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FIGHTING UNDER THE BLANKET: THE CULTURAL POLITICS
OF INDONESIAN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN HONG KONG

LAM BIK CHE

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Department of Applied Social Sciences

Fighting under the Blanket: The Cultural Politics of Indonesian
Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

Lam Bik Che

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

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(Signed)

Lam Bik Che

(Name of Student)

Abstract

This thesis explores the cultural politics surrounding Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong who face exploitation in the context of international migration. Existing studies suggest that Indonesian domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation upon arrival in Hong Kong. However, these studies tend to reinforce racial stereotypes by portraying Indonesian women as submissive, obedient, and naïve, while neglecting other forms of exploitation such as the suppression of sexuality.

Drawing on a Foucauldian approach, this research aims to explore the mechanisms through which power operates within society, specifically through the biopower and governmentalities of sending and receiving states. It analyzes the discourses, institutions, and practices that shape and regulate the experiences and bodies of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Furthermore, this research seeks to articulate the ways in which Indonesian domestic workers respond to exploitation through culturally specific strategies of resistance, transgression, acceptance, and the formulation of counter-discourses. By examining their migratory trajectories, the study aims to shed light on how these workers challenge the perceived economic logic and patriarchal gendered assumptions imposed upon them.

The findings of this thesis suggest that migration acts as a site for Indonesian domestic workers to question, dispute, and challenge the dominant norms. By transgressing societal boundaries and constructing alternative discourses, they defy the accepted norms of feminine morality and refuse to conform to the knowledge entrenched in the discourses that confine their bodies.

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---In Memory of My Father---

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Dear Sau Che, my cherished oldest third sister, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the sacrifices you have made for our beloved family. I owe you a debt that can never be repaid. My heart fervently yearns for all the beautiful things to find their way into your life first. As I am nearing the culmination of my journey, it is my sincerest wish that you are able to lead a fulfilling life and pursue your dreams without having to constantly sacrifice on my behalf. The magnitude of what I owe you far exceeds what I deserve.

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How are you, my dear father? Do you realize my heart aches with inconsolable grief at the sudden loss of you? Yet, in the midst of this profound sorrow, I can't help but imagine your radiant smile, shining down upon me, witnessing every single arduous battle I have fought. With a toast to your everlasting spirit, I pledge to persevere. And as promised, Sau Che and I will take

care of mom just as you wished. Even though there are times when fatigue sets in, we are willing and determined without any regrets. Please rest assured about us!

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Dear God, you are aware of my constant self-doubt that lingers within me, and I truly believe that without your presence, I am nothing. And dear God, you understand the fear that grips me when it comes to what lies ahead tomorrow. Yet, it could very well be your gentle voice whispering in my ear, reassuring me with the words from 2 Corinthians 12:9: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”*. Gratitude to you, oh Almighty! So be it!

Cheers! Never cease forever!

Amen!

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Chapter One

Problematizing Indonesian Domestic Labor Exploitation

At first, I didn't want to come to Hong Kong because I had heard on the radio that many girls were trafficked for sex. But when I learned that many Indonesians could earn big money, I decided to go. I followed a broker to the recruitment agency in Malang and was asked to undertake training there for three to four months. During that time, my life was so hard; it was even worse than being in prison. I was only given one piece of vegetable with a spoonful of rice for each meal, I wasn't allowed to eat chilies, and they cut my long hair randomly pa-pa-papa by putting a helmet on my head. I was warned that Hong Kong employers do not like spicy food and dirty maids, only those that eat a little bit. Every night, I felt like a pitiful cockroach, moving on the floor hungrily and sleeping on the floor without any pillows or blankets with hundreds of other girls...After arriving in Hong Kong, my nightmare began. My male employer forced me to give him oral sex; he said, 'Eat my banana! Suck it! It tastes delicious!' I sought help from my agent Jenny, but she refused to help because she said she needed evidence. One time I turned on my mobile phone video recorder, and when my male employer ran inside my room, it clearly showed him pulling his pants down, dragging my hair, pushing my head towards his penis, and I pushed him away. I held my mobile phone and immediately ran to my agency. However, after Jenny [agent] watched the video, she said, 'My good girl, try to be patient until you pay back your seven months' agency fee, then I will get another good employer for you.' I was really, really mad. I burst into tears and felt totally helpless...

(Asoka, aged 28, from Kalimantan)

1.1 The Phenomena

The above is a snapshot of an Indonesian domestic worker experiencing sexual exploitation while working in Hong Kong, which I came across during my work in 2009. It was my third year in a migrant service project, which served foreign domestic workers and victims of human trafficking, mainly from Southeast Asia. Asoka (pseudonym) is one of 27.5 million international migrants in Asia, representing approximately 13% of the total global figure (International Organization for Migration, 2010).¹ In Indonesia, of the estimated 2.6 million domestic workers, who are predominantly women, serving almost 2.5 million Indonesian households, approximately 750,000 Indonesian women leave their country to work as overseas migrant domestic workers annually (International Labour Organization, 2010).

In the Asia-Pacific region, labor migration is often from peripheral countries such as Indonesia, India, the Philippines and Vietnam to countries such as Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and Singapore that have labor shortages or demand for cheap and docile migrant laborers (International Organization for Migration, 2010; Oishi, 2005). It is argued that labor exportation from peripheral states that becomes institutionalized overseas labor migration for temporary or contractual work exhibits the key feature of global migration, which serves as a product of globalization characterized by acceleration and feminization in the new migration. This global feminization of migratory populations serves the forces of globalization that increase the demand for cheap female domestic labor worldwide (Lan, 2006; Lindio-McGovern, 2012; Oishi, 2005). Globally, it is estimated one in every 13 female wage earners is employed in domestic servitude.

¹ Note that all names of Indonesian domestic workers, with the exception of those specified, are pseudonyms.

Of the 52.6 million migrant domestic workers worldwide, Asia-Pacific occupies 41% in this sector (International Labour Organization, 2014).

Indonesia, a peripheral country, is one of the greatest suppliers of domestic workers to industrialized, semi-industrialized and developing countries, which has increased tremendously in significance and scale over the last two decades (Hugo, 2005). Much movement of Indonesian workers, like those from the Philippines and Thailand, has been to the Middle East and East Asia (i.e., Hong Kong). Following global demand in international labor migration for a cheap workforce, Indonesian workers have long been encouraged by their government's labor export program to generate national income through remittance. According to the World Bank, the registered remittance, which accounts for more than US\$6 billion each year, was sent by Indonesian migrant workers, mainly women, contributing to the second-highest income source after oil and gas (*The Jakarta Post*, 17 February 2012). Where receiving states are former developing or semi-industrialized nations, this results in shifts in their relation to the world economy (Robinson, 2000a).

Hong Kong is a popular destination for many migrant domestic workers from Asian countries because of its higher salaries than Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Singapore. Furthermore, most migrants believe Hong Kong has substantially more progressive labor protections (Asian Migrant Centre, 2007). According to the Hong Kong Immigration Department statistics, as of the end of January 2016, there were 343,684 foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong; they mainly came from the Philippines (183,937), Indonesia (151,409), Thailand (2,550) and others (5,788) (Hong Kong Immigration, Communications and Public Affairs Section, 2016). Officially, Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong represented 53.5% of the total labor force in this sector compared with 44.1% for Indonesians, accounting for almost 98% of the domestic workers in the

city. Overall, the market demand continues to rise. For example, in 2013, Bangladeshi migrant workers entered the domestic work market in Hong Kong after the Bangladesh Consulate reached an agreement with local employment agencies to recruit and train domestic workers in Bangladesh to work in the city (*South China Morning Post*, 28 December 2012). As a result, Bangladeshi women are constructed as enthusiastic workers with lower recruitment costs than other Southeast Asian countries (*South China Morning Post*, 16 March 2013). This measure came in response to the domestic helper agencies in Hong Kong claiming an acute shortage of foreign domestic workers could occur by 2017 because the Indonesian government planned to prohibit women from undertaking domestic work overseas. This would prevent the deployment of maids because the inadequate protection of domestic workers, predominately women, had led to different forms of abuse and maltreatment in the receiving regions (*South China Morning Post*, 01 September 2012; *The Jakarta Post*, 6 May 2015).

Indeed, there is considerable evidence of migrant domestic workers experiencing exploitation while working aboard. For example, in 2011, the International Labour Organization (2014) estimated that 3.4 million domestic workers were in forced labor, of whom 6.5% were migrant domestic workers working oversea. In Hong Kong, many local studies' results are congruent with this, arguing domestic workers from Indonesia are particularly vulnerable to exploitation compared with other nationalities upon arrival in Hong Kong. For example, on arrival, they are subject to excessive placement fees (pre-departure training camp fees) made mandatory by the Indonesian Ministry of Manpower in 1996. Surveys also show that the usual placement fee for Indonesians likely amounts to seven months of their salaries, totaling HK\$21,000 (Caritas Community Development Service, 2006; Hong Kong Catholic Commission

for Labour Affairs, 2011). Lee and Petersen (2006, p. 9) refer to this unfavorable condition as “debt bondage”, a contemporary form of slavery.²

Moreover, all migrant domestic workers are to remain in recruitment agency dormitories (training centers) to receive training in electrical appliance usage and foreign language skills for 3 to 12 months or until departure to the destination country. Before deployment, migrants are forced to sign a letter of promise indicating agreement of salary deductions paid to the agencies (Asian Migrant Centre, 2007), incurring debts for their accommodation, food and document-making. Other forms of exploitation come into play once they enter domestic service, including underpayment of wages, confiscation of passports, improper holidays, excessive working hours, illegal deduction of wages, physical assault, sexual harassment and forced illegal work (Asian Migrant Centre, 1994, 2007; Caritas Community Development Service, 2006; Hong Kong Catholic Commission for Labour Affairs, 2011, 2014; Justice Centre Hong Kong, 2016).

1.2 Are Indonesian Maids Hong Kong’s Modern-Day Enslaved People?

Over the last decade, the continued exploitation of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong has received increased international attention. Since 2009, Hong Kong has been downgraded to Tier 2 from Tier 1 in the annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report (U.S.

² When referring to “debt bondage” and “slavery” in this research, I adopt the United Nations definition. The two terms are defined as follows in Articles 1a and 7a of The UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (United Nations, 1957). Debt bondage: “the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of those services are not respectively limited and defined.” Slavery: “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised, and ‘slave’ means a person in such condition or status.”

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/slaverytrade.pdf>

Department of State, 2009),³ a product of the U.S. government's global leadership on global human rights issues and the TIP report serving as a principle diagnostic tool to assess 188 governments' efforts in implementing the three Ps: Prosecution, Protection and empowerment of victims of human trafficking, and Preventing future trafficking crimes. The TIP report determined Hong Kong as a destination and transit territory for the sex trafficking and forced labor of men, women and children. It criticized the authority's failure to enact a comprehensive anti-trafficking law, particularly signaling foreign domestic workers' high levels of debt from placement fees, which can lead to debt bondage if recruiters or employers unlawfully exploit them, making some workers more vulnerable to labor trafficking.

In 2014, the case of Erwiana, an Indonesian domestic worker brutally abused in Hong Kong, startled the world and attracted widespread international media attention (Allmark & Wahyudi, 2016; Barrow & Cheng, 2018; Wong et al., 2016). Aside from substantial coverage in media in Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia, and foreign news publicity such as *Time Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, all harshly condemned the Hong Kong government. The *Time Magazine* article had the title, "Beaten and Exploited, Indonesian Maids are Hong Kong's Modern-Day Slaves" (*Time Magazine*, 2014), which notably degraded the reputation of Hong Kong's governance. Simultaneously, Hong Kong media utilize every chance to elicit social emotions, using inciting and provocative headlines to report on the enslavement of Indonesian domestic workers, such as "Indonesian Domestic Worker Recounts Eight Months in Hell: This Woman is Very Terrible [印傭親述 8 個月地獄生

³ The Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report is the major diplomatic instrument used by the U.S. for negotiating with and monitoring worldwide governments on the issue of human trafficking. In addition, it shows the U.S. government's commitment and aspiration to assume a leading position in international human rights and law enforcement issues. The U.S. government also provides foreign countries with measures to combat and eradicate human trafficking.

涯「這個女人很恐怖」]”(Apple Daily, 2014b)⁴, “Two Domestic Workers are Being Tortured in Forbidden Room [兩傭工飽嚙禁室酷刑]” (Headline Newspaper, 2014), “Lazy Polices Mistreat an Indonesian Abuse Case, Serious Injury by Beating with Stick and Pouring with Hot Water, Employer Throws \$100 and Hurriedly Sends Maid Back Indonesia [印傭疑遭殘虐警「懶理」, 棍毆淋滾水傷重, 僱主留百元急送回國]” (Sky Post, 2014), “Agency Rejects to Rescue a Needy Maid, the Groups Petition for the Abolition of the Slave System [挨虐傭曾求助, 中介疑袖手, 團體請願促停「奴隸制度」]” (Wenweipo, 2014), “The Lament of Metropolis, Foreign Domestic Workers Become Slaves [外傭變奴隸大都會悲歌]” (Mingpao, 2014c), “The Government Builds a City of Abused Maids [由港府築造的虐傭之都]” (Kung Kao Po, 2014), “Modern Piglet Selling [現代賣豬仔]” (am730, 2014a), “Say No to Becoming an Accomplice of Human Trafficking [不能淪為販賣人口共犯]” (am730, 2014b), and “Indonesia President is Angry, Urges Hong Kong to Protect Indonesian Domestic Workers [印尼總統憤怒 促港保障印傭]” (Oriental Daily, 2014).

The media’s representation of Indonesian domestic workers portrays them as vulnerable victims. It uses a narrative of essentialism and racial stereotypes, including personality traits and skin color, to attribute and draw conclusions about Erwiana’s suffering. For example, a local newspaper *Sing Tao Daily* (2014) article, “Immigration Misinterprets Erwiana’s Dark Skin Color as Disease, Blames not Asking for Help, Not Alerting to Abuse [入境處誤會 Erwiana 臉黑有皮膚病, 離境無求助, 未聯想被虐]”. In defense of Customs counter staff, Immigration Chief Chan Kwok-ki stated, “When Erwiana left that day, our colleagues recalled seeing something a

⁴ Since *Apple Daily* and its website ceased publication on June 24, 2021, all relevant archives were retrieved prior to the last publication date.

little dark on the faces of foreign domestic workers, but they were unable to determine if it was due to their dark skin color or skin diseases, and they can't associate it with abuse.”⁵ In another news article in *Mingpao* (2014b) titled, “Indonesian Character [印尼人性格]”, the reporter cited his experience interviewing Indonesian domestic workers in Java, using determined phrases such as “kind to people” and “trust people” to essentially describe Indonesians’ characters, stating that even when Indonesians face strangers, they still smile at each other and that even when Indonesians are separated from their families, they handle it with a smile and optimism.

All of the aforementioned media representations of Indonesian domestic workers, including newspaper titles, captioned photographs and article content, are likely indicative of racial essentialist stereotype ideology that culturally misrepresents Indonesian domestic workers as submissive, ignorant, passive and helpless victims (Loveband, 2004; Ladegaard, 2013; Paul, 2011). Suddenly, Indonesian domestic workers are not only “strangers” and “others” in the eyes of their employers (Chiu & Asian Migrant Centre, 2005; Ladegaard, 2013; Lindio-McGovern, 2004), but they have also become objects of global surveillance, turning them into objects of knowledge and management.

Due to Erwiana’s case causing great international attention, in 2016, Hong Kong dropped to the Tier 2 Watch List, ranking alongside Afghanistan and Uzbekistan in the annual Trafficking in Persons report (TIP report) (US Department of State, 2016).⁶ The Hong Kong

⁵ The interview with Immigration Chief Chan Kwok-ki from the *Sing Tao Daily* newspaper was translated by the author from the original Chinese into English.

⁶ In response to the U.S. Department of State’s (2016) Trafficking in Persons Report, a government spokesman for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) stated, “The Report is not doing justice to the HKSAR Government.” It emphasized that in order to defend the plight of more than 340,000 foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong, HKSAR had taken strong measures in collaboration with various authorities and relevant Consulates. <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201606/30/P201606301004.htm>

government’s Secretary for Labour and Welfare rapidly announced a self-preservation measure in response to the Erwiana case, following criticism for having the worst human rights records and failing to improve their ability to combat human trafficking. These were the headlines of some local newspapers: “Cheung Kin-chung: It is Proposed to Force New FDHs to Attend the Labour Rights Class [張建宗：擬強制新外傭上權益班]” (*Wenweipo*, 2014c); “The Government Publishes in Newspapers Teaching Foreign Domestic Helpers to Protect Themselves [政府登報教外傭自保]” (*Apple Daily*, 2014c); “Cheung Kin-chung Advocates Low-interest Loans to Help Indonesian Domestic Workers [張建宗倡印尼低息貸款助印傭]” (*Wenweipo*, 2014b).

Figure 1.1

Using Emotive Images to Report Enslavement of Indonesian Domestic Workers



Note. Photo credited to *Apple Daily*.

In these years, while working at my organization, I noticed two strange patterns in the migrant field. First, with huge funding provided by U.S., western countries and other sources (e.g., international churches, anti-trafficking groups, or westerners etc.), and at this critical juncture of debt bondage and the Erwiana case, all these factors were timely for many so-called anti-human trafficking experts to take advantage of this golden opportunity, in the name of protectionism, to set up branches to rescue foreign domestic workers (e.g., Liberty Asia, Mekong Club, Hong Kong Helpers Campaign, Enrich HK, Justice Center, Hagar International, The Vine Church, STOP, Viva, 825 Freedom Campaign, Eden Ministry, Path Finders, Vision First etc.). Their scope of services includes anti-human trafficking and extends beyond this to foreign domestic workers' social domains, such as unwanted pregnancies, overstaying and financial literacy.

Second, over the past decade, in organizational documents and reports in English-speaking media and legal scholarship, there has been a shift to contextualize migrant domestic workers' migratory experiences through human trafficking discourse in preference to exploitation (Emerton & Petersen, 2006; Lee & Petersen, 2006; Justice Centre Hong Kong, 2016). Indeed, the precondition of trafficking at its core is a labor issue; whether one is exploited, coerced and trafficked into domestic work truly starts as a labor matter. Exploitation remains at the core of human trafficking (Jordan et al., 2006; U.S. Department of State, 2016).

Worst of all, it is disheartening to discover that both anti-human trafficking projects and the UN agency often refer to the situation of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong as "selling piglets[賣豬仔]." However, this characterization fails to acknowledge the personal agency, subjective experiences, and right to self-determination of these migrant women. Instead, it perpetuates a narrative of deception and undermines their autonomy. In reality, these

institutions adopt a victimization perspective that reflects western savior ideology. They view migrant women as helpless victims who lack knowledge and are in need of education and supervision (De Angelis, 2016; Hardesty & Gunn, 2019). Nonetheless, in my experience in the workplace, it is evident that Indonesian domestic workers no longer need to be coerced in order to be exploited. Instead, there is a certain level of voluntary participation and consent from migrants in activities that aim to extract their surplus values during labor (Steinfeld, 2001).

Here, I argue the conceptualization of human trafficking is not a neutral process; it is a product of social construction which is shaped by interplay of power/knowledge. Primitively, what makes Indonesian domestic workers more vulnerable to exploitation? Why are these women on the periphery more likely to be vulnerable and taken advantage of in the global political economy? What are the drivers and demands for Indonesian labor migration, and what significant role does Hong Kong play in the world economy? Are any economic forces coupled with mediating socio-cultural influences that possibly increase their vulnerability or exploitation? What is the multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that preserve the current world economy in Hong Kong as a global city? Most importantly, how do both sending and receiving countries contribute to shaping public perception of Indonesian domestic workers? Do they align themselves with, perpetuate, or depend on one another in creating the prevailing discourses that are propagated by Western countries' hegemony?

All of the above suggests that the exploitation of Indonesian migrant workers in international migration is increasingly complex. Before I seek answers, it would be useful to review how scholars have approached the exploitation of Indonesian migrant domestic workers in the global international migration process.

1.3 Problematizing Indonesian Domestic Labor Exploitation

Although the emerging human trafficking discourse generated by the U.S. government poses a great challenge to the conceptualization of exploitation, it nonetheless promotes urgent re-thinking of the implications of its social construction, social, political and economic consequences, and how this form of knowledge operates and shapes the lived experience of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. However, most local scholarly work examines the causes of the exploitation of Indonesian domestic workers focusing on human rights violations by the receiving state; for instance, aversive work conditions, breaches of contracts, illegal mandatory agency fees and the two weeks rule (see Asian Migrant Centre, 1994, 2007; Caritas Community Development Service, 2006; Hong Kong Catholic Commission for Labour Affairs, 2011, 2014; Justice Centre Hong Kong, 2016).

Robinson (2000a) points out that Indonesian domestic workers are vulnerable to exploitation partly due to their isolating work conditions in employers' houses, which possibly induces greater potential for abuse. From a similar standpoint, Jones (1996, as cited in Hugo, 2005) also maintains that Indonesian domestic workers have higher levels of vulnerability to exploitation because they live with their employers, are detached from fellow workers and support networks and do not have witnesses or evidence of their mistreatment and abuse. Moreover, there is a lack of local labor laws in some destinations. Robinson (2000a) further suggests that cultural constraints in the Indonesian context are substantial in mitigating the potential for abuse, as Indonesian domestic workers are assumed to reproduce the familial nature of relationships that demand the exercising of parental authority from the employer. Yet, migrant unions disagree, challenging this cultural tradition. They argue that Indonesian women are taught to be obedient and silent and not dare to query the patriarchal system and the positions of those

in power. Moreover, Javanese culture teaches people to accept all as it comes from the will of God. As a consequence, these factors make them more fragile to exploitation. Therefore, union leaders propose that Indonesian domestic workers require re-educating and empowerment (Asian Migrant Centre, 2007).

This culture of silence, to some extent, explains why Indonesian domestic workers are trapped in a situation of exploitation through an imbalance of power relations between their employers and agencies. However, I argue focusing on the household economy can only confirm Indonesian domestic workers' lack of legal protection and human rights advocacy in the receiving state. Whereas the state's role in the country of origin (i.e., Indonesia) still rarely receives attention in the city and is not included in the analysis of the major source of exploitation. Palmer (2014a) is among the very few to critically examine the administration of Indonesia's overseas labor migration program. His work focuses on the evolving structure of the labor export program in Indonesia under the official establishment of the National Agency in 2007, which oversees the placements and protection of its citizens in the emigration process. He contends that intra-state conflict in the bureaucracy's internal politics constitutes illegal overseas labor migration program acts. "Indebtedness" is an apparent feature of this bureaucracy in which recruiters and the Minister for Manpower charge huge placement fees (the equivalent of seven months' salary) from Hong Kong-based Indonesian domestic workers in pre-crisis foreign currency values, which becomes legitimate. The Indonesian government having sovereignty, exercises its power over the territory, violating exclusive rights (Palmer, 2013).

Palmer's (2014a) argument is congruent with Hugo's (2005), who maintains that since there is an official system in Indonesia regulating Indonesian domestic workers' whole migration process, from recruitment, placement, training and deployment to return, they are unavoidably

under the full control of the registered recruitment company, the Perusahaan Jasa Tenaga Kerja Indonesia. Hence, exploitation is not just happening in the destinations; Indonesian domestic workers have been victims since pre-departure in the sending country (i.e., deceit, forged documents, coercion) and various forms of exploitation have been evoked by recruiting agencies and government officials.⁷

Following an increase in women wanting to work overseas as domestics, this migration industry has become institutionalized, highly organized, and embedded in neighborhoods comprising gangs of labor recruiters, brokers, travel agencies and training providers aiming to increase the labor supply of Indonesian domestic workers to expand the markets in foreign countries. More scholars are acknowledging the role of the sending country in their analysis of the exploitation of Indonesian domestic workers, suggesting the systemic failure of two governments collaboratively provides the framework for such exploitation. However, this analysis does not explain Indonesian domestic workers' migration patterns and their driving force within the Asia-Pacific region. Also, it does not explain why there is a shift in contemporary migration trends (i.e., Philippines-Indonesia-Bangladesh) in the city. Moreover, if remittance is the main interest of the sending country, Indonesia and its migration industry (i.e., recruitment agencies), what is the link between international migrant remittance, capitalist development and economic migration? If the international division of labor is allegedly the cause of inequalities and exploitation of Indonesian domestic workers, how can this be explained?

1.4 Global Development and International Migration

⁷ See Hugo (1995) for further critique of the Indonesian government's system of labor export.

Increasingly, analyses are paying attention to the link between international migration and development as the “migration-development nexus” (Hsia, 2004; Piper, 2008). As a result, there is growing international interest in putting this theme on the agenda of international governmental organizations (i.e., the United Nations) and calling for policymakers, politicians, NGOs and researchers to develop various working plans to deal exclusively with this subject at a global level (Piper, 2008). Indeed, international migration (i.e., the outflow of Indonesians) has long been regarded as a way to secure livelihoods and a clever solution to labor surplus in the country of origin, which becomes the supplier of major unskilled labor (i.e., domestics) to the wealthier nations (Hugo, 2005; Lan, 2006; Piper, 2008).

Hugo (2005) notes four clear trends that have transformed over the years when discussing the change in international migration in global development. First, circulation becomes transmigration, which involves frequent movement between origin and destination areas. Second, unskilled labor groups are being replaced by highly skilled ones. Third, women have become dominant and significant in the global international mobile population. Fourth, undocumented movement has largely increased, which involves smuggling and trafficking. In this regard, all regions, particularly the poorer ones, are implicated in the rising outflow of people hunting for job opportunities abroad through official or illegal channels. Although people’s mobility improves their living conditions, this has long been part of human history. The International Labour Organization (2004, as cited in Piper, 2008) points out that the contemporary era of the globalization process has led to an intensified negative impact of modernization and capitalist development in developing countries. Consequently, many periphery states suffer from serious social and economic disruption associated with continual poverty, high unemployment rates, loss of traditional trading mechanisms and what the

International Labour Organization coined the “growing crisis of economic security”. As such, it is of the utmost importance that we review the historical development of the emigration and immigration of domestic servitude between Indonesia and Hong Kong, examining its interlocking forces concerning the changing nature of the capitalist world economy and locating my theoretical position in this research.

In Indonesia, modernization emerged from the New Order government, or what scholars name “the self-descriptor of the Suharto regime” (Robinson, 2000a), a term chosen in 1966 by President Suharto to characterize his authoritarian regime (Robinson, 2000b). Feith (1980, as cited in Robinson, 2000b) coined the regime “repressive developmentalist”, governance that has seized every opportunity for rapid economic growth, exercising authoritative power that compresses its citizens. During the regime, the government facilitated its rapid economic growth by opening the economy to foreign investment to create new forms of waged employment. Also, the government initiated its labor export market to international labor flow to make remittances to boost its economy.

When analyzing the export of labor in Indonesia, it is worth considering the New Order gender ideology, in which the patriarchal family was regarded as the cornerstone of the country, and gender relations served not only in the household but as a microcosm for the national political system, which imposed a homogenized vision on all women in Indonesia. At that time, women were perceived only as wives and mothers under the authoritarian power of the New Order. Their social role and status as citizens were considered different from men’s as a way of legitimizing the authoritarian regime. Patriarchal power in the family served as a model for patriarchal power in bureaucracy and the nation. Nonetheless, as more women left their families

to work abroad, this appeared contradictory to the Indonesian government's stance on supporting female labor migration (Robinson, 1994, as cited in Robinson, 2000a, 2000b).

To make its female labor export legitimate, in 1978, the government made a drastic change when defining the social role of women in the Guideline for State Policy (Garis Besar Haluan Negara), an important government policy framework stipulated every five years. In that year, the nation redefined women as a special category, "reproducers of the next generation of workers", even though women still failed to be recognized as workers in the Garis Besar Haluan Negara; nonetheless, women's citizenship was starting to be recognized. Later in 1993, there was another big shift in the gender ideology of the Garis Besar Haunan Negara, in which Indonesian women were unprecedentedly redefined as "human resources", assets to better Indonesia's economic development.

Comparing the differences between the two discourses in 1978 and 1993, the former described women as fertile for fundamental citizenship, yet the latter emphasized women as human resources for development (Robinson, 2000b). According to Robinson, although women's economic participation in international migration was through work as housemaids, their migratory links were mainly between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia due to religious factors. As such, Muslim Javanese were promised, as a reward by their employers, that they could make the pilgrimage to Mecca when their contracts ended. If newly rich Asian countries can be seen as a capitalist version of Mecca, this gave women a chance to make a secular pilgrimage to access modernity, thus inducing an increasing number of Indonesian women to work abroad (Lan, 2006).

1.5 Immigration of Working Women From South East Asian Countries

The immigration of women into Hong Kong is not a new phenomenon; it dates back to the colonial era. Before the 1970s, many rich Chinese families depended on female enslaved people, “mui tsai” or migrant domestic workers from Guangdong “amah”, for household work. However, since the British banned any form of selling and purchasing of *mui tsai* in 1923, the demand for domestic servitude shifted to *amah* (Oishi, 2005). In the late 1940s, the early colonial period, Hong Kong’s main economic development was entrepot trade, which greatly relied on the British government’s laissez-faire approach and the Hong Kong government’s non-intervention. Later, following the communist revolution in the early 1950s, a massive influx of capitalists and entrepreneurs from China established a prosperous industrial economy based on export in Hong Kong.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the manufacturing industries, such as garment, plastic, electronic and textile, required intensive labor forces, which accounted for 85% of the jobs for working women. The growing population enjoyed employment benefits, including refugees and immigrants from mainland China. This also increased local women of all ages’ participation in the workforce. At that time, Hong Kong was an important trading center for the manufacturing industries. Its export mainly relied on expatriates from western countries (i.e., England), of which these high-income foreign families had a great need for household help. Therefore, in 1974, the Hong Kong government officially permitted the importation of domestic workers from Asian countries (i.e., the Philippines) after President Marcos initiated the Labour Code and began its official labor migration program. This provided a steady supply of domestic workers to Hong Kong (Cortés & Pan, 2013) to serve expatriates requiring overseas domestic workers who could speak English (Constable, 1997; Tang & Yung, 2016). Gradually, there was also an increasing

demand for household help among highly skilled local families, which led to rapidly growing numbers of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Cortés & Pan, 2013).

In discussing the international migration-development nexus, the mainstream neo-classical push-pull theory creates many challenges. For example, although push factors, such as poverty, high unemployment or underemployment and low wages are likely to induce emigration, people from peripheral regions where labor is comparatively abundant and capital rare often flow to semi-peripheral or core regions where labor is in short supply, and there is a surplus of capital (Oishi, 2005). However, this does not adequately account for women's migration pattern between countries or regions, nor does it fully explain why the supply in some sending countries is dominant and why one destination has more particular types of migrants than the others (Sim & Wee, 2005).

Furthermore, scholars also argue that the influence of cultural factors, such as ethnicity, gender roles, informal social networks and linguistic resemblance, have always been overlooked and receive little attention. Yet, all these factors can challenge migrants when choosing a destination and serve as political forces that shape the adopted labor policies of sending and receiving countries. Therefore, it is practical to move beyond push-pull economic factors to examine the interplay between cultural and economic processes in mediating the international migration pattern and its consequences (Oishi, 2005; Sim & Wee, 2005).

Inspired by So (1986), I found world-system theory better at systematically explaining the interplay between supply and demand in the historical development of domestic work in Hong Kong and understanding the causes of inequality in the international political economy. I argue that analysis of the exploitation of Indonesian domestic workers should be linked to

microanalysis of the capitalist world system and not narrowed or restricted to Hong Kong or Indonesia. This is because it is essentially connected to turning points in historically important events (i.e., the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the replacement of the Suharto regime in 1998, the transformation of the reallocation of manufactory industries to service industries in Hong Kong in the 1980s to 1990s, territorial base protection and the visa regulation preclusion of China, and Macau and Taiwan citizens entering Hong Kong as domestic workers in 1990s). All these emerging political and social factors possibly alter the core semiperiphery-periphery relationship and induce the changing nature of the capitalist world system. In the following, I articulate the relationship between the economic restructuring of Hong Kong and the immigration of Indonesian domestic workers.

1.6 Economic Restructuration of Hong Kong and the Immigration of Indonesian Domestic Workers

As mentioned, in the 1970s, Hong Kong's economic development mainly relied on labor-intensive manufacturing. Nonetheless, owing to China's open-door policy to foreign investors in 1978, Hong Kong began to transform its capital flow to service industries, such as banking, finance, trade, travel and insurance (Tang & Yung, 2016). Likewise, Hong Kong's capitalist system shifted northwards with the movement of capital to China. According to Sim and Wee (2005), due to its territorial base protection regulation, the Hong Kong government unitized its sorting system to exclude China's migrants from entering to obtain job opportunities. Instead, Hong Kong began to admit temporary workers of different nationalities and physical appearances from South and Southeast Asian countries because they provided cheap and docile laborers, reducing economic costs by paying lower wages to maintain its capital-rich base.

Between 1980 and 1995, the share of the service industry in the gross domestic product (GDP) increased sharply from 68% to 83%, while the manufacturing industry's GDP shrunk from 25% to 10%. Most significantly, the annual GDP per capita doubled from HK\$80,000 to HK\$160,000 in the said period, contributing to the increasing number of women participating in the economy and becoming an important part of the labor force in Hong Kong (Tang & Yung, 2016). According to the Census and Statistics Department (1986, 1997b, as cited in Tam, 1999), female labor force participation of those aged 25 to 34 increased enormously from 47.8% in 1976 to 72.2% in 1996. At the same time, married women aged 30 to 39 years who participated in the labor force were 55.1% in 1996.

This increasing local women workforce helped increase capital accumulation and facilitated economic success for Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the rapid increase in women's labor force participation also created a huge demand for childcare and care provisions in the city were no longer able to keep pace with the urgent need for quality childcare. To fill this care gap between the government welfare policy and the urgent need for working families, female migrant domestic workers became the solution to this shortfall (Oishi, 2005).

In the 1990s, due to political and social factors between the regions, domestic worker visa regulation was banned for residents of China, Taiwan and Macau (Tam, 1999). As a result, the supply of domestic servitude mainly came from nearby peripheral Southeast Asian countries, where the labor export served to reduce the unemployment rate and increase remittances, thereby contributing to capital accumulation (Hsia, 2004).

Indeed, Hong Kong households hiring foreign domestic workers continued to grow throughout the last two decades, from the 1980s to the 2000s. In 1980, the foreign domestic worker population was around 20,000 but grew sharply to 70,000 in 1990. This number doubled

between 1990 and 1994, reaching 140,000. In 2010, this upward trend reached 286,000 (Tang & Yung, 2016), whereas, by 2016, the foreign domestic worker population had reached 343,684. Filipinos are still the biggest group in the market, and Indonesians are the second largest. Bangladeshis joined the market in 2013; the rest mostly comprise Thais, Sri Lankans and Indians.

In analyzing the relationship between international migration and capitalist development, Cheng and Bonacich (1984, as cited in Hsia, 2004) argue that the conceptualization of labor immigration is a product of capitalist development, something more than merely the push and the pull from exporting and importing countries. During capital accumulation, various factors are related to the international division of labor, such as the type of market and cheap labor at the core of semi-periphery countries and monetary funds in periphery countries (Hsia, 2004). In Indonesia, due to the impact of the Asian Financial crisis in 1997 and the replacement of the Suharto regime in 1998, a massive change occurred in the flow of domestic worker migration, with women pressured to work abroad as domestic workers. For instance, families in West Java raised funds to send women overseas to work in the domestic servitude sector resulting from the effect of the financial crisis (Hugo, 2005). This increasing outflow of Indonesian women in labor force participation was in response to the impact of the 1997 financial crisis on the labor market, which caused high male unemployment, underemployment and a sharp decrease in household income. Generally, women were sheltered from the full impact of the crisis as it mainly affected the male sector of the economy. Nevertheless, the impact of the crisis facilitated women's labor market opportunities and experience and access to modernity (Cameron, 2002).

Aside from these political-economic factors that affect labor immigration and capital accumulation in Asia-Pacific regions, Hugo (2005) points out several factors that increase the

diversity of Asian destinations for Indonesian domestic workers, reflecting the increasing differentiation of the labor market between Asian countries. First, capitalist development in core and semi-peripheral states (i.e., Hong Kong and Taiwan) is finding new markets to lower labor costs due to the higher wages paid to Filipino domestic workers. In searching for cheaper labor from periphery countries, Indonesian labor agents and recruiters have extended their business in Asia by collaborating with receiving countries. Second, the Indonesian government has become very aggressive following the financial crisis and is anxious to open up its labor market to more markets for Indonesian women. As such, the Indonesian Ministry of Labour, through its Overseas Worker Placement Agency, legitimizes the recruitment company's (Perusahaan Jasa Tenaga Kerja Indonesia) power to arrange the recruitment, placement, training, deployment and return of Indonesian domestic workers. However, the Perusahaan Jasa Tenaga Kerja Indonesia is not the regulating power; this is supposed to be the government. Yet, since labor export is a way to boost the meltdown of the Indonesian economy, the Perusahaan Jasa Tenaga Kerja Indonesia became a migrant industry or so-called trading business of profit-orientated and commodified Indonesian domestic servitude (Hugo, 2005).

World-system theory offers significant insight into how exploitation exists in the international system and how core countries pull the labor migration of peripheral countries (Oishi, 2005). In doing so, it illustrates how inequality occurs in the international division of labor and affects the movement of people and the direction of labor migration (Sim & Wee, 2005). Hence, this theory richly advances our understanding of the academic terms "global care chain," "international division of reproductive labor," and "nanny chain," clarifying how global economic restructuring induces worldwide demand for migrant domestic workers to fill the gaps in household help, child and elderly care. This facilitates capital accumulation and the

economy's success and reveals how globalization and capitalist development set forth the "race to the bottom" and competition between peripheral countries to provide the cheapest domestic labor force and incorporate women at the periphery of the world-system into the migrant industry or "global commodity chain." Thus, commodifying women as a value-added product to satisfy the market (Oishi, 2005).

However, this structuralist theory faces a great challenge because of its sole focus on the direction of labor migration and the structural forces within core, semi-periphery and periphery relations (Sim & Wee, 2005). Thus, its theoretical concern is inadequate for addressing important, hidden questions. For example, why are Filipinos still more favorable to the market than Indonesians? How are stereotyping and racialism against Filipinos and Indonesians represented and reproduced through mass media? Hong Kong is a popular destination that draws cheap and docile labor from periphery countries (i.e., Indonesia), so why did President Jokowi of Indonesia still implement a national road map banning sending women overseas in 2017? How much is this connectivity related to the political economy? If people in peripheral countries are pulled to higher-income semi-peripheral or core countries, why is the Indonesian women's movement seemingly restricted to Asia instead of high-income core countries in the West? (Oishi, 2005). Exporting labor from Indonesia allows women's participation in development. Domestic servitude provides a route toward Indonesian modernity, which is likely to be contested for its tradition and female subjectivity in Indonesia (Elmhirst, 1999). How do Indonesian domestic workers mediate these tensions and conflicting notions, then? If exploitation is at the core of human trafficking discourse, why do western countries construct Indonesian domestic workers as "victims to be saved" through governments, NGOs, activists and mass media? Indeed, is the peripheral state (i.e., Indonesia) merely a passive recipient and, in

turn, its Indonesian domestic workers? Or are they truly active social agents engaging in the social construction of their lives?

1.7 Beyond: A Post-Modernist Approach to Labor Exploitation

Therefore, it becomes essential to broaden the scope of world-system theory beyond international migration and capital accumulation. This expansion should encompass post-modernist critique of developmentalism in order to understand how the prevailing discourse on trafficking oversimplifies Indonesian domestic workers, categorizing them solely as ideal victims. According to Escobar (1995), developmentalism promotes a national ideology that emphasizes economic growth as its primary goal, modernization as its theoretical foundation, industrialization as its approach, and western countries as its model. As stated above, Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong have contributed their remittances to the country's development. These remittance heroes should be credited for the sharp annual rise in Indonesia's gross domestic product (GDP). Bambang Brodjonegoro, the deputy Finance Minister of Indonesia under President Joko Widodo, declared that the nation's economic growth must reach 5.8 percent in 2015 (*Central News Agency*, 2014). Indeed, Indonesia's Finance Minister, Muhamud Chatib Basri, stated during an investor forum that Indonesia's economic growth aimed to reach 7 percent by 2017-2018 (*Sina Finance*, 2014). Unquestionably, Indonesia, a semi-periphery country that blindly pursues developmentalism, must attain its economic growth target by inviting foreign investment, generating job vacancies, and exporting labor (Chan, 2014; Lan, 2006; Warburton, 2018). Evidently, Indonesian domestic workers as remittance heroes and Hong Kong recruitment agencies accused of cooperating to contribute to the nation's annual economic growth targets. To ensure the GDP increases, the Indonesian training centers pressure the lowest

hierarchical Indonesian domestic workers to earn money. In all actuality, this yearning for modernization and developmentalism is deeply rooted in Indonesian domestic workers' minds, shaping their definition and imagination of a better life. Western hegemony of developmentalism operates what Foucault refers to as "dividing practices" to induce a "pulling" force, thereby causing individuals from peripheral countries to adopt western ideology voluntarily. Indonesian women voluntarily subject themselves to adopt western standards by categorizing themselves as civilized or uncivilized, developed or underdeveloped. Even though migration is considered precarious, it has become a "window" for Indonesian domestic workers to explore the globe and embrace the West. Western countries can turn semi-peripheral countries into objects of their knowledge and management, influencing them to yearn for developmentalism. According to Ku (2003a), the determining factor is that western countries transform developmentalism discourse into an ideology of hegemony. This legitimizes their implementation and derivation into a set of dominant practices, which leads to people from semi-peripheral countries accepting the label bestowed on them and identifying as a group of degenerates who need to be developed. Consequently, this strengthens developmentalist ideology and enables the establishment, operation, and maintenance of western hegemony. Lan (2006) argues to comprehend the migration of Indonesian domestic workers and what motivates them to work abroad, it is important to link their situation with their cultural context to examine how the mass media shapes their cultural imagination of a better life through globalization. Lan, like Busza (2004), Hoyle et al. (2011) and Krummel (2012), refuses to oversimplify migrant domestic workers as victims of human trafficking. This is because migration is more complex, ignores migrant domestic workers' agency and neglects their resistance to negotiate oppressed and subjugated relationships.

In fact, the definition of human trafficking has long been challenged as lacking clarity. For instance, the term exploitation is said to be the core of human trafficking. Legal scholar Gallagher (as cited in Huijsmans & Baker, 2012) claims its definition is too vague and interrelated concepts such as “slavery”, “forced labor”, “practices similar to slavery” and “servitude” are all underdefined. Furthermore, when applied to real-life scenarios, it may lead to a heated debate about whether or not the forms and degrees of exploitation constitute human trafficking, as very few theoretical and conceptual knowledge bases can be traced (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012). Indeed, since the enormous anti-trafficking activities need to be justified with a legitimizing factor to ascertain the magnitude of the problem, thereby convincing society the trafficking problem is rapidly growing, the figures of the reports become very significant. Nonetheless, scholars need to be cautious about the figures, as there lacks substantive and reliable data due to a shortage of rigorous and sound methodology, and only basic projections on the number and circumstances of trafficked migrant workers without any strong scientific base (Jordan et al., 2006; Huijsmans & Baker, 2012; Kotiswaran, 2012).

Therefore, I suggest a critical stance to examine how anti-trafficking interventions have approached the exploitation of Indonesian migrant workers. In analyzing the problems concerning the anti-trafficking discourse, Kotiswaran (2012) indicates that there appears to be a global panic combined with the definitional ambivalence of human trafficking. One of the obvious features is its vulnerability approach. The vulnerability paradigm of third-world migrant workers can justify state intervention as it is backed by the moral legitimacy of international anti-trafficking law. This critique echoes post-modern feminist scholars, who argue vulnerability should be redeployed in the trafficking debate by departing from victimhood to examine so-called liberal legalism. Indeed, several factors challenge victimhood discourse. First, the U.N.

Trafficking Protocol comprises concepts of coercion, consent and exploitation. However, how can coercion and consent that drives the anti-trafficking law and its enforcement be distinguished when considering the exploitation of migrant workers? (Ghosh, 2014; Kotiswaran, 2012).

Second, women migrant workers may face a higher risk of vulnerability to trafficking due to gender discrimination and patriarchal traditions that continue to limit their employment opportunities through gender segregation in the labor market. This makes them more likely to take up unregulated domestic, entertainment and hospitality work in which women are traditionally dominated. Consequently, all women migrant workers come to be seen as vulnerable and in need of protection, and the unintended consequences are more state restrictions on their movement and freedom. Third, stringent migration and immigration policies greatly affect women's choice to access overseas job opportunities and conditions. Therefore, does this anti-trafficking intervention conflict with women migrants' best interests? (Jordan et al., 2006; Huijsmans & Baker, 2012; Richards, 2004). Fourth, would ending women's migration reduce exploitation from recruiting agents or people exploiting them simply because they need a job? Would this be an unrealistic or oversimplification of the absolute poverty or unemployment problem in the peripheral states? (Adragna, 2014; Huijsmans & Baker, 2012).

There are scant studies specifically examining the discourse on human trafficking. Nonetheless, Desyllas (2007) critically analyzes the construction and discursive history behind it. She follows the work of Michel Foucault, utilizing a third-world feminist theoretical framework in addition to post-modern feminist theory to critique the dominant discourse on human trafficking. For example, Desyllas (2007) maintains the relevant concepts related to trafficking are "socially legitimized as knowledge and truth within society" (p. 58), which connects with discourse, language and knowledge, with the definition of trafficking predominantly constructed

by the hegemonic position of the ethnocentric language and western assumptions. Consequently, this understanding of the “truth” oppresses and omits the voices of migrants, discounts their agency, and constructs them as weak and “other” using the hegemonic framework of protecting and rescuing victims. This legitimately takes away their power and agency. Therefore, Desyllas strongly urges a conceptual shift is needed to examine the experiences of migrants and emphasize the importance of migrants’ agency.

Clearly, the anti-trafficking movement’s labeling effect can isolate and deny migrant women workers’ choices, overlook their ability to understand their work or give alternative definitions for their job. Therefore, circulating the moralization of human trafficking can neglect that victims can have agency and voices in migration (Warren, 2012). Schrover (2009) argues there is a tendency for migrant women to be constructed as wives and mothers instead of workers in the migration literature. This is combined with victimhood discourse that perceives women as vulnerable. Representation is continuously used by governments and migrant organizations to create differences between migrant men and women and successfully force migrant women to remain by adopting restrictive immigration policies. Schrover (2009) maintains this victimhood discourse best fits western ideas of femininity, giving a humanitarian face to it but reinforcing the gender hierarchy. Hence, he objects to using victimhood discourse in issues concerning migrant women, as vulnerability is a negative connotation that denies agency and empowerment.

In line with a growing body of feminist literature, scholars have started to contest the discursive work of anti-trafficking intervention and explore the various ways migrant women negotiate and counter the vulnerability stereotype and labeling (Adragna, 2014; Fukushima, 2012; Ghosh, 2014; Howard, 2012; Huijsmans, & Baker, 2012; Schrover, 2009; Warren, 2012). For example, Ghosh (2014) conducted an inspiring ethnography to study how Indian migrant

women negotiate their gendered and problematic notions of vulnerability constructed in their migration process. She revealed that the anti-trafficking interventions of NGOs deploy a harmful “paternal protectionism” on migrant women by characterizing the borderland as a space for risks for women migration. However, these Indian women asserted their agency to challenge the overarching framework of victimization, fighting for their choice of work and that whether it is good or bad work should come from women’s opinions, rejecting “gendered determined hierarchy” moral evaluation. They struggled to create a space for themselves. Indeed, they contested their portrayal as passive victims through the narration of alternative stories. They ultimately argued the significance of knowledge and choice in their migration decision by exerting control over their experience, opposing the stereotype of a trafficked victim.

Based on my personal encounters with Indonesian domestic workers, my observations and experiences differ significantly from the prevailing discourses in Western countries. These countries often depict them as passive victims of human trafficking or portray them as docile, obedient, and ignorant individuals. Although these social constructs still exert a certain level of control over Indonesian domestic workers, my own experiences have shown me that they are tactical and non-subjugated subjects who employ various strategies to safeguard themselves. They also develop discursive counter discourses to defend and legitimate their actions while cleverly utilizing cultural stereotypes imposed upon them to their advantage. Despite being subjected to domination, Indonesian domestic workers exhibit agency and resilience in navigating their circumstances for self-benefit.

Given the above, I argue that even though exploitation is an important feature of Indonesian migrant workers, caution should be exercised as these studies adopt a trafficking lens to understand migrant women as vulnerable. In doing so, this reinforces racial stereotypes of

Indonesian domestic workers and reduces them to mere commodities. One way forward is to use a cultural politics lens to explore how Indonesian migrant workers exercise agency, which is an important mode of critique to contest the dominant perspective.

1.8 Overview of the Thesis

I use the metaphor “Fighting under the blanket” to depict the culturally specific way of resistance exhibited by Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong. This metaphor exemplifies a historical product formed in conjunction with developmentalism’s aspiration, international migration under globalization, the commodification of people in the capitalist production chain, and infrapolitics that theorize the subordinate group of Indonesian domestic workers’ everyday forms of resistance, singular or collective.

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. In this chapter, I contextualized Indonesian domestic labor exploitation within a body of scholarly literature by critically reviewing the classic push and pull theory, a world-system perspective and posing a post-modernist critique. I demonstrated that a shift in the discourse contextualizing the hardships of Indonesian domestic workers, from exploitation to human trafficking, is theoretically insufficient to explain the cause and mechanism of exploitation that oppresses and silences the voices of Indonesian domestic workers. This overlooks their agency and portrays them as passive, vulnerable, and weak. Therefore, I suggest replacing it with a cultural politics lens instead of a trafficking one to understand their predicament.

In Chapter 2, I will illustrate the importance of adopting a Foucauldian approach to cultural politics to establish a link between Indonesian domestic workers’ treatment and

transnational labor migration. Foucault contests the narrow conventional understanding of power to oppose power as top-down hegemony; alternatively, all parties are equal opponents in power relations, entangled in discourses tied to power/knowledge. Since power domination and resistance are two sides of the same coin in cultural politics, my theoretical concerns focus on the realm of power/knowledge and the subaltern's reconfiguration of power and resistance. As such, I will employ Foucault's two major concepts, the "docile body" and "transgression", to examine how Indonesian domestic workers are coerced and struggle against the dominants.

Chapter 3 will show why oral history supplemented with ethnography will yield the richest data and best address my research objectives. I will explain which international instruments and what criteria I will examine when identifying participants in this research after reviewing the bulk of the academic work of the International Labour Organization's exploitation research and other related scholarly works. In addition, I will demonstrate what substantial practical and ethical challenges exist and how my position as an insider/outsider, social worker, researcher and employer, will enable me to overcome these hurdles.

In Chapter 4, I will set the stage for the next three chapters by introducing an Indonesian domestic worker, Eza, and her 10-year migratory trajectory in Hong Kong. I use Eza as an exemplar of an Indonesian domestic worker because she was subjected to numerous forms of labor exploitation throughout her four contracts in Hong Kong, including underpayment, passport confiscation, denial of holidays, physical abuse, inadequate food, and occupational injury. By drawing on Eza's comprehensive vivid life history, which echoes the experiences of many Indonesian domestic workers, I hope to provide readers with a glimpse of the cultural politics of migrants. In particular, how they contest ill-treatment at work, resist being turned into

a commodity for sale, transgress sexual orientation and sexual desire and battle to bring legal action against their employers.

From Chapter 5 through Chapter 7, increased emphasis will be placed on the resistance of migrants. In Chapter 5, by utilizing a framework of rightful resistance, I will examine why so many Indonesian domestic workers struggle with whether or not to pursue legal action to address their rights through authorized means. Can they resolve the problem by prosecuting the protagonist through legal proceedings? And, ultimately, why do migrants prefer less overt everyday forms of resistance to more overt legal forms? Why did the legal forms of resistance become so terrifying? What advantages do they receive from their overt resistance? Is rightful resistance more consequential as a weapon or, paradoxically, as an amulet?

Chapter 6 will follow the paradox and unresolved issues raised in Chapter 5 to address several issues: Are Indonesian domestic workers simply a commodity of modern slavery, as western countries claim? How does the labor export system shape migrant women into docile bodies? How does self-discipline occur? And, what regulatory technologies that the two governments (Indonesia and Hong Kong) use for surveillance and discipline to control migrants, which individualizes and totalizes them? Notwithstanding, can Indonesian domestic workers, as commodities, shift from object to subject in their ongoing commodification process? Can new forms of economic subjectivity emerge?

In response to the critique that both receiving and sending states depict Indonesian domestic workers solely as economic bodies, Chapter 7 will examine how their sexual transgressions conflict with the state's idealized feminine morality and how they construct their discursive counter-discourse that manifests in their everyday lives. The following critical questions will be addressed: How does the Indonesian New Order impact the gendered morality

of Indonesian domestic workers when they migrate? How does Hong Kong society view Indonesian domestic workers' sexual transgressions, which reinforce the stereotypes that the hegemonic discourse portrays? And, what counter-discourses do Indonesian domestic workers employ to defend and legitimize their sexual decisions and transgressions?

Concluding Chapter 8 will address the cultural politics of Indonesian domestic workers in light of their action principles. Indeed, reflecting on and reconsidering my dual roles as a social worker and researcher will be explored to expose the struggles and myths.

Chapter Two

Foucauldian Approach to Cultural Politics

It seems to me that power is 'always already there' that one is never 'outside' it...But this does not entail the necessity of accepting an inescapable form of domination or an absolute privilege on the side of the law. To say that one can never be 'outside' power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what...hence one should not assume a massive and primal condition of domination, a binary structure with 'dominators' on one side and 'dominated' on the other, but rather a multiform production of relations of domination...there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised...[Resistance] exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies.

("Power and Strategies": an interview with Michel Foucault)⁸

⁸ Foucault, M. (1980b). Power and Strategies. In M. Foucault & C. Gordon, *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (pp. 141-142). Pantheon Books.

2.1 Culture, Politics, Power/Knowledge

I use the Foucauldian approach to cultural politics to link Indonesian domestic workers' experiences and the process of transnational labor migration. Drawing on insight from Kate Nash's cultural politics model presented in: "The Cultural Turn in Social Theory: Towards a Theory of Cultural Politics", I follow Foucault's "analytics of power" and develop his ideas of domination and resistance to construct my theoretical framework. I argue that Foucault's reasoning of politics involving the contestation of relations of power lays out important principles and elements for me in theorizing a radical model of cultural politics in the realm of contemporary political sociology. I also maintain that this model can apply equally to the politics of the internationalized state and civil society and the studies of globalization (Nash, 2001).

2.1.1 Reconfiguration of Culture in Politics

Referring to the key term culture, I first position it according to Foucault's definition in "The Hermeneutics of the Subject," which is, "A hierarchical organization of values that is accessible to everyone but which at the same time gives rise to a mechanism of selection and exclusion" (Gros, 2005, p. 179). Since culture is a hierarchical organization of values, it should be understood that it represents all people, regardless of time, place, or group, as well as humanity as a whole, in their special way, which is embedded in webs of power (Williams, 2015, p. 90). Indeed, what makes us able to give meaning and significance to our everyday life, is all about culture (Chaney, as cited in Nash, 2001).

Nonetheless, I argue that culture is a contested and elastic term, which can also be described as a process (Duncombe et al., 2002) where value is internalized and able to exert anti-

politics and promote transcendence (Arnold, 1993). As such, culture is political and can be used as a means of resistance (Arnold, 1993; Marx & Engels, 1970). Culture plays an important role in constituting an individual's sense of being by providing a sense of identity. It denotes, "Who we are, where we are from and where we are going" (Jordan & Weedon, 1995, p. 3) and competes in terms of cultural domination versus cultural subordination, which culture should be displayed or hidden. It also implies what social life categories should be protected versus what should be marginalized, what voices should be heard versus those to be silenced, who is speaking or representing whom and vice versa. Such debates fall into the realm of cultural politics, concerning which categories of people have the power to define the meanings of social practices and also emphasize the making of subjectivities and identities (Jordan & Weedon, 1995). Culture is indeed a sign of the "existence of order," as stated in Foucault's (1970, p. xxiii) book "The Order of Things" and his work. He articulates and recognizes how culture is made through various types of order that are exchanged and intertwined with "space and time" to form the "basis of knowledge." Hence, I suggest the theoretical concerns at the core of my research concern the realm of power/knowledge and the subaltern's reconfiguration of power and resistance in terms of its nature, location, operation, practices, and tactics in a context where culture is a site of politics and power is positioned at the center of cultural politics.

Indeed, when discussing the realm of power and politics, tension between structural and cultural dimensions always arises in sociological research. Theorists have long debated if the two can be jointly embedded to constitute an individual's social relations and identities (Goldberg et al., 2016). Or if there is any possibility of a dynamic relationship between structural (e.g., nation-state powers, globalization powers and governmental forces) and cultural practices to understand better the complex articulation of migrant workers' identities, agency and discourse (Drzewiecka

& Halualani, 2002). Regarding the “cultural turn” in the ontology of political sociology, theorists have raised two important questions, is culture something universally constitutive of social relations and identities, and can culture play an unprecedented role in constituting social relations and identities? According to Nash (2001), the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens is increasingly concerned with the relationship between structure and agency; nevertheless, his standpoint tends to emphasize that social structures are reproduced through social actors’ everyday practices. Even the hegemony theory of Gramsci stresses the significance of culture in using political consent to rule. However, this is criticized because residual economism is said to constitute economic determinism when understanding politics, as hegemony remains ultimately based on class issues (Nash, 2001). Along with the Marxist tradition, Lash and Urry’s (1987, 1994; as cited in Nash, 2001) viewpoint on capitalist social relations suggests making links with “signs.” They urge to understand contemporary global capitalism better; it is necessary to perceive culture as being implicated with consumption and production. This is consistent with the plethora of postmodernity theorists who regard social life as mediated by culture, with a radically unstable nature, and manipulated by symbols and meanings to secure collective identities.

Referring to the paradigm shift, Nash (2001) argues this cultural turn is a consequence of the rejection of structuralist theory’s deterministic ideology merely focusing on structural aspects. Thus, theorists started to move beyond the structural dimension and pay attention to agency and subjectivity, which emphasizes the subjective construction of social actors in society. However, in Nash’s standpoint, the issue of agency, although clearly discussed, makes understanding power problematic. Foucault disagrees that the “juridico-discursive” mode of power is regarded as being possessed by the state or that people usually perceive power as

something imposing order on society by law, a legal contract involving legitimate prohibition, or repressive legislation and policing to maintain class domination (Foucault 1980, as cited in Nash, 2001). On the contrary, Foucault is concerned with how power works within states, institutions and discourses across the social field by analyzing how power exercises in terms of social practices at certain points produces effects and exists as fluid, omnipresent, reversible and strategic. When Foucault uses the term domination, he refers to it and replaces it with power within the government. In Foucault's feature of power, power is a fluid matter concerning social relations where human interactions and domination are seen as a particular structure of power instead of being consolidated in hierarchal and stable relations (Nash, 2001).

