

Powered by Love? In search of reasons for staying to work at a Hong Kong maid café

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Abstract

This paper is an autoethnography, a reflexive study of reasons for making economically irrational choices as I, my co-workers, and my boss had – staying at a job position of undesirable conditions and running a losing business in a local maid cafe despite being eligible for and deserving “better” offers. Informal interviews, participant observation, and reflection on personal experience were used in the inquiry. I argue that the lack of alienation at work and the fact that the workers are in a liminal life stage may be some possible answers. This research not only provides a glimpse into the working conditions of maid café in Hong Kong but also offers an alternative way of looking into the meaning of work in a capitalist society.

1. Let me take you to Candy House¹

Turn left, and you will reach an unnamed back alley with cardboard boxes and rubbish bags lying around, and smokers with their cigarette butts on the ground, just like any other narrow passages hidden in the bustling city center of Mong Kok. Without any investigation beforehand, one would rarely pass by the entrance of Prosperous Commercial Building², situated on a backstreet between two other commercial buildings that were more upscale, apparently recently renovated. Despite being a rundown building with an unappealing entrance, Prosperous Commercial Building is a hub of coffee shops targeted at hipsters and local maid cafes. For the past decade, at least 6 maid cafes have operated in this building, and it is still the building with the highest concentration of maid cafes in Hong Kong. It was nothing extraordinary to meet young girls in meticulous makeup, gorgeous hairstyles, and outfits in the latest Japanese trends in the elevator, ready for work or getting off their shift. All maid cafes are upstairs shops, given the pricy rent of shops on the ground floor in Mong Kok – one of the major shopping areas for local people and tourists – as well as the small scale of business in local maid cafes. This thesis will introduce you to an in-depth journey to my workplace, one of the local maid cafés with the longest history, more than 8 years as of 2023, Candy House is the tenant of the 9/F in Prosperous Commercial Building.

¹ Pseudonyms are used for all locations and people.

As the elevator door opened, you would step into a tiny entry painted in pink and white stripes, so small that if a group of more than 4 arrived, some of them had to stand behind the fire door and wait in the backstairs. Once the café door opened, you could easily see everything in the tiny shop at a glance as you waited for us, the maids to welcome you in. You would probably find our shop bright and vivid in the afternoon just as our guests liked it, as we had glass window walls for the seating area, so you could enjoy the view of the hustling and bustling Mong Kok while spending your time here relaxingly.

“Okaerinasaimase! Goshujinsama!” (Welcome back, Master!) As we noticed the arrival of customers, we would come to the door, greet you, and invite you to the café. For most maid cafes, including Candy House, the role-play starts as soon as the customer comes in; the café is not a restaurant where one would “visit” but the home of the customers where you can come back to relax after a day of hard work, which is shown in the welcoming greetings. Therefore, you are not just customers who come in and pay for catering service but are Masters or Princesses who return to a place where familiar servants take care of you. Interestingly the role-play may not be very complete in maid cafes in Hong Kong since after the “rituals” of greeting, bowing and introduction are done, maids and customers usually interact in a more “egalitarian” way. In fact, the hierarchy could be subverted in practice, that the Masters are followers of the maid idols, giving gifts and buying beverages for the maids on their shift. Nevertheless, there is such a conventional setting, or an agreed

“worldview” in maid cafes, even if not fully performed.

On a usual day, there would be two to three maids on the restaurant floor of Candy ready at your service. Junior maids would dress in a brown dress with a sailor collar and a frilled apron around her waist. Senior maids were in a maid uniform of a darker brown, made in an apparently thicker and straighter cloth with rounded collars, and they wore another type of frilled apron, one with more exaggerated frills and ruffles. For any maid, regardless of her level, a big ribbon of her “representing colour” would be on her collar, and personal accessories such as badges of her favourite cartoon characters, fluffy animal ears, and tails could be worn to show her style. Therefore, girls in maid café were dressed in a “dramatic” way like cosplaying, to draw a difference between normal places and maid cafés. Entering a maid café was spoken of as “結界” (enchanted area) within the maid circle. The

“enchantment” of the space was also enforced by the magic spells that we would invite you to cast on every food and drink before consuming them together, which is a major part that many new customers came for – to record their friends’ embarrassment in casting the Japanese spells for the first time, or to experience the awkward scene of speaking out childish lines they have seen on television or Youtube videos depicting the scenes in maid cafes. The awkwardness or shyness was one of the fun parts of maid cafes for first-timers since making “kawaii” (cute) poses and reading out comical scripts were acts that people do not tend to make in their “normal” lifestyle, these elements marked maid café out of the space of usual

“reality”.

As regular customers found the once peculiar experience familiar, they also found Candy House an escape from “reality”. Here they could be detached from their families, workplaces, and pre-existing social circles while not feeling abandoned and lonely in the company of the maids. Although conversations between customers and maids would seldom go beyond mere chit-chat, many found the time at maid cafes satisfying and relaxing; some also feel they regained the energy to strive for another day after seeing us the maids working so energetically and enthusiastically. As regular customers often saw one another at the shop, they would even form a new social circle and become “Candy Friends”; they would automatically sit at the same table as they entered Candy one after another. Candy Friends were people from different occupations, educational backgrounds, and of different ages, as they intersected at and assembled in Candy, they could carefreely talk about their workplace pressure and personal problems within their circle, where they did not have mutual friends in “real life” and need not worry about any “consequence”. While we maids seldom engaged in such “deep” topics with the customers during our service, the group they produced organically in Candy helped themselves with venting and commiserating internally.

Back to the shop, from any seat in Candy House, you could look into the semi-open kitchen, the heart of Candy House, where the production of food was done, and where the recipe creator, the main chef, and the shop owner were located. Yes, they were all the same

person, Lawrence, my boss. You could also see the maids mixing beverages and preparing deserts in the bar, which many customers viewed as an “extra service”. Once the meal and desserts were done, we would also decorate the plate by drawing pictures on your request on the food and writing your name around the plate with ketchup or chocolate sauce before we cast the magic spell together. Some of us were so sophisticated in “plate drawing” that we could replicate your favourite anime characters with complicated features on the omelette rice, which made the experience even more unforgettable and the photos more “Instagrammable”.

If any of the Master or Princess ordered a live performance of the maids, the entire shop could enjoy the show. LED glow sticks would be distributed, so you could switch them to the maids’ “representative colour” and show her your support. You would probably feel yourself in a mini-concert as the lights go off and glow sticks turned on, maids singing and dancing in cheerful J-idol songs under the spotlight and regular customers who were familiar with the songs yelling “コール” (call, specific lines of supportive response to the performers between lines and during the interludes), making the atmosphere even more elated.

After having a good time, it was also very usual that Masters and Princesses like you would like to have a memorial souvenir of the day by taking a photo. We would invite you to take “チェキ” (cheki, polaroid photos printed instantly), where we would make cute poses together. After it was printed out, we would decorate the photo in front of you, and ask if you

had fun at Candy House while we were drawing hearts, sparkles, and ribbons on it. In the end, we would hand the photo to you with both hands and send you to the door with a greeting “Itterasshaimase! Goshujinsama!” (Take care on your way! Master!) If the shop was not very busy, we would often stay at the door with you until the elevator arrives, and wave goodbye until the elevator door closes.

This was how our routine looked like: sparkling excitement with peculiar rituals like magic casting, “call” yelling, and making surprises with lovely drawings on food and photos, as well as showing hospitality with greetings, bows, and respectful gestures. We hoped to make your visit to Candy House a memorable one, one that is different from what you would experience in any random restaurant. Some described maid cafes as a "2.5-dimensional space"—one that is in between the 2-dimensional world (二次元, usually referring to the realm of anime, comics, and games, the fantasy world) and the 3-dimensional world (reality). It is somewhere physically located in the real world but aimed to provide the experience of a fantasy.

However, the dreamy world could be easily shattered, and Candy House was not like Disneyland, where fantasy was under careful control. If you remember our semi-open kitchen, the openness of the kitchen broke the boundary between the fantasy-like role-playing area (restaurant floor) and the area of reality (the working kitchen). Some frequent customers would directly shout into the kitchen and talk to Lawrence, just like customers and staffs in

cha-chaan-teng (Hong-Kong-style diners), which entertained him at some time but also frustrated him at others. But the worst thing about the semi-open kitchen was that whenever conflicts in the kitchen broke out, or whenever Lawrence got mad, everyone in the restaurant could hear his rumble, which could disrupt your entertainment experience. It may be tolerable if we are just a normal restaurant, like Australian Dairy Company, the cha-chaan-teng well known for their rude staff, where people even visit to experience the “impoliteness”, but not for a maid café where people came to escape from stress in real life and enjoy the company of cheerful young girls. Our smile froze as he publicly scolded someone unlucky, and we, as maids had no choice but to try our best to dismiss the awkwardness and bring up some other topic to cheer the customers up (although it would likely be in vain). While Lawrence was a rather temperamental person, which means the yells were no rare incident, this made ensuring a fantasy space an even harder mission.

