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Repairing (and Exploiting) the Underclass Image: The Importance of
Intersectionality in Asia's "Maid Trade"

By

Michelle Elizabeth Phillips

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Development Engineering

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Thomas Gold, Chair

Professor Irene Bloemraad

Professor Marion Fourcade

Professor David Levine

Spring 2021

Abstract

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Intersectionality in Asia's Maid Trade

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Michelle Elizabeth Phillips

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

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University of California, Berkeley

Professor Thomas Gold, Chair

Migrant domestic workers (MDWs) make up a global market of 12 million temporary migrant laborers, famous among scholars for being one of the most vulnerable populations of workers worldwide. Most often recruited from poor villages, these women work solely for one household in wealthier societies with no time off for several years at a time, largely invisible to the outside world. Despite decades of advocacy on their behalf, MDWs remain vulnerable to extensive abuse, including debt traps, overworking, and even assault. This dissertation examines the many systemic causes of abuse for these workers. I investigate how deeply held biases regarding gender, race, and poverty hold these women hostage before they even begin work. I explore a complicated market that lives on opacity and poor communication as its lifeblood. I expose how a political system, rather than taking responsibility for its citizens and workers, delegates its power to the private sector, effectively cutting off appeal to law and, in many cases, rights. Finally, I expound on the various tactics that these vulnerable women use to defend themselves and make their lives bearable — and that result in a different kind of empowerment than most scholars recognize.

There are many home nationalities and host societies for MDWs, but Indonesian MDWs in the Asia-Pacific region specifically have been poignantly described as “modern-day slaves.” To date, however, most scholars have focused on Filipinas, who in past studies have proven to be better educated and more politically aware than most other migrants. Research on other nationalities exists, but is far more limited. I find this gap in the literature untenable, as the experiences of Filipinas almost certainly cannot translate wholesale to the experiences of other MDW nationalities. Indonesians, for example, remain aware of their rights less than half as often as Filipinas, have a less experienced sending state/government defending them, and endure substantially higher rates of fee overcharging, wage underpayment, and human rights violations.

Yet, even as the number of Indonesian domestic workers swells worldwide, no research contrasts the disparate situations of MDW nationalities in various host states.

My dissertation asks *why* abuse and exploitation persist so stubbornly in this market despite decades of advocacy. To achieve a solid cross-section of the “maid trade,” I focus on two of the most popular sending countries — the Philippines and Indonesia — and two of the most well-regarded receiving societies — Taiwan and Hong Kong. My results draw on 15 months of participant observation in sending and host states; document analyses of thousands of webpages; two surveys of MDWs; and 245 in-depth interviews across domestic workers, employers, employment agencies, activists, and governments to address this critical question. I dissect the myriad social dynamics at play in MDWs’ lives, including crippling poverty, demeaning racial stereotypes, rampant misinformation, political power struggles, and inconsistent legal enforcement. For each nationality and in each host state, these social forces impact one another differently, giving Indonesians a divergent lived experience from their Filipina counterparts in each host society — most often to the detriment of the Indonesians.

I begin by showing how MDWs are bound by structures of *unfreedom*, living their lives under the constant threat of arbitrary interference. Cross-cultural gender norms and competition for power and resources among the more powerful actors (employers, agencies, governments, etc.) set the stage for exploitative practices from the outset. Those in power complicate the system of migration and employment for their own ends (monetary or otherwise). The resulting uncertainty and vulnerability MDWs face severely restrict their options. When they do formally complain or resist, they are likelier to suffer job loss and harassment than justice.

I then analyze three of the primary large-scale forces holding these women in their bind: economics, race/racialization, and politics. To begin, profit in the maid trade is founded on *opacity* and non-transparency. Agencies rely on domestic workers’ and employers’ ignorance to charge excess fees and minimize hassle for themselves — so much so that this market would be transformed without opacity. Said opacity renders most domestic workers unable to resist exploitation and abuse, and it also spreads many false stereotypes and misinformation to employers and even governments, leading them to exploit these workers even further.

The fine-grained racialization of each nationality has also slotted domestic workers into certain roles, magnifying and naturalizing the power dynamic of the employer-employee relationship. In the Asia-Pacific maid trade, each nationality is made into a race, causing international political dynamics to become embodied in the home. Given the lower economic and political standing of these two Southeast Asian countries, domestic workers are yet again expected to submit to the “superior” race of their (mostly Chinese) employers.

Lastly, governments on both sides struggle to claim true sovereignty over these women, as their work dictates that they are the full responsibility of both/neither state. Thus, officials and laws have left the enforcement of workers’ rights vague and open to change. The power to decide what happens in different cases of abuse is largely restricted to the states, which will often sacrifice these women’s rights to avoid political conflict. Arguably, state interventions by countries involved in domestic worker migration create structures and patterns that facilitate abuse, in particular by undermining consistent recourse for abuse and exploitation.

These three facets of the maid trade make for a perfect trifecta of oppression and vulnerability. In my research, I found that the MDWs were acutely aware of the extent to which the system is rigged against them. Consequently, many of these women knew that the classical ideals of resistance and “empowerment” could not apply to them. Instead, they sought a different kind of empowerment all their own — a defensive empowerment, one that endured less-than-ideal conditions specifically so as to not draw the ire of people and forces that could make their lives even more miserable. While counter-intuitive to many academic audiences, these women had the foresight to know that in their position of relative powerlessness, the surest chance for success was to *not* try to fight. Rather than trying to claim more control from institutions that were more powerful, they maintained what little control they had so that these institutions would interfere in their lives and work as little as possible.

By linking the vast literatures on immigration and state power with an empirical, comparative case study, my research intervenes in long-standing academic debates on the role of states in the lives of migrant workers. In dissecting the *intersectionality* of *how* the large-scale forces in the maid trade become real and tangible, I adjudicate between prior research that has either stressed domestic workers’ individual agency, or the macro-structures oppressing them. The key to understanding the persistence of exploitation and abuse, I argue, is finding where the large-scale institutional systems manifest in the day-to-day lives of domestic workers, employers, and even authority figures.

To my parents, Harvey and Linda Phillips,

who have given me more love, support, and guidance than I can ever repay. You taught me what it means to live a life worth living. The sacrifice and dedication you both exemplify in your own lives continues to be an inspiration to me.

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This dissertation project has been a tremendous journey of adventures, challenges, low points, some tears, and laughter. I never would have imagined, when I began my graduate schooling, just how much I would come to rely on the encouragement and help of others to finish this project. Navigating the many twists and turns this dissertation has been through – from the initial project proposals to fieldwork and theorizing to writing and re-writing – would have been impossible without the countless helping hands along the way. Although I bear responsibility for whatever faults you may find with this dissertation, I owe its completion to so many people who provided me with their generous assistance along the way.

My greatest debt is to the hundreds of domestic workers that befriended me and shared their stories despite the risks to their job security. It was truly humbling to witness their bravery and dedication in the face of great adversity. They were always so patient with me as I slowly learned how to be an ally and a friend given their unique constraints. The social debt I owe these women is immeasurable. I consider it an honor to have been made a part of their lives, however small. Sadly, I cannot name any of them, as it could cause complications in their work or family lives. But I hope they all know just how crucial they are not only to my work, but to society as a whole – no matter who may tell them otherwise. I only hope that someday I can be as kind and brave as these women are.

I also owe an enormous debt to the officials and agencies who opened the world behind the maid trade to me. Not every official and agent was up front with me, but those that were provided a paradigm shift in my fieldwork. These individuals had little reason to be so open and detailed with a mere student from UC Berkeley, and yet they would take hours out of their days to walk me through all the regulations and transactions that brought the domestic workers from home village to host family. I am particularly grateful to those officials and agents that had a burden for making the lives of these women better – the ones that wanted to make the changes necessary to fix the system. These men and women truly believed that nothing would get better until I and other researchers got to the bottom of the broken system, and I cannot thank them enough for exposing the hidden flaws that they have to work with every day.

Although most of my fieldwork had to be done solo, I would be remiss to forget the support I did receive from local activists. The NGO workers helped me adapt and provided emotional and spiritual support when things got frustrating or depressing in the field. The value of their tireless work towards migrant and worker rights cannot be overstated. While there are many that I do not have the space to name, I must especially thank the Mission for Migrant Workers, SPA Shelter (Taiwan), and the church-sponsored Indonesian Care Center in Hong Kong.

Of course, no dissertation is possible without the persistent support of my dissertation committee. I began working with my chair Tom Gold from my first year, and in seven years I've never had a dull conversation with him. He was always able to provide intellectual stimulation and encouragement when I needed it, and was always eager to connect me with anybody around the world that he thought could further my work and my own personal development. Tom, you always showed such faith in my abilities to accomplish my goals, as well, and I cannot tell you how much that meant to me. I always left your office with a renewed excitement about my research. Thank you for your generosity and kindness over the years, and for your marvelous ability to link people and ideas together.

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My research did not flourish in this little bubble of a committee, of course. Wherever I went, I found a meaningful space for conversation and debate in the Sociology Department at UC Berkeley. From workshop groups to classes to random chats in our offices, I felt both encouraged and challenged to go further with every day. I would especially like to thank Professors Cybelle Fox (who gave), Neil Fligstein, Raka Ray, Cihan Tugal, Michael Buroway, and David Harding for providing solid training and critical support at the initial research and coursework stage. I have Cybelle to thank in particular for giving my project direction in my very first semester in her immigration class.

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school these seven years has lightened the yoke so much. I also owe thanks to my parents Harvey Phillips and Linda Phillips for their courage, dedication, grace, support, and sacrifice. They have spent their lives in non-profit work in Asia, and have taught me all the values that I hold most dear. When doing my work in Hong Kong, they were gracious enough to open their tiny Hong Kong apartment to me again and again, becoming my anchor and sanctuary in the storm of fieldwork. They have always supported my brother and me in pursuing our passions, and I would never have made it this far without their unwavering faith in me. I owe my parents everything and for that reason I dedicate this dissertation to them.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	Pg. 1
Chapter 2: Case Selection, Essential Background, and Methodology.....	Pg. 40
Chapter 3: The Twisted Setup.....	Pg. 30
Chapter 4: Market Inefficiencies, or Market Dysfunction?.....	Pg. 50
Chapter 5: Racialization of the Servant.....	Pg. 98
Chapter 6: Porous Sovereignty.....	Pg. 125
Chapter 7: Sanctuary of Equals.....	Pg. 152
Conclusion.....	Pg. 183
Bibliography.....	Pg. 198
Appendix.....	Pg. 229

List of Tables

Table 2a: Countries Receiving Migrant Domestic Workers – Comparisons.....	16
Table 2b: Research Data Collected.....	20
Table 2c: Webscraping Metadata	22
Table 2d: Demographics of Indonesian MDWs	25
Table 2e: Demographics of Filipina MDWs	26
Table 2f: Demographics of NGOs (21 Interviews)	28
Table 4a Webscraping Analysis	90

List of Photos and Images

Photo 1b	2
Photo 1a.....	2
Photo 1c.....	4
Photo 4a.....	76
Photo 4b	77
Image 4a.....	89
Image 5a.....	108
Image 5b.....	108
Image 5c.....	109
Image 5d.....	110

List of Figures

Figure 1a: Global Distribution of MDWs	2
Figure 1b: Theoretical Intersectionality	6
Figure 3a: Maid Migration, Step 1	45
Figure 3b: Maid Migration, Step 2	46
Figure 3c: Maid Migration, Step 3	47
Figure 3d: Maid Migration, Step 4	48
Figure 3e: Maid Migration, Step 5	48
Figure 4a: Agencies Control Access to Governments	66
Figure 6a: Current Theory of States	128
Figure 6b: Alternate Theory of States.....	135
Figure 6c: Alternate Theory of States, Claims on States	148
Figure 6d: Alternate Theory of States, Claims from States	149

List of Common Abbreviations

POEA – Philippine Overseas Employment Administration; the main agency/ministry in the Philippine government that monitors and supervises overseas recruitment and manning agencies in the Philippines

KDEI – *Kantor Dagang dan Ekonomi Indonesia* (Indonesian Economic and Trade Office to Taipei); the representative office of Indonesia to Taiwan, a de facto embassy with a different title due to the “One China Policy”

KJRI – Konsulat Jenderal Republik Indonesia (Consulate General of The Republic of Indonesia); in this dissertation, KJRI will always refer to the Indonesian Consulate in Hong Kong

TMS – Taipei Main Station; central train and subway station in Taipei, Taiwan, and a common gathering ground for Indonesian domestic workers on Sunday

MFMW – Mission for Migrant Workers, one of the largest NGOs for MDWs in Hong Kong

MDW – migrant domestic worker

Note on Research citations:

HK – Hong Kong

TW – Taiwan

ID – Indonesia

PH – Philippines

Ethnography: when citing my own fieldwork, I use the format of country-source-year/number. For example, HK-Fieldnotes 2018 refers to fieldwork I did in Hong Kong in 2018.

Interviews: my own interviews are referenced in the format of country of interview-interview group-number. For example, a Filipina domestic worker that I interviewed in Taiwan would be referenced at the end of her quote/summary as TW-Maid (I) 7, where the “I” would be for Indonesian and “F” would be for Filipina. Numbers are assigned purely at random

- The one exception to this rule for interviews is for the interviews I conducted in Hong Kong in the summer of 2015. In these, I reference the year as well in order to be upfront about the gap between my preliminary research phase and my full year of fieldwork. All other interviews were conducted between August 2017 and August 2018, so the year is not referenced to avoid being cumbersome. As another example, a government official interviewed in Hong Kong in 2015 would be referenced as HK 2015-Gov 3. Once again, numbers assigned are random, and I do not distinguish between the kinds of officials (local or consular) to maximize anonymity.

CHAPTER 1 ***Introduction***

In January 2014, the story of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih incited international outrage (AFP 2014; *TIME* 2014). A 23-year-old Indonesian woman who came to Hong Kong as a domestic worker, she was abused to the point of torture for eight months by the woman who employed her. From the moment she arrived, Erwiana was locked in the employer's small apartment on the 38th floor with no phone and no means of contacting the outside world. The employer forced Erwiana to work non-stop, sometimes only permitting her three hours of sleep. The only space Erwiana had to sleep was a tiny room little bigger than a closet, where some cleaning materials and a ladder were stuffed. She had to remove everything from that room just to sleep on the floor. It seemed that, as far as the employer was concerned, this Indonesian woman deserved no better treatment than her broom. And whenever the employer felt that Erwiana's work was not perfect, she would scream at her and beat her repeatedly. This treatment became a daily experience for Erwiana, but she had no way of calling for help. Even as injuries from repeated beatings (from household items like a mop and clothes hangers) became infected, Erwiana was prevented from going to the doctor, until she could barely walk. Local media described her as "covered in bruises, with injuries so severe as to render her unrecognisable" (Lau 2015; see Photo 1b). After she could not work anymore, her employer arranged for Erwiana to return to Indonesia, allegedly threatening the lives of her parents if she revealed details of the assault to anyone (ID-Maid 13).

