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Body politics and the spirit of affective performance: The case of female flight attendants

Arratee Ayuttacorn

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1. Introduction¹

This paper grew out of a study that aims to show that a particular form of affect² is instrumental in producing a set of human characteristics, which form a personality that is assumed to be crucial for a certain kind of cultural labor in support of the global economy. In particular, I will look at the work of female flight attendants in Thailand from the perspective of affective labor³. With the ever increasing importance of affective communication in the globalized world, female flight attendants are more than ever economic tools that create values for the airline industry. In Thailand, these values cater, despite all efforts to raise awareness for women's rights and gender equality, to traditional male chauvinistic expectations.

Although quite a few researchers have dealt with affective labor in general, not much attention has been paid to the aspect of affect in relation to political and economic transformations. Early research work focused on service employees who display a cheerful disposition as part of their working role (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). These pioneering studies of emotional labor examine the role of flight attendants (Hochschild, 1983), employees at the Walt Disney company (Maanen and Kunda, 1989) and clerks at convenience stores (Sutton and Rafaeli, 1988). Other research works look at the role of physicians, who are expected to display "affective neutrality" (Smith and Kleinman, 1989), and of bill collectors, who are supposed to display negative emotions (Hochschild, 1983; Sutton, 1991). These studies analyze the causes and consequences of emotions that are expressed in order to fulfill an occupational role. The empirical part of the studies are supplemented by more theoretical frameworks needed to conceptualize the affects with regard to the human body, technology and globalization (Clough, 2007; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). Recent studies tend to shift their focus on the role of affects in relation to the state, the economy and society (Carnera, 2012; Muehlebach, 2011; Richard and Rudnycky, 2009).

Despite the increasing number of studies being carried out on affective labor, little has been written on flight attendants after Hochschild's pioneering study from 1983. This is remarkable given the central role flight attendants play in the new global economy⁴. They have a central position in airline companies, because all efforts to create and manipulate affects are directed at them as icons of emotional images. Previous studies on flight attendants' lives have instead focused on cost minimization and the flexibility of the labor process (Shalla, 2004; Spiess and Waring 2005), the geographies of mobility and placelessness, including the exercise of control over female flight attendants' bodies (Whitelegg, 2005; 2007), experiences of sexual harassment (Chudapanee, 2005; Pavanee, 2007; Williams, 2003), collective movement and the history of flight attendants (Barry, 2007; Whitelegg, 2003), as well as the politics of place and space in relation to air travel (Murphy, 2002). These studies looked at the labor process, collective identity and organizational culture within a modern industrial society. Few studies have focused on the production of subjectivity through the affective performance of flight attendants in the post-modern era.

In an attempt to close this gap, my research aims at contributing to the theoretical understanding of the role affect plays in the linking of social and economic structures within the context of globalization. I will examine how female flight attendants produce and reproduce a particular form of affect in order

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² The word affect is used in terms of its dynamic and reflexive quality; the ability of actions to affect others and oneself. Affect is a conceptually richer term than emotion. Emotion cannot illuminate the reflexive and reciprocal relationship between subjective experiences and social order, while affect suggests relations are practiced between individuals rather than by individuals (Richard and Rudnycky, 2009: 61).

³ Affective labor is a subset of immaterial labor that produces and manipulates affects such as feelings of ease, satisfaction or excitement or passion (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 108).

⁴ Economic interaction of new global economy relates with communicative action based on human relations, affective production and manipulation.

to create social and economic value for the benefit of the airline industry. In particular, I attempt to explore how certain forms of affect are formed and communicated under multiple forms of power, and how flight attendants construct subjectivity to negotiate with these dominant powers. I hope my research will enlarge the existing body of knowledge regarding the impact of capitalism and globalization on women's lives, and also the negotiations and relocation of power imposed on women's bodies. Ideally, this knowledge will further improve our understanding of the exploitation of women's bodies in other work environments, namely in bars, dance clubs and movies.

This research paper contains of three sections. First, I explain how I gathered my data using an auto-ethnographical approach. Furthermore, I will explain and describe my methodological approach of body narrative analysis which I apply in order to understand how flight attendants construct their identities and subjectivity.

