The Alienation of Emotional Labour from the Perspective of Marxist Notions of Freedom: A Critical Analysis of Affective Commodification in Neoliberal Asia

ความแปลกแยกของแรงงานเชิงอารมณ์จากมุมมองแนวคิดเสรีภาพแบบมาร์กซิสต์: การวิเคราะห์เชิงวิพากษ์กระบวนการกลายเป็นสินค้าเชิงผัสสารมณ์ในเอเชียยุคเสรีนิยมใหม่

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Abstract

In this academic article, critical reflection on one of the central concerns of this paper has been directed towards the alienation of the emotional and affective emotional labour in the neoliberal economies with special references to Thailand and China, and the comparative knowledge in Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines. This paper takes Marxist approaches to viewing alienated labor and modern theorizations of what can be understood as affective labor (Hardt and Negri) along with feminist methodologies to argue that these contemporary notions of affective labour can be taken a step further in terms of subjectification and exploitation through the problematic that neoliberal development policies are preconditioning or mapping out affective capacities on to a scale that is more encompassing than the historical experiences of emotional labour. By carrying out a thematic analysis of various case studies of displaced housewives, Kathoey performers, domestic workers, and media-women, the article shows how affective labor has become the primary operation of extracting value in the current capitalist society. The article has contributions in gender studies, labor studies, and critical theory that surmise that affective alienation is a qualitatively distinct phenomenon than that of conventional Marxist alienation and that new analytical approaches be produced which include productive dimensions of affect and their role in neoliberal governmentality. Finally, it promotes politics of policy change and opposition, where the focus on the side of affective justice and economic development is to oppose the marketification of human affective and emotional potential.

Keywords: Emotional Labor, Affective Labor, Marxist Alienation, Neoliberalism, Commodification, Gender Studies, Thailand, China

บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิชาการฉบับนี้นำเสนอการวิเคราะห์เชิงวิพากษ์เกี่ยวกับความแปลกแยกของแรงงานเชิงอารมณ์และแรงงานเชิงผัสสารมณ์ ในระบบเศรษฐกิจยุคเสรีนิยมใหม่ โดยเน้นกรณีศึกษาหลักในประเทศไทยและจีน และผสานข้อมูลเปรียบเทียบจากเวียดนาม กัมพูชา อินโดนีเซีย และฟิลิปปินส์ งานศึกษานี้ใช้ทฤษฎีแรงงานแปลกแยกของมาร์กซ์ ทฤษฎีแรงงานเชิงผัสสารมณ์แนวร่วมสมัย (Hardt และ Negri) และกรอบแนวคิดสตรีนิยม ในการเสนอว่าการพัฒนาภายใต้นโยบายเสรีนิยมใหม่ได้เปลี่ยนไม่เพียงแต่อารมณ์ แต่รวมถึงศักยภาพด้านผัสสารมณ์โดยรวมให้กลายเป็นสินค้าอย่างเป็นระบบ สร้างรูปแบบใหม่ของการผลิตสร้างองค์ประธานและการแสวงหาประโยชน์ที่ลึกซึ้งและซับซ้อนกว่าความเข้าใจเดิมของแรงงานเชิงอารมณ์แบบดั้งเดิม โดยอาศัยการวิเคราะห์ประเด็นหลักจากกรณีศึกษาที่หลากหลาย ไม่ว่าจะเป็นแม่บ้านที่ต้องย้ายถิ่น นักแสดงกะเทย แรงงานในบ้าน และบุคคลสาธารณะในสื่อ บทความชิ้นนี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่าแรงงานเชิงผัสสารมณ์เป็นกลไกสำคัญในการดึงมูลค่าในระบบทุนนิยมสมัยใหม่ ทั้งนี้บทความยังมีส่วนร่วมในการอภิปรายในสาขาสตรีศึกษา แรงงานศึกษา และทฤษฎีวิพากษ์ โดยเสนอว่าความแปลกแยกเชิงผัสสารมณ์นั้นมีลักษณะเฉพาะตัวแตกต่างจากความแปลกแยกแบบมาร์กซิสต์ดั้งเดิม และต้องอาศัยกรอบวิเคราะห์ใหม่ที่อธิบายศักยภาพเชิงผัสสารมณ์ในระบบการปกครองชีวะญาณยุคเสรีนิยมใหม่ ในท้ายที่สุดบทความนี้เรียกร้องให้มีการปฏิรูประบบนโยบายและยุทธศาสตร์การต่อต้านขัดขืนที่ให้ความสำคัญกับความยุติธรรมเชิงผัสสารมณ์ควบคู่กับความก้าวหน้าทางเศรษฐกิจ เพื่อท้าทายกระบวนการเปลี่ยนอารมณ์และศักยภาพเชิงผัสสารมณ์ของมนุษย์ให้กลายเป็นสินค้า

คำสำคัญ: แรงงานเชิงอามรณ์, แรงงานเชิงผัสสารมณ์, ความแปลกแยกแบบมาร์กซ์, เสรีนิยมใหม่, กระบวนการกลายเป็นสินค้า, เพศภาวะศึกษา, ไทย, จีน

1. Introduction

The rise of neoliberalism has fundamentally transformed labor relations across the globe, creating new forms of exploitation that extend beyond traditional material production into the realm of human affect, emotion, and subjectivity. This article critically examines how neoliberal development policies in Asia—particularly in Thailand and China—systematically commodify emotional and affective labor, generating novel forms of alienation that challenge conventional Marxist frameworks and demand new theoretical approaches to understand contemporary labor exploitation.

