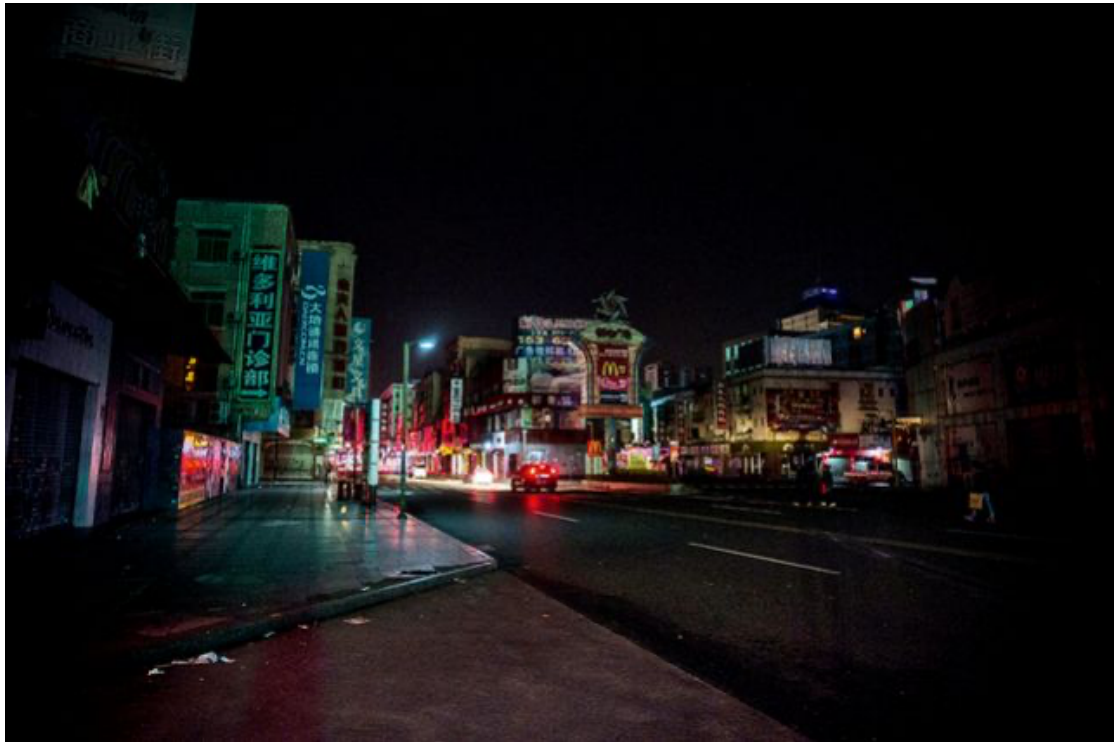


With the help of semi-official protection and the advantage of low human rights standards, Dongguan's sex industry achieved a level of standardized production. Of all that is "Made in Dongguan," the sauna girls are its most distinctive product.



Made In Dongguan

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To demand back pay from their boss, a group of Dongguan girls confronted hotel security and auxiliary police on the grand marble steps and beneath the European-style columns of the **Huimei Tianlun**, a five-star hotel in Changping Town. That's where I first met Meier. Flustered, we exchanged a few hurried words before she suddenly grabbed my sleeve. *"We have to run,"* she said.

And so we ran.

A quick glance back revealed three auxiliary officers chasing after us—and a police car. The other girls started to follow, but Meier shouted at them: *“Don’t run with the reporter. We can’t let the police catch the reporter!”*

Behind the hotel was a bustling local market filled with meat and produce vendors. Ten minutes later, we had dashed through the market, ducked into two side alleys, and slipped into a dilapidated stairwell of an old residential building. Up to the fourth floor. Into a room. Lock the door. I had barely registered what was happening. Meier had dragged me into what was clearly a pay-by-the-hour room used for sex work. It was grimy. Aside from a giant poster of a blonde, blue-eyed nude that covered nearly an entire wall, there was only a single bed. We were both gasping for breath.

“What does the boss owe you?” I asked.

“He was afraid we wouldn’t come back after the New Year,” she said. *“So he withheld part of our pay. Then he ran off.”*

The Protest Collapsed Overnight

A week earlier, they had lost their jobs.

On the day it happened, a girl named Chuchu was still *on the clock*. Around 5 p.m., she came down from the fifth floor with a client, only to find the hotel nearly deserted. Just one floor supervisor remained by the door.