In the second part, I will use Foucault's ideas of "disciplined body" and "bio-power" to explain how female flight attendants try to maintain their beautiful appearances in order to satisfy both the organizations' and customers' expectations. In this section, I will describe the various ways of self-discipline that have developed in relation to flight attendants' bodies, their uniforms and the rhetoric they use. Moreover, the concept of bio-power will be employed to understand the subjugation of female flights attendants' bodies within the capitalist context.

Finally, I will attempt to demonstrate how flight attendants create new forms of identity through their performances and everyday practices, as a response to and a result of negotiations with multiple forms of power. Flight attendants employ gossip and rumor to produce active subjectivities, and in addition, create socio-economic value through their affective performances; a form of affect formed and mutually communicated within society that binds flight attendants together as a collective.

2. Reflexive auto-ethnography and body narrative analysis

I will employ auto-ethnography as one element of my methodological approach, as it situates the author's own life experiences within a social and cultural context. Auto-ethnography is a blend of autobiography and ethnography; and refers to anthropologists doing ethnography within their own society (Reed-Danahay, 2009). Since I worked as a flight attendant for twenty years, my experience offers an insider's perspective and a subjective point of view. This is an important resource in my effort to deal with the issue of insider views versus outsider perspectives.

For this paper, the data is drawn from my memoir, from in-depth interviews and from participant observation. I interviewed eight female flight attendants, one of whom was already retired. The purpose of an in-depth interview is to investigate informants' stories and see how they construct past events and actions in their narratives, and how they claim their identities. Analysis in narrative studies is meant to explore the different ways in which experience can be conveyed, not only referring to the linguistic construction of these experiences, but also to the motives and ways of telling the story. I will pay special attention to the observation that by retelling everyday life experiences in a gradually changing manner the narrators succeed in constructing a different and more fulfilling narrative (Riessman, 1993: 2).

For my research, I joined the flight attendants' duties in some short- and long-haul flights which allowed me to observe the cabin crew's activities and their performances on and off duty. I had the chance to take note of their actions and solutions when faced with problems such as unruly passengers. Thus, I was able to gain insight into the social relations among members of the cabin crew, between them and in-flight managers, the flight crew and passengers. I also participated in activities of the flight attendants beyond the working context, such as eating, shopping and traveling. This gave me the opportunity to interview them and observe their interactions with other people in different time and space settings.

In this research paper, I will explore the lived body and subjective experiences of female flight attendants. I will attempt to understand the multiple ways in which these women experience their bodies, and

explain how their identities and selves are shaped by various forms of power over time. Miller and Penz (1991) pointed out that “the body, despite its apparent immediacy, is never knowable in direct and unmediated ways, instead we know it through its discourses” (Miller and Penz, 1991: 148 – cited in Sparkes, 1999). I will, therefore, focus my analysis on the body narratives I witnessed and the stories I heard. These narratives impose order on experiences and create sense of events and actions in people’s lives. Individuals tend to construct past events and actions on the basis of such personal narratives; thus engaging in a dynamic process of claiming identities, shaping selves and constructing lives (Sparkes, 1999: 18).

3. Disciplined body under multiple forms of power

Market liberalization, privatization of state-owned airlines as well as the various influences of globalization, have pushed the global airline industry into a fierce and intensifying competition. Many airlines have restructured their organizations. Some have attempted to reduce the power of the airline unions and have “economized” the labor process by reducing the number of cabin staff.

However, the service image portrayed by the airline industry still relies significantly on affective labor. Its sexualized overtones refer to a reactionary male perception of the role of women and disregard completely the achievements of women’s liberation and the discourse of gender equality. The female flight attendants’ physical dispositions are a product of a corporate identity that maintains the role of female submission. Under these conditions, selection and training processes have transformed the female flight attendants’ work into “aesthetic labor”⁵ (Spiess and Waring, 2005). Female flight attendants’ bodies have been fetishized⁶ and sexualized through advertizing (Whitelegg, 2007), thus treating female sexual identity as a commodity or resource to be exploited.

Apart from that, female flight attendants are also assigned the role of representing cultural identity as deemed appropriate by an official nationalistic discourse. A Thai National Airlines’ female flight attendant for instance demonstrates ‘Thainess’, through the use of Thai costumes and the use of Thai gestures such as the *wai* (traditional Thai greeting in which both hands are held together just below the face and accompanied by a slight bow) and the ‘*Siamese-smile*’. In this regard, the flight attendants’ bodies are turned into symbols in accordance with the demands of the modern nation-state.