This paper argues that the commodification of emotional and affective labor under neoliberalism represents a qualitatively distinct phenomenon from traditional forms of labor alienation, necessitating theoretical frameworks that go beyond Hochschild's concept of "emotional labor" to encompass broader theories of affective labor as advanced by Hardt, Negri, and Lazzarato. While emotional labor focuses on managing feelings to produce publicly observable facial and bodily displays, affective labor involves the production of subjectivities, social networks, and forms of life itself—making it central to contemporary capitalist value extraction.

The central theoretical tension addressed in this article concerns how affective labor operates not merely as performed emotion but as a productive force that generates economic value by modulating bodies, affects, and social relations. This perspective challenges traditional Marxist alienation theory, which may inadequately capture the self-exploitative, performative, and productive dimensions of contemporary service work under neoliberal rationalities of self-enterprise and responsibilization.

Drawing on comparative case studies from Thailand, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, this analysis demonstrates how neoliberal development policies create systematic conditions for affective commodification across diverse industries—from tourism and domestic work

to media and manufacturing. The regional focus on Asia provides crucial insights into how colonial legacies, rapid economic transformation, and gendered labor markets intersect to produce particular forms of affective exploitation.

This article advances debates in gender studies, labor studies, and critical theory by proposing that affective alienation operates through mechanisms of subjectification rather than merely through traditional separation from labor products or processes. It advocates for analytical approaches that account for how neoliberal governmentality shapes both labor conditions and the affective expectations placed on workers, ultimately calling for policy reforms and resistance strategies grounded in principles of affective justice.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Beyond Emotional Labor: Toward Affective Labor Theory

While Hochschild's foundational work on emotional labor remains influential, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes its limitations in understanding labor under neoliberal economies. Hochschild's framework, developed in The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling (1983), conceptualizes emotional labor as "part of a clearly patterned but invisible system of feelings, shaped by individuals' acts of feeling work, social feeling rules, and various interactions in both private and public life" (Marx, 1959: 46). This labor manifests in workers' management of self-emotions, deep performance under social control, and manipulation of emotional norms.

Hochschild's distinction between "surface acting" and "deep acting" revealed crucial dimensions of emotional exploitation: workers either manage their emotional expressions while maintaining psychological distance, or actually transform their inner feelings to match organizational requirements. However, this framework remains limited by regarding emotion as something workers possess and manage, rather than recognizing affect as a transpersonal

force that circulates and creates value through its movement.

As Italian autonomist Marxists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) observe, the transformation of capitalism in the post-industrial era requires expanded theoretical frameworks. Building on Maurizio Lazzarato's theory of immaterial labor, they identify affective labor as "the production and manipulation of emotions," which extends beyond individual emotional management to encompass the production of subjectivities, social networks, and forms of life (Marx, 1959: 50). This distinction is crucial for understanding how contemporary capitalism captures and commodifies not only performed emotions, but also the generative capacities of human affect itself.

The concept of immaterial labor, developed by Lazzarato, provides crucial insights into how post-industrial capitalism operates—through the production of cultural content, social relations, and forms of subjectivity, rather than material objects. This includes communication work, cultural production, and social networking that become directly productive via digital technologies. Platform capitalism exemplifies this transformation: social media platforms capture and monetize human interaction, transforming everyday communication into sources of economic value.

Affective labor theory offers several analytical advantages over traditional emotional labor frameworks. First, it recognizes that affect operates transpersonally—circulating between bodies and creating atmospheres that exceed individual emotional experience. This understanding is vital for analyzing how service industries create affective environments that influence customer behavior and generate profit through collective mood modulation. Second, it accounts for how affective labor produces subjectivities and social relations as commodities, making workers complicit in their own subjectification rather than simply alienated from external products. Third, it explains how neoliberal capitalism captures the productive dimensions of human sociality, creativity, and collaboration.

The work of Brian Massumi and Patricia Clough further develops

affect theory by demonstrating how affect operates as a form of potential energy that can be captured and channeled by various social and economic forces. Massumi's analysis of affect as "intensity" that exceeds conscious emotion provides tools for understanding how capitalism operates through the modulation of bodily states and energetic flows, rather than through traditional disciplinary control. This shift from disciplinary to modulative power represents a fundamental transformation in capitalist exploitation.