Besides the unpredictable storms of my boss, another “dark side” of the fantasy world in a maid café, was how disproportionate it was between the workload and the financial reward. It was the same case for my boss, my coworkers, and me. The wage was minimally low and sometimes even delayed due to a shortage of cash, although we had to fulfill requirements of entertainment and catering services, manage our own image to attract fans on and off work (sometimes socialize with them in our private time), and even invest in buying our own accessories before coming to work. My boss had difficulties in gaining profit throughout the

eight years of operation, despite being a hardworking person devoting himself wholly to the business, handling the sum, the kitchen, and all the major strategies at the same time. I often self-question why I kept my position as a maid and backstage staff in Candy House, “suffering” poor compensation, unpaid labour, unpredictable workplace dramas, and dim career prospects, yet still find it hard to leave emotionally. Why am I still here? What was the reason to stay while everyone around me told me to “just quit?” This writing basically stemmed from a self-contemplation and expanded into a close investigation of other intimates in the same workplace as I found my colleagues and my boss were all in similar situations of being “not rational enough” in financial terms. I knew there were way “better” chances of higher income, better welfare, and a more balanced life than being a worker or an owner of the maid café. We would be eligible for better offers in the job market but we hung on to Candy House at that moment. Was our decision out of love? Was it about the sense of belonging? Was it for the memories we had here? Or for the flexibility it offered? Or maybe all of the above?

2. Methodology – Why Autoethnography?

This piece of writing is an autoethnography, in which I reflect on my experience and encounters in Candy House during the past two years. I did not join the company in order to conduct my research, but on the contrary, I started my investigation as questions started to

grow inside me as I became more engaged in my workplace. As I became puzzled about the reason for staying in Candy while hating it and loving it at the same time, I decided to look into my struggle in an anthropological way, hoping that theoretical tools may help me make sense of my situation and some of my close co-workers in Candy. By understanding our perplexities, it may also shed light on comprehending the seemingly unreasonable life decisions of others.

Autoethnography is a research approach that “describes and systematically analyzes personal experience” to understand larger cultural experiences. (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). Characteristics of autobiography and ethnography are combined. As for autobiography, authors write about experience retroactively and selectively. (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010) Significant “epiphanies”, important events that affect one’s trajectory of life are recorded, as they “force one to attend to and analyze lived experience” (Zaner, 2004). They reveal how one person negotiates “intense situations” and their aftereffects. (Bochner, 1984) The “epiphanies” are personal, in the sense that for the same event, it might be transformative for one person but not for another. As for ethnography, a culture’s practices, beliefs, and shared experiences are studied qualitatively in order to explain the culture to both members and outsiders. (Maso, 2001). In ethnography, participant observation is used to illustrate cultural happenings in the field. By doing participant observation, the researcher immerses oneself into the community, the social setting of the group to be studied, and lives

with them day-to-day for an extended period. First-hand accounts are collected through informal daily interactions, direct observation of the group, and open-end interviews, and are recorded in the ethnographers' field notes for later analysis.

By combining the features of autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography is a reflexive research method of social culture, where personal experience becomes one of the subjects of inquiry. It has been a controversial research method, receiving criticism of being "self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualized" (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999) for putting the authors' experience, subjective emotions, and perspective at the center, and academic values of such personal accounts have been questioned. However, autoethnography can be social, as life stories "do not happen in a vacuum" but are positioned in society, with their authors surrounded by many others, and affected by larger structures and forces.

Autoethnography differs from a memoir, merely telling stories of one's personal encounters, by connecting those encounters to the wider cultural and social contexts and meanings critically, with theoretical and methodological tools (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). As Carolyn Ellis (2007) stated, "Doing autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of the experience" It is the connection between the larger society and the personal accounts illustrated in autoethnography makes it a valid research method.

Also, autoethnography has been challenged in that its representation could be biased

and distorted, as the author became too “inside”, and that the “truth” of the reality narrated and the validity of the research were in doubt. In a postmodernist view, where universal “truth” and “reality” are never attained and objective since people stem from unique beliefs and values, even research done by outsiders, or done quantitatively could not evade biases as subjectivity affects how research questions are set and how factual data is organized; research is always “contingent on historical and social context” (Lyotard, 1979). Autoethnography is a method that recognizes the subjectivity of the author, where the author is constantly reminded of how their gender, race, socio-economic status, and other aspects affect their experience and perception while recording and reflecting on them. Subjectivity is “assumed and accepted as the value of autoethnography” (Méndez, 2013)³; its richness lies in reflecting social and cultural contexts through the interaction of the author, their experiences, and their social environment.

For this research, autoethnography was chosen as a method as I became so intertwined in the field – my workplace – that it became impossible to not reflect on and analyze my own circumstances and behavior if I am to study my workplace. Also, I have come to recognize that I could not merely observe and describe the events happening like an outsider, because as a senior, active member of the managerial board, directing operations and helping make decisions on promotion and brand-making, my participation had to be considered during my

³ http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0123-46412013000200010

investigation for it may have significantly affected others' behavior in the field. The research question initially stemmed from personal contemplation that long lingered inside me; it was firstly a query on myself, then later expanded to others' situations beyond my own. I was first confused about my reluctance to leave Candy House despite low and delayed pay and, the unpredictable fury of my employer, then later I became curious about why other co-workers remained despite such undesirable work conditions as well, and finally came to be amazed by my boss's decision of keeping this business open and devoting himself to it despite the fact that it actually made no profit. It seemed to be a lose-lose situation for all of us, but we kept hanging on. This was a very interesting phenomenon that I was eager to look into, as we do not make life decisions out of nowhere. Although it may be subtle, intricate, or undescribed, there must be something supporting our commitment to this unbearable job, that we often complain about as “西工” (sh*tty job) to our friends and family, making everyone around us incite us to “just quit,” which we could not easily do. As an anthropology student, simple conclusions like “perseverance” were far from enough to explain it. In this paper, I will explore more conceptual tools to analyze this socially, as well as look into the contextual web that I, my co-workers and my boss were situated in, to search for the socio-economic reasons for us to make such an “irrational” choice.

In order to conduct this research, I started writing fieldnotes to record specific occurrences and conversations that I have had and observed during my shift and time that I

spent with my co-workers after work since September 2022, conducted semi-formal interviews with my boss and some of the co-workers in late 2022, and reviewed my experiences, emotions throughout my work at Candy House from 2021 up to the present (early 2023). I use the method of thick description to illustrate the spatial configuration in Candy, the people involved, and remarkable events in the workplace. Fieldwork has been situated in relation to writings on alienation and liminality.

I gained consent from my boss and my co-workers to do this, and all my co-workers were informed that I am an anthropology student writing her final year project about our workplace, that I would not audio or video record anything except scheduled interviews, but may write field notes on what happened on and off work afterward. Pseudonyms have been used when indicating specific persons and places to secure their anonymity. In fact, my boss and coworkers were very helpful and were sometimes more proactive than I was in the early stage of research. They offered to be interviewed and scheduled their time before I actually invited them, just to push my project progress as they were very concerned for my studies and future prospects as well. I was more than grateful to have them not only for being my interlocuters and my co-workers but also as people with whom I developed sincere personal connections.

3. Structure of Candy House – A brief description

Candy House is a business of sole proprietorship, with my boss, Lawrence possessing the sole ownership. It was not a limited company, so my boss had unlimited liability to Candy, meaning that if Candy was in debt, it would be my boss's personal debt. My boss was also currently the only one investing money into the business. Apart from being the sole owner, Lawrence was also the only male staff in early 2023. Although at certain periods in the past, there would be one or two male staff joining in as assistant chef or for takeaway delivery, all the other staff working in Candy House were women. In Candy House, there is an actual social structure of one male chief and a mass of female subordinates reporting directly to him. Even though Lawrence tried to establish a group system and assign some senior maids to be the group leaders and the head maid to handle the affairs of the junior maids in order to free himself for more time for strategic development of the shop, most of the maids tended to contact Lawrence directly on any enquiry or confusion. The assigned group leaders or head maids often found their position meaningless, since very few group members would recognize them as their head in practice. More than being the one in power within the internal structure, Lawrence was also the icon of Candy House, and his fame (or notoriety for being temperamental) was more well-known than any of the maids under the brand of Candy House. While some of the owners, especially male maid café owners, would hide their presence in the shop by not appearing during business hours, confining themselves

to the closed kitchen, or simply investing sums and leaving operational decisions to female managers, Candy House was a maid café where you may not see the maids you became familiar with the last time you met, but you will always see Lawrence cooking in the semi-open kitchen. Since most of the maids worked on shift, they would come and go at certain times, Lawrence was here always. Often, frequent and long-term customers of Candy got along with Lawrence more than the maids; sometimes they even come to see and chat with Lawrence and put the maids aside, making Candy a “Lawrence café” instead of “maid café”; he often complained that the focus of the shop went entirely wrong.