I will attempt to explain how flight attendants’ bodies are shaped by rules and regulations as described by Foucault (1991). Acts of discipline are, by way of physical action, inflicted upon the individual as an affective being in order to control his or her unruly passions. Flight attendants’ bodies are disciplined by company rules and regulations⁷. The uniforms and the scripts⁸ they follow shape their identity and behavior to match their companies’ and customers’ expectations. A style is created to heighten their feminine allure, from the neatness of their hairstyle, to the color of the cosmetics and accessories they wear, and even to their body weight and their performances in the cabin. The cabin crew’s behavior is shaped by the training schools they attend and the organizational cultures they enter. Furthermore, they have to exude charm and conceal their emotions and fatigue. They cannot go on a bus, go

⁵Aesthetic labor refers to the mobilization, development and commodification of embodied disposition. This deployment of employee’s physical characteristics occurs through corporate production, and control of the selection and training processes, and is designed to transform employees into an embodiment of the organizational aesthetic (Spiess and Waring, 2005: 198).

⁶ Marx analyses the commodity as both thing and social relation. Partially because of their own alienation, workers attribute social characteristics to commodities, hence the fetishization of the commodity. It is not enough to realize that the appearance of social products is symbolic of social relations. The social relations signified are not transparent, they are symbolized in things, are themselves distorted, and social constructs, defined by categories of thought that are the product of society and history (Taussig, 1980: 9).

⁷ The National Airline has been privatized since 1991 but the government sectors are still main shareholders for more than 70%; the airline is not really privatized. Thus, the regulations sometimes are influenced by the state. For instance, Thai uniforms for female flight attendants could not be abolished because they represent the National Airline and the Thai nation.

⁸ ‘Script’ refers to the company rules and regulations including organizational culture.

shopping or eat street food when they wear their uniforms traveling to and from work, in order to preserve the image their employers have created.

Despite these limitations, most female flight attendants agree to follow their company's rules regarding the uniform and accept that these rules are necessary in order to control their and other employees' behaviors. One flight attendant, Mod, told me *"It is a trivial matter, I don't want to create problems. I just manage my feelings and follow the rules. It would be stupid to fight with the company. If I want to wear other clothes, I do it outside the workplace"*⁹.

Many flight attendants feel confident and attractive in the uniform, as it ascribes importance as a representative of national identity and portrays a professional image. Apart from that, the airline uniform indicates an internationally recognized status with a connotation of a luxury and prestigious lifestyle. This effect of the uniform was expressed to me by Chompoo, who noted:

I feel calm and well-behaved in the uniform; my personality totally changes and I display a different character to the one I normally have. My clothes, my face and my hair need to be neat and tidy; to represent the company's image.¹⁰

Another case is Manee, who loves to wear the Thai costume because of its beauty. She said:

Passengers admire me when I wear Thai dress. I have viewed this uniform as the symbol of the airline since I was young. The Thai costume shows I am a representative of the national airline, as well as of the Thai nation"¹¹.

The body discipline imposed on flight attendants was admitted by Nam, who said:

Our behavior is shaped by the culture of the organization; we follow the same rules and perform the same roles, we all think in the same way. For our airline, 'rabob ar-wu-so'¹² (seniority system), Thai 'wai' and 'rabob aup-patham'¹³ play a vital role in Thai society. We are Thai; therefore, we follow the rules.¹⁴

Even though many acts of discipline regulate the flight attendants' bodies, namely the uniform and the scripts, the company rules cannot always regulate or control the employees' health, appearance and attitude in every respect. Then, the "societies of control" (Deleuze, 1992) are coming in to compensate for the failures of disciplinary societies. In 'societies of control', corporations have replaced factories and operate through challenges, contests and motivational forces (Ibid.,: 4-5). These new forms of discipline exercise power within people's bodies, molding the individuality of each member and at the same time controlling the work-space in order to modulate behavior more thoroughly.

