Spatial Agency and Occupation

Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

Evelyn Kwok

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Spatial Agency and Occupation

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Contents

List of Figures vi
Preface: It Takes a Village ix
Acknowledgements xiii
A Note on Terms and Interviewees xiv

Introduction: A Matter of Space and People 1
1. Policy and/vs People: Mobility and Stagnation 36
2. Narratives of Oppression: Servitude, Invisibility and Spacelessness 69
3. Agency and Resistance 96
4. Little Manila and Beyond 127
5. Commodification of Care: Costs and Sacrifices 150
Conclusion: A Matter of Gender, Labour and Space 174

Bibliography 183
Index 201

List of Figures

0.1 Photograph of domestic workers in the Former Central Market Arcade on a Sunday afternoon. 2
0.2 An example of how the site analysis is documented via photography, drawing and annotations. 26
0.3 A floorplan sketch of one interviewee's bedroom produced during fieldwork. 28
0.4 The final digital version of the drawing of DD's bedroom, showing the scale of her occupancy in dotted lines, in the same scale as her employer's child, with whom she shared the room. 29
0.5 A digital image that presents the space the worker has at home, next to the temporary social space she creates for herself and her friends on the footpath that can be expanded, on an elevated walkway on a Sunday. 30
2.1 Drawing of KL's bedroom, where KL and her space are outlined in dotted lines. 76
2.2 Drawing of two scenarios in dotted lines (A and B) of FH's sleeping arrangement. 78
3.1 Map of Central Elevated Walkway. 105
3.2 The cardboard units are often reinforced by string and cable ties connected to the balustrades to create sturdy structures to reside in for the day. 107
3.3 Spaces outside of closed shop fronts in the Former Central Market arcade, which has been renovated and reopened since 2022, were popular with workers because they were completely protected from the weather. 108
3.4 Chater Road hosted the global campaign 'One Billion Rising' on a Sunday in 2015 as hundreds of migrant domestic helpers gathered to participate in choreographed dancing. 110
3.5 Workers gather to practice their dance routine as part of the parade for the 125th anniversary of Philippines Independence Day. 110
3.6 & 3.7 The two photographs show the activities created by Angelique Santos as part of The Essence of Sundays. 111
3.8 Indonesian workers gather in Victoria Park for traditional dance performances on Sunday. 116

4.1 On the Central Elevated Walkways, workers create robust cardboard structures to separate their space from the pedestrians' foot traffic. 129
4.2 It is very common to see workers gather in their spaces to play cards and sing pop songs from their portable karaoke sets. 130
4.3 Card games of all kinds ensue throughout Sunday, in between conversations and sharing food. 131
4.4 Workers create spaces in areas under the elevated walkways for protection from the weather. 131
4.5 Migrant workers come together to celebrate each others' birthdays with food, drinks and customised decorations and balloons. 132
4.6 On Chater Road, many workers find spaces away from the crowds to video call their loved ones, sing songs to them on karaoke sets and make crafts. 133
4.7 Some groups of workers collect extra cardboard pieces for their friends, who may need more to build larger spaces. 133
4.8 In Victoria Park, Indonesian workers like to use plastic mats that can be easily folded and stored and are also suitable for outdoor weather conditions. 134
4.9 Sometimes, plastic sheets and fabric mats are also used by workers, especially if they are sitting in undercover areas like some of the semi-enclosed elevated walkways in Central. 135
4.10 Workers get a lot of joy from singing, especially when they sing with one another or compete against each other. 136
4.11 Cardboard spaces may often appear on both sides of the Central Elevated Walkways, leaving space for the pedestrians in the middle. 137
4.12 Similarly, in Admiralty, a suburb away from Central, the elevated walkways also have workers erect cardboard structures on both sides of the walkway, with just enough room for pedestrian thoroughfare down the middle. 137
4.13 The atrium of the HSBC bank headquarters has been frequently photographed with the workers' Sunday gatherings as a commentary of contrasting the financial giant against a marginalised labour group. 138
4.14 The pedestrian tunnel connecting Chater Road and City Hall is popularly known as the 'Salon'. 139
4.15 'Kilay is life' is an expression known to Filipino women, and many migrant workers love to have their eyebrows fixed and maintained by fellow workers. 139
4.16 Kilay can be seen being offered in many areas in Little Manila, especially if there are special events such as dance performances or parades. 140

4.17 Workers can be seen with large bags and luggage on Sunday, which hold clothing they want to exchange with friends or sell to the public. 141
4.18 Some entrepreneurial locals sell clothing on Chater Road, where they know many workers will be every Sunday. 141
4.19 Many workers suffer from body pain due to long working hours and cannot afford to have a body massage. So on Sundays, they ask their friends to do it. 142
4.20 Every Sunday, an activity that many workers engage in is packing the care packages – *Balikbayan* – to send to their families back home. 143
4.21 These packages are usually filled with daily essentials such as toothpaste and soap, and sometimes clothing and toys. 143
4.22 The packing and sending of the Balikbayan boxes go on all Sundays, no matter the weather conditions. 144
4.23 In Victoria Park, Indonesian workers gather in groups to pray, chant and play musical instruments together. 145
4.24 Birthday celebrations also occur among the Indonesian workers community on Sundays in public space. 146
4.25 Singing and dancing can take place everywhere the workers are, whether they are practising for a competition, rehearsing for a parade or just having fun. 147
4.26 The date of 12 June is Philippines Independence Day and every year there are dance parade practices on several Sundays leading up to the parade. 147
4.27 Sunday 11 June 2023 was the day of the 125th Philippines Independence Day parade. 148

Preface: It Takes a Village

I am an only child from a working-class family, born and raised in Hong Kong and migrated to Australia when I was ten years old. Although I have spent most of my life living in Sydney, the memories of my childhood in Hong Kong are very vivid. From a time when I can remember, my domestic life in our 400 square foot apartment consisted of my mother, I and many others. My mother was a single mother, who worked part-time when I was a baby and picked up full-time employment when I was 2 years old. Before my stepdad came into our lives, I was taken care of by an array of women: part-time nannies, childcare workers, my aunts, my grandmother, and my cousins' migrant domestic worker. As we were a single-income family in a small home, we could not afford a full-time live-in worker, unlike my cousins, who grew up with workers from infancy until the end of their adolescence. My part-time nannies fed me when my mother had to run off to work, the childcare workers entertained me with stories and playground games, I stayed with my grandmother on an outer-laying island outside of the city for weeks over summer, while my cousin's helper picked me up from after-school care, plaited my hair and cleaned my clothes. It took a village of women to raise me, and I am not the exception.

Hong Kong had an economic boom beginning in the late 1960s and the government was encouraging women to enter the formal labour workforce (Wee and Sim, 2005). As such, Hong Kong women became more financially independent and skilled, and demanded a better lifestyle. Women who married and had children remained in the workforce as it was aspirational to have a 9–5 office job in the city. My mother was 15 years old at that time when she began to work outside of the home, earning a small wage cleaning her neighbours' houses alongside her mother, supporting a family with six children living outside the city centre. Gradually, my mother joined the formal workforce in the city.

With the shift of women leaving their homes and entering the formal workforce full-time, a gap was left in domestic work and the Hong Kong government looked to its Southeast Asian neighbours for labour import. Both the Hong Kong and Philippines governments saw the opportunity to partake in the supply and demand of migrant labour and in 1975, 1,000 Filipino women arrived in Hong Kong on designated domestic worker contracts (Law, 2002). After this, the number of Filipino domestic workers entering into Hong Kong steadily increased and the numbers reached 140,500 by 1998 and 189,000 by 2016,

forming the majority of the contingent of migrant domestic workers in the city-state (Research Office-Legislative Council Secretariat, 2017). Nearby southeast Asian countries followed, namely Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Myanmar. From then on, southeast Asian women migrants in Hong Kong became synonymous with domestic work. As of 2022, there are 338,189 migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Immigration Department, 2022b).

Some decades later, I am part of a generation of Hong Kong people who were raised by migrant workers in their homes or had frequent interactions with them throughout their upbringing. Migrant workers were present at school pick-ups and drop-offs, supermarkets, metro stations, public transport, playgrounds and wet markets. Even if I did not grow up with live-in workers, they appeared in many spaces I frequented. I have memories of my cousin's worker who told me about her son, who was the same age as me; she saw him once every two years when she visited her family in Thailand. While she was working in Hong Kong taking care of someone else's children and family to send her wages back to financially support her own family, her child was raised by grandmothers, aunts and neighbours. It also took a village, or rather, a 'chain' of women, to raise her child.

The Global Care Chain demonstrates the cyclic effect where women in many households participating in the 'chain' of domestic work are in a perpetual cycle of such labour (Hochschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2001; Yeates, 2009a). The 'chain' begins in the rural villages in the Philippines, where women move to urban areas to seek work and end up working for families whose mothers may be working abroad. Within those families with members abroad, apart from hiring domestic help, the grandmothers, aunts and female relatives often assist in raising the family, often unpaid. The mother who works abroad is working to allow her employers (especially the mother of that household) to obtain work in the formal economy. Despite not physically doing the domestic tasks, the female employer within the household is not absolved from being responsible for the hiring process of the domestic worker, thus also being responsible for the delegation of domestic tasks to the worker, who is now attending to the tasks she used to do. Within this 'chain' of duty and command, whether the role is to command or enact duties, women partake in many of the roles, no matter their socio-economic status. As such, the Global Care Chain continues, and women in households across labour-sending and labour-receiving nations participate in a continuous chain of domestic servitude. This is not to absolve the reality that men also partake in domestic labour and in many forms that women do, but it is undeniable that there is a higher expectation and social practice of women shouldering these roles, whether the motivations are familial responsibility, love, pressure or coercion, and most often unpaid (Arslan, Alam, Floro, Cha & Kang, 2023).

In the home, I recall how my cousins' worker would usually communicate with us in Cantonese with only limited English. While she would have her dinner

in the kitchen alone, we typically gathered to eat at the dinner table. She also slept on a foldable bed on the floor of my cousin's bedroom. At the time, my 7-year-old mind did not externalise my curiosity; *Why was she not eating her meals with us? Why does she not have a bedroom? Why does she not speak much to the family except for nodding, smiling and only answering to requests?* Perhaps I presumed that she worked for the family but was not part of the 'real' family, especially because she was not Chinese. After nearly two decades of being socialised and educated abroad, all my memories came flooding back when I saw groups of migrant women gathering in public spaces on an ordinary Sunday afternoon. It hit me in that moment: what I saw was no longer just a typical scene on the streets of Hong Kong. That this common and weekly scene of tan-skinned, southeast Asian women sitting on pieces of cardboard speaking to each other (not in Cantonese or English), eating, sleeping, playing card games on footpaths and elevated walkways in front of international bank headquarters and glamourous fashion retailers, is a signifier of something that could not be contained neatly. It is an issue that physically and metaphorically spilled out onto the streets. The issue demonstrates an intersected inequality of ethnic minority, gender, labour and space that was unique to Hong Kong, yet universally unsurprising.

Unique to Hong Kong is its immense population and its contrastingly small landmass, with a population of 7.34 million and useable land mass of 1,089 km^2 and population density of 6,740 people per kilometre (Hong Kong SAR Government Census and Statistics Department, 2023). This means both public and private spaces are small and limited, creating many tightly developed high-rises with high property value. It is one of the most expensive cities to live in the world.[1] This urban spatial condition of small spaces and high value directly impacts on its residents, particularly those who have limited financial resources in accessing adequate housing. Combined with its British colonial political structure abiding by Basic Law, Chinese traditions of the patriarchal family and societal structure at large, and the capitalist economy, Hong Kong created a condition of well-oiled commodification of imported labour and goods, especially migrant domestic labour done by women from less-developed countries and economies (Law, 2001; Lim, 2016; Tam, 2019). The creation of the Foreign Domestic Helper visa was then specifically designed for the workers to remain 'in their place' as it restricts them to a permanently temporary status with no eligibility for citizenship, no matter the years spent in the city-state, denying their capacity to rent a residence of their own, and renumerated with a minimum allowable wage that is not accounted to the minimum wage of citizens. These rules curtail the workers' access to autonomy, mobility and legitimacy beyond their role as a foreigner doing domestic work. Essentially, 'the workers are expected to return "home" when their labour is no longer wanted' (Lee, Johnson & McCahill, 2018). This issue is also universally familiar, in that it is a migrant group that is stereotyped to attend a low-skilled job that people in the host country do not usually do;

Mexican care workers in the United States, Pakistani and Bangladeshi low-skilled construction labourers in the Gulf countries, Filipino caregivers in Canada and so on. The migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, the majority of who are from Indonesia or the Philippines, are legally required to live in their employers' homes. Therefore, every Sunday, on their weekly day off work, they create their own community spaces and networks in public spaces all over the city. Although their work has contributed to several generations of people in Hong Kong being able to partake in the formal economy and flourish, their status remains controlled and marginalised with limited economic, social and spatial resources. Maggy Lee, Mark Johnson and Michael McCahill say:

> Migration control is not simply about keeping people out; it is also concerned with producing, sorting, and admitting 'desirable' temporary workers based on particular forms of differential inclusion and ideologies of race, gender, and nation. (2018, p. 13)

My research began in 2012 on an ordinary Sunday, when what was seen, could no longer be unseen. This is where it begins.

Note

1. According to global consulting firm Mercer, Hong Kong is the no.1 city in the world, with the highest cost of living in 2023. Over the last decade, it has always been in the top ten most costly cities in the world, alongside cities like New York, Zurich and Singapore (Mercer, 2023).

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The research for this book originated from my PhD project at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia between 2012–2018. From 2019 onwards, I relocated to Hong Kong and since then, the world has changed and shifted in many unexpected ways, along with my research. Firstly, my deepest thanks go to the editor of this series, Franklin Obeng Odoom, Professor of Global Development Studies at the University of Helsinki, whom I met a decade ago at the beginning of my PhD, as a colleague and friend. He saw the validity and clarity in my work well before I was aware, and he continued to show encouragement throughout the years, even after we went our separate ways to different parts of the world. My thanks also extend to Sarah Foyle, Sam Johnson, colleagues at Edinburgh University Press and the reviewers of the manuscript.

The book could not have been written without the generosity of the migrant domestic workers I met over the last decade, who spent time with me sharing their stories, goals and dreams over food, laughs and tears. I am deeply aware that they are real people beyond the words I have represented them with here, and that their compromises, sacrifices and resilience are very real and ongoing. I am honoured and humbled by their perseverance for a better life for themselves and those around them.

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A Note on Terms and Interviewees

This book focuses on the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, who are legally called Foreign Domestic Helpers. There are terms used throughout the book to represent migrant domestic workers varying from 'workers', 'migrant workers' and 'domestic workers'.

As the majority of migrant domestic workers are women, all interviewees featured in this book are women. This book features stories from twenty-five workers, selected from eighty-seven formal interviews and fieldwork data collected between 2013–2023. Their names have been changed into acronyms or altered to uphold anonymity.

Introduction: A Matter of Space and People

Sunday: a public encounter

It was a typical Sunday afternoon, and I was walking along the Central Elevated Walkway, towards the International Finance Centre shopping mall in the Central Business District on Hong Kong Island. The Central Elevated Walkway is a system of elevated walkways that connect over twenty-five buildings in the area. Such is a typical urban wonder of cities like Hong Kong, where the walkways create an alternative network of paths above ground level for people to access the various transport hubs and commercial towers without setting foot on the street.

As a spatial design researcher, I am interested in the way public space is activated and appropriated by city users. Throughout my creative practice, I focused on how people have used and transformed public space for their own purposes and the emergence of temporary urban spaces. Protests, public assemblies, flash mobs, skateboarders and other kinds of temporary interventions all fascinated me with their alternative and subversive use of public space. There has been a long-standing global phenomenon of small- and large-scale spatial contestations, and my practice was significantly informed by various philosophers and artists' ways of reimagining and remapping cities in two-dimensional and three-dimensional ways that suggested different ways of occupying the city. Thus, some ten years ago, I began to look at Hong Kong's urban spaces through this lens.

On this Sunday on the elevated walkways, I began noticing that these spaces were used differently than on the weekdays. They were not just conduits for office workers and consumers to access the various shopping malls and office towers. They were also a site for migrant domestic workers to gather. I was motivated to document these spaces of aboveground circulation.

As I wandered through the Former Central Market arcade, most of the shops were closed with their shutters down. With the row of shutters to my right and an empty public exhibition space to my left, the arcade served as a pedestrian corridor for a steady flow of tourists and locals.[1] My focus shifted to people sitting on the floor in front of them. Groups of women sat on flat cardboard boxes; eating, chatting, sleeping or applying beauty routines to themselves and others. Small suitcases and various personal items were arranged to form new sets of delineated spaces. Some groups stood their cardboard boxes upright, others opened umbrellas to act as barriers between the pedestrians and themselves. Shoes were

placed on the periphery of the cardboard mats, resembling the common Asian practice of removing shoes when entering the home. Some of the women had their backs turned away from the footpath, denying eye contact with pedestrians. Absorbing the details of the scene in front of me, it became evident that I was seeing where migrant domestic workers come together informally to socialise and to have some space of their own. Connecting the dots between my personal interactions with my cousins' worker during my childhood and other disparate pieces of related information to the scene in front of me, it made sense in ways it never did before. I was overwhelmed by the intensity of their collective appearance and occupation of public space.

A few moments later I reached the end of the arcade and witnessed more migrant domestic workers occupying the next section of the Central Elevated Walkway; the U-shaped elevated walkway that connects to the Hang Seng Bank tower. Unlike the enclosed arcade, this section has glass balustrades, providing unhindered views of the streets below. Here the groups of workers were leaning against the glass panels which, when viewed from the street, can offer a sense that the people are floating in an elevated space within the density of the city. In this elevated walkway, the groups were also seated on flattened

Figure 0.1 Photograph of domestic workers in the Former Central Market Arcade on a Sunday afternoon. (Photograph by author).

cardboard boxes, although they did not make vertical dividers between their occupancy and the pedestrians. The width of the walkway was narrower than the arcade and I was following the pedestrians in front of me in single file, moving uncomfortably through and between groups of seated women, who seemed to be intensely focused on each other and their conversations in Tagalog, an Austronesian language native to the Philippines (its standardised form is Filipino, which is the official language of the Philippines alongside English). It was an uncomfortable experience because it felt as though I was entering a private space where women were engaged in domestic activities. Informally speaking to Hong Kong locals about this phenomenon on Sunday, many expressed their frustration at how congested, dirty or noisy Central (the district) had become due to the overbearing number of migrant domestic workers. By contrast, when I heard Filipino workers talk about Sunday, many of them affectionately called Central 'Little Manila', which is a commonly used term to describe their gatherings in Central (Law, 2001; Tam, 2016; Kwok, 2019).

The distribution of the population of migrant domestic workers is split almost evenly between the Philippines and Indonesia (Government of Hong Kong SAR, 2019). On Sunday, Central Hong Kong's overpasses, walkways and pockets of public space are dominated by Filipino migrant domestic workers while Indonesian migrant domestic workers gather in Victoria Park, some three kilometres away in Causeway Bay and proliferate in many public spaces throughout other suburbs and territories. In Central, different urban interior and exterior spaces – formally and informally – offer a range of goods and services to the Filipino community. World Wide House provides Filipino food and magazines, World Wide Lane sells international phone cards, Chater Road provides open spaces for choreographed dancing and political rallies and Connaught Road Central becomes a packing and loading zone for care packages enroute to the Philippines. On early Sunday mornings, pieces of cardboard boxes can be seen, laid flat, in various parts of Central – on the Central Elevated Walkway, the ground-floor atrium of the HSBC headquarters building, various underpasses and sheltered footpaths – symbolising the informal demarcation of such public spaces. These pieces of cardboard are eventually used by the migrant workers to construct makeshift home-bases for temporary inhabitation between errands that day. Every Sunday, specific public spaces in Central are linked by the ritualised inhabitations of migrant domestic workers. What emerges is a unique ecology; a temporary but repeated socio-spatial system of overlapping spaces of an ethnic enclave, a site of contention between the citizens and the workers, and the recreation of a series of domestic spaces. Further, it reflects the problems within the labour conditions, whereby workers have no legal access to a home of their own outside of the workplace, intersected with low wages, temporary residency status and deregulated working hours. Migrant domestic workers are a

socially, economically and spatially marginalised group that makes up 5% of the city-state's population.

The scope: space and people

This book explores the socio-spatial phenomenon of the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong through the intersection of space, economics, gender and labour. The scope will begin with introducing the physical context of Hong Kong through *space* and the migrant workers as *people*.

Space

Hong Kong is located on China's south coast, connected by land to the Chinese Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen and enclosed by the South China Sea and Pearl River Delta, with a total useable land mass of 1,089 km^2 and a population of 7.34 million (Hong Kong SAR Government Census and Statistics Department, 2023). Hong Kong SAR consists of Hong Kong Island, the Kowloon peninsula, New Territories and 200 small offshore islands. Hong Kong's geographic terrain is mountainous, with hills and slopes throughout Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon peninsula. Approximately 25% of Hong Kong's land is available for urban development, with the majority in Kowloon, the north coastal edge of Hong Kong Island and scattered areas of New Territories. Victoria Harbour runs between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, separating their corporate and commercial skyscraper-dominated skylines. Hong Kong's urban density may seem complex and chaotic as shopping malls, hotels, corporate towers and residential towers ascend in quick succession and intense proximity, merging and blurring spatial and programmatic boundaries. Architects Adam Frampton, Jonathan Solomon and Clara Wong summarise Hong Kong's urban planning strategy as 'a combination of top-down planning and bottom-up solutions, a unique collaboration between pragmatic thinking and comprehensive master planning, played out in three dimensional space' (Frampton, Solomon & Wong, 2012, p. 6).

In Central, the commercial district of Hong Kong Island where the migrant domestic workers from the Philippines congregate every Sunday, the compact density is specifically aided by subterranean and vertical connective spaces. These public spaces are predominantly privately-owned public spaces which are regulated with various modes of surveillance such as frequent security patrols, closed-circuit television and numerous signs to imply a strict sense of spatial order and regulated public behaviour. Homeless people, buskers and other disenfranchised minorities who cannot afford admission into these spaces by means of consumption discover opportunities in the liminal spaces that are in between. Every Sunday, groups of migrant workers inhabit such liminal spaces: elevated walkways, corporate atriums, underpasses, open stairways and pedestrianised

roads. In doing so, they transform these spaces by enacting their agency in ways that create new spatialities and histories.

Hong Kong's colonial history and postcolonial political landscape have shaped its unique cultural identity, which can be easily overlooked as an archetype of 'East meets West' (Abbas, 1997; Mathews, Ma & Lui, 2008), with East being the Chinese ethnic origin of Hong Kong and West referring to British occupation (1842–1997). Yet, to categorise Hong Kong's cultural identity as a bifurcation of cultures is too generic. Rather, it has been moulded by the complexity of the intertwined strands of Chinese, British colonial and postcolonial influences, in addition to laissez-faire economic practices, which have created a strange amalgamation embodying aspects of capitalist cosmopolitanism, traditional Chinese paternalistic and patriarchal values, and international progressiveness. This intricate identity has formed the foundation for Hong Kong people's lifestyle and their identification with certain politics and freedoms. Over the last decade, with many large-scale social events that resulted in various changes to its political structure, the city-state is and continues to undergo significant social, cultural, political and economic changes.

Hong Kong became a British colony in 1842, and the Sino-British treaty between the British and Chinese governments was signed in 1984, establishing the 'one country, two systems' policy, under which Hong Kong's rule of law and economic system were promised to remain unchanged for fifty years after the handover, between 1997 and 2047. This was to benefit both Britain and China, as it ensured the continuation of Hong Kong's capitalist mixed service economy, which is distinctly different to China's authoritarian, planned economy, while activating a gradual transition of ties to China towards 2047 (Lim, 2015, p. 4). Hong Kong's postcolonial, diverse socio-cultural identity offers a unique political, social and urban-spatial context to this book, which sets the scene for the socio-spatial ecology that the migrant domestic workers create and dwell in.

People

Migrant domestic workers are live-in domestic workers employed on a two-year contractual basis, earning a minimum wage of HK$4,870 each month, which is approximately US$622 (Hong Kong Immigration Department, 2023). According to their contract, they have one weekly rest day and other specified working conditions (Hong Kong Immigration Department, 2022a). They are responsible for all domestic duties within the home, including caring for the children and elderly who reside in the home. Their legal monthly wage is substantially below the Hong Kong citizens' minimum wage of HK$40 per hour, which equates to a monthly salary of HK$16,300, approximately US$2,083 (Hong Kong SAR Labour Department, 2023b). From fieldwork data collected between 2012–2017 and 2019–2022, nearly half of the eighty-seven workers who were formally interviewed earn less than the legal minimum amount or 10–20% below

that, many due to private negotiations with recruitment agencies and employers. The overwhelming majority of the people entering into Hong Kong under the Foreign Domestic Helper visa are women. Many of these women leave behind their families in their home country to come to Hong Kong alone, and work as domestic helpers for middle- to high-income families.

According to the legal specifications, migrant domestic workers are required to live in their employers' homes. These workers have no legal access to rent property on their own. Due to the limitations of apartment sizes in Hong Kong and very little specifications about the provision of private spaces in the contract, the most common sleeping arrangement for domestic workers is a makeshift bed on the floor of the children's bedroom or one that is temporarily placed in the living area and used only when the rest of the family have retreated to their bedrooms. Such spatial restrictions and lack of separate spaces within the home have a significant impact on the workers' capacity to have privacy, autonomy and refuge within the home that is also their workplace, where they spend most of their time in Hong Kong. Beyond being economically marginalised, the workers are also spatially restricted.

Migrant domestic workers from the Philippines first entered Hong Kong in 1975 (Law, 2002). As Hong Kong's economy continued to grow, migrant domestic labour continued to be in demand, with the number of migrant domestic workers growing from 30,000 to 380,000 between 1990–2020, thus supporting the economy indirectly by fulfilling the domestic roles of local women (Chiu, 2003; Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, 1992; 2020; Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2022b). Despite the importance of their roles, migrant domestic workers are one of the most marginalised workforces in Hong Kong due to their low income, inflexibility over their work, no choice over their place of accommodation and no right to permanent residency. Their identity, status and occupancy in the domestic and public realm are marginalised and contested.

Employment process

Before the workers set foot in Hong Kong, their employment process begins with applying for the Foreign Domestic Helper visa with a potential employer. This is often not a smooth, straightforward process and is rife with potential for exploitation, negotiations and miscommunications.

In the sample migrant domestic worker employment contract provided by the Hong Kong Immigration Department (2022), there are subtle disparities between the Chinese and English versions that subsequently alter the perception and portrayal of the migrant worker and their relationship with the employer. The formal legal term 'Foreign Domestic Helper' in the English contract is represented in the Chinese version as '*外國聘用家庭傭工*', which translates to 'Hired Family Servant from Overseas'. The disparity between the English and the Chinese

legal representation is problematic, as there are significant implications within 'Helper' and 'Servant', 'Domestic' and 'Family'. A 'helper' is someone who helps with an activity, which does not automatically denote the person to a lower status or belonging to the person who he or she is helping (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). In contrast, a 'servant' is defined as 'a person who is employed in another person's house, doing jobs such as cooking and cleaning, especially in the past' (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). There is an unsaid and well-practiced expectation of a servant obeying rules and being under the control of an employer or master who is of higher status economically and socially. Subsequently, the terms 'Foreign Domestic Helper' and 'Hired Family Servant from Overseas' are inconsistent in their Chinese and English translations, thus falsely representing their meaning. The implication of the role remains ambiguous as the concept of servitude and obedience is lost from the Chinese to the English translation. There are also differences between 'domestic' and 'family' as 'domestic' refers to the home or the household, while 'family' inscribes a close relation between spouses, parents and children. The migrant worker is an individual who is not related to the employer by name or by blood. They are hired on a professional basis to perform domestic duties and not family duties. In this situation, domestic duties are recognised as paid labour, while family duties can be perceived as a moral obligation. The migrant worker is not working for the employer due to moral obligation. However, the misuse of terminology, misconstrued meanings and expectations can impact how employers interact with the migrant workers. An example of how the language used has direct impact on the workers was in 1997, when the Hong Kong government reduced the domestic workers' legal minimum wage due to the financial crisis. At the time, the argument used to justify this was that the workers are 'members of the family' and should also bear the sacrifices that the citizens were facing (Wee & Sim, 2005). This 'member of the family' identity is used often in many circumstances publicly and privately as a means to justify control and continue to access cheap domestic labour (Constable, 2007).

The Chinese representation of 'Foreign Domestic Helper' as 'Hired Family Servant from Overseas' is dishonest as the term abstracts the pragmatic differences between a paid assistant and a person who is morally obliged to obey orders. The Chinese version of the employment contract further suggests a master-servant relationship between the employer and the migrant worker as the English contract uses the term 'Employer', while the Chinese version uses the term '*雇主*', which translates to 'Employer, Hirer or Master'. This term in the Chinese contract openly prompts an ambiguous power imbalance between the 'Hired Family Servant from Overseas' and the 'Employer/Hirer/Master'. Despite the inequality between employers and employees, the English version portrays a more professional employment relationship between the 'Foreign Domestic Helper' and the 'Employer'. Many employers of migrant domestic workers are Hong Kong Chinese, which gives them access to both the Chinese

and English versions of the contract. On the other hand, the migrant workers are not of Chinese background, which limits them to reading the English version of the employment contract only. Therefore, the disparities in translations between the two language versions disadvantage the workers as the Hong Kong Chinese employers have the discretion to command the terms of employment that denote the master-servant relationship. As a result, these gaps encourage the identity of the employer as the master and the migrant worker as the servant. On the other hand, the migrant worker agrees to a more professional, upfront employee-employer relationship that is suggested in the English version of the employment contract. The disparities of terms in the contract extend beyond legalities to the perception and identity of the worker. One simple and prominent example is the way they are colloquially addressed condescendingly in Cantonese as '賓妹', which directly translates to 'Filipina girl' and is understood as 'Filipina maids' even when they may not be from the Philippines and erases the fact that they are grown adult women who may likely be the breadwinners of their families. The way the domestic workers are represented in language has direct impact on the way they are consequently treated.

Contracts, fees and debts

The disparities in representation contribute to the role and identity of the migrant domestic workers, making them more open to manipulation or exploitation by their employers and the recruitment agencies. To begin, the employment process can be aided in several ways: through agencies in both the labour-sending and labour-receiving countries, online platforms, and referrals by friends and family members. Assistance by agencies is the costliest for both the employer and employee, and increases the chance of the worker being exploited by the agencies due to illegal fees that can lead to the accumulation of months of debt before they have even begun their employment (Hong Kong Helper's Campaign, 2023; Lindio-McGovern, 2013, pp. 45–53; Mission for Migrant Workers, 2018). Online platforms such as HelperChoice minimise the agency fee and allow workers and employers to post job advertisements and connect with transparency for a small fee (HelperChoice, 2023). Personal referrals are usually the most direct way to connect for employers and employees, with no third-party charges, yet it does not negate exploitative situations over verbal agreements and personal communications.

To understand the process of employing a migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong, I spoke in 2021 and 2022 to three employment agencies based in Hong Kong – Overseas Employment Centre Ltd, Sunlight Employment Agency and Fair Employment Agency Ltd – and the Immigration Department. Legally, all migrant domestic workers must submit a Standard Employment Contract as specified by the Immigration Department in Hong Kong, which then creates a Foreign Domestic Helper employment visa (Hong Kong SAR Immigration

Department, 2022a). The paperwork can be supplied directly by the potential employer in Hong Kong, which often is the case when workers are referred by friends who are already workers in Hong Kong, and they may meet their potential employer over the phone, and details are agreed upon without a recruitment agency. In cases where the employer looks for a worker through an agency, the agency will charge service fees that include consulate processing fees, translation fees and any other fees they outline necessary to fulfil the process of selection, communication and delivery of the worker from the labour-sending country to the doorstep of the Hong Kong employer. In the labour-sending country, a worker may speak to an employment agency and pay a fee to put their information into the database and wait to be contacted by them when an inquiry has been made by a potential employer. Once an inquiry is made, the agency sets up a virtual meeting with the potential employer, who may also be assisted by an agency in Hong Kong to meet the potential employee. If both the employer and employee agree with the details of employment, then the agency in the labour-sending country will charge a fee to the employee and the employment visa and paperwork processes will begin. In most cases, it can take between two to four weeks for the employment contract and visa to be approved by the Hong Kong Immigration Department.

The area where workers can be exploited before they even begin working is by the unregulated fees charged by the agencies. In Hong Kong, the Philippines and Indonesia, the employment agencies are unregulated and privatised. Agencies establish fees that are comparable to the market rate, that is, the rates that are charged by other agencies. Years of establishment, number of successfully fulfilled employment contracts and promises for good quality workers are often the basis for justifying the service charges. For employers, agency fees vary depending on the country the desired worker is from, as exemplified in the Overseas Employment Centre Ltd fee listed on their website; the fees for a worker from the Philippines and Indonesia are at the highest at HK$11,980 and HK$12,980, while the fees for a Burmese or Sri Lankan worker are HK$9,980 and HK$6,980 respectively (Overseas Employment Centre Ltd., 2023). Some workers also may take out a loan in their home country to be able to afford the agency fees, which results in debt bondage. Debt bondage has affected mostly Indonesian workers as it is systematic and built into the structure of labour export from Indonesia, as debts are incurred by the training fees, medical examination fees, travel and administrative costs, and the agencies inflate these costs and may even be double charging the employers and the workers (Sim, 2009). The term bondage is used here as the workers use the income produced by their labour to pay off the debt they have incurred (Wee & Sim, 2005; Sim, 2009; Lindio-McGovern, 2013; Amnesty International, 2013).

Since 2020, one of the mandatory requirements is also proof of vaccination records considering the global pandemic. The migrant domestic worker pays

another fee to the Hong Kong agency as a receiving fee to obtain their employment visa, prior to meeting their assigned employer. They do not have the opportunity to select their employer; rather they are given a description of the makeup of the household and any specific duties such as taking care of an elderly person, an infant or anyone in need of disability care. The exact details of where they live, who the employers are and any other details about the family are arbitrarily given. The employer, on the other hand, selects the workers from a database provided by the recruitment agency. This database has every worker's full name, age, gender, marital status, number of children if they have any, their town of origin, education and work experience. The database also has portrait and profile photos of the workers, and in some cases full body length photographs. In these photographs, the workers are dressed in a uniform provided by the agency. Some may be wearing a simple t-shirt or shirt, while the attire of others may resemble a typical colonial housekeeping uniform.

This employment process is considered a legal operation from both the labour-sending and labour-receiving countries. The airfares, training program and agency fees paid in both countries can add to upwards of HK$13,000, equal to nearly three months of the minimum wage salary. From a series of video interviews published in South China Morning Post (2015), fees for the training program are around HK$4,500 and agency fees can add up to HK$8,600. In some cases, as the recruitment agencies are privatised and remain unregulated by their respective governments, the fees required can be dearer and more disproportionate to the income of the migrant worker. This leads to an accumulated debt prior to the commencement of their employment that can take up to twelve months to repay. From the eighty-seven workers I formally interviewed, seventy-five of them had no less than three months' worth of their wages accumulated in debt when they first arrived in Hong Kong. The way they pay off their debts is through monthly payments. For the majority of them, alongside their responsibility to remit their wages back home, it took an average of ten months to pay their debts off completely.

From the outset, before the migrant domestic worker has set foot in Hong Kong, they are already labouring under assumed ideas of servitude, service and employment that are inscribed in language and well-accepted practices. Their gender, lack of choices and economic dependency place them in a position that makes them more susceptible to coercive actions.

Within the restricted domestic environment, low wages and bound by the two-year temporary residency, these migrant workers uphold their agreement to the contract by abiding their employers' needs to complete domestic tasks as required, speak English or Cantonese only, wear appropriate attire as requested, eat, rest and sleep at designated times and in allocated spaces in the homes. On their one day off work, usually a Sunday, the workers seek a space of their own, where they can be free to be themselves. Among the highly regulated

public spaces that surround international hotels, shopping malls and designer fashion houses, these migrant women seek opportunities in the public spaces in between. Apart from the network of elevated walkways that connect commercial towers, underpasses and public atriums, even the make-believe domestic diorama at IKEA and just about any piece of unoccupied public space may be rife with potential for the workers to occupy on their day off work. The workers demonstrate their resourcefulness further by collecting found cardboard boxes, or purchasing them from a few local opportunists who sell the cardboard pieces cheaply and deliver them to their designated spots every Sunday morning. With these cardboard pieces, the migrant workers construct temporary units of their own, which they eat, sleep and gather in and occupy as their temporary homes alongside the pedestrian traffic and consumerist fanfare. Beyond spaces for rest and domestic activities, there are other spaces that are appropriated as areas for mass gatherings, packing and sending of care packages postmarked for their home countries, karaoke and dance competitions – all of which make up the unique socio-spatial ecology where these migrant women seek refuge and respite and demonstrate their resistance on full display. In doing so, they have created a migrant enclave that constantly demonstrates to the public in plain sight the socio-spatial restrictions they endure for six days each week, under their labour conditions that are usually invisible to the public.

In the commercial and finance hub of Central, or rather Little Manila on Sundays, Filipino migrant domestic workers gather in groups according to the Filipino provinces they originate from, evoking a sense of being at home but away from home. In these areas, the workers are not bound by the same rules and restrictions as in their employers' homes. Instead, they are able to speak their own language, dress the way they like, eat the food they want, construct spaces with various degrees of privacy and have the choice to be themselves without the scrutiny of their employers, albeit temporarily. Beyond Central, Indonesian workers gather in Causeway Bay, Kowloon Park and in many other suburbs. Every Sunday, as the workers appropriate and transform public space to reconstruct their own domestic interior, the spatial phenomenon dominates the urban landscape of Hong Kong.

Existing research and addressing the intersected problem

Existing research on migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong from an interdisciplinary perspective is scarce. The topic has yet to be examined through the interrelationships between the systemic problems of their labour, the subsequent socio-spatial oppressions they face, the reclamation of autonomy through the ritualistic occupation of public space and its transformation into a community of resilience. Currently, sociologists have interwoven ethnographic data to understand the social and cultural power relations between the employer and employee

(Constable, 1997; 2003), compared the lives of different migrant domestic workers in different cities to reveal the marginalisation and the inherent exploitations and disadvantages of women migrant domestic labourers (Parreñas, 2001; 2008), examined how globalisation and labour export have systemically disenfranchised migrant workers and the labour-sending nations within the global economy (Lindio-McGovern, 2013), and illustrated narratives of workers' powerlessness, repression, alienation upon return and identity transformation (Ladegaard, 2016; 2023). All of these works are paramount literature and contain decades of dedicated research that engage with migrant domestic workers within local and global contexts. However, the questions that I intend to propose in this book are:

1) How does the Foreign Domestic Helpers' occupation of public space reflect the problems they endure in the workplace that is also their home, specific to the labour and spatial conditions in Hong Kong?
2) What are the local and international contexts in which they operate that allow this systemic oppression to be accepted and overlooked as common practice, and why are they so prevalent?
3) What activities do the workers engage in, in public space and privately, that cultivate resilience and agency?
4) Furthermore, how does the intersection of the migrant domestic workers' wages, gender and labour further their marginalisation?

These are the four research questions that the chapters of this book will be responding to.

The existing scholarship on migration labour does not address these questions. Urban economics provides well-developed analytical tools to address questions on migration. However, the dominant approach to migration in urban economics is informed by the neoclassical school and the new economics of labour migration, whether in the media (e.g., *The Economist*), in popular writings such as *Arrival City* (Saunders, 2010) or in more scholarly works such as the Harris-Todaro Model (see, for a review, Obeng-Odoom, 2013; 2016; 2017; 2022; 2023). According to this set of orthodox approaches, migrants move to acquire skills and financial reward for labour in the host nation and may have the intention to gain mobility in the host nation or return home with the skills to help out their own country. This orthodoxy purports a view of 'brain circulation' instead of 'brain drain', the latter typically associated with conservative approaches to migration. Although it is arguably a more humanistic approach, it is problematic for four reasons. First, the temporariness of migration labour is hardly questioned (Rosewarne, 2010; 2012). Second, the problems associated with returning to the home country that is not structurally ready to receive them with upward employment, which causes stagnation and underemployment (Parreñas, 2008; Constable, 2014). Third, migrants' social identity post-integration and assimilation in the

host nation leads to a common mindset of being superior to those who have stayed, which reinforces the movement of people in the first place (Parreñas, 2001; 2008; Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki, 2017; Constable, 2021). Fourth, the dominant approach neglects urban land rent, a consequential institution in the migration experience (Obeng-Odoom, 2017; 2022; 2023), and as in the specific case of the migrant workers focused on in this book, the enforced cohabitation of the workers with their employers is the root of many problems, especially compounded by the power relations between employees and employers that becomes the ground where all kinds of exploitations occur (Kwok, 2019; Lee, Johnson & McCahill, 2018). In *Urban Land Rent*, Anne Haila argues the importance of urban land and how it is valued, managed and used, as it is the centre of any analysis of the economy or the city (2016). She coins the term 'Property State' to specifically describe Singapore and Hong Kong to demonstrate how land rent is an important source of revenue and profit and how the property sector has to be understood as an important contributor to economic growth (Ho, 2021, p. 326; Haila, 2000, p. 2249). Further, she draws on this concept to describe the ability of the state to use land as a resource for public good and as a source of public revenue (2016, pp. 15–17). The privatisation of public space and the 'Property State' housing situation in Hong Kong have direct impact on the lack of both public and private space for the migrant workers. The lack of provision of adequate housing outside of the employers' homes and the denial of renting their own home strips away the workers' power to access land in Hong Kong, even temporarily (two years at a time as per their employment visa). This inaccessibility prevents them from direct contribution to the economy that could be accounted for concretely in numbers, which if this were to be the case, could possibly be used to demand better working conditions and wages. Their inability to rent their own home consequently strips the workers from collective bargaining powers in Hong Kong. Discussing this spatial and social issue requires an interdisciplinary understanding and a necessary focus on Hong Kong.

Beyond problems in their workplace, a look at the motivations behind the migration of the workers reveals the unemployment problems of their home countries and the encouragement of overseas work by their governments (Parreñas, 2008a, pp. 27–31). This is intertwined with the economy of remittances, thus linking to a larger framework of national and global political economy (Obeng-Odoom, 2022). These components must be understood to address the socio-spatial inequality and commodification of the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and the significance of their agency, through the ritualistic occupation and transformation of public space and other socio-cultural activities they engage in.

Stuart Rosewarne puts forward that migrant workers are being exploited and commodified, despite being able to escape unemployment in their home countries (2012). He argues that while the workers are employed, they are engaging in

informal labour that does not further their future career prospects. They are also employed contractually, which renders them as temporary residents in countries where they lack civil rights, and their legitimacy to stay in the country is tied directly to their employers. This also means they are in a perpetual state of marginalisation, lacking political, economic and social freedoms. This is definitely the case for migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. Overall, Rosewarne claims the commodification of migrant labour is emphasised by the women workers' lack of physical and financial mobility. An important point that he notes is while migration labour might be an empowering move for women in the global south, the remittance programs and temporariness of their labour take advantage of their labour and inevitably create an imbalance where the women are sacrificing their labour, family and community life for what is systematically not supporting them (Ibid.). This concept of the feminisation of migrant labour where there is an overwhelming number of women participating in migrant domestic labour, particularly in South-East Asia, is important to address and has been explored by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, Ligaya Lindio-McGovern and many other gendered migration labour studies scholars (Parreñas 2001; 2008a; Gibson, Law & McKay, 2001; Elias, 2010; Lindio-McGovern, 2013; Lim, 2016; Fresnoza-Flot & Shinozaki, 2017). However, migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong have specifically not been of focus or have been mentioned only as part of the larger contingent of Filipino migrant workers. It is paramount to establish a thorough understanding of the socio-spatial specificity of the labour to see how the experience in Hong Kong can provide valuable insights on the conditions of the lives of migrant workers. Maria Floro's work engages ways in which globalisation and neoliberal policies shape many aspects of the development of women's place in the global economy (Beneria, Berik & Floro, 2016). Her works emphasise the important interconnections between the global north and south, incorporating the field of gender and development to contribute to policy and action to reach an interdisciplinary audience (See in more detail, Ibid.; Beneria & Floro, 2005; Floro, 1995). The economic, spatial and social marginalisation women experience is symptomatic and has key impact on a much larger global issue of the commodification and simultaneous devaluing of care and domestic work, often participated in by women, especially those who are from less-developed economies.

Interlinked to the commodification and feminisation of migration labour is the economic landscape it operates in. Alexandre Abreu argues that the new economics of labour migration should be regarded as a 'reworked' version of the neoclassical theoretical framework, which ultimately is insufficient and individualist (2012). It is limiting as it does not consider the constraints at the structural level that shape migration dynamics, nor for individual migrant agency interacting with the structure that it is informed and constrained by, emphasising that

> The New Economics of Labour Migration has in fact been little more than an avatar of the neoclassical approach in which only marginal concessions and changes were made, while the core rationality, methodological individualism, lack of regard for structural trends and constraints remained untouched. (Ibid., p. 64)

Abreu's reasons for a new 'historical-structural synthesis' are a more satisfactory alternative to both the new economics of labour migration and the standard neoclassical theory. As mentioned, migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are often discussed and understood as part of the millions of migrant workers worldwide or are often subsumed within the group of Filipino or Indonesian migrant domestic workers. This subsumption obscures the workers' experiences of specific marginalisation in Hong Kong that has been uniquely shaped by the city state's social, cultural, economic and spatial forces. Further, an important part that is missing within New Economics of Labour Migration is the impact of individual migrant agency, as the title of the book emphasises *spatial agency*; that is a moulding of the individual by space and reciprocally, the space is shaped by the individual. It has been the general practice within existing literature to speak of and view the workers as a sector of migrant workers from the labour-sending nations. There are practical reasons to analyse and understand the issue from a macro perspective; however the collective is made up of many individual workers and their families, and the significance of individuals' motivations, identity and agency should be explored. The key point here is that this book addresses these many gaps and moves our understanding and actions forward, as fundamentally, the manner in which mainstream (urban) economics addresses questions of identities and power relations is problematic. The issue of identity has been seen as a niche issue in economics, in that focusing on certain aspects such as race and religion has the tendency to be side-lined as 'identity politics' (Burnazoglu, 2023; Ozkul, 2019). Failing to distinguish between 'identity politics', which challenges the oppression of certain identities, and Identity Politics, which excludes others for its own gain, has serious ramifications for research, policy and practice (Obeng-Odoom, 2022, p. 7; Darity, 2021). Current social and political movements use identity politics to challenge the centralised notion of the 'average man' and moving away from this reference point opens the discussion of identity beyond the dichotomous structure of what is considered 'normal' and 'abnormal' (Burnazoglu, 2023, p. 12). In addition to edging away from this so-called normality, the idea of the 'average man' is often the average, white man, which has clear limitations in being used as a norm to understand women migrant workers in Hong Kong, who originate from non-white dominant nations in the global south. Merve Burnazoglu asserts that 'Objectivity, rationality, universality all appears for default man ("reference man"), but "seeing the world from a female perspective … is niche, ideological"' (2023, p. 15; Criado-Perez, 2019, p. 22). Stratification economics and feminist economics are possible alternative

approaches to the standard economic approach of the 'average man' and are gaining momentum in demonstrating what is at stake, as they

> Focus on economic and political institutions in search of a deeper, systemic, and intersectional understanding of the mechanisms behind inequalities by looking at the interplay between identity and structurally discriminating and excluding labour markets and their consequent inequalities. (Burnazoglu, 2023, p. 13)

Evidently, to adequately address the intersected issue of the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and contribute to the existing scholarship of the topic at large, an interdisciplinary framework combining economics, space, gender migration and labour must be used.

Ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, spatial analysis and drawing as methods of urban political economy

Interviews: positionality and power dynamics

One way of addressing the issues concerning migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and expanding the study of these issues is to focus on the quality of the study's data. This book uses combined fieldwork data collected in Hong Kong from 2012–2018 for my doctoral research, and in addition for this book between 2020–2023. During these years, I have formally interviewed eighty-seven migrant domestic workers and have met and had informal conversations with more than 100. Before the pandemic, interviews were conducted in public spaces. In the later period during the global pandemic of COVID-19, interviews were conducted at a safe physical distance in public space, over the phone or on Zoom. Throughout the early years of the pandemic, Hong Kong had many stages of restrictions on public gatherings, which also significantly impacted on the migrant workers' daily lives; the way they engage with their duties inside and outside of the home, the way they gather in public space on their day off work, their access to healthcare, and other factors that furthered their marginalisation. In early 2022, there were cases reported regarding mistreatment of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong in instances where workers were sacked, locked out of their employers' homes and denied hospital treatment when they contracted COVID-19 (Wai, 2022). Lisa Law, Simona Azzali and Sheila Conejos discussed how temporary urbanism has resulted in the time of COVID-19; however there was no specific reference to how migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong have been adapting to new social distancing measures in public space and beyond (Law, Azzali & Conejos, 2021). This book will include discussions on the negative impact the pandemic has had on the migrant workers in Hong Kong.