While the position of the boss remained static, it was not the case for the maids. When the research was first started in September 2022, there were 13 maids at Candy House, with 4 of us senior maids and the rest junior. In terms of maids, I was of the second seniority, but that was not because of how experienced or sophisticated I am (as I only joined Candy 2 years ago), but because all maids who came before me had already left Candy House. My only senior was Cherry; we had a 6-year gap in terms of experience at Candy, and she was the only maid who has stayed since the birth of Candy. It is not a surprise that over a hundred maids have come and gone; many of their names have long disappeared not only from Candy, but from the entire maid circle, given the liquidity of the job. There were two full-time staff in Candy House as research commenced, and I was one of them. Another full-time staff was Kiki, the Head Maid of the time, who looked after almost everything on the restaurant floor,

including the purchase of ingredients stock and sundries, management of the shift roster, supervision of junior maids and her own job as a maid – to provide an entertaining catering service to the customers every day (except during her six days off from work per month).

Stability for junior maids could be very low: some may have worked for a year before they left, but others may have only showed up for a single day. I have met over 50 girls as junior maids in Candy House, with 20 or more joining Candy House at the same period as I did, but all had left by the time the research started. This implies that it was not “normal” to have stayed employed in a maid café for an extended period.

Beside the maid café, Candy House itself, we also had a back office in Mong Kok, a 3-minute walk from the shop. While Kiki and Lawrence were in the café all the time, I mainly worked in the office, making promotional materials and planning and preparing for upcoming campaigns and events. The office was also where we would store stocks of frozen food, syrups, utensils and obsolete decorations, and hold interviews and internal meetings.

Sometimes we, the maids, would also visit the office and use it as a free studio for dance and singing practice. However, it was not all about formal and work-related use, it was also a place where my boss put his book collections, photo album, toy figures, ornaments on his bookshelf on the right, and I put mine on the left. It was like a mini library or gallery decorated with our favourite things (that we did not have much space to display at our tiny homes). The fact that work and private use were mixed in the workplace provides a glimpse

into the complicatedness of our decisions of staying or leaving.

4. A Possible Explanation - Alienation and the lack of it

Every time when I ponder on the reason for staying in my current position, the keyword “alienation” comes into my mind. Alienation, as understood by Karl Marx is the separation of human nature from labour under capitalism, marked by the division of labour and industrialization, which leads to an experience of estrangement from humanity and disempowerment. He identified four aspects of alienation, namely, the alienation from the product of labour, the alienation from the labour process, the alienation from others, and the alienation from one’s species being. Alienation from the product of labour means the object produced by the worker was separated from him, as they were owned and disposed of by the capitalist. (Cox, 1998) The creative power, the value of the object produced, was purchased by the capitalist, leaving the worker no ownership of what he has accomplished. Alienation from the labour process describes the lack of control over how production proceeds. The working conditions, the organization of work, the content of work, and the method of working are not decided by the workers. Economically efficient methods such as the division of labour break down the labour process into small and repetitive parts and standardization turned workers into “a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system” (Lukacs, 1954). Alienation from others refers to the loss of relatedness to other human beings under

labour relations, so that on one hand those who exploited the labourer's effort would be seen as enemies who coerced them, and on the other hand, other workers would be viewed hostilely as rivals and competitors in the job market. Others were no longer known as individuals, "but as extensions of capitalism" (Ollman, 1976). For the last aspect, the alienation from our species, Marx assumed a humanity of the human species which marks its distinctiveness, which is the "ability to consciously shape the world around us" (Cox, 1998), meaning the capacity to creatively express and freely make use of nature for our personal and collective interest. However, with the private ownership of resources and the coerced process of production, the labourer could not even control his actions, and work no longer amounts to a life purpose.

I believe that the relatively low extent of alienation could explain why I am still at Candy House, despite the low income and its many challenges. I have to compare my previous job with my current one, to show why I found it "not so alienating". Before I started my career as a maid, I used to work as a part-time telephone interviewer for the university census center. I was paid the standard student helper rate (\$60/hr before 2020, \$65/hr by the time I left telephone interviewing, \$72/hr if I achieved to be the top 25% of interviewers with the most complete cases of the day). To me, it was a highly alienating job as it perfectly fulfilled the four aspects of alienation.

First, in terms of alienation from the product of labour, the interview replies made little

sense to me. On some days I would ask questions about people's attitudes toward electric-powered vehicles, and on other days I would ask them to rate the severity of air pollution in Hong Kong. Every week I would ask a different set of questions for different institutes that commissioned my center for data gathering; every night I would call a bunch of people for their yes, no, partly agree, or totally disagree responses, and I would never remember who said what. The data I collected had nothing to do with me.

Second, in terms of alienation from the activity of labor, there was no say in how I conducted the interview. To make a survey convincing and fair, we all had a standardized set of questions and answers, the same script to follow, and an expected average time of completing an interview case. The worst feeling of being a telephone interviewer was that I knew I was calling to ask for people's opinions, but when the interviewee became very enthusiastic about the survey topic and had a lot to share, I had to interrupt them and force them to the next question. If not, my supervisor would jump into the line to overhear the "overtime" conversation, call my name, and remind me to complete the case as soon as possible and complete as many cases as possible in one night. It was the most unacceptable part of the quantitative telephone survey for me, but I had no choice but to bear the surveying process if I was to earn the money.

Third, in terms of alienation from others, telephone interviewing by nature alienates interviewers from their interviewees. In order to prevent bias in the answers, interviewers and

interviewees are expected to be total strangers to one another, so nothing personal would “pollute” the results. Also, no personal contact should be retained, no social relations should be created after the case is completed, as it violates the work ethic. At the same time, I had no connection with other interviewers in the room, as we were all sitting in our own cubicles. I had about thirty-something co-workers every day, but I never knew any of them in my 2 years of telephone interviewing. I was completely isolated within the 4 hours and only occasionally had brief interviews with someone somewhere during the night.

The last aspect is the alienation from my species being, which is interlinked with the above three aspects. The sense of losing my “selfness” as a human is rather obvious in this job as I was supposed to be an information-collecting machine under predetermined standards, and I had to treat the people I talked to as mere data. I was not expected to understand where their thoughts came from or what life stories were in them. When I was working, I seldom cared much about why they would make a certain reply. Most of my focus was on finishing the interview as soon as possible, as the longer the interview became, the more likely they would get impatient and discontinue the interview, then all my effort would be wasted, which would be the most undesirable outcome. Thus I found myself viewing them as a “token” for exchanging my bonus reward. Usually, as a human being, I did not see or interact with others in that way, but in the work of telephone interviewing, the way I treat other human beings was distorted, and I felt that I was not being myself.

Working in Candy was another story. The highest hourly pay that I achieved after a year of hard work was even lower than the initial base pay in the census center, but the workload was surely a lot more tiresome than sitting on an office chair, reading scripts according to whatever was shown on the monitor. I joined Candy in February 2021 with the alias Mirin. In November 2021 I got promoted to the managerial board, and I decided to be a full-time staff at Candy in May 2022. My hourly rate was \$40/hr⁴ at first as a junior staff (which is also the rate offered by other maid cafes for juniors in Hong Kong); it was raised to \$50/hr after the semi-annual appraisal of my photo ticket sales target was met, and it became \$60/hr after I joined the managerial board. When I was a part-time staff, only the labour performed in the shop was paid. To be more specific, I was paid only for being “on-duty” during that 4- or 5-hour shift serving customers. After business hours (10pm), although there were still tasks such as cleaning the floor with a vacuum machine and mop, tidying the bar and the changing room, evaluating, and reviewing the business of the day with my boss, overtime work was never paid. Not to mention the labour performed off the shop, such as attending meetings of the managerial board (which used to be held in a shared office or study room in the neighborhood before we officially set up an office in May 2022), planning and preparing for upcoming events with other co-workers after work, replying to the midnight messages from my boss complaining about poor sales or bringing up random ideas after he read something

⁴ Minimum wage at the time was \$37.5/hour, while minimum wage has raised to \$40/hour since 1 May 2023, the wage for junior maid remained \$40 (for most of the maid cafes in Hong Kong, including Candy House)

online. These were all unpaid labour. Things were better for me after I became a full-time staff, as some of the unpaid labour in the past became included in my formal job duty. Let me first explain my unique work condition before further elaboration.