A society of control's exertion of influence over individuals is achieved by using consciousness or ideology (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 27). Power is exercised through machines that directly organize individual brains and bodies. In contrast to the control by disciplinary societies, this form of control extends well beyond the structured sites of social institutions, thereby relying on flexible and fluctuating networks. Bio-power is one these forms of power that regulates people's social lives from within. In a disciplinary society, the relationship between power and the individual remains static; the intensity of the discipline corresponds with the resistance of the individual. Bio-Power, in contrast, comprises the whole social body and develops by ways of imagination and manipulating consciousness. Power over these processes manifests itself as a virtual control mechanism appropriating consciousness and thus forming the bodies of a population (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 23-24).

⁹ Interview with Mod (45 years-old) - flight attendant, on 18 September 2012; All interviews were conducted in Thai and translated by the author.

¹⁰ Interview with Chompoo (45 years-old) - flight attendant, on 18 September 2012.

¹¹ Interview with Manee (32 years-old) - flight attendant, on 7 December 2012.

¹² 'rabob ar-wu-so' in this context, means that junior flight attendants should pay respect to senior ones and the bosses namely the air purser, inflight manager and supervisor. Furthermore they have to honor the captain and pilot.

¹³ "rabob aup-patham" means patron-client system.

¹⁴ Interview with Nam (46 years-old) - former flight attendant, on 12 December 2012.

Flight attendants try to stay healthy and maintain slim bodies through physical exercise, which they usually undertake in fitness centers. They control their diets; take various drugs or herbs to lose weight, while some of them even undergo cosmetic surgery. Since airlines employ a spatial movement strategy to control the body of the cabin crew members, their income depends on their submission to this regulation. The airlines regulate flight attendants' weight and appearance through scheduling; 'overweight'¹⁵ flight attendants can only fly on domestic and regional routes that generate less income, or they may even be suspended from the duty. Flight attendants therefore voluntarily subjugate to the 'perfect body', in order to protect their 'perfect schedule' and maintain the highest possible income.

After having a child, Chompoo engaged in carboxy-therapy in order to destroy the fat deposit around her stomach acquired during pregnancy. Concerning this, she told me:

The treatment lasted a week and was much more painful than giving birth. It was costly but worth it, because I could immediately wear the uniform and go back to work. There is also another treatment that claims to reduce your weight by 20 kilos in a month; however, it is extremely expensive. Some flight attendants are willing to pay this kind of fee though.

Mod told me she keeps in shape by going to yoga classes, by eating healthy and taking vitamins. She said:

I like fruit and vegetables and spend a lot of time exercising. During the yoga class, I could not eat anything; it extends the time of diet. Otherwise, I would have more free time to eat. I've never taken drugs or undergone surgery to lose weight, but I underwent eyelid surgery to reduce the aging line around my eyes. It only took an hour and there was no pain at all.

For intercontinental routes, the airline needs strong and healthy aircrews, as they must be able to tolerate the fatigue and long hours of work. Flight attendants know that staying healthy is crucial to keeping the job. In my case, even though I had been exercising all my working life, it was very difficult for me to maintain a healthy body. I had many health problems to overcome, such as allergies, dry eyes, knee pain and pre-menopause symptoms. However, I had recovered from these afflictions two years after leaving the job and I still exercise on a regular basis.

While their bodies are determined by company rules and regulations, flight attendants can, at the same time, accumulate and apply acquired cultural capital in order to maintain their position in the social order, and particularly in Thai society. Cultural capital is acquired, enhanced and stabilized in the process of socialization and education (Bourdieu, 1986 – cited in Swartz, 1997). Carriers have established their own criteria for recruiting and training personnel and thereby counterbalancing any possible lack of cultural capital. I myself was trained on a basic course for two months, but this was not long enough for me to work efficiently. I then had to gain further experience from my senior colleagues for a year. Moreover, I had to adapt myself to meet the requirements of the new environment I had entered. This changed the way I talked, acted and dressed.

In this regard, Chompoo told me she had to learn about food etiquette and table manners from this job:

I had just graduated from university in a southern province, and I was not confident when talking to my classmates on the training course; I felt embarrassed when I appeared in a public space. I was even too shy to make eye contact with other people. I was very stressed on the first day of the training class; I had to improve my dress sense and my use of make-up. Now, I am well behaved and have an appropriate personality. I know how to dress properly and how to socialize with strangers.