Given the above theoretical lens, Nash urges that conventional politics focusing at a state level should be displaced to other forms. However, this does not mean that the state is irrelevant to politics; rather, cultural politics in or between civil societies and states within the practices and institutions should be considered. At the same time, the state also provides conditions for the effect of social action.

2.1.2 An effect of Power/Knowledge

In addition, when discussing the notions of power, Foucault challenges the narrow understanding of the conventional view that power has overly emphasized the ways, "ideology operates through conceptions of hegemony," where its discursive mode has been undermined and not received much attention (Clegg, 1989, p. 15). In Foucault's (1978) words, "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (p. 95). Thus, in his line of reasoning, power does not occur as

an autonomous or monolithic state. Instead, his notion of power lies within individuals and collective institutions as equal players in the field, in which “power and resistance coexist and constantly reassert themselves against each other” (Constable, 1997, p. 11). Despite this, Foucault (1978) argues two points. First, the discursive mode of power exists and is exercised “in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” but not “something that is acquired, seized, or shared” (p. 94). Second, the individual in this relation is not considered an “Elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material” in which power crushes oneself. Rather, the individual is identified and constituted already by the effects of the power of “certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires” (Foucault, 1980d, p. 98). Foucault (1980d) concludes that:

The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle. (p. 98)

Foucault focuses on analyzing how the threads of discourse and practice are interwoven with the “subject,” “knowledge,” and “power” by locating them historically (Rabinow, 1984, p. 7). He attempts to unmask how power operates in society, which appears to be neutral and independent, by exercising strategies in the form of knowledge and institutional practices that make human subjects turn into an “object” (Gordon, 1980, p. 235). He also affirms this set of relational forces constitutes the domain of the political in society but denies the political can determine the final analysis even when the relations are fundamental and by nature. Foucault’s claim, “Everything is political,” is to assert the being of relations of forces and their immanency (Foucault, 1980c, p. 189).

In understanding Foucault’s genealogy of the modern subject, I found his three books, “History of Madness (1961),” “The birth of the clinic (1963),” and “Discipline and Punish: The

Birth of the Prison (1975),”⁹ extremely helpful to comprehend how social construction becomes possible in society through power/knowledge. In these three books, Foucault argues that the terms “madness,” “pathology,” and “deviance” are socially and historically constructed by the newly developed “human sciences” of “psychiatry,” “clinical medicine,” and “criminology” in the mid-17th and 18th centuries, in conjunction with the power operation network of social institutions, as a result of society’s effective social control. Foucault introduced the term “archeology” in the “History of Madness” to illustrate how a social discourse became conceivable in the mid-17th century (Hacking, 2006, p. xii). Although Foucault retraced history before the mid-17th century, he found no mention of the term madness. Insane people were not classified as “reason” or “unreason,” and the terms “object” or “medical” were not used for mental diagnosis, cure and treatment (Foucault & Khalfa, 2006, p. 519). However, with the establishment of human science, people became “medical objects” of psychiatry diagnosis and treatment. Furthermore, once classified under the term “mental alienation” (e.g., those who disobeyed or undertook violent social disorder) (p. 82), they would be arrested, disciplined, divided, and confined in institutions as objects for inhuman treatment (p. 140); consequently, social stability could be achieved, and no one could affect the social order.

In Foucault’s book “Discipline and Punish” (1977), he uncovers certain forms of discipline that began to develop through a new project of docility in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries, which were formed by a compilation of “knowledge, techniques, ‘scientific’ discourses” and became intertwined with “the practice of the power to punish” (p. 23).

⁹ The years listed for these three publications by Michel Foucault denote their first publication in French. When referencing the text in this document, I use the English version, with the years modified as follows: “History of Madness (2006),” “The Birth of the Clinic (1994),” “Discipline and Publish: The Birth of the Prison” (1995).

Consequently, a new power extended its effects to judge and punish through the “scientifico-legal complex” in which it derives its “bases, justifications and rules” that disguise its “exorbitant singularity” (p. 23). In “Discipline and Punish”, Foucault shifts his methodology from archeology to genealogy, which is different from his previous work, “History of Madness” and “The Birth of the Clinic,” which focused on uncovering how power operates behind the discourses. Foucault’s focus on genealogy was intended to unmask new techniques used to link the “analyzable body” to the “manipulable body” concerning docility. His critique of these “new things” included “the scale of control” changing from “wholesale” (unity) to “retail” (individual), “subtle coercion” by exercising “mechanism itself” in the form of “movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body,” “object of the control” by using “the economy, the efficiency of the movements, their internal organization” but no longer the “signifying elements of behavior or the language of the body” (p. 136-137). As such, a docile body may still be “subjected, used, transformed and improved” (p. 136) in a more subtle but modern way and discipline may be imposed more effectively “at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful” (p. 138).

2.2 Disciplining the Docile Body as a Strategy for Domination

Foucault’s disciplinary power is particularly relevant for my analysis in this research, as his ideas about docile bodies and covert discipline are very useful for exploring the docility of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong (also see Constable, 1997). For example, certain forms of control and discipline experienced in their trafficking and the exploitative practices within the Indonesian labor export system (recruitment, pre-departure, destination country, upon return), their dealings with recruitment and placement agencies in Indonesia and Hong Kong, employers

and government bureaucracy and policies, can be regarded as a modern form of total bodily discipline.

2.2.1 Metaphor of a Soldier: Automatism of Habit

Foucault uses many metaphors in his work “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison”, such as “soldier,” “machine,” and “panopticon” to illustrate how discipline produced the docile body in the 18th century and how this new form of power, through the transformation of people’s bodies, corrected the modern soul of people. Thereby ultimately serving as a form of governmentality to manage the population effectively (Foucault, 1975/1995). In discussing how the docile body is produced, Foucault first uses the soldier metaphor in the late 18th century to illustrate that people’s bodies had already become objects and “targets of power” by authorities since the classical age (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 136). As Foucault states:

...the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit; in short, one has ‘got rid of the peasant’ and given him ‘the air of a soldier’. (p. 135)

In Foucault’s reasoning, regardless of a peasant’s initial quality, qualified or unqualified, fit or unfit, willing or unwilling, they can be transformed into a soldier. The meaning behind “a calculated constraint” is that it is designed, exercised and mastered by the “power-over” (governments, recruitment agencies, employers). In this sense, one’s body can be manipulated, shaped and trained by this power, and through repetitive performance and correction, that body will slowly be self-evaluated and self-regulated. It obeys, responds, becomes skillful, and

increases its forces until it reaches a state of “automatism of habit.” Thus, peasants are no longer peasants, as they behave like soldiers.

Here, I argue that the soldier metaphor can serve as an analogy for the Indonesian domestic worker to reveal a similar process of how a village woman turns into a docile maid or a commodity for sale on the market. Thus, in understanding Foucault’s notion of the docile body, I argue there are important interrelated questions, for example, from where does this notion derive? What are its main features? What is the relationship between the notions of docility and discipline? Does discipline have any historical meaning in its genealogy? How does discipline produce docile bodies? What are the essential techniques used in this form of discipline?

2.2.2 Metaphor of Machine: Docility Reigns at the Center

To understand how a soldier can be transformed or reach the automatism of habit from calculated constraints, Foucault uses the metaphor of a machine to help him illustrate his idea of how the docile body is created. Here, I argue that Foucault carefully selected authors’ ideas of machines. For example, he criticizes the work of Descartes, who claimed humans are like animals having no feelings or thoughts. Foucault disagreed with this dualism. He, in turn, adopted the idea of L’Homme’s “Man a Machine” to symbolize his ideas of self-discipline, in which something makes it possible for the docile body to become self-operated and self-evaluated. What Foucault borrowed from “Man a Machine” is the relationship between body and mind. L’Homme strongly rejected Descartes’ claim; he instead emphasized how bodily experience affects human beings’ mental processes. I argue this point is very important for understanding how automatism of habit takes place. I maintain that why and how such

“automata” can occur is, on the one hand, through repetitive performance, undoubtedly serving as the necessary condition. However, on the other hand, without self-discipline taking place, this machinery of power fails its function; thus, the docile body cannot be generated because Foucault emphasizes the operation of self-generated power. In Foucault’s reasoning, self-discipline is the necessary and sufficient condition to make the docile body possible:

La Mettrie’s *L’Homme machine* is both a materialist reduction of the soul and a general theory of dressage, at the centre of which reigns the notion of ‘docility’, which joins the analysable body to the manipulable body. A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved. (p. 136)

For Foucault, seeking an explanation for an “intelligible body” and submission of a “useful body”, the features of a docile body consist of two parts, the “analysable body” and the “manipulable body”, resembling the “anatomico-metaphysical” and “technico-political” registers. These automata are not used to account for an organism, rather, they are reflected as small-scale models of power, in which such power operation “was constituted by a whole set of regulations and by empirical and calculated methods relating to the army, the school and the hospital, for controlling or correcting the operations of the body” (p. 136).

2.2.2.1 Discipline: Political Anatomy and Mechanics of Power. Following Foucault, this form of docility-centered machine has two purposes. First, to assure “constant subjection” and to impose a “docility-utility” relationship on the human body (p. 137). Second, to make the human body more obedient, thus becoming more useful or vice-versa (p. 138). What Foucault calls discipline is what makes the operations of the human body calculated and meticulously controlled or the required methods.

The term discipline is not synonymous with a layman’s understanding of using certain methods to make people obey. In Foucault’s genealogical framework, discipline constitutes its

historical meaning. Foucault places it into three layers. First, discipline is an art of the human body, to recognize that a new mechanism of relations was born, collaborating with the birth of an art of the human body in the historical moment, aimed at making people obedient and useful to authority (p. 137). Second, discipline becomes “a policy of coercions” to symbolize a new policy act upon the human body, using calculated manipulation to manipulate the human body’s elements, gestures and behavior (p. 138). Third, discipline turned to “political anatomy” or a “Mechanics of Power” to reveal it was unavoidable for the human body to get into this kind of new machinery of power, in which it was being explored, broken down and rearranged. One can use designated techniques to determine the human body’s speed and efficiency. Consequently, the human body was being manipulated automatically and silently. It was not only making people do “what one wishes,” it was turning them into self-operated “as one wishes.” Thus, an end product of a docile body was produced, a subjected and practiced body in automata (p. 137-138).

2.2.2.2 Discipline is a Political Anatomy of Detail. Foucault emphasizes, “Discipline is a political anatomy of detail” (p. 139). When he discusses the birth of this new form of political anatomy, he rejects it as a sudden discovery. Instead, he views it as a “multiplicity of often minor processes,” which seem to be dispersed in different locations. Still, these different processes may intertwine, support each other, and converge to produce this new invention (p. 138). As such, Foucault claims meticulous and minute techniques occur. Their importance cannot be overlooked, as these micro techniques form a “new microphysics of power,” which can ultimately extend to the entire social body (p. 139). Therefore, Foucault argues we should look into how the tactic functions and focus on how coherent this tactic relates to others and how other external conditions combine to make the tactic possible to form a microphysics of power.

Therefore, in this thesis, I will illustrate how these meticulous and minute techniques are utilized in their disciplinary process to produce the docile body. Indeed, I demonstrate how the power-over (governments, recruitment agencies, employers) utilize time, space and activity to operate Foucault's disciplinary mechanism. Most importantly, I reveal the tactical process of how Indonesian migrants impose self-discipline, thus ultimately producing a docile maid. I argue that the profit-making recruitment agencies intend to transform Indonesian women into a "qualified" and "fit" commodity that will satisfy potential market employers. I will explore ways Indonesian domestic workers are controlled, and their bodies disciplined to mold them into a single commodity, hard-working, docile, obedient and submissive for export into the global labor market through capitalist labor control and the disciplinary process. Simultaneously, I will examine how women self-discipline and self-regulate to fit into the market's desired mold (Constable, 1997; Moors, 2003). In addition, I will explore how women's bodies are disciplined by altering their biological and personal data and physical features to conform to an acceptable mold and how large recruitment fees make them economically dependent and desirable for employers (Constable, 1997). Apart from commodification, I will also examine how household rules and CCTV serve as new forms of discipline to control Indonesian domestic workers' bodies. Here, I assert several forms of discipline occur within the household. Control through their employers' discipline can extend into their private and spatial domains (Bruyns & Nel, 2020; Lan, 2003), including their appearance, sexual orientation, intimate relationships, and financial management. Indeed, unofficial agreements, detailed timetables and strict work schedules may also allow employers to manipulate their time and space (Constable 1997), making them subordinate and inferior, transforming them and the mechanism into docile bodies.

2.3 Transgression as a Tactic: Shaking Legitimate Truth

Since cultural politics is dualistic, like a coin with two sides, it addresses how domination is produced and how resistance is exerted. As previously stated, I contend that Indonesian domestic workers are not entirely “powerless passive subjects” but are “active-as-being” while resisting oppression and the dominant. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge that Indonesian domestic workers must be viewed as active social agents who contribute to constructing their lives and meanings within the context of cultural politics.

In understanding Indonesian domestic workers’ resistance within the Foucauldian framework, resistance should be theorized as a consequence of effect in the realm of power/knowledge. Even Foucault emphasized the coexistence of power and resistance in power relationships, but how do we distinguish transgression from resistance? Some may argue that transgression is a form of resistance (see Allan, 2008), whereas some may posit that transgression can go beyond resistance (see Ahn, 2018). Do I need to situate my position a priori? Or are we unable or unsuitable to affirm anything in the here and now? Thus, I maintain that transgression, as a form of or beyond resistance, is determined by the resulting possibilities in a particular time and place (Ott & Keeling, 2011) where it is highly uncertain, unfixed, unstable, and interacts with other modes of resistance in a complex way, in which hegemony power relations and the status quo can be violated or merely opposed. As such, I situate transgression as a mode that falls within the spectrum of resistance, as Ott and Keeling (2011) describe:

I define resistance as any discourse, performance, or aesthetic practice, which through its symbolic and/or material enactment, transgresses, subverts, disrupts, and/or rebels against the social codes, customs, and/or conventions that --- through their everyday operation ---

create, sustain, and naturalize the prevailing relations of power in a particular time and place. (p. 335)

Foucault's work can be divided into three distinctive but penetrable phases, with different major focuses and discussions. It can be classified from his early stage of epistemological knowledge formation to his middle stage of technology of power and its discursive practice, then to his later stage of self-formation, the technology of self and freedom. Foucault's final stage of concern was intended to address the question of how one could actualize as a human subject under a disciplinary society. He states in "The History of Sexuality (Vol II): Use of Pleasure" what motivated his curiosity in his examination of knowledge was not the assimilation of knowledge; it was to enable "one to get free of oneself" (Foucault, 1987, p. 8). In other words, Foucault's main concern was to study how one's subjectification process could become possible and where one as a "subject of desires" could actualize themselves as a "human subject" even when subject to domination.

Perhaps, Foucault has already offered one of the answers in his work, "A Preface to Transgression"; here, he initiates a notion of transgression to illustrate how one negotiates in this process:

Transgression is an action that involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy. (1977, pp. 33-34)

For Foucault, whenever a human being is overpowered, even when crossing the line, it is a complex process that greatly depends on the situation. Still, it is natural to have the desire or will for power. Foucault often connects the notion of transgression to three interrelated keywords,

“experience,” “limit,” and “pleasure,” in exploring how and what transgression can do and bring for us. I consider these three terms as harmonizing through a spiral and circular bond.

2.3.1 Circular Bond: Experience, Limit, Pleasure

Practicing transgression is an “experiencing”; I argue that the term experience should be taken in the gerund form of experiencing instead of static experience, as it should be viewed as an active, ever-changing and dynamic process (Elliott et al., 2004), where it involves the interaction with other players in the power-relation field. Foucault defines experience as “something that can and must be thought. What are the games of truth by which man proposes to think his own nature where he perceives himself as mad...” (Foucault, 1987, p. 7). This implies when Foucault uses the notion of experience, he emphasizes the discourse in which it is historically constituted and formed in the so-called games of truth. Therefore, when studying experience, aside from psychological stresses, such as perception, memory, feelings, felt meaning, action tendencies and linguistic conceptual thought (Elliott et al., 2004), it is important to include Foucault’s genealogical analysis dimension because it traces the historical social construction of discourse to determine what is going on with relationships in terms of games of truth, as Foucault (1987) maintains:

I felt obligated to study the games of truth in the relationship of self with self and the forming of oneself as a subject, taking as my domain of reference and field of investigation what might be called the history of desiring man. (p. 6)

Foucault is conscious of the relationship between transgression and limit, as these two concepts must co-exist simultaneously. They depend and rely on each other; without either one, a crisis of existence may happen:

The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable, and reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows. (Foucault, 1977, p. 34)

In this sense, transgression and limit are not simply mutually exclusive; one depends on the other for its existence (Ahn, 2018). It enables one to identify themselves by recognizing their excluder and establishing their identity (Foucault, 1977). For Foucault, even the relationship is a paradox; it enables transgression to liberate its potential energy (Ahn, 2018).

What transgression can then be generated? For Foucault, it is undoubtedly a result of a form of power. However, the importance of his notion of pleasure is always neglected in resistance studies. Indeed, as Foucault states in “The History of Sexuality (Vol. 1): An Introduction”, pleasure and power both exist in the mechanism of power operations:

The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 45).

Foucault further emphasizes in his later work, “Body/Power”, that pleasure is a buffer for power to “retreat, reorganize its force, invest itself everywhere” so that the battle can continue (Foucault, 1980a, p. 56)

Therefore, questions remain: How is this battle of transgression exercised? How does power operate in this battlefield? What are the gains? What remains? Therefore, when we talk about practicing transgression, it should be captured within the four major features presented below.

2.3.1.1 Four Major Features of Transgression. The first feature of transgression is “limit is created by language,” but how does one identify where and whether a limit exists? In Foucault’s reasoning, no one would identify the limit if it is only by means of language. It is exercised aggressively by using language to exclude the form of what we originally and persistently regard as natural. Foucault (1977) states, “What characterizes modern sexuality from Sade to Freud is not it’s having found the language of its logic or of its natural process, but rather, through the violence done by such languages, it’s having been ‘denatured’” (p. 29). Indeed, how do we know a rule that tells us what we should or should not do? And how can we know a limit that we cannot exceed; otherwise, we may have consequences? It is through discourse; discourse is relied upon through language to represent and propagate it. To avoid violent punishment, we use self-discipline to abide by the rules. Foucault (1977) uses sexuality as an example of this kind of fissure, a symbol of a crack that separates and excludes one from others, “Sexuality is a fissure --- not one which surrounds us as the basis of our isolation or individuality, but one which marks the limit within us and designates us as a limit” (p. 30). Without language, it is impossible to recognize what and where of a limit.

The second feature of transgression is “an experience of interior and sovereign”: How does one experience practicing transgression, or how does one feel while crossing the limit? For Foucault (1977), once people pass the boundary, transgression thus provides them space to experience the “inner experience” in three layers. The first layer is “consequently to experience [*that*] which is interior and sovereign” (p. 32). By creating one’s space within a designated or seemingly restricted culture and language context, we can enjoy a moment of freedom or otherness (Allan, 2008). The second layer is the “experience of the impossible” (Foucault, 1977, p. 32). Here, we exceed our constrained self that once was denied by the limit, and it is

transgression that constitutes the experience and makes us experience “the impossible being.” The third layer is “to recognize itself for the first time.” As Foucault states, “transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance to find itself in what it excludes (perhaps, to be more exact, to recognize itself for the first time)” (p. 34). This means that when we are crossing the limit, we can see who is excluding us due to the limit imposed, and it can be the first time we finally recognize our real existence.

The third feature of transgression is “affirmation contains nothing positive.” Will transgression establish alternative discourse? Does violating the limit mean creating another new truth in the game of truth negotiation? Foucault’s answer is no, “no established discourse can supply its model, its foundation, or even the riches of its vocabulary” (p. 40). Foucault wants to show that transgression does not intend to affirm a universal claim or discourse that replaces the old, homogenic, constrained one with fixed content. Instead, Foucault points out that transgression vs. limit is not black vs. white, using violent ways to conquer the limit or revolutionary ways to fight for victory (p. 35). Transgression’s affirmation means two things: the first “affirms the limitlessness into which leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time” (p. 35). Its focus is on limitlessness, the human subject, in which one’s existence could be the first time it is recognized. The second is “affirmation contains nothing positive: no content can blind it, since by definition, no limit can possibly restrict it” (p. 36). Its focus is related to the content, the language itself; there is no specific, static, established, positivist claim or universal truth. Using Foucault’s idea, transgression is intended to demonstrate the “existence of difference” (p. 36).

The fourth feature of transgression is “is exposed.” One may argue that if transgression is neither for fighting “victory over limit” nor producing established discourse, then what is the

significance of practicing transgression? I argue that Foucault may address this challenge in two ways: Transgression enables one to break the surveillance chain. What makes surveillance successful and effective in our society? It is through self-discipline. And when would this chain be destroyed? According to Foucault, it is until the “sovereign subject” emerges. And when will that happen? Transgression can be seen as one of the strategies, as he states, “This inner movement is finally resolved in a nonmaterial center where the intangible forms of truth are created and combined, in this heart of things which is the sovereign subject” (p. 45). It implies that once transgression takes place, in this inner movement in the form of self-discipline, thus being paused or ceased, at least one would be awake, and we can get a sense of self-control, even if this freedom is only partial. Therefore, what is the significance of this transgression experience? Foucault regards it as a possibility or chance for one to create their space to become a “speaking subject”; this speaking subject is not aimed at “expressing himself” but “is exposed” (p. 51), being recognized for their existence instead of being excluded.

Therefore, I argue that Indonesian domestic workers are not simply powerless passive subjects; instead, they are “active-as-individuals” when responding to their oppression (Constable, 1997, p. xxi). Therefore, it is crucial that they are perceived as active social agents participating in the meaning-making of their lives; they react to control and bodily discipline within the context of cultural politics. They perform as dynamic power adversaries when they react to control and bodily discipline, regardless of whether they feel powerless, vulnerable, or subject to coercion. Despite this, they can resist oppression and negotiate the stereotypes assigned to them. They can use less overt or confrontational tactics or cross boundaries to disturb and unsettle the assumptions embedded in the dominant ideologies and discourses that exclude

them. Most significantly, for understanding migrant resistance, it should be theorized as the effect of the power operation in the realm of power/knowledge.

2.4 Constructing the “Ideal Victim”

Panopticism is a metaphor used by Foucault to explain how the “new physics of power” mechanism is used to control social bodies (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 208). Under this architectural design of a prison, social bodies are arranged separately and individually in a designated spatial arrangement while being seen 24 hours a day by an observer (e.g., a guard) stationed in the tower’s central hierarchical position. As a result, it is an efficient method for monitoring and controlling social bodies as they become self-disciplined to avoid danger. Indeed, Foucault also describes how the “mechanism of discipline” operates and how “examination,” which functions as a disciplinary tool of “normalizing gaze” for “normalizing judgment,” makes “monitoring” legitimate in society (p. 184). Thus, with the emergence and assistance of human sciences, these “sciences” turned to disciplinary knowledge to “judge” (p. 226) and produce power in the arena of “power-knowledge relations” (p. 27).

The global discourse on trafficking in persons or human trafficking describes “the act of recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining a person for compelled labor or commercial sex acts through the use of force, fraud, or coercion” using a variety of forceful services including “involuntary servitude, slavery or practices similar to slavery, debt bondage, and forced labor” (U.S. Department of State, 2012, p. 33). People may be categorized as “trafficking victims” because:

...they were born into a state of servitude, were transported to the exploitative situation,

previously consented to work for a trafficker, or participated in a crime as a direct result of being trafficked. At the heart of this phenomenon is the traffickers' goal of exploiting and enslaving their victims and the myriad coercive and deceptive practices they use to do so. (U.S. Department of State, 2012, p. 33)

In this conceptualization, trafficking victims are mainly from peripheral countries and are perceived as vulnerable, powerless, ignorant, deprived and poorly educated. As such, they need to be rescued, protected, educated and supervised by semi-periphery countries, the industrialized or capitalist countries with a corpus of techniques, planning, methods of victim identification, intervention strategies, professional knowledge and global institution practices.

In this thesis, I regard the situation of Indonesian domestic migrants as falling within the criteria of the definition of human trafficking according to the UN Protocol. I agree that many migrant workers "have typically been tricked, lied to, threatened, assaulted, raped, or confined" (U.S. Department of State, 2012, p. 11). However, I urge that the concept of human trafficking must be understood as a social construction produced by the discourses and practices of development in the global political, economic and social context. In other words, the formation of discourses is held together by a set of elements and power relations. Hence, I regard the influential global forces from capitalist societies shape this discourse for developing countries (i.e., Indonesia), relating them to Foucault's idea of knowledge and power and analyzing the construction and treatment of trafficking victims under the notion of the hegemonic worldview of capitalism and developmentalism.

I argue that trafficking in persons or human trafficking is a historically singular experience rather than biological determination, a product of social construction. This concept is similar to the research conducted by Escobar on the formation of the Third World during the early post-World War II era (p. 17). He examined modes of operation "through which

development has been deployed, namely, the professionalization of development knowledge and the institutionalization of development practices” (p. 17). Consequently, he problematized poverty by producing a new domain, namely development, to deal with the alleged problems through a new strategy.

Here, I want to highlight the importance of the regimes of “representation” in Escobar’s discourse analysis. Escobar (1995) regards representation as his theoretical and methodological principle to study the mechanisms and consequences of the construction of discourses. He analyzes how representation influences identity construction in which “violence is originated, symbolized, and managed” (p. 10). Foucault (1970), referring to the archaeology of knowledge, claims that all knowledge is situated in the “space of representation” (p. 261). Outside of it, knowledge is withdrawn because the space is “its foundation,” “its origin,” and “its limit” (p. 263); by scanning that space, knowledge of laws is formulated. Also, the banks of discourse can only appear in that hollow “space of representation” (p. 141) because language is an indispensable link “between representation and things” (p. xxv). Through social institutions, people can construct and exercise language through words to signify meaning.

Hall (1997) claims representation is something that “connects meaning and language to culture” (p. 15) and further explains that:

...representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the “real” world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events. (p. 17)

Indeed, the production of meaning depends on language; however, a complex problem occurs in the analysis of the process of meaning due to the problem of signification, where there are “general rules” and “social norms” situated in “the system of language itself” (Williams, 2015, p.

21). In this line of logic, language does not simply “reflect the processes of society and history” as the “social and historical processes occur within language,” linking representation and power (Williams, 2015, p. 22).

2.5 Cultural Politics of the “Weak”

Considering Foucault’s analysis of the power relations between the dominants and Indonesian domestic workers, aside from the more overtly legal form of resistance, such as O’Brien and Li’s (2006) proposal of rightful resistance, Foucault’s primary focus is still on the subtle forms of resistance and its power mechanism. Undoubtedly, one of the most insightful analyses of resistance is found in Scott’s (1990) research into how peasants resist oppression in Malaysia. In his book “*Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*”, he introduces his concept of “public” and “hidden” transcripts to study power relations between the dominant and subordinate. This concerns “the encounter of the public transcript of the dominant with the public transcript of the subordinate” (p. 13). His central argument is that “subordinate group politics” lies between the public and hidden transcripts, in the form of using “politics to disguise and anonymity” or “double meaning” or “shielding the identity of the actors” (p. 19). The most common ways of this “folk culture” may include “rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms” (p. 19). Therefore, Scott attempts to recover the “nonhegemonic voices” and “practices of subjects” from the subordinate, critiquing Gramsci’s notion of “hegemonic incorporation” that leads to a one-dimensional, narrow answer about community power. Instead, he argues that open rebellion is not the only concept of political life, “low-profile forms of resistance” are “the infrapolitics of subordinate groups” (pp. 19-20).

Scott initiates the idea of infrapolitics to theorize subordinate groups’ everyday forms of

resistance, either singularly or collectively, in which open or revolutionary contestations are not aimed at or emphasized. His study of infrapolitics focuses on the “ontological narrativity” of subordinate groups rather than the traditional story-telling method commonly adopted by historians. In other words, Scott endeavors to treat subordinate groups as social agents, giving them a voice to narrate how a process occurs, define themselves, construct their identities, and comprehend whether conditions have the possibility for change. This conceptualization of infrapolitics can explain the changing meaning of politics and resistance in most daily dominant-subordinate relations (Chin & Mittelman, 1997). Scott (1990) is thus concerned with understanding the conditions behind subordinate groups’ rebellions and their absence of openly declared resistance, rejecting the oversimplification of less overt or confrontational resistance as conflating with acquiescence. In this sense, resistance, conceptualized as infrapolitics activities (i.e., foot-dragging, squatting and gossip), is viewed as the product of interactions between structure and agency, where it offers a contested and viable site for generating insight on constraints and opportunities and the complex interplay affecting the response of subordinate groups. Scott’s public and hidden transcripts then become a way to reveal this changing notion of domination and practice, and hidden transcripts further deepen understanding of the internal politics of the subordinate groups.

Moreover, Scott (1990) asserts that the public transcript is not the whole nor the authentic story. It is only a performance serving “an indifferent guide to the opinion of subordinates...played by disguise and surveillance in power relations” of the public transcript. Subordinates perform “deference and consent” when “potentially threatening powerholders” onstage, but those underneath them are “deceitful, shamming, and lying” (p. 3). Nevertheless, subordination takes place offstage when direct observation by powerholders is dismissed. Scott

uses the term hidden transcript to characterize this discourse, “offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (p. 4). The most important thing here is that by identifying the discrepancy between the hidden and public transcript, it is possible to “judge the impact of domination on public discourse” (p. 5).

Therefore, in the hidden transcript, when the insult assigned systematically to subordinates relates to issues of “race, class, or strata,” then the fantasy of revenge and confrontation thus becomes “a collective cultural product,” and this “collective hidden transcript” can turn the world upside down offstage (p. 9).

However, Scott’s work has been challenged for running the risk of romanticizing resistance, sanitizing the internal politics of the dominated (Ortner, 1995) and neglecting the location of power and structural constraints (Constable, 1997). Nonetheless, I find his notion of hidden transcript and infrapolitics highly useful for understanding the struggle of subordinates because Indonesian domestic workers are generally perceived as stupid, obedient, docile, submissive and uncivilized. Therefore, we tend to act and speak on their behalf and unintentionally or intentionally overlook or discount their voices. In Scott’s words, “if they are thought of as ‘stupid’ and if direct refusal is dangerous, then they can screen a refusal with ignorance” (Scott, 1990, p. 113). In other words, “the refusal to understand is a form of class struggle” (Hobsbawm, as quoted in Scott, 1990, p. 133). Therefore, Scott’s work provides a different understanding of the political conduct of subordinate groups, and his hidden and public transcripts offer an alternative way of understanding resistance to domination.

Nonetheless, Scott’s notion of everyday resistance is not recognized as a powerful form of resistance due to criticism of its limitation in improving the structure (Constable, 1997). Here, I argue that even though everyday resistance is “informal, often covert, and concerned with

immediate gain”, institutionalized politics is “formal, overt, concerned with systematic change” (Scott, 1985, p. 33). To date, the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs), digital technologies and “cyberspace” that transform people’s ways of living have received increased scholarly discussion on how they affect the exercising of power (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2011). Building on this discussion, scholars have examined how ICTs serve as a site of resistance and as an instrument of power and how the development of technological infrastructure enhances the subalterns’ space and opportunities to resist oppression because ICTs are almost embedded in migrant domestic workers’ migration experiences (Kim, 2016; Platt et al., 2016; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2011). In this regard, I maintain that ICTs pose a great challenge to the conventional understanding of everyday resistance by seeking alternative and divergent forms of formal and overt systematic change. Given migrant domestic workers are exposed to a greater risk of exploitation due to social isolation in the labor process, collective action is considered impossible due to their scattered spatial location. As such, there is a need to include ICTs in Indonesian domestic worker research to provide a micro-meso-macro-level understanding of whether they create fluid possibilities for them to exercise a greater sense of agency in their daily lives, how they are used to negotiate and renegotiate social relations in the household and public sphere and if they empower or disempower social control under the surveillance of employers and society (Kim, 2016; Platt et al., 2016).

Over the past few decades, academic research on subaltern resistance has received increased scholarly attention, increasing the knowledge base on exploitation linked to agency and subjectivity. For example, through her anthropological fieldwork in Hong Kong, Constable (1997) studied how Filipina domestic workers experience their dealings with “forms of control or discipline” with “recruitment and placement agencies in the Philippines and Hong Kong, with

employers, and with government bureaucracy, rules, and regulations” (p. xiii). Inspired by the work of Michel Foucault and James Scott, Constable (1997) focuses on “everyday” resistance and “less confrontational discursive forms of resistance” instead of “violent social movements, peasant rebellions, and revolutions” (p. 11) to reveal Filipina domestic workers are not entirely “powerless passive subjects” but “active-as-individuals” when responding to their oppression including resisting, neglecting or accepting it in the process of migration. Ku (2003b) also provides a rich ethnographic account of peasants in his father’s hometown Meixian in China, studying how they protect their interests and respond to dissatisfaction with rural reform, living with insecurities and forced birth control policy through everyday resistance. He follows Scott’s insight to show how peasants engage in resistance, linking agency-subjectivity level research within a moral context to provide a detailed account of how rural people’s “philosophical systems” inform their “everyday lives, work, and political activity” (Ku, 2003b, pp. xviii-xix). Furthermore, he explains their legitimacy of resistance; it is extraordinary for conventional philosophers to seek systematic interpretation and assume peasants’ capability by framing abstract terms. In this vein, Ku argues the practice of peasants in Meixian is a form of “moral politics” that falls within the domain of cultural politics, emphasizing peasants’ ethical standards in terms of their specific cultural ways of defining the state relationship and mutual responsibility, and the notion of fairness and legitimacy (Ku, 2003b, p. xix). Ong (2010), similarly, through profound ethnographic engagement in Selangor, demonstrates how Malaysian female electronic factory workers negotiate deprivation of humanity and autonomy in the capitalist market economy (Thomas, 1988). Drawing on Michel Foucault, Ong examines how capital transformation in Malaysia “engenders new forms of discipline in the everyday life of Malays” and traces how discipline comes into possession in “the effect of the exercise of power”

in the logic of capital production (Ong, 2010, p. xi). By linking Malay women as historical subjects in respect of their subjective experiences in the market economy and industrial labor, Ong claims women struggle over the means and meanings of gender interwoven with new disciplinary techniques concerning new forms of control and domination. They also confront industrial discipline through various overt practices or tactics to convert power relations and construct a new subjectivity for female workers.

Constable, Ku and Ong's work increases understanding of subaltern resistance concerning Filipino domestic workers, peasants and factory workers. Nevertheless, subaltern studies of Indonesian domestic workers in the context of Hong Kong are woefully scant. The extant knowledge base of migrant cultural politics is inadequate for a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of Indonesian domestic workers' exploitation at the regional level. As such, there is an urgent need to fill this gap in knowledge and shift the focus from grand narratives of openly declared forms of resistance to localized and cultural forms of resistance and Indonesian domestic workers' daily practices.

The cultural politics of Indonesian domestic workers in East Asia has not been widely studied. Scarce-related scholarly work mainly comes from Singapore and Taiwan, with two major research focuses. First, scholars have begun incorporating micro-level understanding into migrants' identity negotiation and reconstitution. For example, Ueno (2010) examines how the identity of migrant domestic workers in Singapore is endangered and how the social agents struggle to reconstitute them. This study shows that migrant domestic workers tend to contrive tactics for negotiating their situation, reconstituting their damaged identity and redefining a new identity by compensating their "discredited status" for a "low prestige occupation." They do this by learning new skills (cooking, computers, English) to increase their value instead of "just being

a maid”, by recalling their previous social and family roles and envisioning a future identity through furnishing a new house, dreams of being a shop owner or buying a house. By obtaining these additional roles, migrants attempt to change how they feel about their status and meaning as domestic workers and redefine their relationships with others by joining collective activities, engaging in NGO events or volunteering. Before entering Singapore via training centers, the identities of most Indonesian women are often damaged as their personal belongings (i.e., family photos and mobile phones) are withdrawn and their hair cut very short in similar styles. However, after arrival in Singapore, Indonesians may purchase cosmetics, accessories and mobile telephones, develop new lifestyles as domestic workers overseas and perform supportive roles in their families by sending remittances. All these successfully help manage their damaged identity. The findings also reveal that Filipinas tend to comment negatively about Indonesians, criticizing them for having poor intelligence, body odor and uncivilized behavior. Similarly, Javanese Indonesians tend to differentiate themselves from other regions, perceiving themselves as different. By devaluing one another and creating otherness or alienation from other domestic workers, they become involved in “identity battles” or “mechanisms of identity politics,” strengthening conventional stereotypes and generalizations of their ethnicity, nationality, and gender.

Cheng (2004) also conducted similar research in Taiwan, exploring the politics of identity of foreign domestic within employers’ households. Cheng examines how the state maintains regulation of migrant domestic workers by “institutionalization of legal othering” and suggests a strong link between legal othering and popular discourse on foreign domestic workers. A typical example of popular discourse includes the stigmatization of the countries of foreign domestics as poor and in poverty, associated with “backwardness”. Furthermore, the discourse also

categorizes different national and cultural characteristics, such as Filipino workers as aggressive, disobedient, and militant yet well-educated, and Indonesian workers as obedient, docile and loyal yet less intelligent and less educated. These discourses are constituted by the state via various exclusion practices, for example, banning foreign laborers' permanent residency and requesting employers pay a guarantee deposit in case the laborer runs away, losing their quota for hiring another. By constructing foreign laborers as undesirably different, racially and culturally, society can justify this exclusion and reinforce their otherness. Under globalization, state policies shape household politics and translate them into household practices. The state, employers and employment agencies are collectively embedded in webs of power, connecting state policies, popular discourse and household practices of employers to constrain the lives of foreign domestic workers contributing to gender inequality.

Second, scholars link identity negotiation to the broader context of landscape, temporality and spatiality. For example, Lan (2003) uses the theoretical concept of "boundary work" to examine the micro-politics of Taiwanese employers and Filipina domestic workers in negotiating the public/private social boundaries. The boundary work links actors' "structural position" and "subjective disposition" in which employment relationships are "distant hierarchical" in nature, and domestic workers give their "deferential performance" in terms of linguistic, gestural, spatial or task embedment. Following Goffman's metaphors of front and backstage, live-in domestic workers negotiate their privacy by identifying public and private spaces in their everyday lives, acting to "display subservience" and "pretend to be stupid" during weekdays (front stage) in front of their employers (audience). On the contrary, to display offstage identity where there is no direct observation from their employers, they enjoy their freedom and privacy in this backstage area located in the public space. Here, they exchange jokes, mock their employers, shop and

wear off-day clothes as a symbol of identity, shifting from their maid identity. Domestic workers play this micro-politics across the front/backstage regions as an active tactic to maintain their dignity and self-identity.

Wuo (2010) extends the concept of “bracketing” to the public sphere, giving an account of the spatial-temporal tactics used by migrant domestic workers in Taiwan against the distorted inversion of the shutdown of a shelter for migrants. The shutdown was a “counter-bracket measure” used by the local elites due to a conflict of interest. Unsurprisingly, employers can exert power over the space or gain total control over their privacy. Nevertheless, wage laborers have “social reproductive needs” requiring satisfaction. As such, they employ the concept of bracketing as their strategy to deal with the blurred distinction between work and free time to fulfill their needs. Also following Goffman’s model, Wuo asserts that migrant domestic workers make an effort to put their time “within brackets” when alienation exists, then place themselves back into the “time-space” acting like they were in their home country. This virtual return home reconstructs their subjectivity through “temporality” and “spatiality”, serving the subordinate class to rediscover their true self and agency. Yet, employers never play a passive role. Instead, they struggle over space and time by using “counter-bracketing”, for example, telephoning migrant domestic workers to interrupt their time and space during holidays, arranging cooking or caretaking classes to fill their days off, or telling them how dangerous outside is for them. Through surveillance, employers can extend their discipline and obedience anytime, anywhere.

Following this group of scholars’ work, I will combine the insights of Foucault and Scott by analyzing how power influences Indonesian domestic workers and how they negotiate the exploitative situation. Foucault’s disciplinary power and Scott’s hidden transcript and infrapolitics are useful because they best fit the fundamental questions of my theoretical

framework: what has culture to do with politics? Concerning culture, what does it mean to be political? How are politics constituted? What are the essential and sufficient conditions of cultural politics? In addition, I will pay attention to the structural features of developmentalism by examining how global and local discourses, with modes of governmentality, influence the subjectivity and identity formation of Indonesian domestic workers and how they react to these coercions in a culturally specific way.

Chapter Three

Seeing Old Memories with New Eyes

3.1 Researching through the Migrant Kaleidoscope

Critical ethnography's theory of knowledge fits my research topic and political interests. It asserts that doing any research leads the researcher into a social relation in which our view of knowing, relative to others, becomes part of the constitution of knowledge (Fabian, 1995; Simon & Dippo, 1986). Thus, avoiding the risk of traditional ethnography's colonizing discourse interpretation (Horner, 2002). Hence, it is crucial to explore my position vis-à-vis others. When treating my position as a knower, questions may be raised because it may cause bias. However, revealing which parties' interests are to be served and acknowledging how my knowing is organized can reduce such bias as power is always situated and within. Therefore, before beginning my research, I regard it necessary to make "my own place", background experience and expectations explicit, where I come from and where I stand in analyzing the phenomenon, maintaining the notion that power is carried in knowledge (Campbell & Gregor, 2004).

This thesis is based on my fieldwork, or more precisely, my ethnography of work encounters with overseas migrants from January 2007 to December 2015, with some additional follow-up oral history interviews and fieldwork observations conducted between 2016 and 2020. I have worked as a social worker for NGOs for over 20 years. In 2007, I was seconded to work on a church-based project for overseas migrants since it required Hong Kong staff. Since then, I have participated in this setting and developed close associations with many overseas migrants, mainly foreign domestic helpers from the Philippines and Indonesia; this setting served as my primary field site for completing my Ph.D. thesis. I named this field site *The Underground*

*Migrant Kaleidoscope*¹⁰ because our service also assisted victims of human trafficking from the Philippines, Thailand and Columbia referred by the Consulates and Hong Kong Police Force. In addition, we also supported undocumented or abandoned migrants who were excluded from mainstream social services due to their unestablished or ambiguous visa status, such as overstayers, torture and asylum claimants, and migrants whose employers abandoned them in hospitals due to severe illness, such as cancer, stroke, and mental illness.¹¹ These complex and varied mappings of overseas migrants' migratory trajectories were akin to viewing the everyday life of migrants through a kaleidoscope. Our project has one Crisis Intervention Center, two migrant shelters and one Indonesian community sub-base. I provided advice for foreign domestic workers with police, immigration or labor cases; gave migrant rights talks in shelters, organized Indonesian domestic workers in their sub-base and empowered them to answer inquiries on labor laws and Immigration rules. I also mobilized them in migrant gathering spots such as Causeway Bay, Yuen Long and Tsim Sha Tsui to raise awareness of migrant rights during Sunday holidays.

My interest in human trafficking and how it related to the exploitation of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong did not develop overnight or dramatically; rather, it was sparked by several lingering issues.¹² My first encounter with a victim of human trafficking occurred on my first day of work. However, unlike other well-organized local NGOs in Hong

¹⁰ Due to the fact that my field site deals with sensitive cases such as victims of human trafficking, undocumented migrants, false representation in migrants' passports designated by recruitment agencies, and migrants involved in illegal work, to protect the identities of staff members and informants, the name of my project for migrant workers has been omitted and replaced with the pseudonym *The Underground Migrant Kaleidoscope*.

¹¹ When citing the cases of undocumented and abandoned migrants in this study, I have typically chosen the cases of foreign domestic workers. This means that they entered Hong Kong with a valid working visa but became overstayers, asylum seekers, or contract-terminated workers without official notice for a variety of reasons.

¹² I situate myself in a historical context with a number of critical incidents that occurred in the migrant field in Hong Kong. For a thorough account of historical issues, see Chapter 1 of this thesis.

Kong, where staff often received basic training in their specialty during the first week of orientation, this did not occur. It was likely that no staff on my project came from a social work background; none had this conceptual background. Therefore, for the first few hours of my first day, I stared out the window at the streets of Hong Kong. I felt anxious and worried because all the staff members were from the Philippines and Indonesia. I experienced culture shock for the first time because I never expected to be in the “ethnic minority” in my homeland, no one spoke Cantonese to me, and I knew nothing about migrant workers; I felt so out of place. Then, suddenly, a Filipina staff member approached me and said, “Phoebe (my English name), please stand by; a Columbian victim of human trafficking is coming; please interview her and arrange her in our shelter.” “Human trafficking?” I mumbled. “So, what should I do?” I asked. “Check her passport” she answered. At that precise moment, my entire body began to shake. “Just check passport?” I did not believe that was the only thing a senior social worker should do; I believed I should have done more. How could I engage a human trafficking victim, and what information should I gather? I knew absolutely nothing. Fortunately, when I met the victim, a young Columbian girl, I guessed she was in her early twenties; she did not speak English, so we were unable to communicate. Then a consular officer from the Columbian Consulate spoke to me, “Please let her stay at your shelter for two days. We’ve already bought her a plane ticket to go home.” Ultimately, this terrifying interview was concluded within five minutes. Not only did I exhale with relief, but also with guilt. When I returned home in the evening, I googled “human trafficking” on the internet. This was the first time I had heard of international instruments, such as the UN Palermo Protocol, ILO, and IOM indicators.

By reading these documents, I learned more about debt bondage and slavery concepts and wondered if the descriptions resembled the circumstances of Indonesian domestic workers in

Hong Kong. Even though, at that time in early 2007, I handled human trafficking cases from Consulates, the core of my work still heavily focused on Indonesian domestic workers, particularly the underpayment and agency fee problems that plagued the majority. Nevertheless, I observed that whenever I worked or spoke with migrant leaders or union members, we typically referred to their hardships as exploitation and rarely human trafficking.

As the years went by, from 2007 to 2009, I dealt with an increasing number of human trafficking cases not only from Columbia but also from the Philippines and Thailand, with the majority from South Asian countries. I also worked collaboratively with some Consulates and the Organised Crime and Triad Bureau under the Hong Kong Police Force to assist victims in statement taking, accompanying them to court hearings, and providing counseling and accommodation. The majority of cases were trafficking for sex. However, some were lured with false promises of jobs but ended up being forced to work in factories or transported to Shenzhen for other work purposes; most of these cases were returned to their home countries after only a few days in our shelters. After gaining the trust of the “victims” and reassuring them that I would not force them to pursue further legal action or be spies for the Consulates, they revealed more of their motives and struggles to me. I discovered that not all were being coerced, tricked or confined by traffickers. Indeed, some voluntarily consented to risky job opportunities (i.e., sex work in a brothel or factory labor) but had disputes about the commission or extra fees required by the “traffickers,” so they fled and sought help. However, at that time, Indonesian domestic workers and humanitarian organizations would not have come forward or made referrals due to debt bondage or slavery.

One thing that surprised me was that while I was doing outreach work in isolated rural areas, I met Indonesian men whose girlfriends were Indonesian domestic workers. Although

taking a western perspective, many Indonesian men were “victims” of human trafficking because they were offered false jobs and ended up working on construction sites or as garbage men; nevertheless, they seemed to enjoy their lives in Hong Kong. When I asked one man if he was angry at the “trafficker”, he said, “No, I’m not mad at him. What makes me mad is that I can’t be here and make money without him [*laughed*].” Another man, a musician in Bali’s tourist region, revealed that an infertile couple offered to transport him to Hong Kong. Instead, the couple targeted him during their trip to Bali and lured him to Hong Kong with promises of a large cash reward and an illegal job in exchange for his sperm. As a social worker on the front line, I began to ponder: “should human trafficking be deemed more sophisticated and complex than the cold and rigid international definition? who is the “victim”, and who has the final say?”

Then, in 2009, following Hong Kong’s downgrading to Tier 2 from Tier 1 in the U.S. government’s annual Trafficking in Persons report (U.S. TIP Report), some dramatic and significant changes occurred in our migrant field. Initially, I was perplexed as to why western groups and English newspapers were interested in our project and wanted to speak with us about how we dealt with governmental authorities regarding trafficking work and the difficulties faced by Indonesian domestic workers, particularly the issue of agency fees. One foreign journalist asked me passionately, “How many victims have you rescued in your work?” I replied flatly, “Rescue? I’ve never rescued anyone!” I wondered, “Have I ever broken into a brothel to rescue the girls? Have I ever snatched any Indonesian domestic workers from the home of an exploitative employer? Did they truly want to go?” My response made me realize that the issue of human trafficking appeared to involve a cultural conundrum and contested ideology that underlies the debate on discourse.

In 2014, following the international dissemination of the Indonesian domestic worker abuse case ERWIANA, the *Times Magazine* claimed, “Indonesian Maids are Hong Kong’s ‘Modern-Day Slaves’.” In 2016, Hong Kong was placed on the U.S. TIP Report’s Tier 2 Watch List alongside Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. The issue of Indonesian domestic workers had repeatedly and persistently come under the spotlight, and the mass media continued to attribute the reasons for labor exploitation to Indonesian women’s obedient, submissive, naive, passive, and ignorant cultural characters. Subsequently, more research reports, more internationally well-known human trafficking experts, and more western-based anti-human trafficking projects arose in Hong Kong.¹³ Again, the foremost demands of these experts, academics, and activists were connection, data, and stories. Since no solid foundation had been laid in Hong Kong, we were constantly asked to provide data and stories in the name of “collaboration”. One Indonesian migrant leader complained:

I remember that during a meeting, some white westerners asked me, ‘Can you give us some data?’ I asked them right away, ‘For what?’ Have they ever helped them [*Indonesian domestic workers*] in any way? I’m sure that westerners would want to know the stories of our girls, right? But they said they only used the data in their organization. I told them, ‘No, I won’t give it to you because it’s private.’ I know they want our data, but I don’t like it. The westerners just thought Asians would say, ‘Okay, okay, okay, okay...’

I concurred with this Indonesian migrant leader, particularly regarding the western representation of Asia and so-called Third World women (i.e., Indonesians). At this time, I was invited by a human rights attorney to serve as an expert witness in a judicial review case involving a victim of human trafficking. I was also asked to comment on the general situation in Hong Kong regarding the issue of human trafficking, alongside specific cases I had handled. I knew I was not

¹³ The relevant debates can be found in Chapter 1 of this thesis. This chapter contains my arguments on the discourse of human trafficking that emerged in Hong Kong and the influence and response from South Asian migrant leaders.

the expert westerners required, but I had many stories from migrants. While preparing the affidavit for this judicial review, I presumed it was worthwhile discussing the struggles encountered by Indonesian domestic workers. However, I grappled with speaking on their behalf as a social worker. This burden was not limited to this case alone but also the rising number of interviews and visits from anti-trafficking organizations, human rights activists, journalists, attorneys, and foreign Ph.D. students from western universities, who all had a strong interest in this topic. Indeed, I was well aware that to participate in this type of legal pursuit, my story selection and representation of Indonesian domestic workers would need to be fractured and fragmented to highlight their vulnerability and conform to the victimhood stereotype that civil society expected to see; of which I did not fully agree. It would lead people to focus solely on their labor body as migrant workers without contemplating other exploitations, contrary to my belief in human wholeness. Central to my inquiry is whether framing their experiences as human trafficking can effectively address and reduce exploitation. Throughout the entirety of my research endeavor, my primary concern remains the issue of *exploitation*. This assertion was evidenced further by my multiple and shifting roles as a researcher.

In 2016, I hired an Indonesian domestic helper because I desperately needed someone to care for my mother, who had been diagnosed with dementia, and my father, who was suffering from a terminal illness. My role as an employer made me realize that maintaining honesty and integrity as a social worker and researcher were not simple. Mixed feelings of love and hate, alongside front and backstage power-switching games, compelled me to realize that Indonesian domestic workers are not passive participants or merely a labor body. Furthermore, I am not a saint, as I also desired a maid who would follow my instructions without deceiving me. This further assured me that they are subjects of desire.

During my work encounters, I observed that Filipinas generally behaved more aggressively than Indonesians when they experienced oppression in their work. They would seek advice from me, but at the same time, they would go to other unions like The Mission for Migrant Workers or Helper for Domestic Helpers to compare opinions. However, Indonesians preferred to stay in the shelter and wait quietly for my instructions. I found that the public generally views Indonesians as obedient, loyal, docile, submissive and uncivilized. As such, we always act and speak and make decisions on their behalf, which unintentionally or intentionally overlooks or discounts their voices and ignores their goals, motives and subjective feelings. Indeed, I observed numerous Indonesian domestic workers suffering from debt bondage, typically five to seven-month salary deductions by their recruiters, enduring different forms of abuse by their employers, being racially and culturally stereotyped by the general public, and commodified as a product for sale without acknowledging them as the desiring subject. Therefore, I wanted to know how they survived these conditions and negotiated their situations; or if they merely succumbed to their destiny.¹⁴

3.1.1 Research Aims and Objectives

This research aims to explore the cultural politics surrounding Indonesian domestic workers who face exploitation in the context of international migration. Cultural politics is concerned with two core issues. First, the process of power domination: how is the dominant discourse produced, who determines it, why, for what reasons, and to what effect? Second, the

¹⁴ See Chapters 5 - 8 for a discussion of the responses of Indonesian domestic workers to different forms of exploitation and racial stereotyping.

issue of resistance: what is the subjectivity of the weak in their relationship with domination? How do they resist oppression and change their relationship with domination and their reality?

Drawing on a Foucauldian approach, which emphasizes the complex interplay between power, knowledge, discourse, and social practices, this research seeks to comprehend the ways in which Indonesian domestic workers are shaped as objectified *subjects*, and how they actively turn themselves into autonomous *subjects*. As a result, I will re-examine the nature and effects of power and the possibility of resistance in the fissures of domination. The overall research objectives are two-fold:

- (1) To analyze the mechanisms through which power operates within society, specifically through the governmentalities of sending and receiving states. This analysis will encompass an examination of discourses, institutions, and practices that shape and regulate the experiences and bodies of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong.
- (2) To articulate the ways in which Indonesian domestic workers respond exploitation through culturally specific ways. This includes exploring their strategies of resistance, transgression, acceptance and the formulation of counter-discourses as they navigate their migratory trajectories, ultimately seeking to alter power relations.

3.2 Shuttling Between Little/Big and Insider/Outsider

I utilized oral history and ethnography as my chosen methodologies. Oral history was the main focus, while ethnography served as a supporting method. Through these approaches, I aimed to explore the exploitation of Indonesian domestic workers and their everyday resistance. In the following sections, I first explain why combining these two methods can enable me to

collect the most extensive and thickest data, best suited to my fieldwork and stance. Then, I will illustrate how I carried out data collection and analysis. Lastly, I will discuss the limitations and challenges associated with my multiple roles.

Multi-site exposure provided me with multiple and diverse opportunities to observe behaviors, work closely and participate in the given field with Indonesian migrant workers, which enabled me to understand and access their social meanings and activities. If the central aim of social science is, “to understand people’s actions and their experiences of the world, and the ways in which their motivated actions arise from and reflect back on these experiences”, knowledge of the social world should “involve this intimate familiarity with day-to-day practice and the meanings of social action” (Brewer, 2000, p. 11). This is why ethnography implies that by not involving daily practice, “acquiring the social world’s knowledge” is impossible (Brewer, 2000, p. 10). Nevertheless, a pertinent question arises from this assertion: Can I claim that I am doing ethnography now when I have already been in the field doing fieldwork for a long time? Or can I only term this as “little” ethnography? Brewer (2000, p. 10) distinguishes “little” ethnography from “big” ethnography regarding “ethnography-as-fieldwork” and “qualitative research”:

Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘fields’ by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systemic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally.

This way of defining ethnography was strongly criticized by Fetterman (1998) as, “an adjunct to the serious stuff of quantitative research” (p. 5). How can people make sense of social meaning without the researcher’s meaning being imposed externally? This echoes the positivistic paradigm, which assumes “the existence of an objective reality” and “a priori assumptions about

relationships” (Fetterman, 1998, p. 5). Indeed, without incorporating the researcher’s assumptions, we cannot discover evidence; without talking with people, we cannot understand people’s perspectives. Thus, misinterpretation becomes unavoidable, and without considering the process, how can we know development and change?

The emergence of ethnography is based on critique of the validity of quantitative research. Hammersley (1992) concurred with Fetterman’s critique, in which he refuted quantitative research on five grounds: First, he argued that in quantitative research, the data collection process inevitably incorporates the researcher’s beliefs about the social environment, which sneakily diminishes the likelihood of finding evidence that contradicts the researcher’s assumptions. Second, their assertions about a natural setting and arguing its generalization are unduly implicit and questionable. Third, relying solely on observation without speaking with individuals to grasp their values risks misinterpreting their actions and ignoring the complex link between attitudes and behavior. Fourth, researchers risk neglecting the factors that influence development and change by presenting social phenomena in fixed forms. Fifth, by presuming people’s behavior is a mechanical result of psychological and social variables, we unquestionably neglect their creative cognitive functioning and group interaction.

Whether my approach is little (ethnography-as-fieldwork) or big ethnography (qualitative research) or later what Wolcott (1973, as quoted in Brewer, 2000, p. 18) argued to be “a way of doing things” (ethnography-understood-as-fieldwork, little) versus “a perspective on research” (ethnography-understood-as-qualitative method, big), is more a debate between method and methodology. Hammersley considers little ethnography as more than a way of data collection because, first, little ethnography captures the qualities of method and methodology; it is not that small compared to big ethnography. Second, little ethnography still involves judgment-making in

real practice, like deciding the objectives of the research, the natural setting for studying people, the role of the researcher, how to make meanings of people's actions, and what data should be collected; all of these are imposed from outside (Brewer, 2000). As such, Hammersley gives little ethnography embracing terms, with reference to data collection techniques and broader methodological issues. For Hammersley (1992, as cited in Brewer, 2000, pp. 18-19), both little and big are all ethnography categories. Following heated debate, he sums up five features of ethnography research:

1. People's behavior is studied in everyday contexts rather than under unnatural or experimental circumstances created by the researcher
2. Data are collected by various techniques but primarily by means of observation
3. Data collection is flexible and unstructured to avoid pre-fixed arrangements that impose categories on what people say and do
4. The focus is normally on a single setting or group and is small-scale
5. The analysis of the data involves attribution of the meanings of the human actions described and explained.

In light of the above ethnography research features, I propose that these features are well-matched with my research. My research aims to explore the treatments and responses of Indonesian domestic workers in negotiating exploitative conditions during the process of migration. Therefore, I consider the qualitative method the only route because qualitative interviews seek to collect data directly from individuals, and the nature of data can vary in amplitude and range. It is particularly fitting for topics exploring personal experiences, memories, attitudes, values, beliefs, opinions and perspectives (Leavy, 2011). To successfully gather data, the researcher should openly observe participants' behaviors, ask them what they think about their experience in their own words, and learn new things to make discoveries about the social world (Yow, 1994):

...the nature of the social world must be discovered; that this can only be achieved by first-hand observation and participation in 'natural' settings, guided by an exploratory

orientation; that research reports must capture the social processes observed and the social meanings that generate them. (Hammersley, 1992, p. 12)

I concur that discovery can only be made through first-hand observation, participation in natural settings and social process meaning-making. Therefore, as my research aims to fill the knowledge gap concerning the exploitation of Indonesian domestic workers, I assert that ethnography is the best fit.

