exploitative conditions, including prolonged working hours, low pay, and hazardous working environments (e.g. Pun 2005; Pun and Chan 2012). While it is not possible to talk about “work-life balance” in the case of rural-urban migrants, we need new ways to articulate how work colonises more of migrant workers’ lives, including the most intimate and personal parts. This article draws on the cases of ethnic migrant performers to think about how “the multiplication of labour” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) provides a valuable lens to elucidate the ever more blurring boundaries between work and non-work spheres, and how it provides a different context for workers to negotiate their everyday agency. Here, agency is broadly understood as “both the

intention and the practice of taking action for one’s own self-interest or the interests of others” (Rogaly 2009: 1).

Ethnic performers, who are the focus of this study, are people who perform ethnic songs and dances at different venues, such as restaurants and tourist sites. They are mostly rural-urban migrants who are members of ethnic minority groups. While most existing literature about rural-urban migration in China tends to focus on industrial workers in eastern, coastal areas, few examine migrants who move to small-to-medium cities in Southwest China, despite the rapidly rising number of such migrants in recent years (Liang, Li, and Ma 2014). Also, little research has been conducted on the experience of ethnic minority migrants (but see Iredale *et al.* 2001; Ma 2019), therefore, we have little insight regarding how minority migrants’ experiences differ from their majority Han counterparts. Further, in theorising migrant workers who undertake ethnic performance labour, this research departs from the majority of work about migrant labour in China, which overwhelmingly tends to focus on industrial workers while neglecting a wide range of informal workers (Swider 2017).

Ethnic performance is essentially a form of service work, as I will illustrate later. While it is well recognised how service work has become an important site for workers’ negotiations around gender, emotions, bodies, and sexualities (Zheng 2007; Hanser 2008; Otis 2011; Ding 2017), little work has placed the intersection between work and life as the major focus of inquiry. While situating ethnic performers’ experience

in the literature about ethnic tourism and migrant workers in China, a systematic focus on work-life intersection is still lacking. Literature about people who participate in ethnic tourism tends to suggest that workers could successfully separate the “on-stage self” from the “off-stage self” (Hillman 2003; Li 2003; Bai 2007), while literature about rural-urban migrants tends to argue that work becomes an obstacle for workers to “have a life” (Pun 2007; Wang and Nehring 2014). How could we use a less dualist way to talk about the work-life intersection? This article argues that “the multiplication of labour” potentially lends a valuable lens to shed light on such an intersection.

“The multiplication of labour” was proposed to capture how the frontiers of global capital keep expanding by engaging with different bordering mechanisms and complex assemblages of power, in a context when national borders are no longer the most relevant reference points in shaping mobilities and labour (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Globalisation does not lead to a borderless world. On the contrary, borders proliferate as they are produced “whenever a distinction between subject and object is established” (*ibid.*: 16). Here, the meaning of borders has been expanded to include not just geographical borders, but also symbolic and ideological ones, although these different forms of borders are overlapping and intersecting in most cases. Therefore, “bordering” points to the different processes of making boundaries and drawing distinctions, which leads to different forms of inclusion and exclusion. “The multiplication of labour” more specifically points to the tendency for work to be *intensified*: the increasing intensity of work, which not only includes the lengthening of working hours and increasing precarity of labour conditions but also how work colonises more of labourers’ lives; *diversified*: how workers are expected to do multiple aspects of work at the same time; and *heterogenised*: the heterogeneity of different regions and scales, as well as the heterogeneity of workers’ status and subjective positions (*ibid.*: 88). This article recognises the heterogeneity of labour by focusing on the region and type of workers that tend to be less discussed by scholarly work and draws on labour’s intensification and diversification to illustrate the work-life intersection in the case of ethnic performers.

This article will first demonstrate how ethnic performance could be best theorised as a site of border struggles for performers, as their work is shaped by different bordering mechanisms. It then further illustrates labour’s multiplication, elucidating how performers are expected to do ethnicity at work and work on their ethnic self, as well as how women performers are drawing a distinct boundary between stigmatised sexualised labour by referring to the state’s rhetoric of ethnicity. These border struggles highlight workers’ everyday agency in responding to work’s colonising effect, demonstrating how performers engage in different meaning-making mechanisms to make sense of their work, which also has implications for their sense of selves. They actively mobilise the party-state’s discourse about ethnicity (e.g., promoting ethnic culture; relating ethnic tourism with poverty alleviation) to reaffirm the value of their labour. This article, therefore, further explores how “the multiplication of labour” provides a valuable lens to understand the intersection between work and personal life, and the implication of understanding workers’ agency in this context.