Ethnographic research is almost always messy. It is messy because it is conducted by people with people, and people are inherently influenced by and are products of societal constructs, politicised ideals and contextual identities. Being

an academic researcher does not exempt one from subjectivity, even if one works with rigorously tested and supported methodologies and peer-approved frameworks. Many ethnographers have acknowledged the influence of positionality, reflexivity and power relations. Reflexivity in research involves reflection on self, process, representation and critically examining power relations and politics in the research process, and researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation (Jones et al., 1997; Falconer Al-Hindi & Kawabata, 2002). Farhana Sultana notes that it is important for reflexivity to be present throughout the entire research process, and that the researcher's reflexive reflections and examinations can create a more nuanced and complex understanding of the subject (2007). Similarly, Ann L. Cunliffe and Geetha Karunanayake build on feminist psychologist Michelle Fine's conceptualisation of 'working the hyphen' to unpack the stickiness of relationships and issues of objectivity, representation, power and identity in research (2013). It can be discerned that agility, flexibility and constant care are required to decipher the subjective/objective entanglements of problems and possibilities, and it will not be a linear or clean process.

Michelle Fine argues that researchers who work directly with respondents are in a power relationship that is often asymmetrical and possibly exploitative because as the researcher observes, analyses and represents the lives of others, they are speaking for and actively constructing their identities (1994). In addition, sometimes participants' voices are written out of the research and they are presented and preserved as generalised abstractions (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013, p. 365), where researchers are the 'inventors of some questions and repressors of others, shapers of the very context we study … interpreters of others' stories and narrators of our own' (Fine, 1994, p. 13). Critical reflections along the lines of what Fine articulates were present with me throughout the first stages of conducting fieldwork around 2013, however only in the form of inarticulate feelings of doubt, hesitation and confusion. Only years after I first began ethnographic research did I begin to have some clarity about my own position of acquired power within my identity and the constantly blurred boundaries I operated in.

As mainstream (urban) economics deals inadequately with power and identities, I turned to stratification economics, the most comprehensive alternative to consider race, gender and class of my interviewees and of myself as a researcher, and an immigrant (when I lived in Australia). Mainstream economics has either no general theory of race with respect to global migration or when it does provide one, it is usually insufficient and problematic (Obeng-Odoom, 2022, p. 63). Franklin Obeng-Odoom looks at Gunnar Mydral's acclaimed book, *An American Dilemma* (1944) on the subject,

> The book struggles with developing a robust theory of race, along with many other problems … First is looking at race without its intersections with class,

> gender, ethnicity, colour, and caste. Second is reducing racism to beliefs and attitudes, suggesting racial consciousness elevates racial minorities in the class hierarchy. Third is considering economic interests (in those cases when such material interests are the focus of some attention) as secondary or subordinate to so-called 'culture'. A final critique is that institutionalism reduces race to binary, black and white categories. (Obeng-Odoom 2022, p. 63)

Obeng-Odoom furthers his point that stratification economists (Darity, 1982, 1995; Darity and Mullen, 2020) attempt to address these problems by emphasising that identities are omnipresent and diverse and are continuously produced, reproduced and transformed in the process of migration and the importance of their focus on the centrality of economic interests to stratification by race, colour, caste and other identities, including how they are interlinked (Ibid.).

As a renowned stratification economist, William A. Darity Jr asserts that as the typical person holds multiple identities, some will matter more than others in determining their relative social ranking and condition. Individuals may possess a mix of identities, some of which are celebrated (which may propel them) and others denigrated (Darity, 2022, p. 403). He explains,

> The full effect of the identity potpourri is an empirical question that should be resolved on a case-by-case (society-by-society) basis, best determined by a quantitative, social, intersectional analysis. As such, stratification economics considers the context in a way that traditional neoclassical utility does not. (Darity, 2022, pp. 403–404)

These insights provide a framework for my own reflections on my identities and their entanglements with power. My personal identity as an Australian, Hong Kong-born woman who is proficient in English and Cantonese plays an important role in how my fieldwork in Hong Kong was conducted. Critically, my personal heritage also shapes my approach as I am part of a generation of Han-Chinese Hong Kong citizens who migrated to Western countries prior to the transfer of British sovereignty to China in 1997. My family's migration path was shaped by socio-political and economic motivations that were beyond our household. This is important to note because my socio-political perspectives and research interests have been shaped and influenced by a unique mixture of Hong Kong's post-1997 identity, the social, cultural and political discourse and productions created since then, as well as by my Australian (colonial and Eurocentric) socialisation. The post-1997 identity for some Hong Kong people refers to an affinity between the colonial cultural experience of before 1997 and the experience of belonging to the Chinese nation after having been a British colony.[2] While living as an immigrant and later as a citizen in Australia, my Chinese ethnicity and identity place me as part of a 'model minority', which refers to a minority group whose members are perceived to be achieving a higher socio-economic status than other minority groups and the population

average (Wong, 2015). Although this term has been largely used in the United States to refer to Asian Americans as a 'model minority', it is a term that can also be applied to the Asian diaspora in white-dominant countries such as Australia.[3] With these intercultural influences, my perspective is not simply a binary combination of 'East and West'; rather it is partly autoethnographic with a critical distance that requires ongoing awareness of my position within coloniality that is in flux. As a researcher, my identity is connected to a generation that holds a collective identity. This identity is nuanced within the postcolonial and Special Administrative Region (SAR) era of Hong Kong that is taking place now, between 1997–2047, which is also not static. The handover from British sovereignty was in 1997, when 'One Country, Two Systems' was agreed to be active for fifty years according to Hong Kong's Basic Law (Government of Hong Kong SAR, 2021a).

In the field, my identity facilitated the successful acquisition of information as I was able to shapeshift between many identities and appearances: a young Chinese woman who speaks fluent Cantonese; a young Western-educated Chinese woman who speaks fluent English with an Australian accent; a female academic in a position of authority; and a generic-looking and non-threatening Chinese woman pedestrian. That I was able to shift from and move between these identities opened opportunities for me while conducting fieldwork in Hong Kong that would not have the same effects or advantages elsewhere. Being bilingual allowed me to understand what was occurring around me, yet I could easily pretend I did not speak Cantonese and blend in as an expatriate. Giving the impression of being an expatriate can be advantageous as they can be less targeted by law enforcement in some circumstances and are sometimes favoured by migrant workers as they are perceived to be nicer employers and pay higher wages to workers. This reflects a deep-seated and often unconscious bias towards whiteness and coloniality that still exists in Hong Kong (Lee & Chou, 2018; Li & Liu, 2021). Essentially, my gender, identity and appearance allowed me to be perceived as low-threat and to be able to walk around and be relatively unnoticed and easily accepted.

While being reflexive about my/a researcher's positionality can be perceived as a self-indulgent exercise, it is important to understand and critically examine how I participate in power relations and the impact on how information is obtained, interpreted and re/presented. Audrey Kobayashi has reflected on this nexus of identity and power since the first volume of *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* was published in 1994. In her 2003 work, she remarks on how reflexivity can result in 'navel-gazing', yet she insists that bringing attention to one's positionality is not to self-indulge, but to reflect on how one is inserted within the grids of power relation and how that influences the way research is conducted (Kobayashi, 1994; 2003). It gives room for thinking beyond the work itself and into the spheres of influences, as Farhana Sultana echoes:

> Reflexivity is integral to conducting ethical research … as it is also implicated in how one relates to research participants and what can/cannot be done vis-à-vis the research within the context of institutional, social, and political realities. As such, it is integral to conducting ethical research. (Sultana, 2007, p. 376)

While reflexivity is an important aspect to engage with in conducting ethical fieldwork, it needs to be used in combination with other methods throughout the research process in creating a more holistic representation of an issue through particular voices and perspectives – those of the researchers and the subjects. While my work does not fit in singularly within the discipline of feminist geography, the research that I have chosen to do has always asked for constant unlearning and relearning of ethnographic approaches that critique the self, the field and the disciplines as boundaries and relations of power and identity ebb and flow.

My unease with interviewing migrant domestic workers as an Australian, Hong Kong-born Chinese woman was ever present throughout my ethnographic research process. From the start, it did not go unacknowledged that I come from a position or class that is like that of some of their employers or prospective employers. As I am a Hong Kong-Chinese woman, I am perceived as possessing the financial ability to employ a domestic worker. This evidenced itself as a fluctuating sense of unease and some awkward interactions between the workers I interviewed and myself.

My first interview was enabled by an introduction to a friend's worker in her apartment over dinner one evening in 2013. At the time, I knew I had to undertake fieldwork via both observational and participatory methods; however I did not know where and how to begin approaching potential respondents. My friend's helper, known as JM, agreed to introduce me to her friends on the following Sunday. While I asked her in front of her employer, I was mindful of not coming across as too inquisitive or demanding and anticipated some unease and awkwardness. I clearly explained my project and asked if I could come to one of her hangouts with her friends on a Sunday, respecting the fact that I would be intruding on her day off work. With JM being my friend's employee and her being much older than I was, with adult children likely not too far from my age, I was aware that there were several possible relations of power between us. Firstly, within Asian cultures, our age difference gave her seniority over me. However, as I was her employer's friend, a woman with a tertiary education, in addition to being a Hong Kong-Chinese person, I was on those counts in the position of authority and power. My understanding of this dynamic influenced the way I interacted with her and her friends, especially in the way I spoke and behaved around them. For example, instead of interviewing from my pre-planned questions, which would have placed me at the centre of the group, I asked open-ended questions and listened and observed on the periphery of the group, to

show patience and respect. This method was intuited from behaviours in my upbringing within Asian patriarchal customs – from girlhood to womanhood – rather than any academic resource.

Currently, I have yet to come across other women of colour scholars who have reflected in detail on their way of incorporating particularities of their cultural upbringing into a professional scenario of ethnographic research, although the boundaries of professionality in fieldwork are arguably very much open to interpretation. Geetha Karunanayake's experience of working in a tea plantation in Sri Lanka, among local workers who were the subjects of her research, shared similarities with my own experience (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013). She is a Sri Lankan-English woman educated overseas who returned to Sri Lanka to conduct fieldwork and who has ethnic and gender sameness to the subjects, yet distance in education, religion and class placed her in situations where she had to approach her subjects in ways she was not prepared for within academia. She had hired some local people who could bridge the divide, which closed eventually after a slow process of introductions and initiations. Like me, Karunanayake walked into the field with trepidation and caution, knowing there were different power relations at play that put her at a distance from her subjects. Her situation was more complex than mine as she also grappled with religious identities and juggled different cultural behaviours attached to such different identities. She felt like she was at times an insider and an outsider, and the advantages and disadvantages of this varied considerably between different people she approached (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013, p. 373).

On the first occasion I met JM and her friends on their day off work after my initial meeting with her at her employers' home, I left with nearly five hours of audio recording, with most of their conversations with each other responding to my questions or prompts and chit chat that happened subsequently. This became the basis of my interviewing methodology. I realised that being sensitive to our power dynamics was not enough to justify or lighten my intrusion into their social time on their day off work, borrowing their stories and using certain apertures of their lives for my research. I had a niggling feeling that my research was somehow too straightforward and that it should be more agentic, take a more critical stance and care for the issue. Initially, I had thought that my intentions were to simply shine a light on the workers' narratives of struggle and reveal overall systemic issues within migrant labour policies. However, through my observations, time spent with them and our conversations, it became apparent that their lack of labour rights and economic conditions restricted them to temporary status despite their long tenure in Hong Kong. Further, their lack of autonomy and personal space within the home of their employers placed them in vulnerable positions that are acknowledged at face value, unrightfully justified to an end, and not recognised with the urgency that the matter deserves to be as a dire breach of personhood for cheap labour. As I realised the research was providing

a platform for the workers' voices and empowering them to speak up about the intersected problem of labour, gender and space, my complex positionality also became more apparent.

Beyond the academic and professional framework, I became personally and emotionally invested, specifically with respect to my identity and personal experience as a Hong Kong-born woman who has grown up around domestic workers who enabled the women in my family to be able to undertake formal employment outside of the home. This directly impacted on my education and wellbeing. I am the beneficiary of the labour of the domestic workers I grew up around and collectively, I am part of a generation of Hong Kong children who have benefited from the contingent of migrant domestic workers. Aside from this, my positionality is also steeped in coloniality. The Hong Kong government's intention to import migrant domestic labour in the 1970s was to integrate local women into the workforce, and consequently discovered a readily affordable labour stream from its neighbouring Southeast Asian neighbours who needed solutions for their own economic crisis (Constable, 2007). Prior to British occupation, Hong Kong had practised Chinese customs of domestic servitude that saw girls and women of all ages as domestic properties of their employers (Constable, 1996; Jaschok, 1988; Watson, 1991). Although slavery was abolished by the colonial government of Hong Kong in 1923, some Chinese slavery customs illegally remained and were often culturally accepted (Watson, 1991). Within colonial British households, their domestic servants were often Hong Kong Chinese. The hierarchy of white supremacy was pervasive, with lighter skin-toned people at the top and darker skin-toned people towards the bottom.

As a political ideology, white supremacy seeks to maintain social and institutional domination by white people and has been put into effect to justify European colonialism in structures such as the White Australian Policy, the Jim Crow laws in the United States and the Apartheid in South Africa, to name a few examples (Shain, 2020; Gale de Saxe, 2021). Hong Kong, as a former British colony, for over a century has not been exempted from the impacts of such social and institutional influences. Racism, intersecting with classism, was common among Hong Kong Chinese people, as there were prejudices against darker skin-toned Chinese people, who were considered as labourers who worked in the fields (Constable, 1996; 2007; Gaw, 1991). It is not a coincidence that the importation of domestic workers into Hong Kong in the 70s was, and continues to be in the present day, of people of a darker skin tone than the majority of Hong Kong's population, the Han-Chinese. Domestic workers have become synonymous with cheap and easily available labour and the way they have been addressed colloquially by the media in Cantonese as 'Filipino girls' and 'Indonesian maids' reflects a commonly accepted white-supremacist, classist and sexist attitude. In 1989, American activist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality as a framework to describe how systems of oppression overlap and

intersect, creating multi-layered discriminations for people who live in multiple identity categories (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). The prejudices that migrant domestic workers experience in Hong Kong intersect gender, race and class across both a colonial and Chinese society in ways that situate their marginality in a very localised context. To normalise these everyday occurrences would be to ignore the impacts of Hong Kong's colonial history and the complexity of such intersected discriminations.

Coloniality is an important point to bring into my positionality as a researcher in the field, as not only am I a Hong Kong-born Chinese woman, but I am also educated in a country that has its own colonial history – Australia. In other words, I embody and perform coloniality in ways that are multi-spatial and multidirectional, which consciously and unconsciously impact the way I behave in my fieldwork interactions. My colonial roots influenced the way power and authority were perceived by my participants, despite their seniority in age. During my interactions with participants, I did not openly discuss my background, however my accent and my purpose for conducting fieldwork were unavoidable. Some women were impressed with my education background and interests, while some women were not familiar with the tertiary education system, but were impressed nonetheless. Sometimes I was also asked if I wanted to marry a Hong Kong Chinese man or a white Australian man and occasionally asked about the reason why I am pursuing further study instead of pursuing potential marriage partners. Many participants were intrigued by my background, education and my identity as being both Hong Kong Chinese and Australian, with a steadfast association with both cultures, rather than the more common social phenomenon of leaning more heavily into one and maintaining a certain distance with the other.

On one of the earlier fieldwork occasions in 2015, while I was sitting with two workers, known as MB and CJ, I was mistaken as their employer's daughter by their friend who was walking by. The interaction between them happened very quickly in Tagalog (the Austronesian language that forms the basis of the standardised language of the Philippines), and they explained to me what happened after she had left. The friend who passed by found it very strange that they were accompanied by their employer (or a proxy of) on their day off work. MB and CJ casually said I was not a relation of their employer and was just a friend doing a university project. Their friend asked if I was paying them a fee and walked off with a dismissive chuckle when they said I was not. I asked them if it is common to be approached by researchers. They said it is not uncommon for people to want to know about 'what it's like to be a worker in Hong Kong'. MB elaborated further:

> Sometimes, people want to know what our struggle is, how our employers are mean to us and how hard it is for us. They already think they know what we do

> when they want to talk to us. I don't know why that is helpful. Why don't they ask us about what makes us happy? I'm very happy I can give money to my family and my daughter can go to university! (MB, personal communication, January 2015, exclamation in original)

This response reflected several common assumptions about foreign domestic workers: 1) that they are mistreated by their employers; and 2) that they are unhappy in their job and that they need to be rescued out of their circumstances. These common assumptions stem from legitimate concerns as there have been public protests and court cases over mistreatment of domestic workers, particularly regarding physical and emotional abuse (Carvalho, 2017; Siu, 2021). From my observation of MB, CJ and their friends over a few occasions, my understanding and interpretation of this comment was a demonstration of her frustration about being perceived as a victim. It also expressed her desire to be seen as a person who has a full spectrum of characteristics and nuanced ideas beyond being reduced to a one-dimensional vulnerable victim of social or economic circumstances. More importantly, it was an expression of agency, self-awareness and decisiveness. Currently, there are nearly 350,000 foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. They are not a monolith that shares the same background, feelings or circumstances. This interaction was a turning point for my research as I was reminded to consider how the work will frame the public perception of the collective, particularly how it should not contribute to an ongoing narrative of their victimhood, and should rather establish one that is empowering and multidimensional. Fine (1994) draws on the idea of a hyphen space that the researcher and respondent dwell in during fieldwork, and within this space, both the researchers and respondents have a mutual understanding that identity can fluctuate and change in their conversations as they account for themselves and their actions (Fine, 1994; Cassell, 2005; Cunliffe, 2003). This means a reflexive stance is necessary in exploring power relations and the multiple influences on the co-constructions of meanings and identities in the relational spaces that researchers and the participants co-inhabit (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). Throughout my research, I was dwelling in a hyphen space that I co-created with the workers I interviewed. In these spaces, both physically at the time and thereafter in my writing that can be considered as another 'space', I felt the responsibility to frame their narratives not as evidence of their hardships through victimisation, but rather as ones of solidarity and empowerment. This reframing from victimhood to resilience could only have happened through the continual revaluation of, and reflection about my intersectional positionality of gender, education and ethnicity, as well as confronting the impact of Hong Kong's colonial history of domestic servitude. This was not an act I was able to do alone; rather it was something that could only have been conceived with the participants. Acting with integrity and care with the information I had access to, being cognisant of

how it is interpreted and represented to my peers, the public and students and the ongoing implications of such narratives and knowledge were paramount. The reframing of the narrative of victimhood to resilience became more apparent and three-dimensional when I began to interpret some of that information into drawings and sketches.

Spatial analysis

Returning to my first encounter with migrant domestic workers in public space described in the first section of this chapter, my work was undertaken through spatial analysis and ethnographic observation. This became my approach throughout the intermittent fieldwork conducted in Hong Kong between 2013–2017, and subsequently from 2020 onwards. As a spatial design researcher, I conducted a series of site analyses to understand the structure, proportion, scale, patterns of circulation and access. These were documented by sketching, drawing and photographing, which are fundamental first steps to any developing spatial design project.

I looked at areas in which the workers gathered and analysed their structural and spatial features: access points, pedestrian circulation, proportion of the space that they used compared to the pedestrian thoroughfare, structural enclosures and openings (particularly applicable to the Central Elevated Walkway), proximity of free public amenities, sizes of the various public spaces occupied and number of people occupying each area. After this initial spatial analysis, the second layer of information recorded the activities that occurred in each area. The spatial functions of each area were then mapped out and the spaces began to connect as a network of domestic spaces. The third layer of observation further inquired into each spatial program and the particularities of the temporary formation, such as the details of the makeshift cardboard structures created from disused cardboard pieces that the workers use to delineate their spaces from the pedestrian thoroughfares.

The combination of three layers of spatial analysis allows for a holistic understanding – a macro to micro perspective – of the spaces being occupied, simultaneously extrapolating information about why they might select a certain space for a specific purpose, the size of the spaces they occupy and the details of individual constructions of their temporary shelters. Coupled with spatial mapping, diagramming, photography, observation and annotations, the data collected began to display the typology of the public spaces that are used – transient, connective thoroughfares between popular commercial public spaces. These spaces are within close proximity to free public amenities such as bathrooms and free wireless internet. More importantly, they are public spaces that have no distinct inhabitable, domestic features such as benches or tables; rather they are transitory public spaces that are not usually considered for private use by Hong Kong citizens.

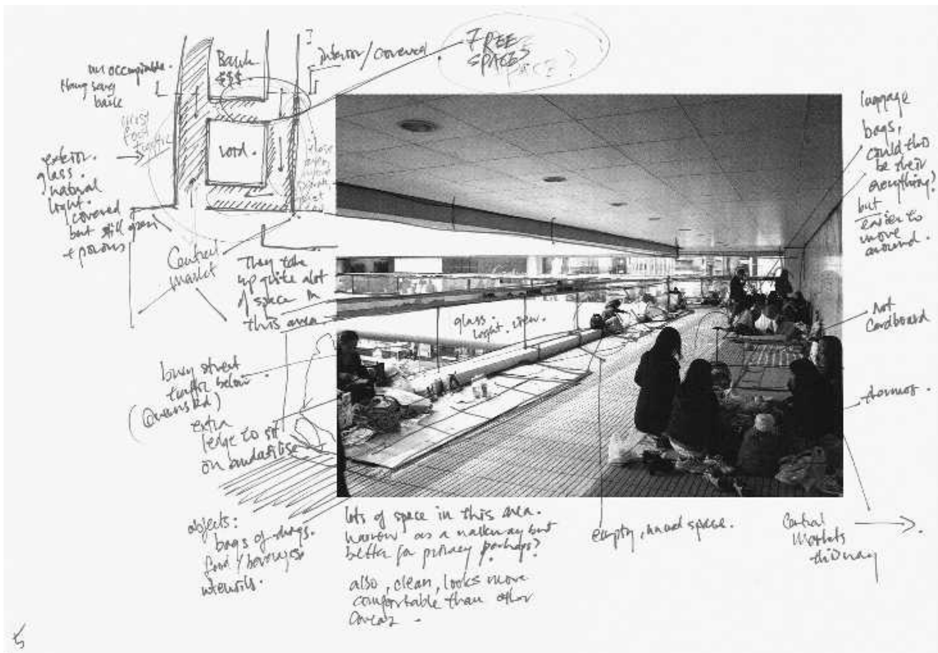

Figure 0.2 An example of how the site analysis is documented via photography, drawing and annotations.

The methods of fieldwork and spatial analysis have recently been successfully applied; for example in the works of urbanist William H. Whyte, architect and urban design consultant Jan Gehl and architect Jonathan Solomon. Whyte's influential work *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980) was revolutionary in applying methodologies to how public space can be studied. He initiated a small research group called *The Street Life Project*, where he and his team observed New York City's plazas, parks and informal areas with an agenda to investigate the success or failure of such public spaces in the city.

With a similar focus on public spaces and their capacity to shape the quality of urban life, Gehl conducted projects that closely linked the liveability of cities to public spaces. In *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space* (2011), Gehl was interested in how people inhabited the space between buildings. While the works of Whyte and Gehl are both important to building the foundation of observing urban spaces and the interrelation of human activities, Solomon's guide to Hong Kong's elevated and underground spaces is particularly relevant. *Cities Without Ground* (Frampton, Solomon & Wong, 2012) attempts to chart the complexity of Hong Kong's elevated walkways and its pedestrianised underground networks in two-dimensional plan-view site maps as well as digital axonometric exploded drawings that illustrate the vast connections, intertwined paths of circulation

and the human activities within. The book illustrates the proliferation of human activities and proves that public space in Hong Kong is not necessarily demarcated, dedicated or stable ground. More importantly, it demonstrates the flexible and agile nature of public spaces in Hong Kong, which consequently have allowed the workers in Central to deploy public spaces as tools for resistance and the reclamation of space.

Adopting the spirit of Gehl's attentive method of social observations, Whyte's focused curiosity on people and space, and Solomon's three-dimensional architectonic understanding of the network of spaces above and below ground, I produced photographs, spatial diagrams and sketches from my field trips. I am aware that Whyte, Gehl and Solomon have a wealth of experience in observing public spaces and the intricacies of urban life in mostly European and North American cities, which are vastly different to the structure and scenarios of Asian cities. From their techniques and frameworks, I deduced what can be adapted and what methods I needed to reappropriate to the nuance of Hong Kong's public spaces.

Drawing as method of co-creating fieldwork data

My spatial design background encourages me to understand problems spatially and visually. This played out in an unexpected way that became an important aspect of my methodology. Interpreting information from interviews into drawings and sketches gave my research a new dimension that brings a new intersectional framework to understand and explore the spatial issue further. Rather than just analysing the different kinds of public spaces that the migrant workers occupy on Sundays, I wanted to understand more about their daily routines, the kind of work they did, the spaces they dwelled in, within and beyond the workplace that is also their so-called home. I did not have the audacity to ask for permission to enter their employers' homes, so I would ask them to describe their daily movements within those interior spaces. Many of them described the size of the home to me in vivid detail; the number of rooms, windows, how many people lived there, whether they had their own private room or shared with younger children or slept on a makeshift bed in corners of communal areas. These descriptions allowed me to visualise their private spaces, which led me to sketch floorplans and sectional drawings throughout our conversations.

In this sketch, the interviewee, known as DD, described how she shared the bedroom with her employee's young child:

> My bed is under the child's bed, you can pull it out when I sleep and push it under to hide it when I am not sleeping. My things are in my [suit] cases next to a small table and the room is very small, with one window and I have to close the door when I take out my bed, otherwise it will hit the door! (DD, personal communication, February 2015, exclamation in original)

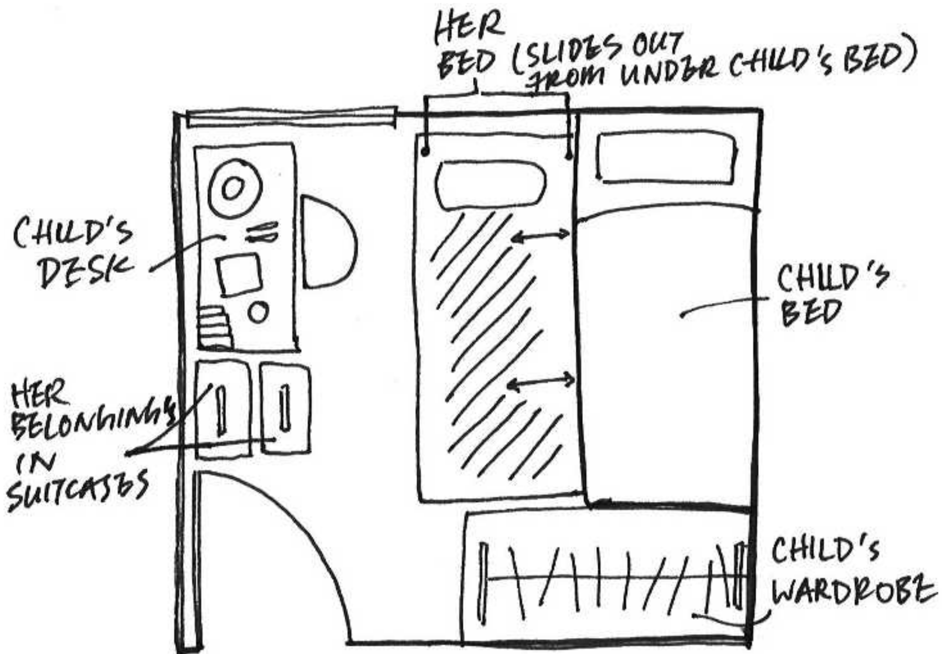

Figure 0.3 A floorplan sketch of one interviewee's bedroom produced during fieldwork. (Drawing by author).

DD gave me some more details about the position and scale of things as I sketched and created the final sketch with annotations. I did many sketches like these throughout my fieldwork trips and afterwards, I would digitally draw these sketches to refine them to the right scale to effectively show the amount of personal space and objects they had in their homes.

These sketches were met with many positive responses as the workers saw me produce the sketches in front of them, which allowed them to add more detail about the way they lived and how they worked in these spaces. Subsequently, different stories and perspectives emerged in new spatialised and visual formats. Beyond the photographs, maps and site drawings I made of the public spaces the migrant workers used to demonstrate the scale of their community, the spatial drawings of their interior lives strengthened the argument. It was no longer about the way they used public space because of the availability and flexibility within the governance of such public spaces; instead, their weekly transformation of public spaces is a consequence of the lack of private and personal space they endure throughout most of their time in Hong Kong. Inserting the interior drawings alongside the drawings of the public spaces strongly demonstrated the problem with the workers' everyday interior spatial experiences, apart from simply the limitation of physical space.

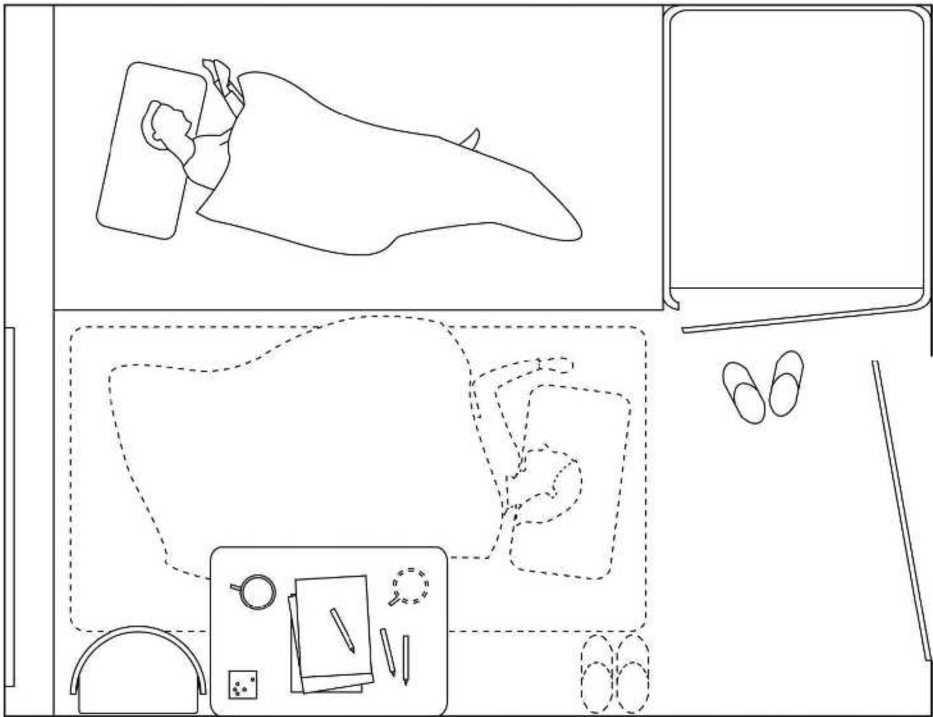

Figure 0.4 The final digital version of the drawing of DD's bedroom, showing the scale of her occupancy in dotted lines, in the same scale as her employer's child, with whom she shared the room. (Digital image by author).

Drawing is an important communication tool in all design disciplines, and it is also a very useful tool for processing ideas. Beyond that, using drawing to record ethnographic observation and fieldwork data has been used by many urban designers and architects, in particular, the aforementioned projects by Gehl (2011) and Whyte (1980) that effectively captured the scenes, scale and movement that occurred in the featured spaces. However, there have been no reflections on how drawing can be a tool for communication and building of understanding between researcher and participants during fieldwork. Some participants have given feedback where they appreciate how the spatial issue has been acknowledged and visualised in a way that supports their argument that the contractual live-in requirement is problematic and should be abolished. Some have said that they have lived with the condition for so long that it is not something that comes to the forefront of their mind when considering their situation. I have found that co-participation and co-creation of fieldwork data not only strengthens the relationship and builds trust between the researcher and participants; it also allows for transparency within the research process that begins to challenge the norm

of speaking for participants, and instead speaks to and with them (Kobayashi, 1994; 2003). The data collected from fieldwork provided intimate insights into the migrant domestic workers' lives and the way they work and live. Moreover, it added another level of complexity to the research, as what appears in public spaces demonstrates what is lacking in the domestic environment and their place of work. The fieldwork data, as communicated in photographs, stories, diagrams and maps combines with the textual content of this book to produce a holistic picture of the multi-layered issue.

In summary, drawing on original institutional, stratification and structuralist economics theories of migration (Obeng-Odoom, 2022), this book challenges the claims of the new economics of labour migration and its predecessor, neo-classical urban economics, by integrating data from ethnographic fieldwork, literature from sociology, migration studies and urban geography to present a holistic view on this issue that acknowledges the spectrum of global and local

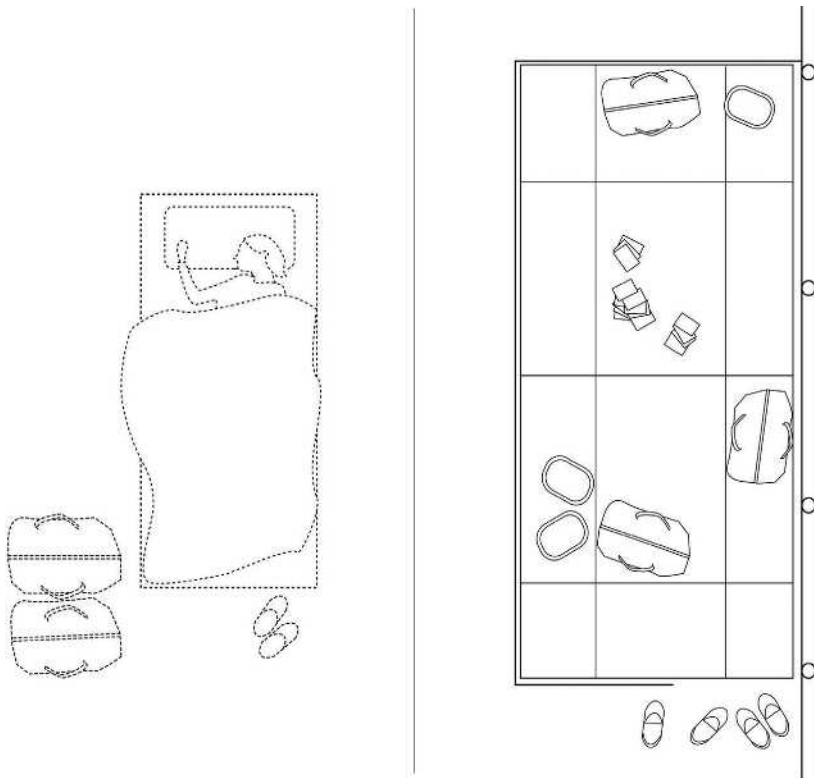

Figure 0.5 A digital image that presents the space the worker has at home (left), next to the temporary social space she creates for herself and her friends on the footpath that can be expanded, on an elevated walkway on a Sunday. (Digital image by author).

contexts, individual migrants' agency and the structures the migrant domestic workers operate within. Furthermore, this book critically examines how the workers create new spatialities through the weekly reconstruction of a unique socio-spatial ecology. It shows how migrant workers resist the socio-spatial limitations and cultural deprivation they experience in their employers' homes, from the interconnected restrictions in their labour, by appropriating and transforming public spaces for themselves and using them to enable agency, relationships and community.

Structure of the book

This book will use an institutionalist/structuralist approach that is a more appropriate alternative for three reasons. First, it will consider race, class and gender in relation to the participation of domestic labour and the feminisation of labour. It will investigate both the Filipino and Indonesian Foreign Domestic Helper communities in Hong Kong to explore, compare and understand the social activities and place-making strategies they engage in to enact their freedoms and agency. Second, it will analyse the socio-spatial limitations within the workers' labour to further understand the particularities of their marginalisation in Hong Kong. Third, it will incorporate the politics, governance and use of public space to recognise the significance of the workers' appropriation and occupation of public space to create their own community within their state of disenfranchisement, as a demonstration of agency, resistance and autonomy. Further, the book will explore other ways in which private/personal space is carved out by the workers in public or private space through other means such as same-sex relationships, food and religion to create temporary remedies for the deprivation of autonomy and space. The book will also argue that the current methodology within new economics of labour migration is lacking in incorporating the various scales of contexts; from the global systems to the individual's agencies, space, rent, identities and power and considerations for participation in migration labour.

As this current chapter sets the context of Hong Kong, introducing the *space* and *people*, the gaps in existing literature and the methodological approach of the book, in Chapter 1 – *Policy and/vs People: Mobility and Stagnation* unpacks the economic, social and legal frameworks within which the migrant domestic workers operate with analyses of the government policies, employment contracts, rights and wages of the workers, in combination with existing literature across multiple disciplines of migration studies, political economy, urban geography and cultural studies. Unpacking these frameworks is important, because it is via these that institutions inherently established the grounds for the oppression and exploitation of migrant workers, and the chapter makes clear the failure of the policies within labour-sending and receiving nations in providing social mobility and equity for the workers.

The chapter responds to one of the four research questions of this book – What are the local and international contexts in which they operate that allow this systemic oppression to be accepted and overlooked as common practice? It poses the problem of social equity against the increasing economic and political motivations behind migrant labour, while challenging the current methods of labour migration and discussing its ineffectiveness, and proposes the relevance of stratification economics in creating a different framework to discuss the intersected problem in this book. It also reveals the reasons for migration through ethnographic data and discusses the 'double bind' that many workers experience; moving away from their families to provide for them as they live under the pressures of unemployment/underemployment and sustaining livelihood for themselves and their families in their home countries. At first, being able to seek opportunities abroad for higher wages seems to be creating physical and economic mobility, yet the lack of upskilling potential in domestic work and very minimal salary increases often leave the workers stagnant.

Chapter 2, *Narratives of Oppression: Servitude, Invisibility and Spacelessness* follows on from the systemic problems that have impacted their marginalisation on a larger scale by moving into a more local scale, exposing the social and spatial problems created by the lack of boundaries between the home and workplace, ultimately providing grounds that lead to exploitation. The chapter continues to raise the research question presented in Chapter 1, focusing on *why* the systemic oppression is commonly accepted and overlooked. It presents the intersectional nature of their oppression, discussing how their gender, race and class all contribute to the systemic and personal prejudices the migrant workers experience that only a few migration scholars have touched on and, hence, remain trapped in space. I argue that these intersectional issues have directly impacted on workers' lack of social and economic equity on a global and local scale.

Drawing on extensive ethnographic data collected from 2013–2023, the chapter will explicitly expose the forms of control that occur in the employers' homes and reveal various themes that influence the disciplinary strategies applied to the workers by their employers. These themes evolve around the female body as a sexual or moral threat, separation and isolation and the normalisation of continuous abuse. It will further demonstrate the negative impacts of the legalities in the employment contract that sympathise with the Hong Kong employers and ultimately give power to the employers. The primary data from interviews reveals the detrimental effects of the blurred spatial boundaries between the domestic space and workplace, including the facilitation of exploitative scenarios that expose the workers to mistreatment and solidify their invisibility and spacelessness. The term *spacelessness* is created to describe the condition where the workers have minimal to no physical and personal space within their place of employment. While clarifying the issues raised in Chapter 1, this chapter

also raises three additional questions, namely: Are these workers mere victims or do they exercise some agency? If so, how, and to what extent, could such agency be liberating? Could the response of migrants provide any policy lessons for the labour-sending and receiving nations? Answers to these questions will be explored in the following chapter.

A long-standing debate between neoclassical economists and Marxist economists is the extent to which individual agency can help to address all social problems. The rational individual in the neoclassical model is entirely freed from structures and social bonds, while the classical Marxist models give limited room for individual autonomy (Charusheela, 2005). The approach utilised for this book helps to see that the reality among migrant workers is not as dichotomous. Emerging from the understanding of the intersectional oppressions through space, gender and labour that migrant domestic workers experience, Chapter 3, *Agency and Resistance*, analyses how they resist the continuous socio-spatial oppression endured during their work week by creating community through gathering in public space, and in so doing, perform their identity and exercise the freedoms they regularly are deprived of in a unique temporary socio-spatial ecology. This chapter focuses on two of the four research questions of this book – how does the workers' occupation of public space reflect the problems they endure in the workplace that is also their home, specific to the labour and spatial conditions in Hong Kong, and what activities do they engage in that cultivate resilience and agency? The chapter will do so by exploring how Filipino and Indonesian migrant domestic workers resist the limitations of their labour by establishing their community externally in public space on Sunday, and investigating the specific ways they express social agency through relationships, food, religious practices, place-making and social media platforms to continue to cultivate and enact social agency. These vignettes will demonstrate how these methods are significant in facilitating agency and reflect the full spectrum of resourcefulness, resilience and agency of the workers.

Furthermore, this chapter will unpack the complexity within the kind of resistance, resilience and resourcefulness the workers engage in that has materialised as a socio-spatial phenomenon. I also put forward the argument because existing migration scholars and political economists have not previously discussed the resistance of the workers through the informal communities they have repeatedly established on a weekly basis, and the continuous significance of this resistance. Their small acts of resistance have been documented, but thorough discussions of Little Manila and other public spaces Indonesian workers occupy as sites of resistance and agency remain thin, and have not been discussed to the full extent and contextual expansion as I do in this chapter and book. Drawing upon Henri Lefebvre's *Right to the City* and social production of space, and the works of Judith Butler that focus on public assemblies and appearance in the public realm, I argue that the migrant workers' public assemblies, individual and group activities

and their collective appearance in public space are indeed important ways of self-actualisation and performance of identity and dignity.

The next chapter, *Little Manila and Beyond*, is a photographic and illustrative component that provides a visual narrative of migrant domestic workers' socio-spatial occupation on Sundays. The photographs will be selected from the database created during field research between 2013–2023 and the chapter will also feature illustrations by Hong Kong-based migrant workers artist collective Guhit Kulay. The visual chapter aims to show the spectrum of activities, events and social interactions, moving through different areas in Central, Causeway Bay and beyond. This photographic account visually displays the reclamation of space that disrupts the city-state's hegemonic spaces every Sunday and demonstrates the migrant women workers' agency, socio-spatialised resistance and joy.

After a visualisation of the scenes on Sundays, the next chapter, *Commodification of Care: Costs and Sacrifices* investigates the origins of the socio-spatial phenomenon and analyses the origins of migrant exploitation. Contrary to claims in neoclassical economics theories of migration about 'free choice' and 'autonomy' of migrants, the chapter argues that experiences of migrants are shaped by certain institutions and structures. Migration is not an isolated circumstance of intersectional disempowerment. Rather, it is a consequence of a global economic and labour restructuring. When migrant domestic workers emerge weekly from their workplace to use and activate public space, it reflects power relations and spatial contestations that result from the economic, political and socio-spatial inequality inscribed in the global operation of migrant domestic labour. This chapter exhibits the global context in which the workers' disenfranchisement in Hong Kong originates and the network of disempowerment that is the operative method of global migrant domestic labour. The chapter will include a discussion around the economics of care, particularly through a feminist economic framework. It will discuss the type of work that the marginalised groups participate in and how care work and domestic work are known as part of the informal or unskilled labour sector, which undermines and undervalues its efforts, and subsequently diminishes the rights, social mobility and economic value of those who participate in this workforce. It poses a question of how much is care valued and how much does it cost, in human terms and economic terms. This chapter aims to reinforce the ideas expressed in Chapter 1, by adding the global scale, focus on the nature of domestic work and comparative case studies to provide the reader with a holistic view of the structural problems and systemic prejudices that have created the unique scenario that the migrant workers operate in. It answers the last of the four research questions of the book – how does the intersection of the migrant domestic workers' wages, gender and labour further their marginalisation?

The book concludes with a summary of the key findings and arguments, and reflects on the methodological contribution of the book. Here, the final chapter,

A Matter of Gender, Labour and Space, will reiterate the problems within mainstream urban economics in understanding migrant labour and how the book has challenged the previous methods with its structural approach, in combination with ethnographic and fieldwork data that reveal the many interconnecting layers and scales of the issue. In so doing, the book illuminates a new understanding of how the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong operate, as well as using this as a framework to review global migration and other disenfranchised migrant labour groups. Finally, a summary is presented of the various ways in which the workers have enacted their agency through social, cultural and spatial acts, to not only resist the socio-spatial depletion endured in the domestic spaces of Hong Kong but also to reclaim physical space and autonomy to continue living a dignified life. This book makes clear that there is an urgency to instate systemic changes to migration labour that could prevent and minimalise exploitation, and empower migrant workers to be integrated into host nations with equitable opportunity.

Notes

1. The Former Central Arcade has undergone renovations since the described event here. Since 2022, it has been transformed into an arcade of food providers and shops, with no space that migrant domestic workers could occupy in the following scene as described.
2. For more elaboration on the topic of Hong Kong's post-1997 identity, please see Lin, Chen & Flowerdew (2022), Fung & Chan (2017) and Mathews, Ma & Lui (2008).
3. The 'model minority' is a stereotype that can be deleterious to the reality of understanding discrimination and prejudices that occur to and within minority groups placed under this categorisation. Please see Chow (2017).

CHAPTER 1

Policy and/vs People: Mobility and Stagnation

This chapter unpacks the economic, social and legal frameworks within which the migrant domestic workers operate. With analyses of the government policies, employment contracts, rights and wages of the workers, in combination with existing literature across multiple disciplines of migration studies, political economy, urban geography and cultural studies, it reveals how the policies of labour migration, whether in the labour-sending or labour-receiving country, are not designed for the well-being of the *people* (the migrant workers), and instead create a mobile migrant workforce who are immobile and stagnant. It will give context to the two labour-sending nations that provide the majority of workers to Hong Kong – the Philippines and Indonesia – to reveal the origins of the labour export policies and the economic motivations. The following section, *The economic forces of migrant labour*, poses the problem of social equity against the increasing economic and political motivations behind migrant labour, while challenging the current methods of labour migration and discussing its ineffectiveness, and proposes an alternative framework relevant to the intersected issue of labour, gender and space as the focus in this book. The next two sections zoom in on Hong Kong, looking at the city-state's active participation in labour importation and how the specific regulations within the Foreign Domestic Helper contract create the grounds for exploitations of the workers' time and labour and enforce their permanently temporary status. Throughout the chapter, the reasons for migration begin to unfold through ethnographic data, such as in *Diana's story* and others, and bring to light the 'double bind' that many workers experience; moving away from their families to provide for their families as they live under the pressures of unemployment/underemployment and sustaining livelihood for themselves and their families in their home countries. At first, being able to seek opportunities abroad for higher wages seems to be creating physical and economic mobility, yet the lack of upskilling potential in domestic work and very minimal salary increases often leave the workers stagnant. Essentially, this chapter responds to one of the research questions in this book – What are the local and international contexts in which the workers operate that allow systemic oppression to be accepted and overlooked as common practice, and why are they so prevalent? The chapter aims to make clear the transnational contexts for migrant domestic labour and the failure of the policies in providing social mobility and equity for the migrant workers, and

the chapter after this will illustrate the oppressive common practices that result from these policies and structures.

Diana's story

> I want my children to grow up with more than I had. I hope they can understand that I moved away only to give them more, so they can go to college and get a better job, a good life. It has been very difficult for me to be here without them. I think about them every minute. (Diana, personal communication, February 2015)

I first met Diana in 2015 in Hong Kong and I met her again in 2021. Diana is from Rosario, the Batangas province from the Philippines, and first came to Hong Kong in 2007. She was the oldest of four siblings in her family. At the time of her departure, her children were of the ages of two and five. Before working in Hong Kong, Diana was studying for a degree in nursing, but discontinued in the second year because she needed to provide for the family. She initially worked in a food factory for five to six days a week, earning a monthly wage of 7,000 peso (approximately US$147). Her husband worked as a courier in a freight company that required working long hours, and his earnings were double her income. The couple relied on the help of her mother and aunt to take care of their children, as well as doing some domestic chores while they were at work. Diana first discussed with her family the possibility of working abroad as a domestic worker several months after giving birth to their first child. Her husband strongly objected to this suggestion at the time. A few years later, after the birth of their second child, her husband had an accident, which led to a recovery period that heavily reduced his income. Diana acknowledged the best way to earn more money for the family and to afford better education for the children was to work abroad. After careful consideration and discussions, the couple and their families agreed that Diana would go to work in Hong Kong for some time, at least until their financial difficulties eased. Diana's first Foreign Domestic Helper contract in Hong Kong began in March 2007, earning her a monthly wage of HK$3,800 (approximately US$489), which was more than three times her salary back home.[1] Each month, she saved HK$500 for herself and the remainder HK$3,300 was remitted back to the Philippines to support her family. Although this new employment made significant contributions to the family's operations, her husband, before and during her time abroad, asked for her return after two contracts (four years). At the time of the interview in 2015, Diana was working in Hong Kong for the eighth consecutive year and earning HK$5,000 each month (approximately US$643). She had not foreseen spending almost a decade abroad:

> I wanted to go home after two contracts, but it is very difficult to return home because I can help so much with my wages here. My children can go to a better school outside [their village]. My husband can work less. It is too hard in the

> Philippines to have the same pay. But it is very sad to come back to Hong Kong after going home. Very sad. I cry for two weeks after every visit. (Diana, personal communication, February 2015)

Despite the pain of family separation and her family's plea for her return to the Philippines, Diana saw time spent with her children as something necessary to sacrifice in order to provide money for them. This 'decision' of money earned at the expense of time is not one made from free will; rather it is a forced decision between two difficult options that has partly resulted from the Philippines' continuous participation in the global migrant labour force. At the time of Diana's departure in 2007, and the years leading up to the decision, the labour market conditions in the Philippines were poor. Wages in the country were low and decent employment opportunities for women, even educated women, were limited (Asian Development Bank, 2013). The rate of employment for women during 2000–2012 was between 42.1 to 46.7% and although the Labour Force Participation Rate for women was rising steadily between 1990–2012, it did not translate to reductions in the gender gaps in labour market outcomes including employment, decent work and social protection (Ibid., p. 13). The Philippines' government encouraged Filipino workers to partake in overseas work deployment to alleviate the pressure of underemployment in the country, despite the numerous discussions about phasing out, yet the reality was that labour export had long been part of the government's economic development strategy given the value of remittances to help the national economy (Estopace, 1997; Ofreneo and Samoste, 2005). Overseas work deployment has been part of the Philippines migrant labour experience over the course of the last century; to Los Angeles in the 1920s (Ong & Azores, 1994), to Rome in the 1980s (Parreñas, 2001), to Hong Kong since the 1970s (Constable, 2007), to the United Arab Emirates since the 1990s (Lindio-McGovern, 2013) and to various developed countries in Asia such as Singapore and Taiwan in the 1980s (Lindio-McGovern, 2009; 2013; Parreñas, 2001).