As a front-line social worker working with Indonesian domestic workers in the everyday context of a migrant center, having much direct hands-on experience with trafficked persons, I am fortunate to have easy access to conduct ethnography in the given field through “getting close to the inside”, “telling it like it is”, “having an insider account”, “being true to the natural phenomena”, and giving “thick description” to obtain “deeply rich” data (Brewer, 2000, p. 37). Through my observations, conversations and interactions with Indonesian domestic workers and their exploiters (employers, agency staff, Consulate officials, labor department officials and police), I can collect rich data based on first-hand interviews using a bottom-up approach rather than hearing the bulk of sensationalized, misrepresented and politicized discussions from a top-down approach (Brennan, 2005). Furthermore, while conducting research on the sensitive topic of human trafficking, socially desirable responses are a serious problem:

...data are often missing because respondents have been reluctant to talk about sensitive issues such as illegal border crossings, salaries, deception, and experiencing violence. Furthermore, even though interviews took place upon the return of migrants, they are still distrustful of the actual intention of the researchers. (Andree & van der Linden, 2005, p. 67)

As an insider in the field, I find this method advantageous for collecting data due to our deep-rooted relationships, which can reduce Indonesian migrant workers’ suspicions. Jarvis (1999, as quoted in Walsh, 2011, p. 42) also points out the strength of researchers as embedded in the

context of their research and having the advantage of “qualitative and in-depth involvement” in the “richness of the potential problematic situation”. Thus, they are “more likely to be in a position to pose the right questions for research than individuals coming from outside to investigate”.

3.3 Speaking Out is the Act of Power

Contemporary ethnography using multiple methods typically includes naturalistic observation, documentary analysis and in-depth interviews (Brewer, 2000). However, this knowledge-generating paradigm is criticized by feminists as too male-orientated and positivist. Instead, they propose the alternative method of open-ended interviewing that focuses on interpretation, relies on the researcher’s immersion in the field, and requires intersubjective understanding between researchers and participants (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). Thus, feminist researchers suggest feminist ethnography should be consistent with three goals:

- (1) To document the lives and activities of women
- (2) To understand the experience of women from their lives and activists of women
- (3) To conceptualize women’s behavior as an expression of social contexts. (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992, p. 51)

To achieve these goals, I suggest oral history as a feminist approach for generating alternative open-ended interviewing. For instance, Anderson and Jack (1991, p. 11) claim:

Oral history interviews provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about women’s experiences of themselves in their worlds. The spontaneous exchange within an interview offers possibilities of freedom and flexibility for researchers and narrators alike. For the narrator, the interview provides the opportunity to tell her own story in her own terms. For researchers, taped interviews preserve a living interchange for present and future use, we can rummage through interviews as we do through an old attic- probing, comparing, checking insights, finding new treasures the third time through, then arranging and carefully documenting our results.

As mentioned above, my research aims to study the experience of exploitation for Indonesian migrant women trafficked into Hong Kong for domestic servitude. Since civil societies typically portray Indonesian domestic workers as vulnerable, ignorant of their rights, and unable to make decisions, they thus ignore or dismiss their voices. Researchers now promote the possibilities of collaboration between researchers, trafficked persons and NGOs through advocacy and allowing trafficked persons to speak for themselves. This encourages them to move beyond their victim status to give their testimonies about trafficking, voice their opinions on the anti-trafficking movement and participate in decision-making to mitigate potential problems that can arise when researchers speak for them and de-sensationalize what media and activists term them. Thus, protecting their rights and facilitating their well-being (Brennan, 2005). However, this oral history approach poses further questions: What is oral history? Can it serve as a qualitative research method? Why is oral history valuable for uncovering women's perspectives? What makes it happen? What are the strengths of this approach? How can it fit in with my research? What if I adopt it together with ethnography?

Oral history differs from other methodologies because it is transmitted orally regardless of people's writing ability or educational background. The participant will be the subject of analysis and interpretation. Even powerless groups can be good candidates for oral history research (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). Oral history is also a significant, powerful and valuable instrument for studying migrants' migratory trajectories (Ronquillo et al., 2011). Hence, it is recommended that oral history be utilized while composing migrants' biographies (Ritchie, 2014). Slim and Thomson (1994) point out the importance of first-person testimony, "it gives voice to the experiences of those people whose views are often overlooked or discounted...to ignore these voices is to ignore a formidable body of evidence and information." (p. 1). Although

the generic term oral history has many layers of meaning, it has additional meaning for marginalized groups such as older people, women, ethnic minorities and the poor, whose voices are often silenced and hidden.

For example, oral history can correct bias against dominant discourse, thus acting as a “counterpoint” to the generalization of the collective version. These are the underprivileged, whose voices tend to be “spoken for” and “misrepresented” by government officials, politicians or even social service providers due to their incapability of writing or being labeled as “lacking professional knowledge”. Their words and accounts are always excluded from meeting agendas. Therefore, giving them a voice and volume can ensure they are heard (Slim & Thomson, 1994, pp. 4-5).

Furthermore, oral history can connect peoples’ various life spheres, such as family, work, health and income, which researchers tend to separate. When accounting their first-hand testimonies, people tend to move back and forth between their lives and experiences and different sectors. Oral history focuses on connections instead of differences, helps create a richer understanding of their views and experiences in a wider contextual framework, and gives people the opportunity to reveal the connections between different spheres in terms of personal, social and cultural aspects of experience (Slim & Thomson, 1994).

Moreover, oral history can reverse the power relations between researchers and participants. In collecting oral testimony, both researcher and participant are extremely cooperative and participatory in the process of talking and listening. People can use their preferred idioms, language and communication methods to express themselves, encouraging them to use their stories, traditions, songs and theatre to communicate with each other. The researcher no longer holds the power, contributing to an equal relationship (Slim & Thomson,

1994). “Speaking out is the act of power” (Slim & Thomson, 1994, p. 3). As Thompson and Bornat (2017, p. 2) state in their book *The Voice of the Past*:

Oral history is not necessarily an instrument for change; it depends upon the spirit in which it is used. Nevertheless, oral history certainly can be a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry, it can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside, and in the writing of history- whether in books, or museums, or radio and film- it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.

Speaking up for marginalized groups signifies confidence (Slim & Thomson, 1994) and being listened to, and its process can be therapeutic, promoting assertiveness to every individual in the community. Therefore, giving people back a voice can make them visible and insiders, creating an increased sense of community and thus inducing social consciousness. Hence, history, in both its content and purpose, will ultimately be transformed.

Thus, I use oral history as the method of inquiry to give a voice back to “silenced” Indonesian migrant workers, include their insider views in the exploitation agenda and transform their roles in the interviewing process as collaborators. Compared with other methods, the primary merit of oral history is that “it allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated” (Thompson & Bornat, 2017, p. 5). Indeed, oral history enables understanding of “the meaning of artifacts” in people’s lives and experiences by revealing the “images” and “symbols” they give meaning to and how they sequence their experiences by revealing the psychological reality people hold for these things. This is achieved by narrating how people see and interpret their experiences and their views of themselves and the world (Yow, 1994, pp. 14-15).

Furthermore, oral history has strengths in tapping into historical processes, the agency within

shifting contexts and holistic understandings of life experiences. Leavy (2011, p. 15) illustrates how oral history can access these three processes:

...with respect to historical processes, an oral history project could explore how changing gender norms, including the gendered division of labour in both the public and private spheres, shapes women's experiences balancing work and parenting. In terms of agency with shifting context, oral history could look at how women's experiences, challenges, and feelings change over time as do other factors on both the micro and macro levels. On the micro level these might include factors such as relationship status, work roles, age of child/children, health, health of ageing parents, and personal financial circumstances. On the macro level, factors might include the state of the economy, the real estate market, changes in gender norms and expectations, and political changes. Finally, with respect to holistic understandings of life experiences, particular experiences are viewed and understood contextually.

Accordingly, to analyze coercive factors that contribute to the exploitative situation that leads to trafficking, I find oral history's "tapping into processes" distinctive features the best method for making links between the treatment of Indonesian domestic workers and the process of transnational labor migration embedded in social, cultural, and historical patterns.

Therefore, in this research, I adopted oral history supplemented with ethnography to extend the range of data (Brewer, 2000). As central community members, I consider participants of oral history key actors in the given field, providing detailed historical data about their everyday forms of resistance. This can provide empirical evidence to support my observations and assist in assembling the massive amount of perceptual data required to address my research questions (Fetterman, 1998, pp. 47-51).

3.4 Old Memories, New Eyes

3.4.1 My Eye-Opening Research Journey

I began my Ph.D. program in January 2013. Even though my research took place in 2013, I included considerable data from my work encounters from 2007 to 2012 because the occurrences and ongoing events were connected. In 2007, since I had experienced a culture shock and was a stranger in a culturally unfamiliar place, I kept a diary and wrote notes whenever I felt odd, nervous, excited, or depressed. At that time, I simply used it to calm my emotions and gain work expertise, particularly in labor law. I never imagined it could provide informative and useful research material. I formally invited my previous Indonesian domestic cases between 2007 to 2012 that I deemed valuable for oral history to participate in tape-recorded interviews to minimize interpretation bias.

In December 2015, I left my job at the migrant project, *The Underground Migrant Kaleidoscope*, to devote more attention to my Ph.D. studies. However, this did not mean that I separated myself from the migrant field, as I obtained a freelance position as a fieldwork instructor at a university, where I supervised social work students assigned to migrant unions for practicum. This has allowed me to keep up to date with migrant trends and maintain relationships with migrant leader friends.

I mostly used participant observation to collect data during my ethnographic research. This requires data gathering through the researcher's participation in the daily life of participants in their natural settings. Observing and talking with them, the researcher discovers their activities, social meaning and interpretations (Brewer, 2000). As the researcher is the main data collection instrument in participant observation (Burgess, as cited in Brewer, 2000), their attitudinal change or feelings aroused when engaging in and living with the people (participants) become part of the data. Thus, data is unavoidably affected by the interventions of the researcher. Therefore, their experience in the field is a central part of understanding it. DeWalt and DeWalt

(2011, p. 5) summarized the key elements of participant observation, which served as a checklist to guide my research. These included spending a considerable length of time in a setting, engaging in a variety of activities with others who are active participants there, learning and employing the local language, using causal talk as an engaging technique, observing their activities without disruption, writing field notes to record observations, and including tacit and explicit knowledge when analyzing and writing about them.

I recognize that researchers who are already insiders in the setting, like me, have several advantages, such as familiarity with the customs and context. However, one major disadvantage is that I might “take events for granted, leaving important data unnoticed and unrecorded” (Fetterman, 1998, p. 36). Instead, I tend to favor the notion that “ideas and behaviors that were only a blur on entering the community take on a sharper focus” (Fetterman, 1998, p. 35). For example, to help their student researchers “seeing old events with new eyes”, DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) strictly imposed the following requirements on them to offset this problem, requiring them “to take detailed jot notes and later write extensive field notes about things that seem obvious to them”, requesting them “to make spatial maps, map out interactions, and take notes as though they were carrying out running observations” (p. 88). Consequently, their students found aspects of the scene they had not noticed before. Since I have already been in the given field for over nine years, I may run the same risk; this is good advice for me to apply when writing my field notes.

My participant observation was mostly undertaken at the following sites:

1. Crisis Intervention Centre
2. Two shelters
3. Indonesian community sub-base

4. Outreach locations (Victoria Park, Tsuen Wan, Yuen Long, Shatin, Tsim Sha Tsui)
5. Escort services (labor departments, law courts, police stations, consulates, hospitals)
6. Liaison (NGO meetings, conferences, actions).

I spent approximately three days each week in the field observing, talking with participants and actively participating in their various activities. My work setting provided rich opportunities for me to become acquainted with different types of Indonesian domestic workers. For example, I located participants with prematurely terminated contracts in the Crisis Intervention Centre and shelters. I undertook extensive interviews with them, assisted them in filing cases against employers, made statements and escorted them in all legal proceedings and court hearings. I also located participants within contracts, overstayers, or asylum seekers on Sundays in the various outreach locations. I observed their activities and made informal conversations with them. Moreover, I observed the interaction patterns between government officials, participants and system practices during escorting occasions.

Aside from the regular field sites mentioned above, I supplemented my research with four different types of participant observations. These observations helped me better understand and broaden my perspective on the Indonesian practice of exporting labor, migrant workers' expectations of their country's president, and their private spaces outside their productive labor bodies. These included the following.

In 2012, I spent around ten days on a field trip in Indonesia. The purpose of my visit was to present Indonesian domestic workers' current situation to missionaries at a mini-conference, understand the operation of the training center, and learn about the available social services for families of overseas migrants. First, I visited an orphanage in Bogor, where I spoke with a few children whose mothers were migrant domestic workers. I learned that some migrant women

abandoned their families after working abroad. Then, in Malang, I was brought to a vocational school for youth, as some missionaries believed that if youngsters could work, they would remain in the country, which caused fewer family problems. Here, I also had the opportunity to visit a training center and conduct interviews with the owner, teachers, and a counselor. This visit helped me relate to Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and the commodification of migrant women. Next, I interviewed a former government official in Yogyakarta to gain a deeper understanding of the government's labor export system. However, I found him to be extremely defensive with a bureaucratic tone. Following this, I visited a shelter for pre-marital pregnant young girls, which had a similar tone to the orphanage in Bogor. I also visited the family of a migrant domestic worker and spoke with her husband.

In 2014 and again in 2019, I attended the overseas Indonesian presidential elections in Hong Kong, which I observed at the voting station in Victoria Park station in 2014 and Wan Chai station in 2019, respectively. One Indonesian domestic worker I knew well volunteered twice to be my guide and introduced me to her friends and other migrants waiting to vote so that I could conduct brief interviews. I also came across some Indonesian domestic workers with whom I was acquainted. Through casual conversation, they explained why they insisted on waiting in line for six or more hours to cast their votes. They also told me what they expected of the new president and what they should do to help migrant women working abroad.

Further noteworthy and intriguing documentation was compiled when I wrote field notes from approximately 20 interviews from 2013, in which I was not the interviewer but the interviewee. As previously said, a variety of people - staff from recently launched western-based programs, the U.S. Consulate, anti-trafficking experts and activists, foreign and local reporters, and oversea Ph.D. students - approached us. I mostly noted down the types of questions they

posed, their stances on migrant exploitation issues, and how they portrayed Indonesian domestic workers and union migrant leaders. I noticed that their perspectives followed a similar pattern, which could be used to draw certain inferences.

Indeed, throughout my ethnography, I attended dozens of current and former Indonesian domestic workers' invitations, gatherings, and reunions, such as the wedding party of a lesbian couple, birthday celebrations, and dinners with a group of Indonesian asylum seekers. I also traveled to Macau to visit former cases, sick migrants, and migrants who sought assistance while waiting for their visas in Macau (i.e., forced overstaying, forced mail-back of passport to Hong Kong agency). Sometimes, I would refer them to appropriate migrant unions or NGOs when necessary and for their benefit. Participating in these activities reinforced my conviction that the exploitation of Indonesian domestic workers is multifaceted. In addition to the labor dimension, space, class, sexuality, and intimacy are always neglected.

I wrote field notes to capture data from my participant observations. Ethnographers' commitment to discovery and field notes consists of detailed descriptions of social processes and their contexts. Writing field notes can capture the integrity and values of the various features and properties (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Therefore, my field notes recorded daily observations of events, behaviors, overheard conversations, informal interviews, people's verbal and nonverbal expressions, and other details that emerged. It was a good training tool for improving my observational skills (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

By the end of 2019, 112 oral history stories had been collected, including 57 long stories and 55 short stories. Due to the length of my fieldwork, the exact numbers were greater than that; therefore, I only counted my tape-recorded interviews. Participants were between 19 and 45 years old, with the majority between 20 and 35 years and under contract; only a small percentage

were former domestic workers who became asylum seekers or married Hong Kong men. The length of the oral history interviews varied from 2 to 50 hours because some stories evolved over the years. For example, I purposefully documented one Indonesian domestic worker's ten-year migratory trajectory as a guide, with whom I had at least 15 interview sessions. Based on my experience, the more familiar participants were with me, the more focused our sharing, which was easily diverted to memories in shelters or courts, and times with other girls or staff, further resulting in lengthy interviews.

According to the International Labour Organization's experience designing research involving trafficking elements (Andree & van der Linden, 2005), adopting definitions of trafficking and exploitation is of utmost concern when developing research and selecting participants. This is because the clarity of concepts can guide us in selecting the most appropriate targets, and there is also a need to limit the range of cases in the research. Unfortunately, there is no standard or internationally accepted definition of exploitation. Therefore, for discussing the dominant discourse of human trafficking that emerged from western countries, particularly the U.S., I relied on the UN protocol definition of trafficking. As such, my selection was based on three elements: acts, means, and purpose¹⁵ to determine whether a case could be classified as a trafficked person. Furthermore, exploitation is viewed as a process and cross-border phenomenon; many actors (exploiters) are maintained in the field. Therefore, the terms "migration process", "exploitation", and "exploiter" were used to define at which point in the migration process exploitation occurred, such as during recruitment, before departure, in the receiving state, or upon return.

¹⁵ See Chapter 1 for a comprehensive overview of the UN Protocol.

Since this research may touch on sensitive and private topics (i.e., forging passports, false representation of age, province or other details in official documents, and engaging in illegal jobs), it was not easy to locate potential participants through open recruitment. Therefore, potential participants in this research were mainly cases in my work. Since ethical dilemmas related to negotiating my role as both researcher and social worker may arise, I discuss the suggested resolution in the ethical considerations section. Nevertheless, I regarded this as an integral part of my methodological design and implementation of my research (Coy, 2006).

Regarding expected participant numbers and interview sessions, Leavy (2011) suggests the repeated process of participant selection and interviews may generally end when researchers feel they have attained data saturation. Hence, I felt the number of participants should not be restricted because the number of expected interviews may lead to a better sense of security. I anticipated that each participant would take part in two to three interviews, but the actual number exceeded my expectations.

Participating in research can be a very exciting but distant experience for some Indonesian migrant workers and might induce anxiety. Therefore, when inviting my previous cases for an interview, I did not discount the significance of instilling a strong sense of security in them. For instance, before each recording of the verbal interviews, I clearly explained: a) my research purpose: including the time commitment, location of interviews, ethical issues, confidentiality and voluntary nature, that the interviews could be stopped or suspended anytime they felt uneasy, provided follow up details and my contact details (Leavy, 2011), b) their language preference for the forthcoming interview sessions (i.e., Indonesian/Cantonese/English). If an Indonesian interpreter was preferred or made them feel more confident to speak freely in

greater depth, arrangements would be made in advance, and c) they would have time to make inquiries and give their verbal consent.

In verbal interviews, the role of the researcher is an active listener. I seek to understand what meaning participants make of their experiences. Thus, the art of listening is very important. Anderson and Jack (1991, p. 24) propose three ways of listening during verbal interviews: 1) listening to the moral language, 2) attending to the meta-statement, and 3) observing the logic of the narrative. I applied these during the interviews and data analysis.

I tape-recorded 112 oral history stories and then transcribed 55. The criterion for selection was whether the accounts allowed me to address my research aims. As transcription is a time-consuming and seemingly endless process, I needed to set a limit based on my research objectives. I studied these transcripts. If any data required elaboration and/or clarification, I followed this up in the next interview. Indeed, I invited participants during their storytelling to share whatever materials they considered meaningful in their lives (Leavy, 2011). These were photographs, daily logs, passports, HKID cards, 7-eleven payment receipts (agency fee records), scarves, bibles, police statements and court summons. In addition, I wrote pertinent memos in my journal after each interview. The content included my descriptions, impressions and feelings about what participants had shown me during the interviews and their non-verbal messages. This material greatly assisted my data analysis and interpretation.

Apart from participant observation and oral history, I also conducted in-depth interviews with key people, including core staff or members from inter-governmental organizations, anti-human trafficking projects, migrant unions, and religious groups. I purposefully omitted several names and their affiliations to preserve their privacy. For additional ethical concerns, as most interviewees were previously acquainted with me, I added final remarks at the end of each

interview to offset potential risks that may arise from trustful relationships. For example, “since we know one other, perhaps you couldn’t help but disclose too much to me; Did you find anything in this interview that you might regret saying? if so, I promise to erase that part.” I felt at ease asking this final question because, as a researcher, I would be easily tempted to gather as much beneficial data as possible. I did not want to exploit our trusting relationship or make them feel betrayed. One thing I can divulge is that I found their regrets mostly stemmed from their political stances toward western countries, which may have led them to accidentally cross the line, given the current political climate in Hong Kong.

I also analyzed archived materials, including overseas job advertisements, local maid hiring brochures, employment agency websites, employer discussion forums, local and migrant newspapers, local magazines, editorials, government reports/documents, CCTV maid monitoring systems, maid insurance and maid medical check advertisements. The purpose of this analysis was to examine how the sending and receiving state, mass media, employment agencies and local employers produced/shaped the representation of Indonesian migrant workers, making the commodification of Indonesian domestic workers legitimate.

Indifferent to the prevalent inductive approach, I adopted thematic analysis as my method of data analysis. This framework is driven by directed theory or concepts, supplemented with extensive discussion and reflective accounts of the researcher’s experience (MacFarlane & O’Reilly-de Brún, 2011). My interpretation of data was guided by Foucault’s approach to cultural politics, examining the operation of power domination that the Indonesian domestic helpers experienced and their ways of resistance, including everyday tactics, legal resistance, transgression and counter-discourse. Discussion themes emerged gradually in the dialogue process between data and theories. Data was carefully selected to support my analysis and

arguments. Indeed, key concepts from Foucault's work, such as disciplinary power, docile body, governmentality, pastoral power, resistance, and transgression, were employed to guide the selection of relevant data for subsequent analysis, discussion, and interpretation.

3.4.2 Kaleidoscope Eyes: Infinite Memories Swirl and Interweave

As noted previously, DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) suggest that notetaking, field notetaking, and mapping interaction can help "Seeing old events with new eyes (p.88)." When I finished many years of fieldwork, my main thoughts were, "Can I gain a more thorough or accurate grasp of the situations of Indonesian domestic workers even if I followed all of the above advice? If so, what are the distinguishing features of these "new eyes"? I used the metaphor "Kaleidoscope" to describe my field site. This allowed me access to Indonesian domestic workers' popular gathering places, labor departments, police stations, law courts, hospitals, a training center in Malang, Macau boarding houses or their private parties. It also served as a "time tunnel", revealing that both migrants' stories and my interpretations are not fixed because the meta-statements regarding our memories change over time.

Like a warped mirror, the Kaleidoscope provided me with multisensory experiences, albeit distorted versions and broken shapes, in at least two ways. First, I vividly recalled portraying Indonesian domestic workers as vulnerable victims during my first year. Once, after interviewing an underpaid timid Indonesian domestic helper, whose voice was weak, I felt empathy for her at the time. However, I noticed a different image of her on Facebook, playing an electric guitar and singing rock music with black smokey eyes and a sexy vest, looking like an anti-social adolescent. When I mentioned this episode to her years later, she laughed heartily and

said, “because I needed your help, and I was scared the Indonesian staff would kick me out!”

This experience sharply brought to mind the power dynamics that exist between social workers and migrants, as well as between researchers and participants. This also inspired me to invite my previous cases for oral history interviews to deepen my understanding of Indonesian domestic workers’ front and backstage performances to reveal their actual or three-dimensional characters. I found it helpful to see them in the Kaleidoscope at various points in time.

Second, playing multiple and shifting roles as a researcher - social worker, spokesperson, employer, and researcher - pushed me to view the Kaleidoscope from various angles. At one point, I wanted to see justice, at another, I wanted to see more secrets; and at another, I avoided changing my viewpoint because I wanted to protect my self-interests. All this caused me to see different images, not only of the complex facets of Indonesian domestic workers, but also of my conscience. For example, I recall accompanying an Indonesian domestic worker to a reconciliation meeting with the Labor Department. She was caring for an older woman but had not been paid for several months. During the meeting, the older woman admitted everything but used foul language to hide her shamelessness. Then, unexpectedly, the Indonesian domestic helper grabbed the older woman’s hand and tenderly whispered, “Popo, I’m sorry! Let it be over! I will no longer claim from you; I’m worried about your health, so don’t get angry. Money, I can work hard to earn again!” Her voice trembling with tears, this older woman said, “I’m the one who owes you! I should apologize to you!” And they both embraced. The labor officer and I fell silent with reddened eyes. This example is not intended to justify injustice; rather, it is to show that the longer I stayed in the field, the more complicated and difficult I found it to interpret the experiences of Indonesian domestic workers. How could I judge the interpretation’s legitimacy when the story fell into a gray area?

In the following chapters, this type of narrative will continually reappear, and as a researcher, I will unavoidably fall into this interpretation dilemma.

Chapter Four

A Migrant's Narrative: (Un)lock the Doors in the Diaspora

The New Order government's economic reform of Indonesia under the Suharto regime sought rapid economic growth to bolster its economy and pursue developmentalist ideology through modernization pushed by western nations. These two dual forces, and the rise of economic restructuring and capitalist development in Hong Kong in the early 1990s, necessitated more local female labor force to flow into the market to help increase capital accumulation, which gave rise to international migration. This labor exporting process "rolls out the red carpet" for many Indonesian girls and women who have been crowned "remittance heroes", allowing them to use the given "modernity key" to unlock patriarchal doors, despite their diasporas being liminal, precarious, and under surveillance. Nonetheless, they can enjoy a brief moment of pleasure by shaking the prevailing presumptions that limit them.

Eza is one of the women who became a remittance hero working in Hong Kong as a domestic helper for ten years. In this chapter, I present Eza's life history to show the complicity and integrity of a human life, which cannot be divided. Past, present and future are mutually informed. To make sense of their lived experience, we need to understand their family and historical time, as life course theorists emphasized.

Eza worked in Hong Kong from 2005 to 2015,¹⁶ from age 17 when she arrived to 26 when she returned home. I met Eza in 2008; at the time, I was aiding her pursuit of a case against

¹⁶ I view Eza's oral history as a research method related to transnational migration studies situated in a complex macro context with societal implications rather than as an individual piece of documentation. As such, I place Eza's ten years of migratory experience in a broader historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural framework, which I have laid out the basics in Chapter 1.

her employer for underpayment. However, we were threatened by a gang of three ferocious accomplices sent by her recruiting agency to terrorize us. Regardless, we remained close, and I shared some of her most difficult life crises, such as labor exploitation, the loss of her father, work injury, and love and sexual struggles, not only until her departure in 2015 but also up until now. I selected Eza as an example of the numerous Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong. I intended for Eza's ten-year diasporic journey to set the stage for succeeding chapters because it marked a historical period characterized by many critical incidents resulting from the intensifying governmentalities of both the sending and receiving states. This shed light on how disciplinary and pastoral powers are exerted on the bodies of migrant women and how they negotiate their situations.¹⁷ Indeed, a portion of Eza's exploitative account from her second contract in 2008 was included in my affidavit for the first Hong Kong judicial review case involving human trafficking in 2016. In this sense, Eza's story represents her and symbolizes trafficked Indonesian domestic workers in the territory. Therefore, Eza's case is legitimate enough to generate a dialogue with the dominant western discourse on trafficking throughout this thesis and resonate with many other Indonesian domestic workers.

Eza's story is not a dramatic example. Yet, based on her trajectory of four contracts with different types of employers, most, if not all, Indonesian domestic workers can sympathize with Eza's emotions at some level, as they may have had similar experiences in the diaspora. This story reveals Eza's process of subjectification as an Indonesian domestic worker, showing how a migrant body was disciplined to become docile and conform to the idealized commodity. For

¹⁷ This chapter provides an overview of the migratory experiences of Indonesian domestic workers through Eza's ten-year narrative. For more in-depth discussions with scholarly works pertaining to power dominance and resistance, as well as exhaustive explanations of the law and legislation relevant to Indonesian domestic workers, see Chapters 5-7.

example, she engaged in overt and subtle forms of resistance in her everyday life, defied being reduced to merely a labor body, and created counter-discourses to acknowledge herself as a desiring subject.

4.1 The Pull of the Past

4.1.1 A Hungry Child, a Shameful Past

Eza was born in the Central Java city of Jogjakarta. When she was three years old, her father moved the family to Kalimantan in pursuit of a greater crop yield due to their residence's proximity to an active volcano, where eruptions frequently devastated their properties. Nevertheless, it did not bring their family much fortune, and she could not forget her most difficult years as a poor and hungry child. Eza sobbed, her voice shaking:

I know how it feels to be hungry. When I was between 7 and 8 years old, I remember that every day at 2 o'clock, when I got out of school, I ran straight to the farm. What for? I'm just looking for any potatoes to eat! Because I hadn't eaten anything all day! I searched and searched, but all I could find until 5 o'clock was some vegetables. I immediately brought them home and cooked them to eat. But, the next day, there was nothing left, and I returned to a hungry child again.

The neighbors despised Eza's family because they were impoverished, and her father owed the villagers a huge debt for gambling in the hope that he would win and become rich. Furthermore, her fourth older brother was publicly beaten for stealing food from a neighbor's farm. As a child, Eza had no idea what transpired; she merely questioned, "Why can't we get enough food to eat? Why does my father work hard but still earn so little?" Eza loathed and was frightened of being without money and food and began to associate being poor with shame. This resentment motivated Eza to work hard in school to earn a scholarship, and every year her mother waited for

her to win first place in her class so she might reclaim her honor among their neighbors. This was Eza's pride.

Unexpectedly, when Eza was in Primary Three, her class teacher employed an unfair method to demote her from first to third place. Since Eza's father was in Java at the time, her mother confronted her class teacher at school. However, they did not expect the teacher to remark, "Since we are a Muslim school and the majority of our kids are Muslim, the first prize should go to them. Your daughter is a Catholic, and she has no right to be." Although Eza harbored hatred toward this teacher, she knew that her mother could not assist her in redressing her rights. As Eza stated, "We did not have bargaining power because my mother is a woman." Without a father, there is no man and, therefore, no power. This was Eza's deeply ingrained concept.

4.1.2 Dos and Don'ts: A Young Girl's Guide to Female Chastity

In Eza's early memories, her father was the most influential figure and established a ritual in their family heritage. Every evening, a "moral preaching time" was held. Her father would rigidly assemble all seven of his children and give them a moral lecture, followed by a prayer. According to Eza, her siblings fell asleep during her father's lecture. However, she was genuinely intrigued, "My father's words entered my ears and were implanted in my mind; these have served as a compass throughout my life." She believed that her siblings consistently behaved immorally due to their refusal to listen to their father, most engaged in premarital sex, and one sister abandoned her studies to become a single mother while still a teenager. When I

asked her which of her father's moral lectures had the greatest impact on her, she exclaimed,

"How to be a woman!" Eza went on:

My father taught me the importance of a woman's virginity! My father said that the first man who makes love to me will steal my heart. Because he 'opened' your vagina and caused you to remember him for the rest of your life. So, man and woman can't sleep together before they get married. Because the man would easily flee, and the woman would only be taken advantage of and lose everything. My father also told me that God doesn't want us to have sex before we get married. Everything he taught me about being a virgin influenced me a lot.

"Do you agree with what your father said?" I questioned. Eza firmly replied:

Of course, I agree with him completely! Without my father's guidance, I believed I had already lost my virginity in Hong Kong. I didn't want to lose my virginity; I tried hard to keep it because I would feel bad if I didn't do what my father said.

According to Eza, her mother taught her nothing about being a woman; instead, she learned everything from her father. He was the moral guide and guarantor ensuring Eza's normative femininity as a virgin. Eza's father even gave her practical advice on maintaining chastity and retaining her virginity:

My father taught me how to dress like a woman. He said a woman should sit elegantly and not laugh loudly. He even reminded me to protect my breasts and not let the man touch me there. Before I got married, a man could only touch my hands.

As a man who knew a great deal about men, Eza's father taught his daughter how to be both a loyal and astute wife:

And when I get married, my father said I must listen to and obey my husband. I have to stay at home and cook for him. Even though he is wrong, I can't be mean to him, and I still have to serve him. But my father told me that women should be strong and shouldn't rely on men too much. He said that if a man left you, it would be hard to make a living.

My father told me that I should listen to my husband, but I shouldn't totally listen. I should make my own plans so that I can survive in any circumstances.¹⁸

Eza understood that Indonesian women's bodies are full of mysteries that require caution and that it was also prohibited and dangerous to discuss their bodies openly or expose themselves explicitly. She recounted that when she was a young girl, she observed her mother's clothes splattered with menstrual blood, but her father explained that her mother had fallen and bled. Indeed, whenever she lay down on the bed with her brothers, her father would instantly warn her, "You're a girl. Even though he is your brother, he loves you, the 'ghost' may enter his body, and he would 'steal' you [*virginity*]." As I listened to Eza's statements, I wondered if she might have experienced some contradiction due to her father's teaching. No matter what, her view of her father as knowledgeable and wise remained unchanged.

4.1.3 Dark Passages: Ethnicity, Class, and Gender

Even though Eza desperately wanted to continue listening to her father's preaching, this family ritual ceased after she graduated junior high school because she was leaving Kalimantan for Surabaya following her father's elaborate, strategic, and pricey plan. To ensure Eza would have a bright future, her father sold his land in Kalimantan and sent her to a prestigious senior high school in Surabaya. Nevertheless, Eza never imagined that what she had learned from her father's preaching was insufficient for her survival in Surabaya. For example, she was not taught how to struggle and fight against discrimination and marginalization, which she experienced when her father placed her with a group of social elites with different ethnicity, skin color, and

¹⁸ See Chapter 7 for feminine morality and normality in Indonesian ideology.

social status. When Eza first arrived in Surabaya, she began to understand that only two categories of students in her senior high school could command social respect. The first consisted of students from wealthy families. The second exhibited intelligence in academic performance. However, most were Chinese and appeared to have high status at school. Eza recounted with deep frustration:

I finally understood why my father wanted me to come here, but what about me? [widened her eyes] My whole body is nasty dark skin. Why? Because I used to be only with my cows every day, and I didn't come from a wealthy family. When I offered my hand for a greeting handshake and introduced myself, their eyes narrowed like they hated having me as a classmate. No one would even touch my hands. Some did, but all they did was bump my last finger roughly and then pull their hands away. Both boys and girls were like this.

Eza had never used a computer in Kalimantan, but in Surabaya, her classmates pounded the keys “tick-tick-tock-tock, tick-tick-tock” to swiftly complete their homework. However, she could not complete it even after several hours had elapsed. Eza murmured with rage, “My classmates thought I was dumb! They only saw me as a ‘black-skinned villager’ from Kalimantan.” Nonetheless, she fought bravely for academic excellence to combat her inferior status as an unintelligent and uncivilized young rural girl from Kalimantan. She buried herself in the library during many recesses and lunchtimes to catch up on her studies. Only a school scholarship was what she desired. She could help her father save money if she obtained it. Then, after one year, Eza soared to 2nd place in her class and represented her school in many mathematics competitions, where she received numerous awards. Finally, her classmates began to notice her and approached her in an attempt to befriend her, but she was uninterested. After completing three years at senior high school, her academic performance enabled her to gain a full scholarship to an Australian university. Nonetheless, Eza realized that the scholarship was an unfair exchange:

A cigarette factory called Sampoerna gave me a full scholarship offer to study chemistry in Australia, but I must work in their cigarette factory after I graduate. At the time, Sampoerna was a well-known company in Indonesia; many people wanted to work there because they could have higher social status and salary. But when I heard that this cigarette factory would pay my Chinese classmate IDR30,000,000 a month, which is a lot more than I would get. I didn't like it. [yelled] Why should Indonesians be paid less?

Eza was well aware of the unfair exchange of cheap labor caused by different ethnicities and social classes. Therefore, before deciding whether to accept the scholarship, she took a short vacation back to Kalimantan to visit her parents. However, she never imagined that this trip would ultimately completely change her dreams of attending university.

Immediately upon Eza's return to Kalimantan, a young man from her village developed a crush on her and tried to force her into marrying him. But, of course, she turned him down: "I was only 16 at the time, and I didn't want to marry so young; I wanted to be successful!" Unfortunately, he persevered in his pursuit and resorted to threatening words and deeds to frighten Eza, saying, "Within three days, you will kneel before me and beg me to marry you! Don't ask me to save you!" In Indonesia, witchcraft [*Black Magic*] is a cultural method of taming or exacting vengeance. Eza revealed her dreadful experience with taming to me:

I began to scream hysterically at midnight. And at 6 p.m., 12 a.m., and 3 a.m. I would suddenly jump out of bed, take off all my clothes, and run out of the house as if I was completely crazy. I wanted to kill myself by jumping out the window or walking down the street naked. Everyone was so scared and didn't know what to do; my father and fifth eldest brother finally tied me to my bed. The most horrific thing was that they found a lot of small black needles stuck to my head. My sister screamed in terror, 'Oh, there are so many sharp needles on Eza's head!' And my father kept crying as he took them out one by one. That man wanted to make me insane and humiliate me; he 'locked' my body.

Then, Eza's grandfather was determined to ask the indigenous Dayak people for assistance because it was rumored they possessed supernatural, magical powers to kill and heal. Before this, I had also heard about the Dayak tribe from several Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong,

who claimed that they possessed mystical powers that allowed them to execute someone with an invisible knife. Whether it is true or not, I have no idea.

Surprisingly, after spending a month with this Dayak tribe, Eza gradually regained her sanity. Then, one day, a Dayak chief asked, “Do you wish to get revenge? Would you like me to counter-lock this man’s body?” However, Eza said to me:

At the time, I really hated that man because he had caused me so much pain. But I told the Dayak, ‘No. I don’t think that’s what Jesus wants.’ I also promised myself that I would never give in to a man in my life; what I want is to be successful. I’ll never forget my father’s tears; I must repay him whatever.

After a month, Eza’s father decided to send her back to her senior high school in Surabaya to complete the university admission procedure for Australia. The night before departing for Surabaya, her father and mother prayed for her tearfully. They sat on chairs while Eza was lying on the floor. Her father then walked across her body three times as a ritual to bless and protect her. Her mother cried while her father sobbed. That day, Eza vowed, “Once I left that door, I must make a good living for them when I go back home!”

Eza was still grappling with her plans because she despised the cigarette factory’s discriminatory wage structure. Then one day, while strolling down the street near a training center in Surabaya, she noticed many girls wearing identical t-shirts with the words Hong Kong in large letters and wondered, “Why are these girls willing to work abroad, far away from their families? To be a domestic worker? Even though Kalimantan is a poor place, no one would do this kind of work.” Then, driven by curiosity, she asked one of the girls how much her income would be in Hong Kong. When she heard, she appeared to awaken:

Four Years at University? Then, four years later? It is a waste of my time. My goal is to make money, lots of money, so I can start my own business. I don’t want to be a cheap office worker at a cigarette factory; I don’t want to work for anyone!

4.2 Docility-Utility: Get Rid of the Indigenous Feminine Body

4.2.1 *Dog? Dirty Job? Lose Face?*

Eza ultimately declined the university scholarship to study in Australia because she could not wait to pursue her ambition of making quick money in Hong Kong. Instead, she abandoned her university dream to enter a training center in Surabaya. Nonetheless, she was determined to conceal this from her father because there was a strong occupational stereotype against the domestic worker in Kalimantan:

Do you know that being a domestic worker is a very, very, very low-status job in our village? [*sighed*] Being a domestic worker is like being a dog because people can tell you what to do, and you have to do it. Even though Kalimantan is a poor place, people would rather get less pay than do domestic work.

Eza recalled a memory from primary school. It was a striking illustration of how such occupational stereotypes about domestic workers were profoundly ingrained in the minds of Indonesian children:

One time, our teacher asked us, ‘What do you want to do when you grow up?’ Most of us wanted to work at an airport or a bank. Unexpectedly, a very poor classmate blurted out that she wanted to work as a domestic worker. All of a sudden, there was a long silence in the classroom, and then everyone started laughing and making fun of her, ‘Wow! Getting a job as a domestic worker! What the hell is going on?’ When I got home, I told my parents about this funny thing. My mother said, ‘I’d rather die than have my child become a domestic worker. Don’t make me lose face. So, how do I tell my parents I went to the training center? This dirty job would only be done by the lowest of the low.’

Indeed, Eza desired to work in a factory in some Asian countries, such as Korea; however, only domestic workers can deduct agency fees from their wages, while others must pay a substantial sum in advance, “If I want to climb to the top, I have to take this road.”

4.2.2 Masculinity Without Men?: Female Masculinity, Privilege and Power

Although Eza's father's moral preaching significantly impacted her values, domestic servitude offered a gateway into "Indonesian modernity," which challenged her deeply ingrained traditional values, notably gender and sexuality. This contestation with tradition and female subjectivity in Indonesia caused Eza to feel tension and excitement. She stated gravely:

Maybe our hair was all cut short, or maybe we weren't even allowed to wear dresses inside; simply bringing a dress or short pants was forbidden. And, when we slept on the floor together at night, when we looked at each other's faces, it felt as if we could only see men's faces. Suddenly, it hit me that my body really wanted to touch and be touched; we felt so lonely, and we really wanted to be understood. I think most of us felt the same way, and I really believed it.

As an indigenous village girl, Eza was unaware that her feminine body was being disciplined and made into a commodity for sale. Nevertheless, she observed that the training center molded her physical features into a standardized form to erase her individuality. At the time, Eza had no idea that her shifting physical features had unwittingly prompted her to re-explore her sexual identity. Indeed, all she knew was that the staff at the training center immediately targeted, utilized, and amplified her female masculinity. Eza guffawed with pride:

I don't know why, maybe because my speaking style was straightforward and firm, the staff and teachers liked me very much, they thought I was smarter than other girls, they trusted me and assigned me important special tasks. I was like the administrative assistant there, assisting them in coordinating many things.

Therefore, during the day, Eza was required to assist staff in processing girls' passports and visas and packing and checking their documents. However, at night, staff would request her to provide extra Cantonese tutorials to some girls, even though Eza's Cantonese at the time was quite terrible. In addition, because there was no man around, no one could perform heavy labor. Thus, Eza had to rise each morning at 4:00 a.m., ride a motorcycle to the market, collect the many

heavy baskets and fasten them tightly on her motorcycle before racing back to the training center before 6:00 a.m., “Suddenly, I felt like a real man. I began to become a ‘boy’ and began to hate my set of breasts because they were too large. I made every effort to make my breasts flat.”

Working like a boy also elevated Eza’s status and spotlighted her. However, she was baffled why many girls had crushes on her and fought over who would win her affection:

I really liked how they made me feel, and the girls thought ‘uh-oh, this *boy* Eza is now very important.’ Similarly, like today, when we see a rich man, we want to get close to him and steal his heart.

Eza’s higher status also afforded her special privileges that allowed her to explore her sexual fantasies and confront her sexual identity. She could not conceal her excitement:

I don’t know why, but I began to enjoy watching girls strip naked, especially those with big breasts. Their oversized breasts really scared me, but I kept doing it. When the girls were taking showers together, I would always rush into the room, stand in front of them, and tease them by saying, ‘What are you girls doing, huh? The girls would scream, ‘uh-uh,’ but I knew they were happy because they thought I was a man.’ I smiled, and in my mind, I thought, ‘What’s wrong with those girls?’¹⁹

Eza’s tomboy identity was growing; she was not just playing a game of changing her appearance but was also immersing herself in male roles to cope with patriarchy. One Sunday, she accidentally engaged in her first lesbian sexual activity, which was tinged with excitement, numbness, and pleasure, but followed by mixed feelings of self-doubt:

One Sunday, I lay sadly on my bed, wondering why my working visa to Hong Kong had not yet arrived. Suddenly, I saw a girl walk over to my room. She gazed at me, then knocked on my door. I said, ‘What’s up?’ in a rude voice as if I were a man. ‘Can I come inside?’ she asked. Then I said, ‘It’s up to you!’ in a manly voice as if I didn’t care. She then began to tease me, saying, ‘Kor Kor [哥哥], do you want any food? Why not get up?’ ‘No mood,’ I told her in a flat voice. Then, she grabbed my arms and laid her body flat on my chest. With a seductive voice, she teased me, ‘What’s wrong, huh?’ I kept a cool look on my face. She kept trying to woo me, ‘Uh...um...I’m talking to you, so why

¹⁹ See Chapter 7 for further discussion on the sexual desire and transgression of Indonesian domestic workers.

don't you just leave me alone?' I didn't say a word but stared at her face for a long time. She suddenly pulled up her clothes, unhooked her bra, and showed me her big breasts. I couldn't help but think how gorgeous, big, and firm they were. Then she whispered, 'So,' as if she was trying to get me to go on. I could feel that one of my hands had already moved up to her breasts and was shooting through them, squeezing them hard, and playing with them. I didn't know why, but I even felt another hand reach out and start to grab both of her breasts. She liked it, but she wanted more; she urged me, 'Let's go down there [*vagina*].' I immediately yelled, 'You crazy!' Then I sat up quickly, lost my wits, didn't know where I should go, but I ran to take a shower.

During her shower, Eza was astonished and perplexed as to why she became sexually attracted to a woman; she asked herself, 'Why did I feel so strongly?' Even though she continued to feel this way once she arrived in Hong Kong; nevertheless, she did not permit herself to focus on her sexual identity at that time because she wished to endure the difficult period in the training center. However, one thing she was certain of was that being a tomboy allowed her to obtain extra power, special privileges, and higher status, which caused her to be treated differently from other girls. However, under the spotlight's glare, Eza paid a steep price for this. She expected to receive training but was instead made to perform extra labor without salary. When I questioned Eza if she viewed her circumstances as a type of alternative exploitation, she gave me an unexpected response:

Really, being a *boy* made me tired as I had to do extra work, but I did have some advantages. Living there was very boring, but I could have fun and play outside while the other girls couldn't. I could steal their money and buy food to eat so I wouldn't feel so hungry, but the other girls couldn't do the same. I could even ride a motorcycle and use a cell phone, but the other girls were not allowed. The other girls had to be disciplined and managed, but I was free. Living in the training center was the same as living in prison.

4.2.3 "Prison": A Metaphor of Discipline and Humiliation

In Eza's memories, the training center was a place many girls wished to flee but could not because the front gate was so high and entangled with electrical wires that if any of the girls

attempted to scale it, they would undoubtedly perish. For Eza, the most aggravating thing was the inadequacy of food; everyone was given only a small spoonful of rice, never any meat, and only one piece of vegetable with a small amount of salt. They ate dry yamakurage since it was the least expensive vegetable. In addition, they had to rise at 5:00 a.m. every morning to perform physical exercise together before being split into groups of ten to clean the office or the restrooms until 7:00 a.m. For most girls, these mandatory duties could only discipline their physical bodies, which they could tolerate. Yet, the most humiliating thing they could not tolerate was what happened in the Cantonese training lesson, which completely devastated their dignity. Eza recalled:

One time, she [*teacher*] taught us how to say chopsticks in Cantonese, and one of the girls forgot how to say it; the teacher poured cold water on her and kept yelling ‘biiiiibaaaaa’ at her. I was so mad at that teacher. We were all too scared to say anything, so we just looked at the girl. The teacher scolded us, ‘When you work in Hong Kong, one day your employer will not only pour water on you but also beat you up.’ She even hit us with a heavy stick. When any of us girls cried, she would yell loudly, ‘Stop crying!’ Even though we knew we hadn’t done anything wrong, but we would answer the teacher with, ‘Yes’ and ‘Sorry.’ We only learned to be like that, but that’s not who we are.

Eza made her sharpest criticism when she reflected on how this staff member had used threatening language and brainwashed the girls with language to make them submissive:

The worst thing I learned at the training center was to always say, ‘Yes [係]’ and ‘Sorry, sorry [對唔住, 對唔住].’ The staff taught us that no matter what your employer in Hong Kong said, we had to answer, ‘Yes ar [好吖],’ and if our employer was a woman, we had to say, ‘Thank you, Madam [多謝啊, 太太].’ If she asked you if you knew how to care for a baby, no matter what she asked, you had to say yes. Even if your employer is wrong, you have to say, ‘Sorry, ar! I’m sorry! Sorry!’ My agency told us that we can’t talk back. Only reply ‘Yes’ and ‘Sorry,’ even if your employer was wrong.²⁰

²⁰ See Chapter 6 for further discussion on how the two governments regulated migrant bodies into docility and associated technology of governmentality.

Eza heard from many people that working overseas may end tragically, even in death, and disagreed with the obligatory submissive language of an Indonesian domestic worker.

Nevertheless, she was willing to sacrifice her life in the diaspora, as she exclaimed, “Cut my hair? Even my heart was saying, ‘Ai, ai,’ but I told myself, ‘Let it.’ All I wanted was quick! Quickly make money! Quickly make money!”

4.3 The Scary Payoffs of Legal Entitlements

After nearly three months of waiting in the training center, Eza’s visa to Hong Kong finally arrived. As it is mandatory for a parent’s signature to indicate consent for a daughter to work abroad by the Indonesian government, Eza pleaded with her third eldest sister in Surabaya to pretend to be her guarantor. Eza had no luggage, just a small bag as she boarded the airplane. When she recalled her first migratory journey as a young village girl, she smirked at her “backward” behaviour on the plane as she did not know how to fasten the seat belt. When the airplane took off, she could not stop her hands from pressing on other passengers’ thighs as she was terrified, “Suddenly, I felt like I was so ‘uncivilized,’ but I didn’t want people to look down on me.” As such, Eza pretended to know everything, giggling, “I hit every button on the TV as if I knew how to work it, but in fact, the screen never moved at all.” Eza never imagined that her pretending tactic would enable her to survive on the airplane and become one of her sharpest weapons throughout her migratory trajectory.

Figure 4.1

Eza's Hong Kong Identity Card Displaying her Short Hairstyle on Arrival



4.3.1 A “Yes-yes-yes” Maid

Following a five-hour flight filled with adventure, on December 28, 2004, a date that Eza would never forget, she landed in Hong Kong wearing a very thin t-shirt shivering from the cold. This seemed to signify that her body had left her nation and entered the diaspora. “More money! More money!” was Eza’s body-soothing motto. Aside from this culture shock, Eza was excitedly drawn to the tall, gleaming buildings as the taxi drove through Central. However, she soon realized she was a maid working in a strange foreign land rather than a tourist.

Agencies taught domestic helpers to say, “Yes, yes, yes [好呀, 好呀, 好呀,]” no matter what their employers requested. Therefore, Eza became a “yes-yes-yes” maid, which fulfilled her Hong Kong employer’s desire for a subordinate maid who truly needed the compassion of the

employer. Because she was from an impoverished Third World country, Madam told Eza, “You came far from your home for money.” As such, she asked to assist Eza by keeping her passport and all her salary. They assured Eza that if she needed anything, to simply tell them, and they would give her everything. When Madam noticed that Eza was only wearing a thin t-shirt, she bought her a HK\$900 feather jacket, which Eza found incredibly touching. Moreover, Madam taught her Cantonese by instructing her to watch her mouth, demonstrating how to say, “This is a spoon” and “These are chopsticks” in Cantonese. Nonetheless, Popo (Madam’s mother) was not as patient as Madam; after one week, she began to react fiercely to Eza:

Because no matter what she told me to do, I only said ‘Yes, yes’ and didn’t do anything. After her dog pooped, she asked me to clean up the poop. At the time, I didn’t know what she was talking about. All I heard was ‘stool-stool-stool,’ so I said yes, but I didn’t understand. Then she yelled at me, ‘Why did you answer yes but do nothing?’

Popo took Eza to Yum Cha (a Chinese restaurant) with her friend. However, she moaned to her friend, “My maid knows nothing!” Almost every night, Eza cried over this until she finally understood, “That’s what a domestic worker is like.” Eza sobbed:

I hated being a domestic worker. I hated winter. I had to get up early [*pouted*]. Even if you wanted to stay in bed a little longer, you had to get up, put your hands in cold water, and start mopping the floor. I didn’t need an alarm clock my body would wake me up when it was time.

“So, what can I do?” Eza pondered. She still owed seven months of her salary for her agency fee; if she returned home, she would be severely punished. Aside from pushing herself to watch Cantonese television and writing down the words, she attempted to survive in the presence of these strange people by employing her favorite tactic. Eza chuckled slyly:

I’m the best at complimenting people and acting. When Popo took me to Yum Cha, I would say, ‘Popo, you-beautiful-clothes!’ and act like I was complimenting her. She would say, ‘Really?’ I knew that was what she wanted, so I tried to praise her more. And I could tell that she was starting to like me more and more. When she went out, she started buying me bread as a gift.

Eza, like many other Indonesian domestic workers, began receiving her first month's salary after she paid her seven-month agency fee. However, the agency asked her employer not to grant her a weekly rest day to prevent her from interacting with outsiders or acquiring "accurate" information. Subsequently, Eza discovered she had been underpaid since she had only received HK\$2200 even though HK\$3270 was written on the payment receipt that her Madam required her to sign:

I didn't dare ask at first, but when I finally did, my Madam didn't say anything. I didn't have my mobile, so I couldn't ask anyone about it. I thought they were so nice, though. Because Sir and Madam took me to an Indonesian bank, helped me open an account, and asked me to put all my money in it. Then Sir said: 'Now, Eza, I can give you a holiday if you want.'

4.3.2 Protect Virginity: A Chastity Tomboy Performance

During the 14 months Eza worked for this employer before her contract was terminated prematurely, she was only granted three to four days of holiday. However, since Eza met her fourth eldest sister Pikul in Hong Kong, these few days completely altered the course of her migratory life. Pikul, one of the siblings accused by Eza of falling asleep during their father's preaching, dropped out of school as a teenager due to pre-marital sex resulting in pregnancy; after giving birth to her daughter, she left Indonesia and worked abroad.

On Eza's first Sunday day off, Pikul met her at Mei Foo MTR station. Eza was thrilled to meet Pikul, the only person she knew in Hong Kong outside her employer's family. However, Eza did not understand why Pikul's eyes scanned and examined her outfit. She took a deep breath:

When I met Pikul, she yelled at me, ‘You! Why do you dress so sexily? You can’t be that! Don’t you know that the Pakistanis would fuck you up?’ I was so scared when I heard about this. I suddenly remembered that the staff at the training center always told us, ‘There will be a lot of Pakistani men following you in Hong Kong, so be careful to protect your body.’ I asked Pikul right away, ‘So what can I do?’ She said, ‘Don’t worry! Just follow me!’

As such, Eza began a process of “body-mind reconstruction”; the first step was altering her appearance. Indeed, Pikul took Eza to the Fa Yu street market in Mong Kok, one of the most popular local markets for purchasing cheap clothing and hastily grabbed a pair of extremely large, wide-legged pants for her. Eza exclaimed, “Too big! How can I wear this big pair of pants? They might fall off! They belong to a man.” Nevertheless, Pikul insisted on purchasing them and again deliberately chose a large oversized t-shirt for Eza, which caused Eza to widen her eyes, “Wooh! Do I need such a big t-shirt?” Eza questioned Pikul hysterically, but Pikul’s sharp response appeared to awaken Eza:

Pikul yelled at me, ‘If your t-shirt isn’t that big, the Pakistani men could see your breasts! But if you seem like a *boy*, they’ll think, errrr, a man? They’re not going to come over to you!’ Pikul cares so much about me; she said, ‘I’m your sister; I can’t always be with you; if you don’t dress like it, how can you protect yourself?’

For Eza to be a *boy*, she required further coaching as well as changing her attire. Pikul instructed her on a boy’s walking style and facial expressions as she walked Eza back to her employer’s home. She instructed her to imitate her by walking with her legs very wide apart and feigning a very cool expression on her face, which is a predominantly masculine posture. Eza grinned broadly as she recalled this event, but when asked how she felt at that moment, she responded in a very serious manner:

I felt really different after putting on the man’s clothes. I started gazing at myself in the mirror all the time. I thought, ‘I felt like a boy, I felt like...I was really like...I was really like a boy. And I started to use hair gel to keep my hair up, make it stiff, and make my hairstyle look cool. I wanted people to say, ‘Wow, you’re so cool.’

Even though it is debatable whether altering one's outfits, gestures, or facial expressions could successfully shape or mold them into another performative self or whether altering one's body could lead to a change in their mind, one thing is clear: migrants, like Eza, who were re-exploring their sexual orientation or gender roles in the diaspora, may have a status that is fluid and ever-changing in liminal time and space. Indeed, Eza changed her appearance after completing the first stage of body-mind reconstruction. During subsequent Sunday holidays, Pikul transported Eza from the virtual to the actual world, a bar in Causeway Bay, where she practiced being a true tomboy:

There were many lesbians dancing there. Pikul told me to imitate her wide-legged walking style, but I walked like I was dipping my legs with slow, small steps. Pikul mumbled in my ear, 'Ai, your way of walking should be like mine!' Why did I walk that way? Because Pikul made me wear black sunglasses, but they were so cheap, she only paid HK\$10 for them in Mong Kong that I felt dizzy and couldn't see anything clearly. I was afraid I would pass out and hit my head on the floor. I really didn't like it, I didn't think it was me, but I made myself do it because I thought it made me look cool.

Before introducing Eza to her friends, Pikul whispered, "Be cool! Build your image." She cautioned Eza that she must not appear elegant; when seated, she must spread her legs wide, cross one knee over the other, and continue to swing her legs. Eza kept up with everything, as she stated, "Even my heart felt a bit weird, but I was so desperate for the girls to think, 'This boy is so cool!'" Nonetheless, she was initially surprised when Pikul called her "my son." The lesbians would be in different family groups, and the tomboy would refer to her girlfriend as "mummy," not "husband." Eza also heard that Pikul was sometimes referred to as "daddy" or "big brother," which she believed was because she constantly paid for others' beers. But what drew Eza in was that acting this typical or so-called masculine type of man, similar to what occurred at the training center, not only made her a competitive target among the girls but also evoked her sexual feelings:

The light was really dim inside the bar, and I leaned back on the sofa. Many girls twisted my arms to tease me, asked for my mobile number, and some even texted me, ‘I want to be with you!’ Then there was a girl who was already married and had a daughter. I couldn’t help but use my hand to squeeze her big breasts, and I could feel my heart beating like po...po...po...po...This time, she held my hand and put it on her, down there [*vagina*]. She showed me how to slowly and slowly slide my fingers to go further...