I was paid 12k/month as the base salary after I went full-time (the bonus from photo tickets or performance requests by customers varies from month to month, but I usually also receive 1 to 2k, with \$15 per photo taken and \$60 per live performance request), and I am allowed 6 days off of my choice each month. Since the sum of my salary increased, the full payment of my wage (and Kiki, another full-time staff) was usually delayed as the cash flow of the shop fell short. Although the legally permitted delay of payment was only 7 days, we would only receive our full wage for the previous month at the end of the next month, which means it could be 14 to 21 days later than was allowed by labour laws.

Although I was a full-time staff at Candy, I was not a full-time maid. Every 3 to 4 days, I was on duty in the shop as a maid for one shift (5 hours), and for the rest of the work days, I worked in the office for 8 hours a day, with an hour of lunchtime. The timetable for office work is rather flexible, as I can decide the time of going to work and leaving the office, as long as I work for 8 hours in total. Office work included managing the social media pages and webpage, publishing a 16-page monthly mini-magazine (something like a reader for our fans: my work included designing the layout, writing the contents, and dealing with the printing company), designing new merchandise, coming up with promotion campaigns and

shop events and implementing them, helping with some of the shop and office purchases, marking meeting minutes, arranging interviews and interviewing people who submitted job application through our webpage... Although my official title on the business card is “marketing manager”, basically I am an all-in-one back-office worker.

For the part of being a maid, my duty included some basic work as a waitress (taking orders, checking if the customers have exceeded their dining time limit, bringing them dishes), some chatting and perhaps boardgame playing with the customers to keep them entertained, some singing performances (and practices beforehand) in regular sessions as well as upon request, and keeping my social media accounts active (I post Instagram stories very often to keep myself “remembered”; I never miss posting something the day before my service at maid café reminding them to come to visit me, the moment I arrived the café to be on duty, and after the shift, I usually write a longer post to summarize the day, thank the customers for coming and invite them to come again on my next service day. The labour in image maintenance off business hours is, of course, unpaid (whether being part-time or full-time staff), although it is an important part of being a maid.

Another part of unpaid work is drawing chekis⁵ (the memorial instant photos taken with or by the customers when they come to the shop). The chekis are supposed to be returned to

⁵ Cheki (チエキ) are instant film photos. In a maid café, customers could order cheki tickets. They could take instant photos with the maids after handing the ticket to the maid they wished to take photo with. After working hours, maids receive bonuses for the tickets they possessed.

the customers the day they took the photo as a souvenir to take home (and they will be when they belong to the first-timers), but as the day is too busy, drawing cheki during business hours usually delays other work procedures, so it became unavoidable to have the regular customers' chekis undrawn during the shift (as they may take many photos at one time, which makes the time needed for decoration longer, thus further delaying normal work, and they are willing to wait and collect them next time). As a kind of compensation, we usually put more effort in the delayed chekis to show our sincerity, but it takes up much of our private time. I usually spend an extra hour or two to clear my cheki debt every 3 days, but after I became a full-time staff, sometimes I deal with decorating the photos during my office hours (although I was not supposed to deal with these "personal matters" during worktime in my boss's point of view) when my boss is not at the office supervising my work. We had to buy our own tools for decorating the photos (such as acrylic pens, stickers, and masking tape), so at the beginning of our maid career, we had to first invest a sum before gaining the bonus back.

As briefly mentioned earlier, Lawrence, the boss, was a rather temperamental person, who could be hopeful and happy about his business in the morning, and then in the afternoon, he could be irritated by some careless mistakes by our co-workers (like forgetting the utensils when serving a dish) and then fail to control his temper and yell at the staff, with everyone watching. The atmosphere became very tense and embarrassing, not only for the staff who did something wrong but also for other maids and the customers. As a restaurant selling

“magical moments and sweet memories with maids”, his sudden anger ruined the customer's experience. At night he would apologize for losing his temper, but maybe after some days or some weeks, similar incidents would occur. Among the maid café circle, Candy was notorious for its bad-tempered owner, which I could not deny, unfortunately. But when my boss is happy, then everyone would be happy. He could be very generous when he felt like it, paying for our drinks at the bar after work, putting up an annual buffet dinner in a hotel around Christmas, and buying us random gifts. After I became a full-time staff, he often treated me to lunch as he passed by the office, so I managed to save up some money. However, if the business was not doing well enough that month, he could be meticulous in money and would blame us for wasting too much of his money. Ideas like cutting bonuses, and cutting shifts would come into his mind, and he would say things like “I am so fed up with keeping useless people”, and dismiss our every effort to keep the company running as if he was the only one working hard enough.

Whenever I told my friends my situation (mostly university undergrad students and fresh graduates), they mostly responded with, “It’s so awful, why don’t you quit?”, “You can find an easier job with higher and timely pay with the skills and education level you possess” or “it is such a waste for a CUHK student”. I am aware that their comments may have a bias, as I usually complain more than I share the positive side of my work as we chatted, and their judgment on a reasonable salary is affected by a common expectation of the average market

value of a university student. (like \$65/hr for the standard student helper rate, and \$150-200+/hr for being a private tutor) But I rarely shared how I felt work in Candy House was like being at the opposite pole within the spectrum of alienation, which was a great motivation for me to stay.

Regarding to the alienation from the product of labour, which means object produced by workers being separated from them and owned and disposed by the capitalist, (Cox, 1998), in fact in Candy House, I felt that the product I produced was more like mine than it was of Candy's. As a maid, the effort I put on serving the shop's customers usually developed into retaining my own supporters, who would order my cheki photos and live performances, which is where my monthly bonus came from. My boss was also aware of the peculiar business model of maid cafés; he was rather unhappy that maids in a maid café were doing their own business in the shop instead of doing business for the shop. He was upset that the regular customers were not dedicated to the shop itself, but to the maids. However, it was inevitable, as the regular supporters of maids were the ones who dedicated the most time and money at Candy, and they were the most stable customers. People who simply come to experience maid cafés for a single time would not buy a bunch of photo tickets or merchandise featuring the maids (as it made no sense if they had no connection with the maids), and their pattern of visiting was unpredictable. Therefore, despite the fact that my boss hated that only a small proportion of the product of our labour belonged to the company,

an alternative procedure has not yet been found. But it was because the product is more relevant to me and other maids than it was to Candy, (only we could create the unique product while my boss cannot, and he was dependent on our effort in generating income), I found my job meaningful to me. This situation has always been a paradox in the managerial board meetings. Although we were all sitting in the board meetings, us – the maids – had a fundamental opposing stance against the boss.

As a back office worker, the above conflict was less apparent, as I worked to promote business for Candy and support its operation. However, I also felt that the product of my work was mine (although it was also Candy's asset). It may seem contradictory, but every promotion poster I designed, every monthly magazine I published, every merchandise I produced, was all my artwork. Although I made them on behalf of Candy, I always joked that "I am a proud mama of my children". This claim was made possible because where I work is a maid café; the maids were the frontstage cast, so "the maid who does design for the shop" could be a highlight for her character, and "original goods designed by maids themselves" could be a tagline to boost sales. Therefore, my boss would never hide my presence in marketing work. Instead, he often said things like "meet our editor, meet our in-house designer Mirin" to others. My shop did not take away my product of labour from me, and there were no intellectual copyright contracts defined in a small shop, a family business like us (as we would spend more time in developing recipes or promotion strategies instead of

dealing with legal terms.) There was not only a sense of pride and satisfaction in creating new work; on a rather “realistic” point on utility, I saw my work for Candy as a way to build up my portfolio for future career development. I was not only designing for Candy, but also for myself. The more work I created, the more I practiced my skills in using design software, the richer my portfolio could become. This was a reward that could not be determined in monetary terms.