Erwiana's experience, while extreme, is far from uncommon in her line of work – that is, transnational migrant domestic work. The reason lies inherent in their working conditions. To step into the shoes of these women, you must imagine moving to a new country which you have never visited before, which primarily speaks a language you do not know, with no money or bank account, no phone, no computer or access to internet, few (if any) friends, leaving your family behind knowing you will not see any of them again for at least two years, preparing to live in the home of your boss that entire time, at their beck and call 24-7, and only allowed out of the house at their pleasure. This may sound unbearable to most readers, but it is the reality of life for over 11.5 million people – primarily women – who have left their homes to become domestic workers in another country (Popova, Gallotti, and Özel 2015 – see Figure 1a).¹ Called the "maid trade" for short, this market recruits women from poorer Asian countries (Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, etc.), and sends them to richer nations/societies like Hong Kong, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, or Taiwan, where they will live with and work for one family for two to three years with no holiday. The conditions of their migration and work setting leave all these women vulnerable to extensive abuse – debt traps, overworking, even assault of many kinds (Amnesty 2013; Luebker, Simonovsky and Oelz 2013; Ladegaard 2013; Liu 2014; see Photos 1b, 1c). However, at least 73 countries have made migrant domestic work a legal visa status (Popova, Gallotti, and Özel 2015).

Despite these abusive conditions, the market for migrant domestic workers (hereafter called migrant domestic workers, MDWs, or maids²) has only burgeoned in the past few decades. The Asia-Pacific region in particular is the fastest-growing migration corridor

¹ Although this source attempts to account for possible discrepancies, irregular migration and illegal job placement are not uncommon in this line of work. Therefore, these numbers likely underreport the actual population.

² Some might find the term "maids" offensive, but it was one of the most commonly used terms in the market, and domestic workers themselves were not ashamed of it. Therefore, I have chosen to include it as one of my terms.

worldwide, and also hosts the largest number of domestic workers of any region at 3.34 million (see Figure 1a; UN 2015). Asia also hosts the highest proportion of female domestic workers, the population this dissertation will focus on.³

Photo 1a



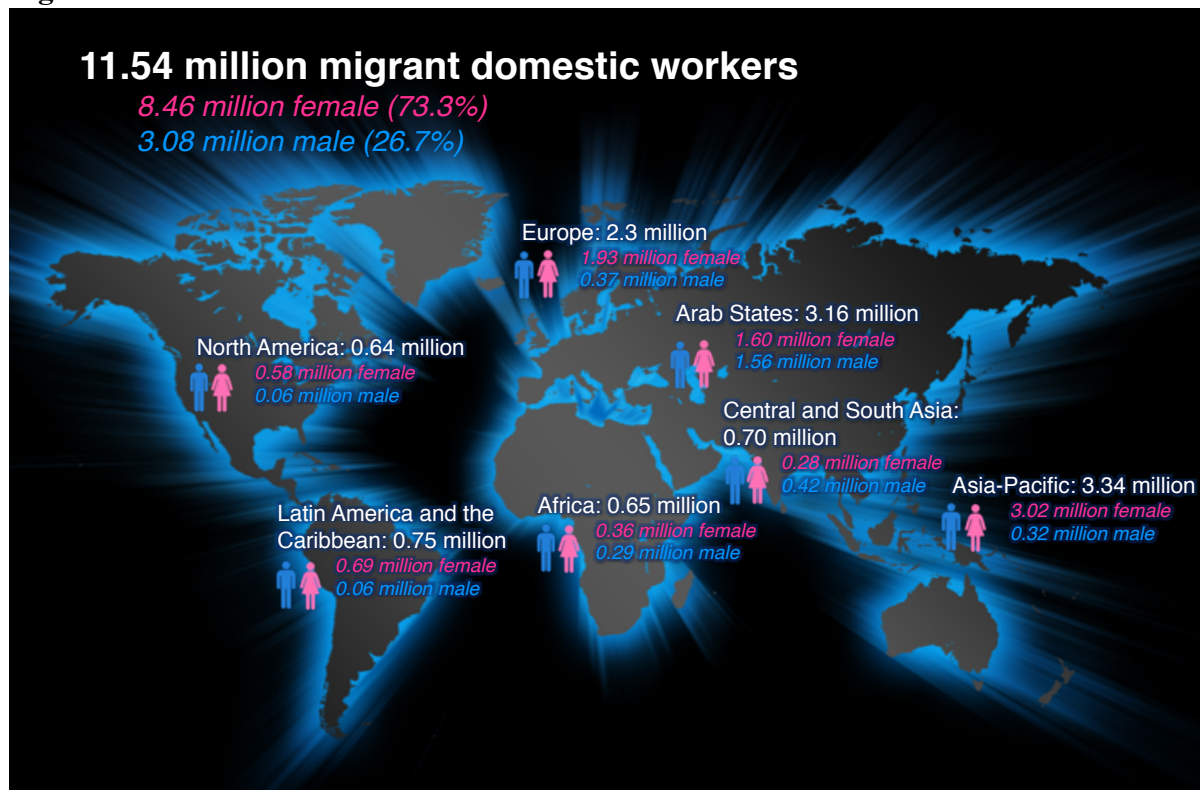
Sumasri, an Indonesian MDW working in Malaysia, had her back and thighs “heavily scarred from the boiling water her male employer threw at her.” Source: O’Connor and Nayak 2015. Photo: Steven McCurry

Photo 1b



Erwiana at a hospital in Indonesia. Source: Lau 2015. Photo: Sam Tsang

Figure 1a: Global Distribution of MDWs



Source of data: Popova, Gallotti, and Özel 2015:18

³ Although men worldwide have the job title of “domestic worker,” they are often assigned to different tasks, such as gardening, driving or working as a butler. However, there are no official or reliable statistics breaking down the job descriptions of domestic workers, since most statistics and regulations consider them part of the informal economy.

The reasons for migration in this market (despite its precarious nature) are myriad. The rapid growth of the “Asian economic miracle” simultaneously created greater demand for labor and pressured families to have multiple incomes – especially in wealthier nations (Kristof and WuDunn 2001). Unfortunately, as more women in Asia’s rapidly growing economies seek careers and recognition outside the home, they are still expected to fulfill the traditional role of a wife. The high pressures of both office jobs and child/elderly care drives these women to seek “labor-market solutions,” – i.e., live-in domestic workers, causing demand for such maids to skyrocket (Lan 2006:9). Aside from allowing the wife to work, MDWs perform “symbolic functions for the family household and for the wives’ gender role” (Chan 2006:133). The wife can still show filial piety and care for her family vicariously, while having a maid can also show off the family’s wealth (Constable 2002).

Migrant work has also become crucial to the economies of many Southeast Asian nations, with the Philippines and Indonesia being the most prolific exporters of labor. In the Philippines, unemployment has repeatedly sparked political and social unrest since 2001. It got so bad that “overseas employment itself [came to be] cast as a ‘right’ of Philippine citizens, which the state pledge[d] to guarantee” (Rodriguez 2010:xx). Many families and local economies became dependent on remittances – some estimates have remittances at as high as 12% of GDP (Ibid.). And in 2015, domestic work was the top occupation for new hires out of the Philippines at 38% of all deployed migrants (Asis 2017).

Indonesia follows a similar pattern: many Indonesians were forced to seek work abroad following the collapse of their home economy in the Asian Financial Crisis (Loveband 2006). Remittances reached US\$9.4 billion in 2015 (a measly 1% of GDP by comparison, but disproportionately significant for rural economies), and about 70% of its migrants are women – primarily domestic workers (World Bank 2016; Migrant Care 2016). Of course, none of these statistics can fully account for illegal migration or informal/in-kind remittances (i.e., sending gifts instead of money). Suffice to say, with both home and host economies so dependent on migrant domestic work, the market is unlikely to dissolve anytime soon. Academia and mass media are well aware of the exploitation and abuse MDWs endure. Erwiana’s case, for example, made headlines worldwide (see TIME 2014; *The Guardian* 2014; Whiteman and Kam 2015). Human rights organizations have decried lenient laws and unchecked abuse in many receiving countries in Asia for years (Amnesty 2013). Advocacy around migrant maid rights has been ongoing for decades, at least from certain sending countries like the Philippines (c.f. the history of Migrant International, 2020). Governments, as well, have been fighting to **repair** the “underclass” image that maid work implies of their countries, often with rights work. Erwiana is one of the rare success cases: with the help of NGOs and the Hong Kong government, she was able to sue her employer and win (Chong and Tam 2015).

But according to activists, most of these women never get justice – they may not even have the freedom to pursue it (Amnesty 2013; Pande 2013; HRW 2008). At least 58% of MDWs in Hong Kong reported verbal, physical, or sexual abuse, though many experts believe that underreports the extent of the problem (MFMW 2014). What’s more, over 94% meet some indications of forced labor and/or exploitation, including unfree recruitment,⁴ work or life under duress, and impossibility of leaving (Anderson and Otero 2016). In fact, just last year, studies indicated that treatment of MDWs was getting worse. Among cases brought to the Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW; one of the largest NGOs for MDWs), rates of illegal work, illegal salary deductions, and rape/sexual harassment all doubled from 2018 to 2019, and cases of

⁴ This refers to recruitment involving coercion, force, or deception in the home and host states.

physical assault jumped from 10% to 15% (MFMW 2020). Cases like Erwiana's have earned Indonesian domestic workers especially the poignant title of "modern-day slaves" (Liljas 2014). In the end, it seems that knowing about the problem has not helped much in solving it so far.

This dissertation seeks to cast new light on a well-acknowledged problem by (1) analyzing the different mechanisms of abuse as a totalizing, interconnected *system* of exploitation; and (2) comparing the experiences of MDWs across different sending and receiving countries. In doing so, I will contribute not only to literature on the maid trade, but use this case to intervene in the larger debates in economic sociology, race/racialization, political sociology, and victim empowerment. Furthermore, I hope the results of this research can be used to design solutions for the problem of exploitation in this market, with interventions that more directly target the metaphorical "disease" rather than just the symptoms.

Photo 1c



Indonesian MDW Sritak was accused of stealing by her Taiwanese employer, who then beat her with an iron pipe and poured hot water on her body. Source: O'Connor and Nayak 2015. Photo: Steven McCurry.

Systemic Abuse and Intersectionality

In the first place, what has remained surprisingly unexplored in most academic studies is *why* the abuse described above has persisted, as opposed to merely why it happens *sometimes*. With decades of advocacy and research, new cases of abuse continue to surface; indeed, I will be discussing many of them throughout this dissertation. However, scholars have often chosen to focus on one angle of exploitation at one point in time rather than the composite interplay of them all (see below). I argue that this narrow focus of research has led scholars to largely miss the overarching question of *why*. One driver of abuse may explain some cases, but is never a full explanation unto itself. Many other drivers of exploitation work to bolster it, and contribute to

other parts of maid exploitation themselves. I argue that the many different facets of exploitation – the many different mechanisms – all working together *intersectionally* is what has made abuse and exploitation so entrenched in the maid trade.

To some extent, the countless *mechanisms of abuse* – by which I mean, all the different factors that lead to exploitation/abuse and allow it to persist – make this neglect on the part of scholars forgivable. This market has many such mechanisms at play – from gender norms to legal practice, ranging from individualized to systemic. So many, in fact, it seems impossible to keep track of them all. These abuse mechanisms have always lain under the surface of past research – such as gender for Momsen (1999), the “labor-brokering state” for Rodriguez (2010), displacement for Parreñas (2001), or private brokers for Pande (2013). Researchers also acknowledge that these mechanisms are NOT mutually exclusive. Dynamics of gender and race/ethnicity, for example, have always played out simultaneously (see McClintock 2013). Yet researchers have so far neglected to put all the different mechanisms in conversation with each other for a holistic theory of migrant maid abuse.

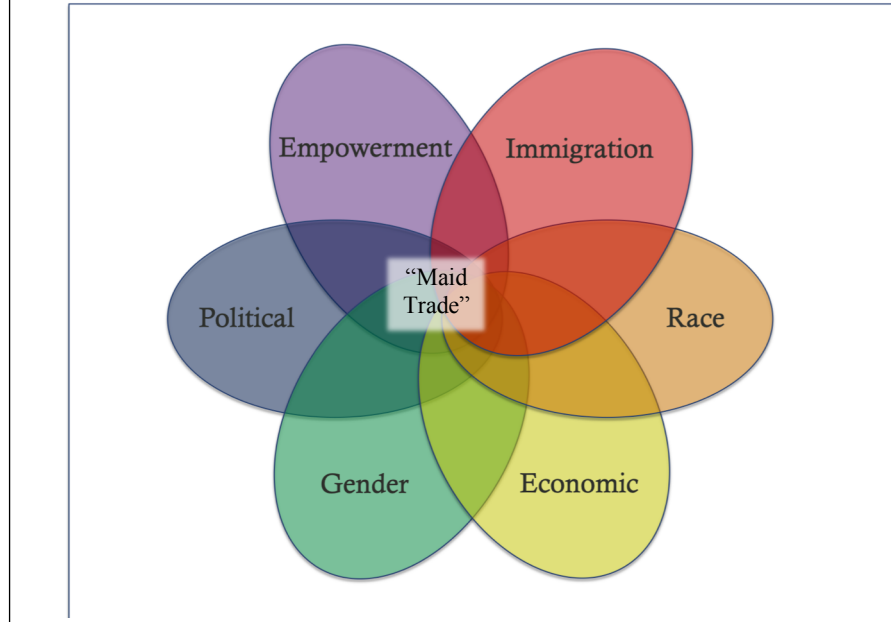
Such reluctance towards conversation among these arguments is problematic, given how intensely *intersectional* this market is (a la Crenshaw 1989, Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013; see also Xiang and Lindquist 2014). *Intersectionality* is a theoretical framework that explicates how aspects of one's many social and political identities (gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, etc.) combine to create unique patterns of discrimination (Crenshaw 1989). For example, white women in second-wave feminism fought for the right to work outside the home in order to not be overly dependent on the white men. Black women, however, never had the choice to *not* work – they had always needed employment to support their families when black men were not given high enough wages. Ironically, black women were almost always employed as *maids* for the white women, to relieve the burden of domestic chores. The discrimination that black women felt was substantively different due to a *combination* of their race and gender (Crenshaw 1993).