Sara Ahmed's concept of "affective economies" further enriches this framework, showing how feelings and intensities circulate as forms of currency within neoliberal systems, creating value through their movement and transformation rather than their static possession. Ahmed's analysis reveals how affects function as social and economic forces that bind people together while simultaneously producing differentiation and exclusion. This dynamic understanding moves beyond the limitations of alienation frameworks, which may inadequately describe how contemporary service workers' affect is captured as a productive force (Marx, 1990: 58).

2.2 Rethinking Marxist Alienation in Neoliberal Context

Classical Marxist alienation theory posits that workers become separated from the products of their labor, the labor process, their species-being, and social relations under capitalist production relations. Marx's analysis in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 emphasizes how workers lose control over means of production, resulting in exploitation and loss of human essence through labor (Hochschild, 1983: xvii-xviii).

Marx's four dimensions of alienation provide a foundational framework for understanding capitalist exploitation. Alienation from the product of labor occurs when workers have no control over what they produce or how their products are used. Alienation from the labor process involves loss of control over work organization and performance. Alienation from species-being refers to separation from human essence as creative, social beings. Finally, alienation

from others involves the breakdown of genuine social relationships as competition replaces cooperation.

However, the neoliberal transformation of capitalism presents challenges to this framework. Under neoliberal rationalities, workers are increasingly positioned as "entrepreneurs of the self" who voluntarily invest in their own human capital, emotional skills, and affective capacities. This creates forms of self-exploitation that appear as personal choice rather than external coercion, complicating traditional analyses of alienation as separation or estrangement.

The concept of "real subsumption" from Marx's later work provides additional analytical resources for understanding how neoliberal capitalism extends beyond workplace exploitation to encompass all aspects of social life. Real subsumption involves the transformation of social relations, cultural practices, and forms of subjectivity to serve capitalist accumulation, going beyond formal subsumption that simply incorporates existing labor processes into capitalist production.

Contemporary scholars suggest that neoliberal capitalism operates through what Foucault terms "governmentality"—mechanisms of power that work through freedom rather than against it. Workers are not simply alienated from their labor but actively participate in their own subjectification as affective laborers, developing emotional skills, networking abilities, and personal brands as forms of investment in their market value.

Maurizio Lazzarato's concept of "subjective machines" helps explain how neoliberal capitalism captures human creative and affective capacities not through external domination but through the production of desires and subjectivities that align with market demands. This creates new forms of biopower that operate through the modulation of affective states rather than disciplinary control of bodies.

This requires analytical frameworks that account for how neoliberal power operates through precarity, self-enterprise, and the erosion of public

protections to create conditions where workers must continuously invest in their affective capacities as survival strategies. Rather than simple alienation, we observe complex processes of "affective capture" where human capacities for relationship, creativity, and emotional connection become directly productive for capital.

2.3 Neoliberalism as Affective Governance

Neoliberalism operates not merely as economic policy but also as a form of governance that shapes subjectivities, social relations, and affective experiences. As Wendy Brown argues, neoliberal rationality extends market logics into all spheres of life, creating "economized subjects" who understand themselves primarily through frameworks of investment, competition, and entrepreneurship.

In the context of emotional and affective labor, neoliberal governance generates conditions in which workers must continuously develop their emotional intelligence, communication skills, and relational capacities as forms of human capital. This dynamic is particularly evident in service industries, where workers' ability to create positive customer experiences, manage difficult interactions, and maintain emotional availability becomes directly measurable and profitable.

The gendered dimensions of this process are critical. Feminist scholars demonstrate how neoliberal capitalism relies on and reproduces gender inequalities by naturalizing women's emotional labor, while simultaneously demanding its intensification across service sectors. Similarly, neoliberal governance produces new forms of racialized and sexualized labor—particularly in tourism, entertainment, and care industries—that commodify cultural differences and bodily performances.

The regional context of Asian development adds further complexity, as post-colonial states navigate pressures for economic integration while managing the social costs of rapid transformation. Development policies that

prioritize foreign investment, export production, and service sector growth create particular vulnerabilities for workers whose affective labor becomes essential to securing competitive advantage in global markets.

3. Methodology

This article employs thematic analysis of secondary sources and case studies to examine patterns of affective commodification across diverse contexts in Asia. The methodological approach combines comparative case study analysis with critical discourse analysis of academic literature, policy documents, and ethnographic studies.

Case studies were selected according to three criteria: (1) representation of different forms of affective labor across service, care, and entertainment industries; (2) geographic distribution across mainland and maritime Southeast Asia as well as East Asia; and (3) availability of detailed ethnographic or sociological analysis in existing literature.

This selection strategy allows for thematic comparison across contexts while recognizing the specificity of local conditions.