Regarding alienation from labor activities, its concern is whether laborers could control the production process (Cox, 1998). In Candy House, “how to be a maid”, “how to be a back-office worker” or “how to be a designer” was never defined and standardized. As for being a maid, although there were some basic guidelines that we had to follow, like greeting our customers in Japanese, calling them our masters and princesses, casting magic spells on every food item, and following work routine on the restaurant floor, there were many undefined areas. Maids at Candy were allowed to present different personalities to stand out from one another (so we could attract different customers), so the way we talked, and the way we acted were up to us, as long as we were not rude and inappropriate. Some displayed themselves as calm, mature elder sisters, some displayed clumsiness as a cute feature, some used their shyness and captured affection, some presented themselves as serious and dedicated maids and gained admiration. As long as there were customers who liked it, it could be a workable way of being a maid. Also, creativity was allowed in many parts of our work. Each of us had

a different set of magic spells that we made up ourselves, we chose our own favourite songs to put into the live performance list, and we decorated the cheki photos in our own style, making every piece of the photo a tiny artwork of our own. Unlike other kinds of work where all workers were expected to be the same to present a corporate standard image, in a maid café, being mediocre, having no unique traits, and giving people no special impression were fatal weaknesses. Therefore, I found my job as a maid probably the least boring job I have ever been in, and this was a huge reason why I stayed in the position despite the low pay.

Being a back-office worker and designer was also not so alienating. Due to its tiny scale and the small number of staff in Candy, I was given much freedom in how I dealt with office work, as most of the time I was all alone in the office with no supervision and guidance. As business hours started, my boss would be busy in the kitchen all day long, with little time and attention for me. Each month, I was expected to publish a magazine, create posts for all upcoming events, design the merchandise for the month, update the social media and webpage, and then that was it. By saying “that was it” does not imply the workload was light, which it was definitely not, but the requirement was very simple, the above orders were all I had to follow. As long as the magazine was about Candy, I could put whatever content I wanted in it. My boss would never intervene in my editorial work, and he would only proofread for my typos after the draft prints were delivered from the printing company. For the posters and merchandise, it was very often that the first time my boss saw them was when

they were out. It was unlike some of my friends who worked in a design agency that needed to deal with customers with very picky requests and ridiculous demands, who thought their “anti-aesthetic” opinions would actually ruin the work but they had no choice but to follow their customers’ order and submit work which they did not like. In Candy, I could create things I liked in my way, and my boss liked it too. That is what I thought was very precious. Although I was aware that my freedom in my labour process was based on my boss’s unavailability to be responsible for everything in the company, I was comfortable with the situation.

There was also little alienation from others in the work at Candy. People that I served have developed connections with me: they were not simply somebody who came up to the shop, ate something, and then left the shop. Even for one-time visitors, we tried to be friendly to ensure a happy experience for them. We would introduce ourselves and ask for their nicknames, and we would also share our hobbies and daily lives. As names were introduced and used repeatedly and topics revolving around real people’s lives were shared in the conversation, I was able to remember many of them. Although we might only meet one another for that one time, I felt that our paths significantly crossed, and we were still somebody to one another. For regular customers, the sense of connection was even stronger. As Candy has not posed any restrictions on the private connection between maids and the customers, some of us became good friends with their supporters, and some even developed

romantic relationships with them. I also find my supporters very important to me, not only in the sense that their spending on photo tickets and performance requests increased my income, but their feedback and encouragement sustained my motivation to continue my work.

Sometimes after my shift, my supporters would write a long passage of review, telling me that the performance was fantastic, the photos were drawn nicely, and they could recharge themselves from a whole day of stress after work by seeing me working in high spirits.

Christmas was a time when I received many Christmas cards and letters from customers who came regularly or not so regularly, telling me how glad they were of our encounter, which greatly warmed my heart. I was deeply thankful for their recognition and support, and I hoped to impress them even more and continue to make them happy. I have become close friends with some supporters, and we share our personal lives and troubles. Although the fact was that I have not been friends with people who did not visit me frequently and order my photos, showing that the “friendship” had a partially economic basis, sometimes I doubt whether interpersonal relationships could be categorized in as clear-cut way as the label “alienation” implies. Whatever the relationship is labelled, there was certainly some connection between me and my customers, and this connection was one that I cherished a lot, and it was a great motivation for me to stay in Candy.

Alienation from co-workers was also not apparent in Candy. First, there were not many regular employees in our shop (probably Candy is the maid café with the fewest regular staff

in Hong Kong, with only 12 maids in Dec 2022, while other cafés might have around 30-70 regular maids), so each of us had more shifts each month compared to other maid cafes, and we got to see one another very frequently. It was impossible to not know everyone in the shop as it was so small. Although during the shift, we were not expected to chitchat with one another too much, as our attention was expected to be towards the customers, many of us stayed beyond business hours for dinner (free, included as a welfare), and that was when we got to gossip and grumble. Our shop closes at 10pm, but it was not unusual that we stayed in the shop until 1 or 2am. After a busy day, my boss would cook us nice food and buy us alcohol and we would all chill on the restaurant floor and sing karaoke with the audio system in the shop. We had many mini after-work parties, and every time it fostered my sense of belonging to Candy because the party was a celebration of our hard work.

Tough times also pulled us together. My best friend Kiki was also a full-time staff and the head maid at Candy, and we were close because we were at the same level, paid the same wage, and suffered the same hardship. Since one of us was the head (and perhaps the only member) of the back office, and the other was the head maid, we bore the most pressure from poor sales and had to tolerate the most resentment from our boss. Every time the “circuit breaker” of my boss tripped, and he became feverous all of a sudden, it was always Kiki and me to deal with the aftermath. Since we faced a “common enemy”, we understood each other. There was no way we could vent it on the juniors, so we grumbled to each other to unload our

stress. I felt very connected to her as a “comrade”. I cannot imagine how I would held on by myself if she were to leave.

Sometimes maids could be rivals to one another; even though it was always unsaid, we compete for our fans when seeing a first-timer, and we fear that our own supporters will be “stolen” by other maids. However, we were never complete foes because there were many things that we had to face together, such as getting rid of an annoying customer who disturbed the shop order, managing performances like group dances and duets, inviting one another to be helpers and guests on our birthday or anniversary event parties. Although sometimes we had conflicts of interests, we could never work only on our own. This kind of co-worker relationship among girls of similar age and similar hobbies could often turn into friendships. We did not just see one another in Candy, but also in shopping arcades, game centers, and party rooms, and our topics of conversation were not just about work, but about our families, mental health, dreams, love and sex, and any of the other things that close friends talk about.

Lastly, alienation from species in Marx’s term concerns whether human beings can creatively make use of nature for their own means (Cox, 1998). As the above elaboration makes clear, I could do many things in my way at Candy; I felt like myself, as a human being with creativity, instead of a machine fulfilling corporate purposes for money to sustain my life. Especially in the role of a back-office designer, each piece of work was a self-expression

of my understanding, following my own sense of aesthetics. While being a maid was a projection of my ideal self, through acting joyful and high-spirited, I gradually felt genuine happiness and got energy from the positive feedback from my performance.

I must note that this was not the fact in the beginning; at first I did feel like I was forced to put on a mask and be a person that I was not, in a place I did not belong to. For the first six months, the work of a maid was painful, and I wanted to escape from work. I felt that Mirin was very alienated from me, and the reason for staying was simply “not wanting to give up that easily” and “testing my limits”. The transition probably happened when I was promoted to the managerial board and I was able to look into the operation of Candy, and have a say in new policies; I was no longer simply an entertainment cast on the restaurant floor. As I became a part of Candy, more responsibility and work became relevant to me; I spent more time in Candy, and it became a major part of my life.

In Hong Kong, the managerial board of maid cafes is usually composed of the boss, the shop owner (if it is not the same person as the boss), and young maids. Maid cafés are a place where very young girls could hold a significant place in the business. (although this does not imply high income). This is not only the case for Candy; in other maid cafes where I had friends working, young maids in their late teens or early twenties could be leaders, taking up responsibilities like managing marketing strategies, recruiting new staff and training them, organizing events, and supervising the restaurant floor. In other industries, young women at

this age, with average educational background and little work experience, were usually at the elementary worker level instead of at the managerial level. But in maid cafés, since all the staff (except the chef and owner) were young women, there were chances to be the head even if we were relatively new. Yes, maid cafes were rather small businesses, but maids did not have to feel small themselves. At least within the tiny world of our maid cafés, we were the “big guys”. This sense of empowerment was one more important factor for us, the maids, staying in our positions despite the low income and the demanding workload.

From the perspective of alienation and work, I have largely answered the research question. However, the situation at Candy was not always so bright and hopeful. Self-determination and empowerment were not always there, and there were many moments when my co-workers and I wanted to quit quite badly.