Over time, scholars have expanded this theory to include many other aspects of a person, including immigration status, class, history of colonialism, and many others (Chowdhry and Nair 2003). This literature highlights how a person has many simultaneous and interconnected identities that cannot be disentangled, which can create situations and difficulties that none of the identities can account for independently. I, for example, cannot choose to exclusively identify as a woman at specific moments, but not white. I also cannot declare that my status as a native-born U.S. citizen has no impact on my perspective or treatment by others. I am always and forever *all* these identities. My specific combination of identities – *everyone's* specific combination of identities – greatly impacts how the world regards me as a person, and the discrimination I face.

The case that I study in this dissertation – the maid trade – finds itself in this same conundrum, but not just at the individual level. In this dissertation, I wish to bring the concept of intersectionality onto the macro field, discussing intersectionality in the larger *environment* that MDWs find themselves in. Gender, race, class, economics and politics/international relations are always and simultaneously at play in the larger systemic operations *and* day-to-day lives of employers and maids. No single interaction can embody one of these dynamics to the exclusion of all the others. Consequently, my research sits at the nexus of six different sociological subfields: Immigration, Economic Sociology, Gender, Race, Political Sociology, and Voice/Victim Empowerment (see Figure 1b). In this particular case, just because a maid's work is gendered doesn't mean that her race/ethnicity is irrelevant. A Philippine and Indonesian maid may both be women, but they often receive very different treatment hinging on both their gender

and their race/nationality. On a more macro level, just because a state passes certain regulations regarding migrant labor does not mean the private market won't manipulate the implementation of those laws, for better or worse. The many macro forces intersecting to the detriment of domestic workers is something that other actors in the maid trade can easily take advantage of – the “exploiting” of the underclass image.

Figure 1b: Theoretical Intersectionality



I also consider the intersectional approach essential to understanding the inherently unstable position that migrant domestic workers occupy. MDWs are defined by a state of limbo and incongruity – they are citizens of one state but residents of another; paid workers hired on the open market but confined to the intimate sphere of the home; earning more than they would back in their country but still at the bottom of the host state's social hierarchy. This state of *limbo* and *uncertainty* is a crucial mechanism in perpetuating exploitation – we cannot understand the maids' systemic abuse without it. I argue that these tensions are not merely the result of case-by-case incidents or even demographic patterns, but of institutional structures⁵ (like government policies and support networks) that perpetuate inequalities and disadvantages. These societal structures include all the different subfields listed above (gender, race, migration, race/ethnicity, etc.), and include combinations of several. In other words, the very institutional structures shaping these women's lives and holding them in said limbo are inherently intersectional (e.g., the for-profit market invokes not just economics, but gendered and racial norms). When all these different actors and patterns of behavior come together, a maid in a bad situation may find herself with nowhere to turn.

Let us take the example of Erwiana. To the casual observer, it is easy to dismiss her abuse as purely the fault of an “insane” employer. Most of my research subjects laid the blame squarely on the employer's shoulders. In fact, even the authorities in the market like government officials and private agencies point fingers at “bad eggs” as the sole culprits. However, that simplistic line of reasoning is deceptive, even downright false. Authorities blame individual employers as a rhetorical device, to absolve themselves of responsibility for a faulty system they maintain (Pande 2013). To be explicit, it was the *Hong Kong government* that necessitated all maids live with their employers, putting Erwiana in a vulnerable position from the outset. It was the *Hong Kong and Indonesian governments* that licensed her employment agency with little

⁵ Here and throughout this dissertation, I hold to the widely-accepted Sociological definition of social structures: the *distinct, stable arrangements of institutions and social practices that influence and shape the thoughts and behaviors of groups and individuals*.

check on its credentials or the quality of care it provided to such a vulnerable population. It was *Erwiana's placement agency* that gave Erwiana to this woman, even though that employer had already abused a previous maid almost as badly as Erwiana and terminated her early (Siu 2018). And it was also this employer's family and her neighbors that never questioned what this female employer was doing to Erwiana.

These actors may not have struck the blows, but they did more than just "enable" Erwiana's abuser. They trapped Erwiana in that abusive situation, and destroyed possible escapes she might have had. Together, they all constructed not just an abusive situation, but a system that made escape and justice near impossibilities. And so, I and many other scholars and activists hold these other players just as responsible for Erwiana's suffering.

I argue in this dissertation that the intersectional matrix of identities, power, market environment, culture, politics, conflicting values, and relationships is what makes migrant domestic workers so vulnerable to abuse. And, I believe, that matrix is also why any approach that focuses on only one dimension will never be able to conquer the abuse and exploitation in the maid trade. The theorization of only one mechanism of abuse – like gender – can possibly blind us to the many facets of *systemic abuse*. Maid trade literature has focused on some dimensions of this matrix far more than others, and in this dissertation I will bring attention to some of the more neglected sides.

Need for Comparison Cases

Another issue with the maid trade literature is the largely single-case-based nature of the research. In general, scholars have either explored dynamics in one host society (for example, Loveband 2006 for Taiwan, Constable 2007 for Hong Kong, Yeoh and Huang 1998 for Singapore); or they have only explored the actions of one sending state (Rodriguez 2010, Parreñas 2001, Killias 2018). In regards to analyses of sending states, moreover, the Philippines has been overrepresented, while more recent entrants to the market like Indonesia and Vietnam have generally been understudied. The single-case approach has the advantage of allowing for great depth of analysis. Through such studies, scholars have been able to distill deep patterns of power plays on the state level and day-to-day status negotiations between employers and maids. Fortunately, this literature has also privileged the lived experiences of the women in this market over any official or legal statements regarding their wellbeing.

At this point, however, the case-based approach is necessitated by the size, scope, and languages in this market. The Philippines was the long-time dominant sender of domestic workers, for example, and Filipina MDWs often speak English. Hence, many English-speaking scholars focused on the Filipinas. While understandable, this approach has also made it difficult to distinguish what is universal for all domestic workers, and what is instead the result of the particularities of a certain society. For example, much research has shown that maids are able to organize and stand up for their rights and for each other through community with each other, provided local laws allow it (Pande 2012; Yu 2009). However, much of that research has focused on Filipina maids, who have a relatively privileged position in most countries (to be elaborated below). Thus, I must beg the question: can other nationalities without the privileges of the Filipinas do the same? And furthermore, in regards to intersectionality, how do all the various themes illustrated in Figure 1b intersect to impact the outcome for these women?

I wish to use **comparison cases to distill the various causes of systemic abuse, and how they apply differently across cases**. I believe this intervention will be crucial to our understanding of the maid trade and migrant labor in general. Without it, we could easily

attribute certain patterns to the wrong cause/system, and false generalizations become more possible. The Sociological Imagination, as conceived by C. Wright Mills, demands that we look not only at social milieus and contexts, but also the social structure that organizes the different milieus (2000). I wish to realize Mills' urge to understand the interplay of milieus with structure with my marriage of intersectionality and comparative cases. The intersectionality approach combined with comparative cases is crucial for grasping the extent of nuance and variability in this market. Beyond sociological theory, my research will also be crucial in determining steps to address the causes of exploitation and abuse in this market. Without determining the underlying causes, policymakers and activists will forever be chasing and treating the proverbial "symptoms" of abuse, but never the disease of systemic abuse. In this dissertation, I will group societal/political structures, social patterns, and even widespread prejudice under systemic abuse, but will distinguish them when necessary.

Crucially, systemic abuse can vary by nationality of maid and location of work. Not all sending states or host states are equal – these governments as well as their workers bring vastly different experience and bargaining power to the table. As I implied above, such different starting points mean that the experiences of the widely-studied Philippines cannot always inform the decisions of new governments like Indonesia. Each individual sending state must negotiate and reframe its authority against that of receiving regimes, which can affect how employers and agencies treat different nationalities of migrants in each host country. A sending/home state's negotiations and presence with their migrants also affects policy enforcement. For example, despite the Indonesian government publicly making increased efforts to defend its citizens, an International Labour Organization (ILO) study found that Indonesian domestic workers are aware of their rights less than half as much as Filipinas, experience significantly higher rates of overcharging on placement fees, higher rates of underpayment, and more frequent human rights violations at the hands of their employers and agencies (Ignacio and Mejia 2009). Despite knowing about these differences, scholars have yet to thoroughly analyze their causes.

Finding Causal Pathways Between Many Variables

In order to make the theoretical/empirical intervention I intend, my analysis cannot be as simple as a single independent variable causing a dependent variable. Researchers are no longer surprised that abuse happens – they have known for decades. Nor is it a contribution to assert that certain obvious factors like corruption, sexism and nationalism cause the abuse to happen. Instead, what I wish to dissect is *how* these factors cause abuse. In a market like this, the devil is indeed in the details: the kind of misinformation perpetuated, the seemingly irrelevant regulations that hamstring standing up for one's rights, even the attitudes of people in authority. These factors all have repercussions far beyond their immediate intent. The fact that corruption happens, for example, is hardly news; but the exact form of corruption can change depending on the circumstances. Finding the exact way that corruption manifests is far more useful for understanding and combating abuse than a mere declaration of its existence. Consequently, I employ *process tracing* to list out the exact way that these factors manifest and impact the market of domestic work – a method that I will describe in the Chapter 2.

Some might wonder at the implications of this research, since this is such a unique market. Indeed, despite its size, the field of migrant domestic work is a unique case – few jobs resemble it, with the requirement to live with employers, doing highly gendered work, and in such total isolation. However, while few others have this exact job description, this case is not as unique as some believe. Migrant labor has burgeoned to over 164 million worldwide, and

temporary migrant labor programs like this one have multiplied (Popova and Özel 2018). In fact, some are in the United States, such as the H2A seasonal agricultural workers or the H2B temporary industry workers (like landscaping, housekeeping, etc.). Therefore, the maid trade is simply one (rather extreme) case of many possible temporary labor migration patterns. Certainly, migrant domestic work has its particularities, and those will be dealt with throughout this dissertation. However, my findings can be used to begin conversations and analyses in other lines of temporary migrant work regarding causes of abuse, vulnerability to exploitation, and the role of intersectionality in trapping such workers in inequality.

Clarification of theoretical terms

Before proceeding, it will be necessary to clarify a few crucial terms. The first term to clarify is in fact my dependent variable itself: exploitation/abuse. As stated above, exploitation is inherently a massive, multifaceted concept. Indeed, for the vast majority of domestic workers, exploitation and even abuse are simply part of the job – they experience it in every moment of their lives, from the way employers talk down to them to financial hindrances to even physical abuse. For the purposes of my research, I define exploitation and abuse broadly, along six lines:

- 1) *Financial* – can be underpayment of legal salary, overcharging the women on fees, and/or using said overcharging as a debt trap (which often forces maids to put up with dismal working conditions out of fear of dismissal and being unable to repay the debt).
- 2) *Labor/Overworking* – forcing the maid to work excessive hours (which I define as at least 10 per day, or 60 hours a week – an amount that even the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions calls excessive) (Zhao 2019).⁶ However, it can also take the form of requiring a maid to work in various capacities not stipulated in their contract. For example, employers may require a maid to work as a clerk or cook for their family store/restaurant, or force her to clean two houses – all of which are illegal.
- 3) *Patterns of Overcontrol or Imprisonment* – most often involving confiscation of travel documents, a constant watch over a maid’s every action (perhaps through CCTV in the house without her permission), refusing to give the maid any privacy, isolating them from the outside world or locking them in the house. Withholding food also falls under this category.
- 4) *Intimidation or Emotional Abuse* – this form is vaguer and much more difficult to quantify as separate from other forms, but it is central to many MDW stories. It manifests in everything from outright threats, vague insinuations that make the maid feel unsafe, constant shows of distrust and dehumanization, or bullying. Most of the time, the intent of these forms of abuse is to cow the maid into submission, or convince her to not stand up for her rights.
- 5) *Verbal* – a clear form of abuse with a long history of research (Sachs-Ericsson et. al. 2006; Tomoda et. al. 2011; Sackett and Saunders 1999). It ranges from shouting and scolding to name-calling and derision. Clinical psychologists and counselors (like the ones cited above) consider prolonged verbal abuse just as damaging as physical abuse (Teicher et. al. 2006).

⁶ As early as 1935, the UN and ILO were already stipulating a 40-hour work week as essential to workers’ long-term health (see ILO 1935 and ILO 1962); however, these have yet to be ratified by most countries. Consequently, I use Hong Kong and its workers as the highest possible standard for overworking. According to a UBS study in 2015, Hong Kongers had the longest working hours by far, at 50 hours per week with only 17 paid vacation days (Steiblin and Graef 2015:36). Working consistently longer hours than that easily qualifies maids as “overworked.”

- 6) *Physical* – the most visible form of abuse, as demonstrated by the pictures above. Beatings and actions resulting in injury (pouring boiling liquids on the maid’s body, burning them, etc.) are the most obvious, but not all physical abuse results in visible wounds. For example, I consider simple shoves and locking a maid in a closet as physical abuse. Furthermore, the threat of violence (such as holding a weapon at the maid) also falls under physical abuse.
- a. *Sexual* – this kind of abuse, ranging from harassment to outright assault, might be severe enough to warrant its own category, given how traumatizing and notoriously difficult it is to prove/prosecute (Chivers-Wilson 2006; Taylor 2007; RAINN 2017). For the purposes of this study, however, I choose to include it as a subset of physical abuse, since in my data and in these host states, it was relatively rare.

These various kinds of abuse often overlap and intermingle; but each one will be important for the different chapters I present. The various mechanisms I explore – described in my outline below – will lead to and touch on all the six forms of exploitation/abuse.