He was in charge of coordinating the hotel's underground operations—calling names, assigning room numbers as girls went up, timing and logging sessions as they came down. He urged Chuchu to hurry: *“We’re off. Change out of your uniform and go.”*

Chuchu returned to the staff room, changed into her street clothes, and folded her uniform neatly into a locker marked with her ID number. Inside were her makeup kit, a training notebook filled with notes on erotic dance routines, and a few leftover coins.

She exited through the “technicians” corridor—a euphemism the hotel used for girls providing sex services—unaware that her clock-out marked the official closure of the sauna department at one of Dongguan’s best-known five-star hotels.

It wasn’t her first *anti-vice holiday*, so she stayed calm—maybe even a little pleased. Her colleague A-Jian had paid 500 yuan the day before just to take a single day off. Chuchu, meanwhile, got her day for free.

At that moment, Dongdong was still on Train T162, returning from her hometown of Xuzhou to Dongguan. She had no idea she'd lost her job—and even when she did find out, she wouldn't really care. She was the quintessential newcomer: just seventeen, with a kind of luminous youth that turned heads. Her hair was thick and black, her eyes dark as game pieces. She was madly in love with her boyfriend, five years older and working as a waiter at a karaoke bar. To save up for their wedding, she had become a sauna girl. Losing her job only meant pushing the wedding a little further out.

A-Jian, meanwhile, bitterly regretted the 500 yuan she'd spent on her day off. Since being laid off, she kept changing her WeChat screen name. For the first few days, it read: *Huimei Tianlun is pure evil*. Then it changed to: *Reality has taught me: no one is simple*.

The temporary WeChat group—"2 p.m. Pay Protest at Huimei Tianlun"—brought together 33 sauna girls. By the time I joined that evening, the chat was already buzzing with voice messages—some long, some short—in Hunanese, Minnan dialect, and Sichuanese. The girls began cautiously, addressing one another by their usernames, inching closer in unfamiliar tones. In truth, none of them knew each other's real names.

They were wary, aloof, mutually suspicious. On the job, they called each other by numbers—"912," "827," or "Car Model 18"—tags drawn from the service menus. After work, each slipped back into her private life like an island unto herself.

"I can't tell you my name. Anything else, ask away," Meier told me that afternoon while we were on the run. Then she added, *"No one in Dongguan knows my real name."*

For the first time, unemployment had brought them together. Chuchu had chosen her name from her personal motto: *"Women don't need to be chuchu-kelian"*—a Chinese phrase that means looking pitiful and delicate to gain sympathy. She was still kicking herself for not grabbing her makeup bag and loose cash when she clocked out that day. The night before their sit-in protest, hotel security had driven off with two trucks full of the girls' belongings—and burned everything.

"Just because we're 'technicians,' they think they can bully us in broad daylight—wipe us out and drive us away, so they don't have to pay what they owe," Chuchu wrote in the group chat.

One of the girls chimed in: *"I've been to the police station before, sisters—don't be afraid. We're massage therapists."*

"We didn't break any laws," Meier added. After a short pause, she said, *"And even if we did, they've broken bigger ones."*

A-Jian agreed. *"From a moral standpoint, who's the angel and who's the devil? It's not like we killed anyone or set anything on fire."*

Meier perked up. *"Exactly. We must face the press bravely. Why are we living like this? And why, living like this, can't we let the rest of the world know?"*

The pay protest stretched on for three days. Over a hundred women came to the hotel to sit in, some for hours, some for the whole day. At the quietest moments there were twenty or thirty; at the busiest, seventy or eighty. Some were beaten by security guards. Some were taken away by police. But the man they were trying to find—Boss Liu—never showed up.

Eventually, his second son was cornered near the hotel's back entrance, car and all. The girls tried to act tough, but out of habit, they still called him *Second Young Master*—the nickname they'd always used for him at work. The problem was, no one was sure if Second Young Master counted as the boss. After some back and forth, the girls decided not to smash his car. They let him go.

"If he's not the boss," A-Jian said, "we can't just kill the innocent."

On the third night, the boss sent money to some of the girls. It wasn't much—not compared to what they were owed—but it was enough to fracture the group. The protest collapsed—suddenly, almost theatrically, just like the sex industry assembly line in Dongguan.

Some received 500 yuan. Others got 3,000. One girl received as much as 6,000. The rest got nothing. No explanation was given. By distributing the payments unevenly, the boss had managed to redirect the tension inward—toward the women themselves.

Suspicion spread quickly. Eyes turned to the three girls who'd been seen playing mahjong with hotel managers during the protest. Then came Meier and A-Jian—*they knew the reporter, so maybe they were the snitches.*

The intimacy in the WeChat group evaporated. One by one, the girls began to leave.