5. Unpredictable Storms – The downside of informality in Candy

While the sense of self-determination, creative self-expression, and low extent of alienation from work mainly originated from the informality of Candy House, such informal arrangements also had their downside. Candy was a minimally bureaucratic organization with nearly no rules and protocols written in black and white. In Candy, organizational directions were discussed in bi-weekly managerial board meetings attended by our boss and us, the 4 senior maids, but whether they were implemented, or the extent of implementation was not

thoroughly or strictly checked since we do not have enough manpower or time for regulating every detail. Things put in the meeting agenda were more like suggestions of trying out new methods and giving elementary ideas, with many blank spaces to be filled up by ourselves (e.g. “Let’s host a cherry blossom themed event next month!” But how the promotion material should be prepared, what clothes were to be purchased and worn, what would be on the special menu, were left to be decided freely. In a typical case, Cherry would buy decorations and search for clothes that she felt compatible for the theme, I would design posters accordingly, Lawrence would come up with his original menu before the event launched, and all the other maids would choose songs of their preference to perform in the mini live show. Even preparation for major events were done very flexibly, not to mention the day-to-day shop operation, with few guidelines, and many other things that were not even named to be discussed.

There were few restrictions and rules for the behaviour of staff, and even fewer to none for the boss. This informality not only provided room for creativity, but also added unpredictability to our working condition. This was also related to the business nature of Candy, as mentioned previously. Candy House is a sole proprietorship of Lawrence, so it is Lawrence’s possession, he can do whatever he liked, theoretically. Plus my boss was a rather temperamental person, and our organization used to be run in a informal style; some principles could be revised, organizational directions could be shifted at any time, no

consensus was needed, and we could not resist but only follow his new ideas because it was his business. For example, he had great enthusiasm in cooking and expected creativity in recipes, so he often came up with special menus during events and holidays, but on another day he would change his mind and say there were too many items on our menu, the leading maid cafes in Japan never had so many food choices for their customers, so we should cut them and stick with the basics.

How the business ran was actually parallel to how his mind ran, and it has never stopped fluctuating. In a business that is nearly a complete contrast to a bureaucratized organization, major shifts in Candy could be triggered simply by a feeling or a “click” after browsing on something random from the internet. Catching up with my boss’s mind was the most exhausting work, as my co-worker Kiki and I agreed. As Kiki said to me, “Okay, he said he hated us looking for him on every single matter, he hated us calling ‘boss, boss’ all the time for trivial stuff, he didn’t want his attention spent on maids outside the management board, he expected me, the head maid to deal with my own subordinates, not needing him to present himself. Now I am doing everything independently, but then he blames me for not talking to him, not updating him on what is going on.” Kiki let out a volley of complaints over the phone. “I don’t know what he wants, and I bet he doesn’t know what he himself wants as well. There is no way to fulfil his expectation.” She sighed.

We could not escape from the equation “Candy=Lawrence”, not only because of his ownership of the business, but also how we work was greatly affected by his emotions and desires. When he did not want to spend time on the junior maids, we should not bother him. But when he had an interest in looking after them, we should be aware of his current needs and report to him quickly. Kiki and I often joked that we needed a “boss telepathy expert” if we did not want to be suddenly blamed or scolded.

I also have been a victim of his “landmines”. As the one responsible for making official merchandise, I had to manage photo shooting days, so we could have photos of our maids as source material for goods. In my mind, the photo shoot had the sole purpose of providing resources for future merchandise. Also, in order to save money for Candy, last November, I arranged all of us to take photos of 3 outfits (for Christmas, Lunar New Year and Valentine’s Day) in one single day to make the most out of the rent and the wage paid to the photographer. Since we had to finish shooting for the entire winter season in only 6 hours, the schedule was extremely tight, and I expected the shooting to be serious instead of a leisure occasion.

However, two days before the shooting, my boss thunderously accused me of “deliberately splitting the restaurant floor staff and the kitchen staff”, “causing discord in Candy by boycotting the kitchen”, as I had only officially invited the maids to the shooting day. I was extremely bewildered: weren’t the shooting planned for making merchandises of

the maids? If it was about making posters, cards, and badges with the maids' portrait, I saw no point in calling the kitchen staff to join in, as we consented that we should not bring the kitchen staff up onstage because entertainment was the job of the maids, and the kitchen should focus on the food. Therefore, I asked my boss if we were making merchandise of the kitchen the coming season, but he said no. He was outraged that, as he said, the kitchen staff were the ones doing "real production" work, while we, the maids, were just hanging around the shop with pretty clothes and makeup, using the money "they" made to take stupid fancy photos. I was infuriated, as I believed I was working for the best interest of the business, I tried to keep costs low and save his money, but all I got was disapproval because now my boss wanted to jump in and take some photos.

I did not reject his request, I was fine with him jumping in with the kitchen staff in spite of the tight schedule, because I knew the shooting was funded by him, so he could do whatever he wanted. But the way he slandered me for "endangering the business's harmony" was unfair, and I had a major fight with him. Most of the time Lawrence was either too busy or did not see the need to exercise his authority. At the end of the day, it was his company, his Candy: this is the power imbalance between the sole proprietor who owns the shop and employees that do not have a share in the profit or loss.

Beside backstage quarrels, conflicts often happened on the restaurant floor, even in front of the customers. One day, a junior maid left a bag of delivered ice unattended (instead

of filling it into the ice bucket); my boss became enraged and scolded her loudly in front of everyone. Another day, the kitchen helper forgot to pack the correct number of utensils for takeaway customers, and my boss rebuked her harshly on the restaurant floor. Since there were no system for check and balance for power in Candy House as a sole proprietorship, he could decide whether providing a happy experience to customers or venting his negative emotions on the shop floor should come first. On most occasions, his anger with the fault committed by the staff was disproportionate. Many new customers were shocked by his behaviour and never returned. Gossip about our bad-tempered boss has been circulating in telegram groups in the maid café circle. Some were from ex-co-workers who suffered from his sudden explosion of anger; some were from the supporters of Candy's former employees discussing awful things their idols had experienced; and some were from the customers who witnessed the embarrassment. All in all, our shop was notorious for its fierce boss.

This was a major point of conflict I often faced. I had always hoped that I could proudly introduce my workplace to my friends. I worked hard to make Candy a place for all to enjoy, but whether it could be one was all of a matter of luck – depending on whether my boss was in a good mood. It became an insurmountable barrier for me, as sometimes I felt I could never achieve my goal of “ensuring a wonderful experience” as long as I stayed in Candy, where unpredictable dramas could break out anytime.

However, there were also things that I felt could only be achieved here: the freedom of

creation, the trust I gained from my co-workers, and the recognition of my supporters were very much rooted in Candy. No one knows whether the same seed could ever sprout again if the soil were changed. Therefore, I was perplexed by the current situation, swinging back and forth between staying or leaving. The informality of Candy was like a two-sided coin, enabling me to achieve what I have done, allowing me to express my creativity, while limiting me from ensuring quality service and experience to customers, and acquiring pride from being a maid of a good brand.

6. Always at Home - Breaking the boundary of home and work

While the previous discussion has shed light on reasons for remaining in a financially unfavorable position, there was more to explain Lawrence's persistence in running Candy House, while losing money almost every year. From his story, I witnessed the rejection of the dichotomy between private versus public, as well as home versus work, and he provided me with an alternative perspective in understanding what a good life is.

My boss Lawrence is in his mid-thirties; he founded Candy House 8 years ago. He was born into an upper-middle-class family. His father owned a local garment factory before it was closed down when the reform and opening-up policy was implemented in China. After the business was shut down, his family was sustained by real estate rent and interest from

share investment. One of the best achievements of my boss, which he was very proud of, was the invention of an “ocean plastic rubbish filtering machine” that was later purchased by a national corporation. The purchase granted him a million Hong Kong dollars, and he started his own business. After a failed attempt in the garment business, he established Candy House under the suggestion of his ex-girlfriend, Moka, who was already a maid at the time; she sought to implement her own ideals in a way that could not be achieved in the shop she was in. Having found the business profitable after a pop-up store event, he founded Candy with his savings and some support from his friends.

In the second year of Candy’s operation, Moka had an affair with the owner of another maid café, and he painfully broke up with her, although they remained co-workers in Candy for another few months. This was a drama that most people in the maid café circle knew about. Lawrence kept the business after his girlfriend had gone: “I had already started it; it made no sense for me to suddenly shut it down just because she was gone. Yes, if it weren’t for her, I would not have opened Candy, but Candy has already become a great part of my life. There is no reason to close it when I still find it doable.”