I must also clarify my *system of value*, because much of the exploitation and abuse described above is tied to a *devaluation* or *undervaluation* of the women and their work. In other words, if the maids are seen as nothing more than “robots” or “slaves,” or objects meant to serve a purpose for the employer and nothing else, exploitation or abuse can become justified or even naturalized (see scholarship on dehumanization and the many varied forms it can take: Haslam and Loughnan 2014, Luft 2019). It may be an abstract concept that cannot be quantifiably measured, but that does not make it any less powerful. We need look no further than the U.S.’s history of slavery to understand the lasting power of dehumanization (Douglass 2018). The concept of value and devaluation will emerge in every chapter. Thus, every time I mention it henceforth, I mean it in three distinct senses:

- 1) *Economically* – in both Taiwan and Hong Kong, these maids are paid well below the national minimum wage, especially if you judge by hourly labor. The pay these host societies legally require for domestic workers is indeed higher than most other host societies: HK\$4,630 (US\$597) and TWD17,000 (US\$562) per month, respectively (Government of Hong Kong 2019; Ministry of Labor 2019). However, it remains well below the minimum wage for their nationals: HK\$6,555 (US\$845)⁷ and TWD23,800 (US\$786) (Labour Department 2019; Ministry of Labor 2019). Also, bear in mind that the minimum wage is almost always the maximum that domestic workers will make (I only ever encountered one or two instances of higher salaries in my fieldwork, and the higher salary was usually offered in exchange for the domestic worker surrendering her days off); most locals (employers, native domestic workers, or any others), on the other hand, do make more than the minimum wage.⁸

⁷ Calculated as a 40-hour work week at minimum salary of HK\$37.5 per hour, multiplied by the average weeks in a month over a normal year (4.37)

⁸ Some may protest that in lieu of additional salary, maids receive room and board. However, recall that all of these are *live-in* domestic workers, and so they do not get standardized room and board. A maid might receive her own room, but she might also be put in a doghouse out on the open balcony, or be forced to sleep atop the washing machine (real cases). In neither case would her salary be adjusted to compensate for inadequate accommodation, nor is the employer allowed to house the maid elsewhere (see Lee 2015). The same applies to the maid’s food: an employer might choose to feed her well, or they can give her nothing but one small bowl of rice per day. A lack of food was a health issue that came up repeatedly in my fieldwork; many women spent their own pocket money to buy

- 2) *Socially* – I will elaborate this further in Chapter 3, but this primarily regards attitudes towards these women. What they do, no matter how many hours they put in or how exhausting it is, is but “woman’s work.” In fact, it is hardly even considered work by most people, but is instead “natural” for the women to “serve.” This is exacerbated all the more by ethnic/racial stereotypes (see Chapter 5).
- 3) *Politically* – technically, domestic workers are not legally termed “workers” at all. They are “helpers” or “caregivers,” and not protected by the general labor laws that protect all other workers. Instead, host societies write separate laws that apply exclusively to domestic workers (to be elaborated in Chapters 3 and 4). Since they are also migrants, they also have little voice in what laws are passed in their host society, and are too far away to be very involved in politics in their home countries.

I must also clarify and defend what others might see as moralistic or judgmental tones in this dissertation. In a field like this, it is very easy to fall into moralistic anger in regards to abusive cases and exploitative systems. This dissertation has been read through for any such terms, and I owe a large debt of gratitude to members of my committee for helping me remain objective about such matters. However, I have also discovered the great need to balance supposed academic “detachment/objectivity” with academic honesty. In short, I must call abuse “abuse” in this market, even if it is offensive to some parties in the market. If 100% of my subjects were required to go abroad with large debts, and said debt was used to threaten and intimidate the workers, I do not intend to sugarcoat that fact. And I also do not intend to hold back from pointing out where the loopholes permitting this system lie. To censor the facts in the hopes of appearing more mellow and scientific is ultimately, in my view, dishonest.

Dissertation Outline

Going forward, this dissertation will expound on the themes I have breached in this Introduction. *Repairing (and Exploiting) the Underclass Image* will show how an intersectional matrix of individual-level identities and large-scale systems serve to lock domestic workers in an easily-mistreated “underclass.” It is a decades-old, still-true perception which agencies and the government take advantage of even as they try to bolster their positive image. The abuse and exploitation of MDWs as an “underclass” has been so persistent because all the different facets of a maid’s treatment work together to pin down the workers in vulnerable positions. This dissertation will go into exactly how these facets work together, and how the whole of this situation ends up being more than the sum of its parts.

Chapter 2 will elaborate my case selection and background on the four countries of interest in this dissertation. I briefly compare the two host states in particular to the range of other host states receiving MDWs. The chapter will also describe the mixed methods approach undertaken for this research, and why each method is needed to reach a balanced analysis here.

Chapter 3 describes the essential, bare bones operations of the maid trade, and proposes three fundamental theories to frame the remaining four theoretical chapters. The gendered nature of the work MDWs do is a theme that emerges in all coming chapters, mostly bolstering what other scholars have already explored in great depth. The chapter also introduces the republican idea of “unfreedom” as a defining characteristic of MDW work, where just the *potential* for abuse and exploitation to happen forces maids to alter their behavior and submit to less-than-

extra food. Therefore, it is impossible to put an exact price on the room and board maids receive – depending on the case, it can be equal to, more than, or less than the difference from the local minimum wage.

ideal circumstances. Maids do not have to personally experience abuse for the fear of it to affect them. The chapter also proposes seeing the maid trade as the intersection of many Bourdieusian fields, both theoretical fields and groups of people. All of the “actors” in the maid trade are diverse groups in themselves, navigating the realms of politics, economics, and social life, all while jockeying for position with one another. I find that these three aspects of the maid trade feed into one another, driving an intersectional matrix of uncertainty and invisibility. This matrix is what underlies much of the vulnerability MDWs experience. The chapter then goes on to explain the process of migration itself from the perspective of a domestic worker – a process that has yet to be detailed thoroughly in prior research. With this foundation, I go on to explain how these three forces play out in real time with the following four chapters.

Chapter 4 will focus on the economic and market dynamics of the maid trade, and elaborate how it thrives on *opacity*. I find opacity (defined as a system of non-transparency and misinformation, obscuring what truly happens through active concealment, willful ignorance, or false assumptions) to be a crucial foundation of the maid trade’s growth, even a central cog in its continued functioning. Academia has largely neglected the concept of *opacity* as an object of study in its own right. While other scholars have highlighted the importance of backdoor agreements and connections made outside of official channels (e.g., Granovetter 1973), they have largely considered opacity *supplemental* to markets themselves, even if opacity is crucial for the *individuals* within markets. Most financial or business literature primarily considers opacity a deviation (e.g., Klyueva & Tsetsura 2010; Kaufmann & Wei 1999). Sociology and other social science disciplines (including anthropology and psychology) focus on how non-transparency or private knowledge of certain rules benefits certain individuals, primarily those in power. Opacity provides a pathway for individuals with the right social capital and knowledge to skirt around the bureaucratic requirements of markets or policies to achieve what they wish (Granovetter 1995; 2005; see also Chinese *guanxi*: Osburg 2013). Even if non-transparency and opacity aid markets greatly, the unspoken assumption remains that these markets – from housing purchases to job recruitment – could continue to function without opacity, even at decreased efficiency. However, my research finds that the maid trade market in its current form *could not function* without the cover of opacity. Opacity is in fact a crucial part of the entire *system*, not merely a tactic employed by many individuals to ease things along. These results have far-reaching implications for theories of markets worldwide.

Chapter 5 hones in on the pervasive racialization elements in the market, using the term “nationalized racism” to denote the highly fine-grained distinctions and stereotypes made by ethnicity/nationality. My findings reveal that mainstream academic understandings of racism are insufficient to understand the dynamics shaping the lives and thoughts of all actors in the maid trade. This is a market where members of different racialized nationalities are forced to accept each other as members of the same household. Faced with both intimate proximity to one another but a highly unequal employer/employee relationship, both maids and employers struggle to define both their connections to and distinction from one another. The nationalized racism that prevails in my case is distinct from the racism studied in the West: it is based on a powerful mix of nationalist sentiments and ethnic divisions/hierarchies inscribed as inherent/immutable. This chapter demonstrates that when a foreign domestic worker lives with Taiwanese and Hong Kong families, racialized stereotypes come to the forefront in identity negotiations on both sides, embodying the international dynamics of power at a personal level.

In Chapter 6, I show that in the transnational migrant market of temporary maid work, the canonical Weberian definition of the “state” no longer holds. That is, neither state can claim the

absolute monopoly of legitimate violence over a territory or over their citizens, precisely because of the “limbo” that migrant maids must exist in (elaborated above). This holds even when we extend the state definition to include Bourdieu’s “symbolic violence” (2015). Both governments may have a dominant ideology that legitimates and naturalizes the status quo, and discredits any competing lines of thought; but in my case, neither home nor host state can impose that ideology alone, because each state must recognize another’s sovereignty over its citizens or within its borders. Practically speaking, neither state can unilaterally make policy related to this labor market, and neither can they single-handedly enforce it. To attempt to do so would risk offending the other state/government, even if the subject in question is technically “their citizen” or “their land.” Instead, both states must negotiate what I propose to call a “porous sovereignty,” in which both have legitimate claims of jurisdiction or enforcement, and to move forward must compromise some of the violence and/or power that used to be solely their own. This negotiation is ever-fluid, the balance of power allocation changing with every major case. The outcome most often benefits the host society (the more powerful), but not always. However, the “porousness” necessitated by this government-to-government relationship has opened the floodgates for other claimants. Now that the illusion of state power invariability has been undermined, suddenly neither state can prevent different levels of society – from individuals to organizations – from making claims over its powers, even if the claimants are of the other state. The chapter also explores what I and other scholars have called the “*patriarchal state*,” an attitude taken by sending and receiving states that connotes ownership of the women, but also claims the right to either help or remain silent on their plight, as if it is the head of a family.

And lastly, Chapter 7 turns to the domestic workers as agents in their own right – agents that choose their own form of empowerment and defiance that may not always conform to the classical academic ideals of speaking out. In the maid trade context, traditional methods of rights work have proven less than effective: certain abuses (such as verbal, labor and emotional) remain rampant, yet these women often do not make use of the systems meant to address those abuses. Indeed, despite decades of advocacy to improve legal systems, the vast majority of domestic workers behave as if they cannot win their rights through such systems. This chapter demonstrates that distrust of authority and strong identification with one another lead these women to seek an empowerment independent of public/official channels, and instead within a sanctuary of their only peers: each other. Contrary to scholarship focused on speaking out as empowerment, I find that silence can in fact be defiance and perhaps the only way for a victim to regain control of her life – a *defensive empowerment*.

CHAPTER 2

Case Selection, Essential Background, and Methodology

To adjudicate among the many theories and perspectives in Asia's "maid trade", I take a mixed-method approach of document analysis, survey data, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. I chose this kind of multilayered methodology because of how complicated the market is – it changes every day. And from the very beginning of my fieldwork, it was clear that no one actor fully understood the entire system. Even if maids were aware they were being taken advantage of, or would declare that the system was unjust, they often could not tell me how they had been cheated; they often did not even know to whom their fee money was going. Governments did not dedicate enough resources to knowing exactly what agencies did behind closed doors; employers of the maids themselves had no idea what to expect from their new employee; and many agencies I spoke to expressed an egregious amount of cultural ignorance. This case study and over-time small-sample comparison required triangulation of extensive data from many angles to get the full picture, and to elucidate how the specific ignorance(s) of each population played into the working of the maid trade.

My unit of analysis is both the individual maids and particular state policies and narratives, but I chose to focus particularly on the intersection of those two: how state policies in actuality impact maids and other market actors, or the links between the micro and macro dynamics of the maid trade. Each method described involves several populations connected to the maid trade – specifically, the maids themselves, sending and host country governments, agencies that train and place maids (private or state-owned), the employers, and activists and NGOs. By combining the interviews, participant observation, surveys, and document analysis, I am able to use *process tracing* – the use of within-case evidence, sequences of events, and analysis of mechanisms to infer causal explanations of that case (see Collier 2011 and Bennet & Checkel 2015). The multilayered data I collected allows me to sit on the cusp between the hypothesis-testing, comparative method (Ragin 2014; Lieberman 1991) and the in-depth case study that delves into "casual narratives" among cases (Burawoy 1998; Sewell 1996:261). In short, I was able to test the validity of certain claims while also tracing out the mechanisms by which differences materialized. My comparative design involving home and host states is also crucial to achieving that balance in my analysis. Being able to compare Taiwan to Hong Kong – or the Philippines to Indonesia – allowed me to distinguish higher-level causal patterns from circumstances unique to just one case.

Case Selection and Justification

Host/Receiving Societies

I chose Taiwan and Hong Kong as the host state sites because they are two of the *best* cases of host states. Overall, these two quasi-states have the most protective laws, some of the highest salaries, and relatively open societies (Constable 2009; Varia 2007; Wang et. al. 2018). Domestic workers and private agencies consistently referred to these "selling" points, and their growing popularity as host states attests to that perception. Indeed, both Indonesia and the Philippines considered these governments' laws good enough to forego the normal bilateral negotiations over maids' rights (TW-Gov 4; HK Fieldnotes-2018). They would never consider such a risk with nations like Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, which have written discrimination into their laws and refuse to recognize domestic worker rights (to the point of executing some for defending themselves) (I Want Helper 2019; Kadiresan et. al. 2016; Braine 2019; Victor and Jett

2018). Compared with many other countries accepting foreign maids, Taiwan and Hong Kong are relatively speaking much better places to work.

Despite the trouble it has had with abuse cases and slow reform, Hong Kong continues to be preferred for its better pay, mandated day off per week, favorable holiday laws, and relatively stable political environment specifically⁹ (Shadbolt 2013). The fact that the famous Erwiana Sulistyningih described in the Introduction (Chapter 1) was actually able to *win* such a public case against a native Hong Kong employer is remarkable in itself. Such a case would be unheard of in most other host countries.

Maids and agencies consider Taiwan a similarly favorable destination despite its own abuse cases, and has now even surpassed the long-time favorite host state, Singapore (Wu & Kao 2017). Its laws are not considered quite as favorable. For example, its law stipulates only one day off per month for domestic workers, only recently changed to once every two weeks. But for a long time, the *de facto* state made up for that with higher minimum wages than Hong Kong, though Hong Kong has recently surpassed Taiwan in that respect (Murdoch 2008). Thus, the Indonesian government stated that Hong Kong and Taiwan would not be included in its (now-defunct) 2017 ban on exporting domestic workers (Chou and Chen 2016).

The preference for countries like Taiwan and Hong Kong reflects the four-tier hierarchy of receiving nations that Paul detailed for Filipinas (2011). MDWs she met considered countries in the Middle East, where abuses are more rampant and wages are lower, the lowest rung and least desirable; the third tier was other Southeast Asian countries (including Malaysia and Singapore); the second tier was East Asian societies, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, and possibly Korea and Japan; and the highest tier, in their view, encompassed Western countries (see also Parreñas 2015, Paul 2017). Thus, excluding countries like Italy and the US (which Indonesian MDWs rarely migrate to or even consider, in my fieldwork), Hong Kong and Taiwan are perceived as the best places to work for MDWs. Table 2a compares these two receiving societies to the most common destinations for Indonesians and MDWs around the world.