The Assembly Line of Dongguan-Style Saunas

For young women from across the country with few marketable skills, the sauna industry in Dongguan offered a kind of equality. Here, academic credentials and family background meant nothing. As the trainers told them, what mattered were only the *outside* and the *inside*. The *outside* meant height and face. The *inside* meant breasts, waist, and buttocks.

On her first day in Dongguan, Meier was told by her trainer to strip naked in front of other *"technicians"* and floor supervisors. She was instructed to turn in a full circle, have her bust, waist, and hips measured, and allow the trainer to check for firmness by touch. All the data was entered into a long spreadsheet. Then the trainer asked:

"How much do you think you're worth?"

"What's the highest price?"

"Fifteen hundred."

"Then I'm worth the highest."

They negotiated. In the end, she was given the *"supermodel"* label: 1,300 yuan per session.

It was a common hierarchy in Dongguan's sauna trade. One level below were girls labeled as *"car models"*, priced between 1,000 and 1,200 yuan. Further down were those assigned number labels. The first digit indicated price. The last two were like vanity phone numbers—those with 8s or 6s had to be purchased; the rest were free.

The Huimei Tianlun Hotel had endless rules. In the sauna department, the top boss was called *laozong*, or general manager. The general manager oversaw the **managers**, who managed the **floor supervisors**. The floor supervisors oversaw the **trainers** and **mamasans**, who in turn controlled the **technicians**. In short, *everyone* managed the *technicians*. They sat at the very bottom of the hierarchy.

Of course, higher-priced *technicians* bullied the cheaper ones. If you were unlucky enough to be given a label starting with a 6—600 yuan per session—you were at the bottom of the bottom.

There were ways to move up. You could pay 3,000 yuan to apply for a label upgrade. If clients consistently gave positive feedback, your application might be approved. That was the *hard-work path*. Some high-pressure clients would stay late into the night, venting to the girls about climbing the ranks in government or business. To Meier, the parallels were obvious: a well-placed bribe or sleeping with a floor supervisor could get you promoted faster than *working your ass off*.

During her training days, Dongdong memorized her routine so intensely she even recited it in her dreams. Chuchu, who had arrived a few months earlier, passed her old notebook to Dongdong—pages of *erotic dance moves*, broken down into sequences and summarized in mnemonic rhymes. Dongdong said it felt just like preparing for finals.

Every *technician* had to pass the same test. Wearing only panties and a bra, Dongdong stood in front of a mirror and danced, trying to ignore the others watching from the sidelines. She danced and danced—until her movements were smooth, precise, sexy. Until the *floor supervisor* was satisfied.

Then came the lesson on **professional ethics**. Your phone had to stay on 24 hours a day. You couldn't steal clients. You weren't allowed to say no if selected. You couldn't ask for tips. You couldn't ask for a client's number. The only clients you were allowed to refuse were women.

"Sometimes women would come in as clients," A-Jian said. "But none of our hundred-plus girls ever dared to go."

Before officially getting on the clock, every *technician* had to pass a **quality inspection**—known in the trade as a *trial session*.

Typically, a girl was expected to complete 20 to 30 tasks within the standard two-hour service window. People in the industry often said: a girl would remember her *first trial client* for the rest of her life. At many hotels, the *floor supervisor* handled the trial personally. They knew the routine inside and out, and had a sharp eye for flaws.

"There's a checklist for trial sessions," A-Jian said. "Every item has to be ticked off. Only when you get full marks can you start taking real clients."

Like most sauna girls, A-Jian had started out as a factory worker. Before entering the industry, she worked in quality control at a shoe factory. So she wasn't entirely unfamiliar with this kind of inspection—except this time, *she herself was the product*, being certified to meet the **"ISO"** standard.

From the moment she knelt to take off the client's shoes, there wasn't a single minute to rest. If the client was tired, she massaged his hands or feet. If he lay down, she pulled out a tool to clean his ears. *Professionalism* was measured by precision in time management: by the time the checklist was complete and the shower taken, the clock ran out—perfectly.

As the client was escorted out, the girls would link arms with him, calling out to one another,

"Hey, isn't my husband handsome?"

What if the client was a foreigner and didn't speak Chinese? No problem. *"You just lie there and wave,"* one girl explained. *"He's not stupid."*

The best clients were from Hong Kong. They were used to paying in cash. The old-timers—men in their fifties or sixties—would still give tips. They had an *old-school sense of manners*. The younger ones, not so much.

Running into predatory clients was routine. Most girls had to endure it—for fear of being reported.