Candy really did take up a huge part of my boss’s life. From my observations, he usually woke up at noon, and then would open the shop at 13:00, and work until 22:00. After the business day had ended, he had to cook dinner for staff and settle the account for the day. At the earliest, he would leave Candy at 23:00, but very seldom would he actually do so. More

often, he would have long talks or after-work gatherings with the staff. Every Saturday, he and some band members (who were also staff in Candy) would visit a band room in the neighbourhood and play music together. There was no regular day off at Candy, so he was in the shop from day to night, seven days a week. Only on very rare occasions (such as the wedding of his friends, or a family reunion) would he take a day off from work, perhaps three days a year. I was astonished by the huge proportion of time he put into his business and asked him whether dedicating his whole self to Candy had hindered him from “normal social life”. However, he was satisfied by his pattern of living (although perhaps just at the time I interviewed him), as he said “I have all I need in Candy. This is a comfort zone that I have built for myself, where I can be self-sustainable. It’s not only my work but also a place where my social connections are. I don’t crave socializing with new friends; you guys (managerial maids, kitchen staff, and some long-term regular customers) are the people I talk with, and ingredients and kitchen utensils are the things I play with. I have my own library (the office) where I can read, I even have my own kitchen to cook food and feed myself. I don’t have to support my family, as they earn much more than I do, and I am tired of dating and developing new romances. Therefore, I find my life in Candy rather complete.”

While notions of setting work-life boundaries have become common, with countless articles on “how to achieve work-life balance” (and thus improve one’s quality of life) bombarding social media, Lawrence seemed content by putting work at the center of his life,

and found work to be the meaning of his life. Given the nature of Candy as a business, Lawrence was the sole proprietor, so it is Lawrence's possession. He has purchased shop furniture to his taste, despite the fact that it may be incompatible with the café's overall style. Also, Candy is a catering business, where Lawrence, the chef, could provide himself with each meal he needed. He could feel himself at home in Candy, and therefore sustaining Candy was not simply running a profit-making business, but also preserving his own habitat, which he would strive to maintain despite financial losses in the business. In the form of a business entity, Lawrence has carved out a comfort zone where he could feel at home.

7. When the Claw of Reality Reaches – Playing in the liminality of adolescence and studenthood

The departure of my coworker was a mirror to be looked at, reflecting the condition that allowed us to stay and be devoted, a condition which would cease to exist after we quit and left Candy. What I found in common among the maids was that we were in a liminal stage of life, which spared us from abiding by social expectations within a limited period. The factor of liminality may not be a proactively enabling one, like the previously discussed reasons for staying, but it served as a background condition that made staying at Candy possible.

Liminality, a concept introduced by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, was first used in describing the intermediate stage of rites of passage in small-scale societies in his most

famous work *Rites de Passage*. There were three stages in a rite of passage from his cross-cultural observations, and liminal rites were the second and transitional stage, where initiates would be taken “outside their normal environment... feel nameless, spatiotemporally dislocated and socially unstructured” (van Gennep, 1909) after their old identity was lost, but they were not yet fully re-incorporated into society with a new identity. While van Gennep focused on small-scale societies, Victor Turner has taken up van Gennep’s idea and expanded the application of liminality, which can be used in referring to a normally short period of in-betweenness that will “eventually dissolve”(Turner, 1969). During liminality there is an “upending of a prior hierarchy...during which power reversals occurred” (Wels, van der Waal, Spiegel, Kamsteeg, 2011). In the liminal state, preestablished social structures and power relations have been temporarily suspended or even reversed. Liminality can cover a wide range of human experience, and is not limited to ritual passage. Liminality is an experience of being “betwixt and between”, and is characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. (Turner, 1969). In my own analysis here, the concept of liminality will be used in describing the gap period between growing up from being a girl under mandatory education (the time when one is still considered a child that needs to be taken care of and worried over) and being settled into womanhood or being a full-grown, self-sustaining economic being.

In Chinese societies, unlike sons who were expected to feed their family and support

their parents and bore financial pressure as soon as they finished their studies, less was expected of daughters as they would marry out someday. This does not imply that daughters are being neglected and can be totally free from expectations and stress from the family; in Hong Kong today, where opportunities for education are available for all genders, average academic performance, or least acquiring a “basic” education qualification (with middle school or high school completed) is a usual expectation for daughters, for being a “normal” social being. Education expectations have been imposed on both sons and daughters in Hong Kong, but Confucian concepts and traditional Chinese philosophy of “*nan zhu wai nu zhu nei*” (“men bear the obligation to secure family income”, while women focus in taking care of the family) are still in effect, so “parents imposed higher educational aspirations for sons than daughters and devoted more resources to sons’ schooling”, while expecting daughters to take care of household chores and possess feminine virtues to be a marriable woman. (Shek, 2019)

In my observation, for my coworkers who have graduated from high school, their parents found their mission already completed and do not have to be worried. As long as their daughters could feed themselves, they could do whatever they liked after education and before the “marriageable age”, usually from the mid- to late twenties in Hong Kong. I describe this period as a liminal stage for girls, where they are temporarily and partially free from social structures such as schools and mandatory education, and the domestic life of their core family, which is expected to be created later, as a symbol of reaching mature

womanhood. Before stepping into full womanhood, there is quite a high degree of freedom temporarily given to girls by the temporal disappearance of familial and social expectations, which allows them to work as maids, where pay is minimally low and the career path is dim. This is acceptable as “playing for a while”, where a girl could make a temporary dream, experience some moments of “self-realization”, and create remarkable memories to be remembered as she becomes old.

I only came to be reminded of this when a dramatic incident happened. It was just another ordinary morning, and I woke up receiving a piece of bizarre news - the head maid, who is also my best friend at Candy, Kiki, was quitting, effective the day it was announced. Kiki had already removed from the WhatsApp group of Candy, leaving me in confusion. Despite knowing that there were constant conflicts between my boss and Kiki, just like I often quarrel with my boss on opposing views on the operation of Candy, I did not expect her resignation to be that abrupt.

She told me that she had gotten pregnant again. I knew that she gotten pregnant once before, last year when she took a week off from work to get an abortion. This time, she decided to give birth to the baby, thinking that maybe it was destiny, that after taking contraceptives she still got pregnant twice. She and her boyfriend liked children, and they feared that getting an abortion again might put her future fertility at risk, so she decided to step into motherhood. Taking it as an opportunity, they also planned to get married in the

coming few months to build their own nuclear family. As she is walking into the next stage of life, her financial condition came to be a top priority of her consideration, and the happiness of being surrounded and adored by followers, which were “dreams” of a young girl, should come to an end.

“I did think of staying here for a little longer... maybe after my 2nd maid anniversary in July... But it's time for me to wake up from this dream. It was fun but it couldn't be a lifelong career... I have to be a mother from now on. I have to find a job that could sustain not only my living but also my baby's'. It would be fine that Lawrence delayed paying our wages if I was only living with my boyfriend, just the two of us. But not any more, not if I have a baby to look after. Can I tell the baby to not poop for now, to not cry for food for the moment, and wait until I receive my wage to buy him diapers and milk powder? Hell no. It's time to return to reality. I need to get a proper job now, I need to do it before my tummy gets bigger and bigger and I can't work anymore, so that I can save enough money for the baby, and maybe for a wedding ceremony afterwards.”

Despite finding her explanation more than convincing, I was still a bit confused about the abruptness of her resignation. “I actually had a little fight with Lawrence. I told him I was planning to quit very soon as I had gotten pregnant and he wanted me to stay, given that there is no suitable substitute for my position at the moment. He said he could offer a monthly

salary of 18k for me if money is my consideration.” “Oh, that again. 18k. LMAO. It was just lip service.” I instantly reacted sarcastically. Lawrence has also offered 18k to me after my university graduation, asking me to continue my full-time work at Candy. But while he was offering a larger sum, he could not pay Kiki’s and my wage on time, we always receive our compensation for the previous month on the very last days of the next month. “Yes, you knew his trick as well, so I said no kidding anymore, you haven’t even paid my 12k wage for last month until now. ‘Take care of your own business first, man.’ Then he got insanely mad and kicked me out of the group. Well, that’s fine, he helped end my hesitation. Now I can focus on learning to be a mother.”