Notwithstanding all these positives, however, abuse cases and exploitation still happen in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In fact, certain forms of abuse (verbal and debt traps) are very common. I argue that this is because the *same elements* that allow for horrendous abuse in the Middle East (see HRW 2008; Pande 2013) are in fact still present in Hong Kong and Taiwan maid trade systems to a lesser degree. The laws may be better on the surface, the society may be less accepting of abuse of women, and there may be better safety nets for employers and maids. But fundamentally, the basis of exploitation remains. First, the concept of a servant/slave is still relatively acceptable in traditional Chinese culture, leading to “ownership” behavior reminiscent of the Confucian bonds based on filial piety, subordination and service (see Smith 1994; Hamlett 2017).¹⁰ Second, a domestic worker is still dependent on the approval of one person in a highly subjective and emotional line of work (though not as extreme as the Middle East’s kafala system – see HRW 2008; Pande 2013; Lori 2013). Third, the women still live and work in one confined space, private and isolated from outside supervision with few means to defend themselves. Fourth, lack of oversight and false rumors remain rampant. And fifth, reliance on the most

⁹ It is unclear at this point how the Communist Party of China’s new national security law implemented in Hong Kong might impact the perception of Hong Kong’s stability (Kirby 2020).

¹⁰ See also what Abdul Razak calls much of Asia’s “soft spot”: many people and leaders do not believe that power corrupts fully (2000:94). Hence, they often behave as if it is within their rights to spin webs of cronies and demand complete obedience from their subordinates.

Table 2a:

Countries Receiving Migrant Domestic Workers – Comparisons									
	Relevant Laws ¹¹	Rest days	Freedom to Quit	Incurring Fees	Number of MDWs	Living Arrangements	Insurance Coverage	Overtime Compensation	Confiscation of Passports allowed?
<i>Major host societies</i>	Salary per month (converted to US\$)								
Taiwan	NTD17,000 (US\$562)	1/month, or 1/every 2 weeks	yes	NTD17,000 - NTD100,000 (US\$562-\$3365) one-time; NTD1800-NTD1500 (US\$60.55-\$50.46)/month	260,500	live with employers	provided nationally	no	no
Hong Kong	HK\$4,630 (US\$597)	1/week	yes	HKD15,000-HKD20,000 (US\$1935-\$2580)	386,075	"reasonable accommodation" – live with employers	employers required to buy	no	no
Singapore	Depends on nationality: S\$550 (US\$394) for Filipinas and Indonesians	1/week	yes	4-5 months of salary (UPDATE with Multinational Maids)	261,900	live with employers; more detailed instructions	employers required to buy	no	no
Malaysia	Depends on nationality: MYR1707 (US\$400) for Filipinas, MYR900 (\$214) for Indonesians	1/week	conditional	MYR12,000 to MYR18,000 (US\$2,900-\$4,300)	320,000	"reasonable accommodation" – live with employers	Not required	no	yes
Saudi Arabia	Depends on nationality: SAR600-800 (US\$160-\$213) generally; SAR1500 (US\$400) for Filipinas	1/week ¹²	<i>kafala</i> system: maid is bound to employer; only allowed to leave if employer approves; fined if they do leave	none for maids - paid by employers	1 million ¹³	"suitable accommodations" – live with employers	employers buy through placement agency	no	yes
Kuwait	Depends on nationality: KWD60 (US\$198) generally; KWD120 (US\$390) for Filipinas	1/week; BUT only for "break"; movement is restricted	<i>kafala</i> system: maid is bound to employer; only allowed to leave if employer approves	none for maids - paid by employers	620,000	live with employers	employers provide medical treatment, no insurance	no	Depends on nationality: Philippines no, others yes
UAE	Depends on nationality: Dh1,469 (US\$400) for Filipinas, Dh800 (US\$214) for Indonesians	1/week; BUT only for "break"; movement is restricted	<i>kafala</i> system: maid is bound to employer; only allowed to leave if employer approves	none for maids - paid by employers	750,000	live with employers	Required in some cities, but not all	no	yes

Sources: see Appendix A

- ¹¹ Note that I am comparing laws on the books as opposed to the implementation of the laws. Implementation of laws like salaries, incurred fees and days off are notoriously poorly enforced in many of these host nations, and MDWs will often take into account poor implementation of laws when they choose where to go.
- ¹² Although rest day laws are on the books, human rights organizations have long decried that maids in the Middle East almost never get their mandated rest day. Significantly, the maids that I spoke to were aware of this oversight, and never expected to get weekly rest days if they worked in the Middle East.
- ¹³ Saudi official statistics do not distinguish between domestic worker "maids" and other categories, such as drivers; thus, this is a best-guess estimate.

vulnerable victims to report crime makes intimidation the rule of the day. Such a system still paves the way for abuse to happen – provides *potential* – even if it does not guarantee it.

Hong Kong and Taiwan also have several other traits that make them ideal for comparison – both similarities and differences. In terms of similarities, both are “quasi-states”: Hong Kong is a “Special Administrative Region” of China, but granted unusual authority up till the time of writing (2019) under the “一国两制 [One Country, Two Systems]” agreement¹⁴; and the Republic of China (Taiwan) is a de facto state for decades, but not widely recognized by the global community. Both states have had to function under the shadow of a rising Communist China, and face similar pressures to conform and join the Mainland. Yet both states have thrived and grown in economic standing in their own right in the region, known for half a century as two of the four “Asian Tigers.” Both now rank in the top three Asia-Pacific populations by GDP per capita (behind only Singapore) (CIA 2017). Furthermore, both are majority Han Chinese ethnically, with a similar written language and similarly uniform cultural backgrounds (as compared to Singapore, which has sizable Malay and Indian minorities besides the Han majority). Politically speaking, both sought to develop relatively liberal democratic systems under unfavorable conditions.

However, here the contrast emerges: Taiwan has by many measures succeeded in forming a democracy since martial law was lifted in 1987, while Hong Kong is still (violently) struggling to attain democracy (Jacobs 2012; Victor 2019). And while Hong Kong has maintained close ties with Mainland China for business and political reasons, Taiwan has been leaning far more towards full independence (refer to the 2020 presidential election and the “landslide” victory of the Democratic Progressive Party, which advocates “defend[ing] our sovereignty” from Mainland China: Kuo 2020). Ultimately, after all, Hong Kong is technically under PRC sovereignty regardless of its procedural autonomy; Taiwan (strictly, the Republic of China) answers to no higher authority. These differences are relevant to the case of MDWs in terms of how laws can be passed, and how they might be enforced. Taiwan, in an effort to assert an identity as a legitimate state separate from China, might lean towards being more progressive for a public show (see some of the reasoning behind its legalization of gay marriage: Tan 2019). Hong Kong, on the other hand, is not trying to be a sovereign state, and instead may choose to appease the PRC first and foremost to avoid excess conflict.¹⁵

With over 645,000 foreign maids between them, Taiwan and Hong Kong demonstrate just how much influence Greater China’s wealth exerts on other nations. While they are not official countries as such, in the maid trade context, they are the governments with greater power, politically and economically. Consequently, sending states must still reposition their authority against that of these regimes, pleasing them enough to maintain their flow of migrants. As Parreñas puts it, “the lesser economic power of sending nations vis-à-vis receiving nations means their lesser political power” (2001:1138). Yet both states have also been under international scrutiny for recent abuse cases, forcing them to negotiate with sending states and

¹⁴ Up until 1997, Hong Kong was a British colony, and developed much of its current political system under the supervision of the British rather than the Communist Party of China, even if the British empire did not grant the Hong Kong populace full democratic rights (Carroll 2007). After the British Empire’s 99-year lease was up, it handed Hong Kong back to the PRC peacefully. According to this arrangement, the PRC will allow Hong Kong to maintain the system of governance set up by the British for the 50 years following the handover, rather than impose its own provincial governance system on the city, in the hopes of smoothing this transition (Basic Law, Article 5).

¹⁵ Even in the current situation of political unrest in the Greater China area, this may remain the case. In order to focus on the political conflict, issues like the rights of MDWs may be regarded as of secondary importance (Brasher 2020; Joles and Chu 2019).

NGOs over domestic worker protections (Henley 2015; Chong and Tam 2015). In this context, Hong Kong and Taiwan's cultural similarities but different systems of government provide an ideal site of comparison regarding policy effectiveness. It allows my analysis to be less concerned with differences in policy implementation across cases due to cultural bias, and instead analyze how different policies *within a similar cultural context* succeed or fail.

Home/Sending States

Indonesia and the Philippines also provide an excellent comparison case as sending states. The two do have a set of similarities that place them in the same playing field for comparison. Both are archipelagic states in the tropics/subtropical region (and subject to all the extreme climate and weather that entails), with a long history of naval trade and exchange. The official languages of the two nations are also quite similar, being of the same language family, having many cognates and nearly identical pronunciation (Del Rosario 1968). Both economies are struggling, particularly in the rural areas. The two nations are also infamous for poor infrastructure and underdevelopment – hence the need for exporting labor. For both, the export of labor has become a vital crutch (see Chapter 1). The Philippines has been sending its citizens to various nations as migrant workers for decades, with millions working abroad today. Indonesia, by contrast, is a more recent entry to the temporary migrant labor market, but in many host countries its migrants are beginning to match the Filipinos in numbers (in Taiwan, for example, Indonesians comprise over 76% of the domestic worker market, according to the National Immigration Agency).

Of course, the Philippines and Indonesia are far from identical. The many political and cultural differences between the two countries are obvious. The Philippines is a long-time democracy, while Indonesia is emerging from a dictatorship; one is mostly Catholic, the other is the largest Muslim nation in the world; and the two Southeast Asian nations have vastly unequal bases for rights activism historically and currently. Government involvement in migration has also been vastly different. While Manila has spoken out against abuses and demanded fair wages for its citizens abroad since the 1980s, Indonesia has remained slower to respond to needs and pleas of its migrants. Aside from outright banning migration to certain countries, the Indonesian government has done little but perpetuate their migrant women's subjugation by delegating all its power to maid agencies, which are famous for bribery and holding maids in debt (see Chapter 3 for more details).

Consequently, even similar policies might have differential effects among these different populations of migrants, because they will respond differently based on their background. Filipinas, for example, have been taught about rights and activism much of their lives, through advocacy in the Philippines and support from the Catholic Church. That history, I and other scholars before me found, has made Filipinas bolder in asserting their rights (see Rodriguez 2010; Loveband 2004). Indonesians, on the other hand, do not have that same background (to be elaborated in coming chapters). Thus, assuming the policies that work for Filipinas will work the same way for Indonesians is short-sighted. Left unchecked, those policies might in fact lead to worse exploitation. In order to make my findings generalizable, highlighting the similarities and differences between a veteran and emerging sending state is ideal.

In essence, I have two levels of overlapping comparison cases, making for four possible combinations: Filipinos in Hong Kong, Filipinos in Taiwan, Indonesians in Hong Kong, and Indonesians in Taiwan. Using a smaller version of Ragin's Boolean method – by comparing the

combinations of variables in each case – I will distill what holds constant in all these cases despite their differences, while also discerning what is unique to each (Ragin 2014). Certain variables will be constant across the cases, but the outcome might still be different. This approach is necessary because my dependent variable – *exploitation* – is an inherently multifaceted and complicated topic. As described in the introduction, there are six elements of exploitation and/or abuse that I intend to analyze, and each element must be considered from multiple angles. Only by looking at the *interaction* between multiple aspects in the four cases can I claim to uncover the causal mechanisms and processes by which exploitation arises.

Research Design

My research took place over 15 months between the summer of 2015 and the summer of 2018, across all four countries involved. Initially, I received a small grant from the University of California, Berkeley to conduct preliminary research in Hong Kong for three months. Because I had lived, worked and volunteered in Hong Kong for two years prior to beginning my graduate career, I already had several close connections to call on to begin the research, including an Indonesian “care center” (for education and recreation on holidays). I was also incredibly fortunate to be introduced to several other crucial actors in the market, either by mutual friends or meeting them at events. For many other important parties, I was able to purposefully sample and recruit interviewees, with most of them being willing to speak honestly as long as their names were not used. Because this is a market that involves the most intimate sphere of people’s lives, these personal connections were crucial to obtaining consent and truthful answers: without time to develop a relationship, it was clear that none of the actors in this market would have trusted me. Even after knowing me for a while, some were still reluctant to open up about their lives until they saw me participating in their routine activities just like one of them.

After conducting approximately 60 interviews of maids, employers, government officials, and agencies in the summer of 2015, I realized how complicated the project was to become. The hours I spent in fieldwork impressed on me even further how much nuance would be left unaddressed by simply relying on the interviews or official documents alone. It also put in stark relief my own limitations as a researcher. I already spoke Mandarin fluently, which combined with English allowed me to speak to most Hong Kong and Filipino actors in this market (although Cantonese was still outside my ability); however, all of the interviews conducted with the Indonesian domestic workers required a translator, which most often had to be an NGO worker or another maid. This hindered much of the natural communication needed to obtain the rich data that interviews offer.

Additionally, it made the disadvantages of the Indonesian maids stand out in stark relief, in particular how I was perpetuating them. No local actors spoke their native language, and their language training in preparation for living in Hong Kong was grossly inadequate. Consequently, upon returning to the United States to complete coursework and the Master’s thesis for my dissertation, I undertook language study for a year to learn Indonesian, and attained a high enough level of the language to conduct the Indonesian-language interviews on my own without the need for a translator, whether with the domestic workers, agencies, or officials. Subsequent to that, only a handful of interviews with Filipina maids required the help of a Tagalog translator, but all others were conducted by me in English, Chinese, and Indonesian.

The second phase took place from August 2017-August 2018, going through all four countries of interest in those 12 months: Indonesia, Taiwan, Hong Kong (once again), and the Philippines, with generous funding from UC Berkeley’s Sociology Department and Fulbright

Taiwan. Thanks to my three initial months in Hong Kong, I was able to make and build strong connections in all four of these countries before going, and was able to stay in touch with them long after the official fieldwork phase had ended. Access to interviewees was largely informal, opened by my time in the field with participant observation and social time. In that time, I completed 245 interviews (each ranging from 45 minutes to three hours), collected 5000 pages of various documents to analyze, completed over 1500 hours of participant observation (ranging from quiet one-on-one sessions to protests of thousands), and collected two surveys (in Hong Kong only, however). The general distribution of the data I've collected is in the table below, and I describe the purpose of each method and how it contributes to my dissertation in their respective sections.