"You can't fight back," Meier said. *"But if the guy's a friend of the boss, getting hit*

doesn't even count."

Two months earlier, Dongdong was assaulted during her very first session. The client tried to force sex without protection. She was only 17, too inexperienced—both in being hurt and in how to resist. After it was over, the man offered her 300 yuan in compensation.

Dongdong didn't know what to do. She went to ask the floor supervisor. The supervisor exploded: *"So 300 yuan gets you a no-condom session? If that gets out, it'll ruin the hotel's name."*

So Dongdong went back and told the client, *"I don't want it."*

The man pocketed the money and left. Dongdong didn't send a pair of street boys to jump him in an alley—though that was the usual way things got handled in Dongguan. *Instead, she blew 500 yuan on snacks. Every single flavor of preserved plum and dried beef the store had—she bought them.*

Some couldn't hold it in. A-Jian, quick-tempered as ever, had just blown up at a client who insulted her. *"You fucking piece of trash—so what if you've got money?"* she yelled.

The guy was livid. She thought she'd be fired for sure—maybe it was time for a fresh start anyway. But the client told the floor supervisor he had to leave early for personal reasons. Nothing to do with her.

"Sometimes I tell myself, fuck this. Day in, day out, serving scum like that—fuck it, I should go hire a duck (a male sex worker) to serve me for once."

One of her coworkers, also a close friend, was a "super VIP" at a bar near Swan Lake. She worked the noon-to-midnight shift and headed there after work every night to blow off steam.

A-Jian had gone with her once or twice. *For 500 yuan, you could choose from a row of young guys, each in a different look. Tell them what to do—they'd do it. "You can pour shot after shot down their throats,"* she said. *What if he passes out? "Then he passes out."*

After a beat, she added dreamily, *"Shit, if it weren't so damn expensive, I'd go every day."*

They Called Huimei Tianlun Their "Danwei"

Meier said she entered the trade at 14 and grew up in it. For ten years, she drifted from

city to city—sometimes following clients, sometimes on her own—until she finally settled in Dongguan.

She liked the feeling of being just one cog in a **standardized production line**. Her phrasing was vague, but when I asked if she meant it felt *“legitimate, orderly, and safe,”* she nodded. *“We wore matching uniforms and name tags, went by numbers instead of names. Training was strict and standardized. If you got arrested, the hotel had a protocol to get you out. Just recently, a client tried to skip out on paying. Old Gu, the manager, made him stay and clean the hotel for two months. It was so satisfying. He wasn’t released until the police crackdown.”*

In other cities, Meier said, she might have been treated like a little darling. But in Dongguan, she felt like a **real employee**. She referred to Huimei Tianlun as her *“danwei”*—a term traditionally used for **state-run company** in China.

Compared to other factories in Dongguan (known as *“the world’s workshop”*) the sauna industry took **low-rights labor** to the extreme. Bags were searched after every shift, and sometimes **bodies too**. If you weren’t on your period, you had to work—no exceptions. Meier once had a fever of 38.5°C but still wasn’t allowed to take leave. If you fainted during a session—which had happened to two of her coworkers—you didn’t get paid a cent. If you had surgery for a pregnancy, you got **15 days off**. Anything beyond that, you had to buy.

At hiring, the hotel charged each girl a 1,000-yuan *“management fee.”* Once on the job, 25 to 30 percent of each session went to the house. On top of that, there were dozens of fines in the employee handbook. Girls had to buy all their daily necessities from the hotel itself—everything from work uniforms and shoes to massage oil, condoms, toothpaste, and gum. Monthly expenses averaged four to five thousand yuan. Condoms were sold at 3 yuan apiece.

To stop technicians from secretly buying identical products elsewhere, one clever floor supervisor had a new idea: they bulk-ordered **coded condoms**, each box assigned a range of serial numbers. Before every shift, the code had to match. If it didn’t? A **1,000-yuan fine**.

Every evening at 7 p.m., all staff gathered to sing in unison: *“Unity is strength.”* Then came the chant: *“Across the ends of the earth, Huimei Tianlun is the best.”* The ritual was the invention of Old Gu, a manager who introduced **military-style** discipline to the sauna. He issued strict rules: during work hours, no more than three employees could gather to talk. If caught, it was treated as *“spreading rumors”* and punished with a heavy fine.

The girls loved to smoke but didn’t dare gather in groups. So they went to the bathroom two at a time. On days the sauna hadn’t been raided and shut down, there

was always a long line outside the women's restroom.

This so-called five-star hotel used the cheapest supplies. According to A-Jian, most of them came from Dongguan's night markets—but no one paid attention.