Ethnic migrant performers in Southwest China

This article draws on six months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2016 to 2017 at one restaurant and two tourist sites, which I call

Waterfall Restaurant, Tea Park, and Forest Park in Green City.¹ Green City is a small-scale city (with a population of around 300,000) that is striving to turn itself into a popular tourist city. Situated in Yunnan Province, which is one of the most poverty-stricken provinces in China, as well as the province with the most diverse ethnic groups, Green City actively uses ethnic tourism as a way to develop the local economy and achieve poverty alleviation (*tuopin* 脱贫). Waterfall Restaurant is a high-end rural tourism (*nongjiale* 农家乐) restaurant that seeks to provide a nostalgic vision of dining for urban people who are detached from rural ways of living (Park 2014). Tea Park and Forest Park are tourist sites using ethnic performance as one of their attractions, alongside natural sceneries and animals in the forest. The customers who patronise the restaurant or tourist attractions are mainly urban, middle class people who crave a taste of authentic ethnic culture, and who arguably reaffirm their positions as modern Han citizens through consuming ethnic tourism (Walsh and Swain 2004). Ethnic performers are mostly rural-urban migrants from adjacent villages. Some of them lack the resources to migrate far away from home to find work, and some of them choose to work in Green City because it is closer to home. Since Green City has few factories, many of the migrant workers have to undertake service work, as in the case of ethnic performers. They are mostly young people aged 16 to 30, and they come from different ethnic backgrounds including Yi, Hani, Lahu, Wa, and Dai. Some of the ethnic performers are Han or are ambivalent about their ethnic identities, but they nevertheless need to leave the audience with the impression that all performers are “authentic” ethnic minorities.² What these three sites have in common is that on-stage performances of ethnic songs and dances are not the only or even the most important part of ethnic performers’ work. In these three sites, ethnic performers undertake the work of “accompanying meals” (*bancan* 伴餐). This means that they perform ethnic songs and dances at the guests’ dining tables, and sometimes also provide services such as toasting the guests, massaging their shoulders while forcing wine down guests’ throats, and sometimes even sitting on guests’ laps during toasting. The songs and dances that were performed were dramatically reconstructed for the purpose of ethnic tourism. For example, in Waterfall Restaurant, ethnic performances can be requested for free for all dining guests. When called upon, all the performers would gather in front of guests’ dining table and be ready to perform a set of songs and dances while performing the toasting ritual to all guests at the table. When they sing minority songs in front of guests, performers have to take turns massaging guests’ shoulders while proposing toasts to them – usually not in a negotiable way, since competitive drinking is also an essential ritual during Chinese banquets (Kipnis 1997; Mason 2013). Every guest takes turns enjoying such services – listening to songs while being massaged by an opposite-sex performer, as well as being the target of compulsory drinking. The atmosphere at the performance scene is often lively and passionate, with guests laughing, watching, and taking photos of the unique scene. Similar styles of *bancan* also manifest themselves in Tea Park and Forest Park, alongside scheduled on-stage performances of ethnic songs and dances.

I undertook participant observation at these three sites, working together with performers in Waterfall Restaurant as a waitress/performer

1. These are all pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of performers.

2. I have taken issue with the idea of “authentic” ethnic minorities more critically elsewhere. See Mao (2020).

and observing the daily work routines of performers at the other two sites. I gained initial access to these three sites through friends who introduced me to managers of the tourist sites and the owners of the restaurants. I took care to ensure that workers did not feel pressured to take part in this research because their managers allowed me the initial access. The fact that I came from the local area, and that I could speak the local dialect made it easy for me to work together with performers. As a Hani, my (officially registered) ethnic identity could provide some common ground for informants to relate to me more easily. However, I do not consider myself as doing “insider research” since I knew little about the group of people that I was trying to learn about, and I take the standpoint that in a sense, all researchers in the field are both insiders and outsiders at the same time (Narayan 1993). Working together with informants or shadowing their work became an important way for me to gain an in-depth understanding of these performers’ everyday, mundane work. It also became a good way to build rapport with informants before approaching them for interviews. In total, I conducted 45 in-depth interviews with performers at these three field sites in order to understand their experiences of migration, and how they experience their everyday work as performers. I chose not to interview business owners/managers and customers because this research tries to understand the performers’ experiences of work and migration from their own perspectives. All the interviews were transcribed in Chinese and were analysed using thematic analysis. In the following section, I will seek to show how ethnic performances became a site of border struggles for migrant performers, as they struggled with their desirable performances and undesirable presence, as well as work’s colonising effect over their lives.