In *A Good Provider is One Who Leaves*, reporter Jason DeParle immersed himself into the life of a Filipina woman and her family over three decades, documenting their migratory path that eventually moved them out of poverty into a global middle class (2019). The book reports the reality of the years of sacrifices and separation of one family, while holding up a mirror of the thousands of migrant workers and their families that endure similar paths in order to create a better life for themselves and generations to come. Diana is part of a consistent migratory path of Filipino women who seek full-time employment overseas. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, whose work focuses on Filipino migrant domestic workers in various parts of the world, sets the context of her book upfront by stating 'The outflow of women from the Philippines and their entrance into domestic service in more than 130 countries represents one of the largest and widest

flows of contemporary female migration' (2001, p. 1). In 2019, the number of Overseas Filipino Workers globally was estimated at 2.2 million, of which 56% were women (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020). Although the number has decreased since COVID-19 became a global pandemic in early 2020 (from 2.2 million in 2019 to 676,000 in 2021), the actual number of migrant domestic workers from the Philippines in Hong Kong has not decreased to the same proportion. There were 399,320 migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong in 2019, which decreased incrementally due to border restrictions of the pandemic to 373,884 in 2020, 339,451 in 2021 and 338,189 in 2022, with between 48–57% from the Philippines (Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2022b). This shows that the demand for migrant domestic workers has not decreased at the same rate in Hong Kong despite the decrease in total outflow globally.

Diana shares a similar experience with many women migrant domestic workers, which reflects the standardised narrative of female labour migration from the Philippines – a narrative of dislocation in which Parreñas refers to the positions into which external forces in society constitute the subject of migrant domestic workers (2001). Parreñas describes four key dislocations that Filipino domestic workers experience in their global migratory labour process: pain of the transnational household, contradictory class mobility, non-belonging and partial citizenship (2001, p. 23). The analysis of dislocations illustrates their process of constitution and the means by which the workers resist in an attempt to eliminate, or negotiate to mitigate the effects of these dislocations in their everyday lives. In other words, from this perspective, the experience of migration is embodied within these dislocations (Ibid., p. 3).

For all the migrant domestic workers who participated in my fieldwork research between 2012–2023, I was told that providing for the family is the primary, sometimes the only, motivation for their migration. These women, together with their families, make the decision to migrate as domestic workers with the main goal of improving the livelihood and financial prospects of their families due to the lack of decent and long-term employment opportunities in their home country. Most of these women embark on their journeys with the intention of returning after two or three contracts, that is four to six years. Realistically, this is usually not the case. For Diana, she and her family realised how much her income as remittance provides for the support of the family despite their separation, and she continued to stay in Hong Kong. Diana's experience may not be the standard experience of all migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, but her circumstances are certainly common. Supporting the family can mean providing for daily expenses such as food, transport, school fees and so on, to larger, long-term financial tasks such as paying off debts or buying land (to build a home) or buying a home. Remittances from migrant workers cannot provide a finite solution to a housing problem back in their home country (Obeng-Odoom, 2022, p. 246). The migration path of the workers, varying

from different economic schools of thought; definite return (neoclassical), circular migration (institutional), dependant on household conditions (new economics of labour migration), all impact on the role remittances play and whether it continues (Obeng-Odoom, 2022; Hunter, 2018). Many workers I interviewed feel the longer they stay, the longer they can provide financial support even if it's not a permanent fix. Many see returning as not being a favourable outcome financially and indeed, it can often be perceived as redundant in fixing the housing problem (Ibid., p. 246). Despite this acknowledgement, many workers remain in Hong Kong.

In March 2021, I met with Diana again. She informed me that the last time she saw her family in the Philippines was November 2018, and she had not been able to travel back due to COVID-19 restrictions. Her children were now sixteen and nineteen years old, and she and her husband had separated some three years prior. She felt that over the last fourteen years in Hong Kong, some of the toughest times experienced were at the beginning and now, since she had been stuck in Hong Kong without the capacity to fly home, even if she was owed paid leave every two years, as her contract was renewed and the Philippines is only a two-hour flight away. At the time of our meeting, she said much of her remittances pay for her children's school fees, paying for her elderly mother's medical care and savings towards buying a house for them to live in together. However, due to her mother's declining health, she was planning to move back to the Philippines earlier and permanently to be with her children and her mother:

> I want to go back home to be with my children, to help my mother and to see what I can do now. I am forty years old! I have been here for a long time. I want to try something different, but I am also scared I can't come back [to Hong Kong] and can't help them. (Diana, personal communication, March 2021, exclamation in original)

Diana completed her high school education but did not finish her degree in nursing before she left to work in Hong Kong in 2007. This sense of uncertainty around the availability of desired employment opportunities in the Philippines if she leaves and the lack of job security in Hong Kong even if she continues to stay is very commonly felt among migrant domestic workers. The repeated renewal of the short-term contract gives the impression of permanence; however it can be anxiety-provoking as security of renewal is never guaranteed, and has been even more exacerbated by the global pandemic. Semi-permanent is the term Ligaya Lindio-McGovern (2013) uses to describe the nature of migrant domestic labour. She explains that although migrant domestic workers operate on short-term contracts, which technically classify them as temporary workers, the feminisation of the Philippines' labour export policy that has been supplying a steady stream of female workers over the last fifty years contradicts the temporary nature as it is tailored to the import policies of labour in the receiving

countries. This results in a steady supply of a cheap, female domestic labour force, which has become a permanent investment for the labour-sending country (Lindio-McGovern, 2013).

> The feminization of migration labour refers to the increasing number of women migrating on their own and the gendered roles that women typically fill as migrant workers (United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2007). Between 1990 to 2014, more than fifty percent of migration outflow for work from the Philippines is composed of women. (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, 1993–2010; Doyle, 2015, p. 5)

As mentioned, the rate of employment for women during 2000–2012 was between 42.1 to 46.7%, and comparatively, the rate for men in the same years was 70.9 to 72.9%, resulting in a nearly 30% gap in their respective employment rates (Asian Development Bank 2013, p. 13). Between 2004–2011, a large majority of women who were employed in the Philippines were engaging in low-wage work such as domestic work (Ibid.). In contrast, the advantage of the steady salary in Hong Kong as a domestic worker compared to the low rate of job opportunities in the Philippines almost always keeps women like Diana in Hong Kong for longer than expected. Yet, when they return home, they are faced with different challenges, among them contradictory class mobility and non-belonging (Parreñas, 2001; 2010, Constable, 2021). Parreñas describes contradictory class mobility as the experience which stagnates the workers' labour market potential and illustrates their immobility within the work that they do, even though their work relies on their physical mobility (Parreñas, 2001, pp. 151–196). Participating in domestic work abroad involves a simultaneous increase and decrease in their labour market status. Their status increases as they earn more than they would in the Philippines, as in the example of Diana, who earned nearly three times her salary in the Philippines in her first employment contract as a worker in Hong Kong. However, their status decreases as they are earning more at the expense of gaining experiences and other skills that would allow them to find the same income at home as in Hong Kong and a desirable career beyond domestic or care work.

As of the end of 2021, the total number of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong is 339,451, with 191,783 from the Philippines (56.4%), 140,057 from Indonesia (41.4%) and 7,611 from other countries (2.2%). The last time I spoke to Diana was in March 2022. At the time, she was planning to finish her contract, which was due to end in July, making it a total of fifteen years spent as a migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong. She planned to move back to the Philippines permanently thereafter.

Migrant labour export: The Philippines and Indonesia

Diana is one of the migrant domestic workers who consistently make up 5% of the population in Hong Kong in the last decade. Labour export is when the state facilitates overseas labour migration for temporary or contractual work and the Philippines and Indonesia have had different circumstances that have motivated their participation in labour export.

The Philippine Statistic Authority estimated that 1.83 million Overseas Filipino Workers were working abroad in 2021 (Philippine Statistic Authority, 2022). The top destinations for these workers were in Asia, with 78.3% of the workers being employed in Asia, and Hong Kong and Singapore being the top two countries in that category. For Indonesia, in 2019, it was reported that there were approximately 3.7 million Indonesian migrant workers overseas (World Bank, 2020). However, the official numbers from Indonesia are hard to accurately be accounted for, as the Indonesian government suspects the estimates for undocumented migrant workers leaving Indonesia each year could be two to four times the number of those who were documented (Anaf et al., 2022). What has been officially reported is the top destinations for Indonesian migrant workers; these being Malaysia, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong and Singapore, in that order (Paul, 2017b). All of these countries are major markets for migrant domestic work.

The Philippine government began its labour export in the mid-1970s in response to its national unemployment rate and rising debt caused by the structural adjustment policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Lindio-McGovern, 2013). At the time, under the Marcos administration, the country saw many militant and civil unrests, as they occurred in response to the national economic crisis and the increasing disparity between the wealthy and the poor. Between the years of 1965–1985, the unemployment rate ascended from 7.1 to 12.6%, while the official poverty rate was 49% in 1985 (Oshima et al., 1986). The economic boom in nearby countries in South East Asia like Hong Kong, together with the infrastructure development in the Gulf countries, opened opportunities for exporting migrant labour and at the time, the Philippine government saw it as a temporary solution. However, the country plunged further into debt and the economy went into further decline in the 1980s, even after the People Power Revolution in 1986 that ended the two-decade Marcos dictatorship and restored a democratic government. At the time, the rise in demand in the world labour market between a dominant core and a dependent periphery has seen migrants becoming part of an ongoing circulation of resources, both capital and labour, within the boundaries of a single global division of labour (Friedman-Kasaba, 1996, p. 24; Sassen, 1993). In the case of the Philippines, this division of labour emerges in the direct recruitment of its citizens to provide labour to more advanced capitalist nations such as Hong Kong and neighbouring countries in Asia, justified by its ongoing national economic crisis, which has

remained and increased since, while the country's debt has not reduced. The Philippines had a total outstanding debt of US$26 billion in 1986 and as of January 2023, the Bureau of the Treasury reported the Philippines' total outstanding debt was 13.70 trillion pesos, which is approximately US$250 billion (Republic of the Philippines Bureau of The Treasury, 2021).

There is an impression that the remittances received from the migrant domestic workers are helping the Philippines' economy, and therefore the main driver for continuing to export migrant labour. Statistics show that remittances from the total number of Overseas Filipino Workers have grown from 1.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the 1970s steadily up to 12.8% in 2005 and remaining at about 9.4% between 2013–2021 (World Bank, 2021). Although there is no exact figure indicating how much of that remittance is from migrant domestic workers specifically, from 2014–2021, Overseas Filipino Workers in Hong Kong remitted an average of approximately US$820 million each year (Philippine Statistic Authority, 2022). As the majority of Filipinos in Hong Kong holding a working visa are overwhelmingly on the migrant domestic workers visa, it is possible to estimate that a large majority of that remittance come from Filipino migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. In 2021 specifically, Overseas Filipino Workers remitted US$722.23 million cash from Hong Kong and the GDP of the Philippines that year was US$394.1 billion (World Bank, 2022). The total number of Overseas Filipino Workers in 2021 was 1.83 million and the total remittance was 151.33 billion pesos, which is approximately US$2.71 billion (Philippine Statistic Authority, 2022).

Lindio-McGovern argues that the foreign reserve gained through remittance is largely used to pay foreign debt and corrupt government officials have allegedly used this money for election campaigns rather than investing into local job opportunities to ease unemployment (2013, pp. 39–41). Further, the structural policies introduced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reduced protective tariffs and trade restriction, which created an influx of imported goods that resulted in the displacement of the local industries and its workers. Labour export was seen as a viable option for unemployment, however using it to deal with the debt that resulted from these policies only reinforces the stranglehold of these policies on the economy in the first place. Despite the steady remittances flowing into the country, the unemployment rate remains high in the Philippines and the impression that the remittances are essential in assisting the national economy by paying off foreign debt is untrue (Ibid.). The continuation of outward migration of skilled workers participating in domestic service abroad 'reinforces the subordinate position of the Philippines within the global economy as well as positioning Filipino women in a subordinate position in the global political economy' (Ibid., p. 37).

In Indonesia, migrant export labour began in the 1980s, about a decade after the Philippines. For many years in the colonisation by the Dutch, Indonesia had

a government-controlled plantation economy and forced-labour system that extracted much of the colony's profits to the Netherlands (Hugo, 2005). After Indonesia became independent from Dutch colonialism and Japanese occupation at the end of World War II, its education levels increased but were still lagging behind other Asian countries as most of its population was still in the agricultural sector (World Bank, 2014). The labour migration that took place then was generally internal, where people from different regions moved to another province for a few weeks or months at a time for work, usually from rural places into the urban areas, but would still have their permanent residence in their original towns (Paul, 2017a). In the 1970s, this kind of internal migration extended across the border to plantations in Malaysia and oil fields in Brunei, yet it was still a temporary and circular migration that saw the workers coming home after a short period of time. Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, introduced new migration policies and five-year development plans that attempted to mobilise Indonesians to migrate abroad for work. From the first five-year plan in 1969, only 5,000 people left to work overseas. Most of the labourers were men, and this number slowly increased, but not significantly. The shift began in the 1980s when there was an increasing demand for migrant domestic workers in the Middle East, which drove up the levels of female labour migration. This change led to the government seeing the potential of its labour export to assist the country's economic problems through remittances and start setting new targets in its economic development plans for the number of Indonesian workers that needed to be sent overseas each year (Hernández-Coss et al., 2008). Although the targets were never met, the numbers increased sizeably every period and continued the justification of migrant labour export.

The migration labour export trajectory of both Indonesia and the Philippines have slight variations in their political economy and histories; however, as close neighbours in the same region, their economic struggles were and are not far from one another. Both governments are aware and have expressed deep concerns over the many reported instances where their citizens who are migrant domestic workers have been mistreated, exploited and even killed during their work abroad by public verbal condemnation and temporary bans of workers leaving the country on migrant worker visas. In 2014, the Indonesian government banned deployment of Indonesian migrant domestic workers to twenty-one countries in the Middle East due to instances of abuse, while at the same time, a severe case in Hong Kong also came to light, involving an Indonesian domestic worker who was sent back to Indonesia by her abusive employers, attempting to silence her from reporting to the authorities.[2] Although serious responses were made by the Indonesian government in the form of a temporary ban for one year in 2014, private agencies still assisted migrant workers to get alternative work permits to bypass the policies. From a governmental level, remittance, and the argument for its role in helping economic development, take priority over the

reported or unreported yet known incidents of exploitation and violence, and migrant workers continue to have limited freedoms and be vulnerable to various forms of exploitation in the countries they work in, due to the lack of concrete social protection in the labour-receiving countries.

The International Labour Organisation estimates that since 2017, there are approximately 164 million migrant workers worldwide, and 11.5 million are contracted to domestic work (ILO, 2017). The challenges that migrant workers face with their limited rights and freedoms, including the dynamics of gender and race, immigration status and inequality, result from the affective dimensions of migration policies, the political economy of migration and the roles of various sections of the global migrant workforce in labour practices. They are never a localised, isolated contestation but a small fragment within the interconnected web of capitalist globalisation. Justin Akers Chacon and Mike Davis claim that global migrant labour is produced and influenced by structural adjustments imposed in the Global South by the World Bank, IMF and other financial institutions (Akers Chacon and Davis, 2006). They define neoliberal immigration as 'displacement accompanied by disenfranchisement and often internal segregation in host countries' (2006, p. 90). This occurs as the negative effect of free market capitalist policies forcing people out of their local communities and submitting to precarious and semi-permanent positions as migrant labourers in other countries, which is evident in the case of the Philippines and Indonesia. The categorisation of migrant workers and the creation of various temporary labourers with different sets of rights attached to their immigration status is a standard policy feature. It is also a capitalist strategy that is fundamental to the functioning of many capitalist economies, facilitating the reduced costs of labour for employers and demanding a pool of cheap labour to satisfy the need for unskilled labour (Akers Chacon and Davis, 2006, pp. 3–5; Sassen, 1990). The relationship between the host countries and labour-sending countries is an abstract bi-folding of supply and demand. Many host countries are post-industrial nations that maintain a high level of employment within the formal economy by importing unskilled labour. These countries' border control protocols manage the rapid flows of migrant workers like a rotating-door labour market (Choudry and Hlatshwayo, 2016, pp. 10–11). This in and out supply of workers intensifies the commodification of labour as it creates a revolving door of continuous temporary workers with limited rights and protection, resulting in less responsibility from the labour-receiving countries, meaning fewer resources needed and greater possible exploitation of workers. Consequently, these labourers are traded as commodities in the market for a lower price and employers gain greater profit (Harvey, 2007, pp. 166–169). David Harvey argues that the state of the labour market has 'transformed the position of labour workers, of women, and of indigenous groups in the social order by emphasising that human labour is a commodity like any other' (2007, p. 171). The continuous supply of migrant domestic workers from the Philippines and

Indonesia and the ongoing demand from the Hong Kong employers has intensified the commodification of migrant domestic labour as well as reinforced a social and cultural norm of outsourcing cheaply available domestic work. The migrant labourers' legitimacy to remain in the job and the country is solely controlled by their employer, which makes resistance to and the reporting of abuse difficult if not impossible. Arun Kundnani explains that within the historical context of British immigration post-World War II, which has shaped the migration narrative ever since,

> The new post-industrial migrant workforce was characterised by several distinct streams – reserve regiments of labour – each adapted to specific needs of different sectors of the economy. The intricacies of the system would be kept subject to constant review and adjustment, so that the numbers, characters and entitlements of workers entering the economy under different schemes could be changed as necessary. Each of these various routes provided employers with a different package of exploitation. (2007, p. 145)

As such, in the case of Hong Kong, the migration policies that dictate the parameters around the living and working conditions of migrant domestic workers are sanctioned schemes that create room for exploitation. Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, whose work expands Asian American studies and labour migration, notes the disenfranchisement that inevitably occurs to the migrant workers:

> The migration-as-development approach promoted by the World Bank, the International Organisation for Migration and the Global Forum on Migration and Development through temporary labour migration programmes allows employers to exploit foreign workers, absolve developing states from introducing truly redistributive development policies and relieves states from extending the full benefits of citizenship to immigrants. (2010, p. 55)

Later in the book, there will be a detailed focus on the individual circumstances and how agency is cultivated and practised, demonstrating the power and limits in pushing back against the deleterious consequences of considering domestic labour as another commodity. How has labour migration been a global phenomenon that has become intrinsic in the global political economy? The economic and social benefits migrant domestic workers bring to Hong Kong's families are substantial and the remittances they bring back to their own countries have by and large been part of a long-standing argument for migrant labour to continue existing.

The economic forces of migrant labour

There has been a long-standing debate globally about the link between migration labour and economic and socio-political development (also known as the migration-development nexus) within academic research and governmental

sectors (Harris & Todaro, 1970; De Haas, 2012; Dannecker and Piper, 2021; Obeng-Odoom, 2017; 2022). Prior to the 1990s, migration labour was defined primarily as a necessary response to the need for economic development in the labour-sending countries. Exemplified in the case in the Philippines, migration labour was a temporary strategy to relieve the unemployment crisis and rising national debt, yet evidently, that has not been the case and migration labour has continued to increase and widen the gap between wages and employment opportunities at home and abroad (Parreñas, 2001; 2008a, Lindio-McGovern, 2012). In the 1990s, positive aspects of migration and the role migrants have in the development of their home countries were being celebrated by governmental organisations, as evidenced in the Philippines, where migrant workers were deemed as modern-day heroes and the Philippines' government even created a national Migrant Workers Day on 7 June as the Migrant Workers Act was signed into law in 1995 (Parreñas, 2005a; 2008a).[3] The discourse around that time shifted from structural development of countries to one that began to see individual agency (Rosewarne, 2010; Piper, Rosewarne & Withers, 2017; Mora & Piper, 2021). However, the understanding of development and in tandem, migration labour, as an economic process, was still placed as priority and persisted.

In 2003, the World Bank published the *Global Development Finance Report* that collated global remittances data showing the potential development impact of migratory flows and remittances. It created a new enthusiasm, along with many debates and strategies, on how governments and international organisations could create and further the positive relationship between migration and development (Faist, 2008; Lindley, 2010). Remittances were not just seen as flows of money, but as an influx of knowledge and ideas that support a nation's development, particularly in poverty reduction and movement of human capital. This was an attempt to push back against the 'brain drain' argument of the 1970s and 1980s, replacing it with 'brain gain' in the 1990s – the former was about migration labour creating the loss of skilled people within the labour-sending country, while the latter was focused on the circulation and continuous flow of people, thus the gaining of skills and people around the world (Kapur, 2004). Around that time, global remittances were about US$167 billion, quadruple the amount of US$40 billion in 1990 (International Organisation of Migration, 2005, p. 270). With this significant increase, since then, there have been many studies that emphasise the positive effects of migration and development, with fewer studies that adopt a critical approach to the neoliberal orientation of the so-called individual's agency or bring attention to the discourse around what exactly constitutes the 'agency' of the individual migrants – i.e. their own motivations for migration and how they consider their own contribution to the country's development (De Haas, 2012; Dannecker, 2009; Withers, 2019; Piper and Rother, 2014).

Neoclassical economic theory explains migration labour on a macro- and micro-level; macro being the geographical differences in the supply and demand for labour while at the micro-level, migrants are viewed as individual, rational actors, who are assumed to have free choice to move on the basis of a cost-benefit calculation (De Haas, 2008). The perspective on individuals' decisions in choosing to migrate for an *expected* or *perceived* optimum combination of better wages and job security, as noted by John Rees Harris and Michael Paul Todaro, is that the motivation of rural to urban migration, or migration from less-developed economies to developed economies, is because 'migration proceeds in response to urban-rural differences in expected earnings with the urban employment rate acting as an equilibrating force on such migration' (Harris & Todaro, 1970, p. 126). Further, as the expected income in the urban area also depends on the probability of employment, Todaro argues that as long as rural-urban income differences remain high enough to outweigh the risk of becoming unemployed, the 'lure of relatively higher permanent incomes will continue to attract a steady stream of rural migrants' (Todaro, 1969, p. 147). This Harris-Todaro-model was later refined and modified to include a balance of factors such as opportunity costs of migration, cost of travel, temporary unemployment and the psychological costs of migration, et cetera (Bauer & Zimmermann, 1998, p. 97; De Haas, 2008, p. 5).

The critique of the model, and of neoclassical economic theory for migration labour at large, considers it as being one of an 'a-historical and Eurocentric' framework, in that it assumes that migration of workers from rural to urban areas satisfies a modernisation of developing countries like in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe (De Haas, 2008, p. 7), which situates the discourse in the context of the global north and negates the structural conditions of the global south.

A historical-structuralist theory on migration emerged as a response to the neoclassical approach, claiming that economic and political power is unequally distributed among developed and underdeveloped countries, leading to people having unequal access to resources, and that capitalist structure and its continuing expansion reinforces these inequalities (Castles & Miller, 2003; Massey et al., 1998; De Haas, 2008). For those underdeveloped countries, their economic development remains trapped and stagnant in a deprived position within the global political structure (Sassen, 1990). Additionally, this historical-structuralist theory sees migration as a natural outgrowth of disruptions that are intrinsic to the process of capitalist accumulation, viewing migration 'as one of the many manifestations of capitalist penetration and the increasingly unequal terms of trade between developed and underdeveloped countries' (De Haas, 2008, p. 7; Massey et al., 1998, p. 36).

There are elements in both the neoclassical and the historical-structuralist framework that can possibly be applicable to the situation of the workers from

the Philippines and Indonesia migrating to Hong Kong, particularly the rural to urban move for higher income and probability of employment, and the continual inequality of access to resources and employment for both of the labour-sending nations' economies and their reinforced subordinate position in the global political economy. However, both neoclassical and historical-structuralist theories on the whole fail to explain why some people in a certain country or region migrate and others do not, and why people tend to migrate between particular places in a spatially clustered, concentrated, typically non-random fashion (Massey et al., 1993; Reniers, 1999, p. 680; De Haas, 2008, p. 8). The interrelated processes of demographic and economic change impacts on global migration patterns, and Skeldon argues that

> There is a relationship between the level of economic development, state formation and the patterns of population mobility. Very generally, we can say that where these are high, an integrated migration system exists consisting of global and local movements, whereas where they are low the migration systems are not integrated and mainly local. (Skeldon, 1997, p. 52)

Responding to gaps between the frameworks and theories came the new economics of labour migration, which acknowledges that migration decisions are not made by isolated individuals but by larger units of people such as families or households (Stark & Bloom, 1985). This framework criticises the previous models as too individualistic and unable to be applied to the diverse realities of migration. Oded Stark places emphasis on the behaviour of individual migrants in a wider societal context and by consideration of not just the individual but the unit, allowing for integration of factors other than individual income maximisation as influencing migration decision-making Stark (1978; 1991).

Furthermore, the new economics of labour migration sees migration as risk-sharing behaviour of families and that better than individuals, households have larger capacity to diversify their resources, especially labour, to minimise income risks (Stark & Levhari, 1982). The assumption is that people, households and families act not only to maximise income but also to minimise and spread risks, and international migration is perceived as a household response to income risk, as remittances provide income insurance for households even if their employment opportunities are low for those remaining in the labour-sending country (De Haas, 2008, p. 35).

Criticism of the new economics of labour migration persists. Alexandre Abreu argues that it is insufficient as it disguises itself as having reconciled both individual agency and structures, between the macro and the micro, yet it is still too individualist in that it does not consider the constraints at the structural level that shape migration dynamics, nor for individual migrant agency interacting with the structure that it is informed and constrained by (Abreu, 2012). Abreu asserts that the framework is fundamentally misleading as a balanced approach

and that there should be a new and improved 'historical-structural synthesis' as a more satisfactory alternative (Ibid., 2012). Considering the specificity of migrant domestic workers' situation in Hong Kong, all three theories can be applied yet be insufficient, as the issues of gender, race and space are missing.

As mentioned in the introduction of this book, stratification economics could be a possible framework to consider aspects of identity and power, in particular race and gender. Stratification economics has been used and pioneered by black economists and economists of colour as an alternative approach to conventional economic analyses of group-based inequality (Darity et al., 2015; Obeng-Odoom, 2020). William A. Darity Jr posits that stratification economics conceives of a world where there is a continuous competitive interplay between social groups motivated by the collective self-interest of their respective members (2022, p. 402). He notes:

> Collective self-interest centers on advancing or maintaining the status of one's social group in comparison with another or others that are situationally relevant. The frame of stratification economics provides a general theory of intergroup inequality. In principle, it is applicable to all societies and at multiple levels of inequality. (Ibid.)

Stratification economics' fundamental context is that individuals are concerned not only with their *absolute* position, but with their *relative* position; that is, individuals gain greater satisfaction the higher the status of the *social group* with whom they identify, and they gain greater satisfaction the higher their *personal* status within the social group with whom they identify (Darity, 2005; 2017; 2022). This framework can be used to further understand and analyse the intersected inequality faced by the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong through the social groups they identify with in Hong Kong and in their home country. The former is a socially, economically and spatially marginalised contingent with higher earnings than they would otherwise have in their home country, yet back in their home country, many of them are their families' breadwinners, and are considered as national heroes. This disparity in social status and identity is part of the motivations in which the workers may leave the labour-sending countries, return to their home country, yet after deliberation return back to the labour-sending countries to continue to work (For further details see Parreñas 2001, p. 150–196).

Through the many studies about migration labour from a macro- or micro-level, no matter how large the remittance amount, the individual choices or how choices are impacted by structural parameters, the issue of gender and the inevitable unequal power relations become apparent (Dannecker & Piper, 2021, p. 306). Petra Dannecker and Nicola Piper revisit the migration-development nexus debate through the prism of gender, politics and agency, and assert that governmental and international organisational actors involved in the migration–development nexus debate at the global level have not analysed gender-specific

power structures and intersectional forms of agency in a sufficiently comprehensive manner (2021). They argue that much of the mainstream debate and policies around the migration and development nexus is too narrowly focused on economic aspects of development, while neglecting the social aspect where care is a very crucial and gendered element. I would consider that care in this instance can speak to both the nature of the work as well as the role of caring women take on that furthers the social wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Dannecker and Piper further consider that the creation of the hero image of migrant workers, as that of heroes of development, serves the political need to emphasise why their migration is 'good' for development, which precisely is a creation that stems from the inability to see the migration and development nexus through a gender-specific framework (Ibid., 2021, p. 304). What this glorification does is take away the intersectional forms of precarity experienced by the migrant women workers – gender and race, and potentially more – that limit their economic agency in the first place (Piper, Rosewarne & Withers, 2017). Overall, they argue that a more nuanced understanding of migrant agency at the intersection of migrant rights, care and development would have the potential to help generate policies that would have better gender outcomes. I assert that similarly, using the intersected lens of gender, labour and space and considering power dynamics within these aspects (that is, the relationship between employer and employee, labour supply and demand, the right to land in rent, the gendered nature of care work) to analyse the decades-long practice of migrant domestic work in Hong Kong, a more nuanced understanding emerges that would have new discoveries and impacts. These analyses will unfold in the next chapters of the book.

So far, this chapter has outlined the migration labour export trajectory of Indonesia and the Philippines and the global migration economic frameworks that it is mostly situated within where there are useful aspects, yet there are missing elements in (urban) economics and particularities concerning space, labour and gender that need to be included. Diving into the situation in Hong Kong, it should be made clear that the city-state has been a long-standing labour-receiving destination for migrant domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia and it is not a passive labour-receiving state that just happens to be geographically convenient in the path of labour migrants. Its economic structures and policies have been active agents of the capitalist system that commodifies migrant labour, which has heavily shaped the economic, social and spatial interactions and negotiations that the workers operate in.

Hong Kong as an active labour-receiving state

Hong Kong was a British colony between 1841–1997. The city-state's laissez-faire capitalist economy, British liberalism and colonial governance by the state under the rule of law have resulted in a relatively transparent legal

infrastructure, which have made it a popular labour-receiving destination. Prior to the migrant domestic labour import from the Philippines in the 1970s, Hong Kong was always a popular destination for migrants from mainland China. In fact, the city-state was known to be a stepping stone for Chinese migrants on their way to North America. Ronald Skeldon has described Hong Kong as a destination of human circulation, observing its emigration in the second half of the twentieth century (1995, p. 51). Anecdotally, that was also a similar practice for Filipina migrant workers between the 1980s and early 2000s (Wee & Sim, 2005). Despite this so-called practice, the number of migrant domestic workers steadily increased from the first 1,000 in 1975 to 140,500 by 1998, to 189,000 in 2016, to 338,189 in 2022 (Research Office-Legislative Council Secretariat, 2017; Hong Kong Immigration Department, 2022b). From the 70s, the introduction of Filipina domestic workers coming into Hong Kong and supposedly using it as a potential transit city to obtain employment experience for further migration to North America was coincidentally useful for Hong Kong's own developmental trajectory (Ibid., p. 178). At the time, the Hong Kong government sought ways to make it more difficult for immigrants from mainland China to come to the city. One of these ways was establishing the official term Foreign Domestic Helper, emphasis on the term *Foreign*, which apparently was intended to make a clear separation between these workers and the Chinese majority population of Hong Kong, and ensure that family members from mainland China would not be recruited under the visa, thus eventually enabling them to stay (Chiu, 1999). Minimalising mainland China's workers from migrating to Hong Kong, and having workers from Southeast Asia instead, with a visibly different appearance under temporary work visas, was a strategy in protecting Hong Kong as a capital-rich base (Wee & Sim, 2005, p. 179). By the 1990s, most of Hong Kong's manufacturers had moved into mainland China due to cheaper labour costs. Within a mere twenty years, between the 1970s and 1990s, Hong Kong's middle class also vastly expanded. This new middle class became the employers of the migrant domestic workers, and having fulltime outsourced domestic work was preferred by local women who could relieve themselves of household duties and focus on their professional careers. The new middle class's wealth and access to resources were also created by their experiences of living abroad. Prior to the handover of British sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997, many Hong Kong people emigrated to countries with developed economies, particularly English-speaking countries such as the UK, US, Canada and Australia. It was a common social practice at the time, and arguably still is, to obtain alternative citizenship for many economic and social reasons. In the time before 1997, many Hong Kong people sought to migrate due to the uncertain political and economic future of the city-state. Those who returned to Hong Kong after obtaining citizenship elsewhere became more employable and had higher incomes, and were thus able to afford a fulltime live-in domestic worker.

In 1982, the minimum monthly wage of migrant domestic workers was set by the government at HK$1,150 (approximately US$147). At the time, this minimum wage was above what most Hong Kong people could afford, except for wealthy expatriate families, which meant that the minimum wage acted as a sorting mechanism, limiting the number of workers coming into Hong Kong and the number of employers who could afford them (French, 1986; Wee & Sim, 2005). This all changed in the 1990s due to the city-state's economic growth. As the middle class became wealthier, the minimum wage of migrant domestic workers did not increase at a comparable rate. This meant the gap between the employers' wages and that of the migrant domestic workers widened, making it more affordable to hire the workers and increasing the demand for them. In 1992, the minimum monthly wage was increased to HK$3,270 (approximately US$420) and as of 2023 to the time of this writing, it is set at HK$4,870 (approximately US$622) (Wee & Sim, 2005; Mission for Migrant Workers, 2018; Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2023). Wee and Sim noted that while the workers' minimum wage became affordable for the middle class, most Hong Kong people would consider it too low for it to be a fair renumeration, 'least of all a job that required live-in arrangements and 24-hour standby service for one's employers' (Wee & Sim, 2005, p. 182). This has proven to be a long-standing observation that is part of the systemic problem of undervaluing the role of the migrant domestic workers, socially and economically, as well as the inconsideration of domestic work itself as legitimate labour that should be compensated equitably. There were sentiments from many Hong Kong Chinese that setting a statutory minimum wage for migrant domestic workers indicated the generosity of the government, that they were being overpaid and that these migrant workers were lucky to be able to work in Hong Kong (Lowe, 2000, p. 118). While there is no hard evidence to prove whether this was still a popular sentiment in 2023, from the many interviews and conversations I had with migrant domestic workers between 2013–2023, I believe that this attitude exists among some Hong Kong Chinese employers, particularly those who are older and have classist and racist prejudices towards Southeast Asians.[4] While there were and possibly still are negative sentiments towards the workers about their pay, having a legislated minimum wage sets Hong Kong as a good destination for workers as it provides an obligatory standard that some other countries do not have.

The minimum wage of migrant domestic workers became a topic of contention in the years following the Asia Financial Crisis of 1997. To ease the financial burdens of employers of the migrant workers, in 2003, the government reduced the monthly minimum wage by HK$400 (at the time it was approximately US$51) and imposed a levy to be paid by employers to the government of the exact amount. The justification was to reduce the wages, while using that reduction to fund the government's new initiate known as the Employees Retraining Scheme. This caused outrage from the Philippines government and

led to a temporary suspension of all contracts for domestic workers coming to Hong Kong and an investigation by the ILO into the negative effects on migrant workers under this imposed reduction. The Philippines Senate described this cut as unjust, especially as at the time, Hong Kong citizens were not liable to pay income tax unless they had a monthly income of HK$9,000 (approximately US$1,155), which amounts to nearly three times that of the minimum wage for migrant domestic workers. At the time, surveys were conducted whereby there was consensus that agreed with the government's move, which can be regarded as a common thought that the wages of migrant domestic workers are leakages from the economy (Wee & Sim, 2005). The notion that the workers relieved local women of domestic duties, lending them time and freedom to be employed full time and contribute to the city-state's economic growth, was a less popular sentiment (Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, 2003). Penalising migrant workers to subsidise the local unemployment was unreasonable and harsh as the workers were 'taxed', while not having access to social welfare benefits that citizens had or the permanency of stay. The levy was in effect from 2003–2013. During this decade, the number of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong ranged from 216,000 to 300,000 (Cortés and Pan, 2013). Since every worker was deducted HK$400 per month, this means each person would have been deducted $400 x 12 = $4,800 each year. By simple calculation, the Hong Kong government had received between $4,800 x 216,000 in the year 2003 and upwards of that every year to $4,800 x 300,000 in the year 2013. This is an astronomical amount of revenue generated off the workers for a decade to retrain citizens to find suitable employment. Despite the levy, Hong Kong was still a preferred destination for the workers, as the minimum wage was more than what was given back home in the Philippines and Indonesia. From the example of the levy imposed between 2003 and 2013, Hong Kong, as a labour-receiving state, has been actively participating in the global migrant domestic labour movement and benefiting from the cheap labour provided by its southeast Asian neighbours. The city-state has continued to do so in many other ways, as other features within the Foreign Domestic Helper contract, apart from their wages, benefit the employers economically and socially. These include: the imbalanced ratio of the workers' minimum wages to the minimum household income of the employers, the two-week rule, the lack of permanent stay, the live-in rule and others. These will be unpacked in detail in the next section and further in the next chapter.

Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong: wages, two-week rule and non-citizenship

Wages: overworked and underpaid

Long working hours is one of the biggest challenges for a migrant domestic worker, as there is no legally set number of hours each day or each week in their

contract (Asian Migrant Centre, 2001; 2005; 2008; Constable, 2007; Hong Kong Helpers Campaign, 2023b; Mission for Migrant Workers, 2022). According to the Practical Guide for the Employment of migrant domestic workers, all migrant domestic workers are entitled to a monthly wage of no less than the legal Minimum Allowable Wage and one weekly rest day of no less than a continuous period of 24 hours (Hong Kong SAR Labour Department, 2022b). It is commonly practised that Sunday is the usual day off work; however some employers might require assistance on Sunday in exchange for another day off. Adherence to the minimum wage and one weekly rest day appears to be reasonable. However, what is not specified in the contract is a contractual wage rate per hour or the number of working hours each day, nor are there suggestions for both given. The lack of standardised working hours and lack of wage rate exploits the workers, and their wage rate fluctuates depending on how many hours they are on duty. In response to the lack of standardised working hours, the Labour Department and Immigration Department claim that household work cannot be measured and that precise work hours would be too difficult to enforce (Constable, 2007, pp. 133–136). To claim housework cannot be measured is factually false, as there are tasks to do, actions to be taken and those tasks can be finished under a time frame that can be accounted for. Yet, for an official government department to state that is demonstrative of how deep and common the sentiment of devaluing domestic work is in the zeitgeist.

Further, this response disadvantages the workers and gives the employers discretion to determine their work hours. Of the eighty-seven migrant domestic workers I have interviewed, eighty claim to be on duty approximately fifteen hours each day between 7 am to 10 pm, and some may work a few hours before they leave home on their day off work, and in the evening once they have returned. This amounts to 15 hours x 6 days, in addition approximately another 5 hours, which equals to 95 hours each week. For the sake of simple calculation, minus the 4–5 Sundays, it can be estimated that there are 25 days of work each month, and the average migrant domestic worker possibly works 25 × 15 hours each month, which is 375 hours. To include the possible 3–5 hours at the beginning or end of their day off work, then that will be an addition of a minimum of 12 more hours each month, making the possible total number of hours 387. Acknowledging that this is an approximation only, it is not far from the potential truth. I have done these calculations with some interviewees and many of them are not surprised by the amount, which they have claimed to be the ‘industry standard’.

Comparatively, according to the Legislative Council’s statistics report in 2018, the average weekly working hours for full-time employees who are citizens or have working residency in Hong Kong is 42 hours (Hong Kong SAR Legislative Council, 2019). The report highlighted that people who work in the service sector can work up to 60 hours each week, with no mention of the migrant domestic workers. By the calculation of the hours that migrant

domestic workers are on duty for an estimated 15 hours each day for 6 days of the week, their average of 90 hours each week far exceeds those included in the official government report of 42–60 hours. According to labour laws in Hong Kong as of the time of this writing, there are no general statutory provisions for maximum working hours, overtime limits or overtime pay for citizens and workers on working visas (Hong Kong SAR Labour Department, 2023a). This is problematic as there is no legal protection of guarantee for paid overtime and employers have the discretion to compensate or not, and how much to compensate by. However, more concerning is that migrant domestic workers are excluded from this labour ordinance and that they are in a separate category of workers, with much longer working hours and less pay. In 2011, Hong Kong instated the Statutory Minimum Wage for Hong Kong workers, which in 2023 was HK$40 per hour.

Many of the migrant workers I interviewed expressed physical exhaustion from long working hours. I spoke with MZ, a 32-year-old Filipino migrant domestic worker, in 2015. At the time she had been employed for six years by the same employer. She recalled the long hours of her daily routine at work (Personal communication, 8 February 2015):

> When I first started, Ma'am [her female employer] asked me to wake up at 6.30 every morning and go to sleep by 9 pm at night. They leave the house at 8.30 am in the morning and I take the boy [employers' child] to school. Many nights Ma'am and Sir [her male employer] finish work and are home by 9 pm. I cook for them and clean up after. I actually do not stop working until around 11 pm. I also must check on the boy and he goes to sleep about 8 pm but he wants to stay up longer when they [her employers] come home. Sometimes I get in trouble for not making him sleep earlier.

With this daily schedule, MZ was expected to be on duty for nearly 16.5 hours each day. Although her employers have set a daily standard work period for her, it was often difficult to abide by those hours. In households where there are infants, young children or elderly people, workers often wake up throughout the night and are expected to begin work the next day at the scheduled time. From the employer's perspective, the workers usually have several hours during the day at home when the children are at school and the adults are at work, which are considered as 'free time' (Constable, 2007, pp. 96–101). This assumption is false because within that period, they are still on duty and doing other chores.

Whether MZ was actively engaged in a task or was between tasks, she was on duty for approximately 99 hours of work each week. In 2015, M's monthly wage was HK$4,600 and the minimum wage for citizens was HK$32.50 per hour (Hong Kong SAR Labour Department, 2015). To illustrate mathematically how her wage depreciates with her long hours of work, her hourly rate can be

calculated by dividing her monthly wage of HK$4,600 by her 16.5 hours of work each day multiplied by approximately 25 work days each month:

$$4{,}600 / (16.5 \times 25) = \text{HK\$}11.15$$

MZ's hourly rate of HK$11.15 as a Foreign Domestic Helper is one-third of the Statutory Minimum Wage entitled to a Hong Kong citizen. If MZ has shorter workdays, between 10–12 hours each day, her work hours equate to approximately 260–300 hours each month, compared to her actual working hours of 412.5. This is a difference of over 100 hours. Under these more reasonable working hours, her hourly rate could be obtained by dividing her monthly wage by the estimated working hours within the month:

$$4{,}600 / 260 \text{ or } 4{,}600 / 300 = \text{HK\$}17.70 \text{ or } \$15.33$$

Under the reduced hours per day of 10–12 hours compared to her reality of about 16.5 hours, her hourly rate was still less than half of the minimum wage of a citizen doing the same job. This meagre rate is unjust and there is no legal nor economic justification for this. It is difficult to ignore the reality that there is a firm belief this migrant labour should be cheap and Hong Kong employees rightfully should have access to such cheap labour, combined with a disregard for the actual tasks and responsibilities of domestic work. Additionally, the lack of standardised working hours is problematic because while her work hours fluctuate and her wage remains the same, her wage rate will continue to depreciate. The difference between the number of working hours in her routine compared to the speculated scenarios of a regulated 10–12 hours is 112–150 hours of labour each month. This is a significant difference.

I was in contact with MZ again in 2021, when she had since left her previous employer in 2018 and was now with a new employer. In this household, there was a 10-year-old child, two working parents and an elderly aunt. Her wage was HK$5,500, which was above the minimum monthly wage of HK$4,630 at the time. At the time, she estimated her working hours were likely the same, except they required her constant care for the elderly aunt, who required mobility assistance and felt more exhausted in her work (Personal communication, July 2021). With her increased wage, MZ's hourly rate at this time can still be calculated to be less than one third of the citizen's minimum wage.

MZ's experiences are not an exception but an industry standard (Constable, 2007; Hong Kong Helpers Campaign, 2023b). The lack of standardised work hours for migrant domestic workers often means that they are overworked and underpaid. Further, the deregulation of working hours allows employers to exploit their labour and time, while adhering to the legal monthly wage.

Apart from the effectively low hourly wage rate, another issue is the low financial requirement of the employer to legally hire a migrant domestic worker. According to the Guidebook for the Employment of Domestic Helpers from Abroad from the Immigration Department of Hong Kong, the financial criteria for the employment of a Foreign Domestic Helper is a total household income of no less than HK$15,000 per month, or assets of a comparable amount for the full period of employment of the worker (Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2022a, p. 1). The minimum household income is only three times the minimum wages of the migrant worker, and this rate has not increased since the early 2000s, while the minimum wage of the migrant workers has. The minimum requirement to hire a worker is absurdly low, and if the household income accurately reflects the standard of living, then it directly impacts on the accommodation that will be provided for the worker. In 2022, the median monthly wage of Hong Kong citizens was HK$19,100, and the average yearly rental for a property of 500 square feet, which approximately equates to a standard 2–3-bedroom apartment in Hong Kong, is HK$17,250 (Rating and Valuation Department HKSAR, 2023, p. 1.2). This means that if a two-income household of median wage persons renting an apartment of the average rental price in 2022 hires a migrant domestic worker at the minimum monthly wage, and provides for their legally required food allowance of HK$1,236, the household would have a total remainder of HK$14,844 for its tenants' general costs of living:

$$(19{,}100 \times 2) - 17{,}250 - 4{,}870 - 1{,}236 = \$14{,}844$$

While there is no concrete number to indicate the standard cost of living in Hong Kong, the city-state is often one of the most expensive cities in the world (World Economic Forum, 2022). The remainder amount for living expenses in the calculation here equates to approximately US$1,900 each month for the couple. That is not a substantial amount for expenses or savings, especially if they have any dependents such as children or elderly people. This is to illustrate that the eligibility of an employer of a Foreign Domestic Helper, as required to have a minimum total household income of no less than HK$15,000 per month or assets of comparable amount, is disproportionate to the reality of living in Hong Kong. The calculated scenario used more than double the legal requirement using the median wage per person in a two-income household, and the remainder after the minimum wage and expenses of the domestic worker leaves an amount that may barely satisfy the standard costs of living. The reality in Hong Kong is that many migrant domestic workers are hired by households with much higher income, especially those among the expatriate population. However, the official legal legibility standard being set so low reflects the lack of consideration for those who could be hired by households with much less income and resources, which will undoubtedly impact on the condition of work and living for the worker. To put

it plainly, if a household living below average income in Hong Kong can be legally afforded the right to hire a migrant worker, who works and lives in their home for two years each contract, there is likely little capacity for provision of wellbeing for the worker, economically, socially or spatially. The problem with commodification of labour, particularly in this instance, is that the financial costs are disconnected from the lived reality of the labourers.

Two-week rule: conditional stay

In 1987, one of the most significant policies regarding the condition of stay in Hong Kong for migrant domestic workers was issued by the Hong Kong Immigration Department known as the 'two-week rule'. The scope of this policy differentiates them from other foreign migrant workers in professional fields, as they do not have the liberty to change jobs and are not eligible for permanent residency after seven years of continuous work. Migrant domestic workers are forbidden from changing employers in the first two years of employment, and if they break their initial contract they cannot apply for a new job from within Hong Kong and they cannot work for multiple employers or outside of the field of domestic work (Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2022a). Under the two-week rule, those who are terminated must find a new employer and sign a new contract within two weeks or they must leave. This rule applies regardless of reasons for termination. While the lack of standardised work hours depreciates the wages and overworks the worker, the two-week rule adds a layer of precarity to their right to be in the city-state and amplifies anxieties of unemployment and deportation.