Working as a flight attendant for a number of years, I learned how to approach, talk and deal with people. I got interested in food and drinks, especially in wine, and I used this knowledge as cultural capital. I could introduce a variety of wines to passengers professionally and gained knowledge about

¹⁵ Airlines monitor flight attendants' weight by using the "Body mass index" (BMI) that calculates proportion between height and weight. This index requires that female flight attendants should have a BMI less than 25, while males should have a BMI less than 27.5. Flight attendants who have exceeded these criteria should strive to reduce their BMI by consulting with their doctors or other specialized health care institutions.

the wine culture in general. I tried first class food that I had never eaten before, like caviar, lobster, rack of lamb, different kinds of cheese and hors d'oeuvres. These fine foods gave me a taste of western peoples' and upper class consumers' preferences.

The extent to which flight attendants' behaviors are shaped by the company rules and regulations is also evident in Ying's statement that she has learned to be punctual due to her job and has taught her son to always be on time¹⁶. Another case is Manee who told me that her thought processes have changed since she became a flight attendant; she now thinks in a more systematic way, plans ahead and gets things done beforehand.

4. Body politics as a tool to negotiate power

Body politics are the obvious consequence of the political interpretation of symbols and practices surrounding the human body (Ong and Peletz, 1995: 6). According to Foucault, political power is mapped onto the body in diverse ways. Society endows the body with symbols and inscriptions of power that are mutually dependent and intertwined with each other. The body thus is a historically and culturally determined space where shifting power relations converge. They inscribe the body with different meanings that function as means of social control and source of resistance (Foucault, 1990).

For my study I borrow the notion of the body politics from Harvey (2000), who pointed out that the body reflects both an internal transformative dynamic and the effects of external processes. The body is not a closed and sealed entity, but relates to multiple processes that produce, sustain, determine or dissolve semiotic values of the body. Persons aware of such semiotic capacities will be able to deploy their bodies in body politics (Ibid.: 99). Notions of individuality, personality, the self and identity thus acquire a political dimension.

The cited statements of flight attendants may have given the impression that power is either externalized or internalized to produce docile bodies of social control. Still, referring to Harvey, I argue that women are not necessarily passive victims of capitalist discipline, but can very well actively negotiate and contest the social and cultural processes that are mapped on their bodies by actively deploying their bodies. The body will then shift from being the object of dominant power to the agent of resistance – as will be explored in the following section.

4.1 Negotiation with everyday life practice

Following Pile and Keith's theory in *Geography of Resistance* (1997), I argue that women's resistance is not carried out in a confrontational manner, but "[...] moves [...] under the noses of the enemy, seeking to create new meaning out of imposed meanings, to re-work and divert space to other ends" (Pile, 1997: 16). We thus find a *dis-located* interaction between the space of domination and the space of resistance, which is not defined by the category of power but by the category of emotion, comprising desire, anger, happiness or fear, or by the category of professional performance such as ability and capacity (Ibid.: 3).

I also apply de Certeau's everyday life practice approach to explain the negotiation tactics used by the flight attendants. A tactic of resistance based on de Certeau's everyday life practice approach inserts itself into the disciplinary discourse imposed by the dominant power, without taking it over. This tactic watches for an opportunity to deploy its inherent mobility. Spaces of domination and resistance thus become interchangeable and reversible. For de Certeau, resistance should not be thought of as a face-to-face opposition between the powerful and the weak, but rather as an opaque and hidden space that is saturated with memories and echoes and the sounds of pleasure and enjoyment (Pile and Keith,

¹⁶ Interview with Ying (45 years-old) - flight attendant, on 13 December 2012.

1997). Many everyday practices, such as talking, reading, shopping and cooking may acquire a tactical character and develop into clever tricks, into the art of the weak to prevail against the strong (de Certeau, 1984).

Flight attendants employ gossip and rumor to produce particular knowledge and subjectivities. Rumor is an important political instrument which can be used in order to undermine an opposing group (Scott, 1985: 282), and it provides flight attendants with the opportunity to express themselves anonymously. One of my informants admitted that the flight attendants gossip a lot within their work environment. Gossip is a key part of their lives and is considered a social norm. Manee¹⁷ said:

Gossip is not good, but somehow it's good in the way that it helps me to get to know people, so I can interact with them. Gossip is based on true stories; I need to know the bosses and be aware not to do something that displeases them. Sometimes when we gossip, it is difficult to differentiate what is true from what is not. Gossip often judges people without evidence. Moreover, personal stories are mingled into our gossip; for instance, an attendant may have done something immoral, and when we talk about it, we may not like her. However, if she is good at her job, we should ignore this to an extent and just focus on her work.