Border struggles and the intensification of labour

Ethnic performance is fundamentally a form of service work, as *bancan* at the guests’ banqueting tables is, in fact, the main part of the performers’ work. Since *bancan* involves physically proximate, and sometimes even intimate, interactions between performers and guests as described above, it is a form of “interactive service work” (Leidner 1993). Such work brings the production and consumption of service into the same time and space, with the quality of such work largely determined by the interaction between service providers and guests (Urry 2002).

Therefore, ethnic performance as a form of service work provides a drastically different context for workers compared to factory work. Unlike factory work, which mainly involves workers facing machines most of the time, service work involves close interactions between service providers and receivers. Such physical proximity brings new challenges to service workers. For instance, working under the “daily reminder of ethnicity” (Bai 2007: 257) means that performers need to act in certain ways to meet the expectations of the customers to see the “authentic” and happy ethnic minorities. Business owners also actively utilise the bordering between the Han and ethnic minorities to make profits, which points to the ways that capital engages with different bordering mechanisms to expand its frontiers (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

The multiple bordering mechanisms that deeply shape performers’ work and migration make ethnic performance into an important site for border struggles – “the struggles that take shape around the ever more unstable line between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ between inclusion and exclusion” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 13). One of the tensions that ethnic performers have to constantly come to terms with is the fact

that while their performances are desirable, their presence is not, as they are migrants without local household registration (*hukou* 户口).³ Such desirable performance and undesirable presence (Barabantseva 2015) should be understood in relation to both national and local contexts. Ethnic performance has gained increasing popularity in recent years, as more and more restaurants and bars that incorporate ethnic performance are emerging in Green City. The increasing popularity of ethnic performance in commercialised settings should be understood in relation to the changing landscape of consumption and service work in China. The service sector barely existed in the socialist era before the 1980s, but by 2018 it accounted for 52.2% of China’s GDP, as it has become “a new engine for economic growth.”⁴ The “consumer revolution” in urban China (Davis 2005) brought more and more urbanites to patronise restaurants and engage in tourism to assert their privilege and gain cultural capital. Locally, the development of tourism in Green City “stems from nothing, and grows into prosperity,”⁵ and its revenue tripled from 2006 to 2015. As mentioned before, the thriving of ethnic performance in commercialised settings also relates to the fact that Green City is trying to turn itself into a popular tourist city, and promoting ethnic tourism is closely tied with local economic growth and poverty alleviation.

Despite the increasing desirability of ethnic performances, however, performers are subject to “differential inclusion” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 159), which means that rural migrants are included on different terms, and that they are treated differently from locals in various ways. Migrants’ settlement in cities generally constitutes a social problem, as the non-possession of an urban *hukou* deprives them of many of the benefits that locals are entitled to. Although obtaining local *hukou* is theoretically easy in a small-scale city, many migrants lack the information or the willingness to do so (see Chen and Fan 2016; Mao 2020). As a result, local governments are not responsible for the social reproduction cost of migrants – such as providing pension, medical care, and other social security benefits – making it difficult for them to access basic entitlement in cities. The differential inclusion of migrants means that while their labour is desired, their presence is not.

Despite the struggle over inclusion, migrant performers also struggle over the work’s colonising effect on their lives. This is firstly shown through how performers are expected to work for longer hours, with high intensity, as well as under exploitative conditions. This is by no means unique among ethnic performers as compared to other migrant workers’ labour conditions, and many other rural-urban migrants in the informal service sector are working without the protection of labour laws and regulations (Otis 2011). At Waterfall Restaurant, none of the performers have signed employment contracts in any form. They only have the restaurant owner’s verbal agreement to work there. As a result, performers work in a context where the business owner largely retains the power to define labour conditions and workplace rules on his/her own terms. Prolonged working hours (ranging from 10 to 15 hours a day) without

3. The household registration system divides the population into “rural” and “urban” populations, and registers people according to their place of birth. With the initial intention of controlling geographic mobility, the *hukou* has become an integral part of China’s economic and political system and social stratification. See Chan 2010; Liang *et al.* 2014.

4. “China’s service sector: new economic growth engine,” *China Daily*, 23 May 2019, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201905/23/WS5ce60fa8a3104842260bd5d0.html> (accessed on 15 November 2019).

5. This information comes from a local news report online. The specific link will not be put here in order to ensure the anonymity of the place being researched.

overtime pay; holding back the first month's pay as a "deposit" so that they cannot quit easily; facing difficulties to take leave; and having very limited time off (half a day per week) have all become the norm for most performers in this study. These actions are illegal according to China's labour laws. However, local governments often have little incentive to strictly implement the labour law while they try to lower labour costs to attract investment and develop the local economy (Friedman and Lee 2010). Meanwhile, unlike with factory workers, who can take collective action such as strikes and succeed in some cases (e.g. Chan and Ngai 2009), collective action rarely constitutes an option for informal service workers in small-scale businesses. Sometimes migrant performers resist by constantly changing jobs. However, every time the workers want to change jobs, they risk losing their deposit money, which is not a small sum for them considering their meagre wage.