According to the Standard Foreign Domestic Helper Employment Contract, employers are responsible for the return airfare of the worker to her home country (Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2016). If the contract is renewed, the worker is entitled to a two-week vacation in her home country (and paid return airfare) before the new visa begins. If no contract is to be renewed at the end of two years, the worker must receive one month of notice and is still entitled to a single journey airfare returning home. In cases where the contract is terminated without adequate notice, the workers risk overstaying their visa and deportation while struggling to find new employers within the two weeks. The risk of deportation, unemployment and the lack of accommodation constrain workers to endure poor working conditions, physical and emotional abuse and overworking to secure a contract renewal (Constable, 2007; Hong Kong Helpers Campaign, 2023a). The workers I have interviewed unanimously expressed the unfairness of the two-week rule and the pressure it creates. Nearly 30% of the interviewees have experienced unlawful termination (at least once) and were not compensated with the airfare to return home or provided with assistance during the two-week period. In 2015, RW, a 34-year-old domestic worker from the Philippines, had been in Hong Kong for eight years and had

an experience with a previous employer who, after renewing her contract once in the third year of her employment, asked her to leave with five days' notice without reason (Personal communication, 15 February 2015). I spoke to her and three of her friends who were also domestic workers, about their experiences with unreasonable dismissals. They all expressed various grievances about the negative impacts of the two-week rule. RW described her experience with her last employers:

> I was told on Tuesday afternoon by the lady [the female employer], that they wanted someone new to look after their son. I asked her why and she gave no reason. I didn't know what was wrong but they (the family) have been very strange to me. Later, she said I have to be out (of their home) by Sunday, and that I should pick a date in the week after to fly home (to the Philippines) if I am not staying in Hong Kong to find another employer. They said they will buy my ticket. I had to pack my bags and leave on Sunday. My friend, who is also a worker, helped me. Her employers were on vacation, so I was allowed to stay at her home for about five days. She told her employers what had happened to me and they helped me find a new employer. I was lucky because if I didn't find a new family [employers] in two weeks, I would be illegal. When I told my old employers that I have a new family [employers], they were very rude to me and did not pay me the money for my flights as they were supposed to. They stopped paying my wages for the last days of work. Two months later they gave me the money, but never for the flights back to the Philippines. (Personal communication, 15 February 2015)

Despite her abrupt dismissal, it was a fortunate outcome for RW as she had temporary shelter and had found a new employer within two weeks. If she had wanted to take legal action against her past employers about her dismissal without the required month's notice and compensation, she would have needed time and resources to remain in Hong Kong without income and accommodation. In many cases of abrupt termination of contract, many migrant workers cannot find a new employer within two weeks. Some overstay their visa and seek temporary shelter in migrant organisations such as the Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge. The Labour Department has claimed that the two-week rule prevents migrant domestic workers from job-hopping (Constable, 2007, p. 146; Wee & Sim, 2005, p. 188). In doing so, the rule protects the employers and discourages the workers from leaving their employers at the risk of unemployment and deportation. Clauses 10 and 11 of the Standard Foreign Domestic Helper Employment Contract give contradictory information that ultimately gives more power to employers to terminate a migrant worker's contract without legitimate reason (Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2016, p. 2). Clause 10 states that either party can terminate the contract with a month's notice; however Clause 11 disregards the need for notice from the employer if there were probable circumstances, as permitted in Chapter 57 of the Employment Ordinance, which include (Hong Kong SAR Labour Department, 2022a, p. 20):

(a) wilfully disobeys a lawful and reasonable order;
(b) misconducts himself/herself, such conduct being inconsistent with the due and faithful discharge of his/her duties;
(c) is guilty of fraud or dishonesty;
(d) is habitually neglectful in his/her duties; or
(e) has caused the employer, on any other ground, to be entitled to terminate the contract without notice at common law.

The terms such as 'wilful disobedience', 'reasonable order', 'misconduct' and 'dishonesty' are neither defined nor given further clarification. This is problematic as the employers can interpret these terms of reference to suit their reasons for termination. Part E of the clause is the most problematic as it gives the employers the right to terminate the contract on any other ground. This demonstrates the ultimate power that employers have over the workers – dismissal without accountability. Clause 11 also outlines the permissible grounds where the worker can terminate the contract without notice (Hong Kong SAR Labour Department, 2022a, p. 21):

(a) if he/she reasonably fears physical danger by violence or disease which was not contemplated by his/her contract of employment expressly or by necessary implication;
(b) if he/she is subject to ill-treatment by the employer; or
(c) on any other ground on which he/she would be entitled to terminate the contract without notice at common law.

Due to the pressure the two-week rule places on the importance of renewing an employment contract, most contracts terminated before the expiry date are not terminated by the workers but by the employers (Constable, 2007). MZ and RW have had their employment terminated on the grounds of being 'no longer suitable' without reason. Other interviewees also raised not being given substantial grounds for their dismissal, echoing similar sentiments, and stating that they have been treated unreasonably to the point they had to decide to find new employers before their contracts finished. The probable circumstances in Chapter 57 of the Employment Ordinance for the employer to terminate the contract, such as misconduct or negligence, are not defined specifically with examples, thus the employers can make the decision with only their interests in mind at their discretion. Contrastingly, the grounds for the migrant workers to terminate the contract are more severe and personal – physical danger or ill-treatment – which reflects the difference in the power relation between employers and workers, and effectively the subordinate position of the latter in the contractual relationship. Migrant domestic workers have much more at stake as their contracts represent both their income and shelter in Hong Kong, and their families depend on their ability to earn a consistent income. Further, the power imbalance is also evident in the documentation required for termination. When a Foreign Domestic Helper employment contract is terminated, the employers are required

to submit a form to the Immigration Department. The one page 'Notification of Termination of Employment Contract with Foreign Domestic Helper' shows the reason for termination not listed as a category on its own, rather as a fine print at the end of the document above the signatures, with a bracketed 'optional' (Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2010). This demonstrates how little relevance the legitimate reason for termination is given and reflects a precarious and disposable attitude towards the employment agreement. In early 2021, I spoke to RW over the phone, and she informed me that in late 2020, she had her employment terminated abruptly without legitimate cause when she contracted COVID-19. She was asked to leave and to take her belongings with her. Through assistance from the Caritas Asian Migrant Workers Social Service, she stayed at a shelter and after she recovered, she was notified that the termination of her contract had been submitted and she had one week left of the two-week period. She could not find an employer in time and returned to the Philippines to start the process of employment again. She returned to Hong Kong six months later, after finding a new employer. Throughout the pandemic, incidents where employers denied their domestic workers entry to their home after having contracted the virus made news headlines (Wai, 2022). Following the many reported incidents and footage of domestic workers sleeping on the streets due to eviction from their employers' homes, the government issued a press release that reminded employers that it was illegal to terminate the workers due to any kind of sickness and a fine of $100,000 could be imposed if convicted. In addition, their eligibility for hiring another migrant domestic worker would be suspended for a non-specified period (Government of Hong Kong SAR, 2022).

The Hong Kong Domestic Helpers Campaign (2023a) claims that Hong Kong violates international standards with the implementation of the two-week rule. Articles 30 and 31 of the International Labour Organisation Migrant Workers Recommendations (International Labour Organisation, 1975) state 'the loss of employment should not in itself imply the withdrawal of the worker's residence'. It also recommends that migrant workers should be given sufficient time to find alternative employment, with residence extended accordingly. The Hong Kong Domestic Helpers Campaign (2023a), International Labour Organisation (2013) and Amnesty International (2013) have been calling for the abolition of the two-week rule since the early 2000s. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, to which Hong Kong is a signatory, argued that the two-week rule pushes migrant domestic workers to 'accept employment which may have unfair or abusive terms and conditions in order to stay in Hong Kong' (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2012, p. 62). Furthermore, a report published by the United Nations Economic and Social Council proposed that Hong Kong should repeal the two-week rule and 'address discrimination and abuse against migrant domestic workers as a consequence of this

rule' (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2013, p. 5). Alongside the UN Human Rights Committee, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Oxfam have also urged the Hong Kong authorities to repeal the rule, as it has a direct impact on the conditions of employment and living conditions of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong.

The two-week rule negatively impacts on the migrant workers' wellbeing, as the terms within the official contract continue to disempower them and give hidden leniencies to employers to exert control over the workers. The rule also becomes a pressure point that hangs over the workers as their income, shelter and legitimacy in Hong Kong are interconnected and could be denied without real reason and legal protection that supports them. In this way, migrant domestic workers are more likely to remain silent and comply with extended working hours and other possible forms of unprofessional requests and exploitation. Considerations for wellbeing, from having personal space to taking breaks and other requests, can also become superfluous and be self-forfeited to secure employment.

Non-citizenship: permanently temporary

One of the most contested and concrete features within the employment policy that creates a specifically restricted context for migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong is that they will never be eligible for permanent residency. No matter how long a person under the Foreign Domestic Helper visa has lived in Hong Kong, and despite the fact other foreigners on different visas can apply for permanent residency, migrant workers exclusively will not be eligible.

In 2013, the Hong Kong High Court denied Evangeline B. Vallejos, a Filipino national, the eligibility to apply for citizenship although she had lived and worked in Hong Kong as a migrant domestic worker continuously for seventeen years. This was a contentious case as Hong Kong's immigration laws allow any foreign person who has lived in the city-state continuously for seven years to apply for permanent residency. Despite this, the ruling made migrant domestic workers an exception and demonstrated no leniency towards Vallejos's continuous contribution to her Hong Kong employers. It symbolised a disregard for the integral role that migrant domestic workers play in Hong Kong society and a non-acceptance of them beyond the intermittent status of a temporary guest worker. It also placed them in a state of exception that separates them from other foreigners working in Hong Kong. From the interviews I conducted between 2013–2023 and the countless workers I have spoken to, the majority have renewed their two-year visa more than two times and have been working in Hong Kong for over five years, and at the time of the interviews were not planning to leave. In the case of the shortest duration of a worker I have met, she had only just started her first two-year contract, while the longest duration of employment for a worker I spoke to

was thirty-one years. Legally, they are excluded from purchasing or renting property in their own name and are contractually obligated to the living arrangement provided by their employers inside their home. Although it has been known that some employers provide separate accommodation, it is illegal and both parties could be prosecuted if found. The denial of permanent residency also means the workers cannot have another legal identity other than that of a migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong for as long as they entered and stayed in the city under that visa. Under the legalities of their entry, they are temporary with exclusively limited rights, yet they have proven to be a permanent part of the society, playing an intrinsic part in Hong Kong's economy and lifestyle. They dwell within Gorgio Agamben's 'state of exception' where they are permanently in a 'zone of indifference' where the internal and external do not exclude, rather blur with each other (2005). Their exception to the norm presents two issues: firstly the complex interdependent relationship between them and Hong Kong society, and secondly their continuous role in Hong Kong despite being temporary residents. Drawing upon Daisy Tam's engagement with Michel Serres's work *The Parasite*, and Saskia Sassen's positioning of citizenship and alienage, these two issues reveal an alternative way to understand the Foreign Domestic Helpers, not just as one-dimensional migrant workers; rather as actors with potential for legitimacy and agency (Sassen, 2005; 2008; Serres, 2007; Tam, 2016). This informs the lens through which we can understand migrant domestic labour through the agency of space, gender and labour.

Tam discusses the so-called messy geographies of Little Manila and the parasitic relations between Filipino migrant domestic workers and Hong Kong (2016, pp. 119–135). Using Serres's reading of *The Parasite* (2007), Tam introduces a paradigm where the guest workers and hosts – migrant domestic workers and Hong Kong – are interdependent and co-existing rather than a one-sided parasitic dependency from the guest workers on the hosts. Tam expands on the problematic generalisation of the parasite: In contemporary political media, migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers are often portrayed as poachers, perceived through metaphorical associations of taking without giving back, profiteers off the host country (2016, p. 129). The figure of the parasite regarded as a purely negative, destructive or undesirable agent is widely deployed to stigmatise and evoke distrust; for example, the blaming of economic problems and unemployment on migrant labourers or benefit cheats. Tam deploys Serres's point that 'the parasitic relation is intersubjective, that the roles of hosts/guests are not fixed, that every identifiable actor is capable of taking up the place of the other with the shift of circumstance' (Tam, 2016, p. 130).

This point is crucial as the complex interdependent relations between the migrant domestic workers and Hong Kong unfold. In Hong Kong, agencies profit from fees obtained from the workers and employers, households gain another set of income since domestic labour allows another family member to

take on formal employment, and the Hong Kong government benefits from more citizens participating in the formal sector and not needing to provide the same social welfare for the migrant workers as they are temporary residents. The Philippines and Indonesia also have a chain of beneficiaries: the migrant workers earn a higher salary in Hong Kong than at home, their families are supported by their remittances, remittance agencies collect fees from their monthly transfers, mobile phone and cellular data companies have made exponential profit from all migrant workers who are in constant communication with their friends and families, agencies profit from training courses that domestic workers participate in before arriving in Hong Kong that give them a slight competitive edge, and lastly the workers' remittances contribute to the GDP of their home countries. From these interconnections, it becomes apparent that the workers activate a series of financial benefits where it is no longer valid to view them within a hierarchy where they are simply parasitic guests. The relations described by Tam are a collection of economic and social networks that have become a parasitic ecology that the migrant domestic workers operate in. As put by Tam, 'In Little Manila, migrant workers do not vandalize the face of Hong Kong. They are what makes Hong Kong' (2016, p. 133).

Apart from the parasitic paradigm, Saskia Sassen's considerations on the dichotomy of citizenship and alienage outlines the need to reposition contemporary understandings of these terms, as she states:

> The two foundational subjects for membership in the modern nation state, the citizen and the alien, are undergoing significant changes in the current period. The effect is a partial blurring of each of the citizen subject and the alien subject. (2005, p. 79)

The status of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong should be understood as a blurred status between citizen and non-citizen. This blurring of their intermittent migrant status yet established labour role renders their status more complex to define when they act with agency. Saskia Sassen notes that there are certain global transformations that are shifting the relationship between citizenship and the nation-state: firstly it is the expansion of globalisation-linked policies that have resulted in economic privatisation since the 1980s; secondly and consequently, the communities and social groups that are strengthened by these transformations have increasingly questioned the need to identify with a nation as represented by the state (2005, p. 80). The concept of citizenship is a complex one, especially in the current global political climate where people are constantly moving for work, seeking refuge or have been displaced. To reposition citizenship against these global transformations requires a process of deconstructing the basic understanding of citizenship.

Citizenship can be defined as the state of being given the rights, privileges and duties of a member of society. It is also a powerful political ideal as it relates

to being a legitimate part of a society rather than an illegitimate or a temporary one. It entitles protection for people in their home country and abroad. Citizenship also alludes to equality irrespective of a person's gender, ethnicity, wealth or sexual orientation. Sassen illustrates that it is not formal features of citizenship that have changed, rather the embeddedness of citizenship and the nation-state, and argues that the global forces are destabilising the relationship of citizenship and the nation state, thus creating opportunities for the emergence of new types of political subjects and new spatialities for politics (2005). New types of political subjects can be various non-formalised or partly formalised political actors. Furthermore, informal practices and political subjects not quite fully recognised (as citizens) can nonetheless function as part of the political landscape (2005, pp. 80–81). Undocumented immigrants who are long-term residents engage in practices that are the same as those of formally defined citizens in the routines of daily life; this produces an informal social contract between these immigrants and the community.

I assert that migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are a new type of political subject that are neither citizens nor non-citizens materialised from the destabilisation of the citizenship and nation-state couplet. They are not legally recognised as permanent residents, but they are an integral part of Hong Kong's labour force. As such they are an indispensable part of the local economic, social and political landscape; every Sunday, as they emerge from their employers' homes and exercise their right to public space, appropriating and transforming to reclaim spaces for their own needs. Thus, they are political bodies in Hong Kong and have become what may be considered as emergent political subjects and new emergents – as subjects of denationalised forms of citizenship (Sassen, 2005, p. 81–88). They also participate in other forms of engagement and social exercise of freedom and power such as joining informal migrant worker hobby groups (kickboxing, yoga, dance, art and cooking are very popular), liaising with local NGOs for outreach events and volunteering with them for various events.

Reconsidering how migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are categorised within the discourse of citizenship is relevant due to the spatial and geographical context they inhabit. Sassen notes that the repositioning of citizenship and alienage is particularly visible in the 'global city' as it is a strategic site for new types of operations, where new socio-political claims materialise and assume concrete forms (Sassen, 2014, pp. 9–10). Hong Kong is in fact a global city, a strategic site where:

> Disadvantaged people, while powerless, gain presence and hence the possibility of a new kind of politics and culture. Insofar as immigrants and political refugees are part of the disadvantaged, the global city is also a site for post-colonial history. Hong Kong remains as a space for a certain type of contestation. (Sassen, 1998, p. 131)

Relating to Hong Kong as a global city, it is also a space of contestation and a site where people with less power, such as migrant domestic workers, can gain presence, autonomy and to an extent, power, to create a new kind of politics and culture. Sassen further elaborates that the global city enables a partial reinvention of citizenship and this reinvention shifts away from the narrowly defined nation-state towards citizenship practices that revolve around claiming rights to the city (2005, pp. 81–82). In global cities, urban practices contain the possibility of directly engaging strategic forms of power, a significant point in a context where power is increasingly privatised, globalised and elusive. As emergents of denationalised forms of citizenship in a global city, migrant domestic workers have reinvented their relationship with Hong Kong by their continuous spatial and social practices, which simultaneously are a claim for their rights to the city. David Harvey proposes that Henri Lefebvre's vision for the right of the city is:

> Far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights. (2012, p. 10)

Dwelling within a blurred status between citizenship and temporary residency in Hong Kong, migrant domestic workers, as emergents of a denationalised form of citizenship, continue to reclaim space, together with their right to the city, acting as empowered agents in the local and global structure of global migration labour despite the economic and social limitations.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the economic forces of migrant labour and provided contexts for both the labour-sending nations – specifically the Philippines and Indonesia, and the labour-receiving state of Hong Kong. It demonstrated how the existing frameworks of political economy are insufficient in grappling with the situation in Hong Kong. The neoclassical economic theory views migrants as individual, rational actors, who are assumed to have free choice to move on the basis of a cost-benefit calculation (De Haas, 2008), and that the motivation for rural to urban migration, or migration from less-developed economies to developed economies, is 'that migration proceeds in response to urban-rural differences in expected earnings with the urban employment rate acting as an equilibrating force on such migration' (Harris & Todaro, 1970, p. 126). The critiques of neoclassical economic theory for migration labour at large consider it as being one of an 'a-historical and Eurocentric' nature, and the historical-structuralist theory on migration emerged as a response, claiming that economic

and political power is unequally distributed among developed and underdeveloped countries, leading to people having unequal access to resources and that capitalist structure and its continuing expansion reinforce these inequalities (Castles & Miller, 2003; Massey et al., 1998; De Haas, 2008). Responding to gaps between the frameworks and theories came the new economics of labour migration, acknowledging that migration decisions are not made by isolated individuals but by larger units of people such as families or households (Stark & Bloom, 1985). However, it is still too individualist in that it does not consider the constraints at the structural level that shape migration dynamics, nor for individual migrant agency interacting with the structure that it is informed and constrained by (Abreu, 2012). Considering the specificity of migrant domestic workers' situation in Hong Kong, existing frameworks can be applied, yet there are missing elements in (urban) economics and particularities concerning space, labour and gender that need to be included. This is where stratification economics could be a possible framework to consider aspects of identity and power, and used to consider the power dynamics embedded in the labour, gender and spatial structure enforced by migration labour policies. In Hong Kong, the migrant labour policies specifically created for Foreign Domestic Helpers reveal how the workers are limited spatially and economically, which reinforces their permanently temporary position in Hong Kong society. I assert that these policies were created not for the protection of the *people* (*people* being the migrant workers), rather they are policies *against* the people's protection, wellbeing and development, consequently creating a workforce with limited options and stagnated mobility for the sake of cheap, imported labour. The next chapter will dive deeper to illustrate the impacts of these policies in the domestic spaces of Hong Kong, where practices of oppression breed and fester, further marginalising the workers' temporal position to a subordinate one.

Notes

1. In 2007, the legal minimum allowable wage for migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong was raised from HK$3,270 to $3,480, as publicised by a Hong Kong government press release: http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200706/05/P200706050169.htm
2. In 2014, Erwiana Sulistyaningsih was a 23-year-old Indonesian migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong who had suffered from eight months of abuse by her employers. Her female employer was found guilty of causing grievous bodily harm and the case received worldwide attention, specifically on the precarious situations and limited rights of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and migrant domestic workers worldwide.
3. The Republic Act No. 8042, also known as the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995, was an act to institute the policies of overseas employment and establish a higher standard of protection for Overseas Filipino Workers.
4. Prejudices and examples of the types of discrimination the migrant workers face from their employers, and the conception of such attitudes, will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

Narratives of Oppression: Servitude, Invisibility and Spacelessness

From the previous chapter, the legalities within the Foreign Domestic Helper contract that are problematic have been outlined and unpacked in detail: their meagre wages that depreciate, especially in the commonly practiced context of unregulated work hours, the two-week rule that pressurises the security of their work contract and right to be in the city-state, and their unending temporary status specific to their work visa that denies their eligibility for permanent residency. Migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong operate in a different category than all other workers – local or expatriate. *The single biggest issue that contributes to their marginalisation and underpins the possibility for all kinds of exploitation is the live-in requirement*. It limits the workers' spatial mobility by assigning them one space to work and live in – their employers' homes – for the entirety of their time in Hong Kong. This case reflects the broader political economic argument for paying attention to, and acting on, institutions of space and rent and how they mould migrant experiences across the world (Obeng-Odoom, 2022). In what follows, I nuance, enrich and extend this argument by examining the practices of control and discipline that occur in the home through existing literature and interviews with workers between 2013 and 2022. I will begin the chapter by foregrounding the history of domestic servitude in Hong Kong that contextualises the disciplinary practices experienced by migrant domestic workers and give background to the formation of the socio-cultural position of the workers through Hong Kong's Chinese and colonial history. *No Home of One's Own* will follow and unpack the details in the contract that suggests meagre spatial provisions within the live-in requirement, reflecting the policy's sympathy towards the spatial limitations of Hong Kong's housing situation, therefore giving power to the employers to decide how much room (often very little) to provide for the worker. This section is titled as a nod to Virginia Woolf's extended essay *A Room of One's Own* where she famously articulates the idea that 'A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (1929, p. 5). A cry for a radical idea nearly a century ago for women to be given the same financial and spatial access in order to become equal members to men in society, yet it remains obsolete in the context of providing separate housing for women migrant domestic workers in contemporary Hong Kong. This section includes spatial drawings of the living experiences of interviewed workers to visualise the measurable reality of not having a room of their own. The three sections that follow under *Subordinate*

position in the home: *'Is that what you are wearing today?'*, *'What are you eating?'* and '*Where are you going?'* are titled with quotes from interviews with workers relating to their lived experience, which further illustrate the forms of disciplinary practices occurring inside the homes that reinforce their subordinate position in the home. These practices and experiences are often invisible to outsiders but are common within the experiences of migrant domestic workers. This chapter seeks to fully illustrate and demonstrate the detrimental effects of the lack of adequate and separate housing provision for the workers and how these spatial, socio-cultural oppressions form the agency and resistance that are on full display when the workers emerge as a collective of people, not just workers, on their weekly day off work.

Hong Kong's history of domestic servitude

Migrant domestic workers as a labour group in Hong Kong form part of a continuous history of servant labour of female domestic servants from China. Arguments from existing knowledge provide the historical and cultural context of servitude in Hong Kong and demonstrate the influence it has had on the current disciplinary practices imposed on migrant domestic workers; the disciplining of traditional Chinese female domestic servants in Hong Kong (Constable, 1997; 2007; Gaw, 1991; Watson, 1980), the blurred boundaries and roles of wives, concubines and servants in pre-colonial and early colonial times (Sankar, 1978; Watson, 1991), the private relationships and tensions between female employers and female servants (Constable, 1996; Jaschok, 1988; Rollins, 1985) and the misconstrued sexual deviance of Filipino migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong (Constable, 1997).

Nicole Constable contends that Hong Kong employers discipline the workers because they hold onto the past images and memories of obedient Chinese servants who 'know their places' and pose no moral challenge to existing patterns of authority (Constable, 1997). In contrast, they see contemporary migrant domestic workers as sexualised foreign women, thus legitimising their exercise of control to satisfy previous standards of servitude (Constable, 1997; 2007). Constable adds that the public concern about Filipino migrant workers' sexuality is linked to broader changes in women's roles in the home of satisfying the traditional domestic roles of motherhood and womanhood, as well as entering into the public workforce and becoming financially independent, and in the social identities of the workers (1997). The historical influence of the traditional Hong Kong Chinese domestic servants and the contemporary methods of discipline used in the homes of employers are problematic. Together, they have distinctly solidified migrant domestic workers' socio-spatial and cultural disenfranchisement in Hong Kong beyond their economic marginalisation and temporary residency status.

The concept of servitude and the servant as a common figure within the domestic realm of Hong Kong runs deep into its Chinese and colonial history (Jaschok, 1988; Watson, 1980). During the mid-nineteenth century, wealthy Chinese families on the mainland relied on free and unfree men and women workers. Up until 1949 'China had one of the largest and most comprehensive markets for the exchange of human beings in the world' (Watson, 1980, p. 223). Participation in domestic labour by both local men and women was practised in Hong Kong Chinese households and the homes of British government personnel from the early 1900s (Carroll, 2007; Tsang, 2007). Opportunities arose for men to work as manual labourers, rickshaw pullers or drivers, which gradually decreased their participation in domestic labour, thus 'Hong Kong experienced a stricter "feminization" of household work' (Constable, 1996, p. 452). As Hong Kong's manufacturing sector expanded exponentially in the late 1960s, older Hong Kong women who might otherwise have become domestic workers opted instead for factory work, while new service sector jobs attracted younger middle-class women into the paid workforce (Constable, 1996, p. 453). The number of traditional Chinese domestic workers decreased because of old age, retirement and other job opportunities, thus the demand for household workers continued to increase. This gap led to the import of migrant domestic workers from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. Since then, domestic work in Hong Kong has evolved into a sector that is synonymous with temporary female migrants from Southeast Asia, especially those from the Philippines and later, Indonesia.

Comparisons of the quality of service are made between the previous league of Chinese servants and the contemporary migrant domestic workers, as Constable notes: 'fuelled by a powerful sense of nostalgia, Hong Kong Chinese employers carry prejudice towards the migrant domestic workers with the notion that Cantonese domestic servants were more superior' (Constable, 2007, p. 44). Historically, in late Imperial China and Hong Kong, Chinese servants came from a variety of social groups and were integrated into the family for the entirety of their lives (Gaw, 1991). This differs to how migrant domestic workers are, as they work for the employers on two-year contracts at a time, are not a part of the family as a regular member and are identified as foreigners in the home. The employment of domestic servants was common in wealthy Chinese families in mainland China throughout the mid-nineteenth century and extended to Hong Kong when it became a British colony. At the time, house workers consisted of both free and unfree men and women. Most free servants were men, while most female servants were unfree. There were two main types of female Chinese servants: the *muijai*,[1] who were young women purchased to become lifelong servants to a family; and the *amah*, who were older, sworn spinsters who worked for a family (Watson, 1991). The fundamental difference between the two groups of womens' labour conditions and identity rested upon their free or unfree status;

the *muijai*, who were a commodity purchased by the family, held a lower socioeconomic status and had less power than the *amah*, who were contracted employees of the family.

These typologies of domestic workers are no longer practised as they became outdated and were eventually replaced by migrant domestic workers. Within the cultural context of Hong Kong, the contemporary migrant domestic workers are part of that lineage and are often compared to the stereotyped identity of *muijai* – the docile, obedient female commodity of the household (Constable, 1996; 2007). *Muijai* were synonymous with unfree and young female servants. They were sold to become indentured servants. Indentured servitude refers to the labour system widely practised in the British colonies of North America in the eighteenth century, where servants worked for a fixed number of years without pay to obtain freedom to then work on their own. Migrants who travelled across the ocean to escape poverty in Britain were sold as indentured servants by the seamen who brought them over. This was an exploitative situation, as the indentured servant essentially signed over their freedom for life as the employer retained the servant's identification – the employment contract – and repeatedly sold it along with the servant to other employers.

The *muijai* in Hong Kong followed a similar trajectory to the indentured servants in the West. In many cases, to obtain lifelong support outside of indentured servitude, female subjects preferred to be married off, even in their teens, to another family, even as mistresses or concubines.[2] Constable states that 'the ending of a muijai's obligation to her master at marriage theoretically differentiated the practice from other more extreme forms of slavery' (2007, p. 49). This transferral of identity as indentured servants to married subjects continually reinstated the women's lives as illegitimate commodities that remained within the domestic realm. The practice of *muijai* remained in effect until the 1940s even though Queen Victoria abolished slavery in 1844; however the practice of *muijai* was often undetected when the female servants were disguised as members of the family (Jaschok, 1988, p. 133). Although the migrant domestic workers do not participate in indentured servitude, their legitimate residency in the city-state, including their accommodation and income, relies solely on the employment contract.[3]

The *amah* was a particular type of Chinese domestic worker different from the profile of the *muijai*. During the 1930s, spinsters or widowed women from nearby provinces in southern China relocated to Hong Kong seeking employment. Many of these women worked in sericulture, which collapsed as a result of the Chinese civil war and the Japanese occupation in 1937 (Gaw, 1991). Simultaneously, the recruitment of *muijai* was not illegal yet it was decreasing in social acceptance, therefore with the influx of older women with previous work experience, *amah* became more appropriate candidates for domestic work. The term *amah* is a derivative of several other Chinese terms pertaining to wet

nurse, nurse or little mother, all of which have one common word – mah – which means 'mother'.[4] *Amah* were commonly employed to perform specific tasks within the household. In the past, many households hired more than one *amah*, as they were employed individually as wet nurses, to take care of the children, and for washing, ironing and cleaning. The contemporary migrant domestic worker is expected to embody all the skills that used to require several *amahs* to perform. Aside from the differences in age and relative autonomy of *amah* in comparison to *muijai*, the *amah* were paid higher wages and had external support from other sworn spinsters. Many *amah* belonged to sworn sisterhoods, which allowed them to be less dependent on their employers and gave them collective bargaining power for better work conditions. The sworn sisterhoods became a kind of informal workers' union, a network of women who supported each other, prevented others from working for offending employers, organised loans and bought property together for their retirement (Constable, 1996, p. 460). Aside from the sisterhood, many *amah* also drew on family networks to bring new domestic workers to their employers or other potential employers. *Amah* were not obliged to reside in their employer's home, only doing so if it was necessary. If they did reside in the home, they were provided with a separate room or a space within the servants' quarter depending on the employer's socio-economic status (Gaw, 1991). A fundamental difference between the *amah* and the *muijai* was that the *amah* were not required to be live-in workers. They had the choice of organising their own accommodation separate from the employer's home and had autonomy over their private affairs. In the contemporary practice of Foreign Domestic Helpers, the right to external accommodation outside of the employer's home is a long-contested matter. It is the defining factor that deprives the workers of their personhood and restricts them to working and living in an environment of constant discipline. Although some *muijai* were married off and did not remain as domestic servants, as workers they had no autonomy over their own accommodation or affairs (to the extent of their marriage) and as married women, they remained owned by the employer, husband or household. In this way, the historical identity of the *muijai* left behind an outdated legacy that is partially inherited by the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and can be argued to have influenced the spatial, social and cultural discipline that current domestic workers experience in their employers' homes.

Labouring under the social and cultural histories of domestic servitude in Hong Kong, migrant domestic workers experience specific disciplinary methods that contribute to the continuous depletion of space and deprivation of autonomy that occurs in the private, domestic spaces of their labour. These practices shape the continuous narrative of the migrant workers' misrepresentation and disempowerment in Hong Kong.

No home of one's own

From the outset, as the worker enters the city-state, they are immediately subsumed into their employer's home. Inside this private domestic space, it is up to the resources and discretion of the employer to provide them with adequate accommodation. There is no real measure for this adequacy, apart from the description in the official employment contract that states,

> While the average flat size in Hong Kong is relatively small and the availability of separate servant room is not common, the Employer should provide the Helper suitable accommodation and with reasonable privacy. Examples of unsuitable accommodation are: The Helper having to sleep on made-do beds in the corridor with little privacy, sharing a room with an adult/teenager of the opposite sex. (Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2016, p. 1)[5]

Following from this, the contract requires the employer to indicate whether there will be a separate room provided or not and some details,

> Yes. Estimated size of servant room *square feet/square metres.
> Or
> No. Accommodation arrangement for the Helper:
> – Share a room with child/children aged
> – Separate partitioned area of *square feet/square metres
> – Others. Please describe. (Ibid.)

As seen, there is no compulsory requirement for the employer to provide a separate bedroom for the worker. By listing examples of other options if a separate room is not provided, the clause reflects sympathy towards the employer and the spatial limitations of the average Hong Kong home, and that expression negates concern for the lack of privacy and the consequential negative impacts that the worker may experience from this discretion. Enforcing the worker to live with the employer and not having accommodation separate from their place of work already undermines the fundamental need and common practice of daily alleviation away from work in other occupations. It also dissolves the boundary of the worker's time on and time off work, which gives employers continuous access to their labour even in their time off. Furthermore, the clause allows the employer to create what they deem as an acceptable form of accommodation, so long as it is not the stated example of a made-do bed in the corridor or sharing a room with an adult/teenager of the opposite sex. It may be assumed by employers that from the examples provided, the worker sharing a room with an adult or teenager of the same sex may be acceptable. This is arbitrary and unreasonable. Despite the clause stating that made-do beds are unsuitable, many employers have ignored this clause by providing their workers with makeshift beds within the shared spaces of the apartment with little to no privacy. As the employer is

preparing for allowing a worker into their home, the contract's flexible description of accommodation gives the employer leniency in providing private space for the worker and it becomes a luxurious notion, not a necessity. From the outset, the enforcement of the worker living in the employer's home has little consideration for the importance of the workers' physical and psychological wellbeing.

In August 2015, a migrant domestic worker leapt to her death from her employer's apartment window when she was allegedly accused of theft. The 47-year-old worker was caught sifting through the handbag of a female friend of the employers and was asked to pack her bag and leave. It was understood that the worker became stressed and inconsolable before jumping out of the bedroom window. Eman Villanueva, the vice-chairman of the Filipino Migrant Workers Union in Hong Kong, urged the police to investigate further and spoke publicly about the negative effects of the live-in policy:

> It goes back again to the issue of domestic helpers not being allowed to live outside, where they can have access to friends. Speaking to someone about it is the first thing to do. They are working in the flat six days a week and this is very stressful. It is paramount that all domestic helpers in difficult situations should stay calm and contact their friends or NGOs, which would advise them what their rights were and what they could do. (Kao & Lo, 2015)

This incident is a poignant example of the negative impacts and consequential effects that the live-in policy has as a local and global issue. The workers' lack of spatial mobility and autonomy over their choice of home reinforces their position as servants and breeds their sense of inferiority and invisibility. The cross-contamination of the domestic space and the workplace creates an unhealthy domestic atmosphere for both the employers and the domestic worker, who are both continuously on duty as employers and employees, without pause. Constable (2007, p. 109) contends that the delineation of household territories and the use of space within the home serve as status makers and means of discipline. The majority of the migrant domestic workers I interviewed did not have a separate bedroom to themselves and they spoke of sometimes being powerless within the home because they have no space of their own. It is common practice that workers share a bedroom with one or two children and sometimes female elderly members of the family.

KL, an Indonesian migrant domestic worker, has never had a room of her own in her twelve years of employment in Hong Kong. She has worked for two employers so far; both have children with whom she shared a bedroom. The first one she worked with for eight years, helping raise the child from infancy to about eight years old. She recalled the difficulties in the first year as she was on duty throughout the night when the child was still an infant (KL, personal communication, 2 August 2020). As the child got older, KL's employers divorced, so she

had the child's bedroom to herself for some nights of the week while the child stayed with the father. She had been working with her second employer for nearly four years at the time of the interview. This employer had a 6-year-old child with whom she shared a room. She described her sleeping arrangement as a single bed that was under the child's bed, which she pulled out to sleep on and pushed back in when not in use. According to her, sharing the bedroom with a young child has its benefits and disadvantages, as she can make an excuse to retire to the bedroom early with the child when they throw a tantrum, but it can also be difficult for her to voice or video call her family in Indonesia while the child is asleep in the room (Ibid.).

KL introduced me to her friend, FH, a migrant domestic worker who has been in Hong Kong for nine years. Her sleeping arrangement was a makeshift bed in the living room. FH's employers have two children and a grandmother residing in a three-bedroom apartment. She felt the apartment is somewhat spacious, however, the grandmother wanted to have her own bedroom and did not want to share it with her. The employers had no other option but to create a sleeping area with a partition that separated it from the rest of the living room (F, personal communication, 2 August 2020):

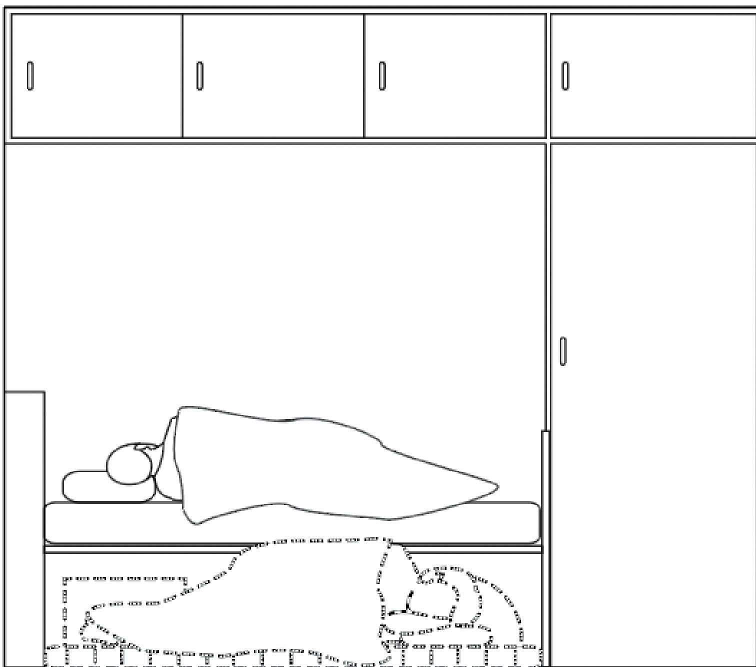

Figure 2.1 Drawing of KL's bedroom, where KL and her space are outlined in dotted lines. (Digital image by author).

> She [the grandmother] said she doesn't like me in the same room [as her]. So ma'am [female employer] asked me to sleep outside [in the living room]. Everyone goes back into their bedroom at about 10.30 pm at night so I sleep then, but sometimes I have to move to another area when they are watching TV till late.

FH described her makeshift bed as a thin, foldable single bed-sized mattress that can be moved around the living room. She had a pillow and a blanket and wore an eye mask to sleep. When the television was used late at night, she moved her mattress to the dining area where half of the mattress was tucked under the table. She used the divider to create a semi-enclosed space between her mattress, the dining table and the adjacent wall. At the time of the first interview with her, Hong Kong was in the first wave of the pandemic. Her employers were working from home and many of the public amenities such as restaurants, cinemas and other venues were closed. Their home became very crowded:

> It's very busy, because everyone is always at home now and it is always noisy. Both ma'am and sir (female and male employer) are working from home, and they have many online meetings. The dining table is like an office and the kids are doing schoolwork online too and grandmum (the grandmother) is complaining she can't go see her friends and she watches TV all the time. There is no quiet time at home! (Ibid., exclamation in original)

Between February 2020 to March 2023 due to the global pandemic, the Hong Kong government implemented an array of restrictive safety measures that impacted people in many ways: restaurants had periods of no dine-in service, recreational and entertainment venues were closed, schools and universities took classes online, social distancing measures in public places were mandated and even the number of people allowed in private residences was limited (Chau, 2021; Yau, 2021; Government of Hong Kong SAR, 2021b). These measures impacted on migrant domestic workers heavily as the two-year restrictions often limited mobility and movement of their employers and themselves to inside the home (For a detailed timeline of the precise restrictions, please see Mok, 2023). Many interviewees I had met before the pandemic told me they have extra work to do throughout the pandemic, from cleaning and cooking more, to having little to no time when they can be alone at home and reduced rest time. Wong Mei Lin May noted that the social distancing measures such as working from home have caused a paradoxical effect on migrant domestic workers especially in the use of the domestic space, noting that because everyone in the household had to remain under the same roof, the workers and the family members had very little distance between one another and had more frequent interaction than before the pandemic (May, 2021, p. 362).

I spoke with FH again in 2021 and she said one of her employers no longer worked from home and the grandmother now had a television in her bedroom,

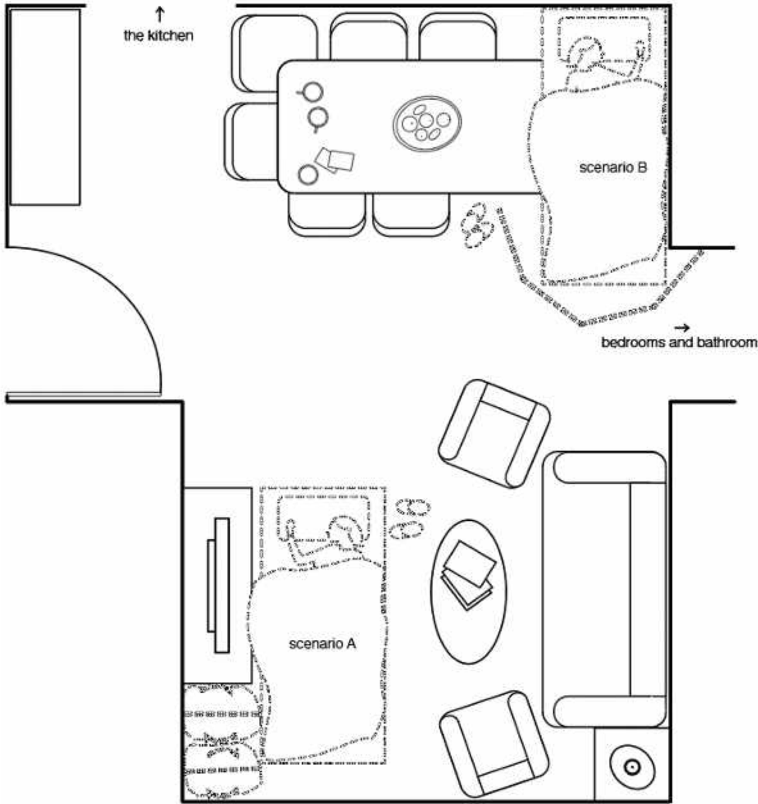

Figure 2.2 Drawing of two scenarios outlined in dotted lines (A and B) of FH's sleeping arrangement. (Digital image by author).

which she preferred as she felt her space was less cramped. She said earlier that year, the whole family had contracted COVID-19 and she had to stay in the home with them. After two days she also tested positive and fell very ill. Everyone mostly stayed in their own room except for using the bathroom, and they would wear a mask if they needed to interact with each other. She was able to rest and recover in her bed without much disturbance for a few days, which she said she was happy about (FH, personal communication, 17 March 2021). She felt that if she was able to stay elsewhere outside their home, she would likely not have contracted the virus. She suggested to her employers that she could stay at a shelter, but her employers thought she might spread the virus or contract the virus there too. She felt trapped and helpless that she had to stay. The live-in requirement has negatively impacted many domestic workers during the pandemic, and F's circumstance could be viewed as one of the better cases as some employers evicted their domestic workers once they tested positive, and illegally terminated their contract (Davidson, 2022).

On a Sunday afternoon in 2021, I sat with KL and FH, on a walkway outside Victoria Park in Causeway Bay. This is an area where many Indonesian migrant domestic workers gather. Prior to the pandemic, many Indonesian workers gathered in the park on their day off work, however, at the time, the park was closed due to the social distancing measures. We sat on the ground with about one metre distance from each other, on a space made up of four pieces of flattened cardboard boxes. This temporary space for the three of us was approximately 3 metres long by 1.5 metres wide. KL and FH had more friends sitting with them usually, but because of COVID-19 rules they had a separate space close by. Although this makeshift space was shared, the group could expand the size of their gathering space as they wished. Compared to the makeshift bed space F had in the living room and KL's shared bedroom with her employer's child for six days each week, their temporary space on Sunday was nearly three times as large.

KL and FH's circumstance were not unique, which echoes the findings of other researchers and organisations (Amnesty International, 2013; Asian Migration Centre, 2004; Constable, 2007; Law, 2001; Zoitl, 2008). Of the workers I interviewed, the majority slept on mattresses or makeshift beds in children's bedrooms or shared bedrooms, and a small number slept in communal spaces with or without spatial dividers, and the smallest number had their own bedroom. In the rarest circumstances where the workers have a room of their own, these rooms might not be regular bedrooms, rather they may be laundry rooms or windowless rooms created by subdividing a room. Nicole Constable notes through her research that in cases where domestic workers had their own 'quarters', they were generally a small windowless bedroom and if they had their own bathroom, it typically had less fixtures than the family bathroom, a squat toilet rather than a seat, and a shower that is a faucet that drains to a hole in the floor rather than a separate shower stall (Constable, 2007, p. 109). Out of the workers I met who had their own bedroom, some did indeed have regular bedrooms while some had bedrooms that were converted from walk-in wardrobes, laundry rooms and other rooms. All of the workers I interviewed who did not have their own bedroom mentioned the discomfort, difficulties and other unpleasant experiences due to the lack of their own private bedroom.

On acceptable standards for domestic workers' accommodation within employers' homes, Article 6 of the International Labour Organisation Convention 189 (International Labour Organisation, 2011, p. 3) states: Each member shall take measures to ensure that domestic workers, like workers generally, enjoy fair terms of employment as well as decent working conditions and, if they reside in the household, decent living conditions that respect their privacy. This article is supported by the recommendation that when accommodation and food is provided for, the following are essential (International Labour Organisation, 2011, p. 13):

(a) a separate, private room that is suitably furnished, adequately ventilated and equipped with a lock, the key to which should be provided to the domestic worker;
(b) access to suitable sanitary facilities, shared or private;
(c) adequate lighting and, as appropriate, heating and air conditioning in keeping with prevailing conditions within the household; and
(d) meals of good quality and sufficient quantity, adapted to the extent reasonable to the cultural and religious requirements, if any, of the domestic worker concerned.

As evident in the employment contract for hiring a migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong, the provisions were brief and the overall tone was more sympathetic to the employers' possible limitations, rather than making clear and detailed suggestions that considered the basic spatial needs of the worker. Most Hong Kong employers have satisfied the loose requirements within the employment contract but do not uphold recommendations by the International Labour Organisation as these are not suggested in the *Guidebook for the Employment of Domestic Helpers from Abroad* or other similar official documents (Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2022a). The government is responsible for how the workers will be received and be provided for, and that should be demonstrated in the official documents. As pointed out, in many cases migrant domestic workers' sleeping arrangements take the form of a mattress on the floor of the child's bedroom (Kwok, 2019; Amnesty International, 2013, p. 11; Wohrer, 2008, pp. 50–57). Amnesty International (2013) reported that over 60% of migrant domestic workers interviewed did not have a room of their own in their employers' home. MA, a 39-year-old Filipino Foreign Domestic Helper, had worked for the same Hong Kong employer for ten years and had never had a bedroom of her own (MA, personal communication, 8 June 2022). MA said her sleeping arrangement used to be a single-sized mattress placed on the floor of the children's bedroom when they were younger. When the children grew into their teens, one of them moved into another room, while the other remained in this room and they shared a bunkbed. When she used to sleep on the mattress placed on the floor between the two girls' beds, she constantly had backaches and enquired about obtaining a more supportive mattress or even a proper bed. Her employers were willing to replace the mattress with a new one that had more support, and the condition improved when she moved onto a bunkbed. Nonetheless, the foldable mattress as ease of storage determined the priority and quality of the mattress. Realistically, there was not enough space in the bedroom for two young children and an adult person. She was much happier when one of them moved out of that room and she could have a bed that was not a mattress on the floor, as she exclaimed,

> It is much better that I have a bed nowadays. Back then even when I was uncomfortable I rather sleep in the girls' room than in the living room. I am at least not

> sleeping in the kitchen. Once they [her employers] joked that the only room that can fit a bed is the bathroom, over the bathtub. I know they were joking! But of course I had to say no thank you! (Ibid., exclamation in original)

Apart from the employment contract, employers are also given a Revised Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties, which refers to the facilities provided in their accommodation that require employers to select 'yes' or 'no' to the following items:

(a) light and water supply;
(b) toilet and bathing facilities;
(c) bed;
(d) blankets and quilts;
(e) pillows;
(f) wardrobe;
(g) refrigerator;
(h) desk; and
(i) other facilities.

This list includes a disclaimer that reads: 'Application for entry visa will normally not be approved if the essential facilities from item a) to f) are not provided free' (Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2016, p. 2). Quantative research that shows the number of employers ticking 'yes' to all these requirements cannot be found; however, my interviews with the workers (some have shown me a copy of their original contract) show that there is a lack of congruence between what employers state on paper and the living conditions of the migrant domestic workers. MA, for example, used to share a bedroom with two children, which eventually turned into sharing with one; there was barely enough space for storage of her belongings and she was also not provided with a wardrobe of her own. She shared part of the small wardrobe with the children and eventually she was given some storage containers that fitted under her bed when they installed a bunkbed. Technically, MA's employers had not fulfilled the criteria in the list of requirements and the disclaimer. As the schedule does not define what is acceptable as a wardrobe or a bed or give examples of the variations of such features, they can be interpreted and skewed to the convenience of the employers. More importantly, like the criteria for a separate space and its listed variations, the facilities were set out as options that may be negotiated or not provided by the employers at their discretion. The items on the list are everyday essentials that should not be optional but mandatory. The disclaimer noting that the visa will normally not be approved if selected items were not provided implies the possibility that the visa may still be approved. The document should clearly define the mandatory essentials of everyday, ensuring the employers are providing a healthy, safe and supportive domestic environment for the migrant domestic worker to work and reside in. However,

the lack of specific mandates in the schedule reflects sympathy and leniency towards the employers' spatial and resource limitations, as if there is a silent understanding that the employers should save as much space as possible or that the worker should take up as little space as possible in their home. It makes clear that prioritising such limitations above the quality of living of the workers in the homes of their employers is a result of treating labour as a commodity, and the workers could remain invisible in the space for as long as the work is visibly completed. The live-in policy and the clauses for accommodation are not created to protect the workers, rather they demonstrate a treatment of the workers as a bi-product of the labour and not as people who are entitled to decent living conditions. The live-in requirement is a means to have them work as efficiently as possible, maximising the cost effectiveness. The impact this has on the workers is their continuous sense of spacelessness and invisibility in the home that is also their workplace.