The analytical framework draws on intersectional feminist theory to examine how gender, race, class, and nationality intersect to produce particular vulnerabilities to affective exploitation. Cases are organized thematically around Marx's four dimensions of alienation, while insights from affective labor theory are incorporated to identify emergent forms of commodification that exceed traditional frameworks.

4. Case Studies: Affective Labor and Alienation in Neoliberal Asia

4.1 Displaced Housewives and the Production of Disposable Affect

The case of housewives displaced by the Pak Mun Dam project in Thailand illustrates how development policies systematically undervalue and

exploit women's affective labor while creating conditions for its intensification. As documented by Soukhaphon and Baird (2024), these women were forced to relocate not only their physical households, but also entire networks of care, community connection, and emotional support.

The Pak Mun Dam project, constructed as part of Thailand's rapid industrialization strategy, exemplifies how neoliberal development logic treats social relations and community networks as externalities that can be displaced without compensation. The project's environmental and social impact assessments focused primarily on physical displacement and economic compensation, while ignoring the affective labor that women perform to maintain family and community cohesion.

This displacement reveals how women's affective labor—involving the continuous production and maintenance of social relationships, community cohesion, and familial stability—becomes invisible to development planning, despite being essential to social reproduction. The dam project treated these women's homes as mere physical structures, rather than recognizing them as centers of complex affective economies involving childcare, eldercare, community mediation, and cultural transmission.

Women's homes served as hubs for extended kinship networks, neighborhood support systems, and cultural practices, all of which required constant emotional and social labor to maintain. The displacement process forced women to recreate these complex social networks under conditions of poverty, cultural disruption, and community fragmentation. Unlike men, whose work was primarily understood in terms of lost agricultural income, women faced the additional burden of reconstructing entire social worlds while contending with trauma and economic insecurity.

Under neoliberal development logic, women's affective capacities become "disposable"—valuable enough to be exploited for community resilience during displacement, but not significant enough to warrant compensation or policy consideration. This creates what might be termed "affective

dispossession": the systematic removal of conditions that allow affective labor to flourish, while demanding its continued performance under increasingly difficult circumstances.

The long-term effects demonstrate how affective alienation operates differently from traditional labor alienation. Rather than being separated from the products of their labor, these women became responsible for recreating entire social worlds without adequate resources, community support, or recognition of their work's value. Their affective labor intensified rather than disappeared, as they struggled to maintain family and community cohesion under conditions of forced displacement.

Furthermore, this case reveals how development policies create new forms of precarity that compel women to intensify their affective labor as a survival strategy. Without access to traditional support networks, displaced women had to develop new forms of mutual aid while coping with social isolation and cultural loss. This demonstrates how resistance to displacement frequently requires intensive affective labor to build coalitions, maintain solidarity, and sustain organizing efforts over time.

4.2 Tourism, Performance, and the Commodification of Gender

Thailand's Kathoey tourism industry provides a complex example of how gender performance becomes commodified as affective labor under neoliberal development strategies. As analyzed by Tan (2014), Kathoey performers are required to embody "hyper-femininity" that caters to tourist fantasies, while also navigating complex negotiations of gender identity, economic survival, and cultural representation.

The development of Kathoey tourism in Thailand reflects broader patterns in cultural tourism that market difference and diversity as consumable experiences, extracting value from marginalized communities. Tourism promotion materials present Kathoey performers as representatives of Thai cultural tolerance, while obscuring the economic conditions that drive many

transgender women into entertainment work. This marketing strategy creates what Dean MacCannell terms "staged authenticity," wherein cultural practices are modified to meet tourist expectations (Zhou et al., 2024).

This case illustrates how affective labor operates through what Judith Butler terms "performativity"—the continuous citation and repetition of gender norms that appear natural but are, in fact, produced through iterative performance. Under tourism capitalism, these performances are commodified as entertainment products required to satisfy customer expectations and generate profit for venue owners.

The transformation of gender expression into commercial entertainment produces specific forms of affective alienation that exceed traditional analyses of gender performativity. The tourism industry's focus on spectacle requires performers to embody hyperbolic versions of femininity that may not correspond to their personal gender expression or community norms. This hyperfemininity serves tourist fantasies while reinforcing normative gender categories through exaggerated performance.

Commodification creates multiple layers of affective alienation. First, performers must separate their "authentic" gender expressions from their "performed" tourist personas, developing internal divisions that exceed traditional alienation from labor products (Pham & Ho, 2024). This separation requires constant emotional labor to manage the psychological costs of performing exaggerated versions of their gender identity for tourist consumption. Second, their performances must continually adapt to changing tourist demands, rendering their gender expression contingent on market conditions rather than personal identification or community belonging.

Postcolonial feminist analysis reveals how this commodification reproduces "Orientalist" frameworks that exoticize Thai gender diversity for Western consumption. As Chandra Mohanty argues, such representations create new forms of colonial discourse, positioning "Third World" gender expressions as available for consumption by wealthy tourists while denying

performers agency over their representation (Weimann-Sandig, 2021). The marketing of Kathoey performances frequently emphasizes their exotic difference from Western gender norms, while presenting Thai culture as inherently more tolerant.