When clients showered, the girl would have body wash poured onto her own body, then twist and sway to lather it onto the client. Whether the soap cost a few cents or a few yuan, who cared? Disposable towels were bought wholesale—ten for ten yuan—but sold to the girls at fifty per pack. Some couldn't bear the waste and quietly washed them for reuse with the next client.

Most of the luxury items the girls wore came from clients. If one girl got the latest iPhone, the others would soon get one too.

"It's not hard at all," Meier said. On Valentine's Day, she posted a photo of a diamond ring on her WeChat feed. She wore it on her middle finger.

After years in the business, Meier had mastered the art of identifying a client's profession and offering the right kind of flattery. She knew how to boost an older man's confidence, how to stretch out flashy but meaningless routines to fill time, and how to discreetly skip the parts that disgusted her.

Services were given poetic names like *"Ten Delicate Fingers"* or *"Ballet on Top"*—each hotel tried to outdo the others with flowery titles. For the girls, this had an upside: even regulars often had no idea what the names actually meant.

"Take this for example," Meier said. *"You've heard of the 'Poison Dragon Drill'? It got exposed on CCTV. It's when you lick the client's anus. I skip it whenever I can. But if he insists, I put a condom on my tongue. He can't tell the difference—he can't see it. It's just that my mouth ends up all greasy every time."*

"Really," she added. *"Not once has anyone noticed."*

*"I've swallowed so much stuff—**massage oil, men's dead skin, lube**. You can't imagine how disgusting it is. All that constant showering wrecked my skin. And every day I wear heels, twisting into unnatural poses. My spine goes out of shape. I have to see a Chinese medicine doctor regularly just to have it adjusted—then it bends again, and I go back. But what gets to me the most is the sex."*

You couldn't skip sex. You couldn't fake it. Meier was a top girl, a crowd favorite. From the moment she woke up, she'd have at least five sessions lined up. What did that do to her body? Her vagina bled, often. The local doctors all knew the drill: **antibiotics, an IV drip, and then—back to work.**

"The pain gets so sharp," she said through gritted teeth. "Even just rubbing against my underwear hurts. Walking hurts. All I have is willpower. Every jolt of pain tells me—yeah, I'm still alive. I really am. I still want to live. I still want to live better."

None of this was ever shared with the clients. In the Dongguan-style service system, a girl could never let a client feel sorry for her. He had to believe she was relaxed, cheerful, enjoying every moment. If he started to pity her—and reported that to the floor manager—the session didn't count. **She wouldn't get paid.**

If There's Any Talent in This Job, It's Recognizing Reality

When Meier cried, she still kept a polite smile at the corners of her mouth. She would pause occasionally to nod and apologize. Maybe that was part of what earned her top-girl status—she was, undeniably, professional.

Her worst sobs came when she spoke of a coworker who'd taken a private client outside the sauna. The man and his friends gang-raped and tortured her. She's now living in a **psychiatric hospital in Dongguan.**

"The first time he came, he tipped her 5,800 yuan," Meier said. "The second time, he brought a gold necklace. The third time, he invited her out—and that was that. It's really dangerous out there. You could die."

"Would you ever go out?"

"If it's just because a guy is good-looking or sweet, no way. But if he gives me a lot of money—in cash—then yes."

Most of the girls had some half-decent-looking, unemployed boyfriend. Meier had only a black toy poodle. She thought her coworkers who still longed for love were hopeless.

*"Rich men only want our **bodies**. Poor men only want our **money**."*

She worked more than ten hours a day, every single day. Not a single yuan would go to a pretty boy.

If there's any talent in this job, she said, it's recognizing reality. And the reality was: **"In this job, you're not allowed to have anything but money."**

And even that takes endless effort. More effort to keep it than to earn it. Among all the girls, Meier was the only one who had never been fined. That took extreme discipline, constant vigilance, social skill—and money. Bribes for the floor supervisors. If you didn't want to pay in cash, sometimes you paid with your body.

Mamasans, Runners, and the Ladder Up

Everyone in this ecosystem had learned to accept their place. Even floor supervisors—or managers—had worked their way up from the bottom of the food chain.

In the red-light districts, men climbed the ranks through social talent. They typically started as runners or security guards, though the latter offered little upward mobility.

Security uniforms looked too much like police—enough to make clients nervous.

There was a saying in the industry: *if you weren't a floor supervisor by 25 or a manager by 30, your career was over*. Old Gu was 30. Wu was 31. By that metric, their careers—cut short by the crackdown—were not great, but passable.