Meanwhile, work intensification does not only include the prolonged working hours and exploitative labour conditions, but also relates to how work has diversified: how workers are increasingly expected to do multiple aspects of labour at the same time.

The diversification of labour

Doing ethnicity at work

Migrant performers are working under "the daily reminder of ethnicity" (Bai 2007: 257). One important part of ethnic performers' work is to do ethnicity in certain ways to meet the audiences' desire to see "authentic" ethnic minority people. Just as it is well recognised that people need to "do gender" at work (West and Zimmerman 1987; Hall 1993), migrant performers are also expected to do ethnicity at work, and ideally, to do it well. Doing gender is not always about living up to the ideals of masculinity and femininity, but is about how we are always subject to "gender assessment" (West and Zimmerman 1987). Similarly, performers are subject to "ethnic assessment" at work, in the sense that they are expected to do ethnicity in a way that is in accordance with cultural norms regarding ethnicity.

Kai is a tour guide in Tea Park. Regardless of the fact that Kai does not identify strongly with his Hani identity, he still needs to do a lot of work in order to meet the "ethnic assessment" at work, i.e., the need for guests to believe that they are interacting with authentic ethnic minority people, and to do ethnicity in a way that is in accordance with the cultural norms regarding what ethnic minority people are like in China. To do ethnicity at work, Kai firstly has to dress up in ethnic costumes provided by business owners. These costumes are designed and manufactured for staging purposes, and they are different from what local ethnic minority people wear in their everyday lives or for attending local events without the need to meet the visual expectations of tourists. Wearing stylised ethnic costumes is a crucial part of the visual representation of ethnic "Others" that meets the expectations of guests while also conforming to the popular conceptualisation of what ethnic minority people should look like according to mainstream media and state discourse (Chio 2014). Besides, Kai also has to equip himself with knowledge about ethnic culture in Yunnan, which mainly comes from tourism manuals provided by local tourism bureaus, and must always be ready to respond to guests' comments and questions about ethnic minorities. The depiction of ethnic minority relies on highly essentialised representations of ethnic minorities in China, which depict them as backward but pure, simple, and happy (Harrell 1995; Schein 2000). For example, it depicts how ethnic minority

people are naturally born with a talent for singing and dancing, or how being hospitable to guests is ingrained in minority people's warm hearts and pure spirits. Being subject to "ethnic assessment" also means that Kai is expected to do emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) in certain ways, as many tourists visit ethnic sites with the expectation to view the happy minorities whose happiness is uncontaminated by modern ways of living (e.g. Harrell 1995; Walsh and Swain 2004). Although all service workers arguably are expected to do emotional labour, being subject to ethnic assessment at work just adds another layer to the emotional labour that performers are expected to do. Therefore, performers are expected to constantly show their emotions such as showing hospitality to guests, showing emotions in more dramatic ways, and being cheerful and happy minorities. Although showing happiness seems to be a feeling rule that similarly applies to the Han and ethnic minorities under the socialist regime, it might be dangerous for ethnic minorities not to show happy faces, as it implies an orientation toward nationalist separatism. Here, the "happiness duty" falls on the shoulders of ethnic performers: they are not only expected to speak about happiness but also, crucially, not to speak about unhappiness (Ahmed 2010). Such happiness duty also means that it is more difficult for performers to express emotions such as anger or sadness at work, even though they are constantly subject to discrimination and prejudice against ethnic minority people during work.

The ways that migrant performers are expected to "do ethnicity" at work are also heavily gendered. From the description of ethnic performances above, it is easy to see how it largely relied on gendered and sexualised labour of performers. This is also related to the politics of banqueting in China, as successful banquets and business entertainment are important ways to build up relationships (*guanxi* 關係), and thereby turn "interested, calculated, commodified relationships into ones rooted in 'irrational' sentiment and affect" (Osburg 2013: 33). The things that performers were doing during *bancan* – singing, urging guests' competitive drinking, proposing toasts, and sometimes even having bodily contact with guests – are all important ways to create certain atmospheres and sentiments at guests' banqueting tables, thereby also contributing to guests' *guanxi*-building process. This creation of sentiment and affect largely relies on the performers' gendered and sexualised labour.

Ethnic minority women in Southwest China are heavily sexualised in popular discourse. They tend to be portrayed as child-like, primitive yet erotic, and subject to different moral standards regarding their sexuality (e.g. Gladney 1994; Schein 2000; Walsh 2005). Therefore, women performers are readily sexualised even before they have had any interaction with guests, since Yunnan is often associated with erotic ethnic tourism, and these women workers (being seen as backward and primitive ethnic minorities regardless of their real identities) are often seen as sexually available (Otis 2011).