Table 2b:

Research Data Collected			
<i>Site and Duration</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Subjects</i>	<i>Number of subjects / respondents or locations</i>
Indonesia (Jakarta and 15 other rural areas) <i>2 months: August 2017-September 2017</i> Cited as "ID"	Interviews	Maids (returnees) Government officials (national and local) Training agencies NGO workers	30 10 3 6
	Participant Observation	Homes/families of returnees (informal) Training agencies	~7 2
	Document Collection	Training agencies Government offices	2 4 departments (books)
Taiwan (mostly Taipei and surrounding areas) <i>7 months: September 2017-mid-March 2018; May 2018-June 2018</i> Cited as "TW"	Interviews	Maids (Indonesian) Maids (Filipina) Employers Placement agencies Foreign Consulates Local government NGO workers	33 11 12 8 3 (2 Indonesia, and 1 Philippines) 5 5
	Participant Observation	NGO shelters Detention centers Extras (court, medical, employer's houses)	2-3; every weekend 3, twice/week Informal, dozens of times independently
	Document Collection	Placement agencies Local government Consulate offices Local media	10 agencies, pamphlets and books 2 departments 2 departments, outreach programs 5 outlets (span 10 years)
Hong Kong <i>5 months: May 2015-August 2015; mid-March 2018-May 2018</i>	Interviews	Maids (Indonesian) Maids (Filipina) Employers Placement agencies Consulates Local government	37 14 17 17 4 3 (2 departments)

Cited as “HK”		NGO workers	5
	Participant Observation	NGO shelters	1-2 sites, weekends and weekdays for two months
		Churches Care center	Every weekend Every weekend for three months
		Others (protests, medical, court, etc.)	Informal, dozens of times independently
Survey	Phone survey MFMW	200 1115	
Document Collection	Placement agencies Local government offices Foreign consulates Local media	20 agencies 2 departments 2 departments each 5 outlets (span 20 years)	
The Philippines (mostly Manila) <i>1 month: July 2018</i> Cited as “PH”	Interviews	Maids (returnees)	12
		Government officials (national and local)	4
		Training agencies	5
NGO workers		5	
Participant Observation	Homes/families of returnees (informal)	Approximately 3, not including other outings	
	Training agencies NGO shelter	3 1 site	
Document Collection	Training agencies Government offices	5 agencies 5 departments	

Document Analysis

The documents I analyzed included agency advertisements, laws, court cases, and local media reports. Indonesian maids can only work abroad if sponsored by a private placement agency (“Hiring an Indonesian Helper” 2008). Thus, the way these agencies portray Indonesian domestic workers to their clients (often as more “submissive” and traditional than their Filipina counterparts) can have substantial, unconscious effects on perceptions, expectations and even treatment of a maid. I collected materials from a random sample of dozens of agencies in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and was able to get a handful from agencies in Indonesia and the Philippines (though these training agencies did not use much). These agencies were selected out of Hong Kong and Taiwan’s official list of licensed agencies, but I also purposefully included some of the largest agencies in these countries – given how large of a market share some of them hold, being in charge of tens of thousands of domestic workers, they could not be overlooked.

Documents were collected through webscraping of websites (of the select agencies that had websites), and in-person visits to collect brochures, booklets, and any taking photos of any information agencies would have on display publicly. In regards to agency documents, however, one of my most significant findings was that agencies rarely used such documentation. A surprising majority of agencies in all four countries did not have websites or an online presence at all, while physical brochures were fairly sparse. Agencies preferred to handle business in person or through word of mouth. I will elaborate this business model in Chapter 3, and explain why it is theoretically significant to our understanding of systemic abuse in Chapter 4.

Agency websites and advertisements were the largest part of my analysis. However, I also did some qualitative analysis of other documents. Media portrayals of maids, for example, serve as public representations of these women, either making their treatment salient to Hong Kong or Taiwanese citizens or silencing their plight. Furthermore, the language of official regulations surrounding MDWs can provide a crucial point of comparison to media and agency portrayals. The subtleties of language in all these documents can invoke quite disparate reactions from readers, drawing on or breaking down particular stereotypes. Textual and interpretive analysis allowed me to capture exactly which stereotypes are most common, as well as changes in portrayals over time.

Most of these documents were processed through python script textual analysis, but I also delved into more detailed textual analysis of some more crucial pieces to present a more holistic understanding (see Appendix B for more details). For the agency sites scraped from the web especially, the data were so massive (each country comprising thousands of pages and millions of words) that aside from a few in-depth case studies, I had to rely on word count techniques. The general metadata for my webscraped agency data are provided in Table 2c. In this endeavor, I am deeply indebted to eight UC Berkeley students and recent graduates that assisted me in adapting the code for every website as needed (all named in the Acknowledgements).

Table 2c:

Webscraping Metadata					
	<i>Hong Kong</i>	<i>Taiwan</i>	<i>Philippines</i>	<i>Indonesia</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Number of Agencies</i>	27	19	19	23	88
<i>Total pages of Agencies scraped</i>	4049	2386	2663	2447	11,545

Surveys

To determine how prolific exploitative cases and practices are, and whether the changing Hong Kong and Indonesian policies are facilitating this exploitation, I launched an online survey for maids that can be taken on their smartphones. Using snowball sampling (which is the best way to secure both truthful answers and the trust of maids in such vulnerable positions), I collected about 200 responses from Hong Kong. In exchange for helping them with advanced statistical analysis, the Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW) in Hong Kong also granted me access to their survey of over 1100 domestic workers in the city, conducted through in-person recruiting at public gathering places. The surveys were focused on very different topics: mine on the process of coming to Hong Kong and general treatment there, the MFMW survey on adverse conditions and what domestic workers wanted to change; MFMW hoped to use the survey to better direct their advocacy efforts. Survey responses are only subjective expressions of what maids think and may not accurately capture all experiences; but understanding maids' *perception* of the state's trustworthiness is just as important as detailing any concrete change. After all, this perception will greatly affect whether maids ever take advantage of government protection.¹⁶

I must point out that these samples are *not* random or representative, and thus they cannot be used to make statistical inferences or predictions about the entire population of domestic workers. However, there are both practical and ethical reasons for this. Not only does the migrant maid population change every day, but obtaining access to most of these domestic workers (particularly those that are most abused or most vulnerable) is nigh on impossible. To

¹⁶ The full list of questions (and translations) for both surveys are available upon request.

elaborate on what I stated above, any methodology other than connections and snowball sampling could give the appearance of coercion. Choosing a random sample and showing up as a stranger at the doorstep of houses to speak to them – when these women do not even know me or have any assurance that I am who I say I am – could easily let the researcher be mistaken for an undercover government agent or an agency representative. Such an assumption is not unreasonable, given the prevalence of threats and intimidation in this market. Maids would then feel obligated to participate out of fear of losing their jobs, and would likely provide false answers to avoid repercussions. I in fact experienced this in in-depth interviews: those who knew me very little often did not give the whole truth or avoided telling me anything about their problems. If the survey is recommended by friends, however, maids can be assured that it is optional, and they will likely be more honest. After all, a random sample that has nothing but lies as answers is even more worthless than a biased sample (Ariely 2012).

In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were the most extensive portion of my research, through which I expose the self-constructions that market actors convey as a public front, as well as justifications for certain policies and patterns. Access to interviewees for me was surprisingly straightforward, most of the time – my research topic was of great interest to all the populations involved, and all expressed interest in the results of my research. As such, they were happy to give me extensive information about their own experiences and their official procedures (as well as some conflicts between the two) in exchange for hearing the results of the research later.

For governments, my connections in Hong Kong and affiliation with Academia Sinica opened many doors, both for consulates and for the local Labour, Immigration and other related departments. My visa sponsor in Indonesia, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, was also invaluable in directing me to the proper departments and people in charge. I had an established connection with Migrante in the Philippines, which combined with the relationship I had built with the Philippine Consulate in Hong Kong helped immensely with obtaining access to officials in Manila. While it is widely understood that interviewees may not always be entirely honest, the language they use to justify government decisions and frame their role in this market provides a cogent image of how the states want to portray themselves – which made inconsistencies in implementation and points of policy contention all the more fascinating. I sampled the experts in these governments: the leaders or most experienced of all the myriad departments involved with the maid trade.

I also interviewed (in both English and Chinese) maid placement agencies, ranging from the largest in Hong Kong and Taiwan to small boutique firms. My sampling frame in these interviews was a mix of purposive and corpus construction: I selected for range, looking at the extremes to foster comparative analysis, based on parameters such as size, knowledge, reach, and experience of the leaders running the agencies (Bauer and Aarts 2008). My sample consisted of agencies with only one staff member, managing only a few dozen domestic workers, to the long-established agencies responsible for tens of thousands of maids across Hong Kong or Taiwan; some primarily serviced lower- or middle-class employers, others catered to the wealthy. Often working closely (sometimes underhandedly) with foreign consulates and host governments, agencies have an inordinate amount of power over a maid's life – and their portrayals of maids carry similar weight. Agencies' rationalization of the common subservient image for Indonesians provided vital insight into the maid trade market mindset: into what they think will sell, as well as what rights they are willing to sacrifice. It was important to get interviews from

agencies in both sending and receiving nations, as these are different companies altogether (at least legally – a lot of evidence suggests they have dealings and connections under the table, but I could not find definitive proof of this in the length of my research). The importance of pre-departure training, the kind of behavior and thinking patterns instilled in maids, and the fees charged from the beginning will be a good indication of what the different countries believe is necessary to turn a profit in the maid trade, and the kinds of costs they will externalize to get it.

On the other hand, employers of Indonesians and Filipinas are the people who have the most contact with a maid on a day-to-day basis, which makes them another crucial population to be interviewed. In Hong Kong I was able to reach out to many current and former employers of maids, and they were able to provide an intimate account of adjusting to having a stranger in their house, how their own bad experiences and experiences of friends colored their perceptions of maids, and the anxieties they had regarding trusting their maids and coping with the increasingly faced-paced life in Hong Kong. I continued these interviews in Taiwan with many local Chinese/Taiwanese friends I made, as well as a nascent employer association that became interested in my work. These interviews gave more perspective on how influential agency messages could be, and allowed me a glimpse at the reasons why employers might treat maids differently or abusively in some circumstances.

Of course, this research would not be complete without an in-depth look at the experiences of Indonesian and Filipina maids. In-depth interviews of maids themselves draw out maids' perceptions of the state and its actions, providing insight into how written policies and experience of policies differ (Lewis 1970). I interviewed some maids who had worked in Hong Kong for more than 20 years who were able to give me a comparative perspective over time – including poignant stories of adjusting to the Hong Kong Chinese and/or Taiwanese culture(s) of the host state, the intensive training before they came, and even horrific stories of collusion and exploitation. The interviews were conducted in both English and Indonesian, although in the first phase of my research I relied on informal translators. As detailed above, I quickly realized that translation did not give me the nuanced and personal stories that I needed. MDWs in general were often unsure of themselves when speaking to a foreigner, and the Indonesians were even more so if they had to speak in English.

Once I learned to speak enough Indonesian, I quickly found that this made a huge difference in the MDWs' comfort level – I had made the effort to learn their culture and language, to give them the space to share in their own words, and consequently they would tell me things they had often told no one else. Indeed, my language ability opened doors with Indonesian speakers that I would never have thought possible: a white woman in Taiwan or Hong Kong who could speak Indonesian was a rare sight indeed, and even passing by I would get dozens of domestic workers or even Indonesian factory workers that immediately wanted to hear my story. Why I had chosen to learn Indonesian was often one of the first questions I was asked whenever I met someone new. When I had explained my research and my desire to use this research to tell the stories of Indonesian workers to a larger audience and find ways to help them make their lives better, I often did not even need to ask for them to tell their stories. I went through the normal research procedures of informed consent regardless, promising every one of them anonymity – and it hardly phased them. In keeping with the trust they showed me, of course, all domestic worker interviewees referenced in this dissertation are given pseudonyms. These interviews allowed me to analyze the maids' perceptions of and responses to different situations – in particular if and where they sought help, and from whom. The interview questions I used for each population group are available in Appendix C.

These interviews were all analyzed with Atlas.TI, using a combination of theory-testing codes and iterative codes that emerged organically from the data. I was aided in this extensive effort by five bright and dedicated UC Berkeley students and graduates who volunteered their time in exchange for mentoring in social science methods (named in Acknowledgements).

Basic Demographics of Interviewed Maids and NGOs

Most of my interviewees were promised anonymity, as many were not comfortable providing personal details when discussing a topic this sensitive. IRB guidelines at UC Berkeley also explicitly forbade disclosing any information about interviewees that could be identifiable. Using a maid’s name, for example, might get them fired should their employers or agencies read this dissertation. Unfortunately, this concern extends to non-maid interviews as well, since providing the name of the government department or agency size of my interviewees could make them easy targets. Several of these interviewees were willing to go on record, and those that were will be named as appropriate. However, throughout this dissertation, most interviewees will be referred to by their interview number, except when explicitly necessary. In Tables 2d-2f, I provide some general demographic information about the MDWs and NGOs I interviewed, as these groups were more willing to disclose these details.