Eza further permitted her to cross the limit, and she experienced both pleasurable and odd emotions. However, Pikul believed this was insufficient, so she subjected Eza to the third step, “competency,” as training or a test to determine whether she could be a true tomboy. Pikul rented two rooms at an hourly hotel, each for two hours at an hourly rate of HK\$180. Here, Eza observed two girls twisting Pikul’s arms and entering one room; then, she motioned for two more girls to wait. Eza was terrified, but she acted bravely, “I couldn’t let the girls say, ‘Why is Eza so odd, looking like a *boy*, but so frightened?’” She thus acted as if she were a *boy*, brought two girls with her, carrying one with her right arm and the other with her left, entered the room and had her first opportunity to experience sex with girls. However, she chose not to because she remembered what her father had told her:

I didn’t know why; every time I wanted this [*sex*]; I remembered my father telling me I shouldn’t get it until I was married. Then, I said in a manly rude tone, ‘I go to the toilet first!’ I used different excuses to pass the time, like poopoo or taking a shower. When we heard Pikul knock on our door, I was so happy that I could keep my virginity.

4.3.3 Beyond Ideal: A Threat to an Employer’s Family

Unfortunately, Eza’s employers began to notice the change in Eza, not only because she was dressing in a masculine way, but because they also found it frightening as they did not know Eza’s friends’ backgrounds. For example, Pikul came with several friends to Eza’s employer’s

house to request a passport to borrow money from a financial company, which terrified Eza's employers:

I understood why Sir was so scared because Pikul's friends all had dyed their hair different colors and gelled it up very high, one of them even had a long punk tail at the back, and Pikul's jeans were also in a ripped style; they kept banging on our door loudly that night. And Pikul even called our house at 3:00 a.m. or 4:00 a.m. in the morning to ask for money. Sir began to hate me, and he asked me, 'Who is that person? I hired you to watch over my two kids. If that person comes back and knocks on our door again, wouldn't you be scared if you were us?'

Eza decided to remain silent. However, remaining silent might have increased their uncertainty, increasing their dread. Sir finally told Eza, "We fire you! Pack your things now." Eza questioned, "Sir! Madam! Did I make a mistake?" Sir retorted, "We're really scared! I'm terrified of you!" "We don't want to do that." Madam calmed Eza by placing one of her arms across her shoulder. They purchased a Cathay Pacific airline ticket for her, and before Eza left, Popo hugged her and said, "Next time you work for another employer, don't make any bad friends."

After Eza's 1st contract was terminated and she left her employer's residence, Pikul assisted her in contacting a migrant organization. This was the first time Eza began to recognize her labor rights and underpayment. To sue or not to sue an employer may have been a relatively simple decision for a migrant union or NGO. For a migrant domestic worker, however, it was difficult and far more complex. When Eza first met the staff member at the migrant organization, she was terrified by her callous attitude, "Sue or not? If you sue, I'll help you. If not, then go!" Eza thought to herself, "That staff was so rude. Could she really help me? I want to sue, but I don't want to sue." Eza struggled as she waited outside. Eventually, she chose not to sue. When I heard about this, I was perplexed; given that the underpayment of Indonesian domestic workers was so unjust, why would she allow it? Eza responded assertively:

Of course, I thought it was unfair that I was underpaid. Why? Even though we worked just as hard as the Filipina maids, we were paid less. I was taking care of my employer's two kids; it was really hard. But I didn't sue. First, I didn't get any evidence. Second, and most importantly, this employer treated me very well. I was underpaid and only received HK\$2200, but she provided me with adequate food and sleep. I thought I was very lucky. And, at Chinese New Year, my employer gave me a red packet with HK\$1000 in it, and sometimes they even added a few hundred dollars and told me, 'You've done great!' It really moved me. You know, I was a stupid maid who didn't know anything and didn't know how to do the job. All I could say was, 'Yes ar, yes ar, yes ar!' I would hate that maid if I were them, but they kept me and taught me. I might think that sometimes, even though I'm not getting full pay, if someone treated me badly, I would rather be underpaid. Among my four contracts in Hong Kong, this one was the best; this employer is number one.

Figure 4.2

Eza's Masculine Appearance During her First and Second Contracts



4.3.4 Looping: A Cycle That Never Ends

Due to the two-week rule imposed by Hong Kong Immigration, Eza was forced to exit to Macau by her agency after failing to secure a new job. Although she had no employment, she still had to pay for a boarding house and daily expenses during her stay in Macau. To survive, Eza pretended to be a gambling customer in casinos, getting free bottles of water and tissues in the washroom and eating cakes out of the sight of the security guards. Then, after nearly three months of waiting, Eza finally obtained a new employer in Yuen Long. However, she had no alternative but to endure another seven-month HK\$3000 agency fee deductions from her salary. Yet, the worst was still to come. In this contract, Eza worked for barely four months.

Like Eza's 1st contract, her Sir employer did not grant her a mandatory weekly rest day until she settled the entire agency fee, and her agency ordered her Sir employer to retain Eza's salary for the first seven months. However, after three months, her Sir found this practice irritating and decided to pay Eza her salary directly. Nonetheless, Eza fell into an abyss:

At first, I thought that Sir might have made a mistake when calculating the cash. When he asked me to sign the receipt, I asked him why it said HK\$3410 when it was really only HK\$2000. Right away, he shouted, 'You ask your agency, don't ask me!' I called my agent straightaway to ask about it, but she yelled at me, 'Eza, I asked you, do you speak Cantonese well? Are you a good cook?' I told myself, 'Yes, it's true. I wasn't very good at cooking, and my Cantonese wasn't very good either.' Then I asked, 'But why did I have to sign for HK\$3,410?' When my agent heard that, she yelled again, 'Don't talk back! Or I will tell your employer to fire you!'

As Eza worried about losing her employment and having to exit to Macau for another three months, she convinced herself, "Eza, what's wrong with you? It's already two years, and you've earned nothing?" So she endured it, even though she was deprived of sleep because she was forced to work illegally in Sir's office and the grandmother's home, and anytime she broke the golden threadfin bream fish while frying, grandmother would smack her with a shovel. When it

came to her 2nd contract, Eza was not a sponge who passively allowed people to manipulate her; she began to “talk back” to assert her rights, threatening the grandmother, “If you hit me, I’ll call the police!” However, for a migrant, talking back is equivalent to setting themselves ablaze. Eza recalled the event that resulted in the termination of her employment:

That night, Saturday, my Madam finally let me take a shower and go to bed around 1:00 a.m. Around 2:00 a.m., I had only slept for an hour, and my Sir woke me up with a loud knock on the door. He told me to get up right away because he was watching football on TV and wanted me to make him some soup noodles. I was really tired, but I still followed. I just thought he’d let me go to bed. But he stopped me, ‘Where are you going?’ he yelled. I answered, ‘Sir, I’m so sleepy. Can you let me sleep?’ ‘Of course not!’ he yelled at me, ‘You have to stand here until I’m done eating the noodles. You have to clean up everything before you go to sleep.’ I was very angry, so I only put water on them and didn’t wash them after he was done. ‘Now, Sir, can I sleep?’ I asked deliberately. ‘No!’ he shouted, ‘Clean them!’ I grumbled to myself, but not aloud, ‘This guy is like there’s no tomorrow!’ Then, after I finished, I embarrassed him, ‘So, I can sleep now? Right?’

Unfortunately, Eza failed to wake up the next morning at 6:30 a.m. When Madam woke her, she could not help but talk back, “Madam, I didn’t get enough sleep, and if this keeps up, I think I’ll get sick. You didn’t give me any holiday; do you know my body is really tired?” Eza’s fair complaint infuriated her Madam, who raged at her, “You dare to talk back! Do you know who pays your salary?” She then commanded Eza to iron many clothes immediately; after Eza finished, her Madam exclaimed, “Wrong! Certainly not this one!” “Madam, what do you want?” Eza snapped, knowing that her Madam was taking revenge by punishing her. Her Madam became enraged and yelled, “I want you to get out! You can only pack your clothes in a plastic bag!” Instead of apologizing, Eza hastily packed her belongings. Then, her Madam shouted, “If you step out of the door, I will not give you back a single cent!”

Eza returned to the agency, and her agent scolded her, “Don’t you know that you still owe agency money? How could you act that way to your employer?” Eza responded, “So what?”

Her agent yelled at her, “I’d never seen a maid talk so loudly like you! You owe money, but you still talk in that rude way. You’re so ugly!” However, Eza employed a cunning strategy to dissuade her agent from disparaging her:

I faked a cough in front of her because I knew that Hong Kong people were so afraid of spreading disease [*giggled*]. The more she said, the louder I coughed in front of her. Then she immediately covered her nose and mouth and shouted, ‘Shit! Stay away from me!’

Dramatically, the next day, Eza’s Madam contacted her and said, “Eza, do you know I like you? But I don’t like you always talking back. You’re just a maid. I wanted you to obey me [聽話] and not do anything naughty [曳].” Eza insisted she would not return, but her agent intimidated her, “If you don’t follow, I’ll blacklist you with Immigration!” Thus, Eza tried to flee from her agency’s boarding house, but the door was locked, and no girl could leave. Her agency retained her passport and mobile telephone, conducted a body search and confiscated several hundred dollars she had inside her wallet. Eza believed that if she could escape to Causeway Bay or Wan Chai, she could seek assistance from the Indonesian girls on the streets. She lied to her agent that her sister had agreed to introduce her to a Causeway Bay employer and asked her agent to drive her to Causeway Bay to meet the prospective employer. However, when her agent drove near the public toilets at the Canal Road Flyer market in Causeway Bay, she began shaking her body, indicating the need to urinate. Her agent never anticipated that Eza would immediately flee after exiting the car. And that was when I first met Eza.

4.3.5 Justice’s Terror: Winning the Case, yet Getting Assaulted

I still recall Eza’s timid and terrified look when we first met. She looked like a teenager between 18-19 years at the time. She had short curly waxed hair that was pinned up and was

sporting a huge loose t-shirt and loose faded jeans. When I asked her what gave her the courage to flee her employer's residence, she took a deep breath and said:

To be honest, I don't know why I was so happy when my Madam told me, "You packed your things!" Maybe I should truly thank her because I'd been wanting to break my contract for a long time but hadn't had the courage. Even when I tried to be very, very obedient in front of my employer, in fact, I was thinking of my way out because I didn't want to get into trouble before I was ready.

At this time, Eza agreed to take legal action against her employer for underpayment and unpaid holidays, but that did not imply it would be easy. Whenever she recalled that her Sir bought her Vitasoy and bread almost every afternoon, she would experience conflicting emotions, "I really felt guilt for him. What kind of employer would buy tea for a maid?" However, Eza could not put up with any further underpayment, given that she came to Hong Kong to make quick money.²¹

Eza's hearing date at the Labour Tribunal eventually arrived six months later. I accompanied Eza to the court hearing alongside an Indonesian Catholic nun and Legi, Eza's girlfriend, to provide moral support. Eza and her Sir employer underwent cross-examination in front of the Presiding Officer during the initial rounds of the hearing. Nonetheless, she looked directly into the Presiding Officer's eyes and used an assertive manner, but her Sir employer stuttered and failed to support his answers with sufficient evidence. In the end, the Presiding Officer ruled in favor of Eza and awarded her HK\$7,000 because her Sir employer eventually revealed everything. However, he maintained that he was just following directions from the agency and shouted at Eza:

²¹ See Chapter 5 for further discussion on the legislation governing migrant domestic workers' labor rights and the challenges they face.

The agency said you agreed with that [*underpayment*!] I don't know why you're still suing me. Why did you say yes to the agency if you didn't agree? It's not fair to me at all. You said you were underpaid. Do you feel bad about that? Don't you remember that I and grandma gave you red packets at the last Lunar Chinese New Year? Money, right? You're too bad! Our family was so nice to you! But you gave us trouble.

At this, Eza's eyes swelled with tears. I departed the meeting first at 1:00 p.m. since I had a visit at the Shatin Prince of Wales Hospital. Unfortunately, and shockingly, I did not imagine the injustice that followed outside the Labour Tribunal. When Eza left the Tribunal, four people lept from a car at the bus stop, three large men and one woman, rushing towards Eza, and her agent forcibly held her t-shirt to stop her from leaving; she yelled, "Give me all the money," and Eza yelled back, "The money belongs to me!" The Indonesian Catholic nun was so terrified she fled with Legi, leaving only the warning, "Be careful!" Eza persisted on leaving, but the men grabbed her and searched her pockets. Eza then used both hands to hold her pockets closed. "You will definitely die once you leave here," the agent told Eza in Bahasa. One man also said, "I wanted to hit you, so you die. How dare a maid like you! Don't you know that you caused a lot of trouble?" Eza only thought, "I'm at the Labour Tribunal, I don't believe they'd dare to attack me, but I cannot show fear on my face."

At the time, I was on my way to the hospital and received a telephone call from Eza. I heard her pleading, "Cece, please help me! My agency sent three big men to keep me from leaving the Labour Tribunal. They are holding me there." I quickly said, "Don't worry! Be brave! The money belongs to you! No one can take a dime from you without your permission. Listen! Call 999 and ask the police to come!"

Unfortunately, more unbelievable things occurred with the Hong Kong Police.²² “I will call the police!” Eza warned men. One answered, “You call! How wrong are you!”

Unfortunately, when she dialed the 999 emergency hotline, they did not know her location because she used the word Tribunal in her native language, Bahasa. Therefore, she grabbed an older man at the bus stop and pleaded with him, “Can you help me tell the police where I am?” When he started questioning her about the details following the telephone call, one of the men warned Eza, “Don’t talk to anyone!” After 10 minutes, two policemen arrived. Absurdly, they told Eza, “You’re wrong, and we can’t help you because you signed your name.” Eza’s agent even added, “All the maids are like that. They owe people money but won’t pay it back. They just run away to Macau.” Finally, the officer repeated, “I really cannot help you!”

Eza attempted calling 999 again, but her agent gave the police a piece of paper with her name stating she owed their training fee. “It’s your fault, and you should repay the money,” the police remarked to Eza before leaving. Eza never thought the Hong Kong Police would not help. She then begged a young man on the street for help, but he scoffed at her, “Hey! You are a boy! You help yourself!”

Then around 5:00 p.m., four to five hours after Eza’s court hearing ended, I received another urgent call from her. Her voice sounded desperate, “Cece, can you come and save me?” I was furious with the agency, the police, and the Indonesian Catholic nun. I took a taxi and headed to the Labour Tribunal. When I arrived, the Indonesian Catholic nun sprang from nowhere and hid behind me. When one of the two men noticed me looking at him fearlessly, his

²² In my affidavit for the first judicial review case on human trafficking in Hong Kong, I detailed Eza’s struggles redressing her labor rights.

ears turned bright red. I grew more courageous when I saw his fearful face and red ears because he appeared more terrified than me. I tried to be strong and told them, “I need to take Eza back!” but deep down, I was truly afraid. I was simply a social worker. But one of the men stopped me with his arm and said in a trembling voice, “Eza still owes money from four months. How can we answer our boss if we get nothing from her?” I shouted out, “I am accountable for Eza’s safety.” Since I was unsure what to do and no longer trusted in calling 999, I yelled, “Okay! Let’s resolve this at the nearby police station. I want to know if it’s legal for you guys to forcefully hold a girl in the street.”

After we arrived at the police station, I explained what had occurred to a police officer at the front desk. However, I was astonished and enraged at his harsh response, “This is a private dispute about money, so you have to settle it on your own. We can’t help you with anything.” I asked him, “Then, is it legal to forcefully hold a girl in the street for nearly five hours?” He answered my challenge saying, “But no one got hurt! Right?” We ultimately paid the men HK\$500 because they stopped us from leaving the police station. Then one handed me his business card, which read, “XXX financial company.” They were, in fact, debt collectors, “We’re just working. We too are workers. Please ask Eza to take on the debts,” he said.

I hurriedly joined Eza and the Indonesian Catholic nun in a taxi. As I sat in the taxi, my fear subsided, but my anger toward the nun resurfaced, and I wanted to reprimand her despite her nun status. How could she abandon a girl on the street? Before I could react, the nun remarked, “I was so scared. If it had happened in Indonesia, I would already be dead. Maybe you don’t know, but in Indonesia, anyone, even the judge in court, can be shot!” As my sympathy grew and collided with my fury, I remained silent.

4.4 Intimacy, Cybersex, and Multiple Performative Selves

4.4.1 *Loss of a Father: "My Conscience Returned"*

Eza eventually left for Macau after six months of legal proceedings to await her third contract visa but was caught in the cycle of deducting seven months' wages for agency fees. Late one evening, I received a long-distance call from Macau. I wondered who it was, but when I answered the call, it was Eza howling, "Cece, my father died! But I can't go home to attend his funeral. My agency won't let me leave. My heart is broken; it hurts so much. I can feel his face at night and smell him in the room. Isn't it he?" As a migrant, nothing hurt more than losing family members and not being able to see them before they passed. Eza's father died suddenly after a heart attack. "Eza, you've grown up already. You have to make all your own decisions, and no one can help you. You must be a good person." These were her father's final words during a telephone call with Eza. However, these words made her feel guilty and brought back memories of her father's moral guidance when she was young. I did not know if Eza was being constrained or instructed. All I knew was that migrants like her were navigating the politics of sex, gender, race, and class and questioning the presumed patriarchal cultural values throughout their migratory trajectories in ever-changing and fluid states. Consequently, Eza began suffering from high fevers and nightmares most days. When I saw her next in Hong Kong, it had been five months, and she was on her third contract. However, since her father died, her life changed significantly, "I cried so hard to die. I felt like my conscience had returned. I called Pikul and told her I no longer wanted to be a boy".

Figure 4.3

Eza Adopted a More Feminine Appearance After her Father's Death



At the time, Eza had a girlfriend, Legi, who was also residing in the shelter with Eza during her labor lawsuit. Eza acknowledged that she adored and loved Legi very much; they were like two young lovers, always holding hands while walking through the parks and watching the sunset near the shelter. However, Legi decided to marry a man from her village, which broke Eza's heart, and she yearned for her. I learned they fell in love after receiving complaints from Filipina girls in the shelter that they engaged in sexual behavior in the bathroom. Eza countered that when shelter staff were absent in the evenings, Filipina girls would watch porn movies and drink beer. Yet, I did not betray them since I knew migrants were desiring subjects, not just laborers. Surprisingly, it was not Legi's money that Eza coveted; rather, Legi resembled the "wife" she had always imagined:

Legi isn't pretty and has a lot of pimples on her face, so who would want to date her? But she always teased me and called me 'kor kor,' as if she was my wife. Every time I went back to the shelter, as soon as she saw my dirty clothes, she would say, 'Let me wash your clothes!' When the staff weren't at the shelter, she would steal and cook spam for me behind their backs. She would do everything I ordered her. We were living together as if we were married, a husband and a wife, and she would always call my cell phone and ask, 'Where are you? Why aren't you back yet?' Then I'd scold her like a husband, 'Why do you keep calling me? What for?' She made me feel as if I were a 'macho man [大男人].' Indonesian women have a very low status, but Indonesian men can have a

higher status. As a tomboy here, I felt like I had turned into a playboy. I was so proud of it, and I thought I was so smart because so many girls liked me.

Eza's lesbian activity cannot represent all forms of performative selves that other Indonesian domestic workers exhibit. However, her tomboy performance challenged the dichotomous assumptions of heteronormativity and homonormativity prevalent in the West. Indeed, her idealized wife resembled the feminine morality that her father instilled in her through the ritual of moral preaching, which caused her to unconsciously self-discipline and impose it on other women, like Legi. Yet, it also went against her father's moral guidance to be a good person. Eza confessed:

At the time, I didn't know if what I had done was right or wrong. All I knew was that I had been in a labor case for six months and spent three months in Macau. I had no money to live. But Legi handed me money. I just thought, 'If I borrow money, I need to return it. But if I use love, there's no need to return it!'

4.4.2 Voluntary Deference: "I Must Finish This Contract!"

After the terror that unfolded outside the Labour Tribunal, Eza realized that from her arrival in 2004 until her contract was terminated twice in 2008, a total of four years, she had earned nothing due to the cycle of enormous agency fees, lengthy legal proceedings, and exiting to Macau. Eza repeated to herself, "I must endure, I must endure, till the time is right." She was determined to finish her contract regardless, as the agency fee for a finished contract was only 10% of her first month's wage. As a maid whose contracts had been terminated twice, she knew how to win over her employers. Eza giggled:

Since I only had a few days left on my visa, I told myself I must win my employer's heart at my interview. After my Sir shook my hand, I told him, 'Sir, I promise you I'll work hard and do my best.' Yeah! I could feel that my Sir loved to hear words like these. I saw that Sir had a daughter who was probably only two or three years old. When I heard that

she told her mother she had to go to the bathroom, I ran to help her and said loudly, ‘Let Cece take you to the bathroom!’ After I was done, I said, ‘Let’s wash our hands first!’ in a loud voice so that my Sir and Madam could hear me. Not only that, but I also taught her how to be polite by having her say, ‘Let’s thank Cece!’ I saw my Sir employer kept smiling at me. Then I told him, ‘I don’t know much about cooking, but I’m ready to learn.’ I kept adding, ‘I want to be honest with you.’ He signed a contract with me right away.

Eza was quite shrewd; she realized that “honesty,” “hygiene,” and “hard work” were the key concerns for the majority of Hong Kong employers, so she performed for her audience and began her 3rd contract with this family in Tsuen Wan. Eza was well aware of this house’s power dynamics, hierarchy and the need to protect herself from termination. Indeed, she understood that further strategies were required:

I noticed that every week my Sir employer would spend HK\$20 or so on chocolate for his coworkers. So, I thought, ‘I have to win the heart of my Sir employer’s daughter. I have to make her like me.’ So, every week when I got home from my Sunday holiday, I would buy chocolate, like Kinder, and give it to her in front of my Sir. My Sir praised me and said, ‘Eza, do you know, even though I have two sisters and one brother, they never bought anything for my daughter!’ I only knew that I needed to protect myself. I had to convince him that I really cared about their daughter.

Regrettably, when Eza declined to renew another contract after a year and a half of working for them, their relationship abruptly changed, “Of course, I wouldn’t be that stupid! Do you know I was never given any breakfast? And my Madam stayed home all day, so how could I play with my phone?” Eza pouted. Eza had met a boy on the internet, and as a young migrant girl, she undoubtedly desired more freedom and free time. Moreover, she was bored of being ordered around and surveilled by 24-hour CCTV, scrubbing the floors, and cleaning the kitchen and the closet. Her negotiations with Sir resembled a battlefield, but Eza always devised an inventive escape route:

My Sir always yelled at me loudly, ‘You look at me [yelled]!’ I wanted to cry, but not because he was yelling at me. I wanted to cry because I thought, ‘You pay me a salary,

and I'm your maid, but that's how you treat me?' But what made me feel the worst was that he punished me by making me 'stand still [罰企]' by the door. Hey! I wasn't your two-year-old daughter! So, I would look at Sir's eyes deliberately and get tears in my eyes to make it look like I was going to cry. Then, every time he lowered his voice, he said, 'Okay! You go to sleep!'

“Why do employers in Hong Kong always tell the maid, ‘We’re a family[我哋係一家人],’ but change so quickly?’ Eza sighed as she left her employer on her last day. After six years in Hong Kong, Eza successfully finished her contract for the first time and only paid HK\$300 for her agency fee without having to exit to Macau. Coincidentally, Sr. Mary, a local Catholic nun, approached me for assistance in finding a maid to care for her 80-year-old mother with dementia in Kwai Chung. Instantly, I recommended Eza to her. Following my strong suggestion, Sr. Mary and her eldest brother, the contract employer, were very pleased with Eza’s interview performance and swiftly hired her. I referred Eza joyfully, but it subsequently turned into remorse.

4.4.3 (Non)Deserving: Private Sphere, Private Time

Due to the significant growth of the older population in Hong Kong, the market for foreign domestic workers is extremely competitive for Indonesian domestic workers. The main reason is that Indonesians are reputed to understand Cantonese and have received training in taking care of older people. Indeed, Eza’s “market value” was extremely high because she successfully finished her contract, which was regarded as “added value.” I asked Eza, “What finally made you sign the contract with Sr. Mary?” Her response surprised and shocked me in ways I never anticipated. She told me, giggling naughtily:

I'm really a lazy girl, but being a domestic worker can't be lazy. When I saw Popo's house, it was only 300 square meters, which was much smaller than my old employer's

house in Tsuen Wan, which was 700 square meters. I thought I could get less work done here. And Sr. Mary and my Sir both said they wouldn't come every day. Popo and I are the only ones living in the house. I thought I could take a nap if I got tired.

Initially, as Eza was entering Popo's home, Sr. Mary insisted CCTV be installed out of concern for Popo's health. Of course, however, Eza battled to defend her "territory freedom." Using a Chinese proverb, I describe Eza's strategy as, "One step back today for two steps forward tomorrow [以退為進]." She tried to convince her Sir and suggested, "Let's give me three months. You look at my work first, and if you're not happy with it, you put it in!" In the end, Sir didn't install CCTV. If CCTV had been installed, Eza claimed it would be impossible for her to relax on the sofa because her employer would ask, "Why are you resting on the sofa?" However, most employers were unwilling to recognize the need for private time among foreign domestic workers; Sr. Mary was an exemplar. Eza whined:

When Sr. Mary came back, I had to kneel like a dog and say, "Yes-yes-yes" to everything she asked. Every time she saw me pressing, pressing, pressing, pressing my phone, she got mad and told me, 'You're working, not playing!' Even if I played with my phone in bed, she would tell me, 'It's time to sleep already; sleeping is sleeping, or you might be dull tomorrow.' She even asked, 'Why do you maids need private time?' Oh shit! I felt like I was in prison.

"Who doesn't want private time, huh?" I heard Eza moan. She yearned for a weekly day off to see friends or attend church. However, no one in this family was eager to take on the obligation of covering Eza's Sunday duties. To transfer all of their mother's caring responsibilities to Eza, the entire family would invent numerous justifications, such as caring for children, self-study, or being busy at work. However, I began receiving many of Eza's WhatsApp voice messages in the evenings during the third year of her 4th contract. Sometimes, I could hear her sobbing, "Cece, my back hurts so much that I can't sleep or move. What should I do?" "Cece, where can I buy painkillers? I went downstairs to see the doctor and got an injection. The doctor told me I could

only get three injections because it could hurt my bones if I got more,” “Cece, do you know how sad I am? My Sir and Sr. Mary told me to put on medicine oil and not go to the doctor, but my back still hurts so much.” The last message I received said, “Cece, the doctor told me to get an X-ray; I did, but I don’t know what he said because his Cantonese was so hard to understand. What can I do?” This truly drew my attention and compelled me to take bold action.

Guilt was affecting me at the time because I was the one who recommended Eza to Sr. Mary. I blamed myself for being too naïve to believe that religious people were more likely to be good employers. There was no assurance, and it appeared to be a myth. Therefore, I bypassed Sr. Mary and took Eza for physiotherapy, despite knowing it was disrespectful and offensive. I will never forget that first physiotherapy appointment when I met Eza at the Fortress Hill MTR Station, she was gasping for air over the phone, “I’m going out the gate now. I’m so sorry, but my waist hurts so much that I can’t walk too quickly.” When I saw her limping, I ran to the gate to help. Eza looked at me, but then her eyes suddenly drifted away as if she was trying to hide something. She then stuttered, “Cece, I’m very sorry. Popo wouldn’t nap, so I didn’t dare leave the house. I didn’t have a choice, so I gave her a sleeping pill.” I widened my eyes, crossed my arms over my chest and glared at her, “I told you that this could put Popo’s life in danger, don’t you remember? You said Sir would return to take care of Popo, right?”

I became enraged because it was not the first time she had employed this harmful sleeping pill tactic. Previously, when Eza was eager to attend Sunday Catholic Mass, she was not granted a day off because Popo’s family members all excused themselves as unavailable to care for her. Nonetheless, Eza resorted to plan B: her “self-disappearance trick.” First, she altered Popo’s lunchtime to 10:30 a.m. and gave her a much larger meal than normal to induce sleepiness. She then gave Popo sleeping pills so she would sleep during the day without waking.

Next, she took a taxi from Kwai Chung to Causeway Bay to attend a Bahasa Mass and a taxi back home after spending one hour there before Popo woke. Eza appeared terrified at the expression on my face, shook her head violently and stated:

This morning, I called Sir and told him I had terrible lower back pain and needed to see a doctor. I asked if his wife could come over for a few hours to take care of Popo since she doesn't work, doesn't have any kids, and just hangs out at home all day. But Sir just said, 'You tie up Popo and go!' 'I won't put Popo in a knot. I won't, never!

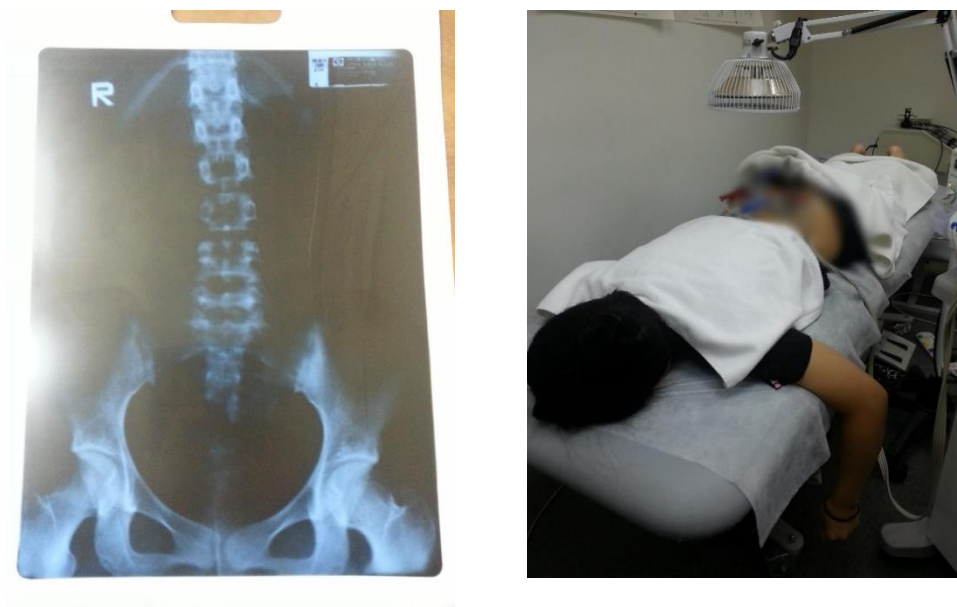
Eza looked at me, and her voice started to shake as she said, "I told Sir, I can't do that. How would Popo feel if she woke up and found herself tied? And what if her neck got hurt?" Then he said, "Before I leave, I put Popo to bed and tell her I will soon be back. I put a few chairs next to her bed to keep her from falling out. She does not have the house key; she can't leave." My heart froze for a moment, and I was at a loss for words before confessing, "I'm really sorry for being inconsiderate." I added, after a brief pause, "Do you know this is a work injury? You take care of Popo, and it hurts your waist. Labor law says that you have the right to medical care." Eza smiled gratefully, then pouted, "Useless! Many of my friends also use this way, many!" She then leaned in and wrapped an arm around me like a spoiled child, leaving me speechless. I returned her smile and winked, "Let's go. We're in a hurry."

Eza told the physiotherapist she had experienced lower back pain for ten months since caring for Popo, who has dementia. Popo had a large frame and was almost bedridden. Daily, she was required to transfer her from her bed to her wheelchair. But raising her was hard work, as Popo was unbalanced and always caused Eza to fall. Every time Popo was on the verge of falling, Eza would fall with her. In addition, two months ago, Sr. Mary ordered Eza to move a tall cabinet back to the sitting room, and the next day, she could not get out of bed, and her lower back was excruciatingly painful. Eza could not sleep for the pain, so she slept face down on her

bed. Following an X-ray, the physiotherapist diagnosed Eza with sciatica and joint and pelvis pain; he said, “I think many Indonesian maids have the same problem.” Eza, surprisingly, asked a question anxiously, “Can I still get pregnant?” The physiotherapist was first taken aback but instantly soothed her. While Eza received acupuncture, I told her, “Eza, you have a work injury, so your employer has to let you rest.” However, she challenged me, “But what if they still ask me to work?” I fought back, “By labor law, you are entitled to one rest day every seven days and 24 hours off work!” “That’s it! But, they will argue, who looks after Popo?” screamed Eza.

Figure 4.4

Eza was Injured at Work While Caring for an Older Person With Dementia



4.4.4 Work Injury: Back Pain, No Doggy Stand

As Eza had not had lunch, I took her to a nearby restaurant. I expressed my concerns as she appeared worried about her back pain and pregnancy. I asked her if it had anything to do with her Indonesian internet boyfriend. Eza exhaled, then whispered, “My waist hurts so much. I

can't even move when I'm asleep. I can't move very fast, so how can I play that thing?" "What?"

I asked. Eza explained:

I want to tell you something, haaaa, but it might make you feel really gross. I raised my ass up towards him. Do you know what I mean? I play cybersex with him. We masturbated in front of the camera, and he would say, 'Let's switch positions! Let's doggy stand!' Now, how do I get my butt and hips to arch upward?

Eza could not contain her laughter. I blushed, but I finally realized why Eza's back pain troubled her. I began comprehending the significance of private time and private space for migrants. I was not shocked by her shifting sexual orientation and did not view her as a migrant for sex. As a human, I recognize the innate desire for intimacy and love. However, as a social worker, I am cursed by protectionism ideology and was overwhelmed with anxiety, "They had only met online and had never met in person. How trustworthy was this guy? Would Eza fall for the trick and get stuck in webcam sex? I was compelled to inquire, "Do you worry that he will videotape your sex activity? Did you ever send him a picture of you naked?" Eza responded firmly:

I sent it. [*smirked*] I sent him a picture of my naked breasts and face. I don't care if he sends my naked pictures to other people. I'm okay with that, sure. Why do I dare to say these words? Because I know what I'm doing. I'm sure I won't be upset if people look down on me. I won't regret it. I watched TVB's best-known pop star Gillian [阿嬌], crying on TV. I wouldn't cry if I were her, though. Because I actually did it. I did that sex thing with him so naturally. We masturbated for each other in front of the cameras, he watched me orgasm, and I watched him ejaculate. Then we smiled at each other without any shame, never.²³

²³ Details can be found in Chow, V. (2009, March 7). Where's my apology, cries Gillian Chung. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/article/672374/wheres-my-apolog-cries-gillian-chung>

Eza's cybersex excitement awoke two opposing voices: First, my deeply embedded values told me that men easily take advantage of women. Thus, we should protect ourselves. Second, we are all sexual beings; therefore, we should acknowledge everyone's sexual desires. Whether Islamic, Catholic, or Christian, you are not an outsider. In the diaspora, Eza acknowledged this. However, one church member caused her great pain:

She had a big mouth; talked too much. Why doesn't she look at herself in the mirror? She always told me, 'Eza, you should learn from me. We're close to God. But you have too many sins and are too dirty.' She even said she had a dream about me and I was doing too much sin. But now I can say, 'No one can claim it's a sin, so that's a sin.' Only God has the final word. God knows that none of us is perfect. And we have to learn from Jesus's 'Station on the Cross,' He fell, woke, and fell, woke.

4.5 A Defiant Robot: (Re)Creating a Story "Master"

4.5.1 Hide and Seek: The Interplay Between Surveillance and Free Subject

Eza's internet boyfriend was a factory worker in Korea. To avoid trouble, she concealed her romantic relationship from Sr. Mary. However, he once sent Eza a huge teddy bear as a gift. Sadly, Sr. Mary's suspicion was raised by this adorable teddy bear, prompting her to check on Eza unexpectedly, but she deliberately fooled her:

I told Sr. Mary, 'Tomorrow is Sunday, now you return, so I want my holiday tomorrow.' She shouted, 'Why?' I insisted, 'You're coming back to see Popo, right?' she exclaimed, 'No, of course not! I don't know how to change the dentures or the urine bag.' 'I can teach you,' I said. Sr. Mary glared at me and intentionally banged, banged, banged things. She continued to glare at me furiously after I got out of the shower, but I ignored her and deliberately played songs one by one. she instantly turned off the light in the dining room, then closed her room door with a loud bang.

The next day, when Eza stepped outside, she was greeted by their neighbor Mrs. Chan, who said, "Are you on holiday today?" Eza exclaimed aloud in front of Sr. Mary, "Yep, because I'm so

tired!” Sr. Mary instantly interjected, “She even said she would come back late today. Of course, she is not Popo’s blood daughter, right?” Eza’s heart sank, “Not a blood daughter? Who helped you take care of your mother 24 hours a day? What an evil heart this nun has. Regrettably, Eza never expected Sr. Mary to track her. Yet, Sr. Mary donned her cap and followed her to the bus stop, but upon noticing her, Eza immediately boarded a bus whose doors were about to close to thwart her pursuit.

Figure 4.5

Huge Teddy Bear That Prompted Eza’s Employer to Track her Movements



At approximately nine o’clock that evening, Eza returned. When she noticed Popo’s urine bag had not been changed for a whole day, she yelled at Sr. Mary, her eyes welling with tears, “Do you know that Popo’s urine is toxic and very dangerous for her?” “Because it isn’t full yet,”

Sr. Mary excused. Then Sr. Mary asked Eza, “Did you hear that Mrs. Chan just fired her maid?”

Eza replied:

That’s not true. Her helper was the one who broke the contract. Of course, Mrs. Chan was very mean to her; she underpaid her. There are a lot of employers looking for maids these days, so no maid would be that stupid...My sister’s employer gives her HK\$10,000 per month for salary? Sr. Mary, do you know why? Because she is caring for an elderly woman who is quite ill.’

Eza explained Sr. Mary softened her voice and teased, “I trust you’re a good girl. You won’t suddenly leave Popo, and you’ll renew your contract with us, right?” Eza told me with pride, “I pretended to joke, mocking Wong Cho Lam [王祖藍]’s fake laugh, I said to Sr. Mary, ‘It depends on whether I’m happy here or not!’²⁴

Eza appeared to have the upper hand at the outset of this power negotiation. Sr. Mary would never know it was Eza who encouraged Mrs. Chan’s Indonesian maid to break her contract when they met in the market. However, as an employer, how could she endure having her powerful position undermined by her maid? Indeed, Sr. Mary arrived one evening, again unexpectedly:

That night, Sr. Mary said she wanted to sleep in the dining room on the sofa. However, she insisted that I sleep on the floor of Popo’s room, saying, ‘You just put a towel on the floor and sleep like you used to do in your rural home village!’ I fought back, saying, ‘Sr. Mary, even though I was poor in Indonesia, I never slept on the floor!’ In the end, I said, ‘I’m sorry, but my lower back hurts a lot. Who will take care of Popo if it hurts more?’ I knew for sure she did not want me to play on my cell phone. When she spotted me with my phone, she would yell, ‘always- play- mobile!’

However, Eza had played enough of this “game”, so she telephoned Sir and screamed, “Sir, I cannot take Sr. Mary anymore!” She even threatened, “I’m going to go crazy! Don’t be afraid of

²⁴ 王祖藍 Wong Cho Lam is a popular Hong Kong comedian whose fake laughter resembled sneering.

me, huh?” Sir was scared when he heard Eza groan and asked her, “Would you really chop people with a knife?” Eza said to me through tears, “Do you know how much I loved Popo? How I would hurt her.”

4.5.2 Just by a Second, Voices can Become History

Eza did not begin to ponder on her ten years as a migrant in Hong Kong until a particular incident occurred. One evening, before she had a bath, she soothed Popo in bed, saying, “You watch TV for a while; please don’t wake, or you might get hurt.” When she emerged from the bathroom, she was surprised to find a foul odor permeating the house. She immediately surveyed the entire area and discovered the floor had been wiped with Popo’s poo. Then, Eza approached Popo’s bed in great astonishment and found her eating while playing with her feces. Eza recalled Popo had feces in her mouth:

I burst into tears when I was cleaning up the poop feces. Even though I put two masks on my face and medicated oil on them, the smell was too terrible. I couldn’t help but miss my mother as I wiped each of Popo’s poopy fingers. I thought to myself, ‘Why am I still here? Are you too greedy for money? You are now helping the mothers of other people clean up poop. What about your own mother in Indonesia? Who is helping your mother? Yet nobody! My heart hurt so much [*sobbed*]. I began to wonder, ‘What are you earning so much money for? When will you be ready to return home?’

Eza spoke further:

Before, I told myself, ‘When I finally go back home, I want everyone to see me as if I were Madonna [麥當娜], perfect and with everything. If that doesn’t happen, I can’t go back!’ So, I always Google the name Lee Ka Shing [李嘉誠] and hope that before I die, my name will be in Fortune magazine. But I lost my father already, so I couldn’t lose my mother again.

One evening, Eza left me a WhatsApp voice message in which she forwarded me a YouTube link to the song 愛得太遲 (Love too late) by the singer 古巨基 (Leo Ku).²⁵ She sobbed and trembled as she added, “Cece, this song touches me too much. Some of the lyrics really say what’s in my heart. I decided to go home. It’s been ten years since I’ve been here.” Eza’s Cantonese was no longer limited to chopsticks and spoons; she could grasp the song’s implied message, signifying that she had been away from home for a long time:

最心痛是 愛得太遲 有些心意 不可等某個日子

what hurts most is being too late to love

there are some words from the heart [that] cannot wait till a certain day

盲目地發奮 忙忙忙其實自私

blindly working hard, I say I’m busy, but I’m just being selfish

夢中也習慣 有壓力要我得志

even in my dreams, I’m used to being pressured then I realized

最可怕的是 愛需要及時 只差一秒 心聲都已變歷史

the scariest is that love needs to be on time

just by a second, voices in your heart can become history.

Eza was determined to break her contract, but it resulted in a sequence of emotional blackmail and humiliation. She began recording conversations to protect herself, fearing this family would cause trouble and prevent her from leaving. Sr. Mary accused her of selfishness, stating, “Popo would die if no one took care of her? I never blamed you for making Popo thinner and late for

²⁵ The translated English lyrics for Songs of “愛得太遲” (Love too late) by 古巨基 (Leo Ku) can be found at <http://shintasword.blogspot.com/2014/06/love-too-late-leo-ku.html>.

dinner, but I still keep you. How could you do that?” “Why don’t you trust me?” Eza argued. “Of course, you’re a stranger [外人], but I’m Popo’s daughter.” Sir teased Eza, “My little sister, let me take you to a tasty Japanese restaurant. We’re a family; all problems can be solved.” Eza frowned to herself, “If you treat me like a family member, why didn’t you let me see a doctor? Why didn’t you give me a holiday? You only gave me your mother.” This family then raised Eza’s salary to HK\$10,000 a month to try and retain her employment, but this act made Eza angrier, more offended, and more determined to give one month’s notice and leave.

Figure 4.6

Ten-Year Shift in Eza’s Appearance



4.5.3 “I Am Not a Robot, I Also Have a Temper”

Eza refused to wait for her employer to hire another Indonesian domestic worker for Popo before leaving because she wanted to punish this family. She desired for this family to

endure the same hardships she did. She detested being referred to as “a stranger” or, “we’re a family.” She legitimated her reaction as morally blameless and stated:

Isn't money the biggest thing [有錢大曬咩]? I really don't know if they realized that I'm a human being. I probably feel annoyed, tired, and sad, right? I am not a robot. I, too, also have a temper. Don't think because you have money, you're the biggest, and I have to listen to everything from you. Before, I only forced myself to obey them. But now I...I...have put up with it for a long time. Don't you know that I'm very naughty and even cunning? I know a lot of things, but you'd never guess it. If you were hiring a maid, you should be afraid of this kind of person. We Indonesians are not what you think we are. So that's why you thought we were trouble, right? Why? Because we kept thinking about everything, and we were just waiting for the right time to show you.

Figure 4.7

Last Photo of Eza in Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong, Before Returning Home



Chapter Five

Rightful Resistance: Weapon or Amulet?

When my Madam said she'll pay me my wage after she took a shower, my heart began to pound against my chest. I tightened my fists and told myself, 'This time, I must succeed; I must get the bukti [evidence].'²⁶ Nobody will believe me if there's no bukti.' I looked around the living room nervously to see if anyone was there. Then, I took my mobile out of my pocket and pretended to check my messages, but I secretly turned on the audio recording function, which made my heart pound rapidly again. I was so terrified that my Sir would return home suddenly or that there was hidden CCTV in the house. [So] I knelt and pretended to wipe the cabinet while putting my phone on the floor. Then, I pretended to mop the floor and used the broom to sweep my mobile into the gap beneath the cabinet so it wouldn't be seen. I could feel my knees almost giving out, but I had to get up. I couldn't get rid of the thought, 'will I be killed?' But I kept telling myself, 'I need bukti!' 'I have to get my Madam to admit on tape that she underpaid my wages for the past four years.'

(Efritha, aged 26, sued her employer for underpaying her)

²⁶ In the Indonesian language of Bahasa, the word "bukti" means evidence or proof. In my working experience, bukti is a term frequently used by Indonesian domestic workers when filing a complaint with the authorities (i.e., Labour Department or Police Station).

5.1 Rightful Claim over Migrants' Rights

The preceding chapter, *A Migrant's Narrative: (Un)Locking the Doors in the Diaspora* (see Chapter 4), documented, Eza, a young Indonesian girl's ten-year migratory trajectory in Hong Kong. Eza, like many Indonesian domestic workers, had been subjected to numerous forms of labor exploitation. Throughout her four contracts in Hong Kong, Eza experienced underpayment, confiscation of her passport, denial of holidays, physical abuse, insufficient food, and occupational injury. Nevertheless, Eza opted to seek redress for her labor rights through a formal legal process just once in her second contract. Before that, during her first contract, despite her circumstances resembling the criteria of "forced labor" used in western countries, Eza did not initiate legal action against her employer. Perhaps, one may argue, that Eza did not know her labor rights, did not have enough legally authorized channels, and did not know where to seek assistance at the time. Nonetheless, after becoming familiar with labor laws and recovering most of her monetary compensation at the Labour Tribunal, she became more courageous after winning her labor case in her second contract. However, it was puzzling why she strongly refused to redress her labor rights through the authorized channels in her third and fourth contracts. Had Eza developed the right consciousness? Was the benefit of pursuing a claim significantly greater than the cost incurred by Eza? Was this strategy through so-called official legal channels more consequential than other forms of resistance? More importantly, do other Indonesian domestic workers currently working in Hong Kong identify and agree with her?

As this chapter demonstrates, Indonesian domestic workers frequently wrestle with whether to seek legal action to remedy their rights or tactfully choose more subtle forms of resistance to defend their interests. Why do many, if not most, Indonesian domestic workers prefer less overt everyday forms of resistance to more overt legal forms? And what caused the

legal forms of resistance to appear dreadful? Moreover, what do those who participate in legal resistance hope to gain from it? What benefits do they derive from these overt forms of resistance?

Therefore, I adopted the theoretical framework “rightful resistance” to comprehend how Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong legally defend their labor rights. The concept of rightful resistance was developed by O’Brien and Li and is considered an increasingly prevalent form of social protest in contemporary rural China. However, this form of contentious politics is neither violent collective action, a fully institutionalized form of political pressure, nor a less overt everyday form of resistance. O’Brien and Li (2006) acknowledged that their concept of rightful resistance was derived from James Scott’s “everyday forms of resistance”; nonetheless, there are still marked differences between these two concepts. As O’Brien (2013) noted, the peasants in rural China have demonstrated new reaction patterns of contentious grassroots politics that go beyond Scott’s concept:

Whereas Scott’s everyday forms of resistance were quiet, disguised and anonymous, rightful resistance was noisy, public and open. Whereas everyday resistance focused on relations between subordinates and superordinates, rightful resisters were engaged in a three-party game where divisions within the state and elite allies mattered greatly. (p. 1051)

So far, this new analytical framework has attracted the attention of academics, resulting in increasing studies in Asian countries such as China, Vietnam, and India. Social groups performing as rightful resisters range from peasants, coal miners with pneumoconiosis and landowners, and the social status of rightful resisters ranges from lower to middle class with high education (Chandra, 2015; Chau, 2019; Chuang, 2014; Xiong, 2018; Ho & Chen, 2016; Kerkvliet, 2014). Yet, the explanatory power of this theoretical framework has long been questioned due to the absence of other subaltern groups, the perception that it is limited to

socialist and semi-authoritarian states, the inability to understand the paradox of incongruent or even opposing policies, and the uncertainty of how widespread this approach could be (Chen, 2009; Froissart, 2007; Heimer, 2007). Indeed, opposing viewpoints argue that rightful resistance is not the most desired option for some people and states, thus suggesting alternative frameworks to fill this void (Kerkvliet, 2014; Chuang, 2014; Xiong, 2018). As such, several key concerns arise: Is this concept helpful for understanding the resistance of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong? Is legal resistance able to protect Indonesian domestic workers? If so, in what conditions? If not, why?

5.2 Towards Rightful Resistance as Negotiation

Despite this theoretical framework of rightful resistance encountering several challenges, I maintain that it can shed some light on the legal resistance of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong. For example, although Hong Kong is a capitalist society with no division between central and local government, which is significantly different from the classic literature of rightful resistance (i.e., peasants in the Chinese communist society context), this paradigm still resembles and makes sense of the contentious politics of foreign domestic workers. Therefore, in the following section, I first illustrate why the legal resistance of Indonesian domestic workers resembles O'Brien's notion of rightful resistance. In doing so, I demonstrate how Indonesian domestic workers' legal resistance satisfies the four essential attributes of rightful resistance proposed by O'Brien and Li (2006). Then, I use four case studies from my fieldwork to show why the framework of rightful resistance is still insufficient to address the unique circumstances of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong. In doing so, I intend to refute O'Brien and Li's (2006, p. 24) assertion that rightful resistance is "more consequential than most everyday

resistance” and highlight the limitations of this legal resistance framework. According to O’Brien and Li (2006, p. 2), rightful resistance has four key attributes:

1. Operates near the boundary of authorized channels.
2. Employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power.
3. Hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state.
4. Relies on mobilizing support from the community.

Hong Kong foreign domestic workers are covered primarily by two sets of laws. The first is labor law, including Employment Ordinance, Cap. 57, and Employee’s Compensation Ordinance, Cap. 282.²⁷ The second is immigration law, stipulated in the Standard Employment Contract, ID 407.²⁸ Once foreign domestic workers have obtained their employment visa and entered Hong Kong, not only must they adhere to the rules and regulations, but their employers must also fulfill their legal responsibilities to care for their helpers until the expiry date of their working visa (Constable, 1997; Frection, 2017; Lee & Petersen, 2006). In other words, employers are the legally authorized body to manage employment-related concerns of foreign domestic workers. Foreign domestic workers have the right to pursue their case through authorized channels, such as the Labor Department, Immigration Department, and police station. Once their employers break the terms stipulated in the employment ordinances and immigration regulations, they can lodge a claim with relevant governmental bodies. As so, it suggests that the

²⁷ See Hong Kong e-Legislation for the complete text of Employment Ordinance, Cap. 57 and Employee's Compensation Ordinance, Cap. 282: <https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/hk/cap57> and <https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/hk/cap282> Additionally, the Hong Kong Labour Department provided two condensed versions to employers who hire foreign domestic workers. The one that was published first is titled “Practical Guide for Employing Domestic Helpers.” <https://www.fdh.labour.gov.hk/res/pdf/FDHguideEnglish.pdf> The publication that followed is titled “Handy Guide for Employers of FDHs.” https://www.fdh.labour.gov.hk/res/pdf/Handy_Guide_FDHS_eng.pdf

²⁸ The specimen form for Standard Employment Contract, ID 407, is available from the Hong Kong Immigration Department. <https://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/forms/forms/id407.html>

highest authority of the Hong Kong government has “committed” to preventing the mistreatment or exploitation of overseas migrant domestic workers by their employers. On this premise, I contend that the situation of Indonesian domestic workers fits the first and second attributes of rightful resistance.

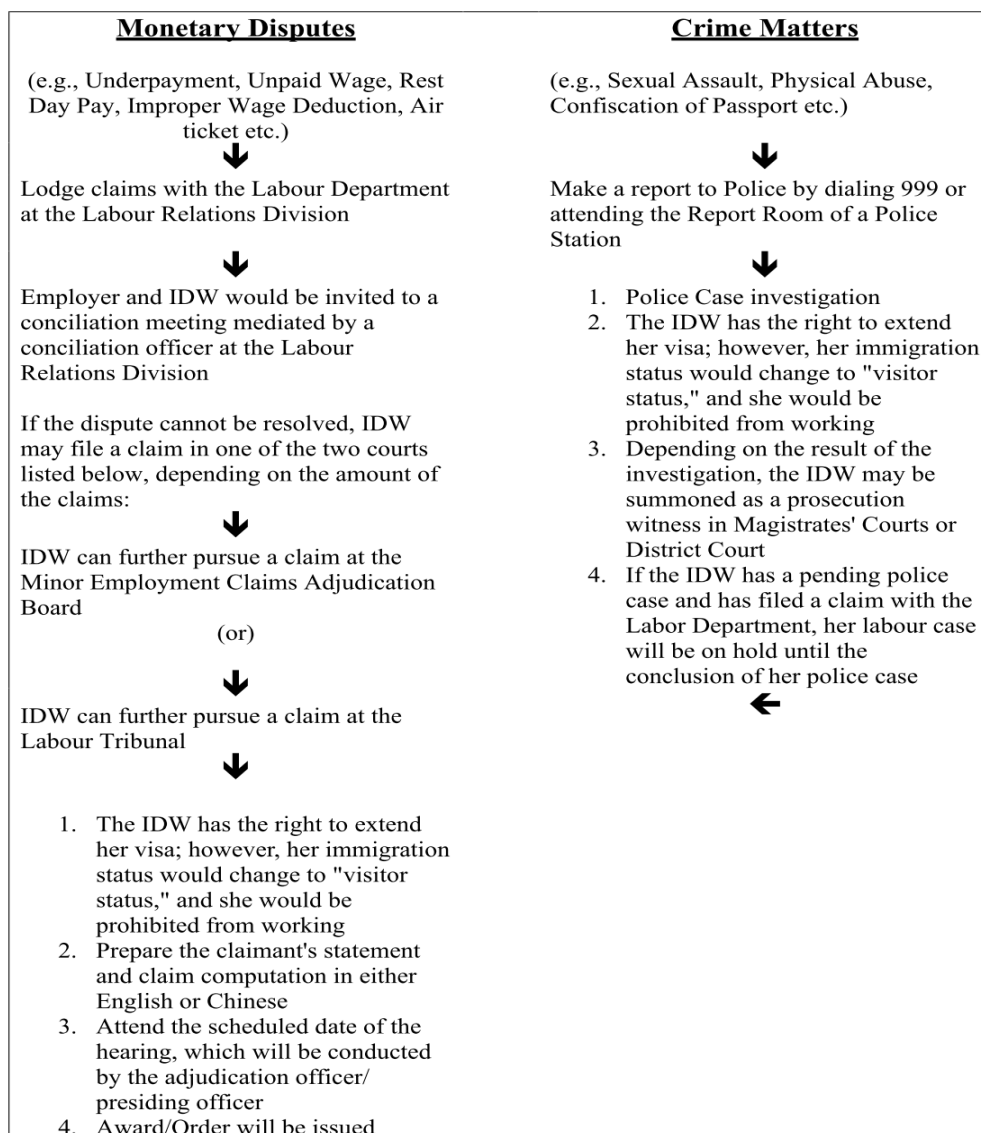
Yet, one can argue that Hong Kong is only a city, not a state and that there is no such thing as a central government or a local administration (i.e., local cadres in China). So, how does the case of Hong Kong fit into this category? As previously stated, once Indonesian domestic workers with working visas enter Hong Kong, their employers become the first and ultimate guarantors, and to a large extent, what is stipulated in the contract terms and rules and regulations are exercised to limit their employer’s power and govern appropriate behaviors towards their helpers. Therefore, I suggest that we should use a broader definition of “division,” with the Hong Kong Government serving as the “higher authority” and employers of foreign domestic workers serving as the “lower authority,” as it serves the same purpose as rightful resistance’s third attribute.

The fourth attribute of rightful resistance is the most challenging and often disregarded, as foreign domestic workers filing cases to redress their rights are typically treated individually. In my nine years working with Indonesian domestic workers, I seldom, if ever, saw any Indonesian domestic worker manage the claim form that the Labour Department provided when they came forward to file a case against their employers. This was not because of Indonesian’s lack of capability or skills; rather, it was due to the written-English language barrier, which forced them to seek assistance from a third party. Many migrant workers informed me that when they told the labor officer, “I don't know how to fill out the claim form because it's in English,” the typical response from officers was, “Contact your migrant unions; they can help!” As a

result, using third parties and mobilizing community support became a vital step before justice was realized. They needed migrant and local communities to assist them in filling out the labor claim form, preparing documents in English, providing them refugee shelters after they leave their employer's house, sponsorship to extend their visas, money for transportation and mobile sim cards. Moreover, once they receive assistance from migrant unions, NGOs or churches, their cases are no longer in the "private sphere" but the broader "public sphere" because their cases are immediately treated as collective data for greater and wider advocacy purposes.

It is evident from surveys, press conferences, and documentaries conducted by migrant unions that Indonesian domestic workers' stories are no longer viewed individually but as collective evidence for social action. As in the case of Eza, I assisted her with lodging her claim with the Labor Department in 2008. During her third contract, in 2011, I invited her to share her exploitation story on a Hong Kong radio program on International Labor Day. Then, in 2014, her struggles with Hong Kong authority during her second contract served as a testimonial for a Hong Kong human trafficking judicial review case.

Similarly, the next four case stories (see Section 5.3) are not individual; most are presented in press conferences and judicial review proceedings, and all underwent similar procedures. For example, their employers breached the agreement and subjected them to mistreatment or abuse, which prompted them to publicly seek assistance from third parties (e.g., migrant unions and NGOs) and file legal action against their employers through authorized channels (e.g., Labour Department and police station). But, most importantly, what was the sequence of events that occurred at the time and shaped their broader narratives? Can their legal actions against the protagonist help them resolve the conflict? And what kind of destination did their stories' endings bring for them?

Figure 5.1*Authorized Channels for Redressing Rights for Indonesian Domestic Workers²⁹*

²⁹ The details in Figure 5.1 are summarized from the following sources and work experience:

Conciliation Service of the Labour Relations Division.

<https://www.labour.gov.hk/eng/public/wcp/ConciliationServiceLRD.pdf>

A Simple Guide to the Minor Employment Claims Adjudication Board

<https://www.labour.gov.hk/eng/public/mecab/SGMECAB.pdf>

Labour Tribunal- Guide to Court Services

https://www.judiciary.hk/doc/en/court_services_facilities/labour_202109.pdf

Hong Kong Police Force- Advice to Persons Reporting Crime

https://www.police.gov.hk/ppp_en/04_crime_matters/aprc.html

To demonstrate the struggle and hardship of Indonesian domestic workers engaging in rightful resistance, I have chosen four case stories of exploitation as examples, each of which is typical yet represents a different type of ill-treatment: including sexual assault, unpaid wages, improper deduction of wages, and underpayment. The first case study is the longest and encompasses the major characteristics of the process of rightful resistance by Indonesian domestic workers and their hardships. However, to build a comprehensive discussion around rightful resistance, what the first case missed, is covered in the second to fourth shorter case stories. Moreover, they all have very powerful evidence in the form of “secret recordings” (audio or video), which they employ as bargaining chips. Yet, can this evidence be effectively used as a potent weapon?