More importantly, such essentialised and eroticised depictions of ethnic minority women are actively promoted by market actors such as restaurant owners and tourist site managers, as women workers' sexualities and gendered performances are used as resources to make privileged guests feel entitled and their social status recognised. As Hanser (2008) suggests, amongst service encounters, the "distinction work" needs to be done by workers to acknowledge the guests' entitlement and distinct positions, and this eventually contributes to the social construction and reproduction of class. It is also well recognised that "distinction work" is largely reliant on women workers' sexualities and gendered bodies, as gender has become "a powerful way of 'speaking', or

making, class distinctions” (Hanser 2005: 588). In a similar sense, the ways that women performers do “distinction work” are also largely related to their sexualised and aesthetic bodies.

In Forest Park, one of the ways to provide distinction service to VIP guests is by doing some special “rituals” during the toasting process – female performers are requested to sit on male guests’ laps whilst forcing wine down their throats. It is a special part of the performance that would not normally be performed for ordinary guests like tourist groups. As I was excluded from doing participant observation in the individual compartments where such performances for VIP clients were conducted (which is revealing in itself), doing such heavily sexualised labour is clearly something that bothers many women performers according to the interviews.

When I first saw the VIP *bancan*, with all kinds of sitting on laps and forcing wine, all kinds of things. I even saw a guest try to touch the performer. When I went back from the scene, on my way to the dorm, I hesitated. I was wondering if I had chosen the wrong job. I felt all kinds of entanglements of thoughts in my mind, but I never told these to my family. If my parents ask what I do for work, I just say...well, just singing to the guests, dancing. And then toasting, you can drink if you want, and you can refuse to drink as well. So my mother has never known...it’s like...put it bluntly you were like escorting...Anyway, sometimes things become more acceptable as time goes on, and you get used to it. Once one of my friends saw our performance, and he pointed out that this job is like accompanying drinking (*peijiu* 陪酒). I said, our work is formal work (*zhenggui* 正规), and it is protected, something like that.⁶

Chun’s ambivalence over doing sexualised ethnic performance shows through the fact that she chose not to discuss the details of her work with her family, and that she needed to defend the legitimacy of her work in front of her friend. While doing the “distinction work” to make guests feel entitled, women performers like Chun also have to produce extra labour in bordering legitimate ethnic performance and other types of sex-related work that are illegal and formally banned in China.⁷ At first, I struggled to understand what Chun meant when she said that such work is “protected.” Later, I realised that she was right – that this work gained its legitimacy through official endorsement, in the name of promoting ethnic culture and achieving poverty alleviation through developing local tourism. This shows women performers’ agency in mobilising available discourses and resources in defending the legitimacy of sexualised ethnic performance and maintaining a sense of respectability. I will return to this point in more detail after discussing another important component of performers’ work that they need to do during off-work hours – working on the ethnic self.

Working on the ethnic self

Despite the constant need to do ethnicity at work to meet “ethnic assessment” under the context of commercialisation of ethnicity, migrant performers also need to work on their ethnic selves to turn themselves into what is desirable by the market, and potentially capitalise on their ethnic identity. The multiplication of labour captures the ways that people need to do extra work to turn themselves into what is desired for the work. It is more about the potential to “become” the right person rather than being the right person. The labour to work on one’s self has become

one of the many dimensions of the job. For Kai, this means the urgent need to know more about what his ethnicity means, and ethnic minority culture in general.

After I took this job [as a tour guide], I felt that I really needed to learn more about Hani culture and customs. It is something essential to learn as a tour guide, as you know, tourism in Yunnan is mainly about ethnic minority cultures. That is what tourists want to see when they go to visit Yunnan.⁸

The commercialisation of ethnic culture promoted Kai’s willingness to know more about his ethnic origins, even though he never thought of himself as an authentic minority before. For him, to “work on the ethnic self,” or to do ethnicity in a certain way, could potentially be rewarded by the market. This is related to the local context, in which the development of ethnic tourism and the commercialisation of ethnicity in Green City makes ethnicity a valued asset. In a way, one could argue that promoting one’s ethnic self in certain ways has been actively encouraged in the local context. Stories have been shared by local and central media about how ethnic individuals achieve success by becoming ethnic performers or actors. Such stories are also popularly shared among performers. There are also ethnic villages that manage to achieve poverty alleviation through engaging in ethnic tourism (see similar discussions by Oakes 1998; Chio 2014).

