

The Moral Geography of Entertainment Businesses: Boundary Work and Respectability Politics in Global City Singapore

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Abstract : The study of inequality in urban space has typically emphasized class and race as dimensions of stratification, but a small and growing body of work also pays attention to exclusionary processes based on moral grounds, as is the case with mainstream disapproval of sexually oriented businesses and red-light districts. However, many sexually-oriented businesses co-exist with similar non-sexually oriented businesses in the tourism and broader entertainment industries. Furthermore, regulators and tourism- and entertainment industries are acknowledged by regulators and ordinary citizens as important contributors to the economy, and in the case of aspiring global cities, to urban prestige. Under such circumstances, it is important to examine how policymakers, residents, and other stakeholders distinguish between sexually oriented and non-sexually oriented businesses, as well as how such efforts shape moral geographies in urban settings. To address this question, this paper introduces the concept of permeable industries to describe businesses that, by their very nature of providing adult entertainment along with a measure of privacy and discretion, facilitate easy interchange between their officially sanctioned purposes and illicit or stigmatised uses, most notably by the sex industry. The permeability and ambiguity surrounding the sexual- and non-sexual activities in such establishments is in fact, a source of tension that generates energetic boundary-drawing exercises that designate legitimate from illegitimate establishments. This paper draws on three years of ethnographic fieldwork, qualitative research, and archival research (1920–2020) on Joo Chiat, a neighborhood in the city-state of Singapore. It then analyzes how middle-class residents reacted to the sudden influx of sexually oriented businesses in the early 2000s, turning the once-quiet residential and commercial neighborhood into a semi-red-light district staffed by migrant Asian women. Ironically, the red-light district had been inadvertently precipitated by the state's neoliberal policies in the 1990s to cultivate suburban neighborhoods as decentralized tourist attractions while loosening social regulations in pursuit of global city ambitions. Residents mobilized around the discourse of "sleaze", using it to draw symbolic boundaries while advocating for regulatory boundaries between sexually oriented and non-sexually oriented businesses in the neighborhood. Since the concept of "sleaze" was informed by middle-class distaste for low-status sex work, the result of residents' efforts was a state-endorsed moral geography that excluded sexually-oriented businesses while tolerating adult-oriented entertainment businesses that dovetailed with global city aspirations. This study contributes to the study of urban inequality by demonstrating the importance of boundary work in reproducing respectability politics, which in turn shapes the urban geographies of moral worth.

Keywords : moral geography, boundary work, respectability politics, entertainment businesses

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