One senior flight attendant, called Suntharee¹⁸, told me another story concerning a supervisor who tried to enforce company rules regarding appearance:

He enforced an outmoded rule and focused on checking our appearance all the time; employing excessively penalties for those who made a slight mistake. Gossip about his aggressive behavior spread throughout the department, and in the end the story was posted on Facebook. Eventually, the flight attendants formed an opposition group and protested at his behavior. Now this supervisor has relaxed his behavior.

According to the informants I spoke to, an item of gossip once spread throughout their work environment about an intimate relationship, emanating from a conflict between a flight attendant and a purser regarding an emergency process issue. The air purser had seen the attendant break a rule during landing, and he gave her a warning. However, the captain of that flight backed her up and questioned the regulation being enforced. Therefore, it was not clear who was right or wrong and the purser did not report the case. However, the story was posted on Facebook and many members of the cabin staff commented on the misconduct displayed by the captain. The story then circulated through gossip and in the end an intimate relationship of the captain and the flight attendant was exposed. It came out that they even matched their schedules so they could fly together. The point here is not whether the story was true or not, but the impact gossip can have on those involved.

Here, I believe, the entire cockpit crew was discredited due to the captain's misbehavior, as there was an attempt made to reduce the standing of a captain, and captains are the dominant group in this workspace. Cabin crews normally are under the control of the cockpit crew, and there have occasionally been serious conflicts between these two groups. Conflicts arise less now than they did in the past, as there has been a concerted effort made to harmonize the two groups. However, the captain of a flight has the ultimate authority, as the 'pilot in command', and the cockpit crews still have power over the cabin staff.

4.2 The spirit of affective performance

The service industry relies heavily on affective labor, and labor and economics co-modify affects in order to create identity and also social relations with customers (Carnera, 2012: 77). Female flight attendants are crucial in helping to produce an image and develop particular manners in relation to the

¹⁷ Interview with Manee (32 years-old) - flight attendant, on 7 December 2012.

¹⁸ Interview with Suntharee (57 years-old) - air purser, on 19 April 2013.

airline industry. They produce and reproduce a particular form of affect that creates socio-economic value.

In this section I attempt to examine how flight attendants create affective subjectivity within a stressful environment, and how a particular form of affect is formed and mutually communicated within their collective. I will refer to Sara Ahmed's (2004) "affective economies" to describe how affects bind the subjects (in this case, the flight attendants) together through movements of circulation and exchange. Ahmed showed how the circulation of emotions between subjects creates a form of collective identity.

Flight attendants have to perform their duties in accordance with company rules; they display their identities in response to the needs and desires of customers, and also to company expectations. Within this context, I will illustrate how flight attendants' bodies create a particular form of affect, and constitute their subjectivity through performance.

Mod¹⁹ accepts that it is essential for her to 'perform' as a professional, especially when she is assigned to work in first class:

It is like acting, as I have to control and manage my emotions. When I interact with passengers, I always smile because passengers expect to be served by good tempered attendants. They have spent a lot of money and we should also think about their feelings; they deserve to be happy with our smile and our service. They should not be the victims of our bad moods or emotions.

One junior flight attendant, Nida²⁰, told me how she learns from senior staff:

I studied on how to perform my duties at training school. Moreover, I have learned from my working experience and from senior members of staff, particularly when dealing with problems. I will pick something up from other staff and use it on the next flight. However, much depends on individual charm when one approaches a passenger; one may use different tactics to deal with different problems.

In accordance with passenger expectations, Nida performs her duties professionally, particularly with regard to emergency regulations. On this, she said:

I always smile, act and talk with passengers politely. I address passengers as 'Sir' or 'Madam' in order to show respect. When they are satisfied, the job is quite easy. I don't use such language in my everyday life; however, I will never allow passengers to break the emergency rules; I have to show confidence on safety issues.