This sentiment of working on the ethnic self is also shared by other performers. A young Lahu performer named Wei from Tea Park said in the interview that he needs to use more time to practice ethnic songs, even though he is more interested in popular songs, his reason being that: “Wherever you go to find work, many places need you to sing ethnic songs; when the audiences see you, they also expect to hear ethnic songs, not others.”⁹ Being aware that the commercialisation of ethnic culture is taking place in Green City, Wei is consciously cultivating his skills and talents as an ethnic performer. Wei had never known how to sing ethnic songs or play the guitar before he came to work in Tea Park. In his own words, he never even “touched a guitar before.”¹⁰ People in the village do sing Lahu songs during important rituals – such as church gatherings and the spring festival celebration. However, these songs are drastically different from the songs that are performed during ethnic performances. It is ironic that even though Wei is an “authentic” Lahu, who grew up in a Lahu village and practices ethnicity in his daily life, he still needed to learn to be ethnic in a certain way that is demanded by the market. Here, practising guitar and singing are not just about skills, but also about constantly working on one’s ethnic self in accordance with the existing cultural normative assumptions about ethnicity, especially those endorsed by the state and the market. When asked about why he choose to become an ethnic performer, Wei said:

6. Interview with Chun, 22 years old, female, Lahu, Forest Park, 1 March 2017.

7. Although the boundaries between sexualised labour and sex work can be blurred. See discussions by Ho *et al.* (2018).

8. Interview with Kai, 21 years old, male, Tea Park, tour guide, 19 January 2017.

9. Interview with Wei, 26 years old, male, Lahu, Tea Park, 31 January 2017.

10. The guitar is a popular musical instrument among the Lahu.

I wish to look for a job that has some space for advancement. Because as people like us (...) Firstly, you don't have good educational qualifications. In that case, it's only manual labour you can do. Even if you can learn some skills from doing the labour, it's still very difficult for you to progress. If you choose to become a performer and choose to sing ethnic songs (...) you don't need much cultural knowledge. As long as you are willing to learn. That's why I chose this road.¹¹

Here, performers like Wei take responsibility for their own employability, and "invest in themselves as assets in the hope of future returns" (Adkins and Dever 2016: 2). This expectation that workers should constantly work on themselves to better suit their work is also an important part of labour multiplication, as workers are hired not because they have the qualities desired by the work, but primarily because of their ability or the potential to be turned into what they are desired to be in their jobs (Akalin 2007). In this sense, working on the ethnic self, while being an important part of work that performers are expected to do, has also shown the performers' agency in resisting their marginalisation and extent of exploitation. While there are limited resources that ethnic minority people like Wei can access – not through education or social capital – ethnicity becomes an available resource one can draw on to achieve "valuable personhood" (Skeggs 2011). Therefore, there is a need for individuals to work on their ethnic selves to attain the image that is desired by the market. Through working on the ethnic self, Wei achieved job opportunities while also aspiring to his future self-development.

Besides learning more knowledge about ethnic cultures and practicing relevant skills, working on the ethnic self also incorporates knowing how to present ethnic cultures in a way that is appealing to outsiders.

Lang: Have you heard about XX's (a village famous for ethnic tourism) slogan about their people: "Once they know how to talk, they naturally know how to sing; once they can walk, they can dance"?

Researcher: Yes I've heard. What do you think about that?

Lang: That's just bullshitting (*huyou* 忽悠), of course. They tell the visitors that so they will buy tea from there. So people's life will improve. If you don't say such bullshit, who will come to tour the place and buy stuff, right? See how all the tourist groups keep coming to their village? You have to learn how to bullshit. A person needs to constantly learn new stuff, or he/she will be left behind.¹²

Here, it is apparent that Lang is very aware of market logic and the logic of development. More interestingly, he tries to associate his own self-development with local economic development and the promotion of ethnic cultures. Furthermore, the fear of being "left behind" is shared by informants other than Lang. Many of them internalise the cultural normative assumptions about ethnicity that depict ethnic minorities as backward and primitive, and consequently feel the urgent need to improve and develop themselves in order to not be left behind. Ironically, however, to keep working on the ethnic self is in a way also to maintain the image of primitiveness and backwardness. It is to do ethnicity in a way that emphasises one's difference and otherness, so as to meet tourists' expectation of interacting with "ethnic others" according to the construction from mainstream media (Chio 2014). Furthermore, the incorporation of ethnic tourism into the local economy does not necessarily lead to more equal work opportunities for ethnic minorities and the Han, as sometimes it can lead ethnic minorities to become even

more marginalised in the local economy (Hillman 2013). At Waterfall Restaurant, for example, there are increasing numbers of Han people taking over the work of ethnic performers, as the skills of performing ethnic songs and dances are deemed easily replicable. It therefore remains to be seen whether working on the ethnic self, despite providing hope and aspirations for some informants, will necessarily lead to the actual improvement of conditions for minority performers, or if it is just another form of "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2010). Meanwhile, while men performers are more likely to capitalise their ethnicity within the work setting, women performers are subject to sexualisation during work. Therefore, they may need to use different ways to assert their agency.