5.3.1 Asoka, Aged 28, from Kalimantan, Sexual Assault Case

Asoka’s case (see Chapter 1) was referred to me by one of my previous clients, Muni, who had been underpaid and forced to sleep in the kitchen.³⁰ Muni and Asoka were both recruited from the same Hong Kong recruitment agency. The story began with the termination of Asoka’s first contract. She was rushing to find a new job due to the two-week rule restriction³¹

³⁰ The HKSAR established the minimum allowable wage for all foreign domestic workers, which is stipulated in the Standard Employment Contract (I.D. 407). Employers who fail to pay wages in accordance with this employment agreement are subject to criminal prosecution. Indeed, requiring the helper to sleep in the kitchen is a breach of the contract’s (I.D. 407) “Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties”, which stipulates that employers must provide the helper with accommodation and reasonable privacy.

³¹ In accordance with the two-week rule, a foreign domestic worker is only permitted to remain in Hong Kong for two weeks following the date of contract termination. Indonesian domestic workers who overstay their visas in Hong Kong are subject to criminal prosecution.

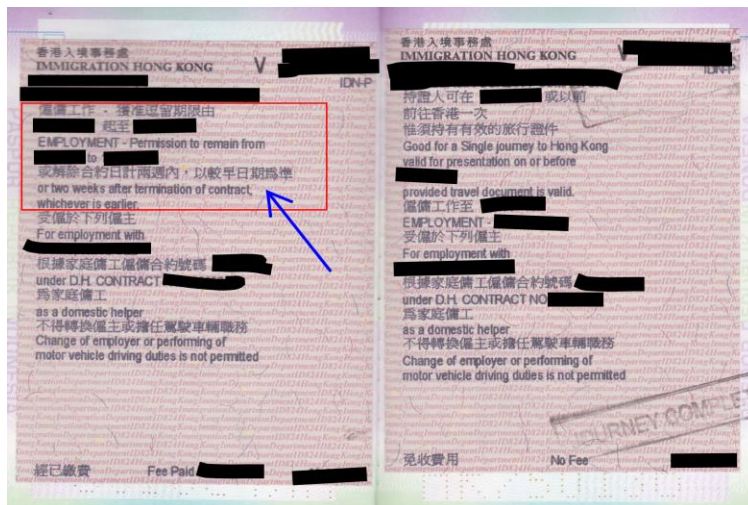
<https://www.gov.hk/en/residents/employment/recruitment/terminateforeignhelper.htm>

when she met an Indonesian domestic worker on the street in Causeway Bay who said she could introduce her to her agent Jenny in Yuen Long, and the nightmare began:

At the time, I was desperate to sign a contract because my visa was about to expire. When I initially met my Sir employer, he seemed to like me very much. When he drove me to his house for a one-week work trial, he insisted that I sit next to him in the front seat, even though I told him, ‘I’m a maid, and you’re my boss.’ But he insisted on it anyway. Then he started hitting my breasts with his elbow and putting his hand on my thigh in a sexual way. He even said, ‘Do you know why I want to hire you? Because your breasts are so big!’ When I left his house, he gave me a big hug, kissed me on the head, and said, ‘I love you!’ I didn’t know how to respond, but I was terrified.

Figure 5.3

The Two-Week Rule: Foreign Domestic Workers have 14 Days to Find a New Employer before their Visas Expire

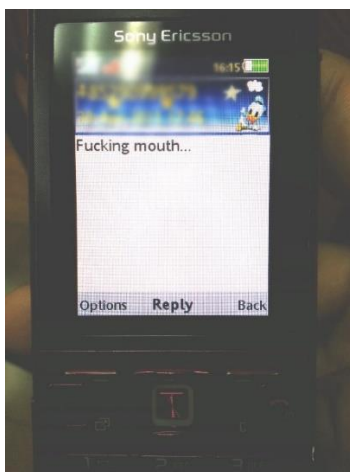


Asoka quickly made a complaint with her agent Jenny, but Jenny merely said, “Okay! You start your work first, and if your employer is bad, I’ll find you another one!” Due to the pressure of only 14 days remaining on her visa after her contract termination, which prevented her from choosing a desirable employer, and her agent Jenny’s refusal to solve the matter, Asoka decided to take the new contract. Unfortunately, her Sir’s degree of sexual harassment intensified:

When I worked in the kitchen, my Sir employer would grab my breasts from behind. When I turned around to stare at him, he would even pull down his pants and show me his penis. He pointed to his penis and told me to kiss it; he said, ‘Eat my banana! Suck it! It tastes delicious [*mocked the way Sir held his penis and gave a thumbs up*]!’ When I ran back to my own room, he would follow me and forcefully pull my hair toward his penis. Every time I felt my face touching his penis, I would push him away with all my strength. He would even send me text messages that said, ‘Fucking mouth’.

Figure 5.4

Sexually Harassing Text Message from Asoka’s Sir Employer



Asoka wanted to leave and terminate her contract but required assistance from her agent Jenny. However, she was well aware that Jenny would not assist Indonesian domestic workers, as she had witnessed her refusing to intervene when an Indonesian domestic worker with a head injury was brutally abused by her employer. In addition, she once observed Jenny reprimanding another girl for being pregnant. She heard her shriek, “You have to go back to Indonesia! Pay your own money for your plane ticket!” Asoka moaned to me, “Who is more pitiful? Me?” Thus, Asoka feigned to treat Jenny well by helping her in the kitchen and cleaning her office on Sundays, hoping she would help. However, Jenny simply stated, “If you don’t have proof, no one will believe you!” Asoka despaired because she knew until she had proof, she had to remain in the contract. Asoka took Jenny’s words very seriously. As with many Indonesian domestic

workers, collecting evidence was not as simple as one may anticipate. Indeed, it was a large undertaking that must be well-planned through perilous strategic risk-taking and executed in the dark. As Asoka explained:

I started to think about how to find proof, think and think and try and try. In fact, I had tried a lot of different ways and tried many times. At last, I decided to use a big toothpaste box from my employer's house. I used a cutter to make a small hole in it, and then I carefully covered it with my clothes, except for the small hole. I put my phone in there, set it on my room cabinet, and set the camera to face the door where my Sir used to force me to have oral sex in the morning. I had to be very careful because I was afraid that if my Sir found it, he would throw it away, and I would no longer have proof.

Asoka finally recorded the video after days of arduous effort; she was so happy and eager to show it to Jenny on Sunday, but what transpired was very different from what she anticipated:

When I showed Jenny this video, she saved it to her computer. At the time, there were many girls hanging out at the agency, and they were all watching it together. But after Jenny saw it, she looked at me and said, 'My good girl, try to be patient until you pay back your seven months' agency fee, then I will get another good employer for you.' I was really, really mad. I burst into tears and felt totally helpless...

Asoka was astonished and disheartened by Jenny's words. However, the girls' words caused her the most pain. Some girls were cruel; after watching the video, they told Asoka, "Your boss loves you so much, let's ask him for more money." At that moment, Asoka fell into a deep hollow. However, Muni, one of the girls viewing the video, approached her stealthily. She was the timely interception Asoka needed. Asoka told me, sighing in gratitude:

Muni said to me, 'you call the police.' She told me that having 'bukti [*evidence*]' was nothing to worry about. I told Muni that if I saw the police on the street in front of my employer's house, I really wanted to jump off the building. I didn't know if I was happy or sad, but I knew I wanted to jump. When Muni heard that, she immediately said, 'Don't do that! Never!'

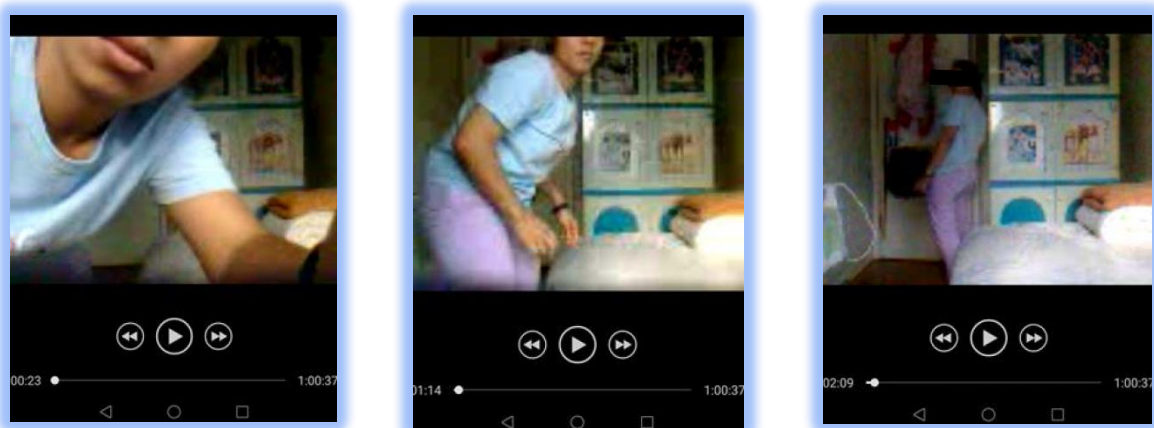
Not only did Muni illuminate Asoka's path in the darkness, but she also armed her for battle:

Muni said to me, ‘If you want to be smart, you have to be brave first!’ She taught me an English phrase and told me to repeat it after her, ‘YES, I CAN - YES, I CAN!’ She even added a gesture and asked me to do it with her [*mocked Muni by clenching both fists tightly and pulling them hard against her chest*]. Muni told me that whenever I feel scared, I can say loudly, ‘YES, I CAN - YES, I CAN!’ [*grinned confidently*].’

Then, one Sunday at Causeway Bay, Muni introduced me to Asoka. When I first watched her “secret video recordings”, I was incredibly shocked, saddened, and enraged because I could plainly see how anxious Asoka was to carry out her secret action plan. In the video clip, I saw Asoka repeatedly adjust the angle of her cellphone camera on the cabinet; then, around 10 to 15 mins later, I observed her Sir open her room door, pull his pants down, and forcefully drag her head toward his penis. As a woman, it saddened me to see how Asoka fought with her Sir, pushing him and kicking him out of the room with all of her might. When Asoka closed the door, she exhaled heavily, but within a second, she ran back to the cabinet to check her cellphone camera.

Figure 5.5

Asoka Nervously Adjusted her Mobile Phone Camera to Secretly Record her Employer Sexually Assaulting her



I then persuaded Asoka to allow me to accompany her to the police station to report the sexual assault. I also informed her that the police investigation period could take three to six months, and her labor case could take another one to six months. I asked Asoka genuinely if she could really tolerate that and assured her that our organization would fully provide free accommodation, three meals a day, visa extension, transportation fees, and accompany her throughout all legal procedures. Like most Indonesian domestic workers with legal cases in the early stages, Asoka replied sternly, “sure! I want to report it to the police!”

However, the path to restoring justice was neither smooth nor direct. For example, when I accompanied Asoka to the police station, the reception desk officer spoke to me in the following harsh manner:

Me: Sir, I want to help this Indonesian domestic worker file a sexual assault case against her male employer.
 Police officer: [*He stared suspiciously at Asoka*] Ah Mui [阿妹]! Are you voluntary? [*He then turned his gaze back to me*] You know, a lot of them are actually voluntary.
 Asoka: No! [*Awkwardly shook her head*]

I stopped the officer and asked him to provide us with a private room to take statements because the lobby was crowded. I had no idea why a police officer would utter such demeaning and humiliating words. Then, I presented the police officer with Asoka’s video recording. When he saw the clip, his demeanor changed slightly, and another senior police officer arrived, probing rudely:

Senior officer: How many times did your male employer force you to have oral sex? Did the penis of your male employer really touch your mouth? Only touching your mouth is counted.
 Asoka: I didn’t give him oral sex. I kicked him out. I did not want it.
 Senior officer: But you said that someone forced you to have oral sex. Did his penis ever touch your mouth? If yes, how many times?

Asoka: Yes, several times [*embarrassed*].

Later, the senior officer instructed us to wait for the Indonesian interpreter, and a female police officer began taking a police statement. After five or six hours of recording the statement, I escorted Asoka back to the shelter around midnight, but on the return journey, she began vomiting. When I asked her if she was okay, she replied in a very weak voice, “I’m so pained!”

More difficulties awaited us the following day. Asoka’s passport was confiscated by her agency³². In Hong Kong, if a migrant domestic worker fails to provide their passport and Hong Kong I.D. card to the Labour Department, their claim will typically be denied. Therefore, I decided to accompany Asoka back to Jenny’s office, knowing that Jenny would be furious with Asoka for reporting her case to the police without her permission. However, I decided to conceal my social worker identity before entering the agency. I knew the agency staff would not be scared of a social worker, but I knew I needed to scare her. Jenny glared at Asoka without saying a word when we entered, so I acted aggressively and asked in a firm voice, “Are you Asoka’s agent? I want this worker’s passport back.” Jenny seemed frightened when she saw my face, perhaps wondering why a Hong Kong person would accompany an Indonesian girl. She responded, trembling, “I’m sorry, Asoka’s passport is not in this office.” I said seriously, “Do you realize it’s illegal to keep someone’s passport in Hong Kong? Jenny muttered anxiously, “um...um...” I prodded, “Tell me when I can get her passport back!”. “Miss, please give me several days to bring it back from the other office; I’m only staff here.” Jenny begged. “OK, I

³² Some agencies would use deceptive means to retain the passports of Indonesian domestic workers to restrict their mobility, such as requiring them to sign an agreement authorizing the agencies to keep their passports; retrieving their passports for an additional fee, or claiming their passports were sent to other offices or the Indonesian Consulate in Hong Kong. Even when they called the police for assistance, police officers typically accompanied them to the agencies, but it was rare to hear of police arresting or prosecuting the agencies.

give you two days; if she doesn't get her passport back in two days, we'll call the police!" I threatened her. Then, I instantly grabbed Asoka's arm and fled. Honestly, when I was bargaining and negotiating that way, I was utterly scared. Still, at least I could experience a tiny bit of what an Indonesian domestic worker felt. Even retrieving a personal document belonging to the Indonesian domestic worker was difficult.

Asoka's daily living was provided by charities, like most Indonesian domestic workers with legal cases. However, the most intolerable issue was the time-consuming legal procedure; they had already lost their jobs, could not work due to immigration restrictions, had no income, and could not send money home. Therefore, "being patient" appeared too lofty and luxurious.

Approximately one month later, in the afternoon, I received a telephone call from a girl in the shelter who said, in a terrified voice, "Cece, Asoka has refused to eat since yesterday, she claimed she has to return home, or she'll kill herself in the shelter, please come!" When I arrived at the shelter, I saw Asoka sobbing in the corner. I attempted to approach her, and as expected, she projected her anger onto me. "What's wrong with you?" I asked Asoka. She yelled and howled:

I want to go back to Indonesia! I don't want to be here any longer! It is such a waste of time! It's been a month already, and I can't wait any longer! I have two kids in school who need money for their education. I come to Hong Kong to work, not to have a case!

I told her:

I know you're going through a lot. As I told you at the beginning, filing a legal case in Hong Kong takes a long time, and you've to be very patient, or you won't be able to wait until the end!

However, she yelled, "No!" in a loud voice. "No! No! I choose to die in the shelter. I won't eat until I die. If I can't go home, I'll kill myself here." I told her outright:

If you want an air ticket, we can solve the problem together. Do you think that if you go on a hunger strike, we'll buy you a plane ticket so you can go home tomorrow? Do you want to punish those who are helping you?

As expected, Asoka softened her voice and apologized, "I'm very sorry. Can you give me an air ticket to go home? I don't have enough money to purchase one. I promise I'll continue my case in Indonesia." We eventually reached a special and partial settlement for Asoka's labor case airfare item in the Labor Department. Unquestionably, her Sir employer instantly agreed to purchase her a plane ticket to leave Hong Kong.

While Asoka remained in Indonesia, we continued to contact the police investigation team to check the status of her case. Nonetheless, even though a year and a half had passed, we were told, "the case is still under investigation." Asoka, like most migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong involved in legal proceedings, not only lost her job but was unable to find another because the Immigration Department suspended the processing of new contracts pending the conclusion of her legal case. However, Asoka's employer was permitted to hire another foreign domestic worker during the legal case, which was incredibly unjust and unfair. To gain further job opportunities in Hong Kong and continue her police case, Asoka asked her friend to help her fake her signature on a document known as a "connecting visa":

I really needed a job, but if I go back to the training center, I have to pay seven months again [*agency fee*]. So, I sent a copy of my passport to my friend in Hong Kong; she gave it to her agency to help me find a job. The agency signed the contract with my fake signature. We call it a connecting visa, but I still have to pay five months.

When I met Asoka again in Hong Kong, it had been more than two years since her police case.

Unfortunately, she broke some bad news to me:

After I went back to Hong Kong, I got a call from the police officer telling me that my case was closed; he said, 'insufficient evidence.' I asked why but he didn't tell me! He just told me to go back to the police station and get my mobile phone back.

I was shocked to learn that the case had been dismissed despite over two years of investigation. I called the senior police inspector in charge of Asoka's case to inquire about the case dismissal. Unfortunately, he responded, "I cannot tell you as it is an internal confidential issue." So, what should I do as a social worker? Merely console Asoka and encourage her to accept the harsh reality while praising her for her spirit of perseverance? At the time, since Erwiana's case had gained international publicity, some human rights lawyers and media approached me for related case stories. When I told them this story, most expressed a willingness to assist. However, Asoka's response was ironic but not surprising. She groaned and shook her head:

No. It's just a waste of time. See, I already had proof of the video and SMS. I have all the proof I need, so why can't the police help me? I've been waiting so long that I can't stand it anymore. And now, I have a new employer who is so nice to me. I don't want to cause any more trouble because I'm afraid she'll think, 'Why is this maid so troublesome?' I'm afraid she wouldn't believe me. I don't want her to know anything about my police case.

Asoka's case demonstrated the following problematic questions around the unreasonable and unbearable costs that Indonesian domestic workers experience and how they employ legally sanctioned rightful resistance to assert their rights: How difficult is it to obtain evidence due to the isolated spatial environment? (Human Rights Watch, 2004). How absurd are the enormous agency fees and the resulting bondage caused by the Indonesian government? (Palmer, 2014b). How prejudiced are the police officers who view foreign domestic workers as willing participants in sexual assault? (Sim, 2007). How worthwhile is it for a migrant who has already lost a job and is not allowed to work to pursue such a time-consuming case? (Paul & Neo, 2017; Zinser & Thinyane, 2021). How violent is the two-week rule restriction that prevents migrants from having ample time to find employment, thus putting them at risk? (Bell & Piper, 2005; Constable, 2009, 2015; Lee, 2021). Can the majority of, if not all, Indonesian domestic workers realistically afford the aforementioned rightful resistance costs?

Asoka's anguish was closely tied to her police case, but what about her labor case? In addition to the police authority's bureaucratic and disrespectful demeanor, the Labour Department, where most workers go to take legal action, is closed on Sundays, Indonesian domestic workers' only free day. Aside from severe maltreatment, such as Asoka's sexual assault, are there any trivial infractions of labor laws that the public often ignore? Adilla's story below, with her three secret audio recordings, revealed how devious employers exploit Indonesian domestic workers in the shadows and how ridiculous the labor relation officer's instruction is.

5.3.2 Adilla, Aged 34, from Kupang, Unlawful Deduction of Wage and Forced Holiday

One Sunday, I met Adilla at Causeway Bay. Adilla's skinny body and dark circles under her eyes caught my attention; she appeared tired or lacking in sleep. Adilla, unable to wait, stretched out her slender arm and hurriedly handed me her mobile telephone. With a gloomy tone, she grumbled:

Today, my Madam refused to let me take my holiday. I told her I wanted to see a doctor, but it was a lie. I even offered to give her back my wage in return for today's holiday. Because I want to meet you, and I want to break my contract by today. I really want to leave as fast as possible! I'm in so much pain that all I want to do is rest and sleep more. I want to go back home [*Indonesia*]. Last night, she forced me to sign my wage receipt again, but I yelled at her and didn't sign. She did that to me every month, so crazy! I really can't take it anymore.

Adilla's complaint against her employer was typical of most Indonesia domestic workers in Hong Kong: countless petty and unjustified wage deductions, which may appear trivial but are actually serious because they infringe on a worker's labor rights and dignity. Adilla was one of

the few exceptionally intelligent Indonesian domestic workers. When she could not defeat her employer's ludicrous logic, she secretly recorded their disputes to allow a third party to decide. I excerpted three dialogues from Adilla's secret audio recordings, which she had strategically and carefully collected for months. The first dialogue concerned broken items in the kitchen:

- Adilla: I did not break this chair. So why do you deduct HK\$350 out of my salary [*shouted shrilly*]?³³
- Employer: It's broken; that's a fact, and if not you, then who? You're so bad; every time I pay your salary, you always act like that [*voice became firmer and louder*].
- Adilla: NO! NO! [*voice rose to a level of hysteria*]
- Employer: You cannot say 'No!'
- Adilla: No! I will not sign it. I've never touched any of the glasses, hooks, or bowls in the kitchen, but you still said I broke them all. Even the hook fell to the floor; why is this my fault? I want to ask the Labour Department.
- Employer: But you're the one who spends most of your time in the kitchen. The law says that if the maid breaks it, I can take money out of your salary.
- Adilla: CRAZY!!!! Why am I the one who broke them? Even the bowl, you took HK\$100 from me. I won't sign it. NO!
- Employer: Listen! Don't say I do not give you a salary! I give you money on time, but you don't take it. It's you!

The second dialogue in the secret recordings concerned ridiculous water bill charging:

- Adilla: NO! [*squealed*]
- Employer: Why 'NO!' You'll be charged for the water bill
- Adilla: That time, it wasn't raining when I hung the clothes outside the window.
- Employer: You say 'NO'; I say 'Yes!' Here is proof that my glasses I'm wearing today became wet. You! Stand here! See! My glasses are dripping. Are you to blame? Are you to blame? Are you to blame? [*voice grew louder and louder*]
- Adilla: NO! [*pleaded*]

³³ Adilla's employer's act was in contravention of Part III of the Employment Ordinance. Damages or losses to employer's goods, equipment, or property caused by an Indonesian domestic worker's "neglect" or "default". In any instance, the amount to be deducted cannot exceed HK\$300 or the value of the damage or loss. But most importantly, the helper should not be held accountable for any wage deduction they did not commit.

- Employer: 'No; Why?' You should pay the water bill, and I'll take the amount out of your salary. This was your fault; you should pay for it. Why do I have to pay your water bill?
- Adilla: NO! I apologize to you!
- Employer: But washing all the clothes again uses more water, and more water means a higher water bill. Since you use more water, why do other people have to pay for it?
- Adilla: I've already washed the clothes for you again.
- Employer: Exactly! You've washed again, so I'll take the water fee from your wage.
- Adilla: CANNOT! [*hysterical*]
- Employer: Why is 'CANNOT' there? How many buckets of water do you think you've wasted on me? You also waste my laundry detergent. No matter what, I will take HK\$380 out of your salary this month.

The third dialogue, which Indonesian domestic workers frequently experience but hardly address, concerned forced holidays:

- Adilla: This month is March, and you've already had four days off. Since I didn't work and stayed home for two days, you'll have to pay me for two more days.
- Employer: Why must I take my holiday whenever you have a holiday and stay at home?³⁴
- Adilla: Certainly! Simply put, I get six days off every month. When I'm on holiday, I stay at home, of course, my boss doesn't pay me. So, if I stay home, you have to go out, that means you take your holiday, of course, you don't get paid. We're alike.
[*Both fell silent for a moment*]
- Employer: Sign your name here; you must, of course. This month, instead of HK\$3740, you get HK\$3171.
- Adilla: [*Adilla suddenly walked away to show how upset and angry she was*]
- Employer: Where are you going? Come back! Don't waste my time! [*yelled*]

³⁴ Part IV of the Employment Ordinance requires the consent of the helper for irregular rest days. The term "forced holiday" is used to describe a situation in which an employer forces a helper to take a holiday without her consent, primarily for the employer's advantage.

Figure 5.6

Photographs of Broken Goods Adilla's Employer Accused her of Breaking



That Sunday, Adilla decided to break her contract. Due to the ill-treatment she received from her employer, I viewed her action as a form of constructive dismissal. Like many Indonesian domestic workers, even though Adilla could not specify which employment terms her employer had violated, she knew without a doubt that her employer had violated the labor law, which is why she refused to sign many payment receipts. Adilla amassed compelling proof using secret audio recordings, and her employer never denied her exploitative acts in the tapes. Nevertheless, her employer never anticipated that Adilla, her helper, would record their private conversations on the monthly wage payment days and during their disputes. Adilla's recording of her employer's exploitation was subtle but well-planned; she strategically said little during the dialogues, instead acting innocent and pitiful, merely stating the exploitation and questioning her Madam, "why?" Adilla secretly taped the recordings, but her employer also mistreated her secretly, making it possible for the secret recordings to serve as crucial evidence to strengthen her negotiating position and support her complaint at the labor conciliation meeting.

I aided and accompanied Adilla in filing a case against her employer at the Labour Relations Division for improper wage deduction and unpaid wages, the first platform for monetary dispute settlement. I accompanied Adilla to the labor conciliation meeting on the scheduled date. The labor officer's demeanor and responses left me extremely disappointed. This was because, once again, such a legal mechanism appeared to be aimed solely at case completion, using enticing or threatening language to pressure employers and workers into quick settlements rather than protecting workers' rights. The following is an excerpt from the conciliation meeting:

- Labor officer: [*Glared at Adilla and me*] Since you ran away, your employer is now counterclaiming you, Ms. Adilla, for 'one month in lieu of wage.' Helper, you are the one who broke the contract without officially notifying your employer, right? Do you know that you are required by law to pay your employer one month's salary?
- Adilla: But my Madam always deducted my salary and forced me to take holidays whenever she took days off her job [*anger in her voice*].
- Me: [*Stared at labor officer, furious*] Do these situations belong to ill-treatment?³⁵ This worker hasn't been paid for two months because she refused to sign the unfair payment receipts. By law, the helper can be deemed her contract terminated by the employer.³⁶ If so, the helper is not required to pay the one month in lieu of wage. Right? As a labor officer, you should tell this worker what her legal rights are. But it seems you didn't.
- Labor officer: [*Softened her voice, nervous*] It's not good that she just left. She should come to us first and see if the problem can be fixed.
- Me: But the Labour Department is closed every Sunday. How can the foreign domestic worker come and file a case?
- Labor officer: But Adilla can secretly pass into our office in the morning during weekdays when she is helping her employer go to the market to buy food.

³⁵ According to Part IX of the Employment Ordinance, a contract of employment may be terminated by either the employer or the foreign domestic worker by giving one month in lieu of notice/wage. However, a helper may terminate her employment contract without notice/wage if she "is subjected to *ill-treatment* by the employer".

³⁶ If an employer fails to pay wages within one month, it is in contravention of Part III of the Employment Ordinance, and the helper may deem her contract to be terminated by her employer. Indeed, the helper is entitled to payment in lieu of notice and other contractual final payments.

Me: [Widened my eyes] What? Is it dangerous for the helper? Do you know that her employer can accuse her of ‘absence from work’ and then end her contract?³⁷

Labor officer: [Ignored my comments and turned the conversation to the employer] So, employer, your helper accused you of improperly deducting her salary for broken items and a water bill; what was that?

Employer: No! Never! [in a proud voice]

Adilla: But I have three recordings; you can listen! [screamed]

Employer: [Face turned red with embarrassment] No need. I don’t want to listen. [Yelled at Adilla] Do you know that the Coca-Cola glass you broke is a limited edition and priceless? No matter what, I have to deduct HK\$50 from your wage.

Adilla: No! No!

As this endless circular debate failed to yield any agreement, the labor officer resorted to her usual tactic:

I’d like to remind both sides. If the case can’t be settled today, this case may be sent to the Labour Tribunal for a hearing. I hope you know that it will take a long time, at least six months, and a recent case has been going on for five years. I also want to say that, depending on who lost in court, she may have to pay for the cost [legal fee] of going to court. [shifted her eyes to Adilla] Helper, do you have money? Don’t you want to find another job right away? You’ve lost your job and don’t have any money now, right?

During the break, I spoke with Adilla about her case and informed her that she had solid proof.

Adilla, however, firmly stated her decision; her answer reassembled the majority of Indonesian domestic workers’ logic:

I find it hard to wait so long. When I’m at the shelter and see how long it takes other girls to get their cases, I don’t want to be like them. I don’t have time to waste. I’ve already started looking for a new employer with a different agency.

³⁷ The Labour Relations Officer’s advice was nonsensical, “absence from work” without notifying the employer may be deemed serious misconduct. In accordance with Part IX of the Employment Ordinance, an employer may terminate the helper without notice or payment in lieu of notice.

Sadly, but not surprisingly, Adilla ultimately opted to reimburse her employer for one month in lieu of wage, as her employer insisted so vehemently. Even though I attempted to persuade her to reconsider, she felt it unjustified. I understood, however, that it was difficult for a migrant worker to pursue her case for six months, a year, or even longer. Furthermore, Adilla seemed to be making inconsistent statements to me. She initially stated that she desired to return to Indonesia but then changed her mind and decided to seek a new employer. I want to emphasize that filing a case to sue an employer or allegedly utilizing rightful resistance is turning the action into a “weapon” for Indonesian domestic workers to combat the two-week rule. Indonesian domestic workers can wait to see how their cases develop and, if favorable, proceed with them. Or, if the outcome is unfavorable, they still retain a much longer visa, allowing them time to find more desirable employers, which is preferable to rushing for a 14-day immigration restriction as they can withdraw their legal case at any moment. Adilla and many other Indonesian domestic workers are making rational choices; it is not uncommon for them to abandon their legal cases when the odds are stacked against them. Upholding their rights is not easy for Indonesian domestic workers.

Asoka and Adilla’s case stories have captured most of the features that Indonesian domestic workers adopt in the form of rightful resistance, emphasizing the structural constraints and huge costs that workers typically bear. In the third case story of Yafi, we can see another absurdity that may occur during the act of rightful resistance: How a victim suddenly becomes an innocent defendant.

5.3.3 Yafi, Aged 32, from Surabaya: Unpaid Wage

When I initially met Yafi and her Indonesian co-worker in my office, I questioned and suspected that they were making up stories of two years of unpaid wages but refusing to leave. However, when I heard their secret audio recordings requesting salaries from their Madam, I finally believed them and pondered how this could occur. Yafi's recording excerpt is shown below:

- Co-worker: We've been here for two years now, and you've always said, 'I don't have any money, but if I do, I'll pay you.' But it's been too long [*snapped*].
- Employer: Of course, I'll pay you if I have money.
- Co-worker: I trust you too much! [*raised, high-pitched voice*]
- Yafi: It's already been too long
- Employer: Do you think I would keep money in my pocket and not pay you if I really had it? But I don't really have.
- Yafi: Can you tell us the exact date? What time? We'll get our salaries back [*exclaimed furiously*].
- Employer: It depends on how well my grocery store is doing in the market. If I can make HK\$300 every day, then I don't have to worry about the rent, and if it gets to that amount, I can pay you back your salaries.
- Yafi: If you can't make HK\$300 every day, then how about our salaries?
- Employer: Then I'll have to save up money bit by bit. It takes time to save up enough money.
- Yafi: So, how much longer do we have to wait?
- Employer: I'm fine with closing my business whenever I want to. I can even close my grocery store tomorrow. Then, you two don't have to cook Indonesian meal boxes to sell. Just like that, so easy! [*sneered*]

Yafi's Madam was a grocery store owner in a market. She demanded that Yafi and her co-worker, both Indonesian domestic workers, illegally sell Indonesian food boxes at the market. As many Indonesian domestic workers went to the market in the mornings, their Madam instructed them to prepare Indonesian meal boxes at her residence and then sell them in her grocery store.³⁸

³⁸ According to clause 4(a) of the Standard Employment Contract for employing foreign domestic workers, the helpers may only conduct domestic duty for the employer in accordance with the attached Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties.

Additionally, this store would offer a paid internet service for Indonesian domestic workers to increase her income. Yafi and her co-worker were instructed if any police came, they should pretend to be using the internet as consumers. However, as one and two years passed, Yafi's Madam told them numerous lies to keep them working without paying them wages. When I took them to the Labour Relations Division to file a lawsuit, I was worried that the labor officer would not believe their stories: two years of unpaid wages but continued their employment. Then, unexpectedly, we met an older Hong Kong man who hailed Yafi and her coworker. When he learned that I was taking them to the Labor Department, he said to me vehemently:

Miss, please help these two Muimui [妹妹]. Their employer has a very bad name in the market because she always owes people money. I am also a store owner in the market. They are so unfortunate that they came to Hong Kong to work but didn't get paid. I don't know what to do to help them, so please!

After hearing these remarks, I began to believe in them more; yet, why did they wait until now?

Yafi reported the following:

A year ago, I went to the Labor Department, but the officer there didn't want to help me. The officer gave me a form [*Claim Form, see Figure 5.2*]", and I told her I didn't know what it said. She then gave me a piece of white paper and told me to write down what I wanted to claim. I don't know how to write in English, but the office said, 'I can't help; it's your claim!' [*mocked officer's sharp voice*] So, I just left the office. Then I asked Mr. Ngai, who owns a store in the market, for help. I begged him to take me to the Labor Department, and he did. However, he didn't know how to calculate the claim, so we left. After that, I stopped going to the Labour Department [*sighed in despair*].

Even though I successfully assisted Yafi in filing a case, this did not ensure that this way of legal resistance would result in the best outcome; on the contrary, things may get worse. During the first hearing at the Labour Tribunal, when the Presiding Officer [Judge] asked Yafi's employer if she had failed to pay her two domestic workers' salaries, she admitted it. Unfortunately and unexpectedly, when the Judge pressed her for a reason, she suddenly responded, "We are in

business together! If my business made money, I would give them a bonus.” “How many shares will you give to your maids?” the Judge asked. She said, “We didn’t talk that well, and now business isn’t doing so well, so I can’t give them money.” Yafi and her coworker were shocked but denied it instantly. Nevertheless, the Judge frowned at them and declared, “I am highly suspicious of this case. I am adjourning this case indefinitely, and I’ll refer it to another authority for a full investigation to see whether any parties committed criminal acts.”

Yafi never imagined that her labor case would be “adjourned indefinitely”. Adjourned indefinitely indicates that the trial will be postponed without a set date. However, while Yafi was still digesting the dreadful news, the worst was yet to come. A few days later, Yafi and her coworker were arrested. When Yafi called me from the police station, I quickly dialed the police station, where a police officer informed me that they were accused of participating in a criminal offense. I was stunned by the entire case’s unexpected development; how could a victim turn into a defendant? After Yafi was released on bail, she called me again and exclaimed:

Cece, why did my case turn out like this? The police kept asking me if I had worked at the grocery store and if I had gotten any money from it. He told me I was working illegally. Why did the police arrest me? I just want my salary back.

Yafi’s question was also my question. Fortunately, Yafi’s police case was dismissed after one month owing to a lack of evidence, and we submitted a request to reopen their labor case. During the 2nd Tribunal Hearing, Yafi’s employer reiterated to the Judge that she did not have enough money to pay her two workers’ salaries and other monetary claims. The Judge then utilized tactics similar to what Adilla experienced in the Labour Relations Office. The Judge sternly remarked to Yafi and her co-worker:

I recommend that both of you adjust the amounts of your claims and immediately reach a settlement with your employer. If I rule in your favor, I will award you two a win in this

case. However, if your employer claims she has no money, she can declare bankruptcy, and you two will get nothing.

In the end, Yafi's employer ultimately consented to borrow money from her family and friends. Yafi received only almost HK\$25,000 from her original claim of HK\$112,493.75, while her co-worker received approximately HK\$20,000. Outside the courtroom, Yafi's coworker instantly fell into floods of tears, knelt and cried that it was incredibly unfair and a complete waste of time. Yafi, on the other hand, sat silently without saying anything, but her eyes were filled with despair, sorrow, and fury.

Figure 5.7

Total Claim Made by Yafi Against her Employer at the Labour Tribunal (Form 2)

表格 2
FORM 2
勞資審裁處條例 (第25章)
LABOUR TRIBUNAL ORDINANCE (Chapter 25)
申索書
FORM OF CLAIM
[請按加來卷1所示]
[Use as in Form 1]

[條例第11條]
[Section 11]

被告人:
TO THE DEFENDANT:

申索人現申索款額
The Claimant claims the amount of

申索書編號
Claim No. : [REDACTED]

總額 Total : \$112,493.75

及and
終止僱傭金有待評估
Terminal Payment to be assessed

每月工資 Monthly Wages \$3,580.00	個人總額 Subtotal \$125,289.35 - \$12,795.60 = \$112,493.75 (Agreed to deduct \$9500 paid by defendant and 28 days leave taken (11/01/2010-07/02/2010 at \$3580x12/365x28))
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所根據的理由詳情及計算方法列明如下:
particulars of the grounds for which and the manner in which it is calculated are set out as follows:

(a) 1. 申索理由為 (The grounds for the claim are):

- 沒有給予休息日
Failure to grant rest days
- 沒有給予法定假日
Failure to grant statutory holidays
- 沒有給予有薪年假
Failure to grant annual leave
- 少付工資
Underpayment of wages
- 沒有支付遣散費/終止僱傭金、機票費及旅遊津貼
Failure to pay severance pay/terminal payment, air ticket fare and travelling allowances

(b) 2. 申索款額的計算方法如下 (The amount of claim is calculated as follows):

1. 不屬於第 VIA 部規定下的申索項目 (如適用者):
Items other than those under Part VIA (if applicable):

L.T.F.2(1) Claim No. [REDACTED] Form 2: Page 1 of 6

After the conclusion of their case, Yafi's coworker remained in Hong Kong to find a new employer. With her long-standing resentment and unjust legal treatment, she courageously accepted my invitation to speak at a press conference about Indonesian domestic workers' situation. Subsequently, Yafi insisted on returning to Indonesia, and before she departed Hong Kong, we met again. I asked if she regretted her decision to sue her employer. Yafi let out a heavy sigh:

The Judge seemed to believe us, but I don't understand why he let my employer pay us back such a small amount. But I was so scared because the Judge kept saying that if my employer went bankrupt, I wouldn't get even a single cent. What should I do? I had to accept it because I didn't want to feel scared every day, and every day was so hard.

I then asked Yafi a question that lingered: "Why do you trust your employer so much? Two years of not getting paid." Yafi's response made me realize that Indonesian domestic workers are more than just a labor body. She exhaled heavily:

Because she was good at teasing us. In fact, she dug a hole for us! She called me 'Ah Nu! Ah Nu! [阿女! 阿女!]' in her family.³⁹ I felt like I was her daughter because she didn't treat me at all like a domestic worker [*desperate tone*]. When she brought crabs and shrimp home, she would stop me from cleaning and get me to sit down with her to eat. She always made me feel like, 'I am not a domestic worker.' She even took us outside to eat a lot of good food. She always asked us what we loved to eat, like sushi, fried crab, and fried fish. We rarely get to eat such expensive food. I thought my employer had a lot of money at the time, only she didn't pay me my salary right away. How could she always eat good food if she was really that poor? Right? But now, I realize she did all these things for one purpose: to get us to work for her for the past two years.

Not only was Yafi trying to shed her identity as a low-status domestic worker, but she was also trying to strengthen her cultural identity within the Indonesian community:

Honestly, I felt so happy working in her grocery store because every day, I could meet so many Indonesian domestic workers. They came and bought our Indonesian meal boxes,

³⁹ "Ah Nu [阿女]" is a Cantonese phrase that signifies daughter.

we played on the internet, and we even sang Karaoke together. It helped me forget my problems.

However, there was one part of her Indonesian domestic worker identity that she could not escape:

If no agent fee is deducted, I would definitely leave this employer. Even though I dreamt that I was her daughter, I knew for sure I was a domestic worker. But if I got a different employer, I had to pay the agency fee again and exit to Macau or China. I was also worried about whether my new employer would be good or bad. If they were bad, I would have to find another one and pay the agency fee again. It's really hard for us to deduct seven months and then seven months again.

Yafi seemed to gain bizarre insight after experiencing this uncertain and unexpected outcome of legal resistance, which I humorously referred to as the “post-traumatic stress” symptom of rightful resistance. Yafi made the following half-joke, half-serious statement:

We have a lot of trouble with the agency fees, so I have to put up with whatever happens at work. Now, I'm thinking that if I worked in Hong Kong again, even if my employer hit me; I mean a little bit, but not too hard lah [*giggled bitterly*]; I surely would keep doing my job and take it. I don't want to break my contract or sue my employer again [*crumpled her face*]. I think that if you take care of a baby, the baby will also hit you, right? So, if my employer just hits me a little, I'm sure I can handle it. I just want to finish my contract and then go.⁴⁰

Yafi's battle demonstrated the inherent danger and unintended repercussions of adopting legal resistance to defend her rights. Indeed, agency fee debt bondage, regarded as a peculiarity of Indonesian domestic workers' predicament, caused double the consequences: in the present, loss of work and possibly turning from a victim to a defendant; in the future, recurrent agency fees

⁴⁰ In accordance with the Employment Ordinance and Employment Agency Regulations, the maximum agency fee that can be charged to foreign domestic workers cannot exceed 10% of their first month's salary. For Indonesian domestic workers with finished contracts who wish to change employment in Hong Kong, the majority of employment agencies will adhere to the legislation to avoid penalties. However, Indonesian domestic workers with terminated contracts will be classified as overseas job seekers, and recruitment agencies would deduct five-seven months of their wages as an agency fee. This could explain why most opt to endure ill-treatment until they have finished their contracts. <https://www.eaa.labour.gov.hk/en/helpers.html>

and unable to guarantee a decent employer. As such, pursuing a case against an employer using rightful resistance may result in a “double cost” and “double loss”, both currently and in the future.

Efritha provided the final case story. Her anecdote is partially recounted, and her continuous fight is a dramatic tale that addresses two questions regarding the arguable essence of rightful resistance: Will rightful resistance result in a rise in consciousness among Indonesian domestic workers? And who genuinely benefits through mobilizing support from communities?

5.3.4 Efritha, Aged 26, from Blitar: Underpayment

When I began working with Indonesian domestic workers in 2007, Efritha was one of my earliest cases and one of the 42% of victims of underpayment in Hong Kong (Asian Migrant Centre et al., 2007). At the time, I was eager to dedicate myself to empowerment work because Indonesians appeared to be more helpless than Filipinas. However, Efritha’s case taught me a hard but valuable lesson.

When I first met Efritha, she was still employed and living in her employer’s house. However, she had already devised a strategy to flee as she had been underpaid for four years; she merely wished to tolerate this until the completion of her contract, as Yafi stated above, to avoid the hefty agency fee deduction. One Sunday, Efritha visited my outreach spot in Causeway Bay to meet me. Like Adilla, Efritha was eager to show me her secret audio recordings. However, unlike Adilla, she wanted me to verify her evidence was convincing and that the voice quality on the recordings was good enough for a tribunal. Efritha adamantly asserted, “I must sue my

employer no matter what because I don't want other Indonesian girls to suffer like I did." Below is the excerpt of the dialogue that Efritha secretly recorded:

- Efritha: Can I ask you, Madam [太太]? A friend from my church told me that my salary should be HK\$3,400. But, Madam, why do you ask me to give you back HK\$1,400 every month? And, my salary is only HK\$2000...*[mumbled awkwardly]*
- Madam: Are you a Filipina maid? Can you speak English? You don't know; you don't know any English, right *[sharpened her voice]*? They are good enough to do the work but look at you when you come to my house; you don't even know how to cook. Think! How good are you *[huffed]*? You're not a Filipina maid! The only maids who can get HK\$3,400 are those from the Philippines.
- Efritha: Ar...ar...like this *[mocked innocence]*?
- Madam: You promised your agency that your salary would be HK\$2,000, so don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. Go, go to your agency and ask *[yelled again]*.
- Efritha: Ar...ar...ar...*[muttered, but didn't answer]*
[There was a long pause, then, Efritha continued...]
- Efritha: I'm sorry, Madam, I don't know, but this is what my church told me... Then, how about my holiday? My friend told me I could take a holiday every week.⁴¹ But why do I have to give you HK\$400 every month *[mocked innocence]*?
- Employer: Don't ask me; go ask your agency. Now, you're smart lah; you're figuring things out with me *[scornful tone]*! Don't forget who gave you free Wi-Fi, and don't forget when the technician came to pull the cable line in the house, I was the one who moved the heavy furniture and made a mess. Did you use the Wi-Fi? Did I ask you for the Wi-Fi money back? Why don't you think about it? You're so mean to me!
- Efritha: Ar...ar...No...No...ar...ar...*[stammered, then continued]*
That means...I can't take a holiday? If I want a holiday, I must pay you.
- Employer: I'll give you when I have time.
- Efritha: Then...*[muttered]*...Why did I not get 14 days' holiday *[annual leave]* after my first contract?⁴² A friend told me I could get 14 days' pay if I didn't go back to Indonesia for a vacation.

⁴¹ According to Part IV of the Employment Ordinance, foreign domestic workers are entitled to one rest day every week. A rest day is defined as a continuous duration of at least 24 hours. It is prohibited for employers to deduct a helper's wage

⁴² Part IV of the Employment Ordinance stipulates that a helper is entitled to paid annual leave after working for the same employer for a period of 12 months. According to the worker's length of service, the number of days of paid annual leave accrued increases from 7 to 14 days.

Employer: Ok! Ok! You want a holiday, so I'll give you all of them [*shouted loudly*]. Come! Next week, look at the calendar: from January 29 to February 11, you must go out in the morning and come back at night. I don't want to see you during the day. Ok! You take holiday lah! Now you're so clever, lah! I give you all [*sneered*]!

Efritha: Ar...ar...ar...No, not this

This dialogue aptly captured the strategy employed by Indonesian domestic workers when collecting evidence; they pretended to be ignorant as employers typically perceived them. It was also the most effective method for reducing employers' suspicions; otherwise, it was difficult to trick their employers into admitting their wrongdoings. However, this did not exclude Indonesian domestic workers from risk and danger. Efritha was also worried that Madam had installed hidden CCTV or that Sir would unexpectedly return home when she activated the recording function on her mobile phone. This was why she feigned mopping the floor to conceal her mobile telephone beneath the cabinet. Her instincts also drove her to fear the unexpected, such as being killed or danger.

Indeed, Efritha's feelings toward her employer were not only filled with wrath; she also had not forgotten how her employer humiliated her; whenever she recounted this incident to me, tears flowed down her face:

During my first 19 months, I didn't get any holidays. The only thing I did for fun was listening to Indonesian migrant radio programs. I once heard that a radio program was inviting Indonesian migrants to a singing contest. I liked to sing, so I asked my neighbor Tiny to lend me a tape recorder. Then I sent my song to the radio program to see what would happen. Surprisingly, I heard my name on the radio program's semi-finals lists, which meant I had to go to the competition on a Sunday. That day, I pleaded with my Madam for one holiday, crying and kneeling in front of her, but she coldly responded, 'No!' Banging, she closed the door, walked out with her family to enjoy their holiday, and I wailed loudly in the house alone.

This image, imbued with anger and shame, was implanted deep within Efritha, compounded with daily resentment; it expanded incrementally, compelling her to devise a strategy for revenge.

When the time was right, Efritha would rush into battle.

Efritha's case, like the vast number of Indonesian domestic workers with Labour Tribunal claims, lasted almost six months. Whenever I discussed and reviewed her case, I would inevitably ask her why she persisted in fighting for her rights. Her response was always the same, "I don't want other girls to suffer as I did, I want to help other Indonesians, and I don't want my employer to treat other workers like she treated me." Her story even drew the attention of the Consulate of Indonesia in Hong Kong, who inquired whether they might be of assistance and invited her to sing in the cultural performance activities in Victoria Park. Efritha once said to me with excitement:

Today, I took the stage in Victoria Park to perform a song. When I was done, I told all the migrants there, 'Please support me! I am now taking my employer to court! I don't want other workers to go through what I did.' Many of the girls screamed and clapped their hands, and the staff at the Indonesian Consulate even came out to greet me [*smirked*]!

Efritha's courageous and tenacious reputation was established not only in the shelter but also within the Indonesian migrant community and in the presence of the Indonesian Consulate. The Labour Tribunal hearing finally arrived. As usual, the Presiding Officer [Judge] would appoint a senior officer to have one more meeting hoping to reach a speedy settlement. This was my first time witnessing how an employer's countenance underwent a complete 180-degree turn. Below are extracts of the dramatic scenes that occurred during this joint meeting:

Senior Officer: Can both parties reach a settlement in this room so that neither of you has to come back for a second, third, or more hearing?
 Madam: [*Glaring at Efritha, she slammed a stack of papers onto the table*]
 Efritha, you signed your name on every month's payment receipt.

- See! Check to see if these are your name! [*forcefully and insultingly pressed the papers into Efritha's face*]
- Efritha: [*She squinted at Madam, then responded in a masterful tone*]
Sir, I have proof. I have audio recordings.
- Senior Officer: Can we listen here?
- Efritha: No, I just want you to listen. I won't let my employer hear! [*held her breath*]

I understood Efritha was pursuing a strategy to frighten her employer. We were instructed to wait outside while the Senior officer listened to the audio recordings in his office. Surprisingly, after waiting for 30 minutes, the Senior officer came out, gave Efritha's employer a weird glance, and requested her to enter his office. Another 30 minutes passed; then, we were all asked to enter.

And then, an even greater surprise occurred:

- Madam: [*She suddenly flashed us a friendly smile, then smoothed Efritha's hair as if she were teasing a child*] I know you are a very good girl. You also know that Taitai [太太] I love you so much, right? Do you want to get me in trouble? Now, you've asked me for HK\$55,000. Can you lower that?
- Efritha: No! I Cannot! [*firm tone*]


Due to Efritha's refusal to accept a reduction in the monetary claim, a settlement could not be reached. Therefore, the hearing was adjourned for another month. However, I expressed my disappointment to the Senior officer asking, "Why didn't the Labour Tribunal prosecute Efritha's employer? Efritha's case is not only a monetary dispute. Underpayment is a criminal offense." He replied vexedly, "Okay, if you put it that way, I'll send her case to our Employment Claims Investigation Division." Efritha was finally invited to be a prosecution witness by the Tribunal Officer since her case contained extremely solid evidence. After we left the Labour Tribunal, I asked Efritha once again if she wanted to pursue her case and what outcome she desired, and she

gave the same answer, “I want to put my employer in jail. I don’t want other workers to suffer like me. I can’t just accept money and let my case go.”

The following day, however, I received a telephone call from an Indonesian staff member in the shelter, who said angrily over the phone, “You know, Efritha went to the Labour Tribunal this morning to get money. The shelter girls said her employer gave her HK\$50000, she accepted it, and has bought a plane ticket to Indonesia for tomorrow.” Initially, I was astonished, and then my anger rose; I felt like an idiot who had been taken advantage of; Efritha was not being truthful with me; she was hiding something. That afternoon, I met with Efritha and the Indonesian staff in the office. Efritha avoided my gaze and looked very embarrassed, so I asked her, “Can you tell me why things have changed so quickly?” Efritha mumbled in shame, “Because I want to forgive my employer? I think Jesus wants me to forgive as well.” Her answer made me angrier, so I said, “Why don’t you forgive your employer before you get your money back, huh?” Efritha looked up at me with guilt and then began to cry. The Indonesian staff yelled at her, “If you were my blood sister, I would slap your face right away.” Tears flooded her face, and she told me the truth:

Cece, I’m sorry, I’m a bad girl! To be honest, all I want is money. I just want my employer to give me back the money she took from me. I was so afraid that if I told you at first that all I want is money, you wouldn’t try hard to help me, so I lied to you [*shook her head*]. So, I kept telling you, ‘I want my Madam to go to prison, and I want to help other Indonesian girls.’ I was so afraid that if I didn’t say it this way, you wouldn’t help me. I know I’m bad, bad...

Figure 5.8*Efritha Signed Letter Agreeing to Testify for the Prosecution*



LABOUR DEPARTMENT (Branch Office) 勞工處 (分處)

Your reference 來函編號 : Employment Claims Investigation Division
Our reference 本處檔案編號 : G/F, Low Block, Queensway Government Offices,
Tel. Number 電話號碼 : 66 Queensway, Admiralty, Hong Kong.
Fax Number 傳真號碼 :

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Ms. [Redacted]

Re: Complaint against your Former Employer
for Suspected Offences under the Employment Ordinance

In relation to your complaint against [Redacted] your former employer, for suspected breaches of the Employment Ordinance, you had signed an undertaking indicating your willingness to serve as prosecution witness in the criminal proceedings related to your complaint at the Labour Relations Division. Your case is now being investigated by the Employment Claims Investigation Division of this department.

To facilitate our investigation, you are invited to attend an interview to provide information relating to your complaint and to give witness statement. Details of the interview are as follows:

Date: [Redacted]
Time: [Redacted]
Address: G/F, Low Block, Queensway Government Offices
66 Queensway, Admiralty,
Hong Kong

Please bring all relevant documents (see Appendix 1) related to your complaint to the interview.

A leaflet entitled "A Guide on Civil and Criminal Proceedings Related to the

G/F, Low Block, Queensway Government Offices, 66 Queensway, Admiralty, Hong Kong

[Redacted]

5.4 Paradox: The Weapon Too Dreadful to Use

From Eza's rightful resistance to Asoka, Adilla, Yafi, and Efritha's skillful use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a "weapon", they each defended their labor rights. ICTs functioned as a site of resistance and a tool of power to efficiently and stealthily support Indonesian domestic workers to gather evidence [bukti] of exploitation in dispersed live-in working environments. Because ICTs, particularly mobile telephones, are

immersed in Indonesian domestic workers' migratory existence, this not only strengthened their ability but also increased their bargaining power to fend off oppression (Allmark & Wahyudi, 2016; Kim, 2016; Lin & Sun, 2010; Platt et al., 2016; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2011; Ueno, 2009). On the one hand, the above stories illustrate the rhetorical failures of Hong Kong's labor law to safeguard the rights of migrant domestic workers. On the other hand, they may reflect the uniqueness of Indonesian domestic workers' culturally distinct form of legal resistance, vastly dissimilar to the predominant form of rightful resistance in Asian countries among peasants, mine coal workers, and landlords.

I placed Efritha's story last because, like the first three, it captured the major characteristics of rightful resistance. For example, using the authorized Labour Department or police stations, employing labor law as rhetoric, locating exploitative employer divisions within authorities, and mobilizing support from local NGOs and migrant communities. However, Efritha's account clearly exposed the underlying aims and reasoning behind most, if not all, Indonesian domestic workers' particular form of rightful resistance, which addresses the challenge of O'Brien (2013) of whether right consciousness would occur. I argue that migrant unions or NGO leaders' over-romanticization of right consciousness would undoubtedly surface if a migrant sued their employers. Rather, in my nine years of fieldwork, I have found that self-interest is more preoccupied in the minds of the vast majority of Indonesian domestic workers.

However, Efritha's story did not end there. After about two years, I made a long-distance telephone call to Indonesia to apologize to her, saying, "I'm sorry for my rude comment and inconsiderate behavior before your departure." As previously mentioned, Efritha was one of my early cases when I was fairly new to the migrant sector. However, after two years, I discovered that many Indonesian domestic workers resembled Efritha: secretly videoing or audiotaping their

encounters with their employers, seeking my assistance, and making a similar vow, “I don’t want other Indonesian girls to suffer as I did.” Their usual but typical action sequence was as follows: After an Indonesian domestic worker gathers secret recordings or credible evidence, she chooses between two paths. First, she will attempt to put up with ill-treatment until the end of her contract to get the extra bonus so that she can sign with a new employer without having to pay the exorbitant seven-month agency charge again. Second, she will plead with me to help her sue her employer if she cannot take the ill-treatment anymore. If Immigration grants her a longer visa, she will use it as a stepping stone to search for new employment while weighing up her chances of success and the compensation she can recover. Since initiating a case is time-consuming, if she has a low chance of success owing to weak evidence, she will either drop her complaint once she secures a new job or be ready to accept less compensation from the Labour Department. She will, however, be required to pay enormous agency fees for another contract.

These multiple incidents I observed during my fieldwork awoke me to the reality of the situation: self-interest is Indonesian domestic workers’ basic human need for survival, and right consciousness is, to some extent, a luxury for them. Right consciousness is the driving force for those who claim to help keep Indonesian domestic workers in the fight. However, for most Indonesian domestic workers, survival is still their primary concern, which is aligned with Scott’s observation of the peasants’ resistance in Malaysia, “Their intention, by contract, is nearly always survival and persistence. The pursuit of that end may, depending on circumstances, require either the petty resistance we have seen or more dramatic actions of self-defense” (Scott, 1985, p. 301). As such, Indonesian domestic workers would strategically use all means, both ethical and ostensibly unethical, to get back the bare minimum of what they felt they deserved.

Therefore, why would Indonesian domestic workers respond in that way through rightful resistance? And what causes it? Perhaps their reaction pattern indicates a larger structural failure in the Hong Kong government's so-called comprehensive employment protection for migrant domestic workers. Even though Hong Kong's labor protection for migrants is widely regarded as superior to that of Singapore and Taiwan (Asian Migrant Centre et al., 2007), I contend that such protection, including the Employment Ordinance and Standard Employment Contract, is merely rhetoric (Andrevski & Lyneham, 2014; Lim, 2016; Tan, 2001). There are two reasons for this. One is foreign domestic workers' spatial live-in environmental nature making it difficult to burden the proof. The other is the challenges they face in exercising their rights due to procedural violence.

Nevertheless, according to a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Catholic Commission of Labour Affairs (2011), nearly 80% of Indonesian domestic workers reported having basic knowledge of labor laws. My fieldwork finding also confirmed this observation during my regular Sunday outreach. When I reminded Indonesian domestic workers that they were entitled to rest days and statutory holidays, typical quick replies were, "I know, but what if my employer says no?," "The Labor Department is closed on Sundays; what can I do?" and "I can't write in English, can someone help me?" Likewise, these types of questions were also frequently experienced by Eza (see Chapter 4), who was assumed to be well acquainted with the labor laws and had developed right consciousness after she won her Labour Tribunal case in her 2nd contract. Regrettably, when she encountered a shortage of adequate food during her 3rd contract, she did not speak out because she would be reprimanded and ordered to do extra housework as revenge by her employer. Then, in her 4th contract, she was denied the right to a holiday and had

an occupational injury. When I urged her to redress her rights to her employer, as mandated by law, her recurrent critical question directed at me was, “what if my employer says no?”

Eza’s reaction, like many other Indonesian domestic workers, revealed a peculiar dilemma of migrant domestic workers’ spatial work environment. Most employer violations of their working conditions were implicit; they did not always leave evidence through cuts, blood or scars, as in Erwiana’s case. Instead, petty concealed exploitation occurred every day in migrants’ lives. Some bizarre and cruel examples of this exploitation I encountered during my work included being: made to stand still for more than an hour, not permitted to use the toilet in the house, only public outdoor toilets, forced to self-slap their face because of a mistake made at work, chastised while having their head pointed at with the employer’s index finger, forced to sleep in the kitchen, on the floor, or in a cupboard in the wall. These breaches were underhand and subtle, making obtaining proof difficult.