This Orientalist framework produces what Gayatri Spivak terms "epistemic violence," reducing complex lived experiences of gender identity to simplified cultural stereotypes. Kathoey performers must navigate between tourist expectations of exotic difference and their own experiences of gender identity, community belonging, and survival.

Resistance strategies developed by Kathoey communities—including grassroots organizations such as the Sisters Foundation in Pattaya (Ellis, 2018) and the Isaan Queer Theater Project (Zhang, 2014)—demonstrate efforts to reclaim control over gender representation and challenge the reduction of gender diversity to tourist entertainment. These efforts suggest possibilities for what José Muñoz terms "disidentification": strategies that neither assimilate to nor strictly oppose dominant cultural forms, but instead work to transform them from within (Sisters Foundation Thailand, 2024).

4.3 Domestic Work and Transnational Affective Chains

Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers represent a crucial case for understanding how affective labor operates across national boundaries through what Arlie Hochschild terms "global care chains"—transnational networks of care that transfer affective labor from poorer to wealthier regions. Contemporary analyses reveal that these arrangements exceed simple care transfer, creating complex systems of affective commodification.

The phenomenon of transnational domestic work has expanded dramatically under neoliberal globalization, as wealthy countries seek to resolve care crises resulting from women's increased participation in formal labor markets without providing adequate public support for social reproduction. This dynamic generates a demand for migrant domestic workers who supply

care services at lower costs than local workers, often while bearing the social and emotional costs of family separation.

As documented by Alcantara (2023), Dewi (2023), and Hird (2019), domestic workers must navigate multiple forms of affective performance simultaneously. They are expected to provide emotional care and intimacy to employer families while maintaining long-distance relationships with their own children and relatives. These workers must appear grateful and devoted to employers while managing homesickness, exploitation, and cultural isolation. They must demonstrate competence and reliability while accepting conditions that would be unacceptable for local workers.

The emotional costs of this division are severe and well documented in research on transnational families. Workers often feel constantly torn between obligations to employer families and their own children, experiencing guilt over being absent from their children's lives while being expected to provide devoted care to employers. This emotional conflict is intensified by cultural norms positioning women as primarily responsible for family care.

This gives rise to what may be termed "affective splitting"—the requirement to distribute emotional and caring capacities across multiple relationships that make competing and often contradictory demands. Unlike traditional alienation, where workers are separated from the products of their labor, domestic workers become hyperconnected to multiple affective economies, each demanding continuous emotional availability and responsiveness.

The gendered and racialized dimensions of this exploitation are central (The Isaan Record, 2020). Domestic workers' affective labor is valued precisely because of stereotypes about Asian women's "natural" caring abilities, submissiveness, and devotion to family. These cultural representations naturalize exploitative working conditions while framing workers' resistance or demands for better treatment as violations of cultural authenticity.

Employers often express surprise when workers assert their rights

or request improved treatment, interpreting such actions as ungratefulness rather than legitimate grievance. Migrant status exacerbates vulnerability by denying workers access to legal protections and making them dependent on employer sponsorship for legal residence (Hird, 2024).

The broader social costs of affective commodification are evident in the families of workers themselves. The children of migrant domestic workers often experience what Rhacel Parreñas terms "care deficits"—emotional and practical neglect resulting from their mothers' affective labor being directed toward other families. This produces intergenerational cycles of affective displacement that reproduce the conditions for future labor migration.

4.4 Manufacturing Affective Masculinities in Chinese Media

The Chinese media industry's production of masculine celebrities—from athlete Liu Xiang's "hyper-masculinity" to the "little fresh meat" idols' "soft masculinity"—demonstrates how gender is commodified through affective labor. As analyzed by Zhang (2014) and Hird (2019, 2024), these phenomena reflect broader transformations in how masculinity is packaged for different market segments (Alcantara, 2023).

The construction of Liu Xiang as a national hero exemplifies how affective labor operates at the intersection of market demands and state ideology. His success as a hurdler enabled narratives about Chinese development and global competitiveness, serving both commercial and political purposes. This national hero status required intensive affective labor: Liu had to embody resilience, determination, and national pride in ways that could be commodified for mass consumption (Dewi, 2023).

Liu's emotional expressions became commodified as symbols of national progress, transforming personal experiences of athletic success and failure into products for both mass audiences and state propaganda. Maintaining this persona required consistent management of his public image—projecting strength, dedication, and patriotism while navigating the

pressures of competition, media scrutiny, and political expectations.

The affective labor involved extended far beyond athletic performance to include media appearances, endorsements, and public events where Liu was expected to embody particular emotional qualities and cultural values. This work can be described as "patriotic affect," wherein personal emotions become vehicles for expressing national identity while simultaneously serving commercial interests.

