“We Eat Our Pigs”:
How Economic Principles and Institutions Shape the Emotions of Piggery Employees

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Introduction

Since the publication of *The Managed Heart* and the introduction of the concept of emotional labour, many literatures have studied emotion management and emotional labour in different kinds of work, and have gradually expanded from the service industry to other jobs, especially in human-animal work, where human work is substantially focused on live non-human animals\(^1\). In existing studies of human-animal work, scholars have either focused on jobs where animals carry a lot of emotional value (e.g., zoos, police dogs, and other working animals) or on the process of de-animalisation of animals\(^2\) (e.g., slaughterhouses).

However, in the farm, a place where “breeding is about killing”\(^3\), animals do not carry much emotional value, but their animality is not hidden either; here, their live animality does not provide emotional value, but rather serves as a necessary support for their commoditisation, which in turn shapes the particular emotional experience of the worker. And this pair of emotions is shaped not only through masculinity in the workplace\(^4\), but also through economic principles and institutionalised means. In these ways, farm animals are constructed as “living commodities,” thus making their fate inevitable and reconciling and transforming workers’ emotions.

This study uses fieldwork in family-owned pig farms and government-licensed slaughterhouses in southwestern China to reveal how economic principles and specialised systems help employees manage their emotions, and how the employees' emotional

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\(^2\) Lindsay Hamilton and Darren McCabe. 2016. “‘It’s just a job’: Understanding emotion work, deanimalization and the compartmentalization of organized animal slaughter.” *Organization* 23(3): 333.


experience is transformed: they not only reconcile their uneasiness with the purpose of profitability when the pigs they spend day and night with are sold to the slaughterhouse, but also rejoice at the prospect of considerable profitability. The strength of the economic principle is explained by showing the changes in the emotional experience of employees in different industrial contexts.

**Research Methods**

Since our focus was on emotions, we mainly used ethnographic and participatory observation methods. We visited 13 family-owned pig farms in depth, in which we worked with employees to prepare feed for pigs, breed and deliver pigs, and select pigs that meet the requirements for sale for pig dealers. In addition to this, we conducted semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews with the heads of the 13 family-owned pig farms, and interviews with 20 pig farm employees during and after the work. In addition to this, we also conducted a field survey of two government-licensed slaughterhouses in the northeast of Chongqing during the early morning working hours to understand their production processes, and conducted semi-structured interviews with four slaughterhouse employees during and after the work. We also visited a nationally known feed mill, and a well-known local meat supplier, and conducted in-depth interviews with a pig feed expert and professional butcher store owner.

**The Construction of Pigs as “Living Commodity”**

The emotional management required to harm animals in a piggery is not as immediate and urgent as in a slaughterhouse; rather, here, all activities appear on the surface to be for the well-being of the animals, yet the living, breathing nature of the pigs does not exist for its own sake. When asked if the various furnishings in the piggery make the pigs comfortable, the workers’ answers are almost always ambiguous, “I guess it’s still comfortable,” and then they start talking at length about these standards of health itself. Ignoring subjective feelings
of health points to the real purpose of health: to sell at a good price. One worker, referring to the reason for banning a type of electric pig-driving stick, said, “That thing is bad, it damages the pig’s internal organs and burns the inside.” When talking about this tool, his concern was whether it would affect the quality of the pig’s meat and thus its price.

In piggeries, the dominant principle is economic domination. It suppresses and shapes the emotions that workers develop as a result of spending time with the pigs. For example, when faced with the sale of a standard pig, many workers expressed their reluctance, “It’s like raising a child, raising a child”, but immediately afterwards they would temper this emotion with the fact that the purpose of farming is to sell. This domination is even more obvious in the case of business owners, who have the “joy of harvest” when the price of pigs is high, while when the price is low, it is a painful thing to sell pigs, because “the cost cannot be recovered”. This is an example of how the economic principle influences the emotional experience of the actors in the piggery in a changing environment, and the closer you are to the economic field, the less you interact with the pigs on a daily basis, the more the economic principle actively shapes the emotional experience of the actors: it not only suppresses certain negative emotions, but also leads to the creation of joy.

In addition to this, the institution of specialisation facilitates the construction of the pig as a living commodity. This construction relies on the premise that the commodification of pigs is either subliminal (the breeding process) or, in the case of a violent commodification such as slaughter, must generate as few negative emotions as possible, otherwise the dominance of the commodity cannot be achieved. Chinese law prohibits the killing of pigs in piggeries, which must be done in large government-licensed slaughterhouses; the custom among pig farmers that “farmers cannot kill pigs” also leads them to avoid the process of pig slaughter. Many farmers are afraid or unwilling to kill pigs, and through institutionalised specialisation, the whole process of pig commercialisation is decentralised to different
individuals, which greatly facilitates ‘role distance’ and thus makes the construction of commercialisation more successful.

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrates how economic principles and institutions deeply influence and shape the emotional experience of workers in pig farms. By avoiding the same employees' exposure to the whole process of life and death of meat pigs in the chain, and by constructing their lives as profitable and by specifying their life purpose and farming purpose as profitable, pigs are constructed as profitable living commodity, and the tension between life and profit is bridged. Ultimately, workers can eat the pigs they raise themselves without negative feelings. This shows the huge role that economic and institutional factors play in human-animal work.

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