	<i>Hong Kong</i>	<i>Taiwan</i>	<i>Indonesia (returnees)</i>	<i>TOTALS</i>
<i>Time frame</i>	<i>2015, 2018</i>	<i>2017-2018</i>	<i>2017</i>	
<i>Total maids interviewed</i>	37 maids	33 maids	30 maids	100
Age				
18-25	4	4	1	9
26-30	10	1	3	14
31-35	10	6	7	23
36-40	7	9	10	26
41-49	5	10	1	16
50+	1	0	1	2
<i>unknown/didn't respond¹⁷</i>	0	3	7	10
Province of Origin				
East Java	13	13	16	42
Central Java	10	7	6	23
West Java	3	7	0	10
East & West Nusa Tenggara (NTT & NTB)	5	2	6	13
Sulawesi	2	0	2	4
Lampung	2	2	0	4
Jakarta	1	0	0	1
Aceh	1	0	0	1
<i>unknown/didn't respond</i>	0	2	0	2
Education				
Elementary	4	2	3	9
Middle School	11	12	3	26
High School	18	12	14	44

¹⁷ Some domestic workers preferred to withhold some of their personal details. The author chose to respect their desire for complete anonymity, and these individuals are reflected in these “unknown” categories

Some College	2	2	0		4
Bachelors	1	0	2		3
Graduate school	1	0	1		2
<i>unknown/didn't respond</i>	0	5	7		12
Time in host country			<i>Hong Kong</i>	<i>Taiwan</i> ¹⁸	
Less than 1 year	6	2	2	1	11
1-3 years	8	5	6	3	22
4-6 years	13	8	10	0	31
7-10 years	7	14	6	0	27
11+ years	3	2	1	2	8
<i>unknown/didn't respond</i>	0	2	2	4	33
Family					
Single	13	8	9		30
Married, no children	2	0	4		6
Married with children	18	17	12		47
Divorced/Separated/Widowed	4	6	5		15 ¹⁹
<i>unknown/didn't respond</i>	0	2	0		2
Worked abroad elsewhere (allows overlap)					
Nowhere else	12	14	20		46
Hong Kong	NA	0	NA		0
Taiwan	6	NA	NA		6
Macau	1	0	2		3
Malaysia	8	4	3		15
Brunei	0	1	0		1
Singapore	14	7	4		25
Saudi Arabia	1	5	1		7
Other Middle East (Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, UAE, Qatar)	5	2	1		8
<i>unknown/didn't respond</i>	0	3	1		4

Table 2e: Demographics of Filipina MDWs					
	<i>Hong Kong</i>	<i>Taiwan</i>	<i>Philippines (returnees)</i>		TOTALS
<i>Time frame</i>	2018	2017-2018	2018		
<i>Total maids interviewed</i>	14 maids	13 maids	12 maids		39 maids
Age					
18-25	0	0	1		1
26-30	3	2	0		5
31-35	1	1	2		4
36-40	4	4	2		10
41-49	4	3	4		11
50+	2	2	3		7
<i>unknown/didn't respond</i>	0	1	0		1

¹⁸ One returnee interviewee never worked in Hong Kong or Taiwan

¹⁹ Three interviewees had recently gotten remarried

Area of Origin²⁰					
Manila	2	4	1		7
Ilocos Region (Luzon)	3	1	2		6
Luzon Island (other areas)	6	4	1		11
The Visayas	3	1	3		7
Mindanao	0	2	5		7
<i>unknown/didn't respond</i>	0	1	0		1
Education					
Elementary	0	0	0		0
Middle School	0	0	0		0
High School	5	2	0		7
Some College	4	5	7		16
Bachelors	4	5	5		14
Graduate school	1	0	0		1
<i>unknown/didn't respond</i>	0	1	0		1
Time in host country			Hong Kong	Taiwan²¹	
Less than 1 year	1	0	0	0	1
1-3 years	4	3	2	2	11
4-6 years	2	3	0	0	5
7-10 years	2	2	1	0	5
11+ years	5	4	3	0	12
<i>unknown/didn't respond</i>	0	1	0	0	1
Family					
Single	1	3	2		6
Married, no children	2	0	0		2
Married with children	11	5	4		20
Divorced/Separated/Widowed	0	4	6		10
<i>unknown/didn't respond</i>	0	1	0		1
Worked abroad elsewhere (allows overlap)					
Nowhere else	5	7	6		18
Hong Kong	NA	1	NA		1
Taiwan	0	NA	NA		0
Singapore	5	1	2		8
Saudi Arabia	2	0	1		3
Kuwait-Bahrain-Qatar	2	1	1		4
Lebanon	2	0	0		2
UAE	1	2	1		4
Japan	0	0	1		1
<i>unknown/didn't respond</i>	1	2	0		3

²⁰ This section has been organized by island group and region instead of province, as most Filipinas I spoke to identified with more than one province

²¹ Five returnee interviewees never worked in Taiwan or Hong Kong

Table 2f: Demographics of NGOs (21 Interviews)

Size	Target Population ²²	Year founded	Interviewee Gender ²³	Religious Affiliation ²⁴
3 global	2 government/employers	4: 1985 or prior	13 female	12 none
5 regional	7 all migrants	6: between 1986 to 2000	10 male	9 Christian (Catholic, Protestant, or both)
10 single host nation	4 only maids	11: after 2000		
3 single home nation	9 only one nationality			
	1 all in poverty			

Participant Observation

Finally, my research involved intense participant observation anywhere I could find MDWs, giving a vital check on how well my other data correspond to what happens on the ground. This on-site fieldwork is indispensable to my research, because the most important aspects of my research questions lie in the “nitty-gritty” of daily life, which cannot be accurately captured through second-hand sources (Jerolmack & Khan 2014). There were also many aspects of this market that were just assumed or taken for granted, including many cultural misunderstandings. Acting as a mediator in many of these circumstances, I was able to see how many issues in the maid trade are simply given no frame of reference to actors (employers and domestic workers especially), and therefore became very difficult to address. For example, employers are given no instruction on cultural differences, and are instead left to feel out themselves how their own cultural practices and habits affect their domestic worker, and vice versa. Rarely do either of maid or employer think to communicate about what they paid their various agencies, and remain unaware that the agencies charged both for the same service (like plane tickets). Only in rare circumstances are domestic workers or employers taught anything about rights and boundaries to prevent the relationship from becoming exploitative. To put it bluntly, I often found MDWs and employers were most often ignorant of their own level of ignorance, and hardly knew how to even ask the right questions to learn what they need.

Besides teaching and accompanying the maids on outings, I helped handle some abuse and even legal cases in the host states. Doing this allowed me to see Indonesian and Filipina maids in some of the most important contexts, giving me the opportunity to see how the state does or does not get involved as such cases evolve, and whether its actions are qualitatively changing. I accompanied maids on trips to their placement agencies and saw all the legal waivers and documents they had to sign; I struggled with some who wanted the government to let them find a new agency and employer, all while certain technical constraints left them without answers; I helped one maid get hospitalized following psychological abuse and neglect

²² Some of these target populations overlapped – such as maids of only one nationality.

²³ Two interviews had more than one person

²⁴ An odd dynamic of the NGOs in this field was the lack of Islamic players. That is not to say the NGO workers were not Muslim – individually, at least six were. However, these individuals were usually working within NGOs with no religious affiliation, or even NGOs with Christian affiliations. Furthermore, I rarely found any NGOs that had explicit support from the local mosques, whereas local churches were often willing to lend practical and monetary support, and even provide leadership. This may be a factor of availability, however – there were more churches than mosques in both Taiwan and Hong Kong. See also Petersen 2014 on rarity of human rights-focused Islamic NGOs.

from her employer; and I participated in large and small protests and seminars across all four countries. At the same time, being active in ordinary hangout places for maids – like church for the Filipinas, the care center in Hong Kong, or Taipei Main Station in Taiwan – also let me see maids who have had good experiences, which will allow for substantive comparisons in this dissertation. By the end of my time in Hong Kong the first time, the maids were already calling me “*kakak* [sister]”; and I achieved similar intimacy in Taiwan, with the maids contacting me whenever they had a problem. It is argued in the literature that this kind of intimacy with subjects actually leads to much greater openness of subjects than a distanced, “objective” survey-like approach; my work in Hong Kong suggests that this is true especially of vulnerable populations like migrant maids (Oakley 1981).

There is, of course, a limit to how much my work can be called “participant observation” or “ethnography.” No matter how close I become to the domestic workers or their employers, I could not be one of them. I am an American citizen, which precluded me from being a domestic worker myself – there is no political, bilateral agreement that would allow me to obtain a maid’s visa or work in that manner. Thus, knowledge about the daily experiences of the domestic workers in the private sphere of the home was mostly limited to indirect methods, from what the maids and their employers told me. Only in several unique cases was I invited into homes to watch maid-employer interactions personally, and those cases could hardly be called representative. I also stood out in stark contrast to all around me with my dark-blond hair, white skin, blue eyes, and Caucasian build; I could never hope to look either Chinese or Indonesian. My presence alone was enough to affect the outcome of what I observed: knowing that a white, educated American woman was watching very likely put many actors in the market on guard. It might have led them to treat the maids better than they might have otherwise (the maids I accompanied certainly voiced opinions to that effect – see Chapter 5). Recognizing this led me to vary my approach fieldwork in multiple ways at different times. Sometimes, I would keep my distance and observe how maids were treated, allowing things to play out as they would if the maids were alone and under normal circumstance. But other times (particularly as I was observing abuse or illegal activity), I would choose to make my relationship with them known in order to give encouragement to the domestic workers, usually at their request. But I would allow the maids to speak for themselves as much as possible and make their own decisions on what course of action to take.

Detailed knowledge of the differences and similarities across maids’ experiences was vital for a comprehensive test of the other data I had and my research hypotheses. And of course, active involvement in legal and volunteering work introduced me to activists and NGO workers who have been working with various nationalities of maids for much longer than I have. Working alongside and even interviewing them provided deeper insight into changes over time and the issues they helped maids deal with day by day. However, most of my fieldwork as well as interviews have to remain anonymized for the safety of subjects, except in cases where government workers and NGOs specifically requested that their names be used.

CHAPTER 3

The Twisted Setup: Actors, Infrastructure, and Ideology behind Maid Migration

Before proceeding to more theoretical arguments, this chapter explains the operations and ideology behind the maid trade as a whole. Europe and the US do not have a market like the “maid trade” of Asia. In the United States, for example, the institution of domestic work and servants has been in decline and even decried as a vestige of slavery (Bloom 2015). Furthermore, the migration systems of the US and Europe focus primarily on *immigrants*, who intend to settle permanently in the new host country – in contrast to the temporary migrants in Asia (Galloti and Mertens 2013; US Citizenship and Immigration Services 2006).²⁵

Unlike in Western countries, the Asian maid trade operates by recruiting women from the poorer Asian countries (the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, etc.), and sending them to richer Asian nations like Hong Kong, Japan, or Taiwan to live with and work for one family for two to three years – fixed term and temporary (renewable, but no guarantee of renewal). The women recruited most often hail from rural areas with little education, and enter on visas that prohibit attaining permanent residency in their new host society.

I described their migration process briefly in the very first chapter, and I will describe it in more detail below. But to preface, I uncovered a journey riddled with debt traps, restrictive policies, altered contracts, and no paper trail to prove how much illegal money has changed hands (see also Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004). Once the maid’s work is done, legal and social systems expect her to return to her home country with no questions asked, even if she has lived in the host country for 30 odd years.

This description likely brings to mind images of human trafficking and slavery. And indeed, parts of this market do border on those atrocities. This market does look at humans as commodities; the exhausting work that the maids put in is undervalued economically, socially, and politically; and the women are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation of many kinds (UN Women 2013). However, there are some important distinctions from human trafficking that make this market unique. The United Nations defines human trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation” (UN 2004: Article 3, paragraph (a)).

Comparing the maid trade to this definition, three primary differences stand out. Firstly, this market does not use force or coercion per se to recruit these women. One could argue they are coerced by circumstances of poverty limiting their options, but it is still a choice they make to migrate. Secondly, being a “foreign domestic worker/helper” is a legal status in many Asian states, with its own visa: each one is registered with and (at least on paper) overseen by both governments involved. Thus, the maids do not need to hide their presence (unless they run away, which I will explore later), and theoretically have a legal authority to appeal to without fear of legal reprisals.²⁶ Thirdly, this work is contract-based: the duration of work is set before the work starts, the women are paid a standardized amount, and they can legally return before

²⁵ This focus continues even for migrants employed in domestic work: ITC 2019.

²⁶ Although informal reprisals from other actors are a concern. I will also elaborate such risks and reprisals in future chapters.

paying their debt (some did, in my fieldwork).²⁷ There are other markets where MDWs are without question trafficked by the UN definition, and they deserve an analysis of their own (e.g., underage Myanmar girls brought to Singapore, or Filipina maids sent to Russia, Brazil or Turkey with false promises and trapped there: Lee and Leong 2018; Wong 2017).

Where the line between human trafficking and a legitimate market becomes hazy is the *implementation* of the rules. Whatever rights and regulations there are on paper, scholars agree they are rarely possible to enforce (Groves 2015; Chan 2008; Constable 2007). Ergo, although this market is not inherently one of human trafficking, it has the potential to become that under specific circumstances. That indeterminacy is the fundamental characteristic of the maid trade that has allowed abuse and exploitation to flourish. Stories of abuse and extreme exploitation (including physical and sexual assault and imprisonment) grab the most attention. News outlets naturally gravitate towards the shocking stories like those of Erwiana (see Chapter 1), and those stories deserve the attention and outrage they generate.

However, cases like that are not the norm in Hong Kong and Taiwan. While few domestic workers I spoke to (and few in past research) described their situation as ideal, many had good experiences working abroad, or a mix of good and bad. Certain forms of abuse are more common, such as verbal abuse and debt bondage (according to a survey from Mission for Migrant Workers, 58 percent of domestic workers in Hong Kong report verbal abuse) (Amnesty 2013). Past research (see Anderson and Otero 2016; Ignacio and Mejia 2009; Loveband 2004) as well as my own data also suggest that abuse in its various forms is generally more common for Indonesians than for Filipinas, but it is still not universal for Indonesians, either. Nor is the form of exploitation or abuse the same across host countries.

To explain why the *foundation* for abuse remains universal and pernicious, even as the outcome is not uniform, I propose three basic theoretical frameworks. First, the ideology of gender, inescapable in this market. Second, the idea of “unfreedom,” where the potential for exploitation instills fear in maids and encourages them to regulate their own behavior (see Chang 2018). And third, understanding all the different groups in the maid trade as Bourdieusian fields, that interact with each other and jockey for position internally and externally. While these theories are not the crux of my arguments in this dissertation, they will undergird all that follows. After elaborating these theories, I then elaborate the basic operations of the maid trade.

The Unquestioned Foundation of Gendered Work and Gendered Authority

One of the most fundamental ideologies perpetuating the maid trade is *gender*. In truth, the concept of gender emerged in conversations far less than I expected during my fieldwork. At least, it was rarely discussed explicitly.

The issue I confronted (in line with many scholars before me) was the *assumed* and *unspoken* nature of gendered roles and the performance of gender (Butler 1990; Risseuw 1988). It was every day implied, but rarely declared. Women maintaining the domestic/reproductive sphere was simply *the way things should be*, “a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character” (Federici 1975). As the ancient Chinese proverb declares, “男耕女織”

²⁷ Compare this to the recent case of Vietnamese women trafficked to the UK who died in the truck (CBS 2019). Deaths such as these from hiding in transit or confinement by smugglers have rarely happened in the maid trade I study, because the trip abroad is legal and regulated. Death and abuse can happen, however, once MDWs arrive at their destination (discussed at length throughout this dissertation).

[nan2geng1nv3zhi1]: “men plow, and women weave.”²⁸ I came to understand implicit gender roles as the elephant in the room, the lurking specter that no one thought to credit. Or perhaps, my subjects thought they didn’t need to address it (see Parreñas 2015; Kandiyoti 1988).