Both of them had started out as teenage **runners**. Their job was to bring fruit and drinks to clients while girls got ready. By then, the clients were usually naked. The runners had to walk in straight-backed, eyes down, bend low, half-kneel, and offer the tray with both hands. Once the drinks were served, they'd back out of the room—**literally walking backward**—until they were out of sight. Only then could they turn around and leave.

Competition was fierce, and most people in the Changping red-light zone took their jobs seriously. Wu still remembered the lesson in “professional spirit” from ten years ago: **“We are gentlemen and ladies serving gentlemen and ladies.”**

Back then, getting promoted from runner to floor supervisor required a **democratic election**. Candidates gave campaign speeches. Everyone got a vote—owners, managers, floor supervisors, runners, cleaning ladies, and “*technicians*”. Wu won by a landslide, achieving his first career milestone: shedding the runner's vest.

His strategy was simple—treat the girls to late-night snacks, take the guys out drinking. Be kind to the girls, and most of them would eventually work their hearts out for you. When Wu left Foshan for Changping, over twenty girls followed him.

In his ten years in Dongguan, Wu had climbed every relationship ladder the red-light business offered. Before losing his job, he had become **general manager**—second only to the owner. But clients could leave. Girls could leave. And one word from the boss could get him fired. So he poached clients, poached technicians, developed new service routines, wrote internal policies and reports, snuck into rival clubs to learn their tricks, and worked hard to brainwash girls—convincing them to embrace ever more exaggerated service moves with sincerity.

“What's the hardest part?” I asked.

"Improving my writing," Wu said with a laugh.

He put up a sign on the *"technicians'"* lounge door: *"A smile is your passport through this door."* Behind his own desk, another motto read: *"Results define the hero."* At times, he had to personally train new girls—trying them out himself. Luckily, he said, **wives in this business tended to be more tolerant than most outsiders could imagine.**

He admitted that, back when he was a runner, he'd been swayed by the *"technicians'"* beauty—but that phase passed quickly. *"You see them every day, day after day. Just think about it."* These days, he found himself worrying more about his wife. In Dongguan, a city full of hotels, what if she ended up doing the same work?

Mamasans—the second most common role in the business after *"technicians"*—weren't much higher in status. Most had once been *"technicians"* themselves. Hua-jie's business card listed her as the **"Director of Business Development"** at Huimei Tianlun Hotel. Back in her prime, she could bring in 200 clients a month and make seventy to eighty thousand yuan—not counting walk-ins, from which she took a cut of 100 to 300 yuan per session. Her daughter, a student at an arts college in Yunnan, got a generous allowance every month. *"If business is good, I send 5,000. If not, 3,000."*

During our interview, she took a sweet, syrupy twenty-minute call from a john. When she finally hung up, she let out a sigh. *"I told him—ten-thirty in the morning, come or don't. You want me to see you at night? Who'd dare? Go to jail for a few hundred yuan? I'm not crazy."*

"Now that there's no business, what about your daughter?"

*"She still gets the same. I'm scared if I send her too little, some man might trick her **into this life.**"*

A-Jian told me there were smart mamasans and not-so-smart ones. Hua-jie was the latter—not much of a marketer. The savvy ones pulled in new clients through WeChat, online forums, or at least handed out flyers on the street. Hua-jie relied mostly on old regulars from her *"technician"* days. These days, she lived in a 300-yuan-a-month makeshift room. Some had urged her to go back to Yunnan and work there, but she refused. The thought of pimping on the same ground her daughter walked every day—she couldn't do it.

"Hua-jie's clients are old now," A-Jian said. "And so is she."

"You Can Never Wash It Off"

In Dongguan, there were thieves who targeted sex workers specifically—counting on the fact that they carried cash but wouldn't dare go to the police. So girls like Chuchu and Meier split their earnings and hid the money in their bras, socks, or underwear before leaving the house. If the phone rang while they were walking down the street, they'd duck into a nearby shop before answering—pulling out a phone in public could get you robbed in seconds.

There was no way to hide, Meier said. **Locals could tell at a glance.** Even without makeup or heels, it was obvious. You could see it in their posture. Even in how they walked. *“One trainer teaches a hundred girls, and all hundred walk the same,”* she said. She demonstrated for me: one foot, then the other, back straight, hand on waist while walking, both hands folded just below the navel when standing still.

“That’s why we almost never go out during our time off. We don’t want to be stared at. If a guy tries to talk to me at the supermarket, I’ll snap at him and run. Maybe he just wanted to ask something, maybe he thought I looked nice. Maybe he didn’t recognize me at all. But I get scared. So I’d rather just stay home.”