By contrast, the "little fresh meat" phenomenon represents a form of masculine commodification that caters to the rise of women's economic power in China. These idols must project an approachable, emotionally available masculinity that appeals to female consumers, while retaining enough traditional masculinity to avoid complete gender transgression. Their affective labor involves sustained emotional availability to fans through social media, fan meetings, and parasocial interactions that simulate intimacy while preserving commercial boundaries.

The success of "little fresh meat" idols depends on their ability to perform what might be called "accessible masculinity"—appearing gentle, caring, and emotionally sensitive, yet still sufficiently masculine to appeal to diverse audience segments. This requires constant negotiation between sometimes contradictory expectations regarding masculinity and cultural representation (Mohanty, 1988).

Live-streaming personalities like Li Jiaqi exemplify the extreme commodification of affect, where personal life, consumer advice, and product promotion blur together (International Labour Organization, 2024). These performers must maintain ongoing emotional engagement with audiences, transforming everyday activities into content that drives consumption and platform revenue.

The affective labor of live-streamers involves fostering intimate connections with audiences through daily interactions, while managing the emotional toll of continuous performance and public scrutiny. Successful

live-streamers cultivate what researchers term "mediated intimacy": audiences feel authentically connected to personalities who must reciprocate those feelings while upholding professional boundaries.

An intersectional analysis reveals how these various forms of masculine commodification respond to shifting gender relations under neoliberal development (Spivak, 1988). As women gain economic power, masculine performances must adapt to new market demands and navigate anxieties around traditional gender hierarchies. This process creates what Connell terms "hybrid masculinities"—performances that incorporate feminine-coded traits while maintaining male privilege and market value.

4.5 Industrial Affect and Service Labor

Cambodian garment workers, as documented by Weimann-Sandig (2021), illustrate how affective labor operates even within ostensibly "traditional" manufacturing contexts. The global garment industry's reliance on young women workers involves not only physical labor but also intensive emotional labor—to maintain productivity under difficult conditions, manage workplace conflicts, and sustain morale despite low wages and job insecurity.

This case challenges the common assumption that affective labor is confined to the service sector. Garment work requires ongoing emotional regulation to meet production quotas, uphold quality standards, and navigate hierarchical workplace relationships. Workers must suppress frustration, anxiety, and physical discomfort while demonstrating enthusiasm and reliability to supervisors.

The factory's social organization depends heavily on workers' peer support networks, conflict resolution skills, and collective emotional management. These capacities are essential to production efficiency but remain uncompensated and largely invisible to management. Workers effectively subsidize production costs through their unpaid emotional labor, bearing responsibility for workplace harmony and productivity.

Similarly, Vietnamese sex workers, as analyzed by Zhou et al. (2024) and Pham and Ho (2024), navigate complex forms of affective commodification that far exceed simple sexual service provision (Firestone, 1970). Contemporary sex work increasingly involves the production of intimacy, emotional connection, and romantic fantasy—requiring sophisticated affective labor skills. Sex workers must manage the emotional boundaries between commercial and personal relationships, providing clients with experiences of authentic connection and desire. This requires what Elizabeth Bernstein terms "bounded authenticity"—the creation of genuine emotional experiences within clearly defined commercial contexts.

The digitalization of sex work through online platforms intensifies these affective demands, requiring ongoing self-promotion, customer relationship management, and personal branding across social media. Workers must maintain emotional availability to multiple clients while protecting their privacy and managing the emotional costs of commodified intimacy.

5. Feminist Perspectives and Resistance in Affective Labor

5.1 Intersectional Analysis of Affective Exploitation

Feminist theory provides essential frameworks for understanding how affective commodification operates through intersecting systems of gender, race, class, and nationality. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality demonstrates how multiple social identities create unique experiences of oppression that cannot be captured through single-category analysis (Daly, 1978).

In the context of affective labor, an intersectional lens reveals that different groups face particular vulnerabilities to exploitation based on their social positioning. For example, Filipina domestic workers encounter racialized assumptions about Asian women's supposed nurturing abilities, gendered expectations of emotional availability, and class-based positioning as expendable migrant labor. These intersecting identities generate specific forms of affective

exploitation distinct from those encountered by other groups.

Patricia Hill Collins' concept of "controlling images" further explains how cultural representations facilitate affective exploitation (Dworkin, 1981). Stereotypes such as Thai transgender women depicted as exotic performers, Chinese men rendered as either hyper-masculine heroes or soft consumer objects, and Indonesian women portrayed as devoted domestic workers all construct cultural frameworks that naturalize—and legitimize—specific forms of affective commodification. Such images also make resistance appear as a violation of so-called authentic cultural identity.

The intersectional approach further shows how seemingly similar neoliberal policies produce different impacts across social groups. Tourism development in Thailand may create opportunities for certain gendered performances while marginalizing others. Likewise, Chinese economic expansion generates new markets for particular masculinities while disrupting traditional gender arrangements (Collins, 2000). These differential effects demand analytical frameworks attuned to how power operates uniquely across intersecting social positions.