Outside of their sleeping hours, KL, FH and MA's sleeping arrangements and personal belongings were in some ways stored away and out of sight in their employers' homes. Ultimately, they had no space to have as their own apart from their bed space in the hours when they were sleeping. Outside of their sleeping hours, that space may be tucked, folded or stored away and placed out of sight. They had no legitimate space of their own inside the homes that they lived in for many years. Their privacy was limited to time spent in the bathroom and temporarily contained. Conceivably, they were spatially 'invisible' for the majority of their work and living. For six days each week, KL, FH, MA and many migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong become visible only in the acts of continuous domestic duties. They are seen when picking up children from school, waiting in line in the supermarket, walking dogs, supporting the elderly and such like. Their occupancy at home remains transitory. From the outset, the lenient provisions give more power to the employers to limit the workers' space in their home. But this is not a classic case of employer-employee struggle as described by Karl Marx in 'the working day' (Owusu-Ansah, Ohemeng-Mensah, Talinbe, and Obeng-Odoom, 2018) for two reasons. First, the employer is also a landlord. Thus, the power of landlords is dramatically increased, as is the power of employers, as research in other contexts (Obeng-Odoom, 2021) demonstrates. Second, unlike the structuralist analysis of Marx, where the employers are the stronger class compared to the employees as they have more power to exert force and define the conditions of work, such as wages and duration of work (Marx, 1867/1990, pp. 162–165), these migrant domestic workers have one more power to exercise, which is what I have been calling spatial agency (Kwok, 2015; 2019). Thus, when this depletion of space perpetuates the invisibility and spacelessness of migrant domestic workers, which disempowers them and encourages a culture of docile and disciplined domestic workers, every Sunday, the impact of the live-in regulation manifests in public spaces where the workers engage in domestic activities

such as eating together, resting and grooming in public, as if they were in private spaces of their own.

The cross-contamination of the workplace and home is challenging for both the employers and the workers as spatial and professional boundaries dissolve. For the employers, sharing their homes with an employee for six days each week potentially exposes their personal relationships and behaviours that they otherwise would not share with their regular co-workers (International Organisation of Migration, 2020, p. 22). Conversely, the workers have little to no private space or sufficient time away from their place of work to recover from their continuous labour routine. Both the employers and employees operate within a complex environment where professional and personal boundaries constantly intermingle, dissolve, fluctuate and reform.

Subordinate position in the home

The lack of spatial separation between the workplace and home facilitates disciplinary practices, where the employer asserts discipline over the workers and places them in a subordinate position. At times, they are required to communicate to their employers in a manner that reflects obedience, and to speak only in English or Cantonese. Many families prefer the workers to speak English in the home, especially to the children. There is often a bias towards Filipino workers for their English proficiency, therefore they are preferred in taking care of children. However, where the employers' English skills are not proficient, they may specify they want a worker who can speak Cantonese. In these circumstances, Indonesian workers may be preferred as there is a perception of their greater proficiency in adapting to Cantonese. Some workers learn Cantonese in training agencies in their home country or through intensive courses provided by agencies in Hong Kong. The use of both Cantonese and English are common in many households with migrant workers. Employers also impose various forms of discipline over the workers including enforcing house rules, applying time-based tasks or Nicole Constable's so-called 'budgeting' time, specifying the workers' physical appearances and controlling the food they consume. These strategies are echoed in Constable's *Maid to Order in Hong Kong* (2007), where she examines the dialectic relationship between discipline and resistance in the lives of Filipino migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. Similar narratives have emerged from my interviews, including the strategy where employers coerce the workers to do extra work by manipulating them to believe they are an equal member of the employers' family. Constable calls this tactic 'part of the family' where employers give the workers a false sense that they are equally respected as a regular member of the family, and therefore may lead them to assist the family outside of contractual agreements, work extra days or receive less pay (Constable, 2007, pp. 112–115). The coercive nature of this method places the migrant domestic

workers in a vulnerable position as relationships with different family members can be used against them as reason for personal conflict.

Throughout the decade that I have been involved in this research and speaking with migrant domestic workers, the forms of control exerted over the workers by their employers have changed and evolved (Kwok, 2015; 2019). From actively pressuring or even asserting control over the workers' appearance, the food they consume, their social behaviours and so on, to subtle comments and more 'playful' cajoling, there have been more instances around discipline through technology, for example, applying time limitations around 'screen time', limiting access to the home wireless internet network, providing them with a separate phone that negates access to social media accounts or personal communication during work hours, and having surveillance cameras in the apartment that are connected to the employers' phones, among other things. The more traditional forms of discipline are still prevalent but have lessened, such as control over the workers' attire, the food they eat (separate from the food they prepare for the family), setting house rules and curfews, budgeting of time and coercion through being called as part of the family. However, as Hong Kong society has slowly progressed regarding gender rights and attitudes towards women, the more traditional forms of discipline over the workers have loosened, and instead many have become more passive remarks or unwelcomed comments rather than enforcement. These remarks are condescending and disempowering as the workers are being seen as vulnerable or gullible people, rather than adult women who have capacity to manage households while being breadwinners for their families back home. Although attitudes have changed, workers have had a long practice of self-disciplining and remaining subservient at the risk of losing their employment, their accommodation and right to be in the city-state. All forms of control, whether exerted by employers or exercised by the workers themselves, are exacerbated by the cross-contamination of home and the workplace and some only exist because there is no spatial separation for the workers and their employers. The global pandemic exaggerated the measures for control even more when everyone spent more time at home and there was a growing anxiety around contracting the virus and infecting the household. All forms of control reflect degrees of distrust from the employers, which come from the insecurity of living with a stranger in the home, and prejudices around race, level of education and gender amplify the distrust and disconnection. The next section will use stories collected through interviews to illustrate the forms of discipline experienced by the workers, and the impact these have had in placing them in a subordinate position in the home, and effectively, their marginalised position in Hong Kong.

'Is that what you are wearing today?': Controlling physical appearances

The physical appearance of a migrant domestic worker can be used to represent the employer's power and the family's social status (Constable, 1997). When the workers first began to operate in Hong Kong in the 70s, many employers required them to wear a uniform, especially when guests were visiting the home. At the time, some wore a maid's uniform, typically a short-sleeved, knee-length loose-fitting dress in light blue, pink or grey, sometimes with an apron attached. When these uniforms were common, they were sold in many places in Hong Kong, including in the shops in World Wide Plaza in Central, where many Filipino workers gathered every Sunday. The visual identity of the uniform was phased out from the early 1990s onwards. Today in Hong Kong, the workers do not have a designated uniform. Their work attire is usually casual everyday clothing, and some employers make requirements for what they deem appropriate. However, on the websites of recruitment agencies, candidates are still pictured wearing a maid's uniform similar to the one described above that was worn in the 70s. This outdated image of the maid reminds employers of a particular kind of servitude they may expect from migrant workers that is unrealistic and outdated. The custom of the domestic worker's uniform in Hong Kong shares similarities with the traditional appearance of Chinese servants; *amah* and *muijai*. The typical *amah* was dressed in a black and white traditional Chinese worker's suit with their long hair braided back, which was a cultural symbol of their spinsterhood. The *muijai*, who were usually much younger girls or women, were dressed in a similar worker's suit in a youthful, floral pattern. These uniforms clearly signified them as domestic servants and the families with servants were traditionally of high socio-economic status (Rollins, 1985, p. 129; Romero, 1992, p. 112). Enforcing uniforms on domestic workers had been a long-standing tradition and a form of body discipline (Constable, 2007, p. 102). Today, migrant workers in Hong Kong no longer wear uniforms, yet in the standardised photographs of workers on the websites of all employment agencies, workers are shown wearing uniforms, often with aprons, with similar haircuts, postures and courteous smiles. Olivia Killias notes that such standardised portraits 'underline the focus on the labouring body and contribute to the idea that choosing a domestic worker is a matter of physical measurements…, which suggests domestic workers are all the same, thus easily repleaceable' (Killias, 2018, p. 9).

I assert that although the workers do not wear uniforms in the homes, their clothing and appearance remain under the scrutiny of their employers as a form of discipline and control.

This entitlement of having control over the appearance of the workers has been enhanced by the popular misrepresentation among Hong Kong citizens

that they pose a sexual or moral threat to the families because they have not come from a lineage of obedient, chaste women who dedicated their entire lives to the families they work for. They can also be misunderstood as being selfish mothers and wives who have willingly abandoned their families to earn higher wages in Hong Kong than in the Philippines (So, 2015). In reality, this is a prejudiced misconception that is untrue. Based on my interviews with migrant workers, and the research of Nicole Constable (1996; 1997; 1999; 2007), Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2001; 2005a; 2008a) and Ligaya Lindio-McGovern (2011; 2013) and the works of many other scholars, the main reason these women participate in domestic labour abroad is to support their families back home, whether in providing for education, for a family home or both. They are dedicated mothers, wives and daughters whose decision to migrate is made under difficult circumstances where sacrificing time with the family is necessary in order to financially support the family. The prejudiced misconception impacts the way the workers are treated by their employers.

In 2019, I spoke to PY over the phone. I have known her since 2015 and at the time of the interview she had been working for the same employers for seven years. On her days off work, PY likes to wear makeup, leaving her hair long and dressing in fashionable clothing. She can only dress this way on her days off because her female employer has prevented her from doing so at work and has given her the impression that wearing fashionable clothes is not aligned with being a good worker (Personal communication, 8 February 2015). During her first couple of years of working for this employer, PY often received comments on her clothing on Sundays before she left home, usually a rhetorical question of 'Are you really wearing *that* today?' This line of questioning would be followed by the employer's opinion about suitable clothing for her body type or skin tone and how she may not be dressed appropriately for a woman of her age who was a mother. PY told me the comments eventually stopped, but she became much more aware of what her employer might think of her and would dress more conservatively so as to not attract such comments (Personal communication, 17 November 2019).

Few of the migrant workers interviewed had the freedom to wear their work attire without comments or questions in the first few months or year of their work with a new employer. Many had restrictions imposed on them by their female employers specifying conservative clothing to be worn in the home, in the form of high neckline tops that cover the chest, sleeves that cover the shoulders even in hot weather, loose clothing that does not show contours of the body and no dresses or skirts above the knees. Some workers commented that they have observed their female employers becoming nervous around young, attractive workers. PY recalls occasional unpleasant comments made towards her about her clothing choice on Sundays by her female employer, directly alleging her image was too sexualised:

> I was wearing a dress and some boots, she says I'm looking too sexy. She tells me that Hong Kong people look at us [Filipino workers] and think we are not good women when we dress like that! (Personal communication, 8 February 2015, exclamation in original)

Similar comments were made by other migrant workers I interviewed over the years. Some recalled accusations of being inefficient in their tasks when they spent time on their appearance, even on their day off work. The comments received by PY from her employers, and other employers' various comments about the workers appearing sexualised, give legitimacy to the imposition of bodily discipline. The misrepresentation of the workers as a sexual threat is further skewed by their representation in mainstream Hong Kong media, as noted by Constable, 'where Filipino migrant domestic workers are often criticised by employers in private conversations and in the media – for their independence, immorality, impertinence, and lack of commitment and dedication to the families for whom they work' (Constable, 1996, p. 458). Over the years, the perception of the sexualised worker has persisted in the mainstream media, as they are often portrayed as devious and sexualised women who want to cause harm to the employers in Cantonese television dramas. These narratives have an impact on the real lives of workers, as these false sentiments may be treated as real in public. The website of a Hong Kong-based migrant domestic worker employment agency, under the section of notes and tips for potential employers upon the application for workers, stated in English:

> Both the husband and the wife shall jointly select the Helper. A beautiful or young good-stature helper is more attractive for the husband, and may cause an affection dispute.
>
> (Peony Employment Agency Ltd, 2023)

The Chinese language version uses a much more problematic expression, as it states 'that maids who are beautiful or in good shape can easily seduce the husbands' (Ibid.). The suggestion of the physical appearance of the worker as a possible cause of a couple's dispute is factually unsubstantiated and ethically irresponsible. Moreover, the suggestion of the possibility of the physical appearance of the female worker seducing the male employer, and causing a breakdown of marriage, is sexist. Public statements like this continue to misrepresent migrant workers and amplify gender and racial prejudices that already exist, and give a false reason for employers to justify their use of control over the way the workers dress, appear, speak and behave. Additionally, they reflect a dichotomous identity that Hong Kong employers may place on the workers from the outset, as sexualised strangers with ill intentions.

In 2022, I spoke to BS, who spoke to me about various experiences with her female employers controlling her appearance. When we first met in 2015, her

then-employer coerced her to go to a hair salon to get her long hair cut short, claiming it was better for work because her hair will not get in the way of cooking (Personal communication, 1 February 2015). She was twenty-seven years old at the time and was on her first contract in Hong Kong, so she was scared to object to her employers' wishes. Later, this employer began to buy clothes for her to wear as her daily uniform. She spoke to her family and some friends about the progressively unprofessional demands, and eventually with the help from Mission for Migrant Workers, she was able to find another employer right after the two-year contract ended. Her next employer told her not to wear any jewellery, apply nail polish or wear makeup except on her day off work. She was not bothered by this request but would be questioned by her employer on whether she was wearing makeup or not:

> She asked me why I look nice to go to the shops. I say I am not doing anything different. She would walk up very close to me and look at my face to see if I have make up on. When I dress nice to go out on Sunday, she says I should not look too nice, because I will attract the wrong guys. Maybe because I am not married, she is scared I will have a boyfriend. She asks me why I don't have a husband back home. I don't know what she wanted. (Personal communication, 1 February 2022)

Some employers have a preconceived idea that on the workers' day off work, they might engage in other jobs, particularly in sex work. This is part of the misconception that some workers are overly sexual and would engage in illegal, or what the employers deem morally questionable, activities. BS speculated that her employers were controlling of how she looked because they were scared she would find a boyfriend, or fall pregnant. Legally, the employers are not allowed to terminate the contract if a migrant domestic worker falls pregnant and would have to provide her and the child with adequate care and time off.

Putting restrictions or demands on the appearance of a migrant domestic worker is not an uncommon practice of exercising control. From specifying items of clothing to banning cosmetics or long hair, the female body is under direct surveillance and discipline, with the aim of oppressing individuality and femininity. BS and PY have both been subject to bodily discipline motivated by the sexualised threat of the female body. In contrast to PY, BS experienced a more severe disciplinary imposition as the perceived threat – her femininity in the form of her long hair – was forcibly removed. Stripping away the workers' agency over their own physical appearance and hiding particular physical manifestations of femininity, disciplinary practices shape the workers to become homogenous bodies that only exist as obedient and unthreatening subjects of domestic labour.

'What are you eating?': Food practices as discipline

Food consumption practices often reflect the power relations within Hong Kong households, as 'employers can determine not only what a domestic worker cooks for the family meal but also what, where, when, and how much a domestic worker eats' (Constable 2007, p. 109). To satisfy the Hong Kong employers' expectations of the migrant domestic workers' capability to cook Cantonese cuisine, employment agencies may provide culinary training. BS and PY both learnt to cook basic Cantonese dishes in their agencies before their arrival in Hong Kong. In terms of cooking techniques, flavours and ingredients, Cantonese food is not completely different from the regular Filipino cuisine and many interviewees become accustomed to cooking for the employers within the first couple of years. For Indonesian workers, those who are Muslim do not consume or touch pork products for religious reasons, yet some employers have requested they partake in the food preparation.

Most of the interviewees reflect that they rarely have opportunities to cook or consume Filipino or Indonesian cuisine in their employers' homes. There have been circumstances where employers have embraced the food culture of the worker and have even asked them to cook what they would like on occasions. However, that is a rare occurrence and many workers prefer to not express their opinion on food matters, as they do not want to be criticised or explain their preferences. CC, who is a very passionate cook, has been working as a migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong since 2005. Her first employer embraced Indonesian food and gave her opportunities to cook Indonesian food for the family, and on special occasions, had her cater for dinner parties and even paid her an extra fee. These employers migrated to Canada in 2012 and she was referred to her next employer. Unfortunately, the next employer did not embrace her cooking skills and she only cooked whatever they asked her to. They have made comments to her that Indonesian food is unhealthy, as they deem it too spicy or oily and have asked her to cook more 'cleanly':

> They tell me to cook like this or like that. I say yes. I do as they say and they think the food is ok. They tell me to not eat too much Indonesian food as it is not healthy. When I cook for myself, I do it when they are not home, so they don't say that I'm being unhealthy! (Personal communication, 11 June 2022, exclamation in original)

Remarks about food consumption can be assumed as regular commentary that people may have in a typical workplace. What is different about this workplace is that it is not typical; it is also their home. Comments made about one's food choices within the power dynamic of employer and worker can place pressure on the worker to be less expressive, hide their food preferences or be embarrassed or ashamed. In other words, the migrant worker may self-discipline

to become more agreeable to appear as a more obedient worker to continue their tenure in Hong Kong. Mary Louise Pratt defines 'contact zones' as social spaces exhibiting diverse cultural encounters and clashes and asymmetrical power relations (Pratt, 1992). The food contact zones between employers and migrant domestic workers are a situation of unequal power relations and their subversion and transcendence. Apart from the fact that the workers, and C in this example, are adults who have the right to make their own choices, ongoing comments on the workers' food or lifestyle choices are unprofessional and condescending. In many cases, this carries a paternalistic tone about caring for the worker, which in fact is disguising control over the worker in choosing what the employer prefers. Ultimately, the worker does not have equal power as other members of the household and their need for space, self-expression and freedom are curtailed.

Yuk Wah Chan uses James Farrer's concept of the culinary contact zone to elaborate on the food spaces in which migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong dwell that are of cultural friction and creativity (2021). Culinary contact zones also allow people from different cultures to exchange culinary skills and at the same time manifest 'highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' (Farrer, 2015, p. 8). Chan elaborates on two spaces – the first being a 'comfort zone' without cultural clashes or power differentials, where the workers share with each other release pressure, and the second being their place of work, where they negotiate power and subvert differentiated and unequal relations (Chan, 2021, p. 48). These culinary contact zones are among the many spaces that migrant domestic workers dance in and out of every day in their labour.

It is common practice that migrant domestic workers are told not to cook their own foods. It is common that many Hong Kong Chinese employers deem Filipino food to be too spicy or have a strange smell and Indonesian food to be too oily and unhealthy. Popular Filipino dishes reminiscent of home, such as braised meat dishes, are not allowed to be prepared or consumed in the homes of many employers. Some do not even allow the workers to cook Filipino food even when the employers are absent. BS never cooked Filipino food in her first employer's home. Her employer was accustomed to using Chinese medicinal herbs in most meals and taught her to make numerous soups that involve long hours of cooking. She also insisted on BS consuming the medicinal dishes too, as in her employer's opinion B had 'low-energy, is unfit and moves slower than a pig' (Personal communication, 8 February 2015). BS's second employer did not have the same requests, but also made comments on her need to be slimmer so she can work faster, therefore restricting the proportions of her food. Legally, the employment contract specifies that food should be provided free of charge, and if no food is provided, a food allowance of no less than HK$1,236 each month is required (Hong Kong SAR Labour Department,

2022b). Although this is a legal requirement, many employers exercise this at their discretion. Many workers consume the same food as the family, so the food allowance becomes part of the household budget. For those who are given the food allowance, it is not always the full legal amount. Besides that, HK$1,236 each month for food is grossly insufficient. It equates to HK$41.2 each day (approximately US$5.3), which can afford one cheap meal at a local Cantonese diner at best.[6]

Josephine Beoku-Betts analysed the relationship between food consumption and preparation practices among women in marginalised cultural groups in the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina (1995). Through several years of intermittent fieldwork, she found that women who are in subordinate positions in the household use food preparation and consumption as a method of cultivating and preserving their cultural identity (Ibid.). From the primary data gained from the interviewees and secondary resources, it is apparent that food is an important part of the cultural identity of the migrant domestic workers (Chan, 2021; Constable, 2007; Law, 2001). This part of their identity is substantially restricted as they do not have the freedom to access their own cuisine in Hong Kong, and the food they prepare and consume is often dictated by their employers. Food practices become a form of discipline in the homes.

Unlike other Asian cuisines such as Japanese, Korean, Thai and Vietnamese that have long been embraced and adopted into Hong Kong's ethnically diverse food culture, Filipino and Indonesian food remains largely on the periphery in the dining scene in Hong Kong, even in 2023. Law (2001) argues that this lack of exposure and unwillingness to accept Filipino cuisine, or attempt to, in employer homes reflects the social and cultural disparity between employers and Filipino migrant domestic workers. In *Home Cooking: Filipino Women and Geographies of the Senses in Hong Kong*, Law (2001, p. 278) contended that through the process of ingesting Filipino food in Hong Kong, the domestic workers create new associations between Hong Kong and the Philippines, and that food consumption becomes a way in which nationalism and ethnicity are intertwined. In other words, the culture of migrant domestic workers can be expressed through their food practices. Disallowing the preparation and consumption of the workers' national cuisine in the home disregards the national identity of the workers. It is also a method of limiting their personal expression in the private domestic space for six days each week. Therefore, the consumption of Filipino or Indonesian food outside of their employers' homes is a way that the workers recover from the cultural discipline and depletion of expression they experience in their employers' homes (Law, 2001). It also becomes a defiant act of national and cultural identification. Food practices as a method of discipline extend beyond what is prepared and consumed, and the amount of food that is provided for the worker.

'Where are you going?': Spatial restrictions and curfews

Contractually, migrant domestic workers are legally entitled to a continuous twenty-four hours of rest each week (Hong Kong SAR Labour Department, 2022b). Realistically, in many circumstances, the workers do not experience a clean break of twenty-four hours without being asked to 'help out' here and there before and after their time outside of the home. Moreover, some employers set a curfew for when they need to be home by, and even make suggestions of the places they should not go. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns caused immobility for all the workers for over two years, as they could not fly home to see their families. Not only were they working under the uncertainty of not knowing when the safety restrictions would be lifted, but their daily routines were also intensified as school suspensions and working from home were enforced. The social distancing measures implemented gave further reason for employers to demand the workers not to go to crowded places, not to meet many friends and to set even earlier curfews. Many workers experienced extra scrutiny over their use of personal time and PY recalled being asked to only see her friends at a distance:

> They told me to not go see my friends, and if I do, I should just say hello to them across the street and have my mask on the whole time. I do not listen, so I eat with two friends and we meet as normal, just in a smaller group. They called me many times and I had to come home early. When I come home they sprayed me [with disinfectant] up and down before I could walk inside. I had to keep my mask on and do a covid test every day for the next two days. (Personal communication, 27 March 2022)

Many interviewees reflected a significant amount of time on their day off being shortened due to their employers' fear of them going to crowded places and contracting the virus. Some workers responded by going out anyway, while others self-disciplined by staying at home in their own room (if they had their own room) or staying at home while not 'working'. The spatial limitations of being in the home made it unpleasant for both the workers and the employers, as neither had private time away from being 'at work'. Wong Mei Ling May noted that during the lockdowns, not only did migrant domestic workers experience a decrease in the quality of space and privacy, but they also needed to constantly negotiate the socio-spatial boundaries in public and private spaces within the home that is also the workplace (May, 2021).

Migrant domestic workers cannot come and go as they please in their daily operations. Unlike a typical workplace where quick breaks may be taken apart from meal breaks, they generally do not have the autonomy to step outside of the home to momentarily take a break. The contract does not mention regular breaks to be given in each workday, and it is up to the discretion of the employers. Some workers might take some extra time when they are between errands

outside of the home, such as when waiting to pick up children from schools. Many workers interviewed recalled their employers specifically instructing them to follow a schedule of when to leave home to run errands and by when to come back. In cases where they want to take a break outside the apartment, many have been asked to inform the employers before doing so. While some employers only care about tasks being completed on time and do not need to know the workers' exact whereabouts or coming and goings in the home throughout the day, some employers insist on constant updates and even put cameras in the house to ensure the workers are indeed working. In some extreme cases, seven interviewees indicated that their employers had occasionally locked the front door from the outside as they left the apartment, which prevented the workers from leaving the apartment until the employers returned.

Some workers have confronted their employers about this and the responses claimed it to have been a form of protective gesture. DD recalled an incident on a Saturday, when the entire family was away from the home for about eight hours. She was attending to laundry and the big weekly household clean. In the afternoon, the building's fire alarm sounded and she discovered the metal door beyond the apartment's front door was locked from the outside, preventing her from leaving. In the end, it was a false alarm, but she did alert the neighbours and they planned to break open the gate to release her if the situation became dire. DD tried calling her employers at the time but they did not answer their phones. Later on, DD raised her concerns with them, but they dismissed her concerns and told her not to panic about a false alarm and that she should not hassle their neighbours. DD's employers claimed that it is for her safety that they lock her inside the home:

> I am able to take care of myself. I take care of them, why can't I take care of myself in the home alone? I was very scared when I could not get out when the alarm was going. (Personal communication, 8 February 2015)

Denying the workers the freedom to take small breaks outside the home during their long working hours is a restrictive and unnecessary measure. It is also unreasonable to claim that it is for 'their own safety'. Constable notes some extreme circumstances where workers have been locked inside their employer's home for weeks when the employers went on vacation and food had to be passed through the gaps of the locked metal gate (2007, p. 110). Spatial restrictions within the home curtail the workers' already minimal mobility and further render them invisible and powerless within the home.

During the pandemic lockdowns, everyone had to compromise on their movements and spatial freedoms, and migrant domestic workers were placed under even more pressure to not contract the virus and hinder the function of the household, which ultimately linked to the security of their job and tenure in Hong Kong. The private times they have to connect with friends and family, whether

virtually or physically, are important times for the worker to release tension and temporarily recover from the pressures of working constantly. Extra restrictions imposed on them by their employers further encroached on the already minimal freedom available in their labour.

Conclusion

This chapter brought to light the oppressions endured by migrant domestic workers inside the homes in vivid detail. It has demonstrated how the lack of adequate housing separated from the employers' homes creates fertile ground for coercion and exploitation of migrant workers. It places employers in a position of power over employees in their own home, vis-à-vis the subservience that workers perform, thus endorsing their invisibility and perpetuating their spacelessness throughout their employment.

The forms of control and disciplinary practices exerted upon the workers by the employers come from outdated notions of domestic servitude created from historical Chinese and colonial practices. In addition, the small spaces of the average Hong Kong home do not always allow for easy and comfortable living for family members, and certainly not with the addition of a worker living and working there on a full-time basis. The commodification of domestic labour expedites the expectation of quality service at a low cost; that is, the workers appear as products, rather than humans with needs and rights. More insidiously, this labour commodity, combined with the historical practices where certain caricatures of women – young, naïve and vulnerable or tough, old spinsters – work in the homes, not only as a career but a commitment for life, form the perfect formula to attempt to justify the continuous cheap import of darker-skinned foreign women attending to upwards of 350,000 households in Hong Kong. The many exploitative scenarios that have festered in the private, domestic spaces are evident in the stories told by the workers interviewed and other scholars, yet these are only snippets among hundreds of thousands of incidents where workers may have experienced far worse treatments that have not been disclosed to anyone, perhaps not even to their family or friends, for the sake of securing their employment and providing for their family. For six days each week, migrant domestic workers as a labour sector of Hong Kong work under outdated notions of servitude, prejudices and ambivalence. Some may have better experiences than others, perhaps with a bedroom to themselves, with employers that trust and respect their privacy and decisions as adults. However, for as long as the legalities of their contracts do not change; i.e. minimum wage stays far below the minimum wage for regular residents, the two-week rule for finding a new employer if terminated and most importantly, the live-in requirement remain non-negotiable, then the workers who do indeed work for fair and respectful employers will remain the rare 'lucky ones'. If the legal standard remains lenient

to the employers' spatial or economic limitations, then it will continuously make sub-par treatment of the workers inevitable and acceptable. On a Sunday afternoon in 2022, as BS was talking to me in between mouthfuls of food eaten with a gloved hand, she gestured to her group of friends next to us, who were dancing and laughing:

> At least we can be who we want to be once a week. We can talk about who we are not just as workers, just be us like we are back home. When we are at work, sometimes we are just being workers, not really us, you know what I mean!? (Personal communication, 15 May 2022, exclamation in original)

In the next chapter, the workers emerge from the domestic interior into public spaces on their day off work, where their agency and resistance are enacted and witnessed in full force.

Notes

1. *Muijai* is defined as a young girl, sometimes as young as 10 years old, who was transferred from her biological family to another family with the intention that she be used as a domestic servant without a regular wage and not at liberty to leave the employer's family on her own free will or her parents' will (Constable, 2007; Watson, 1991).
2. They could not be wives as they were deemed as illegitimate and unsophisticated (Constable, 2007, p. 50).
3. They can never become a permanent resident on their own accord, unless they enter into a marriage with someone who has permanent residency and remain in Hong Kong on a dependent visa and apply for permanent residency after living in Hong Kong for more than seven years continuously under that visa.
4. According to Constable, the term *amah* is not often used when speaking Chinese but has been used by Chinese who speak English and by English speakers in Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. The exact meaning and origin of the term has been debated by Chinese Singaporean and Malaysian academics Mimi Chan, Helen Kwok and Kenneth Gaw. See Chan and Kwok (1990, pp. 204–205) and Gaw (1991, pp. 87–89).
5. In this excerpt of the English version of the contract, the terms 'helper' and 'servant' were used in the same sentence to refer to the Foreign Domestic Helper. The ambiguity in terminology continues to reflect the perception of the worker as both a domestic helper and a family servant.
6. To give an example of meal prices in Hong Kong, as of 2023, the average cost for a meal at McDonalds is HK$45.

CHAPTER 3

Agency and Resistance

The challenging conditions of migrant domestic workers raise the following questions: Are these workers mere victims or do they exercise some agency? If so, how, and to what extent could such agency be liberating? Could the response of migrants make transparent any policy lessons for the labour-sending and receiving nations? This chapter will answer these questions by exploring the ways in which the workers resist the continuous socio-spatial oppression endured during their work week by occupying and transforming public space for their own needs on their day off work. In so doing, they create community through their gatherings, thus performing their identity and exercising the freedoms they regularly are deprived of in a unique temporary socio-spatial ecology.

A long-standing debate between neoclassical economists and Marxist economists is the extent to which individual agency can help to address all social problems. The rational individual in the neoclassical model is entirely freed from structures and social bonds, while the classical Marxist models give limited room for individual autonomy (Charusheela, 2005). Emerging from the understanding of the intersectional oppressions through space, gender and labour that the workers experience, this chapter helps us to see that the reality among migrant workers is not as dichotomous. Responding to two of the four research questions in this book: 1) How does the workers' occupation of public space reflect the problems they endure in the workplace that is also their home, specific to the labour and spatial conditions in Hong Kong?; and 2) What activities do the workers engage in, in public space and privately, that cultivate resilience and agency?, this chapter will look at how Filipino and Indonesian workers establish their community externally in public space on Sunday and investigate how they express social and spatial agency in and through the makeshift spaces, along with how they gather and how they engage in place-making in public and private spaces. The chapter will analyse and summarise how the various methods, activities and relationships are significant in facilitating agency and demonstrate the full spectrum of resourcefulness and agency of the workers.

Existing migration scholars and political economists have not discussed their resistance through the informal community that they have repeatedly established on a weekly basis and its continuous significance. Their political protests or small acts of resistance have been documented, but thorough discussions of their use of public spaces as sites of resistance and agency remain thin. Further, this

chapter will unpack the complexity within the kind of resistance and resourcefulness the workers engage in that has materialised as a socio-spatial phenomenon. This chapter argues that this unique phenomenon contains important ways of self-actualisation and performance of identity and dignity. It will begin with *Understanding public space in Hong Kong* to provide context for the unique urban spatial formation of Hong Kong, which is rife with pockets of public space for creative uses and adaptation. It then explains and demonstrates in full detail the extent to which Filipino migrant domestic workers and Indonesian workers form their own spaces and places, thus creating a home away from home in different parts of Hong Kong on their day off work, in the next sections: *Little Manila: Central Elevated Walkways, Chater Road and beyond*, and *Place and space making of Indonesian workers*. Threading excerpts from interviews, the chapter moves to discuss *The use of social media for knowledge exchange and building community*, and *Relationships and sexuality as expression* of the workers as they exercise their freedoms beyond just being workers. On Sunday, on their day off work, migrant domestic workers demonstrate they are not mere victims of globalisation, but actors with agency and power.

Understanding public space in Hong Kong

With upwards of 7.34 million people and the eighth highest population density in the world, both public and private spaces are limited and crowded in Hong Kong. On a typical Sunday, crowds proliferate in all kinds of public spaces; shopping malls, parks, transport hubs, recreational venues, the streets and so on. In the Central Business District of Hong Kong Island, known as Central, prestigious shopping malls, major financial institutions, international hotels and globally recognised high-end fashion design houses all reside within a short distance of the photogenic Victoria Harbour. Sunday is the only day when the usual business attired workers cannot be easily spotted, and in their place are tourists, shoppers and migrant domestic workers. Every Sunday, the financial hub of Hong Kong transforms into 'Little Manila', where Filipino workers come to gather and occupy public spaces unlike any other group. They do not act like the common consumer as they cannot financially afford to engage in typical consumerist activities. Instead, they gather in pockets of public space that are 'free' and engage in activities they otherwise would have if they had their own private, domestic spaces. They use cheaply available materials and turn them into walls and floors to create spaces to eat, talk, rest, play card games, groom and so on. They also use street areas for packing and sending care packages back home, use flat open spaces for dance practices and many other activities they want to do. These uses and adaptation of public space are not just limited to Central or the resourcefulness of Filipino workers. All over Hong Kong, every Sunday, migrant domestic workers can be seen and heard, especially in areas that have the optimal

combination of 'free' public spaces and public amenities in proximity, both indoor and outdoor. These so-called free public spaces are elevated walkways, underpasses, wide footpaths, atriums, pedestrian tunnels, courtyards and open plazas that are within reach of public transport, bathrooms, free WIFI and so on. Essentially, public spaces that do not require money for admission and are not heavily patrolled by security guards are fertile grounds for migrant domestic workers to inhabit for the day.

Public space in Hong Kong has a particular importance that differs from what pertains in other densely populated cities. As Anne Haila calls Hong Kong 'Property State' in relation to the role of land revenue made in the process of urban development (2000), the city's housing market has been known for its unaffordability, exacerbated by rapid population growth, the influx of money from foreign investors, the lack of supply of residential land and properties, and substantial land being controlled by property tycoons (Yau & Cheung, 2021, pp. 428–429). According to the Planning Department of Hong Kong, only 7.1% of useable land in the city-state is attributed to residential use (Planning Department of Hong Kong, 2019). Within this percentage of land, providing affordable housing to the general public has not been prioritised and has been stunted by the monopoly of property developers working with the state, causing cause urban sprawl and stagnation of urban development (Yau & Cheung, 2021). This has adverse impacts on the long-term socioeconomic and environmental development in Hong Kong and in response to this, one of the common socio-spatial and cultural practices is for families to remain together in shared houses – that is, adults living at home with their parents, shared with children, the elderly and domestic workers.

With limited private space in the home for every person of the household to comfortably go about their affairs, public space then becomes a space of reprieve for many people, where all kinds of intimacy and connections take place in public away from their families. It is not unusual to see many adult couples express physical, intimate affection in public and create other means to have their own private space in public, because they cannot afford to have their own home together (Lee, 2020). In other words, public space becomes an alternate private space, where people can act freely without the gaze or questions of family members under the same roof. The desire to have this kind of freedom and be able to be oneself is amplified for migrant domestic workers, especially when they have no spatial separation from their workplace for six days each week. Consumers who can afford to dine at restaurants and engage in public activities that require money do so, while migrant domestic workers create spaces for themselves and engage in all kinds of activities that cost much less.

Migrant workers are not the only group of people who use public space creatively. Hong Kong has had a long history of adaptive use of public space, from street hawkers and vendors to graffiti artists, skateboarders, peaceful

demonstrators and so on. The density of Hong Kong's urban spaces breeds many 'liminal', 'in-between' or 'loose' spaces with the potential for people to engage in activities they were not originally designed for. The term liminal was brought into prominence by Victor Turner to describe the ritual state of in-between (Turner, 1967). Derived from the term threshold, it defines moments outside the conventions of everyday existence. In spatial terms these tend towards unprogrammed spaces that are open to diverse activities. Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens use the term 'loose space' to describe urban public spaces that afford appropriation, adaptation and some risk taking, and are the opposite to tightly programmed spaces (2007). They note that 'People create loose space through their own actions. Many urban spaces possess physical and social possibilities for looseness, being open to appropriation, but it is people, through their own initiative, who fulfil these possibilities' (2007, p. 35). This concept of loose space resonates with the public spaces that the workers appropriate for their own use as the legitimacy of loose space relies on several factors that are present. Firstly, people's recognition of the potential of the space; secondly, the determination of the users to make use of what is available, and thirdly, the users are not passive users, rather they are actively using the public space to satisfy their own needs and desires. Indeed, the workers are not passive consumers of public space. In fact, they are resourceful and willing to transgress the boundaries of what may or may not be socially acceptable to take place, motivated by their desire to have a space of their own. As a counterpoint to specifically programmed spaces that have little room for appropriation, loose spaces are created from the pivotal point where initial intention unravels and other modes of inhabitation can be created (Franck & Stevens, 2007). The spaces that migrant domestic workers appropriate every Sunday are such spaces that have copious potential for 'loosening': underpasses, sidewalks, pedestrianised roads, elevated walkways and atriums.

In some ways, these leftover or loose spaces that are temporarily appropriated and transformed by migrant workers can also be perceived as in-between, liminal spaces or non-places. Marc Auge proposes non-place as a product of super-modernity and states, 'If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place' (1995, pp. 77–78). Auge proposes a dichotomy of places and non-places, where the first is never completely erased and the second never completed (1995). This dichotomy has been derived from Michel de Certeau's opposition of place and space, which sees space as an intersection of moving bodies and place as an assembly of elements co-existing in a certain order (De Certeau, 1984). In this framework, one may see the public spaces that the workers occupy as spaces created by their usage, and place, namely the elevated walkways, underpasses et cetera, as co-existing alongside the domestic spaces the workers create. Auge defines non-places as temporary spaces for passage, undefined and incomplete, yet dedicated to communication

and consumption (Auge, 1995). So too can the elevated walkways, underpasses and corporate atriums be described as spaces singularly dedicated to specific and linear movement rather than the particularities of program. The looseness and liminal nature of the public spaces in Hong Kong provides prime opportunities for augmentation.

Beyond Hong Kong and the marginal groups of migrant workers, in cities around the world, temporary inhabitation of urban public spaces exists and represents the constant challenges against the privatised, regulated and increasingly diminishing freedoms of and within public space. The participants who oppose the passive ways of occupying public space, who subvert the conservative boundaries in unconventional methods, come from many socio-economic sectors of society and are not limited to the disenfranchised. They also bring with them different objectives and intentions. In Beijing, as the city is constantly densifying, retired yet active citizens search for accessible and free public space to practise *taichi* and *yangge*, a traditional Chinese dance that celebrates youth and freedom (Chen, 2010, pp. 21–35). They appropriate flat, long unused public spaces such as underpasses and plaza forecourts and transform them into public dancefloors. In New York City, citizens claimed Zuccotti Park as the protest headquarters of the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 (Shiffman et al., 2012). This triggered a national and global movement of protests that are ongoing and prevalent throughout the world. In Chung Shan, Taiwan, Filipino migrant workers pluralise the public spaces in the city centre on their day of rest as their community hub, despite some locals' rejection of their legitimacy to occupy the public spaces in the city (Wu, 2010, pp. 135–146). These instances are not isolated events or limited to geographical location, rather they are part of a global phenomenon of socio-spatial contestation that the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are also part of. However, the main difference between other examples of public spatial contestations and the spatial phenomenon of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong is the specific socio-spatial inequality they experience in their place of work, which has cultivated their agency to resist. This motivates them to continuously, on a weekly basis, exert their right to public space and reclaim their autonomy in and through space.

Little Manila: Central Elevated Walkways, Chater Road and beyond

Every Sunday, as Filipino migrant domestic workers gather in Central, parts of the suburb transform into Little Manila. Groups gather according to the Filipino provinces they come from and return to occupy the same area every week.[1] Each area of Central adopts a different function according to the spatial infrastructure, proximity to amenities and existing services. Very early in the morning, while the rest of the business district remains unstirred, in World Wide House, a plaza that

sits two levels above the underground Central transport station, Filipino women bustle about, socialising with the Filipino retailers and purchasing homemade food to share with their friends for the day. Many of them wait for their friends at the intersection of World Wide House and the Central Elevated Walkway before moving to their weekly gathering areas on other parts of the walkway or the surrounding public spaces in Central. On Chater Road, a couple of enterprising Hong Kong locals can be seen pulling a trolley of flattened cardboard boxes, delivering them to groups, who will occupy those spaces and use the cardboard pieces to construct temporary home-bases by demarcating public spaces for the day. Located between luxury shopping malls, this road is pedestrianised on Sundays, providing open spaces for choreographed dancing, celebrations and in the past, rallies that are specific to incidents of violation or injustices experienced by the workers. On Connaught Road Central, some of the Filipino women use fresh cardboard boxes to pack goods and gifts to make up care packages to send back to their loved ones in the Philippines. A couple of freight trucks are usually parked in the loading zone of Connaught Road Central, unloading more flat-packed boxes onto the footpath. There are three Catholic churches that Filipino migrant workers frequent in Central including St John's Cathedral, which houses the Mission for Migrant Workers and the Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge.

As Sunday ensues, these spaces are part of an active scene as pedestrians negotiate various public spaces with the workers. The spatial order and regular use of these spaces overlap with the construction and infiltration of Little Manila, producing a temporary but repeated socio-spatial system of layered spaces – an ethnic enclave, a site of contention and an urban domestic interior. This has consistently occurred throughout the last few decades in Hong Kong as the number of workers has increased. No matter the weather, even throughout distancing restrictions during the height of the global pandemic, Little Manila was present loudly and clearly.

Little Manila has often been referred to by various scholars as a 'well-known spectacle' and a 'carnivalesque gathering' (Hou, 2012, p. 89; Tam, 2016, p. 119). Throughout my time spent in these spaces, I observed the methods by which the workers appropriate and transform unoccupied or seemingly ordinary public spaces into semi-public private spaces that facilitate their socio-spatial expression and autonomy. It became apparent that these acts of temporary transformation are not simply a repeated ethnic spectacle, rather, they are deliberate and expressive acts of freedom. This freedom is one that resists the spacelessness and invisibility the workers endure for six days each week in their workplace. Many workers also affectionately refer to Central as Little Manila, as it is their home away from home.

Beyond the assumption of an ethnic spectacle, Little Manila can perhaps be viewed as a predictable site of contention where the Filipino women express

themselves outside of their domestic worker status. As such it can be viewed as a site of resistance where the workers disrupt the district's established public space order. The interviews and conversations I had on site revealed a common perception held by Hong Kong locals that the weekly gatherings are a disruptive event on the city. In the past, many locals voiced concerns about a lack of cleanliness in public spaces the workers gather in, and fears that their appearance might tarnish the prestigious reputation of the financial district. Local media outlets have also made public accusations that the workers are a disorderly crowd of unruly foreigners, with headlines such as 'Congestion eyesore for tourists' (*South China Morning Post*, 1998, p. 20) and 'Must clean up Central' (*South China Morning Post*, 1998, p. 20). Such comments and discussions reflect a degree of prejudice and socio-cultural tensions that underlie the weekly event, making Little Manila a site of contention (Law, 2001; 2002). Although headlines like those rarely appear anymore in 2023, opinions of this nature can still be heard in casual conversations, and the sentiment of certain parts of Central being 'taken over' is still commonly shared by some locals. Experiencing Little Manila from within, I came to understand that the workers' reclamation of space creates the capacity to be themselves. It is more than a contested site; it functions as a temporary domesticated home that cultivates solidarity, resistance and resilience for the workers.

The conception of home constantly evolves across new social and cultural settings, particularly for migrants. Home can be an expression of identity, of personalities and the bedrock of cultural integrity and citizenship (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011). For six days each week, the migrant workers' so-called home does not uphold those values. It is not a place where they can express themselves, rather it is a place of employment under Hong Kong's history of domestic servitude, where legalised methods of discipline and control sanction the erosion of the workers' physical and personal space, and deprive them of their social and cultural freedoms. They physically and conceptually have no room to be themselves within the domestic interiors of their workplace and are therefore denied the fundamental value and meaning of home. Home becomes an abstract concept realised on Sunday. Their continuously restricted freedom, deprived personalities and cultural integrity, although they live and work in a domestic space, are realised outside the domestic interior in full vigour. To describe and analyse the makeup of their Sunday home, I focus on the specific spatial programs that occur within urban interior and exterior spaces. These spaces choreograph the spatial organisation of Little Manila and the analysis reveals a complex network of semi-public private spaces that produces a unique socio-spatial ecology of resistance and reclamation.

World Wide House and Lane: food store and mass karaoke

World Wide House is a mix-use commercial building located on Connaught Road Central. Situated within the first three levels of the building is a plaza and the

retailers are mostly Filipino vendors, providing Filipino food, newspapers, magazines, and remittance and telecommunication services. Every Sunday, Filipino women fill the ground level, aboveground entrances and staircases in and around the building. As World Wide House is situated directly above one of the underground exits of Central Mass Transit Railway station, the interstitial spaces act as a series of temporary waiting zones and meeting areas. Every Sunday, all pedestrians emerging from the station experience the bustling residency of Filipino workers. Next to World Wide House is World Wide Lane – a narrow pedestrian laneway. It acts as an extension to the meeting areas of World Wide House and contains a popular Filipino fast food store, Jollibee, with queues of locals and Filipinos that stretch out onto the footpath. Prior to the height of the pandemic, on the corner of the lane, a Filipino telecommunication shop held weekly karaoke competitions. Usually hosted by an enthusiastic Filipino man who addressed the crowd in Tagalog and English, this weekly event attracted a sizeable audience of migrant workers, pedestrians and tourists alike. The audience would gather in the small space at the front of the store, and infiltrate the limited spaces under the atrium of World Wide House and the adjacent pedestrian footpath. This space is shared with another underground entrance to the Central Mass Transit Railway station. In 2015, I witnessed an incident there where a member of staff from the railway station was using a loudspeaker to ask the audience of the karaoke competition to move away from the area so as to not hinder pedestrian access to the station. He repeated his message in English and Cantonese several times, however most people paid little attention to the announcement and the event carried on. I asked a Filipino worker near me what she thought might happen if the guard persisted. She replied,

> It doesn't matter. They're not going to do much. It's just karaoke and we are having fun. Today is Sunday and we can find another place. But this is our place too, you know? (Personal communication, 1 February 2015)

This scenario demonstrated how the workers have the capacity to activate public space for their own use and to strategically refuse to comply with discipline outside of their place of work, without using aggressive tactics of disobedience. Since the government implemented distancing rules in public gatherings between the second half of 2020 through to most of 2022, the shop no longer hosts these events. Instead, many workers now have sets of portable karaoke speakers and microphones, which are widely seen and heard throughout Little Manila. World Wide Lane connects to Connaught Road Central, which facilitates another important function.

Connaught Road Central: care package postal zone

Every Sunday, approximately 30 metres of this arterial road is removed from traffic as a loading zone for 'care packages' – *Balikbayan* – to be sent directly

to the Philippines. Throughout the day, the surrounding pedestrian footpath is constantly occupied by groups of workers packing large parcels. The parcels are approximately 800 mm in height and 700 mm in width and length. They are filled with personal hygiene products such as surgical facemasks, toothpaste, shampoo, washing powder and sometimes clothing and toys. Some workers include items given by their employers, like used clothing, that are no longer wanted but are still in good condition, and could be used for reselling or personal consumption. Sending packages back home to their families to help ease their expenses is a common activity among workers. Each parcel costs between HK$800 to $1,000 for door-to-door delivery from Hong Kong to the Philippines, and delivery takes up to two weeks or more. Many workers I interviewed use part of the remainder of their wages after remittance to purchase items for family and friends back in their hometown. Those who have their own bedroom will accumulate items in their own room until there are enough items to fill a large parcel. Those who do not have their own room or space to hold items will make purchases on the same day as sending the boxes. Many workers can be seen wheeling around suitcases and large nylon bags in and out of this makeshift postal zone and some have friends attend to half-filled boxes while they move about to do more purchases. The purchasing, packing and labelling continue all Sundays. Pedestrians witness this packing process and negotiate their way through the footpaths of this small junction of Connaught Road Central that has become an informal Filipino postal exchange. Throughout the height of the pandemic, the delivery time for these packages was delayed, however it did not stop the workers from sending these care packages – rather, due to the inability to fly home for those two years, the packages became an important way to continually show care and love for their families. These care packages are also a small gesture that is part of the larger process of the economics of return in migration labour (Obeng-Odoom, 2022; Killias, 2018). For many workers, whether they are from the Philippines or Indonesia, the act of remitting their wages is tied to the expectation of returning home one day, and every bit of financial resource (whether in material goods or cash) symbolises this commitment and ultimate return home. For many years, Olivia Killias documented the migration journey of Indonesian migrant domestic workers who migrate from rural villages to urban areas in Indonesia and Malaysia (2018). In *Follow the Maid*, Killias discovered that the remittances of the workers being used for the purpose of building a house was particularly important, as it 'stood as material proof of a migrant's plans to return – the presence of the house compensated for the physical absence of the migrant herself, and as such, it was invested with affective engagements' (Killias, 2018, p. 183). Although there are cultural differences and different expectations of the use of remittances for Indonesian and Filipino workers, the economics of return, in various forms, is part of the individual and collective network of ties that keep the workers working abroad.