Meier had spent nearly 5,000 yuan on a **professional modeling course**, hoping to scrub off the sex-industry imprint Dongguan had left on her. She gave up sleep to read romance novels—*“the high-class kind,”* she emphasized. *“Like Yi Shu.”* She wanted to carry herself like one of Yi Shu's heroines.

She also read books on psychology and human relationships. She wanted to understand what **“other people”**—not *“people like us”*—were thinking. She had long forgotten what school felt like. She'd never worked in a factory. Since she was 14, her world had been sex workers, johns, and mamasans. When she asked me what a **“normal girl”** thought about at her age, she meant it—genuinely.

“I want to know how they think, so I can try to think that way too,” she said. *“Maybe then people won’t **recognize** me.”*

But within a week, the modeling course had worn off. Surrounded by a hundred co-workers, Meier slipped back into the same old habits. One day, walking down the street, her hand drifted to her waist again. She didn't even notice at first.

She hated that hand. Why did it go there? Why couldn't it just stay by her side?

“In that moment, it’s total despair,” she said. *“You just know—you’ll never wash it off. It’ll be with you forever.”* She cried again.

Now, the traces they could never wash off had marked them for **expulsion**. Mid-interview, A-Jian got a call from a co-worker: the auxiliary police had started sweeping

through their neighborhood.

"Don't say you work in a hotel," the voice warned. "Anyone who does is being kicked out of Dongguan."

A-Jian spat. *"What did we do—kill someone? Burn something down?"*

The biggest change since joining the trade, she said, was learning to **lie**. *"You talk like a human to people, like a ghost to ghosts."* Every day on her way to work, she'd rehearse a new name and hometown. Chongqing girls were in demand, but her accent didn't quite match—so she usually said she was from Hubei. Where in Hubei? That changed daily.

"Is there anyone in this world you don't lie to?" She thought. *"No one."*

"I hate it," she said. "But if you don't lie, you can't survive."

When we first met, she told me she was new to the business and done with men. The second time, she said, *"Fine—I've actually had a boyfriend for four years."* The third time, we were in her boyfriend's car around 11 p.m., as they drove me from Changping to Nancheng.

"It's too dangerous for a girl to hail a cab this late in Dongguan," she said.

It was pouring outside. Her voice, layered over the drumming rain, felt almost unreal.

She said she had a three-year-old daughter back home. The little girl called every other day to recite Tang poems on the phone.

She was the child of her first love. The boy left when she was one month pregnant. She gave birth alone at 17, bringing shame to her family. When her daughter turned one, she left for Dongguan—and into this line of work.

"This time, it's true," she said.

*"I miss her so much. I've been jobless these days, and I keep thinking about going home. **But if I go now, everyone will know what I've been doing.**"*

"Does Boss Liu Actually Have Ties to the Party?"

Even a first-time visitor to **Changping** could tell something was off. The moment I stepped out of the train station, a few girls—who looked like migrant workers—and I were immediately swarmed by idle taxi drivers squatting by the curb, smoking.

"Not taking a cab? Don't go! I know you! You're from Tang Le Palace, right? Aren't you? Hahaha!"

Tian'e Lake Road was one of Dongguan's most notorious red-light districts. Less than a kilometer long and barely a street wide, it packed in eight sauna hotels, four bars, over six cha chaan tengs, six hair and nail salons, plus foot massage parlors, dry cleaners, pet shops, florists, dessert cafes, and real estate offices. From midday till past midnight, they all served more than a thousand sex workers like Meier—and their clients.

The more striking women had their photos and service numbers printed in erotic tabloids and flyers handed out on the streets of **Hong Kong**. How far was it from Hung Hom Stadium to Tian'e Lake? One hour by direct train, then ten minutes on a scooter. Come as a group and you could even take a **luxury shuttle** from the hotel.

Back when the city came alive at dusk, the girls would spill out from **15-yuan makeup shops**, all wearing the same powder and rouge, and melt into the crowd. A local man once said his favorite part of the day was pulling up a stool around 5 p.m. and sitting outside the makeup shop to watch the beauties emerge. *"Once you've lived in Dongguan long enough,"* he said, *"every time you see a woman—whether in an office, a vegetable market, or even on TV—your brain automatically goes: How much?"*

By the third day of the crackdown, **Lao Gu**, the sauna floor supervisor, hung up on one of the girls and tried calling a few coworkers. Phone off. Phone off. Phone off. That's when it hit him: all they ever had was a string of 11-digit numbers. Now that the phones were off, his coworkers were gone.