5.2 Resistance Strategies and Collective Action

Despite conditions of intensive exploitation, affective laborers develop diverse resistance strategies that challenge commodification while generating alternative forms of value and recognition. Often, these strategies operate through what James Scott terms "hidden transcripts"—practices of resistance that avoid direct confrontation yet subtly undermine systems of domination.

The concept of hidden transcripts is especially relevant for affective laborers, whose work typically requires appearing compliant and grateful, even as they manage their own emotional needs and seek to maintain dignity within exploitative relationships. Domestic workers, for example, may deploy subtle forms of resistance to exert control over their working conditions while

avoiding direct confrontation that could result in termination or deportation. Community organizing among domestic workers demonstrates how collective action can counteract individual isolation by fostering networks of mutual support and advocacy. Organizations such as the United Workers' Association in Hong Kong and Migrant Forum in Asia develop strategies addressing both immediate workplace issues and broader structural inequalities facing migrant labor. They offer practical support—including legal assistance, emergency shelter, and job placement—while building collective power through advocacy campaigns.

Effective organizing among affective laborers requires addressing both survival needs and longer-term structural change, cultivating forms of community that exceed mere market relationships or employment-based identities. The success of these organizations depends on nurturing spaces in which workers can share experiences, build collective analysis, and develop solidarity across differences of nationality, language, and employment situation.

Cultural resistance strategies involve what José Muñoz describes as "disidentification"—performances that neither fully accept nor outright reject dominant cultural categories but instead transform them through creative appropriation and subversion. Kathoey theater groups, for example, create performances that acknowledge tourist demands while asserting complex gender identities that surpass simplistic commercial stereotypes.

Such cultural practices show that resistance can operate through creative, expressive acts that advance alternative narratives and representations, while also providing space for community building and new collective identities. Cultural resistance is particularly significant for affective laborers whose work often requires performing identity categories misaligned with their authentic experiences or community affiliations.

Digital platforms have opened new avenues for resistance, enabling workers to build direct relationships with clients or audiences, bypass exploitative intermediaries, and maintain greater influence over working conditions and

emotional boundaries. Sex workers, for example, use social media and streaming platforms to control pricing, establish emotional boundaries, and build communities of mutual support and advocacy.

Live streamers develop fandoms that provide both financial support and emotional recognition outside traditional employment relationships, fostering alternative modes of cultural production that challenge mainstream media industries. These digital practices demonstrate how technology can facilitate economic arrangements that prioritize worker autonomy and community over profit maximization and corporate control.

However, such resistance strategies face significant limitations under neoliberalism, which tends to absorb oppositional practices into market relations while preserving underlying structures of exploitation and inequality. The turn toward individual entrepreneurship can reinforce competitive relationships among workers and fail to address the structural roots of their vulnerability. Furthermore, digital platforms may offer greater autonomy but can also expose workers to new forms of surveillance, algorithmic management, and precarity that may be even more invasive than traditional workplace monitoring.

These limitations underscore the necessity of collective action and structural change in addressing the root causes of affective exploitation. While individual strategies can offer immediate relief and help sustain dignity within exploitative contexts, longer-term transformation requires organized efforts to challenge the political and economic structures that drive demand for affective labor while denying workers vital resources and protections.

5.3 Policy Advocacy and Legislative Change

Feminist advocacy has achieved significant policy changes that recognize and protect some forms of affective labor. The Thai government's updated ministerial regulation (No. 14), which increases protection for domestic workers, exemplifies how sustained efforts can lead to legislative recognition

of previously invisible labor (Crenshaw, 1989).

This regulation provides minimum wage protections, limits on working hours, requirements for written contracts, and protections against physical and sexual abuse—substantial improvements over previous conditions in which domestic workers had no legal rights. It also mandates regular health checkups and access to communication with family members, acknowledging some of the emotional and social needs of domestic workers.

Nevertheless, these policy achievements are constrained by neoliberal frameworks that emphasize individual rights and market-based solutions without addressing the structural forces that create vulnerability to exploitation. Labor protections focused on hours, wages, and safety may overlook the emotional and affective dimensions central to contemporary service work, while preserving the underlying economic relations that generate demand for exploitable labor.

The enforcement of domestic worker protections is also complicated by the private nature of household employment and the precarious status of migrant workers, who may fear deportation or dismissal if they report violations. This underscores that legal protections alone are insufficient without broader social and economic changes that address the structural inequalities shaping exploitative working conditions.

Feminist advocates increasingly call for approaches that both recognize the value of affective labor and challenge its commodification. This includes policies providing social support for care work, regulating emotional demands in service industries, and fostering economic arrangements that value human relationships above market efficiency.