Central Elevated Walkway: the cardboard village

On this network of over twenty-five aboveground walkways, many workers create different-sized spaces with discarded cardboard boxes for group gatherings to eat, socialise and rest. The first conduit of the Central Elevated Walkway was built between the Mandarin Oriental Hotel and the second level of a shopping complex within the Prince's Building in 1965. It was designed as a pedestrian connection between the two buildings but consequently increased the rent value of the retail spaces within. In direct contrast to the usual conventions of retail rental, suddenly the value of the mall's second level units became far more valuable than those on the ground level. This opened a new logic of real estate value, but more significantly, it sparked a phenomenon that shifted the way people moved around the city to an aboveground circulation. Over the last five decades many commercial buildings in Central (and beyond) were designed to include an air space connection. Entrances and exits of buildings began to proliferate above ground floor, hence creating a labyrinthine network of elevated walkways between buildings, allowing pedestrian flow via many apertures simultaneously. The vast network of the Central Elevated Walkway is one of the spatial infrastructures that add to the unique urban experience of Hong Kong. These walkways vary from 5 to 8 metres in width. Some are enclosed like arcades, while others have various roof structures and balustrades, offering outlooks onto the streets with different degrees of protection from weather conditions.

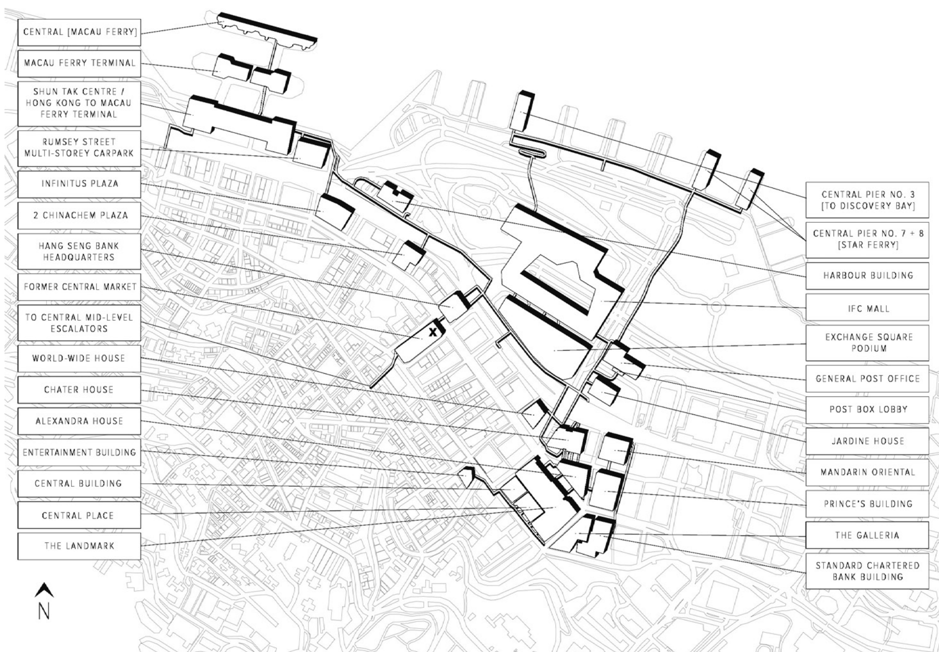

Figure 3.1 Map of Central Elevated Walkway. (Digital image by author).

The walkways' proximity to shopping malls with free amenities like bathroom and wireless internet connection make many of them suitable for appropriation and use by the migrant workers to create their personal spaces. Throughout the day, hundreds of temporary cardboard units are created on the walkways, resembling a village of domestic spaces that are situated within public spaces. In some cases, these units occupy both sides of the walkway, shifting pedestrian thoroughfare to the middle. Inside many of these cardboard units, many people are eating food with gloved hands, sleeping, talking or video calling their friends and family overseas in their native language, playing card games, grooming each other, singing karaoke of popular songs in English and other languages and so on. These makeshift cardboard spaces are their domestic spaces, and they engage in activities they otherwise would have in the privacy of their own homes. These weekly spatial appropriations and transformations can be understood as a reaction and resistance to the socio-spatial depletion and cultural deprivation that occur in the domestic interior. These cardboard units facilitate spaces that are inversions of the interior spatial condition the workers experience in the workplace – the opposite of the physical and personal spacelessness they experience for six days each week.

The majority of cardboard units are erected along the Central Elevated Walkway, circulating Exchange Square, IFC Mall, Hang Seng Bank headquarters, Harbour Building and Central Ferry Piers. Some of the units are elaborately constructed like houses with entrances, floors, walls and roofs, protecting the occupants from external weather conditions and separating them from pedestrian traffic. The cardboard floors and walls are reinforced with packing tape and cable ties, while string or rope is used to reinforce vertical rigidity of the walls by connecting the edges of the cardboard to the balustrades of the elevated walkway. Plastic sheets are draped over and above the interior of the units as roofs for extra privacy and umbrellas are used to reinforce the roofs on rainy days. When entering these makeshift spaces, shoes are taken off and left on the exterior edges of the structures, resembling the common Asian custom of removing shoes when entering the home. Before the existence of social distancing measures, group sizes varied greatly, with some units accommodating up to twenty people. During the time when measures were enforced, units were visibly reduced and groups of only two, three or four people were seen sitting in them, with distances set between the units to satisfy the many watchful eyes of patrolling security guards and police officers.[2] When the distancing measures stopped, the units proliferated and the village became densely populated once again.

The Central Elevated Walkway extends into the enclosed arcade of the Central Market. This heritage listed site has undergone many changes, with a full new development opened in the middle of 2022. Before the new development, the arcade had some shops that were closed with metal shutters on Sundays and a wide footpath, which made it an ideal location for the workers to

Figure 3.2 The cardboard units are often reinforced by string and cable ties connected to the balustrades to create sturdy structures to reside in for the day. (Photograph by author).

temporarily inhabit. Most workers leaned against the metal shutters and created their spaces in front of the shops. In this corridor, the units are less elaborate in their construction as they are not exposed to the exterior weather conditions. Many of them have lower or no vertical cardboard partitions between them and the pedestrian thoroughfare. Opened umbrellas are used more often instead, as partitions. Sometimes people were seen sleeping in the cardboard units, with opened umbrellas shielding them from the light and onlookers' gaze. Since the new development finished and opened in 2022, the arcade has become shops and walkways, with no sight of the cardboard units.

Beyond occurring on the elevated walkways, the cardboard units also appear in some pedestrianised sections directly under the walkways on street level and proliferate in surrounding spaces, such as the footpaths surrounding the General Post Office and the ground floor atrium of the HSBC headquarters building. The underground pedestrian tunnel connected to Chater Road also has many

Figure 3.3 Spaces outside of closed shop fronts in the Former Central Market arcade, which has been renovated and reopened since 2022, were popular with workers because they were completely protected from the weather. (Photograph by author).

cardboard units known for providing grooming services from manicures and pedicures, to shaping eyebrows and body massages. Many migrant workers are providing the services as well as being customers. Every Sunday, pedestrians using the Central Elevated Walkway to access the major shopping areas in Central must negotiate their movement through the workers' demarcated spaces of domesticity and services.

Chater Road and City Hall: dance practices, parades and demonstrations

Chater Road is a flat, uncovered three-lane road that gives street level access to international fashion houses and hotels, as well as historically significant sites such as the Final Court of Appeal and Statue Square. City Hall is a step away from Chater Road via an underground pedestrian tunnel and has a wide-open flat concrete forecourt. Every Sunday, both sites are closed off from vehicular access, becoming the perfect spaces for large group gatherings, particularly parades, demonstrations, public events and dance practices. Prior to restrictions to mass demonstrations and social distancing measures,

many rallies have taken place there. The rallies that occurred were organised by the migrant workers and migrant worker associations such as Mission for Migrant Workers and One Billion Rising, raising public awareness to violation or injustice experienced by the workers. Some large rallies in the last decade were motivated by monumental incidents impacting the workers community, such as the court ruling that refused citizenship to a Filipino worker and effectively all migrant domestic workers, and the case of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih, an Indonesian worker who was abused by her employers (both mentioned in Chapter 2). The events saw over 10,000 people gather on Chater Road and the surrounding streets, drawing participation from Filipino and Indonesian migrant workers, local activists and residents. Many activities of various sizes on Chater Road are organised by various migrant workers' groups such as Asian Migrant Centre, Social Justice for Migrant Workers, Hong Kong Association for Indonesian Migrant Workers, Filipino Migrant Workers Union and many others. One of the leading contemporary art centres in Hong Kong, Para Site, also holds public events and gatherings on Chater Road.

Dancing is a popular method of social and political expression among migrant workers. They dance in groups to upbeat pop songs, from Western classics to songs from their home countries about female empowerment and freedom from oppression. In February 2015, the international movement One Billion Rising organised an event where hundreds of workers participated in large-scale choreographed dancing that occupied most of Chater Road. This event attracted media coverage from local and international news outlets, and the then-recovering Erwiana Sulistyaningsih made an appearance on stage to publicly share her experience, encouraging other workers to take legal action against abusive employers. Other political rallies usually focus on the three regulations that are the most exploitative for workers: the two-week rule, deregulated working hours and the live-in requirement. On other occasions when there are no organised demonstrations, banners advocating for the rights of the workers created by local and overseas migrant worker unions are erected on the balustrade of the sidewalks.

Chater Road and City Hall are also used by celebrations and parades. Every year, for many years now, the Philippine Consulate General hold annual Philippine Independence Day parades and celebrations on the Sunday that is closest to June 12. In the weeks leading up to the parade, workers gather on Chater Road for dance practices that stretch from City Hall. Many workers not only participate in the choreography for the parade; they create traditional costumes, elaborate head pieces, props, banners and all kinds of relevant paraphernalia. When there are no special events, i.e. parades or demonstrations, dance practices for live streaming on social media and personal sharing with friends and family can be seen throughout the area.

Figure 3.4 Chater Road hosted the global campaign 'One Billion Rising' on a Sunday in 2015 as hundreds of migrant domestic workers gathered to participate in choreographed dancing. (Photograph by author).

Figure 3.5 Workers gather to practice their dance routine as part of the parade for the 125th anniversary of Philippines Independence Day. (Photograph by author).

Figure 3.6 and 3.7 The two photographs show the activities created by Angelique Santos as part of The Essence of Sundays, where one event was a talent competition and the other was a ritualistic breaking of mirrors that had the workers' writing of their personal negative experiences in their work. (Photographs by Angelique Santos).

Outside City Hall, community art projects and cooking events created by local artists and migrant workers also take place. Between the months of March to May 2023, Angelique Santos, a Hong Kong-based university student with Filipino heritage initiated an art project called 'The Essence of Sundays' that generated seven Happenings on seven Sundays. The project was intended for public participation, particularly from migrant workers. The participants were encouraged to collaborate and creatively express themselves through prompts such as dance competitions, karaoke, food sharing, sharing stories of being migrant workers, and breaking of props that symbolised social stigma. The intention of the project was to spread the message of care, compassion and empowerment while celebrating the migrant workers' contribution to Hong Kong society. City Hall is a well-known cultural space in Hong Kong that hosts all kinds of events requiring paid admission. Santos's use of the free space at the forecourt was a clever way to situate the project and gain the attention of migrant workers nearby as well as residents and tourists.

Little Manila's informal economy: cardboard, grooming, gambling, thrift store, food services

Migrant workers rely on cheap and readily available resources for the construction of their temporary spaces every Sunday. As it is difficult to store materials like disused cardboard in their employer's home before Sunday, many workers instead purchase cardboard from a few enterprising Hong Kong locals in the area who collect and resell cardboard. It is a common sight throughout Hong Kong, where locals, ranging from the middle-aged to the elderly, collect cardboard from retailers and transport it around in push carts and trolleys. Many of these locals do not have a formal occupation and rely on collecting cardboard and other recyclable and reusable materials to resell and make a living. In Central, migrant workers purchase cardboard pieces from a few Hong Kong locals who deliver cardboard boxes to their designated areas every Sunday. These distributors have knowledge of each group's regular spaces and how many pieces of cardboard they want. Each piece of cardboard was priced from HK$2 for many years before the pandemic. In 2021, the prices increased to HK$3 and even HK$5. The cardboard is delivered early in the morning, and the amount owed is collected throughout the day. The distributors return in the evening to pick up the cardboard pieces and sometimes they can be reused or are discarded. The cardboard boxes were temporarily significant as they transported commercial goods that are not affordable for the workers themselves. Once they were no longer required, they were discarded from Hong Kong's formal economy and became 're-commoditised'. Every Sunday, these discarded elements are reincarnated as an affordable 'commodity' to engender privacy and private space for one of the lowest socio-economic groups of Hong Kong. This weekly informal

economy, motivated by the workers' demand for cardboard as temporary walls and floors, symbolises an interesting reversal of supply and demand between Hong Kong and the workers.

Beyond the commoditisation of cardboard, the workers themselves have created a supply of goods and services in Little Manila on Sundays. The pedestrian tunnel between Chater Road and City Hall is informally known as 'the Salon' as grooming services such as manicures, *Kilay* (eyebrow shaping in Tagalog) and head and body massages are available. The costs for these services are much lower than that in formal retail spaces, with *Kilay* being priced at HK$20–40, while in any formal shop in Central they would cost upwards of fifteen times the price. Undoubtedly, the target customers are the workers themselves, so the prices are set according to the workers' affordability. Some workers have learnt the skills from tutorials online, while others have had experiences or even formal training back home. SM, a Filipino worker who has been in Hong Kong for a decade, is a popular nail artist in Little Manila. She has a beautician qualification from the Philippines but had not practiced formally in Hong Kong. Her employer encouraged her to upskill herself and she would provide the service for her employer and her friends for a small fee. She is very happy to be able to continue this skill and passion of hers:

> I can't do nails in Hong Kong because it's illegal for me. But my boss likes what I can do and she pays me extra. She even helped me buy the equipment and things for cheap! On Sunday I come here and do it for my friends and whoever wants it. It's good for me and good for them! I don't charge them full-price! [she laughs] (Personal communication, 19 March 2023, exclamation in original)

It is illegal for migrant domestic workers to do any kind of work, paid or unpaid, outside of their full-time contract with their employer. Some workers may manoeuvre around that law, with or without their employers' knowledge. In SM's case, her boss is very supportive of her having a hobby and a skill outside of domestic work. This is not a common experience for most workers. Other goods and service exchanges also happen on Sunday via playing card games with cash, selling homecooked foods that are rare to find in Hong Kong and swapping and selling items of second-hand clothing that are sometimes donated by employers or from shops that needed to discard stock at very low prices. Many workers use Sunday as a day for rest, while some also see the day as an opportunity to generate extra income for themselves. Sometimes, workers exchange items or services instead of money, such as home-made food for clothes, or one service for another. Exchanges like these are common occurrences and they are an integral part of an informal economy that can bring small joys and a sense of autonomy and community. More importantly, they forge social connections that are reminiscent of the activities the migrant worker might otherwise engage in within their own home, with friends and family.

Place and space making of Indonesian workers

Although workers from Indonesia consist of half of the current number of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong (Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2022b), a so-called 'Little Jakarta' is yet to be established like the well-oiled socio-spatial ecology of Little Manila. However, Victoria Park in Causeway Bay and Kowloon Park in Tsim Sha Tsui are both very popular places for Indonesian workers and the vastness of these public parks allows for a high number of workers to gather there throughout Sunday. Apart from the public spaces available in those parks, their proximity to the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia, Bank Mandiri, the largest Indonesian bank headquarters in Hong Kong and the Kowloon Mosque and Islamic Centre is a good reason for the workers to repeatedly create makeshift communities in those areas. Causeway Bay is a popular shopping destination, with a wide range of shopping malls and arcades that are closely clustered. Different from Central, where there is a concentration of high-end international fashion houses, Causeway Bay attracts a wider range of locals shopping for daily essentials as well as the latest street fashion and gadgets. Spatially, it is more densely used than Central and the streets are tighter and shorter, and non-commercial public spaces are limited even without the influx of migrant workers on Sunday. This leaves leftover occupiable space available for the workers in clusters, separated by malls and unoccupiable streets in between groups, unlike in Little Manila where areas bleed into one another and different functions of spaces continue flowing with less separation. Tsim Sha Tsui, where the Mosque and Islamic Centre are located, is known for its diverse shops and service providers to South Asian and African communities in Hong Kong.

Apart from the two popular areas, Indonesian workers also gather in many places all over Hong Kong, away from city centres. One of the reasons for this is that many Indonesian workers' employers' homes are not on Hong Kong Island, and the proximity to their friends and community motivate the distance they will travel. From my interviewees, around 75% of those who are Indonesian workers have Hong Kong Chinese employers who live in more suburban areas, away from the city centres in greater parts of Kowloon, New Territories and outer lying islands. It is a common practice that expatriate employers tend to hire Filipino workers more than Indonesian workers and that local Chinese employers do the opposite. One of the reasons for this is the stereotype of Indonesian workers as being more docile and less educated than Filipino workers; therefore they are deemed more obedient, which aligns with Chinese traditions and customs of domestic servitude (Sim, 2009, p. 9). The proficiency of languages of the worker is also a factor that attracts expatriate employers to hire Filipino workers due to their English proficiency, while Indonesian workers are known to be favoured for their quick grasp of Chinese

(both Cantonese and Mandarin) by employers who prefer to speak to them in Chinese at home, especially if the worker is hired to care for elderly family members (O'Connor, 2012, p. 49; Ibid.).

Many Indonesian workers gather in Victoria Park in Causeway Bay. Around the park, there are Indonesian food stores, salons and freight trucks in nearby streets, where the workers also pack and send care packages in similar ways to the Filipino workers in Central. Victoria Park is a park with sports courts and green areas. It is opened to the public for various municipal functions, including for carnivals and mass demonstrations.[3] Workers can be seen gathering inside the park, outside on the footpaths all around the block, as well as saturating the forecourts of shopping malls nearby, underpasses and even traffic islands. Beyond the opportune occupation of large disused traffic islands under highways, the most surprising and clever appropriation of public space is the temporary inhabitations of the domestic stages in the Swedish furniture showroom Ikea. The showroom is located underneath a large shopping mall adjacent to Victoria Park. Every Sunday, groups of Indonesian workers can be seen using the staged apartments as their own; relaxing on the lounges in the living rooms, gathering around the dining tables, and using the complimentary wireless internet to connect to family and friends. The showroom managers do not ask them to leave as the workers are legitimately using the showrooms as they are intended.

Indonesian workers might not have an obvious socio-spatial ecology like Little Manila; however their presence is still very much seen and heard throughout many public spaces. The education level, religious background and cultural practices impact on the way the workers gather in public space as their habits, rituals and preferences for social connection differ. Since 2010, the largest number of Muslims in the territory have been Indonesian, most of them female migrant domestic workers, accounting for over 120,000 of Hong Kong's Muslim population (O'Connor, 2012). The workers' Muslim faith influences the way they interact and appear in public. They dress visibly differently, often in a Hijab, Hijab Amira or a Khimar. Their dress also forms part of a more conservative way of being, meaning they are less frequently seen dancing or singing in public (although some still do) in the way that Filipino workers do in Central, dressed in contemporary fashion and dancing to pop songs. Indonesian workers who do not dress conservatively can be seen dancing to Korean pop songs, hip hop and other popular music and dance routines. Beyond socialising, eating and resting, some of the groups that gather in Victoria Park are also Islamic study circles. According to the Islamic Union of Hong Kong – the oldest Islamic charitable organisation in the territory – there has been a shortage of Islamic teachers and many Indonesians turn to the internet and social media for religious guidance and general news on the Muslim world (Subchi et al., 2021). Sunday's public

gathering can become a day where Indonesian workers preach their faith to recruit new members, which is also a way of practising religion and creating community away from home. The Mosque and the Islamic Centre help foster solidarity and community that are specific to the workers' religion, as workers establish religious study groups to strengthen their faith, simultaneously providing an alternative support network in facing challenges while in Hong Kong (Ibid.).

Apart from religious group gatherings, Sunday provides an opportunity for the workers to develop new skills and share their knowledge and passion with peers in a friendly, welcoming environment. There are groups that create makeup, martial arts and sewing workshops. Traditional Indonesian dancing also occurs, which is another very popular and spiritual way for the workers to feel connected to their identity beyond being a migrant worker. On a warm Sunday afternoon in Victoria Park, workshops and dance performances (both traditional and contemporary) and competitions unfolded throughout the day. I spoke to a worker who had just finished a dance performance:

> Dancing gives me such a good feeling! It is a way for me to feel spiritually connected to my community and reminds me that I am human and can have fun! (Personal communication, 26 June 2022, exclamation in original)

Figure 3.8 Indonesian workers gather in Victoria Park for traditional dance performances on Sunday. (Photograph by author).

Many workers form dance groups and participate in competitions and fashion shows, which become a way to express their culture and identity in a different way to other forms of socialising. They also provide room to develop gender knowledge, reconsiderations of their sexuality and intimacy (Lai, 2020).

The use of social media for knowledge exchange and building community

Social media and the use of digital communication tools are vital parts of the daily lives of migrant workers to communicate with their family back home and connect with their peers in Hong Kong for many purposes. It is well-documented that there exists a common practice of employers restricting workers' phone usage during work hours, confiscating workers' phones or even in some cases, not allowing them to have a mobile phone at all (Astagini & Sarwono, 2021; Killias, 2018; Yeoh et al., 2016). All of the workers I interviewed had a personal mobile phone and only some of them had experienced employers curtailing their usage during work hours. The reasons some employers restrict phone usage are often about not wanting the workers to watch videos during work, which might distract them from their tasks, as well as using too much bandwidth on the home wireless internet network (Personal communication, March 2022).[4] During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media became a reprieve for many workers I encountered. Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp are among the most frequently used applications – not just for communication, but for entertainment and information exchange. Istik Wates, an Indonesian domestic worker living in Hong Kong, has a YouTube channel (Wates, n.d.) that has over 650 videos created between 2017–2023. Her video content ranges from various parts of her daily life, from cooking to giving tips about where to buy particular foods or Indonesian goods, to information about vaccine regulations during the pandemic. Many of her videos contain live footage in public spaces; in shops, on the street greeting friends, doing outdoor leisure activities and so on. The channel has over 22,400 subscribers and one of her most watched videos is from 2021 titled 'Mandatory!!! Swab test in Hong Kong before May 9// How to test for Covid in Hong Kong' (original title in Bahasa Indonesia). In this video, she documented the experience of going to a community testing centre during the pandemic, with details of where to queue, how to prepare, what to bring and so on. It was common practice, and at times required by the government, to be regularly tested at an official centre throughout the pandemic in Hong Kong. This video was viewed over 2,700 times, attracted 498 likes and had 126 comments from Indonesian workers that expressed thanks to her for sharing details and insights. This video and her channel are a rich source of local knowledge for workers, and the shared appreciation can be seen by all the positive and celebratory

emojis that were used in the responses to this video and others. Examples of migrant domestic workers generating digital content from their daily lives are not uncommon, with some even transforming their lives, such as Farida Nurhan, an Indonesian domestic worker who became a food video blogger with more than 4.9 million followers on her YouTube channel (Nurhan, n.d.), and Xyza Cruz Bacani, who was a Filipino domestic worker in Hong Kong who shared photographs she took as a hobby on her Facebook page and was then spotted by professional photographers. She became a globally-recognised photographer featured by the *New York Times*, and attracted other media attention (Giles, 2022). These examples certainly become beacons of hope for workers who aspire to be artists, video bloggers or creative entrepreneurs, but they also reflect the power of social media as a way for constructing identities that differ from the daily mundanity as domestic workers. Nuria Astagini and Billy Sarwono assert that 'social media has an important meaning for women domestic workers, because through social media they can construct and identify their ideal self apart from their profession' (2021, p. 232). Furthermore, social media allows participants to construct a different reality in the online realm that gives them a feeling their position is shared and equal to other users who are not necessarily domestic workers (2021, p. 228).

Pangyao (meaning 'friends' in Cantonese) is a social platform founded by Hong Kong-born Filipino Aileen Alonzo-Hayward and British expatriate Martin Turner. The platform is the first social platform in Hong Kong for migrant domestic workers that consists of a website, a Facebook community and a bimonthly print magazine, addressing all kinds of challenges of their labour, how to deal with authorities, as well as celebrating their diasporic roots via music events, stories, interviews and other special features (Cremer, 2023). The creation of this community through social media, although not created by a domestic worker but someone who is part of the Filipino diaspora in Hong Kong, has a positive impact on the workers' community by raising public awareness of the experiences of the workers and their culture, and builds a sense of collegiality and solidarity with and for the workers. Many of my interviewees are active on social media platforms to experience this sense of solidarity and community, especially when they feel isolated from their friends and family. Throughout the pandemic, when social distancing measures prevented many workers from gathering in large groups on their day off work, social media became an important way to remain connected, as GS, an Indonesian worker, expresses:

> I like to watch videos of other workers doing things in Hong Kong, and sharing their thoughts and feelings sometimes. I don't like to share too much myself, but to watch others have fun or know what's happening makes me feel not alone. If someone was positive [referring to being infected with COVID-19], they also can share with us and not suffer by themselves. (Personal communication, 6 November 2022)

Apart from sharing updates on particularities of their daily lives, many workers also share their various hobbies such as artworks, kickboxing, cooking, sewing and poetry. Members of Guhit Kulay, an artist collective formed by migrant workers who taught themselves how to paint, draw and create artworks, often share their artworks on their social media accounts, drawing praise and attention from fellow workers and the public. Speaking to one of the founders of the group, Cristina Cayat, she expresses the importance of sharing her own artistic work so she can continue to develop herself, but also sharing to empower and inspire other workers to pursue their own hobbies and creative expressions:

> I want others to see they can do what I do, teach themselves how to draw, paint, sew and all that so we can all do things not just as workers cleaning houses. It is good for everyone to see so we can all do it together and support each other. I think this is very important. (Personal communication, 28 May 2023)

There is little doubt that social media platforms and digital communication tools play an important role in many people's lives, particularly during times of struggle such as the global pandemic of COVID-19. For migrant domestic workers, remaining connected to their family and friends back in their home country is fundamental, and to be able to build new ties and nurture community in Hong Kong is also fundamental to their wellbeing and self-expression.

Relationships and sexuality as expression

Many migrant domestic workers have children and husbands back in their home countries. However, there is also a considerable number of workers who are single and date while working in Hong Kong, sometimes in same-sex relationships. Francisca Yuenki Lai conducted research with the Indonesian migrant worker community in Hong Kong and examined the lived experiences and sexual ideologies that circulate the pop dance groups of Indonesian women workers (Ibid.). Lai discovered that there are many membership-based groups that Indonesian migrant workers are part of: dance, religion, wealth management, labour rights and so on. Senior members become leaders and organisers, who may provide moral, emotional, skills-based and sometimes even monetary support for junior members. Lai's research focused on a pop dance group, Champion, and observed their family unit-like structure, where leaders and members use kin terms to address each other, which is common among the dance groups. A comparison can be made to the ballroom culture that originated in New York City in the 1970s, where African American and Latino drag queens organised their own pageants in opposition to racism and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people. Ballroom houses were formed, where kin relations were also created in their own spaces. The workers in Hong Kong do not have their own physical space, so their kin relations are maintained by

their activities or kin labour, without relying on a fixed home or space (Lai, 2020, p. 48). These dance groups also are not just open to workers who might identify as LGBTQIA+, rather they are open to any Indonesian worker who wants to dance and be part of a community with shared values of kinship and *prestasi*, which is the manifestation of good citizenship in Indonesia (Boellstorff, 2004). Boellstorff asserts that *prestasi* fosters social connectivity and it can be any personal achievement that reflects positively on one's community, which is a useful notion for explaining the prevalence of organising and taking part in competitions in the Indonesian community (Boellstorff, 2004; Lai, 2020, p. 43). Membership in the dance groups not only generates kinship and community for the workers, but also creativity, as the competitions require the groups to create their own dance steps and fashion style. These performances literally become a space for the workers to express themselves in entirely different ways to their daily routine, outward expressions and appearance as migrant domestic workers. Lai also observed that in the fashion shows and dance competitions, as all the participants are physiologically women, there are different divisions called *tomboi* and *cewek*, where the *tomboi* dress in men's clothing with short hair, while the *cewek* dress in women's clothing in more traditionally feminine styles (2020). I observed several dance competitions and fashion shows throughout my fieldwork and have found that everyone is cheered and supported equally and the atmosphere is very jovial and supportive. In the audience, there are many people who are dressed like *tomboi* and *cewek*, and sometimes they can be seen holding hands and showing physical affection in ways that signify romantic relationships. MB, an Indonesian worker who has been in Hong Kong as a domestic worker for eight years, is in a same-sex relationship with GS, who is also an Indonesian worker. They met at a dance competition in late 2019, six months after GS arrived in Hong Kong. They became friends quickly but did not get to spend a lot of time together as in early 2020, the pandemic necessitated social distancing measures and GS's employers were strict about the amount of time she spent outside of the home every Sunday. In 2019, GS was 26 years old and single, and had never left Indonesia prior to coming to work in Hong Kong. She worked for a local Chinese family in Fanling, a town in the New Territories. Her primary job was to take care of an elderly aunt, who required assistance for everyday activities. She shared a bedroom with her and had very little privacy in her work. When GS met MB in 2019, she had only been in a relationship once with a man in Indonesia, someone in her hometown with whom she went to high school. They were in a relationship for many years and intended to marry, but the man came from a poorer family and promised to marry her when he had enough money. Before she left for Hong Kong, her family decided she should go abroad and earn higher wages, so she may have potentially better marriage prospects. GS realised that she did not want to marry at all, and was relieved when her family suggested for her to work abroad:

> I don't want to get married and have children. But it is very important for Indonesian women to marry and have children and be a good wife and mother. I know I don't want that, but how to say it to them [her family]? I have two sisters who are married with children and they're always working so hard doing everything to make family happy. I don't want that for me. I just want to earn money and be free. (Personal communication, 13 November 2022)

GS did not know she was attracted to women and did not seek out to have a romantic relationship in Hong Kong. When she met MB, she noticed that MB was a *tomboi*, dressed in more masculine clothing. She felt attracted to her but their friendship at first was platonic. They were in many shared friendship chat groups online and talked there and privately. After about one year of knowing each other, MB asked GS if she would have a romantic relationship with her, and GS said yes. She felt it was natural for her and felt safe and comfortable. MB's employers live in Ma On Shan, which is a suburb also in the New Territories and less than thirty minutes driving distance from where GS lives. However, on Sundays, they both travel for nearly one hour to Victoria Park, as they feel safer being far away from their employers, minimising the possibility of being seen by them or their associates. They hold hands and sometimes kiss on the lips in public. Only friends in the group know they are a couple, and none of their family members back in Indonesia know of their same-sex relationship. MB is a few years older than GS and has had same-sex relationships in Hong Kong before. She has always known she is not sexually attracted to men, but she has not come out to her family. Her employers have never asked her about dating, and she has never told them when she has been in relationships. Both GS and MB expressed that they would never let their employers know, for the fear of discrimination and backlash, which ultimately might lead to termination of their contract. MB dresses more gender-neutral at home, but will change outfits after she leaves home on Sunday – in baggy cargo pants, oversized t-shirts, caps worn backwards and many more. GS dresses more feminine, like *cewek* style, so her clothing does not differ too much from her daily attire. When the social distancing rules eased, they gathered with their friends in Victoria Park, sometimes doing dance practices or dancing in competitions; most of the time they shared a space together and ate and socialised. They both look very at ease in each other's company, as MB says, 'Once a week we get to be with each other freely and show our love. We don't need a lot, just each other' (Personal communication, 13 November 2022). When asked whether they wished they had a more private space alone and not in public, they both laughed and said they sometimes find space. GS sleeps in a bedroom with her employers' older aunt, which GS considers as lucky, as the aunt has a hearing problem and cannot hear her talking on the phone. She keeps her voice at a whisper and often under the blanket, as she does not want her employers to hear her speaking late into the evening. MB has

her own bedroom, which means she has more freedom once she retires to her bedroom around 10 pm each night. GS and MB speak to each other between 10 pm to midnight every night. Throughout the day, they constantly text each other, leave voice notes or sometimes talk on the phone when they are alone, or while MB is commuting to pick up her employers' children from school, or when GS is cooking for the family in the kitchen. For many workers who have intimate relationships with other workers, their courtship is often dispersed throughout many points of communication in the day. They may always be connected, yet not necessarily with steady periods of time for sustained conversations.

In Central, Victoria Park and other public areas on Sundays, workers can be seen in camping tents, which is one of the easiest ways for them to have sustained periods of privacy while still being in free public spaces. This configuration of space creates what Yiming Wang (2019) has called 'pseudo-public space'. Observing GS's group of friends and others in Victoria Park and Kowloon Park, it is common to see Indonesian workers who are dressed in more *tomboi* style, and romantic expressions and gestures are also not uncommon. Many of GS and MB's friends have expressed that they enjoy being able to dress and behave differently on Sunday, sometimes in more flamboyant clothing and being freer in expressing their sexuality.

Although Hong Kong, as a secular society, may be more open-minded towards LGBTQIA+ peoples and related events than the Philippines and Indonesia, many migrant workers do not feel comfortable in outwardly expressing their sexuality to their employers. From my interviews and interactions with workers, most of them who are not married to a man or in a long-term relationship with one do not like to discuss their romantic relationships. Many who are above 45 years of age who have never married nor have children have even expressed their disinterest in having romantic relationships at all. They see it as a kind of burden on top of supporting their parents or others. Not having a space of their own also discourages relationships and takes away the freedom to even entertain the idea of having a partner, as voiced by JH, who when I met her in 2019 was a 38-year-old Filipino worker, single with no children:

> I don't even have a home of my own to have friends over for some games and food. Sometimes I don't even have enough time to sleep and just be free by myself, why would I have time or space to have a boyfriend!? I rather sleep and chat to my girlfriends, much easier! And family back home are doing good, my money helps them enough. If I have a child, all my money will be finished, no, I don't want to work even harder for the next twenty years! (Personal communication, 1 December 2019, exclamation in original)

I met JH again in 2022, when she was still single, without children. She informed me that the pandemic had been a very difficult time for her as she could not fly home to visit her elderly parents. However, she found joy in doing other things,

such as taking kickboxing classes and volunteering for Mission for Migrant Workers in promoting labour rights for workers. I asked her whether she would like to have a romantic relationship with someone if she could; she responded:

> I felt lonely during the pandemic. I wished I had a boyfriend to comfort me when things are hard, but I also know it's too difficult. So I have many friends and they feel the same, and we are there for each other. We support [each other] to make sure we are ok and happy, I think that's the most important. (Personal communication, 20 November 2022)

The pressure on migrant workers to provide financially for their families, as well as satisfying traditional roles such as being a mother and a wife, have been present in different ways among all the workers I have met throughout my research. Whether they are married, with a husband and children back home, or single with children, or single without children, all of the workers have the burden of societal expectations to meet in their home countries and in Hong Kong. On Sunday, on their day off work, while they can express their sexuality more fully in alignment with their desires through appearance, activities or in relationships (or no relationships), they are activating their freedom and personal choice. Many of the same-sex couples may have to ignore disapproving stares from pedestrians or do things to hide their sexual preferences or relationships from their employers, which can be seen as a form of resistance. When speaking to the workers about this, they see it more as simply having the ability to do want they want, even if they might feel some discomfort from judgemental looks. I assert that observing as an outsider, the collective of marginalised workers appearing in public space every Sunday throughout Hong Kong forms a powerful and empowering socio-spatial ecology of resistance, demonstrating their agency and need to have their own space to do what they wish as if they were in their own homes. I can also see that from the workers' perspectives, they may not consider their actions as resistance, as they are just being themselves. To have the freedom to be yourself, especially in public space, is in fact a form of resistance and a privilege, and one that many people afforded it may not realise they possess.

Conclusion

Every Sunday, through the appropriation and transformation of public space, migrant domestic workers' resistance actualises in the temporary spaces they construct, where they have the capacity to express themselves in ways they have not been allowed or feel at ease to in their employers' homes for six days of the week. From the food they eat, the way they dress, the relationships they have, the movements they express and the activities they do, these are all forms of resistance that do not appear as direct opposition or threaten violent collisions with authority. Rather it appears that through the reclamation and occupation of

space, consequently resistance is spatialised. Like Steven Pile and Michael Keith (1997, p. 11), who explain the importance of a spatial understanding of resistance, I too view resistance as a spatialisation that allows for a subtle yet persistent existence rather than a combative eruption:

> By thinking resistance spatially, it becomes both about the different spaces of resistance and also about the ways in which resistance is mobilised through specific spaces and times. The term resistance draws attention not only to the myriad spaces of political struggles, but also to the politics of everyday spaces, through which political identities constantly flow and fix. These struggles do not have to be glamorous or heroic, about fighting back or opposition, but may subsist in enduring in refusing to be wiped off the map of history.

It is important to understand resistance within the context of this research as one where the seemingly 'powerful' and the 'powerless' are not fixed, rather their possession of power is constantly shifting. Nicole Constable comments on the workers' resistance: 'To regard them simply or solely as oppressed by those "with power" is to ignore the subtler and more complex forms of power, discipline and resistance in their everyday lives' (Constable, 2007, p. 202).

In the beginning of this chapter, I posed some questions that had arisen by the end of Chapter 2: Are the workers mere victims of the policies imposed or do they exercise some agency? If so, how, and to what extent does this happen, and would this make transparent any policy lessons for the labour-sending and receiving nations? The workers are not mere victims, and they do, in fact, exercise agency. Through appropriation and transformation of loose, interstitial, liminal spaces in the public spaces of Hong Kong, the workers, as a contingent who are disenfranchised economically, socially and spatially, have generated new spaces that transgress the formal and commercial boundaries of the city. Using their bodies and locally sourced materials such as disused cardboard, their temporary inhabitation of public space demonstrates a subtle yet specific form of agency. Beyond the socio-spatial depletion and cultural deprivation that result from the sanctioned discipline and control that are practised in the homes, migrant domestic workers appear in public space every Sunday to assert their resistance to being treated as docile domestic workers. They refuse to be quiet migrant women who live their lives six days each week as obedient subjects of servitude. Every Sunday, they reclaim space, both physical and personal, to act as they desire with fewer inhibitions. Accompanying this reclamation of space are two significant actions that indicate the continual agility of the migrant workers in Hong Kong: the recovery of autonomy and the cultivation of solidarity and resilience in spaces of temporality.

Nicole Constable critically questions the limits and assumptions of binary concepts of the migrant-citizen commonly used in migration studies. She argues that so-called temporary migrants are actually permanent and that placemaking and

emplacement are not unique to those who seek permanent residence or citizenship, but also apply to temporary migrants (Constable, 2022, p. 2). Emplacement is an existential condition involving a sense of stability and control over one's life and future. This is the opposite of displacement, which is described by Georgina Ramsay as

> 'an existential experience of contested temporal being' in which a person experiences a 'fundamental disruption to the teleology of life: an experience that pulls a person out of the illusory comfort of a life with stability and into a reality of a future that is not only uncertain, but which is determined by forces that are outside of their direct control'. (Ramsay, 2020)

Emplacement is a concept often used on refugees or immigrants as a form of 'demigrantizing' (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014; Glick Schiller & Caglar, 2016). Constable argues that emplacement has rarely been used for temporary migrants and that placemaking and emplacement of temporary migrants 'despite the "revolving door" of ongoing arrival and departure, can be a means of contesting social marginalization and a form of activism' (Constable, 2022, p. 2). With this concept of emplacement as activism, what might appear as an odd assortment of spaces, objects and activities in the urban interiority of Hong Kong every Sunday is in fact a form of emplacement by migrant domestic workers. The systematic construction of informal domesticised spaces, routinised activities, organised settlements and informal economy are ways in which the so-called temporary migrants are actively expanding their social ties and alliances, and producing visibility and sociability in a society that deems them as impermanent residents. As such, the spaces created in Central, Victoria Park, Kowloon Park and beyond are fundamentally a spatial phenomenon that is reflective of a sense of permanence and part of the cultural politics of global labour migration and socio-spatial inequality. Further, this spatial phenomenon is a form of disobedience exercised repeatedly to demand justice. Justice for a recognition of the need of humans for their own space and privacy in order to be fully functional, effective and respectable human beings who are not mere commodities of labour. Labour-sending and receiving nations should consider the need for separate spaces for the migrant workers to live, as opposed to treating the limitations of space as an unavoidable factor overriding the workers' entitlement to a positive state of wellbeing. Judith Butler contends that public assemblies have clear implications, and, as she notes:

> When people amass on the street, one implication seems clear: they are still here and still there; they persist; they assemble, and so manifest the understanding that their situation is shared, or the beginning of such an understanding. And even when they are not speaking or do not present a set of negotiable demands, the call for justice is being enacted: the bodies assembled 'say' 'we are not disposable', whether or not they are using words at the moment; what they say, as it were, is

> 'we are still here, persisting, demanding greater justice, a release from precarity, a possibility of a liveable life.' (Butler, 2015, p. 22)

The next chapter will visually demonstrate the socio-spatial phenomenon in photographs and drawings.

Notes

1. For more detail on the provincial divisions, see Tillu (2011, p. 43).
2. From interviews, many workers felt intimidated by the patrolling police officers and guards, and were fearful of receiving a fine if they broke the rules. The fine for breaking a social distancing rule was HK$5,000 and HK$10,000 depending on varying situations and time. That is one to two times the domestic worker's minimum wage. There is no law that claims receiving a fine will affect their employment, but this was a view shared by many workers as their employers warned them to not break any laws.
3. For many years, the park was the site for peaceful demonstrations every year until 2020, when laws around public gatherings changed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. For further insight into employers controlling the migrant workers' use of mobile technology, please see Yeoh et al., which uses Doreen Massey's lens of 'power geometry' (1991) to discuss spatiality and mobility being shaped by and reproduced by differentiated power in society (2016).

CHAPTER 4

Little Manila and Beyond

Every Sunday, the majority of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong have their weekly day off work. From Central to Causeway Bay to Kowloon Park to further out into the New Territories, the workers can be heard and seen all over the city-state, engaging in whatever activities they wish to do without the daily social and spatial limitations of their working lives. Appropriating loose and transitory public spaces like elevated walkways, pedestrianised roads, tunnels and underpasses, the migrant workers demonstrate their desire to have their own domestic spaces in which to do as they would if they had their own home. It is in these spaces that community occurs, bonds are formed and solidarity is present. Further, they enact freedom and agency by their resourceful use and adaptation of public spaces, demonstrating that they are not simply a labour commodity, but a contingent of people who are resilient and powerful.

So far, this book has analysed the agency and occupation of the workers through economic, historical, social and spatial approaches. While all of these are informative and necessary, it is important to be able to *experience* what occurs on a Sunday, because what is often missing in text-based analysis is the actual humanistic element that cannot be replaced. Historically, ethnography and its research practices have been informed by its long traditions of drawing on visual elements in the pioneering work of anthropologists and sociologists, such as John Collier Jr and Pierre Bourdieu (Mannay, Fink & Lomax, 2019, p. 4). Clifford Geertz notes that ethnographic research often involves in-depth studies to engender data that enables thick descriptions of sociocultural phenomena (1973), 'including the development of approaches that support immersion in the lifeworld of participants … for extended periods of time to enable the ethnographer to understand the social practices which frame and constitute the lives of those being studied' (Mannay, Fink & Lomax, 2019, p. 5; Ibid.). Within the limitations of the book format, it is in this spirit of having immersed myself in the lifeworld of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong for the last decade that I believe it is vital to visualise the resistance analysed in the previous chapter and present the activities and spaces that have long been described and discussed in this book.

Since the development of still and moving photography, many scholars have seen the potential of using these techniques and tools for social change (Marion & Scanlan, 2020). Journalists and documentarians have used photography to connect social justice to visual imagery in the universally recognised genre

of photojournalism, as have filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov, who pioneered documentary filmmaking with a wide range of camera techniques, as exemplified in *Man with A Movie Camera* (1929). While I am in no way claiming I have the photographic skills worthy of artistic relevance in the photographs used this chapter or in other chapters of this book, coming from my background as a spatial design researcher, I am pointing to the importance of visualising and spatialising the scenes in my research to contribute to the uniqueness of the book and to the fields of research this book straddles. With Hong Kong's unique urban landscape formation in the background, the visualisations demonstrate the spatial agency of the workers in poignant ways, resonating with this notion: 'Sometimes the city is sending a clear, straightforward message, sometimes an unobtrusive, subtle and silent one, with a hidden agenda to foster values and beliefs, knowledge and power' (Suleimanova & Tivyaeva, 2023, p. 1).

This chapter provides a visual narrative of the activities the workers engage in and the spaces they create. The narrative consists of some photographs from my fieldwork from various years between 2013–2023, and illustrations by five Filipino artists based in Hong Kong from the art collective Guhit Kulay in 2023. Anthropologists and ethnographers have long enrichened their research with visualisations, but many of the products can be exploitative and stereotypical (Marion & Scanlan, 2020). I would like to acknowledge that in the earlier years of this research, I took many photographs and sketches, yet for this book I would like to add drawings of what occurs on Sunday created by and seen through the eyes of the workers themselves. Guhit Kulay was established in Hong Kong in 2017 and many of its members are migrant domestic workers. Guhit Kulay means 'to draw in colour' and it is a platform built by migrant workers for fellow migrant workers to share their talents and support one another through their self-expression in visual arts. The illustrations featured in this chapter are created by Maria Christina Anire, Cristina Cayat, Lyn Lopez, Lorelito Eludo and Jonalyn Molina.

Figure 4.1 On the Central Elevated Walkways, workers create robust cardboard structures to separate their space from the pedestrians' foot traffic. As pictured here, the structure has walls that are reinforced with extra cardboard pieces against the balustrade for weather protection and comfort, and the handrails along the balustrade have been put to good use as coat and bag holders. There are even spare cardboard pieces on a trolley parked outside their space. With the shoes along the outside of the lowered cardboard entrance, this structure particularly resembles a 'real' private gathering space for the workers to have their own space. (Photograph by author).

Figure 4.2 It is very common to see workers gather in their spaces to play cards and sing pop songs from their portable karaoke sets. This scene was captured on the Admiralty footbridge and drawn by Maria Christina Anire.

Figure 4.3 Card games of all kinds ensue throughout Sunday, in between conversations and sharing food. This scene was captured outside a bus terminal outside International Finance Centre shopping mall in Central and drawn by Jonalyn Molina.

Figure 4.4 Workers create spaces in areas under the elevated walkways for protection from the weather. They are also less frequented by foot traffic, which offers a sense of ease without constant looks from passers-by. (Photograph by author).