Reframing ethnic performance

Besides working on the ethnic self, another way in which performers try to resist work's exploitation and marginalisation effect is through reframing the meaning of ethnic performance.

I like it pretty well [being an ethnic performer]. I think it's a good thing to promote our own ethnic culture (*xuanchuan minzu wenhua* 宣傳民族文化) (...). It is even good for our next generation's development if you think about it in a long-term way. It's a beneficial thing for all of us if we succeed in promoting ethnic culture.¹⁴

"Promoting ethnic culture" is a narrative that is often used by informants to convey the cultural significance of the ethnic performance. Despite the fact that performers are expected to perform the image of marginalised and exotic minority people, they use this narrative to address the importance and meaningfulness of their work. Here, Ai mobilises the discourse that embodies mainstream values to depict one's self and work as less marginalised. It is a way for informants to try to "attach dominant symbolic value to themselves" (Skeggs 2011: 503). Also, by embracing the discourse of "promoting ethnic culture," informants try to include themselves in the state-building project – showcasing China as a multinational unified country. In research about the career development prospects of young professionals, "patriotic professionalism" was proposed to describe how young people are "wedding individual career development with China's future prosperity" (Hoffman 2010: 17). Similarly, some informants in this research are also seeking to combine their career advancement with the promotion of ethnic culture and the promotion of China as a unified, multi-ethnic country.

Similar ways of reframing ethnic performance are also being used by some female performers to desexualise their labour.

[In terms of sitting on the guests' laps] I shouldn't have minded it because it is minority culture, it is what the previous generation of performers kept telling us. But (...) I may not care as a minority person, but I would care as a woman.¹⁵

11. Interview with Wei, 31 January 2017.

12. Interview with Lang, 27 years old, male, Lahu, Forest Park, 19 February 2017.

13. Here I am referring to the popular construction and depiction of ethnic minorities that often portray them as backward and othered. See discussions about this in Gladney (1994), Schein (2000) and Chio (2014).

14. Interview with Ai, 23 years old, male, Wa, Forest Park, 27 March 2017.

15. Interview with Yun, 23 years old, female, Wa, Forest Park, 5 April 2017.

There's nothing wrong with rubbing the guests' shoulders, I think. It's part of our local ethnic culture, and the whole toasting process is to show hospitality to the guests – as they are often being shown in the real minority villages.¹⁶

Yun and Mei's reflections reveal how they draw on certain aspects of cultural norms about ethnicity to reframe the meaning of their labour. By reframing certain bodily contact with guests as a way for simple and pure (*chunpu* 淳朴) minority people to show their hospitality to guests, performers manage to downplay the sexual connotations of this performance ritual. For example, according to this logic, rubbing shoulders or sitting on laps is just one way of showing hospitality, as minority people would do to greet the guests. Performers seek to disassociate sexual connotations from ethnic performance, while emphasising the cultural significance of minority rituals.

Indeed, "it is minority culture/custom" is a popular saying when performers are talking about ethnic performance. It sometimes becomes the weapon for performers' resistance and attempts to achieve inversion of power relations. For example, guests would sometimes require performers to perform another round of toasting. In order to avoid this, performers would try their best to make guests drink as much as possible within one round. They often try to fill the guests' drinking cups with as much strong liquor as possible. When guests objected and said there was too much for them to drink, performers would say things like: "This is our minority culture, and you should respect minority customs," or "you can't stop drinking until the song is over, it is our ethnic tradition." Most guests would be compelled to finish their drinks with strong alcohol and would not normally request another round of toasting. In this way, performers manage to bring a swifter end to the encounters they find awkward. By reframing the meaning of ethnic performance, and by being in charge of urging guests' drinking, an inversion of power relations between performers and guests is achieved temporarily.

It is revealing that while the norms regarding ethnicity in China legitimise the sexualisation of ethnic performance, female performers also actively refer to certain aspects of such norms to desexualise the intimate rituals and practices of accompanying guests. The fact that women performers need to constantly do more work to avoid being seen as sexually promiscuous also points to labour's multiplication, although, again, such labour is not recognised or financially remunerated. Meanwhile, despite all these efforts, undertaking sexualised labour can still jeopardise women performers' intimate relationships with their significant others. Some women performers are compelled to withhold information about their work from their significant others to maintain their "virtuous reputations," since their sexualities are still highly moralised.¹⁷ This can impact their romantic relationships as well, as some female performers face relationship conflicts with partners because of the work that they do, which render them as morally questionable and as undesirable marriage partners. This again shows the blurred boundaries between work and non-work spheres, as the impact of work can extend its influence to impact on the most private and intimate parts of informants' lives.