The girl had asked: *"Did Boss Liu run off?"*

None of the women I interviewed had ever seen the elusive owner. No one could even agree on who he actually was. They only repeated one widely shared legend: *that he once chased a motorcycle thief in his private helicopter*—a story even local media picked up.

A-Jian pulled up the hotel's promo brochure on her phone. *"See this?"* she said. *"Ours is different from the others. Look in the top-right corner of the building. That little dot? That's Boss Liu's helicopter."*

Trying to sound worldly, Chuchu brought up the political tensions behind the crackdown. *"So,"* she asked, *"does Boss Liu actually have ties to the Party or not? If he does, maybe the hotel can reopen?"*

Even Lao Gu, despite being mid-level management, didn't know if the boss had really run. His number had been disconnected. And now that he thought about it, Lao Gu wasn't even sure that number had ever belonged to the boss. From Lao Gu to the girls, everyone learned they were out of a job the same way: **From the news.**

Boss Liu Says: Do What the Government Says

On February 9, CCTV aired its undercover exposé on Dongguan's sex industry. That evening, in WeChat groups populated by local friends and sauna bosses, the mood remained oddly lighthearted. The bosses joked and forwarded memes like everyone else— *"Stay strong, Dongguan," "We're all Dongguaners now."*

The next day, as if to show his untouchable status, the **owner** of the five-star hotel featured in the exposé posted a self-deprecating message: inviting other bosses to cowrite an *"official history"* of Dongguan saunas. *"We can't let CCTV wipe us out with one swing of the stick,"* he said.

By day three, the boss of **Humen New World** was caught at the bank trying to withdraw **six million** yuan in cash. He became the first sauna boss in Dongguan history to be arrested in an **anti-vice campaign**. Word spread. Bosses scattered.

According to their longtime local friends, Dongguan had weathered countless sweeps over the years—yet not once had a **true boss** ever been arrested. During smaller raids, the *"technicians"* got detained and bailed out. In bigger sweeps, they might lose a floor manager or a mamasan, but the hotel always had ways to resolve it. Even during the toughest crackdown of the past ten years, the only people arrested were the **registered legal representatives**—usually low-income locals or farmers who barely set foot in the hotel, but were offered minor dividends in exchange for taking the fall if needed.

In this industry, *identity was the deepest secret*. No ID needed to join. No contracts. Trust was minimal; ties could be severed instantly. Bosses rarely patronized their own venues, and if they did, they paid just like any regular client. To the girls they slept with, they were just *"a friend of the boss."*

After the crackdown, many girls realized they had nothing to prove they ever worked at Huimei Tianlun. No company name on the badge. No name on the uniform. No signature on the training sheet. Not even on the tip slips.

On the night I left Dongguan, **Boss Liu** of Huimei Tianlun finally picked up the phone. In one of his only direct responses, he mentioned the sauna girls. *"We never kept anyone,"* he said. *"Those girls come and go, right? **Can they even prove they worked here?**"*

More often, he just dragged out his words in repetition: *"You have to do what the government says... You have to do what the government says..."* His tone carried the same **flippant ease** as the laughing cabbies outside Dongguan Station.

Disappearance Is What This City Does Best

On the fourth day of the **pay protest**, out of more than a hundred girls, only **one** showed up. She didn't know where the others had gone. She had no idea where she herself should go next. She crouched outside the hotel and wept helplessly.

Disappearance is what this city does best. More than one girl told me: when they quit the trade, they cut ties with everyone who ever knew what they did for a living. They change numbers, change addresses, and if they ever cross paths on the street again—they pretend they've never met.

I asked A-Jian: if she could start over, what life would she want?

*“Go abroad,” she said. “Leave China. **While working here, I’ve seen businessmen, bosses, officials—even cops—from every corner of the country. I’ve seen them all—and after that, I just felt like I couldn’t go on living.**”*

On February 20, A-Jian bought a train ticket. She was the first among all the girls I interviewed to leave Dongguan. Eleven hundred kilometers away, a little girl who recited Tang poems over the phone gave her a reason to go.

The sauna girls had begun to leave, but life in this little town rolled on. The girl running the spicy skewer stand on **Swan Lake Street** now had to answer the same question five times a day from desperate out-of-towners: *“No lie—there’s not a single sauna open anymore.”* The nail artist, still clumsy with polish, would snap, *“Hey, I’ve only been doing this **four days**”—*exactly four days since the crackdown began. He used to work at one of the venues that got shut down. The woman at the pet shop beside the famous Meibao Hotel had grown short-tempered. Many of the girls who once left their **dogs** in her care never came back. She didn't know what to do with them now.

(Translated from the original Chinese version)