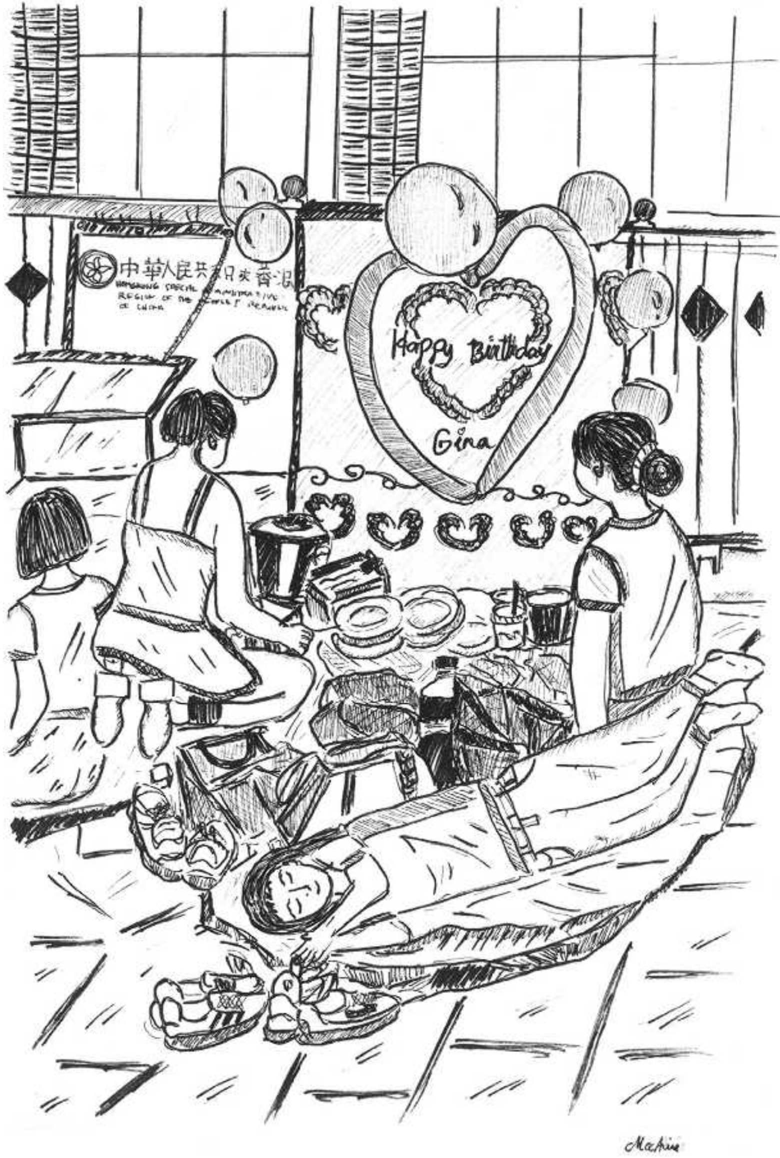

Figure 4.5 Migrant workers come together to celebrate each others' birthdays with food, drinks and customised decorations and balloons. Sometimes after the feasts, workers can be seen relaxing into a nap in the comfort of their friends. This scene was captured on the Central Elevated Walkway near the Central piers and illustrated by Maria Christina Anire.

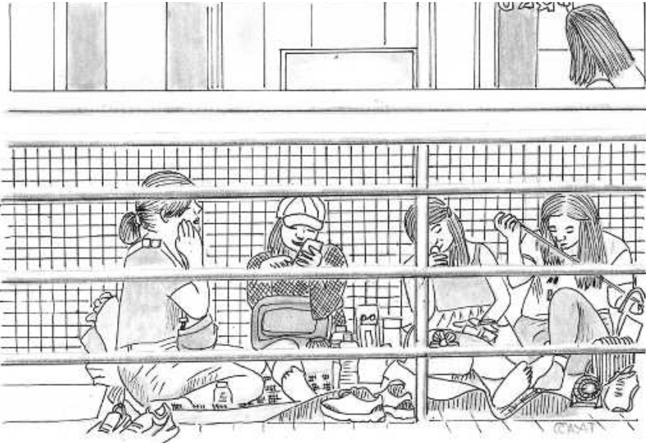

Figure 4.6 On Chater Road, many workers find spaces away from the crowds to video call their loved ones, sing songs to them on karaoke sets and make crafts. This scene is illustrated by Cristina Cayat.

Figure 4.7 Some groups of workers collect extra cardboard pieces for their friends, who may need more to build larger spaces. Throughout the day their friends will know who to go to for extra cardboard, and if they are running other errands and do not have the time to find some for themselves, they will always know who to turn to. (Photograph by author).

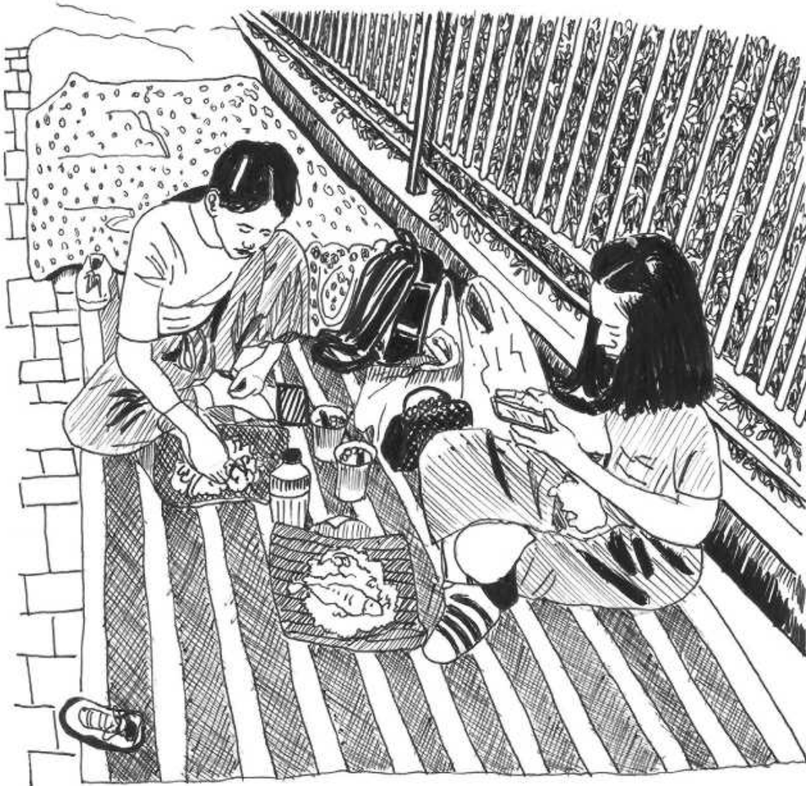

Figure 4.8 In Victoria Park, Indonesian workers like to use plastic mats that can be easily folded and stored and are also suitable for outdoor weather conditions. The workers here are eating Indonesian food purchased from Indonesian food stores nearby. This scene is illustrated by Lyn Lopez.

Figure 4.9 Sometimes, plastic sheets and fabric mats are also used by workers, especially if they are sitting in undercover areas like some of the semi-enclosed elevated walkways in Central. They demarcate space in similar ways to cardboard pieces, albeit with less rigidity and structure. (Photograph by author).

Figure 4.10 Workers get a lot of joy from singing, especially when they sing with one another or compete against each other. This scene was captured outside the undercover area at Central bus terminal, and illustrated by Jonalyn Molina.

Figure 4.11 Cardboard spaces may often appear on both sides of the Central Elevated Walkways, leaving space for the pedestrians in the middle. The footpaths are wide enough for groups to gather on either side and have enough space for easy pedestrian thoroughfare.

Figure 4.12 Similarly, in Admiralty, a suburb away from Central, the elevated walkways also have workers erect cardboard structures on both sides of the walkway, with just enough room for pedestrian thoroughfare down the middle. (Photograph by author).

Figure 4.13 The atrium of the HSBC bank headquarters has been frequently photographed with the workers' Sunday gatherings as a commentary of contrasting the financial giant against a marginalised labour group. For the workers who gather there on Sundays, they enjoy the spaciousness of the three-story high atrium and the weather protection it provides. This space is not always accessible on Sundays, as it sometimes closes for maintenance. (Photograph by author).

Figure 4.14 The pedestrian tunnel connecting Chater Road and City Hall is popularly known as the 'Salon' because of the variety of beauty services, such as *kilay* – eyebrows shaping, manicures and massages that are on offer by workers for other workers. (Photograph by author).

Figure 4.15 'Kilay is life' is an expression known to Filipino women, and many migrant workers love to have their eyebrows fixed and maintained by fellow workers. This is illustrated here by Jonalyn Molina.

Figure 4.16 Kilay can be seen being offered in many areas in Little Manila, especially if there are special events such as dance performances or parades. This scene has been captured and illustrated by Cristina Cayat.

Figure 4.17 Workers can be seen with large bags and luggage on Sunday, which hold clothing they want to exchange with friends or sell to the public. Many workers also barter with items such as food, or services such as massages and manicures. (Photograph by author).

Figure 4.18 Some entrepreneurial locals sell clothing on Chater Road, where they know many workers will be every Sunday. They often are very cheap replicas of famous fashion brands and attract a lot of attention from workers and pedestrians alike. This scene is illustrated by Lyn Lopez.

Figure 4.19 Many workers suffer from body pain due to long working hours and cannot afford to have a body massage. So on Sundays, they ask their friends to do it. Even if their friends are not professionally qualified, the relief is worth it for some. This scene was captured on Chater Road and illustrated by Lyn Lopez.

Figure 4.20 Every Sunday, an activity that many workers engage in is packing the care packages – *Balikbayan* – to send to their families back home. These packages are packed, assembled and shipped off all in the same day and both Indonesian and Filipino workers send these large boxes home. (Photograph by author).

Figure 4.21 These packages are usually filled with daily essentials such as toothpaste and soap, and sometimes clothing and toys. In the last few years during the global pandemic, masks and virus test kits have been packed in large amounts. This scene was captured outside Pedder Street and illustrated by Maria Christina Anire.

Figure 4.22 The packing and sending of the Balikbayan boxes go on all Sundays, no matter the weather conditions. These boxes cost approximately HK$800 each to send and could take up to one month to arrive at the workers' families' doorsteps.

Figure 4.23 In Victoria Park, Indonesian workers gather in groups to pray, chant and play musical instruments together. The park offers large green spaces where they can set up large surface areas with several plastic or fabric mats for others to sit and join them. This scene is illustrated by Lorelito Eludo.

Figure 4.24 Birthday celebrations also occur among the Indonesian workers community on Sundays in public space. This scene shows a group of Indonesian workers gathering and about to take photographs with a plush toy and cake that were gifted by each other. This scene was captured in Kowloon Park and illustrated by Lorelito Eludo.

Figure 4.25 Singing and dancing can take place everywhere the workers are, whether they are practising for a competition, rehearsing for a parade or just having fun. This scene was captured on Chater Road and illustrated by Cristina Cayat.

Figure 4.26 The date of 12 June is Philippines Independence Day and every year there are dance parade practices on several Sundays leading up to the parade. This photograph captures dance practices by Kalinga Association leading up to the event, on Sunday 11 June 2023. (Photograph by author).

Figure 4.27 Sunday 11 June 2023 was the day of the 125th Philippines Independence Day parade. The parade took place on Chater Road and extended to City Hall. The parade saw hundreds of workers participate, dressed in costumes and holding hand-made props. This scene was captured and illustrated by Lorelito Eludo.

Conclusion

The twenty-seven photographs and illustrations featured in this chapter serve as a small vignette into the exuberance, chaos and community that can be experienced palpably on the streets of Hong Kong every Sunday amidst the smells of food, sounds of karaoke singing and laughter. The illustrations, drawn by artists who are themselves workers, capture more than the array of activities that occur every Sunday. They express resourcefulness, friendships, entertainment and solidarity that exist between individual workers and reverberate throughout the community of upwards of 300,000 workers in the city-state. Migrant domestic workers are often discussed with negativity; that is, the focus is often on their struggles. While the journey of many migrant workers is indeed full of uncertainty, oppressive constraints and marginalisation, it is also important to show the joyful moments and demonstrate their full humanity, which deserves recognition and celebration.

CHAPTER 5

Commodification of Care: Costs and Sacrifices

Migrant domestic work in Hong Kong is something that exists in plain sight and many assumptions are made about it – namely that it is cheaply available, replaceable and in abundant supply. Many people do not see the many systems and trails that are interconnected to make this labour accessible, and often disregard the human costs and instead focus on its transitionary nature. Over the decade I have engaged in this research I have had many conversations with people who are not workers, who may be employers, past employers or who may have never employed workers. One of the most common questions raised when discussing problems within the existing migrant domestic labour policies is 'Why do the workers come to Hong Kong then if they know they will have to make certain sacrifices?' This line of inquiry reflects a deep-seated attitude that the migrant workers should be prepared for compromises if they choose to work abroad, and that they are victimising themselves if they complain about the restrictive living conditions or exploitative employers. This attitude may have been created by several notions: the idea that the salary is much higher for the same kind of work back home or for even more skilled jobs, that the first-world image of Hong Kong gives common misconceptions of better living conditions than the workers' home country, and the well-socialised dismissiveness towards domestic work as 'real' work. In this chapter, I wish to bring attention to this third point – the perception of domestic work and its dismissal as valid work – and how that impacts on the workers and the value of the labour sector in society. The questioning of the validity of domestic work as 'real' work is a commonly acknowledged problem by scholars across gender and labour studies. Isabel Shutes asserts 'care is a concept that attends to the inequalities of social relations in terms of the gendered division of labour, manifested in the construction of care as "women's work" and as historically undervalued labour' (2021, p. 109). Therefore, the question of why workers come to Hong Kong knowing there may be sacrifices along the way is a rhetorical one, meaning there is an assumption that workers should accept certain problems in their work, because ultimately, it is considered as gendered labour that could be obtained unpaid, and to be doing it and be paid a wage is better than not having paid work at all or working for less money in their home countries. Further, I assert that this common attitude is also racist and classist, as domestic work is often considered as 'dirty work', not just 'women's work', and certain workers are assumed to be 'naturally' suited for

it, a prejudice that has been constructed by interlocking systems of oppression of gender, race and class (Killias, 2018, p. 13; Anderson, 2010; Browne & Misra, 2003; Glenn, 1992, p. 2). These so-called 'certain workers' are often women of colour from nations in the Global South who experience intersectional inequality in the labour market, specifically in wage inequality, discrimination and stereotyping, and in immigration and domestic labour (Browne & Misra, 2003). I believe the ignorant question asked by employers or past employers of workers I encountered reflects a well-oiled racist, classist and sexist attitude that informs employment and economic practices, underpinning and exacerbating the intersected inequalities that the migrant workers face.

This chapter responds to one of the four research questions of the book: How does the intersection of the migrant domestic workers' wages, gender and labour further their marginalisation? The chapter begins with a brief overview of the *Economics of care*, to give context to the ethics of care and how feminist economists have explored the many dimensions of care in discussions of creating socially and ecologically sustainable societies (Nelson & Power, 2018, p. 80). I assert that the well-socialised construction of care work as 'women's work' is also tied to the gendered and hierarchical frameworks of economics, as Julie Nelson argues that 'The culturally dominant conception of gender distinctions as hierarchical, with "masculine" on top, leads to high value being attributed to subjects and methods perceived as masculine and a parallel devaluing of subjects and methods metaphorically associated with femininity' (1996, p. xi). This gives background to how care work and domestic work are known as part of the unskilled labour sector, which in its name and conceptualisation already undermines and devalues the work, and subsequently diminishes the rights, social mobility and economic value of the workers who participate in it. The chapter moves to discuss what is considered as *Domestic work, care work, unskilled labour* and how historically, housework has been argued to be considered as paid work in *Paying for housework*. In this section, a discussion around the division of labour in the home, with scenarios enriched by interviews and literature, demonstrates how women inevitably participate in both paid and unpaid domestic labour. With these detailed scenarios on full display, the chapter zooms out to look at the larger picture of the feminisation of migrant domestic labour and links these experiences of the workers to a larger, global system that perpetuates such scenarios and more. The impacts of migration labour in terms of the human costs continue to be illustrated under the final section, *Global dislocations and parallel lives*, with interviews from workers adding nuance to the existing research and argument.

Overall, this chapter adds to the discussion of migration labour introduced in Chapter 1 of this book, *Policy and/vs People: mobility and stagnation*, by adding focus on the feminisation of migrant domestic work, unpacking care and domestic work, and illustrating the intersected impacts on the workers. It seeks to provide a holistic view of the structural problems and systemic inequalities that have

created the specific social, spatial and economic scenario in which the migrant workers participate, in Hong Kong and beyond.

Economics of care

In *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* (1988), academic and politician Marilyn Waring recounts how she discovered evidence of the invisibility of women and women's work in account systems that were used to determine public policy, and that housewives and mothers were considered as 'non-producers' and those who were considered 'inactive' were not considered in the economic cycle, which discounted the contribution of benefits from production (1988, p. 2). This excluded the recognition of women's unpaid productive and reproductive work, which when Waring fought it at the United Nations Mid-Decade Conference on Women in 1980, was met with a deluge of opposition from male delegations (Ibid., p. 4). It is in this spirit that Waring wrote this seminal book discussing how attributing a monetary valuation to unpaid work, both productive and reproductive, and calling this process imputation would make women's work visible, influencing policies and questioning values (Waring, 1988, p. 7). Her work has influenced the works of feminist economists such as Julie Nelson (1993; 1999; 2011), Marilyn Power (2004), Martha McMahon (1997), Mary Mellor (1997) and many more for decades to come regarding ethics of care, care work and critical ecologies in global economic development.

Feminist economists have discussed the ethics of care alongside and within the development of feminist economics in aspects of: caring about (e.g. people, relationships, economy, environment, society), caring for (e.g. the vulnerable, the elderly, children, families and nature), and disseminating care in research, thinking, teaching and developing care methodologies (Nelson, 2011, pp. 1–2; Nelson & Power, 2018, pp. 80–81; Herro & Obeng-Odoom, 2022, p. 6). These aspects are emotional, practical and provisional, as Julie Nelson and Marilyn Power argue for a provisioning definition of economics that is

> Instead of defining the discipline around the phenomena of individual rational decision making …, a more useful definition would be to see the field as concerned with how societies organize themselves to provide for the survival and flourishing of life. This idea evokes a more embodied and dynamic notion of human existence than in individualist definition, highlighting relationships of interdependence and human needs for both material sustenance and care. (Nelson and Power, 2018, p. 81)

In this definition, care extends beyond the individual and becomes relational, which offers a new way of understanding care work, domestic work and the workers who participate, as part of the discourse of providing for the survival, sustainability and flourishing of life. This point was illuminated in a

question-and-answer session in an online talk hosted by the International Association of Feminist Economics, where Julie Nelson was responding to a question posed by an audience member about how to create an ethical demand for care (4 February 2023). Nelson responded by using a recent nurses' strike at a hospital in Boston as an example of how there is a common perception that when care workers (in this case, nurses) go on strike, it is due to their greed for money and not caring for the patients left behind. She stated that in fact, it is the high number of patients and lack of resources that cause the nurses to want to quit in the first place. Further, Nelson said the common rhetoric that divides care from money is dangerous because nurses, and other care workers, are being perceived as greedy and selfish if they demand a decent salary to live a sustainable life and do well in their jobs. I believe this rhetoric also applies to other care workers and domestic workers; that is, if they demand a higher salary or better work conditions, their demands are met with resistance as the workers are being perceived as greedy and selfish, which reflects an undermining of the social and economic value of domestic and care work. This comes back to the relational understanding of care, as it is not simply a commodity to be supplied and demanded. In fact, in this scenario as Nelson described, it is not sustainable when the workers are not compensated for or supported adequately to be able to *practise* care. Therefore, Nelson concluded her response stating that there is no finite answer to that question; however, she in turn asked an important question – 'How do we allow caring people to care? We do it by paying more for it, not as individuals but as a society, and paying for it like we pay for roads, telecommunications and other kinds of infrastructure' (IAFFE, 2023). This response illuminates an important point that, if care is given the same economic priority as physical infrastructure, then those who enact care will also be valued and likely be compensated and taken care of adequately.

Domestic work, care work, unskilled labour

As a sector of the workforce, unskilled labour is associated with low skill levels characterised by low education requirements and minimal wages (Choudry & Hlatshwayo, 2016, pp. 1–7). Common examples are low-level construction work and reproductive labour. Reproductive labour is defined as work that relates to the maintenance of households involving domestic chores such as cleaning and cooking, as well as taking care of children and the elderly (Asis, Huang & Yeoh, 2004). Within the context of care work, domestic work is considered as social reproductive labour (Yeates, 2009a). Care work is something that migrant workers provide in transnational settings, not just as domestic workers, but as nannies for infants and children, carers for the elderly in aged-care facilities, nurses and many related works in private homes or public and private facilities. Nicola Yeates describes social reproductive labour as a particular form of labour

that creates and sustains human life as distinct from commodities. Reproductive labour contains different categories such as biological production of human beings, the maintenance of individuals throughout their life cycle and systemic reproduction of knowledge, social bonds and values (Ibid., pp. 5–7). Yeates refers to the importance of care labour as it supports the people as physical, social and cultural beings, because it involves both biological reproduction and socialisation processes; it is a broad field that incorporates sexual and physical reproduction alongside activities as diverse as housework, childcare and education. Migrant domestic workers' labour is categorised within this context, and as it is considered as unskilled labour, it continues to be devalued, economically and socially.

The dichotomy of skilled and unskilled labour separates work according to its labour productivity, that is, how much a worker is paid for the work and how much direct monetary value it returns for its employers. Many unskilled workers, such as cleaners, domestic workers and childcare workers, do not directly create monetary profit through their work for their employers; however, what they do offer is services that free up time for their employers to engage in work that has higher monetary value. Based on that equation, it is a service that is valuable. Moreover, the conventional notion of labour productivity is problematic when applied to the production of services such as those provided by care workers and domestic workers. It is difficult to measure and place an accurate monetary value.

Further, within care work, there is a notion that has been called the 'care penalty', where there is the tendency for occupations that involve healing and nurturing services to be paid for less than other occupations (England, Budig & Folbre, 2002). The existence of this penalty disadvantages the people who go into this line of work, and creates problems in the quality of the care labour force (Nelson, 2011, p. 2).

Bridget Anderson argues that paid domestic workers themselves are inescapably a means of reproduction, as the engagement of the whole person in the act is an essential factor of reproductive labour (Anderson & Ruhs, 2010). The nature of domestic work is inextricably intimate and complex with shifting boundaries between public and private spaces, the professional and personal. The work involves an 'array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and intergenerationally' (Lindio-McGovern, 2013, p. 28). Contrary to its societal and generational impact, the categorisation of reproductive labour as unskilled labour negates its societal value, and only attributing it to direct economic input continues to reinforce the subordinate position of domestic workers – who are mainly women – in all scale of locations, from the individual in the private home to the collective sector in the global labour market. It also enforces the subordinate position of the labour-sending nations (Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2010; Parreñas, 2008a; Yeates, 2012). In the case of Hong Kong, the contemporary practice of domestic servitude is a combination of its Chinese and

colonial histories that now uses cheap, readily available migrant labour, done by foreign women from less-developed countries, which indeed perpetuates this subordinate position narrative. The fact is that domestic work, whether paid or unpaid, has been primarily shouldered by women. When paid, it is lowly valued by society, wage compensation schemes and policymakers. Further, the fact that domestic work is not included in the measure of a country's gross domestic product or outputs means domestic and care work are statistically invisible in policymaking and in development agendas, despite their indisputable significance in the sustainability of human life. This echoes Marilyn Waring's work, and the sentiment that 'if women counted',

> If unpaid productive and reproductive labour remain invisible, then women remain invisible. There seems no doubt if housewives were included in the labour force and the value of their unpaid work was added to the total costs of services, the repercussions would be felt in social policy. (Waring, 1988, p. 12)

Paying for housework

In 1975, Silvia Federici started the Wages for Housework campaign. The project was deemed radical at the time, as it proposed pay for work done by women in the home. By linking wages and housework, Federici created a political framework where receiving a wage for the work that was done meant that a worker could quit or get fired, or find a new job, which were all impossible at the time for the unwaged housewife, whose work was not separated from her life and identity. With the focus on bringing women's work in the home into a public discourse of economic value, Federici's concept linked what occurred privately at home to external societal structures. 'If women don't get paid right in the home, they will not get paid right outside of the home' (Federici, 1975, p. 3). This sentiment is still relevant in the 2020s as the gender pay gap persists globally whether women are paid for housework or not, due to gender-based discrimination in the labour market. According to the International Labour Organisation, women on average continue to be paid 20% less than men across the world:

> We have been talking about gender equality for a very long time. Equal pay for equal value is in our constitution from 100 years ago … And yet we still have these problems like gender pay gaps and lower work participation. It is clear to me that just adopting laws, just doing the obvious good things – important as they are – is not enough. (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 5)

Some key factors that cause the gender pay gap are under-representation in leadership, working hours, time out of the workforce and feminised jobs where women are the majority of workers (Ibid.). I would like to bring attention to two of these factors specifically applicable to domestic work – working hours and feminised jobs. These two factors are interlinked as women work on a part-time

basis more than men, due to women taking on more of the unpaid family responsibilities and the lack of sufficient childcare (International Labour Organization, 2023). Taking on more unpaid housework stems from gender stereotyping, which comes from the notion that women should assume household chores. This impacts paid work outside of the home, where certain industries become feminised and deemed to be extensions of women's gender roles in the home, particularly reproductive or care work industries such as nursing, childcare, pastoral care and cleaning, which are dominated by women as they are assumed to be better at these forms of work and are frequently employed in these jobs more than men, therefore the work becomes normalised as 'women's work' (England, Budig & Folbre, 2002). As labour sectors, they also happen to be paid less than others. The assumption and the practice of unpaid housework create the context in which migrant domestic workers operate – cheap labour. Consequently, the related tasks fall on the shoulders of all women involved, both paid and unpaid – the female employers, the women migrant workers and the female members of their families.

The Global Care Chain, as described in the preface of this book, demonstrates the negative, cyclic effect where women in many households participate in the 'chain' of transnational domestic labour in a perpetual cycle, paid and unpaid (Hochschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2001; Yeates, 2012). Hiring a domestic worker does not absolve the female employer from being responsible for managing the household, as it is likely perceived as 'her duty'. Within this 'chain' of duty and command, whether the role is to command, manage or physically do domestic chores, the roles are almost always held by women, no matter their socio-economic status. This is not to disregard the fact that men also participate in domestic work and in all positions too, but women have been doing so overwhelmingly across millennia. As such, this so-called 'chain' continues, and women in households across labour-sending and labour-receiving nations participate in some way in a continuous 'chain' of domestic servitude out of social and cultural expectations. All the workers I have interviewed have said that their female employers delegate, manage and communicate with them overwhelmingly more than their male employers. Some have even said that the male employer is the one who pays them, while the female employer works *with* them. TP, a worker from Indonesia, shared her experiences of the division of household management in her employers' home:

> Sir [male employer] would come home and just expect everything to be done. No asking. Ma'am [female employer] comes home usually one hour before him and will check on everything I've done, making sure dinner is ready, child is clean, his homework is finished, house is clean, laundry is done, everything. He comes home, they talk, and he doesn't really talk to me. If something doesn't taste good, he tells her and she tells me to change the recipe. Everything goes through her. She has a full-time job too. She is a teacher, so she leaves home early but will

> message me a whole list of things to do after she leaves. (Personal communication, 10 October 2021)

This is not unusual practice among many interviewees' households, where the male employers rarely interact with the workers, unless there is an emergency. WY, a friend of TP, mentioned numerous incidents when there were miscommunications between the employers and they would quarrel over what instructions were given to her, and it would often end with an argument in their bedroom. Afterwards, her female employer would tell her what mistakes she made and to correct them for next time. She has asked her female employer in the past why the male employer will not just make direct requests to her while she is performing the tasks, to which the reply was that he is too busy with work and does not have time to speak about it (Ibid.). TP said the first time her male employer made a direct request with her was when her female employer had contracted COVID-19 and was quarantined away from home:

> I knew what I had to do, iron his work clothes, make his breakfast, around what time he comes home and make dinner, all that. She [female employer] would still call me about everything to do even when she was in quarantine and sick! But he would tell me directly that I don't need to make dinner sometimes, or make sure I tell him that the child has been picked up from school. I have worked for them for two years! This is the first time he messaged me directly. (Personal communication, 10 October 2021, exclamation in original)

Although the physical tasks of domestic work are outsourced to the migrant domestic worker, many women, whether they like to or not, and whether they have full-time jobs or not, still continue to take on the overall management of the household, from delegation of daily operations to nuanced understanding of individual family members' needs. In other words, having a migrant domestic worker allows for the woman in the family to seek full-time employment, but it does not negate her from doing emotional and mental labour for her family.

Emotional labour and mental labour are similar in that they are a dimension of domestic labour that is seemingly invisible. Arlie Russell Hochschild describes emotional labour as

> Labour that requires one to induce or suppress feeling to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others and calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honour as deep and integral to our individuality. (1985, p. 7)

In the case of domestic labour, both the migrant domestic worker and the female employer are doing the emotional labour of creating a comfortable and safe environment for those in the household. Hochschild points out the difference between physical and emotional labour is the cost of doing the work: the worker can become alienated from an aspect of self that is used to do that work.

Further, she uses the term to mean the management of feelings to create an outwardly observable facial and bodily display, which can be seen as labour that can be sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value (Ibid.). I assert that in the case of the migrant domestic worker, the self-discipline of being quiet and obedient is the baseline of the emotional labour they do. Their outward display of obedience and agreement is one of the labours they are being paid for. Beyond that, they dance between many emotional presentations daily; for example, being joyful to children, concerned for the elderly and most often, neutral passivity. Frequently, WY's employers argue behind their bedroom door over whether the right instructions or requests have been made to her, while she continues to do her work. Once they stop arguing but the atmosphere remains hostile in the house, she distracts herself by focusing on playing with the child and seeing if he has concerns, while she herself fears potential repercussions from her employers. She explains,

> When they fight, I must pretend nothing is going on. I try to listen to what they are saying, but they're speaking too fast I can't understand, so I go to the kitchen, I do work, I pretend it's all fine. I go check on child, put headphones on him to watch iPad. They come out, I don't say anything. I'm nervous of course, because I don't know if they are angry with me and tell me to go. Later, ma'am come to tell me I need to listen to her more carefully next time or check something again. She sometimes talks to me when she's angry, but I just say yes, ok ok, always ok. (Personal communication, 10 October 2021)

The quiet obedience that WY performs is emotional labour. She tries to keep calm for the child, and simultaneously so as not to cause any disturbances to the employers. This comes at the cost of her setting aside her feelings of discomfort and fears, as well as her needs for a calm and safe space to work and live in. This situation is not unique to WY, and most workers I have spoken with have shared stories about their employers arguing, where they take on a variety of outward expressions to remain calm and neutral. There are also incidents where employers bring the worker into the argument, asking them to recount what they saw or heard and even choose who is right or wrong. These situations require labour that is not prescribed in the work contract, as it is something that is not professionally acceptable and cannot be accounted for, therefore, it remains invisible and unacknowledged. However, it inevitably happens, especially when there is no spatial separation between the workplace and home, and both the workers and employers have little time to pause their roles.

Mental labour or cognitive labour, a more recent phenomenon (also known colloquially as 'the mental load'), describes not only the emotional labour but also the work that involves anticipating needs, identifying variables, making decisions and preparation that occurs in the background before something can be outwardly executed (Ruppanner, 2020). Such work is tiring but often invisible to the

person doing it as well as those around them. Cognitive labour is also a gendered phenomenon, as studies have shown that women tend to do more cognitive labour overall and more of the anticipation of needs and monitoring progress (Coltrane, 2000; Bass, 2015; Achen & Stafford, 2005; Daminger, 2019). TP's employers often have family members visit for gatherings and she assists her female employer on these matters. She recalls her employer giving her a list of dishes to make and a time by when she should make them. Her employer remembers what each family member or friend likes or dislikes, and asks TP to satisfy those requests. TP witnesses her employer working late into the night after everyone is asleep, on top of her full-time work, and in addition to planning for family gatherings. TP recalls,

> I see she works very hard to make everyone happy. She's a nice person you know. I want to help her too, so sometimes I also listen to her plans and help her think of what to do and be prepared for other people. Birthday cake, presents, balloons, everything she thinks of. I do what I can so the gatherings go well and everyone is happy. When people come over, it's very tiring for me! So much cooking, cleaning, preparing and everything, but not just on the day you know. (Personal communication, 10 October 2021, exclamation in original)

It is clear that the female employer provides emotional and mental labour for her family, while the migrant worker also takes on emotional and mental labour for the same household, in addition to her own family back in her home country, albeit from a physical distance. Taking on emotional labour is an invisible task within domestic labour that is difficult to negotiate and navigate, and emotionally exhausting for the workers (Constable, 2007, pp. 110–115). It blurs the professional boundaries, as the migrant worker may progressively invest emotionally in her employer's family for two reasons: First, she genuinely feels love and care towards members of the employer's family, especially the children, and secondly, because she is physically away from her own children and family, for months and years at a time, it is understandable that her affection may even be transferred to the children of her employer (Constable, 2007; Parreñas, 2001). The impacts of this are often invisible and may not ever surface. I met CM, a Filipino worker who has been working abroad as a migrant domestic worker for thirty-one years. She has one daughter, Bee, who was also 31 years old at the time I met her on Zoom in 2021. Bee lives in the Philippines and has an infant daughter. Bee described what it was like for her to grow up without her mum alongside her:

> When I was younger I didn't know why she left. I felt alone. I didn't have my mum with me for all my life but I saw my friends with their mums. I used to be upset why she would be a mother for someone else but not for me. I thought she didn't want to be my mother and that her employer's child is more important than me. I didn't know why she was never here with me. I know now. Without her, I may have needed to go over[seas] and work too, then I would have to be separated from my child too. I'm so thankful now. (Personal communication, 1 October 2021)

Bee's acknowledgement moved CM to tears. Her silent yet persistent nodding of her head between tears while Bee was speaking demonstrated how powerful yet uncommon this kind of acknowledgement was.

Gendered analyses of migrant domestic labour have expanded our understanding of the position and contribution of migrant women's labour in capitalist economies. The expanded discourse on care and migration has advanced a critical understanding of the transnational relationships and intersectional inequalities that underpin the paid and unpaid labour of migrants (Shutes, 2021, p. 108). The inequalities of care are not just situated within the implications of being paid or unpaid, but also incur other direct and indirect costs to the individual workers themselves, the impact on their families, their communities, the state and the local and global market. More importantly, Shutes posits a crucial link between migrant workers and wider processes of labour market transformations in ways that connect migration research to what Stephen Castles calls a step-change in social transformation (Ibid., p. 116). This points to how labour migration, and particularly gendered migration, responds to, shapes and/or challenges labour market structures and organisations in labour-sending and labour-receiving nations. Castles argues there is a need to embed migration research in a more general understanding of contemporary society beyond focusing on migration processes and individual migrants. He believes that migration is intertwined with wider social processes:

> Social transformation can be defined as a fundamental shift in the way society is organised that goes beyond the continual processes of incremental social change that are always at work. This implies a 'step-change' in which all existing social patterns are questioned and many are reconfigured. (Castles, 2010, p. 1576)

Feminisation of migrant domestic labour

As mentioned in Chapter 1, migrant domestic labourers seek work in host nations in the Global South such as Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Taiwan. In the Global North, destination countries include the United Kingdom, France, Greece, Italy and Canada. The economy of post-industrial nations demands that low-wage migrant workers expand their pool of cheap labour and in particular, it demands that female workers perform low-wage service work in global cities. Migrant workers from the Philippines are synonymous with globalisation and capitalism. With nearly 11.5 million migrant domestic workers globally, of which one in four is a Filipina woman (International Labour Organization, 2015), 'Filipino women are the domestic workers par excellence of globalisation' (Parreñas, 2008a, p. 3). In a visit to the United States in 2003, then president of the Philippines Gloria Macapagal Arroyo referred to herself as the 'CEO of a global Philippine enterprise of millions of Filipinos who work abroad' (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 5). Robyn Magalit Rodriguez calls the Philippine

government a labour brokerage state that actively prepares, mobilises and regulates its citizens for labour migration (Ibid.). The redefinition of nationalism normalises labour migration within the Philippines. Those who leave the country feel the responsibility of supporting the family with their remitted wages and are called national heroes (Dannecker & Piper, 2021; Rodriguez, 2010; Guevarra, 2010). Rhacel Salazar Parreñas states,

> The contemporary outmigration of Filipinos and their entrance into domestic work is a product of globalisation; it is patterned under the role of the Philippines as an export-based economy in globalisation; and it is embedded in the specific historical phase of global restructuring. (2001, p. 11)

Consequently and by default, the female migrant domestic workers join the informal labour sector of global cities, where Filipino-American sociologists such as Rhacel Salazar Parreñas and Ligaya Lindio-McGovern refer to them soberingly as the 'global servants of late capitalism' (Lindio-McGovern & Walliman, 2009) and 'servants of globalisation' (Parreñas, 2001). For most of the past five decades, Filipinas have been the largest group of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. While Indonesian workers have only begun coming to Hong Kong en masse in the last two decades, their numbers have risen within less than two decades from almost zero to making up nearly 50% of the total number of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. Indonesia also has a migration labour regime, where the country's brokerage of short-term contract labour to wealthier parts of Asia and the Middle East is considered in the history of labour mobilisation and colonial indentured labour (Killias, 2018, p. 21).[1] Indonesians also cannot escape the outmigration in the global unskilled labour sector, nor escape a characterisation for being 'more docile workers than the self-assured Filipinas' (Sim, 2009, p. 59).

'Migration has a woman's face'

'Women have always migrated, but female migration has a "herstory" of receiving little attention' (Boyd, 2021, p. 19). Female migrants constitute nearly half of the world's migration population and have done for many decades. Historically, migration has been for the purposes of war and colonisation, and a popular image pervaded throughout the early twentieth century of working-class men as principal actors and women and children as the 'extras' that came with men, to reproduce the next generation and take on the responsibilities of the domestic spheres, supporting men, who were the breadwinners (Ibid., p. 20; Morokvasic, 1984). This began to change in the second half of the twentieth century as women began to enter the labour force, and female labour migration gradually spread. Until the 1970s, migration scholarship was characterised by 'almost complete absence of studies on female migration' (Oso & Ribas-Mateos, 2013, pp. 11–12). The concept of feminisation of migration began appearing in migration scholarship in the late 1970s, which did not provide a critical gender

analysis, but instead, women's experiences were added to the broader histories of men's migration. In the 1980s, as there were notable differences between men and women in the migration process and settlement, scholars started to examine women in more active roles through their labour patterns (Morokvasic, 1984). In the 1990s, the United Nations Statistical Office began to improve the data collection of many nations after postcolonial independence. This further drew the attention towards collecting data on female migrants, and since then, the term 'feminisation of migration' has become a standard term in the migration field, with the United Nations' first report in 1995 on the feminisation of migration, following which it has made subsequent reports every 5–7 years on gender-specific migration data (Zlotnik, 1995; 2003).

The feminisation of labour generally refers to the increasing majority of women participating in a particular workforce. This applies to migrant domestic labour where women constitute 73.4% (approximately 8.5 million) of all migrant domestic labourers in the world (International Labour Organization, 2015). This is problematic as most labourers who participate in the informal, unskilled labour sector of global cities are women, which demonstrates the globally entrenched inequality between men and women, socially, politically and economically. Men are more likely to have employment opportunities in their home country before seeking jobs overseas, as they have higher education and/or more employable skills beyond unskilled labour than women. 'Migration has a woman's face' reads an educational poster released by the United Nations (Parreñas, 2008a, p. 1). The poster states that nearly 70% of migrants from the Philippines and Indonesia, and half of the labour migration worldwide, are women. This statistic has not dropped in the last decade but has remained accurate. As of 2021, approximately 60% of Overseas Filipino Workers are women and more than half participate in unskilled labour (United Nations Women, 2022). These statistics indicate that an overwhelming number of women leave the Philippines to earn income by working as domestic workers. Similarly, 70% of all Indonesian migrant workers are women, and the majority are also working as domestic workers (International Labour Organization, 2022). These statistics highlight the feminisation of both these nations' export labour and more specifically the feminisation of migrant domestic labour.

Nicola Yeates argues that the feminisation of migration has been largely due to women in developing countries holding less land and their inability to secure long-term employment in the agricultural sector (2009b). In fact, among most of the workers I met in Hong Kong, when they spoke of their motivation to migrate in the first place, the top three reasons were children's education, owning a family home and providing support for elderly parents. Land, whether to live on or to generate income, is often tied to such financial prospects. As a result, many women from developing countries respond to the global demand for care workers in temporary yet sustained positions varying between nurses and

domestic workers (Ibid.). From this emerged a global reception of domestic work: women from Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean migrate for work in households in the United States and Canada; Indonesian and Filipino women move to developed nations in Asia and the Middle East; Sri Lankan women go to Greece and the Middle East, and Polish women migrate to Germany and Italy (Mora & Piper, 2021). Various host nations, including Canada, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Japan, Singapore, Greece and Taiwan, have sanctioned the opening of their borders to foreign care workers and have designed their own migration policies for such entries similar to the Foreign Domestic Helper Visa in Hong Kong. However, Hong Kong has one of the strictest combinations of rules: the live-in requirement, the two-week rule and inegibility to apply for permanent residency regardless of years of tenure.

The brain-drain

The Philippines and Indonesia are in a secondary position as labour-sending nations, where there is a condition of the 'brain-drain', which refers to the significant number of migrant domestic workers who have higher education or skilled qualifications leaving the country to be domestic workers overseas due to the lack of employment opportunities and government support schemes (Chacko, 2007; Dodson, 2021; Lindio-McGovern, 2013; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Dumitru, 2014). For example, while the Philippines invests in its nursing and education sector, it is the host countries to which the workers migrate to serve as domestic workers that benefit, but not to the extent of the skilled potential of the migrants. The less educated remain within the country while the educated women become an easily affordable reproductive labour force that raises children and cleans houses in host countries. With regard to this phenomenon, Lindio-McGovern emphasises that 'Another outcome that is detrimental to the labour-sending country is the brain drain, or "brain waste"' (2013, p. 39).[2] A significant number of migrant domestic workers have college educations and skilled diplomas, such as in nursing and in education, but their skills are not used adequately as domestic workers. Lindio-McGovern (2013) continues to describe the effects of the 'brain drain' in relation to the disproportion and imbalance that have direct effects on a national level, where hospitals and schools in the Philippines experience a shortage of qualified nurses and teachers. Contradictory to the intention of exporting labour, the continuous outpour of skilled migrant workers spurs the development of labour-sending countries rather than contributing to pay off its international debt and propelling the economy forward (Lindio-McGovern, 2013, pp. 39–41; Rosca, 1995, pp. 522–27).

Labour-receiving countries, such as Hong Kong, benefit from having over-qualified domestic workers 'doing the dirty work', which maximises opportunities for their citizens to participate in the formal labour sector (Anderson, 2010). As the migrant women workers participate in a semipermanent state of

migrant domestic labour, they gain financially at the expense of their own transnational families and employment mobility. Their employment immobility is enforced by the migration policies that hold them within the sector of domestic work in the host countries and if they return home, they struggle to have access to jobs that pay the same amount without requiring other qualifications and previous experience in a different field. Migrant domestic workers are commoditised and cheaply compensated for their care in supporting families and nations, at the expense of their career paths, families and belonging.

Global dislocations and parallel lives

MA, a 39-year-old Filipino worker introduced in Chapter 2, was earning HK$5,000 per month, which was slightly above the migrant domestic workers' Minimum Allowable Wage of HK$4,870 as of 2023. Her main motivation to work in Hong Kong is to support her family – specifically, her teenage daughter, husband and sister, who is a single mother with two children. Throughout our conversations MA acknowledged that she never predicted this career and migration path. She was working in a garment factory before she moved to Hong Kong. Growing up amongst a family of garment workers, MA aspired to be a fashion designer and worked as a seamstress after completing a diploma in business management and high school studies. She wanted to move back to the Philippines in 2020, but the pandemic delayed her plans. She has been in Hong Kong for fourteen years at the time of this writing. I asked her what she wants to do when she moves back to the Philippines; she said:

> My dream would be to make clothes for women. I still have that dream, but I know I am not young and it is difficult. I am saving for a shop one day. I also want my sister's children to go to university, so I help too. This job [in Hong Kong] keeps me busy and I can help them. I don't know when I will go [move] back home. It's too unpredictable. (Personal communication, 8 June 2022)

Through MA I met WM, who has been working in Hong Kong since 2008. She had completed her bachelor's degree in nursing in the Philippines in 2005 and was contracted part-time in a local hospital near her home. Not long after, WM fell pregnant and due to some health complications, she could not work for the duration of her pregnancy. Three months after the birth of her child she tried to reapply for her position, but was refused. She spent the next year searching for jobs in other hospitals, clinics and nursing homes, but the best that she was offered was a part-time position that offered a much lower wage than her previous job. When her child was two years old, WM and her family decided that seeking a job abroad could secure a more permanent income. She thought she was going back home to the Philippines after six to eight years of working in Hong Kong. When I met her in 2022, she had been in Hong Kong for some

fourteen years. She wanted to move back to the Philippines and find a job at a hospital or medical clinic, but she was warned by her parents that she would not be able to earn the same amount of money to support her family, so in the end she did not take the risk. She felt she had been away from her family for too long and she missed being there for her child. She said,

> I knew my family needed me there at home, but they also needed me here to make the money to support. I can't go home and just open my mouth [gesturing being useless and sitting on her hands]. So I stay. My daughter is 16 years old now! I missed so much of her childhood because I was here. My husband is not happy I'm still here, but at least we have more money. We want to have money for her [their child] to go to university maybe overseas, find a good job and not have to work like me. I am now 42 years old, too old to get a new job. Maybe I will stay here until I have enough to retire. (Personal communication, 8 June 2022, exclamation in original)

Both MA and WM did not predict their long-term stay in Hong Kong. They both had skilled qualifications and potential to seek employment for a career back home that could have been richly developed. However, their circumstances stagnated their career path. Many workers I have known since 2013 have been in Hong Kong for varying lengths of time over 6–8 years and many end up staying even when they want to leave. What they have in common are their gender, motivations, future outlooks and migratory experiences. There is a constant sense of perpetual uncertainty and precarity, which was exacerbated more so by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Migrants experience dislocations that all domestic workers face in global labour migration: firstly, they share the experience of being in subordinate positions in the host countries as unskilled labourers who are cheaply available; secondly, as temporary residents in the host nation, they have scarce social resources and limited legal protections; and thirdly, their home countries have little capacity to ensure the protection of their citizens abroad (Parreñas, 2001; Lindio-McGovern, 2013; Sim, 2009; Parella and Speroni, 2021). This means the incorporation of migrant workers into the host society relies strongly on the reciprocity of the host country. In the case of Hong Kong, migrant domestic workers labour under limited rights and are exposed to various degrees of discipline and exploitation in the employers' homes, which have resulted in their socio-spatial depletion and cultural deprivation. Underpaid and overworked, the workers remain marginalised as a disenfranchised sector in Hong Kong society. The Philippines and Indonesia's forfeit of power to demand adequate protective measures in exchange for the perceived acceptance of their migrants abroad frames the migratory experience of their citizens and exposes them to inequalities and exploitation. Through the analysis of migratory processes, the social settings for the subjection of individuals and the structural formation of migrant domestic labour within globalisation, some key dislocations that migrant workers

may experience overall in global migration are partial citizenship, contradictory class mobility, the pain of family separation and non-belonging, and transnational household and parenting (Parreñas, 2001; Oishi, 2005; Constable, 2005; 2014; 2018; Rother, 2017). In the context of cultural identity and diaspora, Stuart Hall attributes dislocations, or 'narratives of displacement', as the conjunctures or specific positioning of subjects in social processes (Hall, 1997). The next section of the chapter will look at these dislocations in closer detail.

Partial residency

Partial residency is especially harmful to the migratory experience for migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. As evident in the case of Evangeline B. Vallejos in 2013 (discussed in Chapter 1), workers under the migrant domestic workers Visa are excluded from the eventual permanent residency that is eligible to other foreign nationals living in Hong Kong. This has direct impact on the workers, as they continue to work on a contractual basis and the denial of permanent residency contradicts the longevity of their role and their significant contribution to society. From the interviewees and secondary resources, it can be assumed that the nature of domestic labour migration is not a temporary situation (at least 6–8 years) but a continuous path that allows for consistent employment, financial support to the families back home and possibilities for upward migration.

A different scenario can be seen in the case of domestic workers in Los Angeles. There, migrant workers from the Philippines who have been there since the 1920s eventually qualify for permanent residency (Ong & Azores, 1994). This presents an opportunity for the workers to participate more fully in the formal economy. Rome is another popular host city of Filipino migrant workers, but as a labour-receiving state, Italy is more restrictive than the United States. With its three-tiered 'flows decree' system that caps the number of migrants each year, residence contracts are solely guaranteed by the employers, and migrants whose labour contracts have finished or terminated are expelled (Al-Azar, 2006). Migrant workers will generally not be granted permanent residency and are confined to domestic work. However, they are granted access to health services and rights to family reunification (Ibid.). In comparison, Hong Kong's exclusive Foreign Domestic Helper Visa is more restrictive than the domestic labour migration policies of Italy and the United States, as it does not allow for eventual permanent residency, nor offer social benefits and rights to family reunification in the city-state. Hong Kong's legislation permanently reinforces the workers' disenfranchised position within society. Furthermore, in a global context, migrant workers who serve as domestic workers in Hong Kong have limited prospects compared to other nations that grant eventual permanent residency or alternate ways for upward mobility. The 2013 court ruling, which denied the eligibility for migrant domestic workers to apply for permanent residency, was not simply rejecting one worker's possible permanent residency; rather it was symbolic of

the refusal of acceptance, legitimisation and integration of all migrant domestic workers into the socio-political and cultural fabric of Hong Kong. Consequently, this leads to the socio-spatial inequality the workers experience as they are permanently disciplined, temporary residents living in other people's households, with little autonomy or spaces to construct a home of their own away from home. It also places them within a state of permanent impermanence, something Giorgio Agamben (2005) refers to as a 'state of exception', where they perpetually dwell in a 'zone of indifference' where the boundaries of legitimacy and illegitimacy are not mutually exclusive, but rather contaminate and blur with each other. This continuous in-between state exposes the migrant workers to neither the benefits and protection of permanent residency nor the socio-economic mobility of other foreigners.