Pilin²¹, a junior attendant, also described the way she interacts with passengers:

When I perform my duties, I act better than in real life. I might not love the children I am dealing with, but I will always smile, even when I am in a bad mood. I always try to fulfill passenger demands. It is important to build good feelings and a friendly atmosphere first, for after that I can offer a good service to everyone. This is very hard to do when I'm in a bad mood. It is also difficult to interact with unruly or bad tempered passengers. When I first started I could not control my emotions with such people, but now I try hard to understand them, even though they may not have a reason to be angry.

Like Nida, Pilin is not so confident when dealing with problems:

I run to the air purser or consult with senior members of the staff when dealing with problems. I know they will behave in the right way, because they have more experience. If their approach works, I will use it for the next flight.

One senior attendant, Nam²², gave me her opinions on emotional control:

¹⁹ Interview with Mod (45 years-old) - flight attendant, on 18 September 2012

²⁰ Interview with Nida (27 years-old) - flight attendant, on 2 April 2013.

²¹ Interview with Pilin (26 years-old) - flight attendant, on 4 February 2013.

²² Interview with Nam (46 years-old) - flight attendant, on 12 December 2012.

When I was young, my approach was inflexible because I lacked experience. As I have gotten older and accumulated flight time and experience, I have become better at differentiating people by their behavior – I am better at understanding how humans act. I think I am now a much more flexible person emotionally. My duty is to serve passengers; even if they are wrong, I have no reason to fight with them. My aim is to win the hearts of passengers. A passenger got angry with me when I woke her up for breakfast. I turned a crisis into an opportunity – I showed my sincerity and cared for her. In the end, she said “sorry”. I felt very happy, because I was able to overcome a potentially difficult situation.

Sairung²³ also shared her experience of having to deal with a drunken passenger:

I knew how to deal with him. When I noticed him talking loudly and his face going red, I told him politely to care for his health; that he might get sick if he drinks too much at high altitude, I negotiated with him and agreed to give him a drink every thirty minutes. I treated him like a friend and did not order him around. Using this approach, he believed and trusted me, and in the end, fell asleep.

Sairung continued:

We should always be service-minded. I’m the eldest in my family and have had to look after my sister and brothers over the years, so it is easy for me to take care of passengers. Flight attendants should think smart when resolving problems at critical times. I have to be conscious of the need to control my emotions, particularly when the boss is fussy. I learn to talk with him politely, in order to finish the job. I have studied Buddhist ‘dharma’, so it is easy for me; I aim to deliver mercy and happiness to customers.

On the same theme, Manee²⁴ told me about how she manages her emotions:

It is down to my age, experience and the ‘dharma’ I have studied. In the past, I suppressed my emotions and had to release them when I got home. Now, when I finish, I leave all my emotional baggage at work, so I take nothing home with me – I do not get angry with anyone outside of work. I also try to understand my colleague’s emotions; they might have personal problems on a given day. I ignore what people say and simply try to do my best. If one member of staff is complaining about another, I retain positive thoughts and forget everything once we have landed.

We can see that the flight attendants’ performances are accumulated and circulated not only among themselves; their affective performances also have an impact on the passengers. Suntharee²⁵ gave me an interesting description of this phenomenon:

It is the spirit or ‘winyaan’²⁶ of the flight attendant; it is built up by experience, intentions and having a positive attitude. Our professional duty is to be beautiful and exhibit an elegant posture, as we were trained to do. We are supposed to be automatic and cordial. A good flight attendant should be responsible, service minded, good at working within a team, mature and have a positive attitude; she should understand passengers from different backgrounds. After flying for many years, I could feel unenthused, simply treating it as a duty, but whenever I’m on board, I build up my emotions and accomplish the job. It is necessary to do the job without making mistakes, I enjoy it when passengers are happy and say ‘thank you’. It means I have succeeded; the service not only followed the standard, but was delivered with sincerity.

Socialization is also a crucial part of developing an identity. Junior attendants have their idol; they are young and do not know what to do on their own. The staffmembers come from different families and backgrounds, and junior ones have to adapt to our world; they have to choose their own identity. When a new member of staff is impressed by a senior member, in terms of her make-up, hairstyle and manner, she will use this look and adopt it as her own identity at work.

²³ Interview with Sairung (47 years-old) - flight attendant, on 7 May 2013.