It is now more apparent why Indonesian domestic workers are more inclined to use secret recordings as proof because it is difficult to acquire third-party witnesses. With the development of ICTs, mobile telephones have emerged as their most loyal witnesses and allies. The general public’s perception of Indonesian domestic workers is that they are ignorant, stupid, passive, timid and naïve. I argue that these stereotypes inadvertently create space and opportunity for them to revolt. Indonesians skillfully capitalize on this stereotype construction, go along with it, and utilize it to their advantage by acting foolishly to achieve secret recordings, as they are well aware that: “Without proof, no one would believe!” This is their weapon, their bargaining chip in the battle of rightful resistance.

Here, I emphasize that the significance of secret recordings for Indonesian domestic workers should not be confined to evidence in court. Rather, these recordings can also serve as

an “amulet” to provide symbolic protection, psychologically empowering a migrant to endure till the end of her contract. They also provide her with energy, security, and choice, by recounting the particular hardships they face, the debt bondage of agency fees, which leads them to tolerate ill-treatment at work. Therefore, adopting Tyers’ (2021) concept of the amulet, I maintain that Indonesian domestic workers’ amulet should be understood and interpreted as a historically “collective cultural product” (Scott, 1990, p. 9), which they employ to grapple with a particular historical event and document their experiences of survival and resistance alongside their protagonists. For example, Rilie, a smart and persistent Indonesian domestic worker, was 22 years old when I met her. She was one of the girls I met who used a secret recording as an amulet to help her mentally endure being underpaid. She came to me for help after she had worked for her employer for a year. Since then, she began using her mobile phone to document evidence of underpayment. Nearly every month, she would report the progress of her secret recording to me and ask me to listen to them to determine whether they were sufficient. Even when I responded, “OK, we can go to the Labour Department.” I got the impression that she had no motive to sue her employer. However, she regularly visited me, and I appeared to be a witness to her secret recordings until, at last, she revealed her strategy to me:

Cece, do you know that the recordings make me feel better, at least less scared [*gulped*]? Before, I was really afraid that my employer would fire me and leave me with nothing. But now, if my employer were mean to me, I would use these recordings to get even with her [*voice turned serious*]. I don’t want to cause trouble right now. I just want to work until my contract ends. I just don’t want my agency to deduct my salary again.

Rilie did not sue her employer; after her contract ended, her agency rewarded her with monetary reward to entice her to search for a new job with them.⁴³ Her secret recordings appeared to have

⁴³ It is not uncommon for recruitment agencies to offer bonuses to Indonesian domestic workers who have finished their contracts, as the market for “finished contract maids” is highly competitive. Many Indonesian domestic

effectively served as an amulet providing her more options for exacting retribution, avoiding a tremendous agency fee, and seeking another desirable employer who would not underpay her.

Similarly, Shofiy, a girl who also endured underpayment, secretly recorded her employer handing her pay in cash while carefully counting the banknotes in front of the camera. Since her employer had terminated her contract, she requested my assistance filing a labor case against her. However, before the scheduled date of the labor conciliation meeting, Shofiy withdrew her case:

I don't want to continue my labor case; if it takes so many months, I'd better start working again. Filing a case made me have a longer visa, and I've found an agency that will only take three months of my wage. I can't even imagine what would happen if my case took six months or even longer. I don't want to be like Maya, Arinda and Barita [*shelter girls who had court cases*]. Wait and wait! It's useless! [*voice tinged with irony*]

Thus far, the above cases have mapped stories from Eza's battle with rightful resistance to the accounts of the four cases of Asoka, Adilla, Yafi, and Efritha and their unintended consequences of employing the strategy of rightful resistance to Rilie and Shofiy's reluctance to employ it. Undeniably, the cost for Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong to participate in this type of legal framework politics is far higher than for other subaltern groups, such as rural peasants or coal miners. This huge cost results from the brutally inhumane legal procedure and the orphan-like immigration status. These include the language barrier in filling out the English Labour Claim form and preparing English court statements when submitting a case; the lengthy time commitment of typically three to six months or more; difficulty gathering evidence due to live-in arrangements and isolated environments; being prohibited from working due to immigration restrictions; and becoming trapped in a cycle of agency fee bondage. As such, I contend that

workers informed me their agencies urged them to recommend finished contract maids to their agencies, and if they were successful, they would receive a HK\$500 to HK\$1,000 bonus.

Indonesian domestic workers' unique structural hardships undermine the rhetoric of law-mandated employment protection for migrants and dissuade them, causing them to oscillate between hope, anger, despair, and fear while addressing their rights through rightful resistance.

In sum, whether rightful resistance is consequential hinges on two premises for most Indonesian domestic workers. First, sending and receiving regions must have comprehensive and operational legal systems, which serve as the first line of defense for Indonesian domestic workers. However, this is insufficient because playing the legal game largely depends on whether they have sound evidence. Hence, they must gather evidence to deploy as their second line of defense. Without evidence, their chances of winning this war are slim to none. Surprisingly, Indonesian domestic workers cleverly capitalize on the public's stereotypical assumption of their ignorance and lure their employers into secret recordings, which they cherish as amulets. Depending on the circumstances, these secret recordings can be used as a weapon or an amulet. Unfortunately, given that using evidence or rightful resistance as a weapon is too dreadful and entails huge costs, most ultimately retain the amulet until their contracts end to offer more options for escape. This is tragic for Indonesian domestic workers and creates a paradox.

Chapter Six

(Un)Disciplined Labor Body: Neither Submissiveness nor Defiance

One day, the staff at the training center took us to a forest. When we got there, I saw a team of people dressed like 'soldiers.' Then the staff said, 'Today, we deliberately hired them to train all of you!' I thought at the time, 'We're simply going to be domestic workers, so what the hell is this?' They set up the forest with a lot of crossed strings in the air at half-body height. Inside, many sharp iron things were hanging down at different heights, so if you hit one, it would hurt a lot. Then, all of a sudden, a commander roared, 'Now, everyone must go through to the other end. If you want to eat today, you have to crawl through it.' Then we bent down, put our knees down, and crawled up. Toward the end, we even crawled on the soil because if we didn't, those sharp things would hurt our bodies. While we were struggling with how to get through the tunnel, the commander yelled, 'Don't think it's that easy to eat a bite of rice!' After we went through the tunnel, I saw that there was already some food there. The commander split us up right away into different groups. Some of us were given bread, and others were given rice. Suddenly, the commander put a large timer in front of us and said, 'You have two minutes to eat all the food I just gave you!' We were so nervous that we just did as we were told and ate as fast as we could. Woh! They really trained us as if we were soldiers getting ready for war. Honestly, I thought it was useful at the time because we really needed to build up our bodies to survive the hardships in Hong Kong. But now, I can tell it was useless.

(Sinta, aged 26, commented on the pre-departure training)

6.1 Target of Power: A Soldier hit by a Shattered Eggshell

The anecdote of Sinta exemplifies the bodily discipline of many Indonesian domestic workers experienced in the pre-departure training center, which mirrors Foucault's soldier metaphor for the production of docile bodies in a "machinery of power" (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 138). Many scholars believe that before Indonesian domestic workers leave for Hong Kong, they undergo a set of disciplinary procedures that train them to be docile, deferential, and productive (Chang, 2018; Liang, 2011; Parreñas, 2021; Rudnycki, 2004). Sinta's soldier-like training illustrates how Indonesian domestic workers' bodies become a "target of power" upon entering the "machine" that manufactures totalized commodities (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 136). With the designation of a "calculated constraint" running through Indonesian women's bodies, it is anticipated that they can be shaped through self-evaluation and self-regulation of their behavior until they reach a level of "automatism of habit" (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 135). In doing so, this bestows indigenous women with the appearance of "certified maids."

Intriguingly, along her migratory path, Sinta made two seemingly contradictory remarks, "useful" vs. "useless", to declare her "refusal" to accept the knowledge created by the training center that shaped her subjectivity (Foucault, 1983, p. 216). Sinta's transformation of "self-knowledge" paralleled Foucault's dual interpretation of his notion of "subject" in comprehending the subjectification process of migrant domestic workers. According to Foucault (1998), this process requires that one must "observe himself, analyze himself, interpret himself, recognize himself as a domain of possible knowledge"; hence, one "experiences himself in a game of truth where he relates to himself" (p. 461). Sinta was initially ecstatic to be trained as a soldier by the Indonesian training center; nevertheless, her closing words of "useless" contradicted her first sentiments. Sinta provided her explanation for this:

That night, my Madam kept asking me, ‘Did Popo eat dinner?’ I was irritated, so I responded annoyingly, ‘I already answered you.’ Then I ran back into the kitchen to make noodles for my dinner. Suddenly, my Madam went insane and poured the hot noodles over my tummy, quickly turning it red. I cried. I shouted at her, ‘Why did you do that?’ Unexpectedly, she suddenly slapped my face. She said, ‘How dare you be that naughty to talk back [邊個叫你咁曳博咀呀!’⁴⁴ I was so angry! I couldn’t help but slap her in the face in return. I told her, ‘Don’t think I’m a maid, and you can hit me [唔好以為我係工人, 你就可以打我呀!’ She then grabbed my hair and beat me up badly, so I did the same to her. She bit me once, and I bit her once back.

Sinta’s phrase, “Don’t think I’m a maid, and you can hit me!” was a declaration of war against her employer. Her physical combat, accompanying this defiant phrase, revealed the subordinate group’s cultural politics, and functioned as counter-discourse against the dominant group’s oppressive control. However, Sinta’s counter-discourse was not established externally. Rather, it was formulated within and through power relations, as this hegemony was intrinsically incomplete (Wang, 2007), which enabled her to change her conscience of Indonesian domestic workers as “mere commodities” to “human beings.” Addressing the subjectification process, Foucault (1983) considers the subject to have two layers of dynamic meaning: one as “subject to someone else by control and dependence” (p. 212), exploring how human beings are shaped as subjects, and the other as “tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (p. 212), exploring how human beings turn themselves into subjects.

Sinta arrived in Hong Kong as a tough soldier to assume the role of a productive and submissive maid. She began to consider herself a human being rather than a commodity until her employer humiliated her, which went against her inherent dignity. Her slapping her employer in return made it clear that she would not tolerate abuse, regardless of being of a lower class, race, and social position than her employer. As she began to comprehend that a soldier was merely a

⁴⁴ All Cantonese quotations enclosed in brackets are participants’ original words.

camouflage for a commodified maid, she concluded that this soldier construction was useless because it violated her dignity as a human being. In this way, Sinta established a new form of subjectivity by developing alternative self-knowledge about Indonesian domestic workers.

Domination and resistance exist in a fluid and dynamic state where power relations are constantly negotiated and contested (Munro, 2003; Nash, 2001; Raby, 2005). They continuously reassert themselves against one another on the battlefield as equal actors (Constable 1997). The subordinate group's counter-discourse can also trigger a new strategy from the dominant group (Scott, 1985, 1990). For example, the police sarcastically arrested Sinta for allegedly assaulting Popo by pinching his right thigh. This was the tactic through which Sinta's employer exacted retribution on her. Despite this, Sinta never showed remorse for her actions. On the trial date, I accompanied Sinta to the court hearing. Before we entered the courtroom, she told me, "I feel like an egg put on a sharp-edged stick by people; I'm aware that once I fall, the whole eggshell will shatter on the floor, but I can't be afraid." Sinta's "scattered eggshell" metaphor is not equivalent to vulnerability but a symbol of a non-subjugated power poised to erupt. Fortunately, she was acquitted of the crime, as the judge challenged Popo's testimony that Sinta intended to harm her because she refused to purchase a whole chicken for dinner. Sinta's story might be viewed as a case of modern slavery through western hegemonic discourse, in which she must be rescued to address her legal rights through an institutionalized legal channel. Nonetheless, after nearly a year of righteous struggle, including her criminal and labor cases, she lost her job and income, leading to even greater misery. As a frustrated migrant body, Sinta relocated to another global circuit, Macau, in search of alternative possibilities and began working at Circle K.

Figure 6.1

Sinta Displays the Number of Gold Hoops she Bought by Working at Circle K in Macau



6.1.1 Indonesian Domestic Workers as Commodity

Migrant domestic workers as a regional export commodity for consumption have attracted growing scholarly interest (Constable, 1997; Ford, 2001; Lindio-McGovern, 2012; Sim, 2007). However, the main focus is on how structural and economic forces turn individuals into objectified commodities, neglecting the possibility that migrant domestic workers can subvert their object and subject positions in commodity relations during their migratory trajectory in the global circuit (Silvey, 2006; Vogel, 2000).⁴⁵ Nonetheless, new postmodern commodification scholarship asserts that the commodification discourse has taken a cultural turn, in which scholars contend that the hegemonic market no longer controls the commodity's meaning.

⁴⁵ See Nash's (2001) "The cultural turn in social theory: Towards a theory of cultural politics" and Chapter 1 of this thesis for additional related discussions between economic and cultural debates that create an individual's social relations and identities.

Instead, individual agents can equally have the power to subvert meaning by inciting semiotic changes when they clash with the market, where each party struggles over meaning for its market value to decide which party has the power to control it (Radin & Sunder, 2005). In this sense, the term commodity has become contested because it can be negotiated depending on market conditions; hence, it is regarded as political with a negotiation-related meaning (Appadurai, 1986).

Foucault disagrees with Marx's rigid conception of the value of labor power. Marx's labor theory of value posits that labor is only ultimately converted into surplus labor under the capitalist mode of production logic,⁴⁶ implying that the labor force is a surplus and exploited population (Wolfstetter, 1973; Yates, 2011). In contrast, Foucault argues that commodities' exchange value is subject to the "mechanism of competition," which is influenced by the rationality of neoliberal political economy and hence regulates society. In other words, the "commodity-effect" is highly dependent on the "dynamic of competition" (Cook, 2018, p. 53). More paradoxically, Marx emphasizes that capitalists exploit the surplus value of labor through coercion, causing laborers to suffer and become commodities once they lose access to the means of production. Nevertheless, Foucault argues that "coercion" is no longer necessary to extract surplus value from laborers in the mechanism of commodity exchange; rather, individuals are now self-regulated and self-evaluated under global norms. Even if exploitation still exists in the market, its form has become objectified and normalized, as if everyone is willingly subject to it (Manokha, 2009).

⁴⁶ Marx's labor theory of value is elaborated upon in "Capital, Volume One," which is included in the edited volume Marx, K. (1978). *Capital, volume one*. In R. C. Tucker (Eds.), *The Marx-Engels reader* (2nd ed., pp. 294-438). Norton.

Therefore, I argue that Indonesian domestic workers as commodities also exhibit the above features, and their commodification process is everchanging in the circuit (i.e., from leaving home to entering the training center in Indonesia, to starting their domestic worker contracts in employers' houses, to entering local Hong Kong society). It is a continual and not-yet-finished project in which the semiotic meaning of the commodity can be negotiated, contested and subverted. They can actively commodify themselves or passively accept their commodification, which reveals the complexity of their performative selves and displaces multiple meanings of diasporic subjects. This ambiguity differs from Marx's "alienation from the product" and the ultimate separation of labor from the product. Domestic workers' employment is different from factory work or farming because the reality is that domestic workers and domestic service are never separate within an individual's body at any given time. As such, I propose such a special situation creates space and possibility for migrant domestic workers' resistance as they still have certain powers over their domestic servitude, thus having the opportunity to exercise their agency.

This chapter aims to reveal the power domination and resistance among Indonesian domestic workers fueled by the labor export system by addressing the following set of questions. First, how does the labor export system shape migrant women into docile bodies? Foucault emphasizes that a certain degree of voluntary subjection is essential to the disciplinary process; if so, how does self-discipline occur? Second, how does Foucault's concept of biopolitics explain the governmentalities and regulatory technologies that the two governments (Indonesia and Hong Kong) use for surveillance and discipline to control migrants, which individualizes and totalizes them? Third, given this power structure, how can Indonesian domestic workers negotiate these disciplinary forces? Can they alter the semiotic meaning of commodity while

their bodies move through global and local circuits? Can new forms of economic subjectivity emerge?

6.2 Docility-Utility: The Making of Indonesian Domestic Workers

6.2.1 Disciplining Through Time, Space, and Activity

Erwiana (see Chapter 1), an Indonesian domestic worker, was severely tortured by her employer. During an interview,⁴⁷ she described how her body was disciplined using technologies and discourse in addition to physical torture:

There are CCTVs all over the house, so I can't make a mistake. That woman [*employer*] sometimes followed me and sometimes watched me on camera. She gave me a schedule to follow. If she set five minutes to clean something, I couldn't do more or less. She wanted everything to be very clean; she has about eight rooms, so [*high-pitched voice*] she told me to wipe down every door for ten minutes, every air conditioner for ten minutes, every window for 25 minutes, and I even have to clean the inside of the cabinets. Many times, when I was done, she told me to do it all over again. Sometimes I could only sleep for an hour because the job wasn't done.

In an attempt to induce Erwiana to submit voluntarily to the mistreatment, her employer instilled in her mind a horrific image of being imprisoned if she did not comply with her instructions:

My employer always said that no one could imagine prison. She said, 'In prison, it would be just you in a dark cell with a lot of black iron rolls. No one would come with you, you wouldn't have a job, and your life would be a living hell.' She always told me to think about this picture. She said, 'If you don't behave well, I'll call the police to put you in prison [如果你唔乖乖地, 我就叫警察拉你坐監].' I was so scared by it.

⁴⁷ I conducted a personal interview in Hong Kong with Erwiana Sulistyarningsih (Erwiana hereafter) on November 29, 2017. At the time, she had returned to the city to attend her civil claim lawsuit against her abusive employer Law Wan-tung.

Although Erwiana's example is extreme, it demonstrates how time, space, and activity are connected to Foucault's disciplinary mechanism to produce docility. Discipline is initially practiced through spatiality. When analyzing the technology of "the art of distribution," Foucault states, "in the first instance, discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space" (Foucault, 1995, p. 141). Before Indonesian women are qualified as certified maids in Hong Kong, they must undergo pre-employment training in a training center, similar to the army and monastery. There, they are placed in an enclosed area to undergo identity transformation, and their bodies are altered to accommodate the rigorous work in Hong Kong. In this enclosure, the bodies of Indonesian women are trained to submit to the disciplinary technique of "the control of activity", which allows time to penetrate their bodies to develop their efficiency and force (Foucault, 1995, p. 149), which extends to their employers' houses in Hong Kong. Their time and effort are maximized by using emerging modern technology such as clocks, timers, and CCTV. They must complete a certain task within a specified time or repeatedly conduct activities to utilize and boost their total output within a specific timeframe, manifested as "the organization of geneses" (Foucault, 1995, p. 156).

Figure 6.2

Erwiana, Interview in 2017, Following Three Years after her Abuse



The regimented timetable of Erwiana is similar to Sinta's soldier-like training in the forest when the commander used a large timer to mandate when participants should finish eating the divided food to maximize their time and force. Indeed, Sinta's daily routine at the training center functioned as a catapult for extending its application in the receiving state:

Every day, we have to do many rounds of public hygiene for the training center in between taking Cantonese classes, washing our dirty clothes, or eating. Even when we're done with everything, we can't take a break because our training center makes us do a lot of physical exercises, like jumping and running, every day. We can't skip a day.

I asked Sinta if she knew why the training center prepared her like a soldier for battle through endless repetitive cleaning and physical exercises without a break. She scoffed, "Of course I know, they're trying to scare us, 'Don't think it's that easy to eat a bite of rice in Hong Kong [唔好唸住喺香港食一啖飯係咁容易]!" Despite her skepticism regarding the discourse surrounding the living conditions of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong, she voluntarily accepted it into her daily life, treating it as "truth" even though she was not completely in agreement, she internalized it to some degree (Chang, 2018; Constable, 1997; Hierofani, 2020).

Sinta continued:

I sometimes wondered how my body could handle the hard work in Hong Kong if my training center didn't push me to do so many physical exercises. If it wasn't because they made us finish the food in a very short time, imagine if my employer told me, 'Eat faster!' What would I do? If something bad happens to me in Hong Kong, I'm alone because I'm with no one.

Sinta's self-imposed soldier discipline is not uncommon. Cyntah, her employer, a policewoman, would compel her to follow her prescribed procedure for cleaning Choi Sum vegetables by tossing them in water ten times. She would listen to verify Cyntah did this. Cyntah similarly internalized this concept in her daily life in a similar way to Sinta. Cyntah stated:

This employer has taught me a lot. I finally understand what discipline means. It's great! You know, we Indonesians are very lazy and never think about how to do work in a systematic and efficient way. But now, my employer teaches me how to do things better!

Nevertheless, the self-discipline of Sinta and Cyntah poses several critical concerns, including why Indonesian domestic workers view this “docility-utility” training as beneficial. What makes them willing participants, and how are voluntary subjects produced? In other words, why do they reason: If I want to be a certified maid who can survive in Hong Kong, I must train myself to be a useful machine-like commodity with a tough body to withstand hard work, who races against time to maximize her workload, and who performs tasks in a capitalist systematic and effective way. If I deviate from this normality, my fate will resemble Erwiana's employer's threat to put her in a torturous prison.

6.2.2 Technologies and Discourses

Foucault (1984) claims, “truth isn't outside power...it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power” (pp. 72-73). When considering how discipline creates the docility of Indonesian domestic workers, we cannot separate truth from power because this truth always manifests in discourse, thus shaping the bodies of Indonesian domestic workers. Notably, “Don't think it's that easy to eat a bite of rice in Hong Kong” is a typical discourse employed by agencies to manufacture the ideal maid. To meet the basic need for food, migrant women's bodies responded to the time restriction activity and subsequent punishment by striving to comply with the regulations and complete the required task. Foucault borrows L'Homme's “Man-a-Machine,” which emphasizes the link between the body and the mind, implying that migrant women's bodily experiences can transform their minds (Foucault, 1975/1995). It is through self-internalization that “individualizing” and “totalizing”

effects are achieved when Indonesian domestic women internalize knowledge describing the ideal maid produced by the domestic servitude business chain (Curtis, 2002). These discourses are imprinted with differences in terms of gender, class, and race/ethnicity (Hierofani, 2020; Rother, 2017).

Asoka (see Chapter 1) used the analogies “even worse than being in prison [仲衰過坐監]” and “pitiful cockroach [好慘嘅甲由]” to describe the discipline exercised in the training center. She complained she lost her freedom when her mobile telephone was confiscated, was only given one spoonful of rice and one piece of vegetable at mealtimes, was forbidden from eating chilies, and her long hair forcefully cut short. The training center denied Indonesian women’s freedom by establishing a discourse of “threat” concerning their expected treatment by Hong Kong employers by altering and transforming their eating habits through portion size, quality, and taste. This was done to exercise discipline legitimately to accustom their bodies by making them voluntary subjects who self-regulate their behavior. As Asoka stated:

The staff yelled at us, ‘now, you have to learn and adapt; when you work in Hong Kong, you may have nothing to eat [你去到香港打工, 你可能乜都無得食]’; if your employer is good, you might have something to eat; if your employer is bad, you won’t get anything to eat.

As a result, if they were recruited by an employer who deprived them of food, they would accept it because their body had developed the automatism of habit. Therefore, Indonesian women’s daily habits must be altered to generate a desirable maid for purchase, such as eating, sleeping, and speaking freely with their relatives and friends. Their appearance must also be replaced with that of an inferior maid. They would be considered abnormal if they wished to retain their feminine attributes. Asoka cried when her long beautiful hair was cut short because she thought she looked ugly and was unfortunately humiliated by the staff:

‘You come to Hong Kong just to be a maid and not an artist [你嚟香港係做工人唔係做明星呀], why be pretty? You are a maid; you don’t have to be pretty.’ I told myself, ‘That’s how it is! Perhaps, I can have long hair again in Hong Kong.’ But I’ve always thought that even if we’re maids, we can still be pretty.

After nearly three months of transformation into a certified maid, when the staff told her to pose for a photo for an interview, Asoka was finally shaped into what Foucault refers to as the first meaning of a subject, an economic subject ready for market, a docile body ready for an employer:

When I glanced at the camera, I felt like a real maid for the first time. I was wearing a maid’s uniform, and I was told to put both of my hands parallel down at my waist. But I was happy because I would soon be able to make money.

Figure 6.3

Asoka’s Earnings in Numerous Hong Kong Dollar Banknotes Displayed on her Facebook Page



Asoka's training center created discourse regarding the treatment of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong that echoed Sinta's experience, "When you work in Hong Kong, you may have nothing to eat," and "You come to Hong Kong just to be a maid and not an artist." These discourses made Sinta, Asoka, and other women in the training center feel threatened. As they were unsure whether the knowledge associated with these discourses was true, they would force themselves to act correctly, follow and internalize the rules out of fear that they may go hungry or be fired for making their employers unhappy. The effect of these discourses resembles the intended consequence of Foucault's metaphor of the prison "panopticon," where the discourse serves the same purpose as a "lighting system" (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 200).

Through these discourses, the training center used disciplinary penetration of migrants' bodies through time and place to boost productivity. As Foucault emphasizes, "constituting a productive force whose effect had to be superior to the sum of elementary forces that composed it" (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 163), as was the case for Sinta. However, this also removed the femininity and personal attributes of prospective migrant domestic workers who wanted to work in Hong Kong, as was the case for Asoka. Therefore, to totalize them into unified commodities for exportation, the training center normalized Indonesian women not only to eliminate their femininity, but also to eradicate their sexual orientation through threats and punishment.

Ferly spent the longest time at the training center; she had been there six months and attributed this to her lesbian Tomboy status:

The staff at my training center told me that 'Hong Kong employers don't like tomboys [香港 D 僱主唔鐘意 tomboys㗎],' so they don't want me to look like that. And it was true. Most of the girls got jobs and left. I was the only one who stayed. Two months after training, I still didn't have a job. The staff told me it's hard to find a job because my face looks like a boy's.

Figure 6.4

Ferly's Photos From the Training Center With Their Short Hair



With the discourse “Hong Kong employers don’t like tomboys” established by the training center, the staff strictly disciplined Ferly into a “girl,” which caused her to feel scared, hate and label herself as a problem and a mistake. Ferly shook her head with a wry smile:

The staff yelled at me very loudly, ‘You must wear a dress in the training center!’ At first, I was very insistent. I was very embarrassed by that dress, so I told her, ‘I don’t have a dress.’ ‘You can buy one here!’ the staff snapped back. ‘I don’t have any money!’ I said again. The staff then said, ‘Okay! Here, take this.’ But I said, ‘I don’t like it; it is very short, like a waitress.’ ‘You have to dress like this here!’ the staff yelled. After I put on the dress, the staff made me walk like on a catwalk in front of 500 girls, from one side of the room to the other. ‘I want them to know you’re a girl,’ the staff said. When the girls saw how I was dressed, they all laughed at me very loudly. But I knew that this was my problem and that I had made a mistake, so I just let it go.

Ferly was extremely ashamed, but the staff threatened to hold her visa and prevent her from entering Hong Kong. Nevertheless, her tomboy appearance made her popular and a sexual target

in the training center, attracting many girls. However, she was once arrested for sexual activity with multiple girls. Following this, the training center employed yet another terrifying punishment to discipline her lesbian sexual behavior:

The staff told me to write ‘One chance, next time, get out!’ as a warning letter and even made me pay five million Rupiah [*IDR*] as a deposit. The punishment was one letter and one deposit. The staff told me they wouldn’t give me a visa to Hong Kong. I only thought, ‘Maybe after I pay, I won’t get my money back.’ I just said I wouldn’t do it again and begged, ‘Please! No la! No la! No la!’

Ferly’s narrative is an extension of Asoka; by determining right from wrong, the training center eliminated their femininity, sexual orientation and sexual desires to create depersonalized and desexualized ideal products fit for the market. Such disciplinary forces aligned with Foucault’s (1977) concept of “denatured” violence affected through language (p. 29). As most Indonesian women were uncertain about their knowledge of Hong Kong, the training center was able to implant them with a set of discourses. As rational beings, migrant women obeyed these rules to prevent negative outcomes.

6.2.3 Dividing Practices: Successful Maids vs. Failed Maids

One Sunday, Ciatri, a self-assured woman in her early thirties from Surabaya, led me to a park in Shek Tong Tsui, outside an Indonesian grocery store, where she claimed we would meet a newly arrived Indonesian girl with a work-related problem who required my assistance. As usual, she proudly screamed my name from the other side of the street. When I turned to face her, the first thing that attracted my attention was her golden necklace. “Ciatri, your jewelry is very shiny; it seems really expensive, huh?” I teased her while giggling. She exclaimed, laughing uncontrollably:

This gold necklace? [*swinging it*] It cost HK\$4000, huh. I'm really hard at work here, you know. I always wear it when I'm on holiday on Sundays in Hong Kong because I want my friends to see it. Otherwise, how would they know I'm a 'finished contract' maid? [*proud voice*]

The term “finished contract” symbolizes a successful maid in the Indonesian community. This implies Ciatri is qualified as a certified maid, having passed a series of “disciplinary technology” examinations in the training center (Foucault, 1995, p. 227), and that she adheres to normality as a “homogenous social body” (Foucault, 1995, p. 184) by putting on a behaved maid act to avoid being fired by her employer inside her two-year contract. The finished contract status of Ciatri can be viewed as an accreditation with “registration” (Foucault, 1995, p. 228), and under Hong Kong law, recruitment agencies are only permitted to collect 10% of their first month's wage as an agency fee, lessening the chance of getting into a cycle of debt with the agency.⁴⁸

Consequently, a maid with a finished contract can amass wealth and send remittances to assist their family and country. Since Ciatri was planning to return to Indonesia for her holiday, her success shone out to her friends in Hong Kong and her Indonesian neighbors, demonstrating how effective the discipline of “examination,” “registration,” and “surveillance” cooperatively functioned. Ciatri explained:

When I get to the airport in Indonesia, I have to wear my gold necklace. If I don't, people might think, ‘This girl works in Hong Kong, so why doesn't she make any money?’ I have to put on makeup and change into nice clothes before I get on the plane. The people in Indonesia don't know if you are rich or not. How will they know if you get rich? It depends on how pretty your clothes are.

⁴⁸ Concerning the struggle, predicament, and dilemma of Indonesian domestic workers attempting to finish their contracts to avoid incurring agency fee debt. See also Chapters 5 and 6.

Figure 6.5

Finished Contract Worker Received \$500 Reward from Recruitment Agency



However, behind the glory of the symbol of a finished contract was a halo of adversity for failed maids; either the maid broke the contract herself or her employer terminated it prematurely. The girl Ciatri brought along expressed this succinctly:

This girl goes to bed at 2 a.m. but has to get up at 6:30 a.m. She doesn't get any food, and her employer always deducts her wages for things she breaks, but she wants to force herself to finish her contract. This is her third contracts, and she's never finished a contract before. She's afraid she'll be blacklisted by Immigration if she doesn't. She had a lot of bad luck. Her first employer hit her, so she ran away. Her second employer had a mental illness, so she quit. Now, her third employer is the same.

The discourse “A successful maid is one who can finish her two-year contract” was devised by two governments to discipline Indonesian domestic workers to behave. By further segmenting space and time, this technology expands the use of disciplinary forces to govern the bodies of Indonesians (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). By employing the technique of “dividing practices,” Indonesian domestic workers are objectified within this machinery of power. Ciatri's narrative

demonstrates that the self-discipline of Indonesians is not solely a result of the threat and uncertainty posed by the panopticon, which compels Indonesian domestic workers to voluntarily submit to the rules imposed upon their bodies, as was the case for Sinta, Asoka, and Ferly. Self-discipline can also be developed by producing discourse that constructs “classification,” “hierarchy,” and “rank” (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 84), which instills desire and motivates individuals to strive for advancement and attainment of higher positions. By categorizing women as “modern” or “backward,” “behaved” or “naughty,” “successful” or “failed,” Indonesian women can self-discipline to meet these standards without the need for coercion. Regardless of whether these discourses induce the effect of threat or aspiration, these classifications are all marked by hierarchical differences in terms of gender, sexual orientation, race, and class (Mills, 2003). Through these differences, Indonesian migrants can control their behavior and work toward the standards. Discourse formulation must be tied with a knowledge system (Escobar, 1984), including knowledge of how successful maids are defined and Indonesian domestic workers’ life circumstances. By using the manipulative mode of dividing practice, Indonesian domestic workers self-characterize into good and bad categories, which enables the two governments to exclude those unproductive economic subjects, echoing Foucault’s critique of the capitalist mode of operation in contemporary society (Rabinow, 1984).

6.3 Mechanics of Power: Governmentality and Biopolitics

Foucault’s idea of disciplinary power is not about how an “organism” became docile or how its “analyzable” and “manipulable” bodies work together; instead, he is more concerned with macro political economy in terms of “political puppets,” which he refers to as “political anatomy,” “small-scale models of power,” and “mechanics of power” (Foucault, 1975/1995, pp.

136-138). Foucault vehemently disagrees with treating commodities as a metaphor for power. He claims such an overly simplified equation may lead to a misunderstanding of power. Power is not who holds the object and owns it; rather, he emphasizes that power is situated in relations and tied to a set of discourses (Monk et al., 2008). When considering Indonesian domestic workers as commodities, I argue that their social bodies should be treated as embedded in “multiple relations of power” that interweave with diverse discourses, as Foucault et al. (2003) state:

They [*relations of power*] are indissociable from a discourse of truth, and they can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work. Power cannot be exercised unless a certain economy of discourses of truth functions in, on the basis of, and thanks to, that power (p. 24).

6.3.1 The Power of Discourse in Constructing a “Naughty Maid”

I still recall the scene from my training center visit in Malang. Once we entered the training center, we spotted a large number of Indonesian girls wearing t-shirts with the words “Hong Kong,” “Taiwan,” and “Singapore” prominently displayed on the back. The girls would instantly halt their training, twist their arms, and bow their heads toward us in greeting. Regardless of whether this was real or a performance, I understood this was the image the training center owner wanted us to see. However, what caught my eye was the dialogue in the guest room between the teacher and the counselor, both of whom were former Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong. Since they were unaware of the true intention of our visit, they assumed we were traveling with the Catholic nun for missionary work. As such, they appeared to

show very little defense in front of us. When we sat down, the teacher hurled a copy of a well-known Hong Kong Indonesian migrant newspaper, “SUARA,” on the table and snapped:⁴⁹

You know, we’re getting stricter with the girls now. Do you see what they see? -this- it’s the SUARA newspaper. The girls get it while they’re on holidays in Victoria Park, which is why they’re ‘getting naughtier and naughtier [愈來愈曳].’ This newspaper teaches the girls a lot of bad things. When the girls go back to work after a holiday, they fight with their employers bi-li-ba-la, bargaining for their full pay and holidays.

At the time, I could feel my rage rising, but the counselor interjected before I had a chance to collect myself:

Because of this, I always give counseling to our girls; I tell them, ‘Try to imagine one day if your children can go to university and if you can have a big house’ [*in an earnest voice*]. They need to prepare properly here because what they’re doing isn’t for themselves; it’s for their families.

I was scared my fury would explode, so I asked her, “So, will you give them other training to prepare them for life in Hong Kong?” She replied:

I always tell them that they must love their employers’ families and serve them out of love, not just for money. Don’t act like those Filipina maids who are so stingy that they say ‘no’ when their employers ask them to work late at night. If the elderly requests a leg massage, they would also say ‘no,’ arguing that this is not their role. But we Indonesians aren’t the same. We serve our employers’ families out of love, and it’s okay if we sometimes have to work longer hours. Don’t be so mean. We scarify ourselves to serve them because we love them. Indonesian maids work harder and are more kind than Filipina maids. This is why more and more Hong Kong employers don’t like to hire Filipina maids and prefer to hire Indonesian maids instead [*in a proud tone*].

I have heard these sentiments frequently from many Indonesian domestic workers, and it appears that they have internalized these moral virtues through the networks of biopower. The one who referred to herself as a counselor to Indonesian women in Malang’s training center was

⁴⁹ Suara is a very popular, twice-monthly, free Indonesian-language newspaper for Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong. It is published and distributed by numerous Indonesian stores. The contents include information on labor rights, migrant issues, personal stories, and migrant activism.

exercising a type of “pastoral power,” in which power is exercised differently from “royal power”, as opposed to the teacher who held the SUARA newspaper and issued strict commands. Indeed, it takes the form of “sacrifice” to rescue Indonesian women in the training center. The most effective and influential aspects of this type of power lie in its ability to embed values within the minds and souls of Indonesian women, thereby making them voluntarily accept any demands placed upon them. Foucault (1983) underlies this as “individualizing (as opposed to legal power); it is coextensive and continuous with life; it is linked with a production of truth – the truth of the individual himself” (p. 214). These individualizing disciplinary practices are inextricably linked to two major discourses co-produced by training centers in Indonesia and recruitment agencies in Hong Kong. The first is that Indonesians are “uncivilized” and need to be manipulated, rearranged, and trained to transform them into certified maids who can pass quality control testing before being exported to the market. The second is that Indonesians are “getting naughtier and naughtier” and need to be corrected, punished, and surveilled into successful maids capable of finishing their two-year contracts, which enables them to send remittances to their families and their country.

As Foucault reminds us, it is important to note that this emerging form of disciplinary practice, moral norms, is implanted into Indonesian migrants’ minds. One is love, used to disguise exploitation, such as long working hours and irrelevant household duties. The other is national pride used as competition with Filipina maid counterparts to increase production. These moral tactics make migrants more self-disciplined even during adverse work situations. In Foucault’s (1983) view, the exercise of pastoral power, which “implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it” (p. 214), has become the dominant governance of a state, manifesting itself as “a modern matrix of individualization” (p. 215). This management of

Indonesian domestic workers resembles Polanyi's (as cited in Augustin-Jean et al., 2012) conception of commodity, in which he refers to it as a fictitious term that must be understood in the market. Polanyi connected the terms commodity and market to Foucault's concept of biopolitics to highlight that a new technology of governmentality is currently being implemented to manage the population. Through this new form of politics, it is legitimate for anyone to action self-interested behavior inside a self-regulating market, as this is an effective means to regulate and govern individuals. Intriguingly, at first glance, training centers and recruitment agencies appear to be subjugators controlling the behavior of Indonesian domestic workers. By constructing a discourse of "naughty" Indonesian maids, the disciplinary practice of surveillance exercised on migrants' bodies can be legitimately continued and extended across spaces, from the sending to the receiving state. However, behind the scenes, the Indonesian and Hong Kong governments are undoubtedly the masterminds behind this.

6.3.2 Two Governments' New Regulatory Surveillance Technologies

During my work in a migrant organization from 2007 to 2015, I noticed implicit regulations were gradually instructed by the Indonesian and Hong Kong governments, which were quietly relied on and implemented by the recruitment agencies and severely influenced the migratory trajectory of Indonesian domestic workers. This phenomenon is what I refer to as "governmentalization," and from these "general tactics of governmentality," we may understand the "survival" and "limits" of a government (Foucault & Senellart, 2014, p.109). Nonetheless, I

found it difficult to access all the official documents for these regulations,⁵⁰ even with the help of union migrant leaders. At this stage, we simply knew that such regulations were implicitly exercised in migrants' bodies and minds.

When I began this work in 2007, it was the time that Indonesian migrant workers' employment problems caught public and academic attention.⁵¹ I frequently needed to take Indonesian domestic workers to the Labour Department to file cases against their employers or prepare monetary claims to pursue their cases at the Labour Tribunal or MECAB. At that time, I noticed many Indonesians running away from their employers' houses after a few months, even though most had not settled their seven-month agency fee (training fee). Regardless, we advised them, "don't be scared; ignore your outstanding agency fee; this agency is not good. You go to another agency to get a new employer." However, in 2009, we realized our advice was no longer viable because the Indonesian Consulate had created an online system as a regulatory mechanism to check if a migrant worker had reimbursed all agency fees. If not, the system would automatically lockout this migrant's name and the Indonesian Consulate would not process any new contracts until they settled the agency fees. As such, Indonesian domestic workers were forced to return to the agency and continued to fall into a vicious cycle of agency debt. However, this did not imply that Indonesian domestic workers could not unlock their names, only that they could not do it officially. For example, I observed several unofficial and corrupt practices, such as agencies charging Indonesian domestic workers approximately HK\$3,000 and bribing

⁵⁰ The description of the associated regulatory mechanisms employed by the two government institutions (e.g., the Indonesian Consulate and the Hong Kong Immigration Department) is based on information provided by Indonesian domestic workers and migrant union leaders throughout my work from 2007 to 2015.

⁵¹ For local research studies on the exploitation and working conditions of Indonesian domestic workers, see Chapter 1.

officials at the Indonesian Consulate or charging migrants extra money to create fake passports with new personal details, which were potential ways to circumvent the online system.

Nevertheless, in this game of lock-and-unlock, Indonesian domestic workers' mobility and life prospects increased their reliance on recruitment agencies.

Due to the increasingly aging population in Hong Kong, there has been an increase in the need for health and care workers. However, the supply of imported foreign domestic workers failed to fulfill the demand, and there was a rumor that the Indonesian government would prohibit women from working overseas.⁵² As a result, there was a shortage of foreign domestic workers in the market (*South China Morning Post*, 01 September 2012), and job-hopping became a real problem for many Hong Kong employers. It was also a bargaining chip for some political parties who represented Hong Kong employers to pressure the Immigration Department and request authorities to combat this job-hopping phenomenon. In response, the Immigration Department organized an investigation team in 2013. As Dr. Law Chi-kwong, the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, stated in the Legislative Council (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2018):

Since June 2013, the Immigration Department has stepped up its scrutiny of the employment visa applications of foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) who changed employers several times, in order to curb suspected abuse by FDHs of the arrangements for premature contract termination in order to change their employers (commonly known as job-hopping).

At the same time, while the shortage of Filipina and Indonesian maids persisted in the market, the Hong Kong government announced the importation of Bangladeshi domestic workers (*South*

⁵² See Chapter 1 and 7 for a discussion of the Indonesian government's plan to prohibit women from working overseas in 2017.

China Morning Post, 16 March 2013). I began to notice the increasing media portrayal of Indonesian maids as naughty.⁵³ The following local newspaper headlines are indicative of the punishment meted out to migrant domestic workers suspected of job-hopping: “Indonesian Domestic Worker Disappeared on the First Day of Work, Job-hopping, 1,477 Cases in Half a Year [有印傭首日返工即冇影，外傭博抄跳工，半年 1,477 宗]” (*Apple Daily*, 2014a; am730); “Foreign Domestic Workers Suspected of ‘Job-hopping’, Immigration Department Banned 160 Case Applications of Changing Employer [入境處疑外傭「博炒」，拒 160 宗轉僱主申請]” (*Sing Tao Daily*, 2013). As time went on, I observed more foreign domestic workers were banned from visa applications by the Immigration Department when they successfully secured new employers after their contracts terminated. Moreover, Indonesian domestic workers claimed the Indonesian Consulate did not allow them to change agencies unless they had worked with the same employer for two years, completed their contracts and did not permit switching recruitment agencies.⁵⁴ Noticeably, more Indonesian migrants claimed their agencies forced them to stay in designated boarding houses in Macau and mail their passports back to Hong Kong. The agencies defended themselves by stating that the Immigration Department and the Indonesian Consulate needed to inspect migrants’ passports while processing new work visas.

The Indonesian and Hong Kong governments never consider the thousands of Indonesian domestic workers a definite number. Rather, this population is more an “object” for exercising

⁵³ See also Chapters 1 and 5 regarding the political economy of Hong Kong in relation to care work and migrant domestic workers.

⁵⁴ According to my work experience, this practice primarily affects Indonesian domestic workers who are new to Hong Kong, although it is believed that it would have no effect on existing Indonesians. Nevertheless, I continued to receive complaints from this portion of the community. This phenomenon may indicate that migrants are subject to arbitrary regulations.

control, which entails the use of specialized knowledge and technology that are inextricably related to “discipline.” (Foucault & Senellart, 2014, p. 107). As Foucault emphasizes, “The constitution of a knowledge of government is absolutely inseparable from the constitution of a knowledge of all the processes revolving around population in the wider sense of what we now call ‘the economy’” (Foucault & Senellart, 2014, p. 106). Hence, questions that need to be addressed here are: Does governmentality permit the exercise of power to control Indonesian domestic workers as its target? Is “political economy” its most important form of “knowledge,” and is “apparatuses of security” its key “technical instrument” (Foucault & Senellart, 2014, p. 108). If so, how do the two governments’ governmentalities shape Indonesian domestic workers? What institutions and regulatory strategies are employed? How is power exercised with the knowledge produced? Indeed, what rationality underlies this art of government?

Since facing difficulties verifying official sources, I decided to interview key people in recruitment agencies to discuss the rationality of the Indonesian and Hong Kong governments. I bracketed the term “key person” as a recruitment agency is a complex sector. Aside from the license owner, they hire ex-Indonesian domestic maids currently residing in Hong Kong to operate their business efficiently. Also, this business highly relies on brokers who invite existing Indonesian domestic workers to attract, recruit, regulate and monitor Indonesian women’s behavior throughout the hiring process. As such, I interviewed three key people: one license owner (Hong Kong person), one agency staff (ex-Indonesian domestic worker), and one broker (existing Indonesian domestic worker). From these interviews, I argue that the above regulatory mechanisms interlock and are chiefly associated with certain discourses to legitimize their exercising of disciplinary surveillance forces.

Judy is the license owner of a recruitment agency in Hong Kong, so I asked her straight out, “I’ve heard from a lot of Indonesian girls that they can’t change agencies and have to finish their two-year contracts. Is this true? Why do that?” Judy’s response sounded like that of a spokesperson for the government, yet we can see the dominant discourse of contemporary Indonesian domestic workers. Judy sharpened her voice:

The Indonesian government just wants to control the worsening market situation better. They just want to protect the girls [*Indonesian domestic workers*]. Because the girls now become naughtier than before. The Indonesian government requested us to be their guarantors so that it could restrict the girls, thus improving the messy market situation.

The phrases “the girls now become naughtier than before” and “messy market situation” are inseparably linked to the job-hopping phenomenon among migrant domestic workers. Judy continued:

Do the girls know how pitiful they make it for their employers? Their employers paid a lot of money to hire them, they have jobs, they are not lazy, and they don’t have a choice, right? The girls worked for a few months and then broke their contract. They always said they were unhappy, but who doesn’t need some time to adjust? They haven’t finished their agency fee, then fled, then change, change, change employers and agencies, which completely destroys our market.

Judy’s logic is that since Indonesian domestic workers have become naughtier and incited a job-hopping problem, the Indonesian Consulate must restrict their behavior by setting disciplinary mechanisms to regulate their freedom of movement. However, I argue that the discourse “getting naughtier and naughtier” plays a very important role in legitimizing surveillance. Tetty, an agency staff member and a former Indonesian domestic worker married to a Hong Kong man, acknowledged that some Indonesian workers could be troublesome. Yet, she attacked Hong Kong Immigration for its untrustworthy visa-banning policy:

You know, before, it only took a few weeks to one month for the maid’s domestic work visa to be ready, but now, the Immigration Department asks a lot of different questions to

annoy you [*angry voice*]. Because there is a new regulation, no more than two contracts can be terminated by the domestic workers; they reject the application if there is a third. Immigration merely wants the domestic workers to behave well and complete their contracts.

This regulatory mechanism of banning visas by the Hong Kong Immigration Department tends to operate tactfully and skillfully. The public typically learns about it from agencies, domestic workers, and numerous Hong Kong employer forums. However, nobody clearly understands the rules and how it operates. To combat job-hopping, it is evident that the authorities intend to convey a message to migrant domestic workers: “Breaking your contract is neither desirable nor safe. Behave well to finish your contract.” Tetty further elucidated on the matter:

I recently helped one girl process her visa at the Immigration Department. Her contract was terminated twice already; this was her third time signing a contract with a new employer. I sent her to Macau for more than two months. Do you know why? Immigration required us to answer seven questions, like why she broke her contract. What did she do in her work? How big is the house? Can you provide photos of the house? So many-many questions. And in the end, Immigration replied to us, ‘her visa is rejected.’

Tetty inadvertently admitted that recruitment agencies appear to be accomplices in this machinery of power:

Because the Immigration Department kept on asking so many questions of the agencies, of course, we agencies really do not know how to answer. Like just yesterday, I had another maid, and Immigration required us to answer 15 questions. Immigration even requires the agency to be the guarantor to ensure no contract termination, and Immigration only defers the time. Most of us really do not want to get into trouble; just simply cut the worker’s visa, and help the employer look for other maids.

Recruitment agencies clearly know that aside from taking money from Indonesian domestic workers, their main income is from the many hundred thousand Hong Kong employers. As such, agencies know who should be flattered, who can be cheated or punished, and who can be negatively labeled. By cleverly exploiting Indonesian migrants’ trust in their nationals, agencies

tactfully control their behavior. For example, many recruitment agencies frequently target Lonika, an existing Indonesian worker, to serve as a broker due to her smart tomboy appearance.

For each case, she can earn between HK\$1,000 to \$2,000 commission:

Different agents would call me, saying that a girl wants to break her contract but has worked for only one month. The girl feels very unhappy that her employers always complain about her work. So, the agents say, 'I give this girl's mobile number to you; you tease her, make her not go!'

Teasing the girls was not difficult, but sometimes, she needed to work alongside agencies to discipline and correct women's behavior. This was because some recruitment agencies use revenge as punishment to make them behave. Lonika recalled this type of task:

One girl broke her contract and got a new employer, and the agency got very angry and asked me to do something...I called this girl; I lied to her, saying that her friend had given me her mobile number. I asked if she was looking for a new employer, and I cheated her by telling her I had an employer looking for a helper. The work was very simple, only cleaning, and zero agency fees would be charged because this employer would pay her. This girl was very happy, she believed me. But, in the end, I made her lose all her employers and waste two weeks. In fact, what the agency wanted was to punish her. It's to force you to finish your two-year contract. It's not to let you look for another employer. If the domestic worker suddenly breaks the contract, the employer will create a bad reputation for that agency, isn't it?

The interviews with Judy, Tetty, and Lonika were clear. Through the discourse "Indonesian domestic workers are getting naughtier and naughtier," a naughty maid in economic terms is categorized as one who does not complete the two-year contract and engages in job-hopping in the market, thereby making the brand name of Indonesian domestic worker less competitive than their counterparts (Filipinas). Consequently, it is legitimate for the sending country (Indonesia) and receiving region (Hong Kong) to authorize its governmental institutions (Indonesian Consulate and Hong Kong Immigration Department) to exercise surveillance over them through a set of regulatory mechanisms. These include the online lockout system, forbidding changing of

agency within two years, refusing notarization for incomplete contracts, and visa banning for job-hopping. Indeed, the above regulatory mechanisms expose two tactical assumptions: First, there is a high shortage of Indonesian domestic workers in the market and an urgent need for local women in Hong Kong to enter the workforce. As such, job-hopping has become a phobia for employers and governments and must be discouraged. Second, society generally treats Indonesian domestic employees as fixed-value commodities, including their wages and visa status, to maximize economic gain. The government, therefore, makes every effort to increase its surveillance to restrict the freedom of migrants.

6.3.3 (Un)Free Economic Subject: The Dilemma of Self as Enterprise

Foucault employs the concept of biopolitics to characterize the rationalization of governmental population management under neoliberalism and the free market (Foucault & Senellart, 2008, p. 317). In his conception, biopolitics is a “new technology of power” utilized by governments as an efficient means of totalizing the population and normalizing a capitalist society to exercise control (Foucault & Senellart, 2014, p. 24). It is also a “technique of power” that various institutions exercise within social bodies for economic purposes (Foucault, 1978, p. 141). Foucault is most concerned with how the market can self-regulate without “excessive governmentality” and how it rationally shapes individuals’ economic subjectivity (Foucault & Senellart, 2008, p. 320). I contend that the political rationale underlying the Indonesian and Hong Kong governments’ governmentality of Indonesian domestic workers resembles and extends Foucault’s critique of biopolitics concerning the neoliberal market. Hong Kong adheres to the laissez-faire capitalist economic principle, which emphasizes a free market economy (So, 1986; Yeung, 2000). In implementing its “internal rule of maximum economy” (Foucault & Senellart,

2008, p. 318), it emphasizes the generation of “human capital” to increase market competition and highly values decision-making to protect one’s freedom (Foucault & Senellart, 2008, p. 329).

Strategically, the two governments impose double standards on Indonesian domestic workers to maximize their self-interests. On the one hand, the Indonesian government is well aware that competition is the rule of the market economy. To defeat the Philippines, its citizens must develop extra human capital to obtain an image of the ideal maid among Hong Kong employers. This human capital is generated tactically in two ways: First, through recruitment agencies’ marketing strategy of constructing cultural stereotypes of Indonesian domestic workers as obedient, submissive, and naïve (Lan, 2006; Liang, 2011; Moriarty et al., 2012), accompanied by docility discipline in the training center to transform them into certified maids for export. It is noteworthy that this human capital includes a range of work skills and knowledge, such as the Cantonese language, Chinese cooking, taking care of older people and infants, and using modern household appliances and the cultural stereotypes Hong Kong employer’s desire. Second, certified maids are quality-controlled products; employers and authorities in Hong Kong desire well-behaved maids who can complete their two-year contract and not impede local women’s labor force participation. Therefore, the Indonesian government must compel its citizens to become “finished contract maids.” To encourage its citizens to self-regulate their behavior, the Indonesian government promotes the image of a successful maid sending remittance back home and to their country. In doing so, it encourages them to continuously generate new human capital, such as love for their employers’ families, sacrifice for their families, and national pride in their country. This is similar to the training center counselor in Malang preparing them for exploitation in their contracts. As the definition of an ideal maid in Hong Kong is a certified plus

finished contract maid, even though market rationality values decision-making to increase the chance of one's self-interest, the two governments limit Indonesian domestic workers' decision-making freedom through regulatory surveillance technologies. This severely denies them the freedom to select better employers in a so-called free market.

Under these Indonesian and Hong Kong governmentalities, alongside market competition, Indonesian domestic workers are compelled to continuously generate additional human capital in terms of physical and psychological resources, such as skills, knowledge, cultural stereotypes, and moral and national virtues. Consequently, Indonesian domestic workers no longer consider their labor as a "commodity" reducible to labor force and time; instead, they perceive it as "a form of enterprise" (Foucault & Senellart, 2008, pp. 224-225). According to Foucault, this type of economic subject under this governance is analogous to a "machine into which one might loop in generating an earnings stream" (Foucault & Senellart, 2008, pp. 224). As a result, Indonesian domestic workers are forced to generate new and additional human capital to match the logic of competition, even though certain human capital may go against their dignity or place them in exploitative conditions.

Nevertheless, many scholars argue that labor export creates a site for migrants' resistance to reflect the existing class, gender, and racial hierarchies (Constable, 1997; Lindio-McGovern, 2004; Rother, 2017). Market forces play an important role in shaping Indonesian domestic workers' life opportunities and are a crucial factor that enables them to subvert commodification, thus achieving liberation as a form of de-commodification. Arguably, throughout Indonesian domestic workers' migratory trajectories, they may be placed or situate themselves in different physical spaces in the global circuit. Although their bodies are embedded in Indonesian training centers and regulatory technologies continuously exercise disciplinary control over them, they

still interact with different ideologies and scenarios when moving around the global circuit. This is important for understanding migrants' resistance, in which their docile or objectified bodies are not destined or fixed. Their mind-body relationship and content changes over time and from place to place. The semiotic meaning of commodity is thus everchanging as a living subject, making their resistance possible.

6.4 Escape: Moving Beyond Subject and Object

6.4.1 (Non)Subjugated Subjects: Just how Stupid are We?

Wila, a young woman in her late twenties from Surabaya, is timid but courageous. She is a prime illustration of the antithesis of the ideal maid because her contracts were terminated twice. Wila's first contract was terminated because her employer complained about her inability to follow work-related instructions. She broke her second contract because she cared for a youngster who was bedridden and intubated due to severe disease and was terrified of managing his condition, as she remarked, "I'm a maid only. I'm not a nurse; I really don't have enough medical knowledge. But my employer told me I'm responsible for her son's life. Does she know how frightened I feel?" Both contracts were terminated in less than two months, and she incurred significant debt due to 7-month and 5-month wage fee deductions. Wila requested a change of agency since she thought the current one had placed her with problematic employers, but her agent said, "Of course, you can't." Wila then found an agent who promised to help and provide her with a fake passport in exchange for a HK\$15,000 agency fee. This agent told Wila, "Your contracts were terminated twice, and the Immigration Department has already blacklisted you; Hong Kong doesn't like job-hopping maids." Wila agreed.

Nevertheless, when Wila's new work visa finally arrived, she never imagined the agent would take her to a financial company in Central, instructing her, "You need to borrow HK\$15,000 to pay the agency fee first. Be careful with the money when you get it and bring it back to me at the agency." "I borrow money, but for the agency?" Wila questioned in her head. Wila's self-doubt acted as a powerful buffer to awaken her personal agency, leading to her engaging in creative resistance.:

My agent said, 'Follow me; walk quickly!' I didn't follow her. I fled while holding the money. I ran away and kept running until I ran into a nearby Wellcome Supermarket. I hid in there for almost two hours because I was so scared. I held the money tightly and pretended to look for products. Many times my agent called me on my cell phone and yelled, 'This is the first time a girl has done it this way!' I just thought, 'Don't think I'm that stupid [吾好以為我真係咁蠢]. If I'm still being fired. I still owe the financial company HK\$15,000. Isn't it useless? That's the way the agencies treated us! I've had enough.

Nonetheless, Wila finally sent her first remittance back home, which was only generally deserved by a successful maid. To avoid being caught in the cycle of exorbitant agency fees, Wila decided to overstay her visa and work illegally in a restaurant. As a symbol of defiance against the notion of the ideal maid, which entails being a well-behaved "yes-yes-yes" deferential object, she pierced her tongue to appear like a naughty girl declaring war, "I really wanted that tongue ring for a long time. I bought a Coca-Cola simply to numb my pain. I told myself, 'Today, I just want to make money, not waste time!'"

Wila's resistance can be understood as a "struggle" caused by the "power effects" within the web of social relations, in which her recruitment agency exercised "uncontrolled power" over her labor body (Foucault, 1983, p. 211). Foucault emphasizes that resistance is an "immediate" manner in which individuals are not targeting the "chief enemy" (i.e., social structure). Rather, they are looking for the "immediate enemy" (i.e., recruitment agencies) who exercised power

over them at that time. As Foucault (1983) states, “In such struggles people criticize instances of power which are the closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals” (1983, p. 211). Wila disobeyed the agency staff member’s request by escaping with the loan and hiding in a shop, which astonished them since recruitment agencies generally assumed that all Indonesian domestic workers would only be subject to their control. Wila’s disobedience contradicted the recruitment agency’s conception of the ideal maid. She discursively legitimized her disobedience, “Don’t think I’m that stupid.” This discourse is a form of resistance with two underlying meanings: First, Wila opposed the hegemonic discourse that portrays Indonesian domestic workers as “stupid”, which is how recruitment agencies justify their brutal treatment of migrants. Second, as a form of retaliation, this cultural stereotype allowed her to manipulate the imposed knowledge to weaken her opponent’s defense and maximize her advantage.