The liminal stage between childhood and adulthood for Kiki ended abruptly with an unexpected pregnancy; she can no longer “play at being a maid” as she had to settle down and be a responsible mother. For me, being a maid was also an experience that was made possible in the liminal stage of studenthood. As a university student, a “formal” job was not expected by my parents until my graduation while seizing the opportunity to experience life was encouraged for the period after completing high school education and having guaranteed an entrance ticket to university (so they could be relieved from their greatest worry), and before entering society as a grown-up. University life is a transitional period, where we are expected to be something else (graduate, and formal worker in the labour market), at the end of the period. Studenthood was a liminal status. It was a “privileged experience” (Field and

Morgan-Klein, 2010), and a special period of time when errors and mistakes could be forgiven, when ideals outside of mainstream discourse could be practiced, when social and family burdens were lifted, temporally for young adults, preparing to be a full member of the society. Dreams and ambitions are expected of hopeful youths, and we were encouraged to dream and try everything, not to fear failure, and not to be reluctant to go the extra mile while we were young. Many of my co-workers were like me, we applied to be maids to have a taste of being “*kirakira*”(キラキラ, shiny in Japanese) during our undergraduate days; we stayed since we had begun to enjoy the work and one another’s company, but started to struggle as to whether to stay or leave, when the time allowed for dreaming was counting down, and expectations of being a mature adult with careful life planning had arrived. However it was also the ticking of the alarm clock that reminded us that our youth (or more accurately in Chinese, 青春) is short, and that we should dream as much as we can, which gave us the energy to strive hard in a position that enabled self-determination, despite providing low and delayed wages, one that would not be accepted socially as soon as one graduated from higher education.

In fact, almost every maid in Hong Kong understands that being a maid is not a job for a lifetime. The question is just “When is the end of this liminal time”. As a job selling the energy of youthful girls and the image of being cute and adorable, its difficulty rises as a girl ages. Also, as a job at which compensation was far lower than the standard of a regular

catering position, with much higher demands for the workers, it could hardly be a reasonable lifelong career. We, the maids working at maid cafes, were well aware of the realities, but we chose to devote ourselves because this was the time, the only period in life that we would not be blamed for being willful. Someday we would return to a “normal” life, with only very few of us striving to maintain a balance between a “real career” and the effort of lingering onto the identity of maid by working discrete shifts, appearing occasionally to meet their fans, like Cherry, who stayed in Candy as a supporting role and only came to work as a maid once a week. But Cherry was the only one who stayed all through the eight years at Candy, an exceptional example. The other hundred-something girls who were once maids in Candy have eventually left Candy, and disappeared from the maid circle, as they proceed to another stage of life. That could also be one explanation of how I became a maid of the second-greatest seniority, as my “ancestors” have long passed the stage of girlhood, and returned to “reality”.

I would say that the experience of being a maid was like a fun experiment to play, it was about having a taste of being a lovable figure, like trying to sing and dance like a mini idol (although with far less audience and fans), trying to dress up in spectacular costume and have photos taken and autographed like a starlet, trying to manage her own self-image and attract fans like the KOL (key opinion leaders) on social media... Given the small scale and marginality of the maid industry in Hong Kong, it was extremely difficult for one to make

herself successful in the mainstream market and develop their career as an entertainment talent, (In fact, only Sica in MakerVille was successful at this. Starting from a local maid café, she became an artist of ViuTV after gaining popularity from the television idol audition show KingMaker); this may not be a goal for many of us. Most of us have remained in our small circles, being only known and followed by regular maid café customers, with very few “famous” maid-cosplayers recognized in the cosplay circle that could sustain a living by regularly publishing self-made photo books and merchandise. Therefore, despite being a real job with a toilsome job description that involves both catering and entertainment, it was mostly considered “just playing” for its dim future path, only a dream that happened during our liminal stage of life. But as mentioned, it was because this dream could only be dreamt during the liminal stage of being a girl, before the claw of reality reaches in, we tried to experience as much as we could, devoted ourselves wholeheartedly within the limited period, so as not to regret for not pursuing our dream when we got old.

8. The End of the Journey

“I want to add this to today’s agenda. I’m leaving in May, after our promotion booth at Doujin (anime hobbyist) convention.” I announced in the middle of our bi-weekly meeting firmly, while trying hard to hold back my tears. Lawrence’s smile froze before he let out a long sigh. Cherry’s eyes were wide open. There was a long silence before Lawrence went out

the door to cool down with a cigarette. During Lawrence's absence, Cherry asked for the reason for my departure. Having struggled for a few months between leaving or staying as I progressed with my final year project, I have come to the final conclusion of leaving Candy House and looking for a "proper" job as I graduate from university this summer, as my family financial situation worsened, and I felt the responsibility of being the eldest child. "It is time to go and time to grow up." Despite being shocked, Cherry easily understood and nodded as she realized the difficulties of sustaining the delayed and low wages in Candy (she never relied on Candy as a primary source of income and had another full-time job). Ten minutes later, Lawrence returned to the room with a dispirited face, looking at the ground, and all I felt was guilt, literally feeling like a scumbag dumping his poor girlfriend.

There were actually a few private negotiations between Lawrence and I before, on the possibility of switching my position to part-time or raising my salary, but we have come to no conclusion. Sometimes I was tempted by his offer or suggestions and thought wouldn't it be great if I kept being surrounded by these people I liked? But at other times I came to realize that he still had not paid my salary for last month due to a shortage in cash, and it was very possible that he could not afford any raise in my salary, and given the scale of the business, there would not be room for promotion. And the optimal period for fresh graduate job search was shortly arriving. I decided to make a public announcement before coming to a conclusion in our discussion, as I was afraid that I would be persuaded by him.

I was expecting fury from him, and have imagined for so many times how he would blame me as a traitor betraying all his care given to me, which was not reciprocated. I was ready for condemnation, for I understood my departure would likely leave the back office in temporary chaos, the marketing department in a vacuum (because there was only me responsible for all the promotion). However, the feverous roar that I had anticipated did not happen. “You know how bad-tempered a person I am. I tried my best to not burst out in fury. You saw how long I have been calming down myself. It was all because of you. I value you a lot, Mirin.”

The conversation turned out to be a very sentimental one, with him regretting how he could not provide more support in office work and having me do all the design and marketing work, and apologizing for how we ended up talking to each other less than before as his focused his attention to his kitchen members; I said that I was sorry for leaving everyone while the shop is in need of my work, expressing how empty I would feel if I have to be disconnected with these people, and anticipating no future job to be as free, as creativity-encompassing as this one at Candy. I saw Lawrence wipe his eyes with his jacket, and I had already given up holding back my own tears. At the end of that day, I texted Lawrence, “Thanks for making it a peaceful breakup, lol”, trying to be lighthearted. But he replied “I will make Candy a place, that you could return to without worries someday”, which made me cry, again.

9. Conclusion

Looking back to my days in Candy, from appreciating its room for self-determination, tolerating its low and delayed pay, to enjoying the closeness with my co-workers and my boss, as well as hating the unpredictable outrage of my boss, there were complicated and intense emotions invested in my work. This work was more than an activity for financial compensation alone; it was a practice of self-determination, transforming the workplace into a social world knit together by relatedness. When I began investigating “why are we staying?”, I had not yet anticipated my quick resignation; this project gave me insight on how I managed to stay, when I was feeling the tug-of-war between the two choices of staying or quitting. It was the low extent of alienation in my work that affirmed my self-determination, making work in Candy enjoyable and meaningful for me. It was the close relatedness between me, my co-worker, and my boss, that motivated me to pursue my work in spite of the sudden rages of my boss; knowing how he could be mean yet caring gave me a complex sense of obligation, and even when I confronted him with my co-workers, it reminded us of our togetherness. However, even a dreamland-like maid cafe holds a material basis. For my boss, it may be possible for him to sustain his comfort zone for his socio-economic status, while for the maids, it was usually those who were in their liminal stage of girlhood and studenthood, who were temporarily out of their families’ expectation, who could stay

employed there. Just as liminality eventually dissolves, the condition for one to continue the “play” of being a maid will vanish. However, because that is an experience that only be tasted before one has to be a responsible adult and take care of livelihood, the liminal status may serve as a motivation for our commitment.

Although I have often been complaining “西工, 西工” (“sh*tty job”) to my friends all the time – and it really is a “sh*tty job in terms of low wage, unpaid labour, delayed payment, and a temperamental boss – I really liked this place a lot. What I have created, and the people that I bonded with, made me a part of Candy House. I hope this reflection may introduce the objective work conditions of Hong Kong maid cafes as a small-scale business, as well as illustrate the empowering sides of the work and recognize the material condition that enabled one to make such a decision to remain. I came to be able to answer my own contemplation, that to stay in a losing business and underpaid position were not merely “irrational” life choices out of ignorance, but conscious decisions based on a careful balancing of benefit and loss at our particular life stage. As I move on to my next journey carrying all the bittersweet memories, I can finally stop all the 西工 complaints and recall it as a once-in-a-lifetime odyssey.

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