²⁴ Interview with Manee (32 years-old) - flight attendant, on 7 December 2012.

²⁵ Interview with Suntharee (57 years-old) - air purser, on 20 April 2013.

²⁶ Flight attendants normally use the word ‘winyaan’ or วิญญาณ in their everyday life. ‘Winyaan’ here means the spirit of professionalism.

Ying²⁷ agreed that the *winyaan* of a flight attendant is established by the society, family, and Buddhist ideology surrounding her:

It is related to Thai culture and the religious concepts regarding kindness and thoughtfulness; we accept everything as fate and also show mercy and forgiveness. We sympathize for children and sick passengers and try to help them. It is a job that helps people; we do it not only to finish the job, but we also ‘im-jai’²⁸ (fulfill our souls). We only give; we never exploit passengers. Moreover, our families shape our behavior; we have developed a positive attitude from our parents. Social and organizational culture, as well as Buddhist ideas also plays a part – guiding us to think and do good things and to never harm others. The recruitment process also selects people who can control their emotions; one doesn’t necessarily have to be very beautiful; if an applicant can smile the whole time, she will be selected for the job.

In my case, the concept of *winyaan* gave me the strength to work when I got sick, bored or tired. As soon as I put on my uniform, I regained the power needed to accomplish the task – I could interact with colleagues, my boss and passengers effectively, without thinking. This *winyaan* has remained a part of my body and soul. I now know how to approach people, to deal with them and how to control my emotions. I engage this approach not only in the workplace, but also as a part of my everyday life practices.

I have tried to show that the body performances of the flight attendants are imbued with affect. Flight attendants produce a particular form of affect; a spirit or *winyaan* of the flight attendant. This *winyaan* is established through socialization and emotional control.

The production process behind affect is revealed, when the flight attendants encounter passengers with strong emotions, as was shown here. I have demonstrated the capacity of flight attendants to use body affects and to be affected by others’ bodies. They satisfy passengers’ expectations through their beauty and appearance, and they create a positive attitude and try to understand why a passenger may be angry or why their colleagues are fussy. They turn anger into understanding. Flight attendants create a new affective subjectivity in order to deal with the limitations imposed by their working situation. Here, flight attendants are active agents who make use of gender roles and their bodies to accomplish their work. At the same time, they are able to control their own emotions when they encounter problems.

I have proposed that *winyaan* not only resides in an individual’s body, but also circulates and communicates within society through socialization and religious ideology. An affective performance does not take place within one body alone, but in this case is shared among flight attendants. *Winyaan* is internalized into and externalized from flight attendants’ bodies. It is passed on from senior to junior flight attendants and from flight attendants to passengers. The constant repetition of this circular movement serves to strengthen the affective value. The *winyaan* will be constantly reinforced thus binding the flight attendants tightly into a collective and stabilizing their sense of collective identity. They constitute a collective body that is animated by *winyaan*. This form of affect creates socio-economic value for the airline company. When passengers are happy and impressed by the services provided, they are likely to return and generate further income for the airline company.

5. Conclusion

In this research paper, I have tried to show how affect in the work of female flight attendants has a socio-economic impact on the airline industry. I adopted Sara Ahmed’s (2004) “affective economies” approach to explain how affect binds subjects together into collectives through circulation and exchange and have used material from my empirical research to support her approach. In the airline industry, affective performance is a medium that not only binds flight attendants together, but also gives rise to new forms of subjectivity by activating their affective potential. Flight attendants’ bodies and

²⁷ Interview with Ying (45 years-old) - flight attendant, on 6 April 2013.

²⁸ Thai: อิ่มใจ

minds engage with affective performances to negotiate with multiple forms of power, thus being able to turn a space of discipline into a space of performance.

I have tried to illustrate that *winyaan*, in this context referred to as spirit of professionalism, is internalized through everyday practices and performances. It embeds not only in flight attendants' minds and bodies but also gives their collective a distinct shape. The traditional boundary of scientific rationality between the mind and the body is dissolved by affective performances. I attempted to show the interrelation between the mind's power to think and the body's power to act. Flight attendants engage in both rational intelligence and passion and feeling. They produce and reproduce particular forms of affect and succeed in creating economic value. Thus, they become new subjects in the negotiation with capitalist powers.

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