While working at the shelter, I was fascinated by some migrant women’s daily conversations. Although often disguised as jokes, causing the women to laugh, their conversations implied they experienced a lot of stigmatizations in society.

However, most importantly, their comical responses revealed their skills in negotiating their cultural identities. As Farah explained:

One time, Madam’s sister came to visit. They were sitting on the sofa in the sitting room as I vacuumed the floor. I heard Madam’s sister laughing at me; she said to Madam, ‘your black cat is walking around again!’ They burst into laughter. I knew this lady was talking about me; the black cat was me. I held my anger and mocked a fake warm smile; I politely said to her, ‘my name is Farah, I have a name’ [*mocking a smile with a tender voice*], and I continued to clean the floor with a relaxed face. Actually, I wanted to embarrass her. Even though my skin is dark, I am not a black cat.

When the sitting area in the shelter erupted in much sneering, Bae was eager to share her experience of similar discrimination and humiliation:

Before, I had a job interview with a Chinese employer from the agency, and she was very disrespectful. When she saw me, I noticed her eyes scanning my whole body from head to toe [*mocking eye gesture*], then her eyes drifted to my agent, and she whispered in Cantonese, ‘you better ask her to use bleach water to wash her body when bathing!’ I was very angry, but I pretended that I didn’t understand her meaning. I replied to her, acting very innocent, ‘Madam, I don’t know how to use bleach water to clean my body. Can you demonstrate this one time to me so that I can learn from you?’ [*mocking childish voice*] I knew she was sneering at my skin color, like saying, ‘I am too black and dirty.’ When she heard my words, she looked shocked and quite embarrassed.

Figure 6.6

Shelter’s Sharing Moments With Indonesian Domestic Workers



Both anecdotes of Farah and Bae share the common feature of Indonesian domestic workers being stereotyped and degraded by their employers due to their race and class. Their jokes and shaming are reminiscent of Scott’s (1985) weapons of the weak and his infrapolitics (Scott, 1990), in which he conceptualizes everyday forms of resistance used by subordinate groups to negotiate dominant-subordinate relations. Scott’s analysis of the interplay between

public and hidden transcripts resembles a further development of Foucault's concepts of dominance and resistance in power relations.

Farah and Bae, in contrast to Wila, represent a segment of Indonesian domestic workers who adhere to the normalized ideal maid, preferring to remain employed in an existing contract or relying on job referrals provided by recruitment agencies. Hence, to avoid direct threats, they tend to negotiate their situation using less overt or confrontational tactics so that their resistance does not exceed the tolerance limits of their employers and agency staff. Nonetheless, Farah and Bae's subtle forms of resistance should not be conflated with acquiescence (Chin & Mittelman, 1997; Mitchell, 1990). Instead, their activities of *infrapolitics* should be understood as a "cultural product" resulting from the interaction between subaltern agencies and social structure (Scott, 1990, p. 9), in which they negotiate their ascribed cultural identities.

In the cases of Farah and Bae, it is noteworthy that their shaming performances (such as Farah's polite response to the degrading name black cat, and Bae's acting naively by requesting her employer to demonstrate using bleach water to wash) were an attempt to embarrass their employers, thereby limiting their discriminatory actions. Even though all the actors were performing on stage, Farah and Bae's public transcripts exposed their hidden transcript. Their counter-discourses were implicitly heard, and their employers understood the message loud and clear: "Even though I am your maid of a different color from you, that does not justify me having to put up with racist remarks." Whether Indonesian domestic workers engaged in confrontational resistance, such as Sinta and Wila, or more subtle resistance, such as Farah and Bae, their resistance was not a pursuit of pleasure. In line with Foucault (1983), they were opposing the "effect of power" tied to "knowledge", which is an imposed privilege-based knowledge (p. 212), thereby individualizing their daily lives.

6.4.2 U-Turn no Regrets: Job-Hopping as a Form of Resistance

As mentioned above, most Indonesian domestic workers tend to endure ill-treatment and harsh working conditions until their contracts finish to be free of huge agency debts. However, Ajjū, a mother of a 13-year-old daughter from Lampung, intentionally chose to seduce her employer's dismissal [博抄] - a practice known as naughty maid job-hopping by saying, "I believe there must be a better employer out there." Ajjū's story is another typical example of cultural stereotyping against Indonesian domestic workers:

My Madam always insults me, 'You're so ugly! So black! So dirty. Why do you have so many pimples on your face? Why is your long hair so messy?' I asked her what she wanted for dinner; she yelled, 'Are you a maid? Why did you ask such a stupid question?' I hid in the bathroom to cry and really wanted to leave.

Ajjū's employer used a set of racist discourses to attack her work performance. Ajjū internalized this hurtful criticism of her skin color, hygiene and intelligence. However, she did not envisage that her employer would publicly shame her slow actions:

My Madam complained to my agency, 'Why does this maid do everything so slowly? She eats slowly, works slowly, and doesn't know anything. She just wastes my time.' I forced a smile and asked her, 'Mum, can you show me how to do it?' But she scolded me, 'Why are you smiling? Are you stupid?'

However, slow vs. fast is a relative concept. The concept of fast is the main feature of modern-day capitalism, highly associated with efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Ajjū's Indonesian village has very different work and living styles from Hong Kong, a city that places high emphasis on maximizing the labor force. Since Ajjū experienced hurt and anger at her employer's cultural degradation and criticism of slowness, she made use of this by skillfully turning it into a form of resistance in a comical way:

Then, the next morning, when I ate bread for breakfast, Madam stared at me angrily; she snapped, ‘I watched you eating your bread already for a long time.’ At that moment, I didn’t answer her but deliberately ate very slowly [*giggling*]. Then, she asked me to wash the pig hearts to take out the attached dirty white stuff. Again, I deliberately cleaned it very slowly; of course, Madam got very angry; she yelled at me very loudly, ‘you don’t know anything, see, I can get it done in five minutes, you, you take one hour!’ Really, I deliberately did it like that because she scolded me for everything.

Ajju’s intentional slowness provoked great anger in her employer. As her employer had higher-class status and a more powerful position, she retaliated fiercely, “Pack your things and get out!”. Many Hong Kong employers would undoubtedly perceive Ajju’s job-hopping as naughty and immoral. Nonetheless, Indonesian domestic workers are not subjugated objects; they are dissenting, rational, tactical subjects. They would manipulate situations and grasp possibilities for change (Scott, 1990). Since Hong Kong has a long-term greater demand than supply for foreign domestic workers in the market, it induced higher bargaining powers for Ajju to retaliate, thus creating the opportunity to change her oppressive situation. The decision-making of Ajju is reminiscent of Eza’s (see Chapter 4) bravery in standing up to her employer because Eza was well aware of the market’s desperate need for experienced Indonesian domestic care for older people.

Notable is that Ajju, like Wila, Farah, and Bae, cleverly manipulated the imposed cultural stereotype that she was naïve, ignorant, and submissive, which originated as a type of human capital, but now helped generate higher negotiating power or additional resources to alter power relations.

Likewise, Sumali, a 22-year-old Indonesian domestic worker from East Java, had worked for her contract employers for 18 months. Unfortunately, she did not receive any wages and was denied the right to take rest days. Sumali wanted to get her 18 months’ wages and then quit, but her employers continued to use various excuses to prevent this. Then, one day, while picking up

Muimui, her employer's eight-year-old daughter, from school, she sought assistance from an Indonesian domestic worker who taught her the trick of pretending to be crazy [扮痴線] to force her employer to terminate her contract [博抄].

I assisted Sumali in filing a case to sue her employers with the Labor Department. During the meeting, her Sir “honestly” admitted all the accusations with pride:

Ms. Chan (Labor officer), I am a 100% honest man who doesn't know how to lie. Let me tell you what happened. We did not own Sumali's 18-month salary. We are simply helping her save money. Don't you know Indonesians don't know how to manage money? I just don't want her to waste money in Hong Kong. Sumali even doesn't know how to calculate Hong Kong dollars. One time I told her to buy bread, but she returned with incorrect change. She even lost her wallet on the street. She is very careless and not that clever.

Ms. Chan frowned and asked, “So, how about Sumali's rest day?” Sumali's Madam could not wait to interrupt:

Talking about rest day, I could die; I'm so mad at her! On her first day off, I told Sumali to go back to her agency, and I was generous enough to make her a map. So, do you know what happened? She went back home and said she didn't know how to get back to her agency because she didn't know the streets in Hong Kong. I'm very worried about her because she doesn't speak Cantonese well and doesn't understand English well enough. I'm afraid she might get hurt outside, so how can I let her go out by herself?

After a brief pause, Sumali's Madam continued her complaints:

I also thought there was something wrong with her work attitude and even with who she was as a person. She put bread in a plastic bag and put it in the microwave [*widened her eyes*]. She even used scissors to open a can. Once, she almost set my kitchen on fire. Is she a lot of trouble? She always broke dishes with a loud bang, bang, bang, and she never did what I told her to do. One more thing [*glared angrily at Sumali and yelled*]: ‘Don't think I wouldn't know; you always steal my red jujube and eat it in the toilet, right?’ Ms. Chan, you can see that Sumali's behavior is very bad and that she really needs to improve. So, I told her she had to study at home and couldn't go out on her day off until she got better. I didn't force her to agree. She did, as you can see from this letter of consent she signed.

Sumali was racially stereotyped as typical third-world women, uncivilized, passive, ignorant and naïve, in need of rescuing, education and monitoring. Sumali's employers adopted this social construct to legitimize their exploitation. Indeed, they cleverly reduced her to an uncivilized, stupid maid from the Third World who required their supervision and protection. Examples include: not paying her salary while excusing her of being unable to calculate money, refusing to grant her rest days while excusing her of being vulnerable to getting lost and forcing her to undergo retraining during rest days while excusing her of being uncivilized due to putting a plastic bread cover in the microwave. Employers can legitimize their control and surveillance over Indonesian domestic workers by reducing to and stereotyping them as women from the Third World. However, Indonesian domestic workers are not as passive as the public portrays. In Sumali's case, she eventually succeeded in instilling fear in her employers by deftly using their racial stereotype construction of her. This resulted in her winning the labor case she had with them. Sumali's resistance appeared to be productive, creative, and somewhat hilarious on the surface, but her marginal experience revealed the impact domination had on a migrant:

At first, because my Madam didn't give me breakfast. When I woke up one morning with a little cough, I ate my employer's loquat paste [枇杷膏].⁵⁵ I took a bite and thought, 'Oh, it's sweet, and it can fill my stomach.' I couldn't help but finish the whole bottle at once because I was so hungry. I felt a little bit high after taking this medicine, and I felt so good. So, the following two days, I did it again. I ran out of loquat paste at home, so I ate peanut butter with a spoon, taking a bite and then another. I didn't think my Madam saw what I did on the CCTV. She told the Indonesian maid who lives next door to us, 'My maid is crazy; she thought she was eating ice cream.'

Sumali's employer noticed her strange behavior and labeled her crazy. However, Sumali's initial incentive was simple, staving off hunger as her basic human need was not fulfilled. Long-term

⁵⁵ Loquat paste is a well-known brand name of traditional Chinese herbal treatment for sore throats, coughs, and nausea.

deprivation can destroy the self-dignity of a maid and any human being, especially since she did not want to be forced to eat pork. Sumali wanted to return to Indonesia, but most importantly, she wanted her 18 months' salary returned.

Then one morning, when Sumali took Muimui to school, she spoke to one of the Indonesian maids and told her what her Madam did. She immediately suggested, “you can pretend you’re crazy in front of the CCTV because your employer has already regarded you as crazy.” This advice awoke Sumali:

I’m thinking, ‘Perhaps if I am crazy, my employer will fire me!’ Then, I used a spoon to eat the dry milk powder in front of the CCTV, just like I was eating ice cream. Then, I deliberately lay on the floor, suddenly cried, and then suddenly laughed, but my real tears really came out with nose runs [*sobbing, shaking voice*]. I acted like I was crazy and repeated, ‘I am so tired. I don’t want to do anything.’ Then, I slept on the floor until my employer came back at midnight.

Figure 6.7

Sumali Eventually Received the 18-months of Unpaid Wages



From the outset, it appeared ridiculous that a domestic helper needed to use this form of resistance, pretending to be crazy to receive her labor entitlement. Sumali used craziness as her public transcript to threaten her employers, and her employers used CCTV as surveillance to make her submissive. However, Sumali skillfully used this CCTV as ammunition to record her eating milk powder, talking to herself and sleeping on the floor to make her employers think she was crazy. She intended to frighten her employers into terminating her contract and paying her 18 months' salary. In this case, no party knew the other's whole and authentic public transcript, as both were equal players in the performance. However, more importantly, if Sumali's employers had not viewed her as a stupid, uncivilized, naïve maid, she would not have pretended to be crazy. Indeed, Sumali was very skillful in manipulating such cultural misrepresentations. Her employers accused her of intentionally acting crazy to seduce dismissal during a meeting with the Labour Department, yet this should be viewed as a powerful form of resistance; indeed, it is a collective public transcript of Indonesian domestic workers. Thus, the focus should be on how this form of resistance becomes possible in Hong Kong.

6.4.3 Refusal of a Commodified Form of Individuality

Indonesian domestic workers who job-hop are generally viewed as naughty and defiant. However, the public rarely examines why they deviate from the normalizing and totalizing notion of the ideal maid, instead pressing them to complete their two-year contracts while ignoring their exploitation. This mirrors Foucault's critique of liberalist market rationality, in which individuals tend to maximize their self-interest in the so-called free market (Foucault & Senellart, 2008). Yet hypocritically, they utilize external force to restrict the decision-making options of Indonesian domestic workers.

Nonetheless, Indonesian domestic workers are not merely commodities, enslaved people, or victims of human trafficking in need of rescue. Rather, even when their bodies are disciplined as docile or commodified as ideal domestic workers for sale in the domestic servitude global market, they are not passive, vulnerable objects situated in western victimhood discourse. For example, once Indonesian domestic workers' dignity is violated, they display immediate resistance. This is evident in Sinta slapping her employer's face, Farah and Bae's jokes about embarrassing their employers, and Aju and Sumali's job-hopping by acting stupid to create new opportunities in the market. Indeed, their "refusal" is a rejection of a commodified form of individuality that has been imposed upon them, and this refusal plays an important role in their establishment of "new forms of subjectivity" (Foucault, 1983, p. 216). As a result of their bodies as commodities passing through different global circuits, including Indonesian training centers, employers' houses and the Hong Kong market, Indonesian domestic workers were prompted to ponder the definition of the ideal maid. Is the ideal maid defined by how well they behave as a docile body with a finished contract, regardless of how exploitative their contract is? Is it unquestionable that the ideal maid formula equals a certified plus successful maid? Can they fight for a more dominant position through discursive penetration?

Most Indonesian domestic workers are not ardent activists who can effectively communicate their political stance. However, statements like Sinta's "Don't think I'm a maid and you can hit me," Wila's "Don't think I'm that stupid," Aju's "I believe there must be a better employer out there," and Farah and Bae's jokes criticizing the racist language "black cat" and "bleach water," discursively convey a strong message of disagreement with the hegemonic discourses that portray how they should behave.

By disrupting the cultural misrepresentation imposed on them, Indonesian domestic workers unwittingly resist dichotomous labor categorizations that limit them as well-behaved or naughty maids. These Indonesians destabilize the fixed notion of the ideal maid and display neither submissiveness nor defiance. Instead, based on market constraints and opportunities, they define and transform the semiotic meaning of Indonesian domestic workers as commodities, thereby jeopardizing the normalized totalizing categorical boundary markers pertaining to economic migrant subjects. Although job-hopping is an example of such change from objects to subjects, it may be temporal due to market change. Indonesian domestic workers nevertheless transgress, subvert, disturb or rebel when faced with oppressive constraints. They negotiate or make use of being commodified to subvert their commodification in the changing market.

Chapter Seven

Sexual Transgression: Patriarchy within and across a Patriarchy

I don't blame myself for - this - [assertive tone]. When I first arrived in Hong Kong, I behaved with a very good attitude. With no holiday, I kept myself. But after I had a holiday, I was 'free', so this is my world [eyes sparkled]! I want to try new things. I don't just want to sit in the park with other Indonesian girls. I also don't want to pray together like what other Muslims do. I want to have fun, like going to discos or clubs in Wan Chai; for dancing, drinking or smoking. The first time I went there, I didn't do anything but only watched them [Indonesian girls in discos], then I said to myself, 'I want to follow! I want to forget my troubles, just have fun, no sadness, not like, 'Ah! I have to be a good girl.' I really wanted to try this one - 'the wrong side' - Yeah! I can feel that! I can feel that! I'm no longer a good girl anymore; I'm no longer who I was supposed to be. I'm changing from quite a good girl to a wild girl [took a deep breath]. I know my freedom really gives me a lot of trouble, a big lesson, but I'm human; I've desires. I can't control my body; I can't control my mind. Because I'm broken, I've already been bored with my life, bored for many years...

(Harum, aged 28, last interview before returning home)

7.1 Liminality: A Signifier of Diaspora Journeys

Official statistics rarely capture the age distribution and marital status of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, tailor-made data from the Census and Statistics Department (CSD), designated by the Legislative Council Secretariat (2017), showed that almost 99% of foreign domestic workers were female, with the majority being young women aged 24-34 years (41%) and 35-44 years (39%).⁵⁶ However, this report narrowly focused on the socioeconomic benefits for local families with foreign domestic workers and did not mention the marital status of Indonesian domestic workers. Similarly, it was roughly estimated by the Indonesian national agency BNP2TKI that over 50% of Indonesian domestic workers were married, with 96% being the major wage earners in families dependent on their remittance (Palmer, 2019, p. 6).⁵⁷ Age accuracy is not the core concern here; what matters is that both the receiving and sending states depict Indonesian domestic workers as an economic body, “an instrument of production”, and unduly extract their surplus labor (Constable, 2014, p. 17). Harum is an Indonesian domestic worker who falls into the average age range of 24-34. Like many others, she is a daughter, a wife, and a mother in Indonesia who came to Hong Kong for financial reasons. Yet, she rejected the reducible and disguised framing of “foreign exchange heroes”. She moved beyond her bounded labor body and sought pleasure by practicing the sexual transgression of one-night stands with different men. Even when she eventually became pregnant

⁵⁶ A more comprehensive demographic profile of Indonesian domestic workers was conducted by grassroots organizations, including the Asian Migrant Centre et al. (2007). They reported that the majority age of Indonesian domestic workers was 20-29 (53.74%), with an average age of 27, which is similar to the CSD statistic that the median age of foreign domestic workers was 30 in 1995. However, the CSD indicated that the median age had increased to 35 in 2016 (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2017). Without equivalent reports from grassroots organizations to substantiate this finding, the accuracy of Indonesian domestic workers’ age distribution is questionable.

⁵⁷ Palmer (2019) noted that Indonesian domestic workers’ passports always contain “false” personal information due to manipulation by recruitment agencies. Therefore, the exact percentage of those who are married is also uncertain.

by an African asylum seeker married to a Hong Kong woman, she had no regrets. She emphasized that she is a “desiring subject”⁵⁸ and was bored with her life *for many years*.

Harum’s sexual transgression in her diasporic journey was typical of Indonesian domestic workers: as an Indonesian woman, her body was embedded with idealized feminine morality from state ideology. The recruitment agency and training center disciplined her body as an ideal docile, obedient, and submissive labor body, crafted into an overseas domestic worker for commodification. Nevertheless, many scholars argue that migrants’ diaspora journeys create opportunities and possibilities for them to reflect, challenge, and navigate cultural categories, constraining boundaries, and patriarchal gendered values within and across such discrepant and liminal time and space (see Constable, 2014; Johnson & Werbner, 2010; Lai, 2018; Platt et al., 2018; Sim, 2007, 2010). Sim (2007) maintains, “In labor migration, physical distance from home and financial independence has the effect of destabilizing previously unquestioned arena of power, definitions of symbolic boundaries, and social and moral codes that govern behavior (p. 46).” With geographical distance and a diverse cultural landscape, Indonesian domestic workers tend to experience less familial, cultural and religious surveillance. This makes them possible to enjoy a greater extent of freedom to explore more fluid sexual identities, engage openly in varied sexual adventures, and self-evaluate the gender constraints derived from patriarchal ideology in their home country. Kristiyana, a keen girl from Jakarta in her late twenties, reflected on her five-year stay in Hong Kong:

My life is totally different! I mean, my identity as a female [*smiled proudly*]. Before I came here, I felt my body was rubbish. Because of my family, but that’s not all; I think it might be my religion or something else. I’m holding my past in silence. At age 20, the other girls were ‘normal’, but I wasn’t. I really also want to experience things like falling into sex, falling in love, or even feeling hurt. I only imagined...but now, I can even wear

⁵⁸ The notion of “desiring subject” refers to Foucault’s discussion of ethics, which inextricably connects “transgression” with “biopower” (see Bernauer & Mahon, 2005).

a bikini like a model or something [*voice rose in excitement*]. I feel like I'm not 'dirty' anymore, and I think I'm more beautiful than I was in my twenties.⁵⁹

Figure 7.1

Kristiyana's Sexy Photos in Hong Kong



With the opportunity of migratory mobility, many, like Harum and Kristiyana, created alternative spaces for exploring their desires. For example, during her days off work, Harum decided to try the “wrong side” by drinking, smoking and engaging in casual sex, which is viewed as going against the normative feminine morality in her hometown. She refused to be a “good girl”, instead framing herself as a “wild girl” as being locked in boredom for many years drove her to cross the limit. Whereas for Kristiyana, simply having pleasure on days off was insufficient, therefore she chose to overstay her visa:

⁵⁹ All photographs of participants included in this chapter are obtained with their permission. Even though all agreed to reveal their genuine identities, I chose to be cautious and blur their faces to protect their privacy.

Working as a domestic worker is so boring; I'm bored at home and don't want to be locked into being a domestic helper. I want to go to Wan Chai to enjoy, to experience the nightlife.

Kristiyana refused to allow her body to be limited to productive labor as required by her employers. Instead, she wanted to flee and succeeded (Anderson, 2000). Even though she was ultimately sentenced to three months in jail for "breach of condition of stay", like Harum, she had no regrets. On the contrary, she asserted, "I'm ready for that."

Migrant women experience what Foucault calls "the impossible" and "to recognize itself for the first time" when they exceed their limit (Foucault, 1977a, pp. 32-34). Even though they seemingly enjoyed moments of freedom, repeatedly crossing the boundaries intentionally or unintentionally shook the original assumptions that resonated with the patriarchal values of Indonesia. Indeed, they disagreed with the categorization of "good women" vs. "bad women" and "behaved maid" vs. "naughty maid". Sun (2022) argues that migrant workers' sexual transgression, in which they contend with hegemonic and normative discourses, should be positioned and understood historically and culturally in the terrain of cultural politics. In her view, transgression, according to Foucault, is the process by which migrants realize their subjectification through the construction and deconstruction of discourses.⁶⁰

This chapter concerns the moral contradiction between the patriarchal forces exercised by the sending and receiving governments and the Indonesian domestic workers' rejection of patriarchal ideology towards sexual transgression. It examines how Indonesian domestic workers' sexual transgressions conflict with the state's idealized feminine morality and how they

⁶⁰ Relating to migrants' morality and cultural politics, see Sun's other two works: "Maid in China media, morality, and the cultural politics of boundaries" (2010) and "Romancing the vulnerable in contemporary China: Love on the assembly line and the cultural politics of inequality" (2018).

construct their discursive counter-discourses that manifest in their everyday lives. The following key questions demonstrate the two-sided nature of cultural politics: How does the Indonesian New Order create discourses that shape the gendered morality of Indonesian domestic workers as they migrate? How does Hong Kong society portray Indonesian domestic workers' sexual transgressions, in turn reinforcing the stereotypes that the hegemonic discourse portrays? What counter-discourses do Indonesian domestic workers employ to defend and legitimate their sexual decisions and transgression? Can Indonesian domestic workers emerge with new forms of subjectivity, thereby shaking patriarchal presumptions?

7.2 Shame Unveiled: Diah, her Father, and the Village Head

I first met Diah, a 24-year-old from Semarang in Central Java, in 2014. One Indonesian domestic worker requested my assistance because Diah had fled a western organization. Diah is a confident, thoughtful girl. She was three months pregnant. She complained that an Indonesian staff member deemed her “unqualified” to be a mother because she yearned to marry a Hong Kong man and claimed that her partner cheated on her because he is 30 years older. Diah was also accused of not using proper contraception and of not knowing how to make a good plan for the future. Diah mocked the staff member's unempathetic tone:

She [*the Indonesian staff member*] asked me, ‘do you always fool with the men?’ I answered, ‘no, never.’ She spoke angrily, ‘I don’t believe you!’ She didn’t trust me at all. One time, she asked me when I’d had sex with my boyfriend, and I said, ‘yesterday’. She asked, ‘did he use a condom?’ I answered, ‘yes!’ She immediately asked me to go to the toilet to do the pregnancy test. I thought to myself, ‘How can I get pregnant in just one day [*rolled her eyes*]?’ She then forced me to take pills [*emergency contraception*] even though I rejected them. And this time, I inquired about the legal matter regarding giving birth to my baby in Hong Kong. She said, ‘I know everything about Hong Kong, and you know nothing; you must listen to me.’ So, what can I do? She always ‘controls’ me [*raised emotional voice*].

Diah revealed that she lost her virginity to this 56-year-old man. She also said he had a wife in China, but they were no longer in love. Diah denied being cheated on and was conscious of her decision. She was only disappointed by the intransigence of the Indonesian staff member:

I don't care about age. I love someone older than me. I really love him. I still remember that I had feelings for him from the first time at Ocean Park. He cared so much about me. He not only helped me carry my heavy water bottle, but he also lined up in the queue for me. When I was sick and dizzy after the amusement rides, he even opened his backpack so that I could throw up. It's so hard to find a man like that. It seems like no matter what happens, he is always there to help me [*smiled sweetly*].

This man decided to divorce his wife after Diah gave birth to their child in Hong Kong and planned to marry Diah. However, obtaining the final divorce decree took some time.⁶¹

Unfortunately, Diah's domestic worker visa was about to expire, and the Hong Kong Immigration Department refused to renew it. Therefore, I accompanied her to try to renew her visa at the Immigration Office, hoping they would give her discretion after hearing our justification. Nonetheless, when the Immigration officer learned that Diah was planning to marry a Hong Kong man going through a divorce due to their extramarital affair, he frowned, glared and said, "This is a social problem, and you as a social worker should handle it, not Immigration!" Without other options, Diah returned to Indonesia with her baby for a short vacation. Before she returned home, she notified her father of the situation and obtained his permission. Unfortunately, her sexual transgression in Hong Kong resulted in a "moral problem" in Indonesia, demonstrating how patriarchal ideology is deeply embedded in Indonesian society. Diah snorted:

⁶¹ According to Hong Kong's Matrimonial Causes Ordinance, if the petitioner and his/her spouse "have lived apart for a continuous period of at least 1 year before filing the petition and that he/she agrees to a divorce", the case can be concluded sooner. If not, it will take "at least two years". See https://www.judiciary.hk/en/court_services_facilities/divorce.html#

After I returned home, my neighbors began spreading rumors about me; they said, 'I'm a prostitute who isn't married but has a baby.' When my father heard it, he got very angry and scolded me, 'In this village, we don't have prostitutes like you!' I told him over and over, 'I'm not a prostitute, and we'll get married later.' But he didn't listen. Instead, he kicked me hard and yelled, 'If you're not married and having sex with a man, that makes you a prostitute! Don't make this village dirty. You make me lose face; it's like you threw feces in my face!' Without saying anything more, he slammed a chair into my face, and the chair legs hit my head. [*burst into tears*]

Diah argued that she had done nothing wrong, "This house was bought with my money! I can stay here!" This provoked her father's shame and anger, "Do you want the neighbors to use black magic and inject you with a needle in your head?" Diah wiped away a tear and hysterically confronted her father:

Are all of you Muslim? Do good Muslims act like that? You said that they would use the needle to do black magic on me and kill me? Why do they still keep borrowing money from me? Did I do something wrong? The worst out of all the evil things?

Diah's premarital sexual transgression was not only condemned by her father but also by the whole village:

The village Head said, 'you're dirty.' He compelled me to leave the village. But he already had my money! Why doesn't he help but instead gives me trouble [*high-pitched voice*]? I fought back. I told him, 'I don't think the boys and girls here don't have sex before they get married. See, many of the girls here only wear short pants, and the boys hang out in front of the houses; it's hard not to have sex! The girls have seen a lot of love movies on TV, so they know that sex is very common.' The old villagers here are so dumb!

The village Head continued to condemn Diah's deviant behavior, asking, "How dare you say such a stupid thing? Are you crazy?" Diah insisted she was not shameful. In turn, she counter-blamed the village Head's shamelessness in failing to manage the village:

What am I doing wrong? Am I stealing the children of my neighbors? My neighbors always complained their chickens were stolen. Why don't you and the other people here catch the chicken thief instead of scolding me I shouldn't have a baby [*assertive tone*]?

For Diah, like Eza, Harum, and Kristiyana, the labor-exporting system in Indonesia provides her with the means and creates aspiration for her to access modernity through domestic servitude, thereby generating remittances to contribute to the country. Diah's anecdote about gendered morality exemplifies the ambivalence toward migrant women's sexual autonomy and freedom that underpins transnational mobility. She returned home amidst negative stigmas, such as having lost her virginity before marriage, being pregnant, and being a home wrecker who stole another woman's husband, which is far from the moral virtue of a good woman (Constable, 2014). Diah's moral decay linked to migrant women's mobility and modernity induced moral panic in the patriarchal society and patriarchal family, which caused tension and shame for her father (Platt, 2018). Indonesia's gendered ideology bounds her father's shame. In accordance with Indonesian cultural norms, one of the significant roles of a father is acting as a "moral guardian" to provide his daughter with proper moral guidance in performing idealized feminine morality. For example, Eza's father gave nightly lectures to teach her what a good woman does and does not (see Chapter 4) (Bowen, 1998; Lai, 2018; Lim & Paul, 2021; Lindquist, 2010). Otherwise, when a girl violates moral norms, her reputation suffers, as does her father's (Lai, 2018). Therefore, it was not surprising that Diah's father violently expelled her from the village. At the outset, it appeared like the neighbors' rumors provoked his anger, but deep down, it was his shame.

Nonetheless, Diah concluded in her confrontation with her father and the village Head that she was morally blameless for her sexual decision. She scrutinized herself as a desiring subject from her migration mobility and provided three interconnected arguments linked to bigger structural and political terrains to justify her defiance against the village's normative morality. First, Diah regarded gaining sexual autonomy through modernity as a concession under

the state developmental agenda. In her opinion, regardless of whether modernity brings aspirations or risks to women (Mills, 2016), the Indonesian government should face the clashes and consequences of gender morality between modernity and tradition (Lukens-Bull, 2005; Sen & Stivens, 1998). This is supported by Diah's observation of young Indonesian children's clothes and flirtatious behavior in her village. Indeed, she condemned the villagers' backward ideology because the traditional chastity virtue no longer applies to the current generation. Second, Diah rejected the labeling of her sexually transgressive behavior as a problem, sin or offense. Instead, she deftly challenged her father about the Islamic virtue of a good Muslim and questioned why her violation of chastity merited death by traditional witchcraft. She even employed the analogy of a chicken thief to vilify the village Head for unfairly over-magnifying her sexual behavior and his failure to safeguard the village. Third, Diah contended that her Indonesian domestic worker identity should be morally uncommendable due to her economic contributions to her family, village, and country. Her argument echoed what led to Erwiana's shame (see Chapters 1 and 6) and Citra's pride (see Chapter 6) upon returning home, as "materialistic return" (i.e., money) is the measure of Indonesian domestic workers' success. Therefore, it is unethical and wrong to blame her and demean her as a prostitute. Instead, her father, neighbors, and the village Head should feel shameful for receiving her money and then expelling her from the village.

Diah's disagreement shows that Indonesian domestic workers are subjects of desires, which resonates with the same moral framings of Eza, Harum, Kristiyanak, and many others. Her transgression and reckoning with her shameful father and the village Head's judgment can be viewed as powerful resistance to cultural politics and the technique of "technologies of the self" in the subjectification process. Thus, Diah's negotiation aligns with Foucault's notion of

“experience”. Foucault situates his notion of experience on a discursive genealogical analysis of one’s formation as a subject (Foucault, 1987). Not only does Diah’s sexual transgression give her pleasure, but the pleasure itself is a force, a buffer, and a form of power that enables her to continue fighting in the mechanics of power (Foucault, 1980a). By crossing the line of the normative discourses of femininity to which she had been historically subjected, Diah identifies her “excluder”, the patriarchal dominance that disciplines and constrains her, and continues to interplay dialectically with this “truths of game” indefinitely (Foucault, 1977a, 1987).

7.3 Making Sexuality Invisible: State Morality of Absolute Chastity

As usual, on a Saturday, I conducted outreach in Kowloon Park, where many Indonesian domestic workers spend their days off and where the most notable and sizable Islamic Mosque in Hong Kong is located. Usually, Indonesian domestic worker volunteers accompanied me to raise awareness of labor rights and provide mutual help; they occasionally helped me with Bahasa translation. I was with Kemala that day; she had worked in Hong Kong for over four years. She is a native of Kalimantan and a mother of two children. As we strolled around the park, I overheard a male Muslim leader speak to a group of Indonesian domestic workers with a howl. His shouting caused many of the women to sob bitterly. With curiosity, I asked Kemal, “why are the women crying? What exactly did the man say?” Kemala initially had no idea what had happened; she offered me a relaxed smile and motioned me to sit on a bench behind them. However, unexpectedly, when she heard the speech, she simultaneously started crying and remarked to me:

The man [*Muslim leader*] just asked the girls, ‘Do you still remember your families? Are you really missing them? How recently did you last phone your families? Or perhaps you’re now acting like the boss speaking to them in a commanding manner?’

Figure 7.2

Male Muslim Leader Speaks to a Group of Indonesian Domestic Workers, Moving them and Kemala to Tears



The significance of “religious spatiality” in receiving states outside of Indonesia is not only a space for migrant workers to perform religious rituals and congregate believers but also an extension of familial and cultural surveillance from their home country (Constable 2019;

Johnson & Werbner, 2010; Yu, 2009). Through religious teachings in mosques, churches, or religious locations, it effectively functions as a role in disseminating and reproducing the normative moral discourses from the state (Johnson & Werbner, 2010). Even though migrant women's sexual moral norms are prone to loosen overseas, these religious places use institutional power to confirm and preserve the state's feminine and patriarchal ideas. In other words, Indonesian domestic workers are subjected to publicly upholding state morals in these institutional networks to comply with their utility (Lim & Paul, 2021).

Kemala's tears resonated with other Indonesian domestic workers' collective moral confessions in Kowloon Park. They highlighted the ambivalent and contradictory viewpoint of women's roles in labor migration promoted in the Indonesian New Order government rhetoric, in which the state constructs women as remittance heroes while also enclosing them within the patriarchal moral framing of "idealized femininity". "Do not go over the limit, even if you are the breadwinner in the family" was the implied message that the Muslim leader was preaching to the women. In one interview, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) admitted his shame at sending millions of Indonesian domestic workers abroad to work, "[*Indonesian domestic workers*] doing menial chores abroad undermines Indonesian 'pride' and 'dignity'." Jokowi commanded the manpower minister to provide a precise timetable for suspending Indonesian domestic workers for export (*The Jakarta Post*, 14 February 2015). Jokowi is conscious of the state's need for women's foreign exchange for development and is aware that his statements look unattainable. To effectively manage the female population, the state does not use the Suharto regime's New Order nor coercive regulating policies to impose on the labor migration system to maintain a developmentalist social order and prevent women's moral decline. Rather, the state constructs women in two distinct roles in the name of developmentalism and protectionism, invoking

women's national pride to hide the nation's shame and advance an idealized normative femininity to discipline their bodies.

Indeed, Virda, a single mother of three from Jakarta, expressed her regrets about her unexpected lesbian sexual relationship while receiving a massage from Wangi [tomboy], "when she [*Wangi*] touched me, I got a kind of feeling, at first, I just let her kiss my lips, I told her, 'We're sisters', but then, we had this [*sex*], and my love for her grew stronger, I'm so confused." Without giving it much thought, Virda's mother questioned their relationship after discovering Wangi's masculine appearance on Virda's Facebook page. Due to rumors spread by her neighbors following Virda's Facebook post, Virda decided to return home to avoid Wangi. Virda yelled at Wangi when they broke up:

God [*Allah*] has given us a job and money here; watch what we're doing now. HE will be furious with us. I don't want to be with you anymore, and I don't want to play this gay game with you. As a single mother, my purpose for being here is to get money for my kids, not to play.

Sinta (see Chapter 6) lost her virginity to a Hong Kong man while her criminal case was being heard. For financial survival, Sinta was performing illegal work cleaning dishes at a restaurant. Serendipitously, she was falling in love with the chef. Sinta once sheepishly told me, "He wants to sleep with me, but I stopped him. I told him I'm a Muslim; my virginity must be given to my husband." I joked with Sinta, "Let's see what happens next month." Sinta hit my arm in jest, but I could feel how sweet she was. Unfortunately, three months later, I received a text message from Sinta:

Cece, help me! He has another woman, he betrayed my love, my heart is so broken, so disappointed, can you call him and tell him not to play with my love, tell him not to ring me anymore, does he not know how pained my heart is?

I tried to telephone Sinta, but her telephone line was disconnected, leading me to believe she had already left for Indonesia. Then, a year after reading this depressing message, Sinta unexpectedly called me one day and explained her disappearance:

I didn't go home. I don't know how to face myself and my parents. I gave my first time [virginity] to him, but see, how foolish I am, right? Now, I have decided to make more money to assist my family in establishing a laundry shop in Jakarta because people in Jakarta have gotten rich, but they have become lazy and do not want to wash their clothes. So, I think this is how I can compensate for my fault.

Figure 7.3

SMS Texts from Sinta (Translated into Chinese using the Internet)



“Limit” is signified by discourse, whereas discourse is created by language. As Foucault states, through language, it has been “denatured” (Foucault, 1977a, p. 29). Through the state’s discourse, which derives from state rhetoric, familial customs, religious teachings, and the women themselves, language is disseminated and propagated. Thus, migrant women self-discipline and reproduce the denatured discourses. The narratives offered by Virda and Sinta

mirror the aspiration and frustration in Asian modernity that underpins women's labor migration (Platt, 2018). Virda and Sinta are unfortunate examples of the precarious consequences of moral threat and modernity used as a moral teaching illustration by the state, which is opposed by Diah, Harum, and Kristiyana, who aspire sexual autonomy and intimacy. Migration causes moral anxiety over the nation's declining moral virtue of the idealized feminine, which goes against its principles of gender normativity. Therefore, the state introduces a moral discourse of "absolute chastity" to inform women's labor mobility and limit migrant women's sexual autonomy and desire. This idea seeks to eradicate women's sexuality and desire to prevent Indonesian domestic workers from engaging in transgressive and deviant sexual behaviors outside their country of origin (Paul & Neo, 2017). Virda's deviant sexual behavior of engaging in a lesbian relationship and Sinta's loss of virginity demonstrate the contested gendered notions of being a desiring subject and a chaste woman, revealing competing and conflicting ideologies of women's roles in the Indonesian state's developmentalist plan. Virda's decision to return to Indonesia and Sinta's decision to remain in Hong Kong simultaneously shows how migrant women often internalize and reproduce the binary discourses, good and bad, associated with feminine morality in their daily lives, either through self-discipline or self-correction.

The clear message is regardless of how happy their lives abroad are or how much money they make, they must remember that they are there for economic materiality and cannot overstep the mark set by the state's patriarchal feminine ideology. For instance, Virda's confession of guilt, "earning money is for my children's sake", and Sinta's compensation for guilt, "earning more money is for my parents' sake." Through the state, women are indoctrinated with the ideological concept of sacrifice, which emphasizes "being-for-others rather than being-as-self" (Tiwon 1966, p. 55, as cited in Blackwood, 2010, p. 43). This also connotes a sense of

abandoning their “personal life” (Lim & Paul, 2021, p. 28) to make them act as good women in the nation. Concurrently, with the collaboration of the servitude market, recruitment agencies and the receiving state further package migrant women as “well-behaved maids” abroad.

7.4 Moral Threat: Receiving State’s Stigmatization

Scoop [東張西望] is one of the most popular television programs in Hong Kong, broadcast every evening by Television Broadcasts Limited. On March 16, 2020, while I was writing my thesis, I was drawn to its featured story, *Call Girl: The Secret Diary of Foreign Domestic Workers* [外傭賣淫實錄]. The production team dispatched a spy to lure a 37-year-old Indonesian domestic worker named Ari into performing sex services in exchange for HK\$500 on a dating app. The program hosts used derogatory language to sneer at Ari, judging her appearance as very different from the dating app photograph. In actuality, she was a short chubby woman, while the dating app photograph depicted her as tall and slim. When the spy asked Ari why she became a prostitute, she defended her decision to sell sex, stating she is a single mother who needs money to pay for her daughter’s schooling; she added, “never mind, I don’t have a husband.” At the program’s conclusion, the hosts invited a lawyer to discuss the relevant legal sanctions, a representative from a support group for Hong Kong employers who employ foreign domestic workers to provide handling advice, and a recruitment agency representative to present indicators for checking maids (see *HK01*, 2020). With the rippling effect following the broadcast of this sensational story, many employers expressed their worries on parenting discussion forums (see *TOPick*, 2020). They used phrases like, “unbelievable, can’t imagine they will do that!” and “the problem has existed for a long time; some domestic workers

will even take advantage of their employers and lay on employer's big bed to take sexy photos". Others said, "I saw some openly let the old men touch their thighs in the parks" and "Just one minute after flirting with the foreigners in Central, they left together." After reading these sharings in discussion forums, some mothers expressed that they have been too frightened to hire foreign domestic workers.

Indeed, prostitution is only one example of the discursive narratives that local mass media uses to construct foreign domestic workers. Other forms of sexual transgressive practices like same-sex relationships, extra-marital affairs, unwanted pregnancy, casual sex, cybersex, and sexual perversion are often highlighted and negatively stigmatized by public discourses. Therefore, it is common to observe recurring themes in discussion threads that have emerged from online discussion forums. For example, some employers were concerned having tomboy Indonesian domestic workers in their houses would have a negative impact on their children (see *Baby Kingdom*, 2009), some female employers sought help after their Indonesian domestic workers had stolen their husbands (see *Baby Kingdom*, 2010), some expressed shock after learning that Indonesian domestic workers had aborted children while working for them (see *Baby Kingdom*, 2012), and some were curious about how foreign domestic workers addressed their sexual needs (see *LIHKG*, 2017). Indeed, the public is led to believe these socially legitimate "truths" through popular newspapers' exaggerated headlines about the sexual acts of Indonesian domestic workers, such as "Wan Chai Becomes Prostitution Hotspot for Indonesian Domestic Workers, Where Pure Sisters Change into Sexy Outfits to Seduce Foreigners [灣仔變印傭賣淫性地, 樸素姊妹花換裝兜搭外籍男]" (*Apple Daily*, 2014d), "Indonesian Maid Aborted Baby in House, Dead Infant Found in Backpack by Employer [印傭家中墮胎, 僱主搜背囊檢屍]" (*Mingpao*, 2012a), "Maids Pull Pranks on Madam: Demand Money, Own debt, and

Seduce Married Men [外傭玩殘女僱主-索錢欠債勾人夫]” (*Apple Daily*, 2019), “How Daring of a Horny Indonesian Maid: Took 40-year-old Man to Employer’s House to do the Naughty-Naughty Thing [急色印尼外傭好大膽, 帶 40 多歲香港男人回家入埋主人房曳曳]” (*Next Magazine*, 2019), “Maid is Naughty-Naughty, Frequently Sexually Assaulted Little Ward [姐姐曳曳, 小主人屢受性侵]” (*Oriental Daily*, 2008).

Hong Kong society frequently uses the Cantonese connotation “曳” to depict the non-conforming behaviors of Indonesian domestic workers. The Cantonese word “曳” means naughty and is typically used to denote a child’s disobedient behavior (Cantonese allusion [粵典], 2022)⁶² and can be extended to a sex metaphor to stigmatize certain groups of people’s socially unacceptable behaviors. Thus, influencing public perception (Tsang, 2009). This paternalistic ideology is couched within the discourse of Indonesian domestic workers’ sexual transgression, binarily dividing them into the “well-behaved” and “naughty” and legitimizing employers’ disciplinary power to keep them under their watchful eye. This good vs. bad dichotomy disregards Indonesian domestic workers’ temporal, spatial, cultural, and socioeconomic circumstances and marginalizes them as discriminatory and xenophobic targets (Cheng, 1996; Lee, 2021; Ullah et al., 2020). It also diminishes any form of migrant women’s sexual and erotic desire. Once they engage in any sexual activity, they are morally condemned or disciplined because most employers view them as labor commodities with no right to recognize their sexual bodies. For instance, Eza’s (see Chapter 4) Catholic nun employer followed her

⁶² Naughty [曳] (2022, July 11). In Cantonese allusion [粵典]. <https://words.hk/zidin/%E6%9B%B3>

because she suspected her of dating her boyfriend during her holiday. Sari, a 26-year-old engaged in a romantic relationship with an Indian man, also recounted her terrifying experience:

My madam said to me, ‘you Indonesians come to Hong Kong to work and earn money. You come here not looking for a husband or boyfriend. If I found out you were pregnant, I would definitely call the police immediately.’

Similar to Eza and Sari, Harum’s employer and agency strongly expressed their disapproval of her sexual relationship and pregnancy through derogatory language:

My agent was very furious; she shut me in the room and yelled at me, ‘Why do you cause me trouble? You should be working, not becoming pregnant. Why are you Indonesians so ‘low-educated?’ My agent threatened me to sign a termination letter. I opposed. But when I was packing up my belongings in my employer’s home, the grandma said, ‘I will throw away anything you touched in my house; your cup, plate, spoon, all are dirty.’

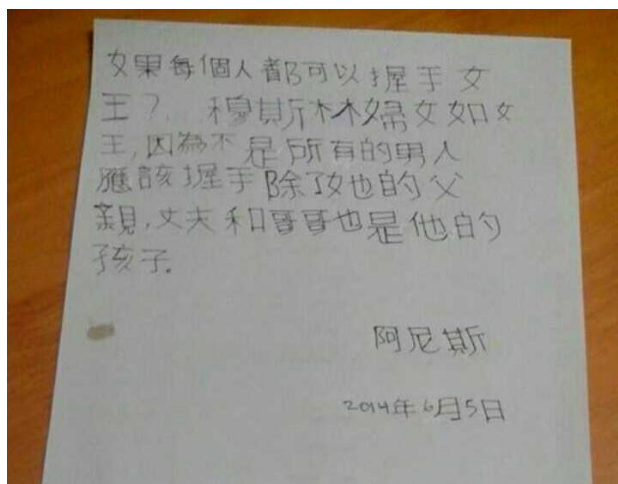
These racist stereotypes of Indonesian domestic workers’ sexual transgressions, alongside intimidation and surveillance, mirror and extend Indonesian state discourse surrounding migrant women. In Indonesia, migrant women’s sexuality may cause a moral downfall for the country. Whereas in Hong Kong, migrant women’s sexuality may pose a moral threat to the Hong Kong employers, jeopardizing the social order of the society (Chang & Groves, 2000; Constable, 1997; Lee et al., 2018). To ensure social stability in the receiving state, Hong Kong’s governmentality in managing Indonesian domestic workers conforms to and extends Indonesia’s ideology, establishing moral limits to regulate their bodies so they can be transformed into an idealized commodity for export. Accordingly, migrant women’s sexuality not only becomes the “target of power” in the training centers of their home country (Foucault, 1975/1995), their bodies can also be manipulated, observed, and supervised by the receiving state, which governs their sexual activities in the public domain, and their sexual desires in the private domain. This is achieved through state policies such as the “live-in rule” and the “two-week rule” and also through private

house rules set by employers such as curfews during days off, dress codes, physical boundaries inside the house, or who they are permitted to speak with (Lan, 2003, 2006; Liu, 2015; Yeoh & Huang, 2010). Yet, most importantly, it is also through Indonesian domestic workers themselves that these norms are internalized in a way that Foucault refers to as “automatism of habit” in the operation of the “mechanics of power” (Foucault, 1975/1995). Like Anis, who often practiced Chinese writing when Popo was taking a nap. Once, she googled translated an Islamic script into Chinese and posted it on Facebook, “If people are permitted to shake hands with others, Muslim women are prohibited from doing so with men. They can only do so with their father, husband, brother, and son.” When asked why she had written this, Anis explained:

It is very easy to learn bad things in Hong Kong. I must keep my heart very clean. You see, Pakistani men often follow us on Sundays; therefore, I must remind myself that I cannot let any man touch my body, not even my hands! I don't wish to bring a mixed-race baby back home, and I don't want to lose my job here. In Indonesia, I usually remove my hijab when I go out, but here, I must wrap my entire body with a headscarf and a long-sleeved dress on Sundays.

Figure 7.4

Anis's Chinese Calligraphy of Islamic Religious Teachings



Anis's self-discipline demonstrates how Indonesian women adopt and reproduce the nationalistic gendered ideology of absolute chastity. Her Islamic calligraphy embodies the state's idealized image of a good woman who can resist sexual temptation and act modestly away from home and represents national pride that extends from her homeland, where a woman is expected to forfeit her sexual and intimate desires. This national pride sometimes stems from the persistence of national morality, as in the case of Anis, or it may be driven by the national identity of competition for moral supremacy, as it did for Utama. Utama claimed, "My madam insists I dress up like a 'market lady' on Sundays; I don't like that. However, when she warns, 'Don't wear clothes sexily as the Filipina maids!' I very much agree."

At a shelter group sharing session, Aulia, a beautiful 26-year-old Javanese girl whose Sir employer is a well-known film actor in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, whined and pouted that her contract was terminated after only one week. Her Madam complained to the agency that her dress style was too sexy. Her employer had hired five Indonesian domestic workers and strictly provided them with work uniforms, which led Aulia to wonder:

Why is my dress style too sexy? How come? She [*Madam*] forced us to wear the same uniform to work, a white-colored T-shirt and long white sports pants. Even though I am only an S size, she handed me an L size; it's too big and does not fit me! Okay, I didn't mind, but why would she still say that?

"But your boobs are very big." one girl said [*all the girls were laughing loudly*]. Others joined the debate; one said, "Even though she wasn't wearing a uniform, her eyes are sexy!" Another added, "See, her sitting posture and the way she speaks are all sexy [*more giggles*]." I implored, "Be honest with yourself. Would you hire her if you were an employer?" Everyone shook their heads, "No!" One girl replied, "I don't think so. Sometimes men do things behind our backs. Before, I attended five interviews, three employers turned me down because they said I was too

pretty.” Then someone exclaimed, “Jealousy!” and others nodded in agreement. Another said, “She won’t do the work from her heart. She just acts like a model in front of the camera. How can she take care of my baby?” Then, another added, “I don’t want any trouble; she is like... [*paused, searching for a word*] ...sexy... [*winked at Aulia, and everyone laughed again*].”

Like Aulia’s female employer, many Hong Kong people feel threatened to hire or keep “sexy maids” in the house. They view the bodies of migrant domestic workers as “space invaders” that must be strictly disciplined and closely watched (Puwar, 2004). Yet, what is most intriguing is that Indonesian domestic workers’ determination, like those who attended the sharing session at the shelter, was simultaneously influenced by the dominant discourse shared by their employers, “A gorgeous maid poses a threat to female employers.” This group resembled a portion of the Indonesian domestic worker population who agree female employers should not employ pretty or sexy migrant domestic workers. They internalized a particular gender ideology that society imposed on them rather than questioning the unequal distribution of power underlying the social structure. Despite all being Indonesian domestic workers, they unconsciously required other Indonesian women to erase their femininity and consciously required themselves to be transformed and reduced to sexless maids. This is a tragic and horrible consequence of migrant women’s self-discipline.

7.5 Double Life: Disrupting Migrant Body’s Idealized Form

This hegemonic discourse of Indonesian domestic workers’ sexual transgression is inextricably intertwined with the social and cultural norms of sending and receiving destinations. It is also influenced by the socioeconomic and sociopolitical conditions of Indonesian domestic

workers in society, where their gendered bodies are embedded in multiple social relations that underpin their femininized morality across their migratory trajectory (Chang & Groves, 2000; Constable, 1997; Elias, 2010; Ladegaard, 2019). Due to migrant domestic workers' low occupational, gendered, foreign and ethnic/racial status in Hong Kong, these subservient positions expose them to an uneven power relationship in employers' homes and marginalize them in society (Cheng, 1996; Constable, 1997; Palmer, 2019; Pyle, 2006). Such expressions of racism and xenophobia, imprinted with a strong official sense of governance to uphold the gendered social order, allow their sexuality to be negatively stigmatized as "naughty". Thereby legitimately placing their bodies under the gaze of their employers and their ethnic and religious networks. This results in social injustice. Most Indonesian domestic workers negotiate with their "excluders" who restrict their sexual agency; however, limit and transgression rely on the collaboration of both parties for its existence in the form of an us-them dichotomy (Foucault 1977a). For this, they legitimize their transgressive acts due to being compelled to lead a "double life" (Guendelman & Perez-Itriago, 1987; Lim & Paul, 2021). This takes place offstage, unnoticed outside the panopticon once they are away from the surveillance of the dominant (Scott, 1990). The following three short stories show how Indonesian domestic workers negotiate their bodies as desiring subjects by concealing their sexual desire before the dominant.

7.5.1 Sunday Whiskey Girl

My telephone rang late one evening; it was Azizza, a thirty-year-old Indonesian mother from Jakarta. "Hello, are you sleeping?" said Azizza in a sad voice. "Not yet," I responded. During our conversation, Azizza suddenly said, "I really am not that type of good girl. My employer just thought I was a 'behaved girl [乖乖女仔]'. I am not, though. I am, in fact, very

naughty [好曳].” She forwarded me her photograph over WhatsApp. In the photograph, she was striking a sexy pose with black-colored fingernails, smoky eyes, and heavy makeup. “Do you think I look like a prostitute?” Azizza asked me. To win her employer’s trust, she pretended to be naive during working hours, acting shy and polite, “but every Sunday, after I put on my makeup, I changed into another person, I became a naughty girl.” She liked drinking whiskey, smoking cigarettes, and having casual sex with westerners she met in pubs. In reality, Azizza’s marriage had broken down. She was afraid if her employer knew about her problems or her Sunday makeovers, she would assume she could not concentrate on her work and would dismiss her. Unfortunately, she was morally condemned as a prostitute by her friends, but she fought back, explaining, “I never asked them for money. What I love is not money!” Azizza sobbed:

I, too, have problems. I am in pain, my husband has another woman, but I can’t tell my family. I enjoy sharing-sharing and drinking whiskey with the westerners, and then we have sex in the hotel; they are better at sex than the men I slept with in Indonesia [sneered]! I know that I’m not pretty enough and that I’m too black [黑蚊蚊], but they said that I could make them smile and laugh like a girlfriend. Do you know I feel so good about that [*desperate voice*]! It makes my pain go away a little bit. I just do things to make myself happy.

7.5.2 Horney Sex on a Two-Week Home Vacation

Gaby, a very dedicated church leader, earned the respect of her peers as a good role model. She has a teenage son who needs her financial support, and like many married migrant domestic workers, she was eager for the 14-day annual leave for every two-year contract. This was because she could rekindle her relationship with her husband through physical and psychological intimacy. Nonetheless, her husband’s heart, like Azizza’s, was now with another, and he was no longer interested in having sex with her. Gaby expressed her sorrow, “For ten

years, even though we slept together, he never touched me. I asked him why? He said, ‘Look at your body; you’re so skinny, I don’t want to touch you, and you’re never at home!’

Due to her husband’s failure to acknowledge her sexual desire and longing for love, Gaby secretly turned her yearning toward another Indonesian man she met on the internet. However, following one home vacation, she found it difficult to stem her guilt and confided in me, begging me not to tell any church members, “This is a secret kept in my heart [*shyly*]. When I arrived at the airport, he [*her internet boyfriend*] brought me to a nearby hotel. Then he said, ‘sleep with me!’ I was just silent. Then I said, ‘Ok’.” She struggled with whether to enter a new relationship with this internet boyfriend, but getting a divorce was difficult for a Catholic. When she was back home in Indonesia, she approached an Indonesian priest for guidance on whether or not she could divorce her husband. However, the priest asked her to, “write down everything since you met your husband until now.” Gaby cried and left as each memory left her heartbroken. She relayed her thoughts when leaving Indonesia, “That’s what I’m thinking. So now, I don’t want to have a boyfriend. Every two years, you only get two weeks to have sex [*raised her voice*]? No need lah! never mind!”

7.5.3 Sex in a Dirty Hourly Hotel

Yuni, a former Indonesian domestic worker who fell in love with a young Hong Kong man, became an overstayer. I first met Yuni, a very clever girl with a rebellious character, in our shelter. She frequently returned to the shelter after curfew but pretended to have been reading the bible before the staff discovered her deceit. In reality, she was late because she had been dating

her boyfriend. One night, she returned to the shelter looking frightened. When I asked what had occurred, she groaned; the police almost arrested her:

I don't like that dirty place, the towels are very dirty, and it looks like a place where men buy women. But my 'husband [老公]' said, 'what can I do? I don't even have my own house [*opened hands in the air*].' He told me he missed me so much and wanted to do the sex thing. But just one minute after we were done, we heard many footsteps, then 'knock-knock-knock' on the door and 'Open the door! Police! Identity Card!'

What Yuni meant by the "dirty place" was an hourly hotel [時鐘酒店], where lovers often go when they want a cheap place to have sex. Yuni said her boyfriend had reserved three hours at an hourly rate of HK\$80. Instead of complaining about the police search, she remarked that she was fortunate not to engage in sex in a "disabled toilet", which I heard mentioned at least three times during my outreach work in Victoria Park. This concerned a virgin Indonesian girl who made love with a Pakistani man in a toilet for disabled people in Victoria Park, resulting in a fire truck and an ambulance arriving. Some joked they could not open the door, and others joked the Indonesian girl feared losing her virginity, which accidentally trapped his penis in her vagina.

Nonetheless, sexuality is never solely about sexual gratification. It is much more connected to human intimacy and attachment needs (Harvey et al., 2004; Laschinger et al., 2004; Mikulincer & Goodman, 2006). For example, one Indonesian girl described her first lesbian sexual encounter in the training center:

When you're lonely, you need someone; when someone cares for you, touches you, it's more about the physical feeling; especially since we've been there for a long time, we really feel empty. I feel like I want to give her comfort, so I try, I touch her, and she feels nice, comfortable, or what...