The concept of "care ethics" offers a framework for envisioning alternative economic models that prioritize human flourishing over profit maximization. Developed by feminist philosophers such as Nel Noddings and Joan Tronto, care ethics emphasizes the moral centrality of caring relationships and the collective responsibility to sustain the conditions necessary for care

to thrive. When applied to economic policy, care ethics would prioritize social reproduction and create arrangements that support caring relationships and community development, rather than merely extracting value from them.

Potential policies inspired by care ethics might include a universal basic income to recognize unpaid care work, the public provision of care services to ease burdens on individual families, cooperative ownership models prioritizing worker welfare, and regulations limiting the commodification of intimate and emotional labor.

A care ethics policy approach would also stress democratic participation in shaping economic and social priorities, recognizing that those performing care work are best positioned to articulate its requirements and challenges. This necessitates institutional mechanisms centering care workers' voices and experiences in policy development, and challenging the ongoing marginalization of their knowledge and expertise.

However, realizing care ethics in policy requires more than legal reform; it demands broader social and political change that challenges the power of capital and builds democratic institutions prioritizing social welfare over private profit. This calls for organized political movements that can build coalitions across different groups, while remaining focused on structural transformation—rather than solely improving conditions within existing exploitative arrangements.

6. Conclusion: Toward Affective Justice

This analysis demonstrates that emotional and affective labor under neoliberalism operates through mechanisms that surpass traditional frameworks of alienation and exploitation. Rather than being simply separated from the products or processes of labor, affective commodification entails the production of subjectivities, social relations, and forms of life that become directly productive for capital. These dynamics create new modes of self-exploitation

and collective vulnerability.

The case studies across Asia reveal how neoliberal development policies systematically foster conditions for affective commodification, naturalizing these arrangements through cultural representations of gender, race, and nationality. Displaced housewives required to rebuild community networks without resources, and domestic workers providing emotional care across borders, illustrate how affective labor is rendered essential to economic functioning while remaining largely invisible and undercompensated.

The theoretical implications extend beyond labor studies to challenge conventional understandings of power, subjectivity, and resistance in contemporary capitalism. The productive dimensions of affective labor mean workers are not simply exploited—they also become active participants in constructing the terms of their own exploitation, investing emotional skills, social networks, and personal branding in the service of market demands.

Thus, analytical frameworks must move beyond traditional Marxist conceptions of alienation to integrate theories of affective capture, subjectification, and governmental power—mechanisms that operate through freedom rather than overt domination. The incorporation of feminist intersectional analysis is essential for understanding how these processes are differentiated across social positions, generating both distinct vulnerabilities and openings for resistance.

The resistance strategies documented here point to emergent possibilities for what might be called "affective justice": modes of economic and social organization that value emotional and relational capacities without reducing them to market commodities. Such strategies encompass collective organizing that addresses individual isolation, cultural practices that assert complex identities beyond commodified categories, and policy advocacy that recognizes the value of affective labor while restraining its commodification. However, realizing affective justice requires more than individual acts of resistance or policy reform. It necessitates fundamental challenges to neoliberal

rationalities, which reduce human relationships to market transactions and foster precarity by compelling individuals to commodify their most intimate capacities for survival.

Further research should continue developing theoretical frameworks responsive to emerging forms of affective exploitation, and document resistance strategies that illuminate alternative economic arrangements. Comparative regional analysis can elucidate how global processes of affective commodification intersect with local cultural and political conditions, giving rise to both vulnerabilities and avenues for transformation.

Notably, the impacts of digital technologies on affective labor deserve sustained attention. Platform capitalism and algorithmic surveillance create novel forms of commodification, while the rise of artificial intelligence and automated emotional recognition systems introduces pressing questions about the future of human affective labor and the need for new modes of protection and resistance.

Likewise, research linking affective labor to environmental dynamics is critical. Ecological crises—including climate change—generate new forms of displacement and community fragmentation, intensifying the burden on women's unpaid care work. Understanding the intersection of emotional and environmental exploitation is pivotal for integrated approaches to social and ecological justice.

The urgency of this work reflects the escalating intensity of affective exploitation amid digital capitalism, platform economies, and ongoing neoliberal development across the Global South. As emotional and relational capacities become increasingly central to economic production, the pursuit of affective justice emerges as fundamental to broader projects of social transformation and human liberation.

Ultimately, this analysis calls for approaches to development and economic policy that privilege human flourishing over market efficiency and recognize the essential contribution of emotional and affective labor to

social reproduction. Such transformation requires not only improved working conditions and labor protections, but also alternatives to economic systems that treat human relationships as mere resources for profit rather than as the foundation of collective well-being.

The resistance and organizing explored throughout this article demonstrate that such alternatives are not utopian aspirations, but emerging realities shaped by the collective action of those whose affective labor sustains contemporary economies. Supporting and expanding these efforts is both an analytical task and a political imperative for scholars, activists, and policymakers committed to social justice and human dignity.

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