Conclusion: Rethinking agency in the context of the multiplication of labour

While focusing on the less theorised experiences of ethnic minority migrants in Southwest China who undertake service work, this article

firstly highlights the heterogeneity in work and subjectivities. By pointing out how different bordering mechanisms shape migrant performers' work and migration experiences, including the bordering between ethnic minorities and the Han, as well as *hukou* as a form of bordering mechanism that leads to the differential inclusion of migrants, this article proposes that performers' work could be theorised as a site of border struggles. Migrant performers not only struggle with their desirable performances and undesirable presence in the city, but also work's colonising effect on their lives.

Secondly, this article focuses systematically on the various ways that work and life intersect with each other in the case of migrant performers. Although previous literature on rural migrants does discuss different ways that migrant workers' work shapes their personal lives, including their family relationships, gender, identities, etc. (e.g. Otis 2011; Gaetano 2015; Choi and Peng 2016), little research places such intersection at the centre of the inquiry and systematically examines the ways in which work intersects with one's personal life. This article highlights "the multiplication of labour" as a useful lens in shedding light on the work-life intersection.

Work firstly intensifies as it colonises more of informants' lives. This is revealed not only through how informants have to work for prolonged hours, but also through how work intrudes in more areas of their lives, including the most intimate ones. "The multiplication of labour" also captures how work has diversified, meaning that performers are expected to do multiple aspects of labour at the same time. For example, migrant performers have to do ethnicity in their daily work lives, and are constantly subject to ethnic assessment, i.e., their doing of ethnicity is assessed in relation to the normative cultural ideas about the "right way" to be ethnic in China. Such cultural norms about ethnicity are also gendered, as minority women in Southwest China tend to be depicted as erotic and subject to different sexual norms. While market actors actively utilise such essentialised notions about ethnicity to make profits, performers are subject to work's exploitation in new ways.

Labour's diversification also illustrates how performers need to work on their ethnic selves in certain ways to meet work requirements – women performers, while doing "distinction work" (Hanzer 2008) to recognise the entitlement of elite male guests, also have to do extra work to deal with the stigmatisation attached to undertaking sexualised labour. Many aspects of the performers' labour tend to be unrecognised and unremunerated, despite becoming increasingly crucial in the context of service work. Therefore, "the multiplication of labour" vividly captures the blurring borders between work and non-work spheres, as it shows how work intrudes into the most intimate areas of the performers' personal lives, including their emotions, senses of self, and relationships with significant others. The myriad ways that work intersects with personal life are by no means unique in the case of ethnic performers. The multiplication of labour can be useful in understanding work-life intersection in other contexts as well.

Finally, the different labour context that migrant performers work under also pushes us to rethink the meaning of workers' agency and resistance. When collective action seems not to be an option, informants resort to

16. Interview with Mei, 30 years old, female, Han, Waterfall Restaurant, 22 October 2016.

17. See Liu's (2016) discussion about how women's sexualities are highly scrutinised and moralised in contemporary China, and therefore women need to use different ways to maintain their "virtuous reputation."

individual solutions that are closely related to their self-making. Under the context of the commercialisation of ethnicity, working on the ethnic self, ironically, has also become a way of resistance for performers, as they seek to capitalise on their ethnicity and add value to their personhood. Performers also actively try to resist being marginalised by reframing the meaning of their work. While performing the exotic and erotic images of ethnic minorities, they refer to party-state rhetoric in terms of ethnic unities and promoting ethnic cultures in order to make their labour more legitimate and more culturally significant. Ironically, such agency may in turn reinforce the party-state's rhetoric of ethnicity, and further legitimise work's colonising effect over performers' lives, as it enables work to capitalise upon more areas of their personal lives. This again shows how agency is always practiced within a particular social structure, and how social structure constrains what agency can accomplish (Ortner 2006). These all point to the importance of thinking about workers' agency and resistance when the borders between work and life have become blurred.

Acknowledgements

■ I would like to sincerely thank Sophia Woodman, Mary Holmes, Isabelle Darmon, and members of the Theorising Our Work Network at the University of Edinburgh for their constructive feedback on the early drafts. I am grateful to guest editors Chris K.C. Chan, Éric Florence, and Jack Linchuan Qiu for organising this special issue, and for their intellectual and moral support. The Great Britain-China Educational Trust has provided financial support for this research.

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Manuscript received on 31 August 2020. Accepted on 16 December 2020.

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