The sexual decisions of Azizza, Gaby, and Yuni were all motivated by their sexual and intimate desires. They refused to conform to the two governments' hegemonic discourses on female

migrant sexuality like Anis and Uttama. Rather, they perceived themselves as desiring subjects and did not want their desires to be eradicated, which was impossible. Unlike Harum, Kristiyana, and Diah, who considered themselves shameless for their sexual practices, their sexual transgressions were carried out more subtly. As per Scott's (1990) hidden transcript, they were only performed when the dominant's direct observation was absent. A dominant can be an Indonesian domestic worker's employer or ethnic peers, as in Azizza's case; or their affiliated religious group or NGO, as in Gaby and Yuni's cases. Nevertheless, their "infrapolitics" demonstrates that the normative and binary good and bad categories are inappropriate for them. Through the interaction of the hidden transcript with the public transcript, their sexual transgressions contradict the stereotype of docile bodies, thereby disrupting the assumption of idealized femininity, as they view the suppression within the "denatured" discourse as a form of social injustice.

From the narratives of Azizza, Gaby, and Yuni, it is clear that Indonesian domestic workers' sexual decisions are shaped by structural forces, including their foreign status, time and space limits, and gendered and racial positions (Chang & Groves, 2000; Constable, 2014). Their rights and opportunities for sexual freedom are restricted by time and space due to their foreign domestic worker status (Lim & Paul, 2021). They are required to live with their employers and are subject to tight curfews on Sundays, unlike most Hong Kong employers who can enjoy sexual freedom in more privileged circumstances. For example, Gaby and Yuni negotiated the constraints of time and space. Yuni exemplified how Indonesian domestic workers engaging in romantic relationships in Hong Kong are limited by time and space for intimate activities, thus deciding to become overstayers. Gaby exemplified how married Indonesian domestic workers can only enjoy 14 days of sex during their home vacation in every two-year contract.

The terminology Azizza and Yuni used to refer to men also resonated in Constable's (2014) research. Here, she discovered that migrant domestic workers tended to refer to their sexual partners as "boyfriends" or "husbands" to avoid a bad reputation for having casual sex in Hong Kong, where sex is only permitted within the context of marriage, per state ideology. To avoid the stigma of being labeled a "naughty maid," Azizza, Gaby, and Yuni, like many others, lived double lives to conceal their sexual transgressions from the power holders. Such contestation of space boundaries in their employers' homes also extended to their surveillance networks, such as ethnic peers and religious affiliations, not only physical but also moral limits. Indonesian domestic workers opt to conform to their dominant's moral expectations of sexuality because these "low-profile" forms of resistance can protect them from losing their jobs and keep them acting like good women in front of other surveillance actors. However, once their transgressions are accidentally exposed, they continue to be clever sexual agents, as one Indonesian domestic worker shared after her lesbian relationship was discovered by her employer and pastor, "I tell them my relationship is over, I'm no longer a tomboy anymore. You must say it that way. If you say 'no' they won't believe you. You should say 'no more' so that you have another chance.

7.6 Reconsidering Pastoral Power: Complicity of the Excluder

When Indonesian migrant women/girls engage in or practice different sexual transgressions, such as masturbation, extra-marital, lesbian or pre-marital sex, their common consequences will result in self-blame or condemnation by religious people and NGOs. Some

migrant leaders tended to scapegoat and accuse “lesbians” of arousing sexual desire in other girls in the shelter. As one Indonesian NGO staff put it:⁶³

If there is a lesbian in the shelter, sex will become a topic. Of course, the girls are very interested in that thing, they will talk about and celebrate sex much more, and the lesbian will be in charge. But, if there were no lesbians around, the girls would be okay. They wouldn't go this way and wouldn't focus on that.

This Indonesian NGO staff member converted the Indonesian domestic worker lesbian phenomenon into an issue of cultural gender negotiation. She argued that Indonesian domestic worker tomboys' playing with masculinity could lead to their gaining more power and privilege (Sim, 2007, 2010), causing them to behave as if they were the idealized man in Indonesia (Allmark & Wahyudi, 2019). However, she was disrespectful, denying genuine love in same-sex relationships. Instead, she reduced their masculine behaviors solely to the fantasy of being a man, which is premised on patriarchal assumptions:

Even if you start dressing like a man, it doesn't change who you are. It's just a fantasy for them to be men, so they try to act like men. This is gender roles, man or woman, Indonesia is very clear. I talked to the girls; even if you act like a man, it will never change your heart; it's your enemy! They are confused; they just follow others.

To prevent the spread and growth of women's sexual desire within the shelter, punishments were unavoidable to ensure Indonesian domestic workers behaved and adhered to the institutional moral codes. As she explained:

We must have a strong attitude. The issue of lesbians has already annoyed our shelter; we must separate them. They can't stay together. And now, another big problem is cyber sex. More and more girls are exposing their bodies on webcams to unknown guys; they don't know the men, right? If the girl violates one time, okay, I will give her a warning; if she violates again, I must kick her out. No choice; we cannot permit it. They must go back to their religions, get married and have sex with their husbands; that's it. Aside from that, it's a sin.

⁶³ Personal communication.

One Catholic nun also echoed the sentiment of this NGO staff member. She recalled her first Sunday in Victoria Park, where she witnessed lesbian Indonesian domestic workers openly display their intimate relationships:

My goodness [*sighed*]/ I can't believe it. I was just wondering why this lesbian thing would happen in Hong Kong. Even when I saw it in SUARA or a movie, I couldn't believe it, because this thing comes from foreigners, right? I have no idea how they know, but they teach others. I think most of their husbands have moved on to other women, which is why they look for younger girls. Since they've already done sex, they teach the younger girls how to do it, and that helps them meet their own sexual needs. They have lost their identity as a woman. I mean, they are not aware they are a woman. When they go back to Indonesia, nobody will accept them. In Indonesia, morals are a big problem.

Surprisingly, this nun would rather accept other sexually immoral behaviors that Indonesian domestic workers engage in than this form of sexual transgression:

It's not normal [*lesbianism*]; they are, in fact, a woman. I respect them as a person, but I don't like the way they act because that's not natural, right? I would rather they have sex with Pakistani men than this. It's more normal to have sex with a man than a woman, and people will recognize you more as a woman so that you won't lose your woman identity. This is why I respect them more when they have babies and have sexual intercourse with Pakistani men.

Figure 7.5

Indonesian Domestic Workers Dressed in Tomboy Attire in Victoria Park and Causeway Bay



This NGO shelter staff's accounts and the Catholic nuns' critical attitude toward Indonesian domestic workers' sexually deviant practices represented the paternalistic management of many conservative NGOs and religious groups in Hong Kong. The NGO staff member regarded sexual activities outside marriage as a sin, while the Catholic nun opposed any form of sex against procreation as abnormal. Intriguingly, unlike Hong Kong society's public discourse portrays Indonesian domestic workers' transgressive bodies as naughty maids due to promiscuity, long-term sexual suppression or economic purposes; or Indonesian state discourse infers transnational women's bodies fail to maintain chaste virtue due to moral downfall. At first glance, these paternalistic NGOs and religious institutions despise to be "moral ambassadors", labelling Indonesian domestic workers as bad or evil; or "moral accusers", blaming the moral weaknesses of Indonesian domestic workers on their inability to resist temptation. Instead, they walk a sideways as symbols of love. This love imprint, which encompasses patriotic and religious love, legitimizes them to rescue this vulnerable group.

When we juxtapose the views of the above NGO shelter staff member and the Catholic nun regarding what led to Indonesian domestic workers engaging in sexual transgressions, both believe that they simply follow or learn from others. In the NGO staff member's opinion, they are confused, and men easily defraud those who engage in cyber sex. According to the Catholic nun, lesbianism is a western idea that Indonesian domestic workers are unaware of and that others influence their lesbian behavior. However, this portrayal of Indonesian domestic workers as naive sexual agents ignores their capacity for making conscious choices. Furthermore, it simultaneously resonates with the western organization that initially assisted Diah's case; staff insisted that her older boyfriend deceived her, a lack of contraception knowledge caused her unintended pregnancy, and she was unable to make decisions for her future. These NGOs and

religious groups in fact adopt the western discourse of victimhood to view Indonesian domestic workers' transgressive acts and, in the name of protectionism, depict them as in need of rescue (Ho, 2017), reinforcing stereotypes. Such disciplinary management exemplifies what Foucault refers to as the exercise of "pastoral power", incarnating as salvation to alter the bodies of migrant women regarding sexuality (Foucault, 1983).

These paternalistic authorities see themselves as rescuing Indonesian domestic workers whom they view as docile, naïve, and vulnerable victims, and see their salvation as a way of rejecting Indonesian state discourse, which uses them as a remittance machine, putting them at risk of exploitation (Allmark & Wahyudi, 2019). Nonetheless, they are incredibly arrogant due to their ignorance and, indeed, moral accomplices of the excluder. We can observe from the NGO shelter staff's punishment of separating lesbian Indonesian domestic workers and expelling those who engage in cyber sex as simultaneously adopting the normative dichotomy of good against bad to evaluate their moral behavior, which replicates and reproduces the gendered normative ideal that is long promoted by the state. More interesting is the Catholic nun, who considered Indonesian domestic workers indulging in premarital sex with Pakistani men sinful but preferred it to lesbian sex. This sin hierarchy stigmatizes Indonesian domestic workers with same-sex attraction and instills homophobia in communities. Both resonate with state ideology; neither accepts Indonesian domestic workers as desiring subjects nor admits that their sexual bodies are bound by patriarchal beliefs in Indonesia and the special constraints of time and space in Hong Kong. Instead, they collaboratively deny and eradicate their sexuality. Whereas Indonesian domestic workers generally do not surrender to fate, as earlier ones who crossed their moral boundaries, they instead exert strategies and construct arguments when they disagree with pastoral authority.

7.6.1 A Silent Dream: Pertiwi's Doomsday Fight

Pertiwi, a remarkably brilliant and gorgeous tomboy, is 27 years old. She was raised in a Catholic family in Kalimantan but converted to Christianity in Hong Kong. I met Pertiwi in 2007, during my first year working with migrant domestic workers. At that time, her ex-lesbian girlfriend, Lintang, was my case. She was arrested by the police for allegedly bodily assaulting another Indonesian domestic worker, who was Pertiwi's new lover. As Pertiwi explained, "I don't know why, but every time I see a pretty girl, I go crazy and change my love." Subsequently, Pertiwi and I kept in irregular contact. She would refer her friends to me, enquiring about labor rights. She also enjoyed sharing her "naughty" stories with me, such as how she unplugged the CCTV in her employer's house, crawled along the floor, and opened the door to escape to meet her girlfriend. She could make me laugh for an entire day with these jokes, playing around with her employer. We became close again around 2013 because she had been using heroin for a long time, causing nosebleeds and difficulty controlling her urine flow. I was concerned about her deteriorating health, but I was more concerned about what happened in her life. One Sunday, she invited me to a Starbucks for a drink. After we had barely sat down, she leaned forward, her voice rising with hysteria:

I had a nightmare. In my dream, it was 'doomsday', and everyone was dressed in long white robes, waiting for angels to take them back to Heaven. But suddenly, there was a fire, and I was the only one left, and I wondered, 'Why are all the baptized saved, but no angel took me?' I fought with the angels, 'I've been baptized twice; why am I still here without salvation?' Then a voice whispered, 'Because you abandon yourself!' I fought back again, 'Ok! I'd like to be saved! Let me baptize one more time!' But the voice said, 'You've already been baptized!' When I woke, I thought, 'I was baptized, so why can't I go to Heaven? And I have to be left here alone? Why?' [*voice full of anger*]

I asked Pertiwi if she had told the church about her dream. She vigorously shook her head and exclaimed, "They [*churchgoers*] might say open your eyes wide to see your sin!" Pertiwi went

on to complain that churchgoers called her sexual behavior abnormal and denied her feelings of same-sex love without recognizing and respecting her authentic feelings:

I never thought I was abnormal, but everyone kept telling me I was. Aren't I normal? It really annoys me at times. But for me, I think our feelings when loving somebody are actually the same. You get sexual feelings for your husband or boyfriend. I get sexual feelings for Eularia [*her current girlfriend*]. I don't know why, but every time I get into a fight with my girlfriend, they laugh and belittle my words, 'Oh! You mean your friend?' They just didn't think it was love. I always fight back. I asked them, 'How would you feel if your husband left you? And how would you feel if you fought with your husband?' It's okay for you to love a man like your husband. I love a girl, too. I love Eularia. Eularia also loves me. We don't think alike at all.

Pertiwi decided to attend church sporadically to uphold her lesbian identity. She paid HK\$1500 per month, nearly 40% of her monthly salary, to rent a boarding house in Mong Kong where she and Eularia could continue their sexual and intimate adventures on Sundays. Pertiwi's sex life provided me with illuminating insight into how heterosexual sexual activity is involved in many, if not most, Indonesian domestic workers' lesbian sexual relationships:

I said to Eularia, 'Man has a penis, but I don't.' Do you know what she said back? She said, 'Man really does have a penis; man can protect me. But now, you can satisfy me with everything I need. You have everything a man has, and I don't feel like I'm falling in love with a woman when I'm with you.' Then I told her seriously, 'I don't want to use the fake [*dildo*]. It means you still want a man, you don't really love me, and I'll feel so hurt, [*if so*], why do we need to be les [*lesbians*], and you can leave me now.' She yelled at me, 'You can make me orgasm. You clearly know if I'm faking an orgasm or not!' I told her, 'But you can't touch me. All you have to do is lie down, like a man and a woman making love.' I used to do some foreplay with Eularia first, looking into her face, kissing, and massaging her breasts before dipping my tongue 'there' to trigger her climax. Then, I tightly cross her legs and get into a position so my 'knob' [*clitoris*] can rock her body. I feel so strong in my love for a woman, and the best thing is I can make Eularia orgasm; the fluid in her vagina is proof! After she orgasmed, she would praise me, 'Wow, you're so great!' And I would also say, 'thank you!'

Pertiwi's lesbian love is not uncommon among Hong Kong's Indonesian domestic workers.

Lesbianism is growing prevalent in the romantic and sexual relationships of migrant domestic workers. Indonesian domestic workers' dynamic interplay between their feminine and masculine

roles offers an alternative imagination to heteronormativity unique to Indonesian domestic worker culture (Allmark & Wahyudi, 2019; Blackwood, 2010; Lai, 2018; Sim, 2010). However, research on Hong Kong Indonesian domestic workers' same-sex desire for the female body as a subject is still in its early stages. Some may argue that they form lesbian relationships out of a need for intimacy and sex, like Virda and Wangi. In contrast, others counter that lesbianism is a means for obtaining male privileges (like Eza and Ferly, see Chapter 4 and 6), or a survival strategy or a weapon to drive away Pakistani men and swindle money from other Indonesian domestic workers (like Eza, see Chapter 4).

However, the Indonesian domestic worker lesbian partners I met while conducting my research, despite their transgressive sexual identities, rarely rejected their established gendered identities within Indonesian culture. They still performed as a couple with masculine and feminine roles, and during their sexual activity, much like Pertiwi and her partner Eularia. Indeed Eularia used to be a tomboy with short punk-style hair. Yet after learning of Pertiwi's deep desire to care for and protect her, she grew her hair to become Pertiwi's "wife" and fluidly shifted her sexual identity. They also purchased rice land and planned to live together in Pertiwi's home village, but they never intended to reveal their relationship. Instead, they opened up an alternative possibility that did not threaten the Indonesian traditional family structure and religious beliefs and considered the cultural specificities of most lesbian Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong (Allmark & Wahyudi, 2019; Lai, 2018).

Moreover, from Pertiwi's dream, she struggled with whether her lesbian transgression was in accordance with her religious beliefs. However, she neither disputed her labeling as abnormal nor dismissed her genuine same-sex feelings, "I am not that type of person who only listens then follows. I will fight if I'm not okay. The more they protect us, the more we want to

escape!” Pertiwi’s wrestling with this exemplified the infrapolitics of many Indonesian domestic workers who engage in same-sex relationships in Hong Kong. They identify themselves as desiring subjects rather than docile bodies and cannot adhere to religious doctrine or patriarchal cultural norms in which they have doubts. In rejecting the sinner-and-saint game, they negotiate and create alternate spaces to preserve their romantic relationships and integrity.

The dynamic interplay between Pertiwi and Eularia and their gendered roles resonate with prior research conducted by Blackwood in West Sumatra, Indonesia. In contrast to western lesbian binary categorization, Blackwood (2010) identified an alternative form for the lesbian phenomenon as a distinct experience, constructing the framework “Tomboi-Femme” from her anthropological fieldwork. She coined the term “lesbi” to counter the western hegemonic notion of lesbian, using “tomboi” to represent a female-bodied individual who views herself as a man and masculine female and “femme” to represent a woman who identifies with the conventional female gendered role of desiring man. Interestingly, a tomboi’s masculinity would be adjusted and reproduced to femininity to maintain familiar harmony in a household. Tomboi will return to a masculine female role in public spaces to alter her subject positions. Western feminists constantly criticize this way of life, condemning it as perpetuating the inequality of heterosexual relationships. However, Blackwood harshly criticizes this western hegemonic paradigm and argues that their kinship and community form the identity of Indonesians.

Nonetheless, the complexity of the cultural context in Asia is consistently underestimated and neglected by western scholars. It is oversimplified to imply that lesbi Indonesian domestic workers are merely a cultural product of oppression. Blackwood’s paradigm is extremely useful in comprehending the Indonesian domestic worker lesbi phenomenon in Hong Kong (Lai, 2018), which helps us appreciate their fluid sexual identity and their contestation with patriarchal

culture. Many, such as Pertiwi's cultural politics, depicting a love relationship with her femme, sexual activity or fighting, refract alternative ideology of femininity, calling into question not only the dichotomy assumptions within heteronormativity and homonormativity but also the legitimacy of pastoral power.

7.6.2 A Quiet Emergence: New Forms of Moral Subjectivity

The interpretation of Pertiwi's dream "doomsday fight" has one more layer of deep meaning. On the surface, Pertiwi seemed frustrated that the angels had not accepted her in Heaven, despite being baptized. The angels' reaction appeared to symbolize a form of punishment due to her sexually transgressive behavior. Nonetheless, Pertiwi's anger at the angels and her fight for salvation revealed a strong sense of entitlement at being violated. She believed that she deserved good things regardless. Pertiwi's anger over being denied the right to enter Heaven enabled her to fight for power concerning her relationships. Her fight exemplified Foucault's interpretation of dreams, disciplinary authority and sovereign subjects; when the self-governing self of the disciplinary power falls asleep, the dream returns to life, thus making the sovereign subject proceed against the dominant's control (McGushin, 2021). However, Pertiwi's dream is more than just "a rhapsody of images" that provide relief from coercion (Foucault et al., 1993, p. 43); it also allows the forming of Indonesian domestic workers' discursive politics. Indeed, the angels in Pertiwi's doomsday fight are not saints but a metaphor for *excluders* in her and other Indonesian domestic workers' everyday life, such as religious congregants or neighbors, who represent an extension of the pastoral authority, jointly practicing biopower to maintain the moral order, which ultimately serves as sex control.

Indeed, Pertiwi's anger is an assertion of entitlement from Indonesian domestic workers as subjects of desire who deserve sexual freedom. Her fight against pastoral authority, particularly religious affiliated networks, was typical of Indonesian domestic workers with sexual transgression. Such as Diah's debate with her father about the witchcraft death needle in her Muslim community for her illegitimate pregnancy and Eza's mockery of her friend (see Chapter 4), "Why doesn't she look at herself in the mirror", as revenge for accusing her of too many sins when engaging in lesbian acts in the Catholic parish. It is of little surprise that one pretty Christian, Shaly, in her early 20s, after girls at her church insulted her by calling her "dirty" for losing her virginity and living with her boyfriend, got into a heated argument with them:

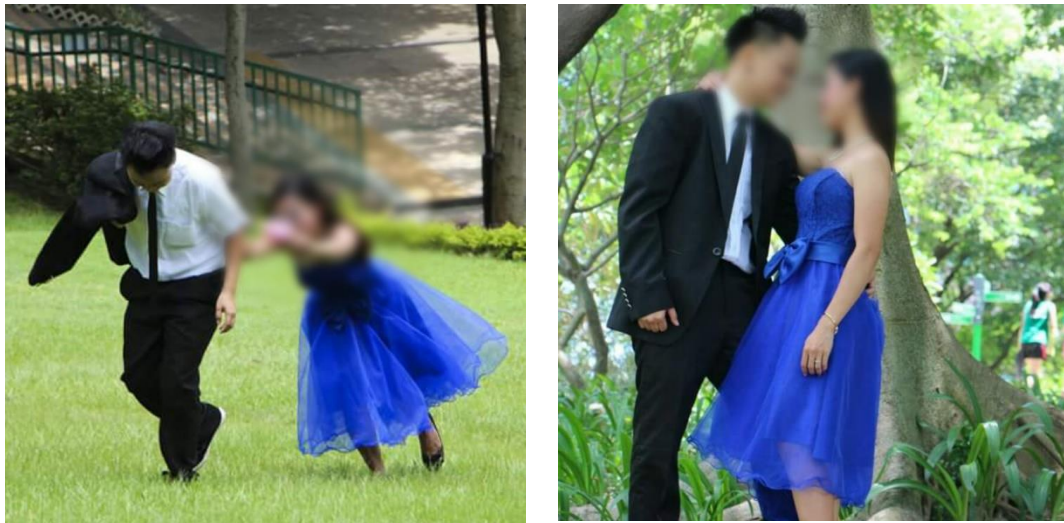
I said, 'Dirty?' Yes, I've done this 'dirty thing' [*sex*]. They told me, 'You said you're Jesus' daughter, so why are you doing this? You should only worship God, and you're bad!' I told them, 'That's between me and Jesus! Nothing to do with you! I know I'm not a good person, but I won't point the finger at other people and say they're bad. Instead, I'll still be nice to them!'

Likewise, Ferly (see Chapter 6) was made a scapegoat for the "virus" because she brought girls into the worship choir, but she fought against it:

My pastor told me, 'Ferly, I love you, I love Wulan [*her girlfriend*], but I hate your relationship. I don't ask you to get a boyfriend, grow your hair long, or wear makeup. No, I'm just telling you to get up, stop being a lesbian, serve God, and be more disciplined.' I fought hard against it. I said, 'It's so hard! I can't eat if I'm not with her.' Even the girls in my church told me, 'Ferly, you're like a virus. You'll spread it to other girls and turn a lot of them into *les*.' But I still think God blesses us. In my mind, I see God standing in front of us, crossing his arms and smiling graciously at us, like this [*gestured and giggled*].

Figure 7.6

Ferly's Wedding Photographs with her Girlfriend



Pertiwi, Diah, Eza, Shaly, and Ferly's anger and tales of resistance against pastoral authority appear fragmented, discursive, and disjointed. Intriguingly, if we juxtapose, collate, and creatively combine their statements to resemble a "story solitaire", we may construct a story about their disagreement regarding the pastoral authority's erasure of their need for love, intimacy, and sex. Following this story solitaire follows the sequence Shaly-Diah-Eza-Pertiwi-Ferly:

Even if I'm right or wrong according to Indonesian religious doctrine, this is an issue between me and Jesus [*God/Allah*]. Nobody can point the finger at me or determine that my sexually transgressive act is the worst of all the wrongdoings that merit punishment [*Diah's witchcraft death needle*]. However, you should look in the mirror to examine yourself before judging others using your normative moral standards. I tell you when you stigmatize or exclude me [*dirty, abnormal, virus*]. I will resist and repeatedly cross the boundaries, viewing it as my subjectification process [*Eza's station of the cross*]. Therefore, don't violently binarily categorize me [*Pertiwi's sinner vs. saint*], as I will fight for my entitlements because I deserve the good things [*Pertiwi's salvation*]. And whatever happens, I still trust God will recognize my existence [*Ferly's God graciously smiling*].

This story *solitaire* is not a linking game; rather, it illustrates the counter-discourses of those Indonesian domestic workers who struggle against pastoral power. This anecdote allows us to create a more comprehensive argument in Indonesian domestic workers' cultural politics of sexuality. Their transgressive acts depart from the patriarchal expectations of the ideal woman/maid, their voices unheard in mainstream discourses. Indonesian domestic workers skillfully borrow the universal ideology "love imprint", which pastoral authorities propagate to criticize the Muslim neighborhood and Christian congregations for their discriminatory reactions, which contradicts their noble philosophy. Thus, they form their claim by legitimating their transgressive acts and the entitlements they deserve as desiring subjects.

In sum, the stories of contestation over Indonesian domestic workers' sexuality can help us better comprehend their cultural politics. Indeed, this chapter considered the process of power dominance, particularly the discourse formation of idealized normative femininity that sending and receiving states constructed (i.e., Indonesia and Hong Kong), which subsequently shaped the subjectivity of Indonesian domestic workers. Despite the subjectivity of Indonesian domestic workers constructed in relationships of domination, their narratives also suggest that they transgress their situation and demonstrate sexual agency away from cultural and patriarchal constraints, becoming subjects of desire. Indonesian domestic workers identify themselves as desiring subjects; however, they neither rebelliously reject the normative framework of a good woman/behaved maid nor accept the negative stigma of a bad woman/naughty maid. Rather, they refuse to be reduced to a labor body; instead, they create opportunities for their sexual bodies to be seen. Thus, their resistance in the cracks of domination can represent new forms of subjectivity emerging across the labor mobility of migrant women. Their diasporic journeys advances women's sexual morality in a new direction, acknowledges migrant women's desire for

love and sex, and affirms their sexual autonomy, which liberates them from patriarchal control. The power relationship between state power domination and Indonesian domestic workers' resistance is not fixed; rather, they navigate their sexual subjectivity in liminal time and space. Their sexual decisions are intertwined with class, gender, and race, in which they negotiate power in a dynamic and ever-changing manner. The sexual transgression of Indonesian domestic workers does not naively seek to subvert the patriarchal structure; in Foucault's words, the affirmation of Indonesian domestic workers "contains nothing positive" (Foucault, 1977a, p. 36). Instead, Indonesian domestic workers merely seek to create space for themselves to become a "speaking subject"; this speaking subject does not simply express themselves but exposes their integrity (Foucault, 1977a, p. 51).

Chapter Eight

Conclusions: Fighting Under the Blanket

I can't sleep. I toss and turn in my bed. Deep down, I'm filled with hatred. So, I get up, turn on my computer, and begin writing my diary. I needed a way to let out my anger and shame. 'Are you a social worker? How will the social worker do this?' These words hammered into my heart like an axe. I went with Tika [Indonesian domestic worker] to the conciliation meeting at the Labour Department this morning. Her Sir employer had threatened to have me arrested by the police. 'I don't believe you're a social worker,' he yelled at me, 'You're merely pretending. Why would a social worker cause trouble? Why are you bringing my maid to sue me? Don't flee; I'll ring 999, let the police catch you.' I pretended to be courteous but sneered at him, 'Oh, I see. Let's call the police right away. I really want to know what crime I've committed in Hong Kong.' The employer's face turned scarlet, and he scowled at me in embarrassment. The labor officer peered at me suspiciously before turning to him and saying, 'This lady claims herself a social worker. I'm actually also uncertain. But do you allow her presence at this meeting?' 'I just gave you my business card!' I interjected. 'I can't check if it's true,' the labor officer said, frowning. 'We rarely have a social worker here.' 'Shame on you!' yelled the employer once more. 'Licensed-Social-Worker! A liar.' Taki stared at me earnestly, waiting for me to initiate the fight. Nonetheless, I only cursed 'Puk Kai [仆街]' to him in my head.⁶⁴ 'Go to hell...Damn you...' I did not say this out loud. Before turning off my computer that night, I wrote my last entry in my diary: 'Let your fear punish you.'

(My inner demons, captured in my diary)

⁶⁴ Puk Kai [仆街] is a derogatory term derived from the English phrase "poor guide"; in Hong Kong, this insulting term refers to someone who is despicable, cunning, and vulgar.

8.1 Diary of Inner Demons

As I neared the end of my PhD journey, one ‘inner demon’ after another began to surface. Self-doubt haunted me day and night as if to question the merit and significance of my research work, its real purpose, and who my thesis serves. It also forced me to confront my dual roles as a social worker and a researcher. Throughout my nine-year work in the migrant field, it was common for me to struggle with inner demons regarding my role as a social worker. Indeed, I was questioned by police concerning a Labour Tribunal because an employer complained that I had abetted another by giving false testimony in court. A senior Immigration officer also approached me at Skyline Tower, where I frequently escorted Indonesian domestic workers to surrender their overstays and said:

I truly suspect you are not a social worker, even if you have a card. If you truly care about the girls, why not persuade them to return to Indonesia instead of turning them into fake refugees, lying that their husbands will kill them, or that they are lesbians and will be slaughtered, or engaging in forced marriage? Why does the social worker not correct their misleading hopes and assist them in life planning?

I also experienced intimidation from a male employer who recently finished a prison sentence after being found guilty of sexually assaulting his maid. He called my mobile telephone and said, “I’ve printed out your photo from Facebook.” I replied, “I never post any of my photos.” “But the photo of your friends has your face on it, right? Do you hang out with Sally, Eric, and Susi [pseudonyms]?” “What do you want?” I asked. “Why do you fully believe my maid’s story?” he interjected. “You’re a social worker; you clearly know that you have ruined my family and career?” These incidents forced me to critically examine my social worker role with marginalized foreign domestic workers. While I have worked as a social worker for over 20 years without expecting any praise, I never imagined that I would be reduced to someone who

betrays my profession. On the contrary, I always believed that I was highlighting the societal injustice this underprivileged population was experiencing.

Inner demons are a type of “moral struggle” that can arise in relations between two individuals throughout the dialogical research process. Each person struggles with multiple voices that compete within (Frank, 2005). The dominant voice is what matters most to me. I used the Foucauldian framework to guide my research process not just because of Foucault’s brilliant illumination but also because when asked why he studies “power,” he underlined what he is most concerned with is “the question of subject” (Foucault, 1983, p. 208). According to Foucault, a philosopher’s role is to “keep watch on the excessive powers of political rationality” in society (Foucault, 1983, p. 210). In this perspective, the duty of a philosopher is not to give a definite, immutable, or universal definition to human subjects; rather, a philosopher acts as a pair of watchful eyes to guard against the “excessive powers” that exert themselves upon humans to objectify and silence them. Is it the sole responsibility of a social worker to be a peacemaker and promote societal harmony, even if you witness the oppressors? Is it a social worker’s duty to aid our government in resolving disputes between migrant domestic workers and employers, even while you recognize the injustice? What exactly is my “mission” as a social worker? Can I serve as a catalyst for Foucault’s assertion, “What we need is a new economy of social relations” (Foucault, 1983, p. 210). As such, I suggest my dual role as social worker and researcher should parallel Foucault’s conception of the philosopher, in that my research was sufficiently robust to operate as a vigilant intellectual eye when examining the life situation of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong.

8.2 Power Relations: A Blanket You Can't Flee

“Fighting under the Blanket: The Cultural Politics of Indonesian Domestic Workers in Hong Kong” is the title of my thesis. The term “Fighting under the Blanket” illustrates the power domination and resistance between the subaltern group of Indonesian domestic workers and their dominants. I have come across this name on two separate occasions from Indonesian migrant leaders. Both of these leaders were unwilling to accept the portrayal of Indonesian domestic workers as powerless and vulnerable. In fact, one of them even used this fascinating term to describe their resistance:

I tell you, even though the girls from Indonesia are ‘polite’, they also ‘fight’, but they *fight under the blanket*. That means fight...quietly...They fight too, but in a quiet way. They'll keep it in their hearts for a long time, maybe years and years. Even though they act out and follow what you want, they won't speak out, they'll keep everything quiet inside and fight, but they won't fight the way bomb-bomb-bomb.

“Blanket” is a metaphor for the web of power relations; it symbolizes Foucault's conception of power, according to which power is a set of social relations that make up an intricate web of power relations. Since birth, Indonesian women have no way to avoid slipping into diverse social relations, which allow power to be exercised, leading them to behave in ways deemed normal (Knights & Willmott, 1989; McNay, 2009). As a result, no Indonesian domestic workers can be completely free of their blanket ascribed to gender, sex, culture, race, and class. Therefore, every Indonesian domestic worker must interact with their blanket and strive to recognize their identity through conscience.

Following Foucault's paradigm, this thesis examined how Indonesian domestic workers entrenched themselves within the blanket and wielded power over it in their diaspora. In other words, it illustrated the power domination and resistance of Indonesian domestic workers by demonstrating Foucault's emphasis on how “human beings are made subject” and how “a human

being turns themselves into a subject.” This intended to uncover how the global discourse of human trafficking was historically and socially constructed in Hong Kong. It also examined how the discourse’s underlying ideology, aligned with the biopolitics and governmentalities of the two governments (Indonesia and Hong Kong), reinforced racial and cultural stereotypes about Indonesian domestic workers, further confining them to a merely commodified labor body while neglecting other aspects of exploitation. Most importantly, it articulated how Indonesian domestic workers react and respond to the exploitation, including resisting, transgressing, accepting, or formulating counter-discourses to alter the power relations.

8.3 Power Domination and Resistance Revisited

8.3.1 New Normalized Formula of Ideal Maid

This research uncovered the power mechanism the Indonesian and Hong Kong governments utilized to manage the Indonesian domestic worker population. As I demonstrated in Chapters 5 and 6, these two governments collaborated to produce a new formula for the ideal maid by using a set of dividing practices and discourses. This ideal maid goes beyond what is portrayed in traditional literature, which merely depicts the ideal maid as a submissive maid who is deferential and obedient in the household (Liang, 2011). Rather, to discipline Indonesian women to self-regulate as docile-utility commodities, the two governments constructed an ideal maid as someone certified (having passed quality control at the training center) plus successful (completing her two-year contract without job-hopping and being able to send remittances home). In addition, in Chapter 7, I further demonstrated that to prevent the moral decay of Indonesian women and restrict them as merely productive labor bodies linked to migration and

modernity, the Indonesian government instills the moral virtues of national pride and feminine chastity as self-discipline to make these women abide by the state's patriarchal ideology. This, in turn, further surveils their bodies through extended ethical and religious networks in Hong Kong. As a result, docile maids portrayed as naïve, ignorant, submissive, and obedient are offered on the servitude market; and most crucially, this human capital makes them competitive with their opponents, Filipina domestic workers.

8.3.2 Neither Well-behaved nor Naughty

Nonetheless, the negotiation between subordination and domination is never fully concluded. Rather, migration acts as a site for Indonesian domestic workers to ponder, dispute, and shake the perceived economic logic and patriarchal gendered assumptions. As a result, they may transgress their boundaries in ways that conflict with the accepted norms of feminine morality and refuse the knowledge entrenched in the discourses that confine their bodies. Hence, from Chapters 4 to 7, I have revealed that Indonesian domestic workers may also build alternative discourses to legitimize and transform their self-knowledge, thus turning themselves into subjects. In short, they will not allow themselves to suffocate under the blanket but will battle and seize as much air as possible.

As represented in Chapters 5 and 6, we can observe from their struggles that Indonesian domestic workers rebel against the formula and stereotype of the ideal maid if their dignity or humanity is infringed upon. They disturb the cultural misrepresentation imposed upon them (e.g., feign ignorance or embarrass the dominant) and utilize the cultural stereotypes for their benefit (e.g., job-hopping). Indeed, they use the public's stereotype of them to weaken their employers' defense and gather evidence to sue them (e.g., secret records). They also manipulate the legal mechanism to maximize their options (e.g., filing labor cases for longer visas). Indonesian

domestic workers do not perceive themselves as degrading machines or an enterprise that perpetually produces unwilling human capital for the market. In contrast, due to market rivalry and fluctuating conditions, Indonesian domestic workers seize opportunities to transform the meaning of their commodity at favorable moments and under good market conditions.

In addition, as shown in Chapter 7, I have argued that Indonesian domestic workers defend and legitimize their sexual decisions and engage in sexually transgressive behaviors (e.g., masturbation, premarital sex, cybersex, one-night stands, extra-marital affairs, or lesbianism). They do not restrict their bodies to the labor domain alone. Instead, they framed themselves morally as desiring subjects with sexual and intimate needs. They develop counter-discourses to express their disagreement and assertiveness in the power relations with their employers in Hong Kong and their families in Indonesia. They regard themselves morally blameless because of the remittances they send home and access to modernity acquiesced by the state. Indonesian domestic workers merely desire their sexual bodies to be seen, acknowledged, and accepted. They reject the binary categories of either “well-behaved” or “naughty” maid.

8.4 An Eye Behind: The Problematics of Power

While I contemplated whether and what I have contributed to this research, a work-related episode came to mind. Although it was a simple anecdote between an Indonesian domestic worker, a migrant union leader, and myself, it vividly highlighted the discrepancy between theory and reality. One afternoon, a migrant union leader brought an Indonesian domestic worker, Oma, to our shelter, whose contract had been terminated by her employer because she was infected with sexually transmitted diseases. The migrant union had already

brought her case to the Labour Department and intended to take it to the Equal Opportunities Commission as a precedent case for discriminatory contract termination. Surprisingly, a few days later, Oma pleaded with me to speak on her behalf to the migrant union because she wanted to withdraw her case. “Why didn’t you tell them directly?” I asked. She grumbled:

I already did. But they told me I needed to fight. I should help other migrants change the law to make it better. Their attitude is too strong. But did they ever think about how I felt? I’m not married, and I have to go to court because I’ve had sex with men and have sexually transmitted diseases. They always said there was no need to feel ashamed; they only saw the law, not me.

Oma’s sexually transmitted diseases remind me of my thesis, which documented many testimonies from Indonesian domestic workers with “marginal experience.” In Foucault’s view, the nature of this type of *marginal experience* is a power struggle that is intrinsically related to language. As McNay (2004) states:

If certain types of social experience possess an unfinished or open-ended quality, it is because they may be historically emergent (or residual) or pertain to the experiences of socially ‘muted’ groups. Although these experiences may be marginal, they are not ineffable but are explicable through the analysis of contextual power relations (p. 187).

Oma showed discontent with the migrant union leader; she complained her voice was ignored, her right to self-determination was denied, and emphasis was placed on structural change at the expense of her personal agency. This prompted me to consider how, despite claiming to be “caretakers” with pastoral power, we unwittingly fall into the trap of endorsing the victimization approach of the West by disempowering migrant women. Hence, towards the end of this thesis, I believe it is appropriate to emphasize certain implications from this research that provoke additional reflection and inquiry.

8.4.1 Can a Conceptual Shift to Human Trafficking Help Reduce Exploitation?

In contrast to embracing the trend of producing findings to contribute to the expanding body of literature on the severity and scale of Hong Kong's human trafficking problem, or examining how global inequality and power imbalances in the international system, such as US imperialism, utilize expert knowledge of the UN Palermo Protocol to position individuals within the discourse of human trafficking, thereby exploiting them for the purpose of Western colonization and governance. While I touch on issues related to cultural domination and imperialism in Chapter 1, my primary concern as a social worker is to assess whether this conceptual shift will ultimately enhance the protection of Indonesian domestic workers or lead to unforeseen negative consequences. It is important to clarify that human trafficking is not the central framework of this thesis; rather, it serves as the research background against which I explore the exploitation of Indonesian domestic workers, particularly in light of the increasing presence of anti-human trafficking projects and so-called experts in Hong Kong that seek to exert dominance in the migrant field. In Chapter 2, I explicitly state that my theoretical framework is based on a Foucauldian approach to cultural politics, which guides the collection and interpretation of my data.

As illustrated in Chapter 1, an intriguing aspect emerges concerning the assimilation of Western labor trafficking ideology within the local culture of Hong Kong. A noteworthy observation is that anti-human trafficking initiatives often employ the metaphor of "selling piglets" to depict the plight of Indonesian domestic workers. I argued this would be dangerous and produce unintended consequences for migrants. Therefore, as emphasized in Chapter 1, I advocated a shift from a human trafficking lens to a cultural politics lens is necessary, and a Foucauldian approach can provide valuable insights in this regard.

First, as demonstrated in Chapters 4 to 7, coercion is no longer necessary to exploit Indonesian domestic workers; rather, to some extent, migrants participate voluntarily and consensually in activities that are supposed to extract their surplus values in the labor process (Steinfeld, 2001). Evidently, migrant women may categorize themselves as uncivilized and backward and adopt western standards when defining a better life and women's aesthetics. They may self-impose national pride to succeed Filipina domestic workers. Furthermore, they may adhere to the notion of feminine chastity as a means of self-discipline for their family's sacrifice and also endure harsh working conditions because money is their success indicator, akin to the nation's GDP. This form of normalcy and individualization permeates their everyday lives (Foucault, 1983).

Second, the underlying assumptions of *selling piglets* imply a strong sense of deception and disregard the personal agency, subjective feelings, and right to self-determination of migrant women. In practice, these pastoral institutions continue to employ a victimization paradigm reminiscent of western savior ideology. Here, migrant women are simultaneously perceived as unknowledgeable, ignorant, vulnerable victims in need of education and supervision (De Angelis, 2016; Hardesty & Gunn, 2019).

Third, this symbol of *selling piglets* continues to limit migrant bodies to the labor market without considering that they may also be exploited based on their sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity, sexuality or gender (Ho, 2017). This intense victimhood labeling may impede their ability to express their other needs, as they fear being expelled from the labor market if they transgress the norms. As a result, we constrain their bodies and reinforce the cultural misrepresentation that compels them to conform and perform as the market's desired labor

commodity. If that is the case, how might such a paradigm shift reduce exploitation? Or will things worsen?

8.4.2 Can Cultural Stereotypes Create Space for Migrants' Resistance?

Foucault's micro-politics and Scott's everyday form of resistance are frequently criticized for romanticizing the resistance of migrant domestic workers without confronting the constraints of social structure, thus simply achieving a moment of pleasure without bringing about wider social change (Abu-Lughod, 1990). I contend that the second significance of this thesis is that it expands our understanding of resistance by demonstrating that new forms of "weapons" and "infrapolitics" have evolved among Indonesian domestic workers.

As demonstrated in Chapters 5 and 6, Indonesian domestic workers' resistance can manifest in a more overt legal form or a less confrontational and subtle form. I utilized the theoretical framework of rightful resistance, developed by O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, to analyze the legal resistance of Indonesian domestic workers. Thus, this may be the first study to apply this framework to the subaltern group of Indonesian domestic workers in the context of a capitalist society, in contrast to the traditional scholarly work targeting peasants, coal miners, or landowners in socialist and semi-authoritarian societies. I believe this study can advance its explanatory power. Indeed, I combined Scott's notions of hidden/public transcripts and Foucault's ideas of dominance/resistance to examine how Indonesian domestic workers negotiate power relations and fight for privilege-based knowledge positions. With the increasing prevalence of information and communication technologies (ICTs), I contend that my empirical findings can defend Scott's disputed questions, i.e., if migrants' everyday resistances are indeed

unorganized and informal. Is it merely a brief psychological release that does not alter the dominance and subservience position? Can this less overt form of resistance result in remarkable social change?

My research revealed an intriguing pattern of reaction from Indonesian domestic workers towards the dominant. Most Indonesian domestic workers may initially embrace the normalized formula of the ideal maid by performing as deferential maids and completing their two years contract. In doing so, they can avoid the cycle of agency fees. Hence, they preferred to vent their discontent through Scott's infrapolitical activities, such as joking, gossiping, or slow work, to restrict the oppressive actions of their employers and recruitment agencies. Nevertheless, they will resist without reserve when their dignity is violated. From them, I observed that some specific action patterns were linked with their discursive discourses.

First, whether addressing their labor rights through legally authorized channels or displaying subtle forms of resistance, Indonesian domestic workers tended to deftly manipulate the cultural stereotypes imposed on them, which inadvertently offered space and opportunity for them to rebel. Before filing a claim, gathering proof is the most challenging process for migrant domestic workers with a geographically dispersed live-in working environment. "Without evidence, nobody would believe." To successfully gather their "secret records" to pursue their rightful resistance, they skillfully exploited the public's impression of them as naive, timid, and ignorant. This is considerably different from Filipina domestic workers, who are more accustomed to directly asserting their rights. Instead, they might use this secret record as a weapon, negotiating chip, or amulet in their fight against legal resistance. In addition, this thesis proposed job-hopping as a form of resistance for migrant workers. I observed that Indonesians seized situational chances under advantageous market conditions to restore their decision-making

freedom along the lines of liberalism's market rationality. Indonesians cleverly exploited the cultural stereotypes (e.g., uncivilized, skin color, bad hygiene, and stupid) that their employers use to humiliate them as a form of retaliation to avoid paying the one-month compensation in lieu of wages for contract termination. Both formulated their claim that even though they are foreign domestic helpers with varied skin colors, Indonesians believe they should be treated with respect.

Second, there is a growing body of scholarly work addressing how ICTs, digital technologies and cyberspace serve as a site for the production of resistance by subaltern groups, as mobile phones, Internet access, and CCTV have become prominent in both migrant and employer zones. For example, ICT (e.g., CCTV) can be employed by the dominant as a type of contemporary surveillance (Ueno, 2009); nonetheless, my empirical findings conclusively demonstrate that Indonesians turned CCTV into a resource to help them achieve their own goals by using it as a weapon to prevent the dominant's disciplinary strategy. ICTs and manipulating cultural stereotype tactics should be considered partners in terms of historical witnesses and amulets, as they function together to preserve and defend migrants' rights. To make secret records viable, both must remain intertwined and aid one another. The legal form of resistance will "lose the war" if it does not have the support of this more subtle form of resistance. In other words, the distinction between more and less subtle forms of resistance has blurred in modern times. There is no defined limit for Indonesian domestic workers; survival and self-interest take precedence above all else. Their actions are more formal and organized regarding their tactically devised plans and coordination with migrant unions to pursue further legal proceedings.

Third, academics and activists often view collective action as a crucial strategy to alter the structure and help foreign domestic workers form solidarity, thereby enhancing their rights

consciousness (Boris & Nadasen, 2008; Piper, 2005) and lessening the impact of individual resistance. I agree with this remark in part. I am cognizant that my thesis may be vulnerable to criticism for placing excessive emphasis on individual resistance rather than considering the broader perspective of the labor movement. Nevertheless, I maintain that my adoption of O'Brien and Li's rightful resistance framework serves as a means to illuminate the contemporary landscape of collective resistance in Hong Kong. Moreover, I advocate for social activists to approach the understanding of Indonesian domestic workers' resistance decisions with a greater sense of empathy and realism. I argue that this rightful resistance framework's fourth attribute, namely "Relies on mobilizing support from the community" (2006, p. 2), aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of collective resistance. By incorporating this framework, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of resistance dynamics within the societal context of labor movements. I agree that collective action is vital and that the more robust the macrostructure, the better it will safeguard migrant domestic workers. It is important to highlight that, as exemplified in Chapter 5, once Indonesian domestic workers receive assistance filing their cases in English from migrant unions or organizations, their cases become collective evidence through their data and stories being used in surveys, press conferences, and documentaries. In alternative phrasing, when Indonesian domestic workers seek support from migrant unions, non-governmental organizations, or religious institutions, their individual situations transcend the realm of the "private sphere" and enter the purview of the "public sphere." This transition occurs as their cases are promptly assimilated into collective data, serving as a catalyst for more extensive collective advocacy efforts. It is crucial to acknowledge that the fourth characteristic of rightful resistance is frequently overlooked within the migrant context, where the filing of individual cases by migrants to address their rights is typically

treated in isolation. In this sense, if an individual Indonesian domestic worker's "personal fantasy of revenge and confrontation" is related to a systematical issue of "race, class, or strata," their resistance would accumulate into a "collective cultural product," thereby creating the possibility to "turn the world upside down," and dynamically alter the power relation (Scott, 1990, p. 9). More significantly, Foucault reminds us that immediate struggle informs us that power is not only wielded from above; it is in fact embedded and dispersed across the diffuse, interwoven, and intricate web of social relations (Foucault, 1983).

In this regard, in examining the logic and dynamics of resistance among Indonesian domestic workers, this study explored the conditions under which they employ confrontational and collective forms of resistance, as well as more subtle forms. Chapter 6 demonstrated that their logic of resistance is significantly influenced by their ability to conform to the new formula for the *ideal maid*, which emphasizes both *certified maid* plus *successful maid*. As discussed in Chapter 5 and 6, these workers typically opt for subtle forms of resistance, such as James Scott's infrapolitical activities and the negotiation of public and hidden transcripts, in order to avoid becoming trapped in a cycle of agency fee debt and to endure until the completion of their two-year contracts. However, Chapter 6 revealed that when their dignity was violated and their humanity undermined, these workers rejected the standardized formula for the ideal maid and resorted to overt and institutional forms of resistance to reclaim their rights. These decisions reflect a complex interplay between power, knowledge, and resistance, all of which are embedded within a web of power relations shaped by class, race, gender, and immigration status.

8.5 Over/Under: Who are on the “Blanket”?

8.5.1 *Can Migrants Move beyond Their Bounded Labor Body?*

Throughout this research, I have observed that studies of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong have garnered increasing attention, particularly in the wake of the Erwiana torture case and the emergence of the global discourse on human trafficking. Academics, migrant NGOs, anti-trafficking organizations, and intergovernmental organizations have generated numerous reports on this vulnerable population’s plight and urged legislative reform for their safeguard. Unquestionably, these studies are urgently needed because Indonesian domestic workers are undoubtedly subjected to severe labor exploitation.

Nevertheless, as demonstrated in Chapters 6 and 7, Indonesian domestic workers continuously assert themselves as human beings and, as Foucault emphasizes, subjects of desire (Simons, 2016). From their narratives in Chapter 7, it appears that Indonesian domestic workers want us to acknowledge that they also have sexual, romantic, and intimate needs. These needs become invisible when “we” only see them as labor bodies, and they implore us not to forget their sexual bodies. I enclose the word “we” in double quotation marks to suggest that “we” relates not only to employers, recruitment agencies, or governmental authorities but also to academic and migrant unions that claim to fight and advocate for them. For example, Oma grumbled about the stance of the migrant union, “they only saw the ‘law’ but not ‘me,’” no one was interested in hearing about Oma’s sexual and intimate desires and struggles; they simply wanted to use her case to amend the law.

Academics have begun publishing research reports on the sexuality of Hong Kong’s Indonesian domestic workers. However, the predominant topics are pregnancy and lesbianism (e.g., Allmark & Wahyudi, 2019; Constable, 2014; Lai, 2017; Sim, 2007), and aside from the

few who have created a valuable discussion on patriarchal constraints and the possibility of emancipation in Indonesia, the majority concluded that existing laws violate their rights and focus on law reform rather than the subject. As evidenced in Chapters 4 and 7, I intended to fill this knowledge gap. On the one hand, I widened the scope of migrants' sexual transgressive experiences to include masturbation, cybersex, one-night stands, lesbianism, prostitution, losing virginity, and extra-marital affairs with Hong Kong men. I was aware that these sensitive themes could probably induce xenophobia in Hong Kong society; however, only through these *marginal experiences* could we see how power was exercised on this subaltern group. On the other hand, I concentrated on examining how Indonesian domestic workers made sexual decisions and their counter-discourses in legitimizing or defending their transgressive acts. In doing so, they are not only perceived as speaking subjects, but we can also comprehend what knowledge inside mainstream discourses they refuse.

My research evidence indicated that Hong Kong employers preferred to characterize the sexually transgressive behaviors of Indonesian domestic workers as "naughty," which is a term used to describe a child's disobedience, thus legitimizing their discipline and surveillance. As we can see, the word *naughty* not only appeared in Chapter 6 to refer to migrants' job-hopping but also in Chapter 7 as a sex metaphor to stigmatize migrants' sexual desire. In actuality, this ideology extended and paralleled Indonesian state discourse, which sought to limit migrant women as merely productive labor commodities and deny them the right to acknowledge their sexual bodies. Indeed, my findings revealed that certain Indonesian women may self-regulate through the nationalistic gendered ideology of chastity and internalize the mainstream discourse of the gorgeous maid, which poses a threat to female employers; thus, they self-reduce as sexless maids. Nonetheless, it is significant to note that there were migrants who engaged in sexual

transgressions, framed their sexual decisions as morally blameless, and refused to be confined to the labor body domain because they viewed themselves as desiring subjects entitled to sexual autonomy. Rarely did they attempt to subvert Indonesia's established gender identities, religious doctrines, or patriarchal culture. Although they disagreed with the dichotomous categorization of good and bad women, they did not accept or reject the well-behaved maid category. Instead, they desired to be treated as a whole-bodied human, exposed and acknowledged but not excluded.

8.5.2 Fractured Wings: The Betrayal of Social Work's Mission

In my dual role as a social worker and researcher, I acknowledge the severe "labor exploitation" experienced by Indonesian domestic workers. However, I find it crucial to question the fundamental mission of a social worker. Drawing inspiration from Foucault's concept of the philosopher, I perceive myself as a vigilant intellectual who scrutinizes and challenges the *excessive powers* that dehumanize and silence migrants. This perspective allows me to critically examine the prevailing discourses, such as patriarchal gendered moral presumption and victimhood narratives. I must reassess how these discourses shape social work knowledge and practice, potentially perpetuating oppression against migrant domestic workers. It is essential to recognize their agency and conscious decision-making abilities instead of treating them solely as *ideal victims*. Our perception of migrant workers tends to align with the prevailing stereotype discourse, depicting them as vulnerable objects who are timid, helpless, innocent, and weak. This perspective allows us to feel a sense of heroism or savior complex as we believe it is our duty to save them. We justify our intervention by convincing ourselves that they are "helpless" and in need of our guidance or that they are "problematic" and require moral reform. However, it is

important to question who truly needs whom in this situation. Is it really our mission in social work? Does it make us feel like angels with full wings soaring through the sky to rescue others?

Based on the migrants' narratives presented in this thesis, it has become evident that the oppression faced by Indonesian domestic workers is not limited to their "labor bodies" alone. They also encounter discrimination and exploitation based on their ethnicity, class, gender, and diverse sexual orientations. Unfortunately, as social workers, we have been turning a blind eye to these issues, choosing to ignore them outright. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the most challenging and concealed aspect faced by migrant domestic helpers is their "sexual body." Therefore, it is imperative for me to shed light on this issue and advocate on their behalf.

Having spent nine years in the migrant field, as soon as migrant domestic helpers arrive at our organization and knock on our door, our immediate focus is on addressing any labor rights violations they may be facing. Once their labor issues are resolved, we take pride in having raised their labor consciousness. We then actively organize them to become ambassadors and help other vulnerable migrants. However, it is important to note that despite our diligent endeavors, labor issues still remain a central focus for us.

In my research on foreign domestic helpers, I have utilized oral history as a tool. This method has made me realize the importance of understanding their life experiences within a global context in order for social workers like myself to truly comprehend their stories. It is crucial to recognize that capital and labor are not the only things flowing globally; migrants' sexual and intimate desires are also part of this flow. When we address issues related to the sexual transgressive activities of migrant domestic helpers, it is essential to question the societal structures and conditions that enable or hinder them from having romantic and intimate

relationships. Moreover, we must reflect upon the unfair treatment women often endure due to society's perception of their sexual and desiring bodies.

In relation to this matter, it is important to highlight that there is a lack of fair treatment towards migrant domestic helpers, and social workers are also implicated in this. Why is that? In Hong Kong, our understanding of migrant domestic helpers mainly stems from research reports and media coverage, which then shapes a set of preconceived notions about these individuals. As social workers, we often accept the narrative that portrays migrant domestic helpers as vulnerable victims without challenging the stereotypes or misrepresentations surrounding them. For instance, as mentioned earlier, there is a perception that migrant domestic helpers are ignorant, naive and highly submissive individuals who require education. Whenever these domestic helpers engage in any transgressive behaviors, disciplinary measures are employed with the intention to reform them.

Social workers, in reality, simply reinforce and sustain the established stereotypes surrounding migrant domestic helpers. We do this by utilizing a type of pastoral authority to regulate and manage their sexual bodies. Unfortunately, this often results in restricting the sexual autonomy and agency of women while erasing their own sexuality and desires. Regrettably, we find ourselves using state power to enforce biopower, aiming to maintain moral order by controlling sex and promoting governmentality. Simultaneously, consciously or unconsciously, we might contribute to the construction of knowledge regarding migrant workers that aligns with the dominant "denatured" discourse.

As a researcher and social worker dedicated to supporting migrant domestic workers, I often contemplate why the topic of migrants' sexual bodies is rarely addressed or discussed within our profession. Is it due to a lack of awareness? I do not believe so; rather, it seems that

we are hindered by psychological barriers resulting from cultural norms and the reluctance of colleagues to openly acknowledge our shared experiences as beings with sexual bodies. If we want to responsibly address the sexual well-being of these workers without infringing on their rights, we must first foster a culture of anti-oppression. We cannot allow ourselves to be tempted into assuming a holier-than-thou attitude; otherwise, when a migrant worker brings up this subject matter, we will only offer simplistic advice like using cold water for bathing - such superficial suggestions merely expose our *fractured wings*.

8.5.3 Beyond Over/Under the Blanket

Here, I emphasize that my stance does not legitimize the silence of Indonesian domestic workers who pursue their rights. Instead, I challenge current migrant research's overemphasis on the migrant labor body because the real struggle of their cultural constraint is frequently ignored due to the belief that putting the issue on a structural level is equivalent to empowerment. We are used to fragmenting migrants' experiences, dividing them into parts to assist us in constructing a sound argument. As a result, we lose Foucault's emphasis on considering the historical conditions in which Indonesian domestic workers are located while researching the subject (Fadyl & Nicholls, 2013; Kelly, 2013).

Although I have presented a relatively thorough account of an Indonesian domestic worker's ten-year migratory trajectory in Chapter 4 and other short oral histories from Chapter 5 to 7, I show how powerful the oral history method is at connecting migrants' experiences with historical conditions. This illustrates how cultural, structural, and global factors influence Indonesian domestic workers' life situations and decision-making (Leavy, 2011). Regrettably, I admit that my understanding of the cultural background of Indonesian domestic workers may

have interpretative prejudices that oversimplify their reality and struggle (Vesely, 2013). This may be due to my inability to read and speak Bahasa and my power relationship with them as a social worker, which can influence them to provide me with satisfactory answers (Chammas, 2020; Humphries, 2008). Indeed, while conducting oral histories with them, I frequently burst into tears when I learned that many had been raped in Indonesia by their families, relatives, and neighbors. I often pondered how these tragic experiences affected their perceptions of Indonesian patriarchal ideology and how migrating pathways offered them the chance for recovery. It is recommended that more research be done on this topic in the future. I believe that the rape memories of Indonesian women are rooted in cultural aspects related to multiple hegemonic discourses, which may silence their voices and motivate them to resist.

Unless we acknowledge their marginal experiences, researchers cannot comprehend the limits they transgress and the hegemonic discourses they resist. Otherwise, we may fall into the dichromatic trap of rescuing them from “under” and placing them “over” the blanket. Who can determine that “over” is preferable to “under”? Or, will they feel more emancipated concealing “under” the blanket while those in power do not suffocate them? Furthermore, do they fervently expect “either-or” or, in actuality, “neither-nor”? This thesis provides, at the very least, some answers. However, most importantly, on the blanket, who are? Unavoidably, both you and I are there.

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