Contradictory class mobility

In some communities in the labour-sending countries, workers who migrate overseas to work can be perceived positively as those who have 'made it'. This notion comes from the idea that the wages obtained overseas are more than what are offered in the home country, as well as an assumption that being overseas, especially in developed cities like Hong Kong, will have benefits in opening different opportunities and possible life paths. Hong Kong, as a financial capital and a popular international destination, also has a reputation for glamour and prestige. On Sundays, workers can be seen posing and taking photos standing outside high-end fashion stores. Many workers do end up working in Hong Kong from their twenties until they retire, because of the idea that this is 'as good as it could be for a worker'.[3] KL, an Indonesian worker who was introduced in Chapter 2, has been working in Hong Kong since 2008. She came from a rural town in Central Java, near Dalangan, where she grew up and left school when she was 18 years old to work in Malaysia as a domestic worker. She came from a relatively poor family and one of her two older brothers also left home to work in Malaysia, and eventually moved to Dubai as a construction worker. She came to work in Hong Kong when she was 24 years old. KL perceives working in Hong Kong as a vast improvement from being in Malaysia, in terms of wages, her experience of her employers and the overall lifestyle (KL, personal communication, 2 August 2020). Over her first twelve years working in Hong Kong, she was able to use her wages to support her family in securing a larger plot of land for their home and livelihood. She initially wanted to leave home because she did not want to oblige to her parents' proposal for an arranged marriage, and at the time of our conversation, she was 36 years old and not married. She shared that she does not want to get married and be responsible for children and have more family members to support. Despite her being unmarried, her father asks for her opinion on business or money matters more so than he asks her brothers. She believes this has something to do with the fact that in her father's eyes, she

is successful because she is financially independent and therefore appears to be more capable and reliable.[4] She is also welcomed by her community at home and is known as an exemplary figure who is capable of consistently supporting her family. Contrastingly, in Hong Kong over the past decade, KL is a migrant domestic worker who has not had her own bedroom in the entire time she has been working. She earns a wage that is above the legal minimum wage, but she is still socially, spatially and economically marginalised. KL has a contradictory experience of her class in Indonesia and Hong Kong, which is a common experience for many workers, whether they are originally from a poorer or less educated background. KL experiences praise from her family and upward mobility to an extent in her hometown, yet her career trajectory is circular and cyclic, with not much room for transformation. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas substantiates the concept of the contradictory class mobility of migrant domestic workers; their dislocation leads to their 'simultaneous experience of upward and downward mobility in migration' (2001, p. 150). Understanding class as a process is appropriate with the concept of transnational spaces that the migrant workers dwell in and between, as it acknowledges that people can hold multiple and contradictory class interests in different spaces of their lives (Kelly, 2007, p. 7). It reinforces that class is non-static and not necessarily economic in nature, since class-processes can be overdetermined by other social processes (Gibson-Graham, Resnick & Wolff, 2000, p. 21).

The Filipino women who are qualified beyond unskilled labour, yet migrate abroad to participate in domestic work, also result in the dislocation of contradictory class mobility. Participating in domestic work abroad involves a simultaneous increase and decrease in their labour market status. Their status increases as they earn more than they would in the Philippines, as in the example of many workers interviewed and mentioned in the book thus far, who earn nearly three times what they were earning back home. However, their status decreases, as they are earning more at the expense of gaining new experiences and other skills that would allow them to find work other than domestic work. In Parreñas's framework of contradictory class mobility, it stagnates the workers' labour market potential and illustrates their immobility within the work that they do, even though their work relies on their physical mobility (Parreñas, 2001, pp. 151–196). My interviewees mostly described the nature of their work as boring and repetitive, and they usually dislike the work or feel indifferent towards the role.

BW, a 45-year-old Filipino worker, shared her sentiment towards her job as a domestic worker in Hong Kong for the last fifteen years (Personal communication, 8 February 2021):

> I don't love or hate what I do. Every day I just do the same thing. It is not easy, it is not hard. The hardest thing is feeling that I am not doing much, not better or worse. I am just doing. I know my children are doing well from my support for

> college, I know my job is important for them. But for me, I'm not doing much in my job. I want to do something that is what I want to do for a job one day.

Some interviewees used the Tagalog term, *nakakabobo*, to describe their work as a process that they feel gradually makes them unintelligent. Many labour migration researchers have noted that migrant domestic workers are hardly ever the least educated nor poorest of the poor (Constable, 2007; Parreñas, 2001; 2008a; Rodriguez, 2002; Yeates, 2009b). For many of their families, to have the ability to migrate for work abroad is seen as an achievement, therefore they can be perceived as more respectable members of their community. Their status at home contrasts against the status they have in the host countries, and the tasks in their work and career path are not of focus, the economic mobility is. Although performing domestic work abroad can be seen as a decline in social status, simultaneously, the financial status of them and their family has increased. In Gibson et al.'s analysis of the economic activities of Filipina migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, they employ a theory of class that is 'a process of producing, appropriating and distributing surplus labour (not a structural location in society) as a way of teasing out the fine threads of a politics of class becoming in the actions of women contract migrants' (Gibson-Graham, Resnick & Wolff, 2000, p. 366). Further, Stefan Rother asserts that labour migration adds to the emergence on transnational political spaces where class is constantly renegotiated, thus, class can be constructed through gender, ethnicity, positionalities in transnational space or other social processes (Rother, 2017, p. 961).

Non-belonging and transnational households

Non-belonging and alienation are part of the migratory experiences of many migrant domestic workers (Parreñas, 2001, pp. 190–202). Difference in ethnicity and socio-economic status creates a gap between the citizens of host countries and the migrant domestic workers. The subordinate position of the labour-sending country to the host nation also reinforces the class difference between the people within the two counterparts and the secondary position of individual domestic workers to their employers. PF, a Filipino migrant worker who has worked in Hong Kong since 2010, describes her feelings of non-belonging as fuelled by cultural and linguistic barriers as well as one of power and discipline (Personal communication, 8 February 2015):

> When I first arrived, I was given a list of rules in English, about what I cannot do in the house. I followed all of them even after I relaxed after one year. I speak English with them but they speak [to each other in] Cantonese, I understand very little. One of the rules was that I am not allowed to eat in the dining room with them. I am ok with that. But it is very lonely, and I feel like a stranger not part of their home. Now it is sometimes different. Ma'am sometimes has afternoon tea with me and we have a nice time. Even after five years I still feel like a stranger

> here. Every Sunday when I can see my friends we speak our language. I know I do not belong in Hong Kong. I am different. At home [her employer's home] I do not belong.

I spoke to PF again in 2021. She was still working in Hong Kong with the same employer. She shared how the pandemic has created an even bigger divide between her employers and herself, because she had to get vaccinated while her employers refused to. She was biding her time to find a new employer after her contract ends. She feels a close connection to her employers' child, who she helped raise over the preceding twelve years. She has a child of her own who is a few years older and often feels that both are her children, whom she has equal affection for (Personal communication, 17 March 2021).

The globalisation of capital is heightened by its penetration into the intimacies of family life (Lindio-McGovern, 2013; Parreñas, 2001; 2008a). Separation from their families for sustained periods of time produces the dislocated condition of the transnational household. In the case of many workers, despite the pain of separation from their families and their husbands, other family members' and/or children's pleas for their return, they continue to make the necessary sacrifice of spending time with their family to provide monetary support for them. For CM, as introduced earlier in this chapter, she made the necessary choice to be away from her daughter, Bee, for thirty-one years – the entirety of Bee's life – to continue to provide for her. Now Bee has grown to be successful and capable, with a formal education, a career and sustaining a family of her own without having to seek work overseas. CM has never spent more than a month with her daughter in their hometown and has many memories of regrets and upset about mothering from afar and being apart from her family. Her husband was supportive for the first few years but after CM's continuation of her third contract and the uncertainty of her return, he chose to leave the family and CM's mother and sister helped raise Bee. Parreñas (2001) argues that the formation of the transnational household cannot stem solely from economic restructuring in globalisation, but also relies on the conscious and unconscious reworking of priorities and values in the families of the migrant domestic workers. Parreñas also claims that 'capitalism's determination of personal relationships in the migrant communities underscores their (the migrants) similar experiences' (Parreñas, 2001, p. 245).

Transnational families where parents and children live in different countries are not a new or isolated phenomenon solely experienced by migrant workers and their families. However, the feminisation of migration, particularly migrant domestic work, has resulted in more mothers migrating independently and leaving their children in the care of someone else – husbands or other female family members. Studies have found that there are profound negative effects on the children, the mother and the family at large (Constable 2018; 2021; Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2021; Parreñas, 2005b; 2008b; Poeze, 2018). Although women may

be working overseas and being breadwinners for their families, there are still social and cultural expectations of women to be the primary care provider – physically and emotionally. More than half of the migrant domestic workers I have met have children of their own back home, with the longest time any have spent away from their child being CM's circumstance with her child Bee, for thirty-one years. The majority have left their children after the age of 6, and all of them are being cared for by their husbands, mothers, sisters, aunts and sometimes hired helpers. In the case of CM, her daughter Bee expressed her resentment towards her mother when she was younger but came to understand that what CM did was necessary for her own life trajectory and development. On the Zoom call we had, she said,

> I wish she didn't have to go, and I didn't have to have so many Christmas and birthdays without her. I don't want to do that to my child. I don't want to read stories to her through a screen. My mum did that to me, through the phone and it was expensive too! [she laughs]. I know she did what she had to do and now we [gestures towards her baby daughter] have a good life here. (Personal communication, 1 October 2021, exclamation in original)

From our conversation, I could sense resentment is no longer there; instead there is a sense of gratitude and peace. This is not always the case. JJK is an Indonesian worker whom I met in 2021. She has a son who was 7 years old at the time and her husband in Indonesia refuses to let her see him after two years of disagreement about her work in Hong Kong. When JJK pleaded to stay in the city-state for one more contract after being there for four years, her husband gave her an ultimatum of choosing to come home or not to see her son (personal communication, 1 October 2021). She did not choose to come home at the time. Later she found out that he was suspecting her of being unfaithful to him by socialising with other men, which she denied. They are Muslim and her husband believed that her refusal to return home is denying him sexual pleasure, which goes against the roles and rules of spouses under Islamic law. Her husband was also blaming her for being an absent mother, when in fact, he relocated their son into his mother's home without JJK's knowing and was an absent father most of the time. Men becoming absent husbands and fathers are one of the impacts of transnational households and transnational parenting (Parreñas, 2008b; Poeze, 2018). Infidelities by or estrangement from their husbands are often worries that migrant domestic workers have, especially when there is no firm date set in place for them to go back home for good (Elmhirst, 2007). The temporality of the two-year contract gives no promise of renewal, yet waiting for two years at a time with family reunion at stake is a difficult circumstance that many transnational families of the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong live with. JJK pleaded with her husband and engaged their family members to discuss the matter of her son and allow her to have contact with him, even if her husband chooses to

remarry. JJK requested help from an Imam in Hong Kong who helped her plead her case to her husband. As of mid-2022, JJK is estranged from her husband, but she video calls her son every day and he resides with her mother and their family.

Impacts on the family members of migrant domestic workers may be hidden or visible, temporary or long-term. In many cases, children grow up without their mothers' physical presence, affection and care for sustained periods of their childhood, while having the privileges of sustained education and tuition that could propel them out of the socio-economic status of the last generation. Mothers might become anxious and maintain constant contact, or become distant and passive. Children become accustomed to not having both parents, which may cause them to be withdrawn or attached to other family members or relationships. In marriages, sustained periods of non-physical connection and intimacy are compromised, for the possibility of the family's upward mobility, at least in their home city or country, and for their next generation to flourish and have access to choices they did not have.

Conclusion

What has been illuminated by the commoditisation of care work, devaluing and undervaluing of housework and feminisation of migrant domestic work in the context of the experiences of the workers in Hong Kong? In this chapter, I have used interview data to show that the impacts of migrant domestic work are transnational and the ramifications affect a global network of people. Migrant workers continue to work knowing that there are limited possibilities for upward mobility and social transformation for their families. This chapter responds specifically to one of the four research questions of the book: How does the intersection of the migrant domestic workers' wages, gender and labour further their marginalisation?

Irene Browne and Joya Misra identify how race, gender and class fuse together to create unique experiences and opportunities for all groups, not just women of colour, in the labour market. They focus on race and gender as systems of economic stratification and question established notions of intersectionality by examining research on labour market inequality. They recognise how an intersectional approach enriches labour market research and theorise further about economic inequality (2003, p. 488). Migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong labour within these interlocking systems of gender, race and class constructs that have fused together to create the labour conditions and their transnational experiences.

Coming back to the question and the sentiment that was expressed by employers or people who are not workers at the beginning of the chapter – Why do the workers come to Hong Kong if they know they will have to make certain sacrifices? – throughout my fieldwork, I have gathered a sense that workers come

to Hong Kong knowing that there might be chances of exploitation, hardship or heartbreak. In the face of the uncertainty and precarity of their labour, created and exacerbated by global structures, it does not stop them attempting to build an improved livelihood for their families and for themselves. Whatever the transnational experiences are for individual workers in Hong Kong, each of them has a network of families and communities of people back in their home country that also make compromises and sacrifices for the possibility of living a better life, with stability, ease and freedom.

Notes

1. To read in detail about how the Indonesian government creates and produces the contingent of migrant domestic workers, please see *Follow the Maid: Domestic worker migration in and from Indonesia* (Killias, 2018).
2. Many terms have been used by various scholars to describe this phenomenon, such as brain gain, brain waste, brain abuse, brain return and brain circulation (Banerjee, Verma & Zhang, 2018; Bauder, 2003; Iredale, 2015; Saxenian, 2005).
3. Many workers throughout the years have expressed a sentiment of accepting that working in Hong Kong is much better than being in other countries due to its relatively high wages, proximity to their home countries, time difference and reputation. Among Indonesian workers, especially those who come from rural towns, they often reflect that they think they are 'lucky' to have been able to find stable income and be able to have access to what Hong Kong has on offer as a progressive and international city.
4. It is common for many Indonesian workers to go abroad to avoid the pressure of being married or escape unhappy marriages (Lan, 2006, p. 135; Rother, 2017). Among the workers I have come across, the majority of those who are not married do not have a huge desire to marry. Their number one reason is to not have to work more to support more family members.

Conclusion: A Matter of Gender, Labour and Space

Much has been written about global migration, but how migrant domestic workers experience migration is often hidden in the homes of their employers. Migrant workers shape urban spaces, but how they do so, under what conditions and in what ways these experiences can enrich how we understand migration continue to hide in plain sight. There are 67 million domestic workers worldwide, of which 11.5 are migrants. Mostly women, these workers labour silently in the private domestic realm. In Hong Kong, due to the legal requirement of the workers living in the homes of the employers, their invisibility is exacerbated by their lack of personal space and spatial separation between home and work, rest and productivity. These migrant workers become visible in public space on their day off work. Their occupation and appropriation of public space has evolved into a ritualistic social practice, where thousands of migrant domestic workers – mostly women from the Philippines and Indonesia – exercise spatial agency by constructing temporary 'homes' in the public cityscape of Hong Kong every Sunday.

This book has focused on four research questions:

1) How does the migrant domestic workers' occupation of public space reflect the problems they endure in the workplace that is also their home, specific to the labour and spatial conditions in Hong Kong?
2) What activities do the workers engage in, in public space and privately, that cultivate resilience and agency?
3) What are the local and international contexts in which they operate that allow this systemic oppression to be accepted and overlooked as common practice, and why are they so prevalent?
4) Furthermore, how does the intersection of the migrant domestic workers' wages, gender and labour further their marginalisation?

This book has answered these questions in its chapters and explored in detail the resistance and exercise of agency of the migrant domestic workforce, through the intersection of space, gender, economics and labour. Expanding upon the body of existing research on migrant domestic workers in the world that details how they are economically and socially marginalised, this book has added an important aspect to their intersected marginalisation – space. The issue of space is part of a phenomenon unique to Hong Kong, yet it can be universally

understood as yet another inequality that migrant workers face as labour-sending and labour-receiving countries perceive the workforce as a labour commodity, rather than individual human beings. Through the collection of fieldwork data between 2013–2023, this book has featured stories from twenty-five workers, selected out of the eighty-seven formally interviewed. They are a small portion of the over 100 workers I have spoken to, who have shared with me their experiences, struggles, hopes and joys. An important aspect of this research is illustrating the socio-spatial phenomenon on Sundays, where the experience of the workers transforming public space into their own temporary homes away from home can be understood and qualified, albeit in the two-dimensional limitation of print form, in photographs and illustrations.

Interlinked to the commodification and feminisation of migration labour is the economic landscape it operates in and existing version of the neoclassical theoretical framework, which ultimately is insufficient and limiting as it does not consider the constraints at the structural level that shape migration dynamics, nor for individual migrant agency interacting with the structure that it is informed and constrained by. Migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are often discussed and understood as part of the millions of migrant domestic workers worldwide, or are often subsumed within the group of Filipino migrant domestic workers. This book has examined the situation in Hong Kong to reveal an important part that is missing within new economics of labour migration – individual migrant agency, and in this book specifically, the intersected problem of gender, labour and space. It has challenged previous methods with structural approaches in combination with ethnographic and fieldwork data that shows the many interconnecting layers and scales of the issue. In so doing, the book has illuminated a new understanding of how migrant domestic workers operate as well as establishing the case as a possible framework to review global migration and other disenfranchised migrant labour groups, through a spatial lens or other ways agency is enacted inside or outside of the workplace.

The book began with Chapter 1, making clear that the policies of migrant labour export and the legalities in the employment contract for migrant domestic workers have been designed not with the rights of the workers in mind, but are focused on creating parameters for an economically and spatially affordable workforce. It could be justified that these policies are designed for temporary work; however in reality since the first contingent of workers arrived in Hong Kong in 1975, the influx of workers has increased and the only thing that is temporary about them is their legal status. Due to the lack of employment opportunities in the labour-sending countries and the difference in growth and stagnation in the economies of both labour-sending and labour-receiving countries, the workers 'make choices' to work in Hong Kong and consistently renew their contracts every two years, making their temporality permanent. From the sample of eighty-seven formal interviewees recorded for this research,

the minimum years a worker has been in Hong Kong was four, and the maximum was thirty-one. The number of workers who had been in Hong Kong between eight years to thirty-one was seventy-five, that is, 86% of my sample had exceeded the seven-year requirement to apply for permanent residency in the city-state. This is a privilege that is afforded to all expatriate workers, with the only exception being migrant domestic workers. This exception has not deterred workers from coming to Hong Kong or staying temporarily. This practice has become normalised over the decades, which has created a mobile workforce consisting of people who have desires and potential skills for upward mobility and contribution to society in areas other than domestic work, yet the system keeps them moving cyclically in this restricted path, thus much of their migratory journey remain stagnant. Additionally, the temporariness in their contracts and residency pressurises their labour, causing them to remain in exploitative situations for the sake of income. Further, this chapter discussed the economic forces of global migrant labour and demonstrated how the existing frameworks within (urban) political economy is insufficient, and that stratification economics can add to the creation of a framework that addresses the intersected problem at the focus of this book.

Chapter 2 revealed in detail the exploitative scenarios that occur behind closed doors. I asserted that the legalities of the labour contract – the minimal wages, the conditional stay of the two-week rule and the permanently temporary status of the workers – all combine to enforce the state of spacelessness, invisibility and servitude. In addition, this is driven by Hong Kong's colonial and Chinese history and cultural practices of servitude, and the cross-contamination of the home and the workplace, which solidifies the workers' subordinate position in the home. The lack of spatial boundaries between the home and the workplace facilitates exploitative situations that have been exacerbated by the anxieties of the global pandemic, through disciplining the workers' appearance, controlling the food they consume and controlling how they spend their time at work and even on their days off. For the majority of the time in their labour, migrant domestic workers are either disciplined by their employers or have become self-disciplined.

Emerging from the intersectional oppressions experienced in the confines of the interior domestic spaces, Chapter 3 demonstrates the full extent of the workers' agency and resistance in public space on their one day off work each week. What can be learned from the migrant workers' weekly creation of community in public space? Their occupation and transformation of public spaces reflects the social and spatial restrictions and oppressions they endure in the workplace. Through their spatialisations in in-between and loose public spaces, they exercise their freedom to be, as they would if they had their own private spaces. In these temporary spaces, they express their social agency through relationships, food, religious practices, place-making and social media, and continue to

cultivate resilience, agency and capacity to generate a life they want, beyond that of a domestic worker. The chapter used stories collected from Filipino and Indonesian workers, accompanied by photographs to demonstrate how these methods are significant in facilitating agency and also reflect the full spectrum of their resourcefulness and humanity. The workers' weekly establishment of a temporary yet permanent community has materialised as a socio-spatial phenomenon that shows they are not disposable commodities of labour, rather people who are powerful and can empower each other.

The book followed with Chapter 4, a visual chapter that portrayed vignettes of Sunday with selected photographs and illustrations by a Hong Kong-based migrant workers artist collective, Guhit Kulay. This chapter showed the spectrum of activities, events and social interactions, moving through different areas in Central, Causeway Bay and beyond to make more real for the readers the experience of the workers' community in full swing in Hong Kong on a Sunday.

Finally, in Chapter 5 the book examined the global origins of migrant labour exploitation, particularly the global context in which the workers' disenfranchisement in Hong Kong originated, and the network of disempowerment that is the operative method of global migrant domestic labour. It discussed how care is undervalued and care work and domestic work are known as part of the informal and unskilled labour sector, which in its own conceptualisation undermines and undervalues its efforts, and subsequently diminishes the rights, social mobility and economic value of those who participate in this workforce. The chapter dived deeper into the feminisation of migrant domestic labour, and illustrated how workers, their families and communities are impacted for generations to come in different forms of dislocations transnationally.

At its core, I believe this book is about migration, care and women, and the experiences of being at the margins. My research began when I became cognisant of my own position and experiences growing up in Hong Kong, raised and cared for by a village of women, subsequently relocating halfway across the world and being a child of an immigrant family in Australia. Some twenty years later, while visiting Hong Kong as an adult, this time bringing with me my colonial socialisation, spatial understanding and a curiosity about the social and gender hierarchy of my second home, I realised the embedded and well-practiced marginalisation and prejudices towards people of different ethnicities and what is perceived as valuable economic productivity. Little did I know, this research would begin my journey of relocating back to this 'home' in 2019. My own upbringing was not living in the margins in any comparable way or space that migrant domestic workers dwell in; rather it was something that informed my interest and eagerness to investigate, talk about, talk with and amplify those who may be in the margins.

For the last thirty years, Japanese-Canadian feminist geographer Audrey Kobayashi has reiterated the importance of reflecting on who gets to speak *for* whom and *with* whom (Kobayashi, 1994, pp. 73–80). Emerging from a lineage of feminist scholars such as Gayatri Spivak and Audre Lorde, these enquiries have continued to be part of the discourse on positionality in many disciplines. Regarding the admission of people of colour and women into academia, she states that the need for deeper action towards equality was more than being admitted into a circle drawn by the standards of a racist and sexist past (Ibid.). The most effective path to change is not about moving the marginal into the centre, or redrawing the boundaries of the circle to make it bigger and more inclusive, but to erase the circle altogether (Ibid.). This metaphor of erasing the existing circle deeply resonates with me, not only in the context of academia, but in a larger sense of existing structures that have a clearly defined centre and periphery such as the global political economy, between the productive and so-called unproductive, the skilled and unskilled (labour) and the formal and informal (labour). Perhaps this notion of redrawing the existing boundaries has been the ultimate motivation for embarking on this research for the last decade. From the existing scholarship on the structural forces and micro circumstances that shape the lives of migrant women workers and their families, through to my encounters and conversations with workers on the ground in Hong Kong, the collective simmering frustration of an interconnected global system that is skewed and disempowering is palpable and hard to ignore.

There is an urgency to bring about systemic changes to migration labour that could prevent and minimalise exploitation, and instead empower migrant workers with the choice of being able to integrate themselves into host nations with equitable opportunity. In the case of Hong Kong, the two main provisions that can bring about positive change would be in the form of housing and residency status. Providing housing for the workers outside of the workplace creates room and time for both the employers and employees to be free from the responsibilities of their roles, which can reduce friction and conflict, thus decreasing the frequency of exploitative scenarios for the workers. Housing is a pertinent issue in urban political economy. Whether it is analysed in a neoclassical framework of scarcity, competition utility maximisation (Whitehead, 2012) or a Marxist framework of quality and quantity of housing attributed to the exploitation of labour by capitalists and capital accumulation (Obeng-Odoom, 2022), the issue of access to housing comes down to rent. If the migrant workers are given legal access to rent their own home outside of their workplace, then their wages need to be sufficient in affording the rent. Currently, the legal minimum monthly wage of the workers is HK$4,870 (Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2023), and the average rental price for a one-bedroom apartment can range from a minimum of HK$12,000 to HK$20,000 (InterNation, 2023). Based on these numbers, it would be impossible for the workers to rent their own home with their

current salary. Throughout my fieldwork, I have come across a small number of migrant workers whose employers have rented a separate flat for them to be shared with other workers. In these cases, generous employers come together and share the payment of the rent for their workers to be able to have adequate housing separate from yet close enough to have constant access to their workplaces. This practice is illegal, yet not uncommon among employers who are of higher income. If employers are legally allowed to rent on behalf of the workers, that might effect some positive changes, yet I assert it would not become common practice, as the legal minimum household income for employers to hire a migrant domestic worker would have to rise from the current minimum of HK$15,000 in order for the employers themselves to afford their own living expenses (Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, 2022a). It is clear that it should be the responsibility of the government to provide adequate housing for the workers (as exemplified in Singapore), and not of the minority of employers who can afford to (Ho, 2021).

Apart from housing, the impact of the ineligibility of permanent residency in Hong Kong specifically for migrant domestic workers is detrimental to their belonging in society, their career mobility and their plans for creating an equitable and tenable future. Many workers have expressed that because they can never be in Hong Kong as a permanent resident, they cannot develop a career they want, given that they cannot work outside of the domestic worker contract, nor can they continue further studies. Many of them wish to finish their interrupted studies or even begin further studies, but they have to wait until they have earned enough in Hong Kong to sustain their families' living back in the Philippines or Indonesia. In many cases, this so-called 'enough' is never achievable and the workers end up staying in Hong Kong as domestic workers until they retire. One of the members of the Guhit Kulay artist group has a dream of running a business that sells fashion items using traditional textiles from the Philippines made in Hong Kong, and potentially promoted and sold worldwide (personal communication, 28 June 2023):

> I want to show the world the beautiful textiles that we have and what we can do with it. My goal is to empower women to do businesses they want and show them if I can do it, so can they. It is very hard though in Hong Kong because of the job. I'm now forty-five years old and I want to stop cleaning so I can do my business. I've been here for more than half my life. But in Hong Kong, I have to be a cleaner.

There was no reason to justify the exclusion of the workers' eligibility to apply for permanent residency like other expatriates, apart from the original reasons for having temporary workers do domestic work in order to preserve Hong Kong as a capital-rich base and not have mainland Chinese workers overstay in Hong Kong (Wee & Sim, 2005). That line of reasoning was established in the 1970s,

since which the economy has changed and now mainland Chinese workers come to Hong Kong under different visas and policies. The impact of this policy and denial of migrant domestic workers to be able to become permanent members of the city-state places them on the margins of Hong Kong society. The two main provisions that could transform the current state of inequity in migrant domestic work in Hong Kong are legal status and housing separate from the workplace. As these two issues remain unchanged in Hong Kong, incidents of exploitation, subordination and oppressive practices will continue and remain harmful to migrant workers, their families and community, and arguably, the employers and their families will also be impacted upon negatively with generational impacts.

In 2009, two Chinese artists, Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, created a series of photographic artwork by asking domestic workers to plant a toy grenade in their employers' homes, take photographs of the scenes and also photograph themselves with their backs turned (Flores, 2011, pp. 111–113).[1] The work expresses the underlying tension between domestic workers and their employers. The photographic series displays a calm stillness of the domestic interiors next to the workers with their backs turned, evoking an unsettling sense that the workers may appear as quiet and obedient, yet there is a possibility of danger. The artists' intention is to comment on the workers as a ticking bomb in the inner sanctum of their employers. However, the danger, as I interpret from the work, is not about the danger of the workers being in the home, rather it is about the danger of the commodification of care and domestic labour and the ongoing negative impacts on everyone involved – employers and employees – thus concretising the subordinate and undervalued positions of care and domestic work in the global economy, and the workers who participate, who are largely women.

Dwelling in and with the current uncertainties in the world today, I wish to speculate about the potential impacts on Hong Kong if migrant domestic workers had the same right as other expatriates to become permanent residents. The immediate scenarios that come to mind are: more Filipino and Indonesian culture integrated into society in the forms of food, music, language and mainstream popular culture, schools offering Tagalog or Bahasa language courses, schools and hospitals and other sectors hiring professionals from the Philippines and Indonesia, and cross-cultural businesses like the one dreamt of by the aforementioned member of Guhit Kulay. All of these examples will produce ongoing social and cultural benefits. The possibilities are endless. Further, children growing up in Hong Kong with domestic workers will see that domestic work is not something that is to be disrespected as 'dirty work', as they will witness the workers they grow up with as business owners or engineers, teachers and other professional experts one day. This could break down stereotypes of southeast Asian women being care workers only, as they also participate in other labour sectors that are neither feminised nor in the category of unskilled or informal

labour. Ultimately, the possible benefits all point towards social transformation – creating a more multicultural and inclusive society that produces people who are progressive, creative and open-minded.

In Chapter 5, I brought the importance of linking migration theories to the analysis of social transformation processes at different levels and the connections between the different socio-spatial levels (Shutes, 2021, p. 116; Castles, 2010). There is a crucial link between migrant workers and the labour market in connection to migration research, in what Stephen Castles calls a step-change in social transformation. Examining migration and care can situate migration in a wider social and political economic framework, which contributes to a social transformation perspective in this field. Migration research often disconnects the workers from the work, and in doing so, disconnects the care from care labour, and categorises it as productive or reproductive labour, further obscuring the people and their rights, experiences and quality of life from the discussion. This exacerbates the intersected inequalities within the reality of migration, specifically in the case of Hong Kong, further marginalising the workers' economic capacity and living conditions. Apart from direct impacts on the workers, the ongoing effects on the labour-sending countries and labour-receiving countries are also shaped by how each society exercises care for the workers and treats them as people, rather than as a reliable and cheap labour force. If the so-called economic benefits of cheap labour overrule the needs of the people providing such labour to have adequate housing and residency status, then the workers will continue to endure the ongoing impacts of such inequity. Ultimately, it reflects how insufficient care is given to those who participate in care work locally and globally. Therefore, to transform the current state of affairs to an equitable future of migrant domestic workers, not just limited to those in Hong Kong, practical reinforcement of ethical labour operations and spatial provision must be implemented. As seen in Singapore, it took a riot in Little India in 2013 and the outbreak of COVID-19 infections in 2020 in congested migrant workers' dormitories for the government to consider a new model of dormitory housing that has more room and adequate amenities (Ho, 2021, p. 344). The fact that the latter incident became a health issue for the city captured the government's attention to finally take action to transform the ongoing poor housing conditions for the workers. The care and wellbeing of migrant workers in Property States like Hong Kong and Singapore, as Anne Haila (2000) coined, begins with providing them with housing; that is, living quarters that have adequate amenities, privacy and social spaces that allow the workers to live in conditions where they can feel safe and be at ease. In other words, being able to live and flourish as people and given access to the same rights as expatriate workers, and not as a separate category of worker that is needed but treated as a disposable and replaceable labour commodity. The implementation of a spatial policy for the workers will have positive impact on their wellbeing and quality of life in the labour-receiving countries. This will have a ripple effect

on the families and communities of these workers across multiple nations and for generations to come. The question remains: *What* would it take for these policies to be put in place, and *when* will adequate care be given to the workers who care for the nations?

Note

1. The entire photo series can be viewed in the artist catalogue on the artists' website (Lin & Ng, 2011).

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Index

Abreu, Alexandre, 14–15, 49–50
Agamben, Giorgio, 64, 167
agency
  in classical Marxism, 96
  creation of new spatialities, 5, 174–5
  individual agency, 47
  intersectionality and, 96
  of migrant domestic workers, 23–4
  narratives of victimhood, 23–4
  in neoclassical economic theory, 96
  occupation of public space, 13, 102, 123–4, 174–5
  socio-cultural activities, 13, 66, 82–3, 95, 97
  spatial agency in Little Manila, 4–5, 11, 82–3, 95, 97–8, *131*
Akers Chacon, Justin, 45
Auge, Marc, 99–100

Burnazoglu, Merve, 15–16
Butler, Judith, 125–6

cardboard structures
  commoditisation of, 11, 101, 112–13
  of Little Manila (Central), 105, 106–8
  as makeshift home-bases, 3, 11, 79, 101, *129*, *133*, *137*
  spatial analysis, 25
care work *see* domestic/care work
Castles, Stephen, 160
China
  history of domestic servitude in Hong Kong, 70–3, 85, 154–5, 176
  workers in Hong Kong, 179–80
citizenship
  and alienage, 65–6
  definition, 65–6
  within a globalised economy, 65, 67, 179–80
  parasitic paradigm, 64–5
  permanent temporary status of migrant workers, xi, 21, 54, 63–7, 69, 109, 163, 166–7, 175–6, 179–81
  the state of exception and, 64, 167
cognitive labour, 158–9
coloniality
  Hong Kong's colonial history, 5, 18, 19, 22–3, 51–2
  indentured servitude, 72
Constable, Nicole, 70, 71, 72, 75, 79, 83, 86, 87, 93, 124–5
COVID-19 pandemic, 16, 62, 77–9, 84, 92, 93, 117, 123, 165, 170, 181
Crenshaw, Kimberlé, 22–3

Dannecker, Petra, 50–1
Darity Jr, William A., 18, 50
Davis, Mike, 45
DeParle, Jason, 38
disciplinary practices
  in domestic spaces, 69, 70, 83–4, 102
  of food, 89–91, 176
  gender and, 84
  and histories of domestic servitude, 70–3, 85, 94
  physical appearance, 85–8, 176
  quite obedience as emotional labour, 158, 176
  spatial restrictions, 92–4
  uniforms, 10, 85
dislocations
  contradictory class mobility, 39, 41, 167–9
  of migrant domestic workers, 39, 165–6
  non-belonging, 39, 41, 169–70
  partial citizenship/residency, 39, 166–7
  the transnational household, 39, 170–2

domestic spaces
denial of rental opportunities to domestic workers, 3, 6, 13, 64, 178–9, 180–1
disciplinary practices, 69, 70, 83–4, 102
domestic workers' accommodation under the ILO, 79–80
drawing and fieldwork data, 27–8, *28*, *29*, 69, *76*, *78*
employer-employee professional and personal boundaries, 83, 176
lack of separate spaces for domestic workers, 6, 73, 75–83, *76*, *78*, 102
power relations, 89–90
recreation of in public spaces, 1–2, 3, 11, 29, 30–1, *30*, 101, 102, *133*, *135*
see also private spaces
domestic/care work
devaluation of, 7, 53, 150, 151, 177
economics of, 152–3, 154, 155, 156
emotional labour, 157–8
ethics of care, 152–3
feminisation of migrant domestic labour, 151–2, 155, 160–4
as gendered labour, 150–1
within the Global Care Chain, x, 156
intersectional inequalities, 50, 51, 151–2, 160, 172, 181
mental labour, 158–9
racist perceptions of, 150–1
as social reproductive labour, 153–4
as unskilled labour, 151, 153–5, 162, 177
working hours, 155

economics
definitions of, 152
of domestic/care work, 152–3, 154, 155
feminist, 152
Harris-Todaro model, 12, 48
historical-structuralist theory of migration, 48–9, 67–8
identity issues in, 15–16
Little Manila's informal economy, 112–13, *141*
migration in mainstream (urban) economics, 12–13, 15
migration in neoclassical economic theory, 48–9, 67
migration-development nexus, 46–51
neoliberal immigration, 45–6
new economics of migrant labour, 14–15, 49–50, 68
remittance economies, 13, 39–40, 43, 47, 65, 104, 161
stratification economics, 17–18, 50, 68, 176
emotional labour, 157–8
employers (female)
cognitive labour, 158–9
division of labour in the home, 156–7
emotional labour, 157–8
within the Global Care Chain, x, 156
employment
commodification of domestic workers, xi, 13–14
debt repayments, 9, 10
employer household incomes, 58–9
employment agency fees, 8, 9, 10
employment contracts, 5–10
food provision, 90–1
illegal additional work, 113
live-in rule, 6, 13, 29, 54, 69, 73, 74–83, 94, 163, 178
one weekly rest day, 55, 92
permanent temporary status of migrant workers, xi, 21, 54, 63–7, 69, 109, 163, 166–7, 175–6, 179–81
power relations, 61–2, 82, 89–90
process of employing a domestic worker, 8–10
provision of accommodation, 74–5, 80, 81–2
statutory minimum wage, xi, 5–6, 7, 53–4, 55, 56–7, 69, 94, 176, 178
termination of contract, 59–62
two-week rule, 54, 59–63, 69, 94, 163, 176
vaccination records, 9–10
working hours, 54–7, 59, 69
see also domestic/care work
employment/recruitment agencies, 8–9, 10, 85, 89
ethnicity
in mainstream (urban) economics, 17–18
model minorities, 18–19

multiple identities, 18, 19
perceptions of domestic work, 150–1
white supremacy, 19, 22–3
ethnographic research
challenges of, 16–17
drawing and fieldwork data, 27–31, *28*, *29*, 127, 128, 149, 177
multiple identities within, 24
photography, 127–8
power relations, 17, 19–20
reflexivity, 17, 19–20, 24–5
researcher positionality, 17, 18–22, 23

Federici, Silvia, 155
female body
control over physical appearance, 85–8, 176
as sexual/moral threat, 86–8
uniforms, 10, 85
feminist economics, 152
Filipino domestic workers
case study (Diana), 37–8, 39, 40, 41
contradictory class mobility, 168–9
English proficiency, 83, 115
Filipino food, 89, 90–1
as 'Filipino girls', 8, 22
within a globalised economy, 160–1
in Hong Kong, ix–x, xi, 6, 39
remittances, 43
as sexual/moral threats, 70, 86–8
see also Little Manila (Central)
Fine, Michelle, 17, 24
Floro, Maria, 14
food
and cultural identities, 91
disciplinary practices, 89–91, 176
employer provision requirements, 90–1
food video blogs, 117–18
in Little Manila (Central), 102–3
perceptions of Filipino and Indonesian food, 89, 90–1
Foreign Domestic Helper visas, xi, 6, 52
see also employment
Franck, Karen A., 99

Geertz, Clifford, 127
Gehl, Jan, 26, 27, 29
gender
care as a gendered occupation, 51, 150–1, 156
cognitive labour, 159
disciplinary practices and, 84
feminisation of migrant domestic labour, 14, 40–1, 151–2, 170–1, 177
figure of the sexualised foreign worker, 70, 86–8
gender-specific power structures in migration, 50–1
pay gap, 155–6
Global Care Chain, x, 156
Guhit Kulay, 119, 128, 177, 179

Haila, Anne, 13, 98
Harris, John Rees, 12, 48
Harvey, David, 45
Hong Kong
colonial history and identity, 5, 18, 19, 22–3, 51–2
emigration from, 52
as a global city, 67
history of domestic servitude in, 22, 70–3, 85, 94, 154–5, 176
interdependency with migrant workers, 64–5
as a labour-receiving country, 51–4
legal frameworks in, 51–2
loose, interstitial, liminal spaces, 4–5, 124, 176
middle-classes, 52–3
migration policies for domestic workers, 46, 175–6
as a migratory transit point, 52
numbers of domestic migrant workers, ix–x, 6, 39, 41, 42, 52, 54, 175
public spaces of, 26–7, 97–100
socio-cultural identity, 5, 18, 19, 22
socio-spatial specificity of migrant labour in, 14, 15, 69, 97, 125–6, 128, 174–5
urban spatial conditions, xi, 4–5, 13
women's entry into the formal workforce, ix–x, 22, 52, 54, 70, 71
see also employers (female); Little Manila (Central)

housing, 3, 6, 13, 64, 178–9, 180–1
 see also domestic spaces

identity
 in economics, 15–16
 food and cultural identities, 91
 migrant workers's state of exception, 64, 167
 multiple identities, 18, 19, 24
 performances of, 97
 on social media, 103
 in stratification economics, 50
Indonesia
 export of migrant labour, 43–5, 161, 162, 165
 female migration, 162
 numbers of domestic migrant workers, 42
 remittances, 44, 65, 104
Indonesian domestic workers
 birthday celebrations, *146*
 Cantonese proficiency, 83, 115
 community space in Victoria Park, Causeway Bay, 3, 11, 79, 114–15, *134*
 contradictory class mobility, 167–8
 debt bondage, 9
 in Hong Kong, xi, 115
 Indonesian food, 89, 90–1, *134*
 as 'Indonesian maids', 22
 pop dance groups of, 119
 religious group gatherings, 115–16, *145*
 remittances, 104
 sexuality and personal relationships, 119–22, 167–8
 social media and knowledge exchange, 117–18
 traditional Indonesian dancing, 116–17, *117*
 Tsim Sha Tsui, 114
International Labour Organisation Convention 189, 79–80
intersectionality
 agency and, 96
 concept, 22–3
 intersectional inequalities of domestic work, 50, 51, 151–2, 160, 172, 181
Islamic Union of Hong Kong, 115–16

Johnson, Mark, xi

Karunanayake, Geetha, 21
Killias, Olivia, 85, 104
Kobayashi, Audrey, 19, 178
Kundnani, Arun, 46

labour-receiving countries
 countries of, 38, 42, 160, 163
 within the Global Care Chain, 156
 legal status of the employment process, 10
 neoliberal immigration to, 45–6
 see also Hong Kong
labour-sending countries
 brain-drain effect, 163–4
 employment agencies, 9
 within the Global Care Chain, 156
 lack of employment opportunities, 13, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 162–3, 164–5, 175
 legal status of the employment process, 10
 overseas work promotion, 13, 38
 perceptions of migrant workers, 167–8
 remittances, 13, 39–40, 43, 47, 65, 104
 see also Indonesia; Philippines
language
 colloquial terms for domestic workers, 8, 22
 proficiencies for domestic workers, 10, 83, 115
 translations of the Foreign Domestic Helper contract, 7–8
Lee, Maggy, xi
legal frameworks
 in Hong Kong, 51–2
 International Labour Organisation Convention 189, 79–80
Lindio-McGovern, Ligaya, 39–40, 43, 86, 154, 161, 163
Little Manila (Central)
 beauty services (*kilay*), 113, *139–40*
 body massage, *142*
 card games, *131*
 cardboard structures, xi, 1–3, *2*, 11, 105, 106–8, *107*, *129*, *133*, *137*
 care packages (*Balikbayan*), 3, 11, 97, 101, 103–4, *143–4*

Central Elevated Walkway, 105–8, *105*, *131*
Chater Road and City Hall, 108–12, *133*, *139*
as a community, public space, 1–3, *2*
Connaught Road Central, 3, 103–4
dances, 109, *110*, 116, *147*
'The Essence of Sundays' art project, *111*, 112
Filipino domestic workers, 100–1
food stores, 102–3
Former Central Market arcade, *108*
Hong Kong local's perceptions of, 3, 100, 102
HSBC bank headquarters, 3, 108, *138*
informal economy, 112–13, *141*
karaoke, 103, *130*, *133*, *136*
parades and celebrations, 109, *110*, *132*, *147–8*
rallies, 108–9, *110*
as a site of resistance, 102, 123–4
socio-cultural activities, 13, 66, 97, 101
spatiality of, 4, 64, 65, 97–8, 100–1, 125–6
as a temporary domestic space, 1–2, 3, 11, 101, 102, *133*, *135*
workers's spatial agency in, 4–5, 11, 82–3, 95, 97–8, *131*
World Wide House, 102–3

McCahill, Michael, xi
mental labour, 158–9
migrant domestic workers
access to housing, 3, 6, 13, 64, 178–9, 180–1
within the 'chain' of duty and command, x
colloquial terminology for, 22
commodification of, xi, 13–14, 45–6, 59, 94, 175, 180
community, public spaces, x, xi, 1–3, *2*, 4–5, 10–11, 66, 70, 176–7
conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, 16, 62, 77–9, 84, 92, 93, 117, 123, 165, 170, 181
the 'double bind', 36
emplacement as activism, 124–5
global numbers, 45
human costs, 151–2, 159–60, 170–2
immobility and stagnancy of employment opportunities, 36, 41, 163–4, 176
interdependent relationship with Hong Kong, 64–5, 180–2
intersectional inequalities, 50, 51, 151–2, 160, 172, 181
language proficiencies, 83
as a marginalised group, xi–xii, 3–4, 6, 21, 165–6, 177
mobile phones, 117–18, 121–2
motivations for, 23–5, 37–8, 50, 84, 86, 159–60, 162–3, 164–5, 172–3
numbers of in Hong Kong, ix–x, 6, 39, 41, 42, 52, 54, 175
perceptions of, 23–4, 64, 150–1
sexuality and personal relationships, 119–23
socio-spatial specificity of in Hong Kong, 14, 15, 69, 97, 125–6, 128, 174–5
status under the Foreign Domestic Helper visa, xi–xii, 6
wages, 5–6, 69
see also dislocations; domestic/care work; Indonesian domestic workers
migration
abuse of migrant workers, 44, 46, 109
access to housing, 178–9, 180–1
agency of individual migrants, 47
economics of, 14–15
emplacement, 124–5
export of migrant labour, 40–1, 42–5, 47, 160–1, 162, 163, 165
female migration, 161–3
feminisation of migrant domestic labour, 14, 40–1, 170–1, 177
feminisation of migration concept, 161–2
gender-specific power structures, 50–1
global migrant workforce, 45, 176
historical-structuralist theory, 48–9, 67–8
human costs, 151–2, 159–60, 170–2
labour market transformations and, 160, 181
in mainstream (urban) economics, 12–13, 15
migration-development nexus, 46–51

migration (*cont.*)
in neoclassical economic theory, 48–9, 67
as neoliberal immigration, 45–6
new economics of, 14–15, 49–50, 68
scholarship on, 11–16, 178
mobile phones, 117–18, 121–2

Nelson, Julie, 151, 153
Nurhan, Farida, 118

Obeng-Odoom, Franklin, 17–18
One Billion Rising, 109, *110*

Peng Yu, 180
Philippines
export of migrant labour, 40–1, 42–3, 44, 47, 160–1, 162, 163, 165
government support for overseas employment, 38
labour market, 38, 41, 43
lack of employment opportunities, 163
numbers of female migrant workers, 38–9, 162
remittance economies, 43, 65, 161
see also Filipino domestic workers; Little Manila (Central)
Piper, Nicola, 50–1
Power, Marilyn, 152
private spaces
drawing and fieldwork data, 27–8, *28*, *29*
problem with the workers' everyday interior spatial experiences, 21–2, 28
relationship with community, public spaces, 29, 30–1, *30*
see also domestic spaces
public spaces
community spaces of the migrant domestic workers, x, xi, 1–3, *2*, 4–5, 10–11, 66, 70, 96–8, 124, 127, 174, 176–7
of Hong Kong, 26–7, 97–100
as loose, interstitial, liminal spaces, 98–9, 176
as non-places, 99–100
recreation of domestic spaces in, 1–2, 3, 11, 29, 30–1, *30*, 101, 102, *133*, *135*
relationship with private spaces, 29, 30–1, *30*
spatial analysis, 25
see also Little Manila (Central)

race *see* ethnicity
Ramsay, Georgina, 125
recruitment/employment agencies, 8–9, 10, 85, 89
Rodriguez, Robyn Magalit, 46
Rosewarne, Stuart, 13–14
Russell Hochschild, Arlie, 157–8

Salazar Parreñas, Rhacel, 38, 39, 41, 86, 161, 168, 170
Santos, Angelique, *111*, 112
Sassen, Saskia, 64, 65, 66, 67
Shutes, Isabel, 150, 160
Skeldon, Ronald, 49, 52
social media
community creation, 117–19
connections with home, 117
during the COVID-19 pandemic, 117, 119
identity-construction on, 117–18
for knowledge exchange, 117–18
Solomon, Jonathan, 26–7
spacelessness, term, 32
spatial analysis
drawing and fieldwork data, 27–31, *28*, *29*, 127, 128, 149, 177
fieldwork and, 26–7
photography, 127–8
site analysis, 25, *26*
spatial function mapping, 25
of temporary formations, 25
Stark, Oded, 49
Stevens, Quentin, 99
stratification economics, 17–18, 50, 68, 176
Sultana, Farhana, 17, 19–20
Sun Yuan, 180

Tam, Daisy, 64, 65
Todaro, Michael Paul, 12, 48

Vallejos, Evangeline B., 63, 166

Wages for Housework campaign, 155
Waring, Marilyn, 152, 155
Wates, Istik, 117–18
Whyte, William H., 26, 27, 29
women
economic invisibility of women's care work, 152–3, 154, 155, 156
entry into the Hong Kong workforce, ix–x, 22, 52, 54, 70, 71
female Chinese servants, 71–2
female migration, 161–3
feminisation of labour, 162
feminisation of the domestic sphere, 71
practice of unpaid housework, 155, 156
sexualised foreign worker, 70, 86–8
see also employers (female); female body; gender

Yeates, Nicola, 153–4, 162