Many scholars have encountered this same problem (Reeves 1979; Manne 2017). The centrality of gender in life, love and labor has proven difficult to unseat after centuries of going unquestioned (Giuliano 2017; Conceição et. al. 2020). But that hasn’t stopped gender scholars and activists from interrogating the concept. For decades, feminist scholars have declared gender a social construct, not a biological or personal trait we are born with (West and Zimmerman 1987; Cahill 1986). Scholars from Butler to Lindsey have challenged any one-to-one correlation between sex and gender, and even argue that societal gender roles heavily influence how a culture views sex and biology in turn (Butler 1990; Lindsey 2015; see also Lippa 2005). Butler demonstrates that “the ostensibly natural facts of sex [are] discursively produced in the service of other political and social interests” (1990:9). Calling gender a social construct does not make it any less “real” or powerful; but it does problematize the implicit value judgments that gender norms carry (Ryle 2012).²⁹

Sociologists primarily concern themselves with the *roles* attributed to these differences: the performance of gender or “doing gender” (Salzinger 2003; Fenstermaker and West 2002). The exact construct and expectations of gendered norms vary from culture to culture, society to society, and even within social groups (Jones 2010; Lamont 2009). Yet in patriarchal societies overall, such as China and modern-day Indonesia, women are considered more vulnerable to various kinds of exploitation (as are migrants) (Morokvasic 1984; Walby 1990). As Staveren and Odebode demonstrate, men generally do not regard patriarchy as a dominant structure, because they are not the ones constrained by it (2007). Patriarchy’s power is invisible to them, because it is on their side. But for the millions of women confined by it, patriarchy is the most real and formative factor of their lives (Ibid.). To this day, patriarchy is part and parcel of modern-day society’s *structure* – it is not just men themselves, but the very setting of society that depowers women and relegates them to certain roles (Dahlerup 1987; see also Chan 2000 on the “patriarchal state”).

Stereotypically feminine work like domestic labor, childcare, or elderly care, is largely invisible and unappreciated, but highly emotionally demanding (Conradson 2003). Men, women, governments, religions, and all the invisible societal structures expect domestic work to be an unpaid “labor of love” (Lan 2003; Silbaugh 1996; Hochschild 1989). These gender norms directly impact the economy and the world, though non-feminist scholars and leaders (economists, political theorists, etc.) have been loath to acknowledge how much (Staveren and Odebode 2007; Squires 1999; McRobbie 2011).

In regards to domestic work, migration, and migrant domestic work specifically, gender has featured prominently. While an analysis of all this work deserves a book in itself, here I detail some of the most important contributions.

Scholars consider the institution of domestic work to be a way to preserve the patriarchal system, be that on a familial or broader social level (Glenn 1992; Momsen 1999). Although carework is a society-wide problem, approaches to it have remained ad-hoc and atomized,

²⁸ Some Islamic proverbs are even more insistent: “A girl must not leave the house more than twice: on the day of her marriage, on the day of her death” (Arabic, Maghreb/West Sahara); or “A woman should come to her husband’s house in a veil, and leave it in a winding shroud” (Persian). Another Indonesian proverb concurs: “Buffaloes must be kept in stables, gold in purses, and women at home” (Schipper and Schipper 2003).

²⁹ See also Berger and Luckmann 1966, and Roy 2001 on the social construction of reality

leaving primarily women to pick up the slack (Duffy, Albelda and Hammonds 2013). Even when states pay for carework, it simply institutionalizes women's role as caretakers – the women provide the service, and remain subject to a patriarchal system (Borchost and Siim 1987). In Chile, for example, women are socialized to take care of the house and family from youth (Pappas-DeLuca 1999). Chilean society deems paid domestic work acceptable for a woman precisely because it undercuts independence: she is moving to live under another's (patriarchal) authority, not the public workplace (Ibid.).³⁰ Even in India, where male domestic workers have been more common, gender ideologies emasculate such men – by definition, they were not good men if they did such menial work (Ray 2000). The only way the men and women doing domestic work could reclaim self-respect was to reappropriate middle-class ideals, like rights and provision for one's family (Ibid.). The blurring of gender and class boundaries made the Indian elite employing the servants anxious: the domestic workers were encroaching on their cultural hegemony (Qayum and Ray 2003).

Such attitudes show that men and women alike rarely consider domestic work “work” as such, as elaborated above (also Glenn 1992). Which is ironic, because the paid economy hinges itself on the assumption that this work will be done (Glenn 1992; Borchost and Siim 1987; Hochschild 1989). The same could be said for the gender norms of the recipients of domestic work: middle- and upper-class men and women by definition must have no part in such “dirty,” menial work. Their masculinity and femininity relies completely on someone else doing all such work, while the higher classes restrict themselves to the more “genteel” tasks – like taking children to the park, participating in a bake sale, or paying the occasional visit to the elderly home (Glenn 1992; Ray 2000). Himmelweit calls the work done by women and mothers at home an “unpaid economy” motivated by a gender norm-based sense of responsibility instilled from birth, which social policy reinforces (2002; Chan 2000). It is an unpaid economy that the paid economy is fully dependent on³¹ (Himmelweit 2002; Borchost and Siim 1987).

In a similar vein, Singapore for decades predicated many women's rights on said women fulfilling their duties to the family: “good women’ who perform their roles lovingly as wives and mothers” (Chan 2000:45). The Women's Charter only discussed women's rights in relation to the family (divorce, custody of children, family property), but never discussed equal pay for equal work, equal opportunities, or the elimination of discrimination against women (Ibid.). In fact, it was not until 2002 that Singapore ratified the UN's Equal Remuneration Convention, and it still maintains reservations regarding the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (ILO 2017; UN Treaty Collection 2020).³² Here, the state itself subsumed women under the male-headed family, suppressing their rights in the name of tradition and guarding the family (Chan 2000).

Migration literature more explicitly intertwines citizenship and race with gender (Yeoh and Ramdas 2014; Benhabib and Resnik 2009). Migrant communities show gender for the dominant, asymmetrical system that it is, since the women face very different challenges than men (e.g., partner violence, de-skilling, stereotyping) (Staveren and Odeboode 2007; Calavita 2006; Guruge, Khanlou and Gastaldo 2010; Man 2004). Globally, the past half-century has seen

³⁰ There are also some explicit racial undertones as regards the kind of woman who does the domestic work, which I will elaborate further in Chapter 4.

³¹ To be fair, the paid and unpaid economies are mutually dependent. But while everyone acknowledges and praises the paid economy's contributions, few do the same for the unpaid economy (Himmelweit 2002).

³² Of note, Hong Kong and Indonesia also have reservations regarding the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (see UN Treaty Collection 2020)

a feminization of low-wage work, which migrant women especially must negotiate even in patriarchal societies (Pearce 1978; Standing 1989; Sassen 2002).

However, masculinist ideologies of what men and women “should” be and do still constitute much of migration and mobility (Yeoh and Ramdas 2014). In fact, “cultural globalization often also gives men *new* ideas [such as celebrating male violence, pornography intensifying women’s objectification, and media-promoted body ideals encouraging female vulnerability] about how to act out oppressive gender hierarchies,” and may not advance gender equality (Derné 2008:137, emphasis in original). Indeed, migration has helped scholars realize that not only are borders gendered,³³ but gender itself is also bordered: if you cross boundaries of your gender, it is as serious as a “transgression,” and carries consequences (Macklin 2009). Conflicting gender norms of migrant and host communities only exacerbate the gender boundaries, as each falls back on their own norms and tries to impose them on the other (Ibid.).

Lastly, literature on migrant domestic work built on all the findings of the previous two fields to make gender one of its dominant analytical lenses. After all, the entire multi-million-dollar market for maids is based on the belief that domestic work is the *wife’s* work (which she outsources to another *woman*) (see Killias 2018). In fact, gender is present in the entire process of migration and work in the maid trade, even before they leave home. Parreñas identifies gender as a hidden cause of migration in the Philippines: women are escaping oppressive gender expectations (2015). The drive to escape intensifies as MDW remittances do nothing to change the unequal division of labor that Filipino men maintain in the household. When she was gone, the childcare and cleaning was almost always relegated to poorer female relatives – even if the man had no work (Ibid.).

In an Indonesian village, comparably, the right time deemed for a woman to go abroad is when she has a child (Killias 2018). Everyone considered that a form of “insurance” that rendered her bound to the patriarchy of her family – a binding amplified by debt (Ibid.). Scholars also describe the training MDWs undergo before leaving, as training agencies mold them into the submissive and docile servant that host country stereotypes demand (Chang 2018; Killias 2009; Samers 2009). Agencies seek to control both attitude and body, stripping away all her personal possessions (photos, phone, etc.) in the name of guarding the women’s virtue – which in truth is only disguising their economic rationale with gendered and patriarchal/paternalistic ideologies (Ibid.). Even in the Philippines, government ideology depicted women as “domestic beings” that belong in the home, while paradoxically depending on their remittances (Parreñas 2008). Publicly blaming the crisis of the Filipino family on the MDW’s “abandonment” was yet another twisted way to squeeze more labor power and care work out of the women through guilt (Ibid.; 2015).

Once MDWs arrive in the host country, gender is no less important. MDWs are put in a “triple bind” with patriarchal societies, undesirable work, and their foreign status, all maintained with explicit racial and gender stereotyping (Tolentino 1996). Though the women are paid for the work, no host society recognizes domestic work on the same level as “productive” work. MDWs and hosts alike call domestic work “unskilled,” meaning the host women who oversee it are of lesser status/worth than “productive” workers, the MDWs that the host women outsource to are of even lesser status, and the women back in the sending countries taking care of the families that MDWs leave behind have the lowest status of all (Parreñas 2015). “Commodified

³³ For example, men and women are not permitted across national borders for the same reasons, women face different treatment and policies when they cross, and most of the time states grant entry to a woman as only a dependent of the man (Macklin 2009; Yuval-Davis and Stetzler 2002).

reproductive labor is not only low-paid work, but it declines in market value as it gets passed down in the international division of reproductive labor” (Ibid.:41). Policies in host states reaffirm the low status of domestic work, either refusing to acknowledge their country’s need for domestic workers (thus relegating MDWs to an irregular/undocumented status) or refusing to acknowledge MDWs as traditional laborers (binding them to a single family with a conditional residency status (Parreñas 2010). Such policies stem from a “cult of *maternalism*,” or an ideology that domestic work is always and forever the purview of women in the house (Ibid.). Most ill treatment and class differences that MDWs face, host societies justify and naturalize by a combination of race and gender (Lee 2018; see also Chapter 7 on victim blaming).

Host women are not free from gender ideology, either. They may have delegated many of the hard tasks, but ultimately they retain responsibility for the domestic sphere. So even with an MDW, host women remain subject to the men in their households, and to societal and state patriarchy (Lan 2000; Tam 1999). If anything, the maid trade has entrenched that mindset further (Yeoh and Huang 1999a). Individuals, private companies, and social policy alike all agree that the “maid issue” and all domestic concerns are exclusively the woman’s issue, something men and the state never have to trouble themselves with (Killias 2018; Tam 1999). The state itself – both sending and receiving – is a patriarchal institution, predicating itself on the ideal of female domesticity (Blackburn 2004; Brenner 1998). In other words, in the minds of states like Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, women contributed to development and nation by being good mothers and wives, putting state and family needs and desires ahead of their own (Yeoh et. al. 2017; Rodriguez 2010; Tam 1999).

Throughout the rest of this dissertation, gender will be an underlying force to reckon with. Implicit gender dynamics pervade every aspect of this market. Be it in the relegation to an opaque private realm in Chapter 4, the racialized stereotypes funneling different nationalities into different roles in Chapter 5, the states jockeying for the right of control over the “weak” women in Chapter 6, or the fewer options available to them in Chapter 7, gender underlaid everything. Most of my results will corroborate what scholars have already found in the extensive literature on the maid trade, which I have elaborated above.

Republican Idea of “Unfreedom”: Preempting Interference

I stated in my Introduction that I focus on the six forms of exploitation and systemic abuse I described. However, one of the most important findings of my fieldwork was that these women did not need to experience these abuses personally for the abuses to affect them. Even if these women had good employers and good agencies, the possibility of encountering financial, labor, imprisonment, emotional, verbal and/or physical abuse was another elephant in the room. MDWs generally planned their lives around that possibility, even if it never materialized. Thus, limiting my analysis of exploitation to the *experience* of it would be incomplete.

Perhaps the best way to understand the maids’ perspective on exploitative conditions is leaving behind the “exploitation” and monopolization of resources of Marx and Kant (the traditional sociological understanding). Instead, we should apply the more republican idea of “unfreedom” to the MDW context.³⁴ According to Skinner and Pettit, freedom is not so straightforward as political involvement or a life without interference (1997; 1998). Instead, it

³⁴ I wish to thank Rhacel Parreñas for clarifying the concept of “unfreedom” and its relevance to the maid trade at a presentation at UC Berkeley in 2018. Parreñas’ current research focuses on how being unable to quit their jobs makes MDWs unfree in the Middle East. However, discussions with her about this theory convinced me that this concept is also relevant for the more liberal societies of Hong Kong and Taiwan.

should be conceptualized as immunity from arbitrary power, or the absence of *domination* (Pettit 1997:9). The two political philosophers make a crucial distinction here, because one can be dominated by someone without that person or group directly interfering in his/her life. For example, a wife can be dominated by her husband, or a subject by his/her king, without the husband or king directly controlling or interfering with their lives (Dahl and Nexø 2014). The mere fact that these authority figures *could* interfere in their lives makes the wife and the subject “unfree,” according to Skinner and Pettit. The possibility is enough to at least make one modify behavior to minimize the potential for interference (Ibid.).³⁵ To be “unfree,” then, is to have the constant threat of arbitrary interference hanging over one’s head.

The maid trade’s key problem lies in this *susceptibility to arbitrary interference*. Thanks to a host of issues that this dissertation will elaborate, the danger of having one’s rights violated is ever-present and largely uncurbed by regulations. The crux of problem is not that abuse is inevitable; it is the *potential* for abuse to occur with *few checks to prevent or correct it* when it happens. This system is almost entirely dependent on the goodwill of those in authority.³⁶ If a domestic worker happens to train at a well-meaning agency and be placed with a sympathetic employer that respects her, this system works relatively well: there is little disruption to her work, no additional, external requirements placed upon her, and the process of moving to a new country and home is over quickly.

When one of these conditions is not met, however – when an agency is willing to sacrifice a maid or employer’s well-being for profit, or when employers are demanding and unsympathetic (or worse) – the “maid trade” system breaks down. The migration infrastructure that brings these women to work overseas in vulnerable conditions is simply not designed to deal with abuse when it happens. It is instead designed (consciously or unconsciously) around the assumption that most actors will do “the right thing” of their own free will.³⁷ But with little oversight, broken communication and misinformation rampant throughout the market (as I will demonstrate in upcoming chapters of this dissertation), such an optimistic view holds no water. Instead, such stubborn adherence to that implicit assumption often forces MDWs to choose between safety and income, I found (see also Yeung 2020). My research found that there was no consistent method to report abuse, no clear assurance that maids or employers can attain justice through official channels, and inconsistent understandings of some of the most fundamental relevant laws. This lack of recourse led to a frightening amount of resignation to bad conditions and “luck of the draw” on the part of many individuals from all the major groups of this market.

Hence the reason I chose to focus my work on *systemic abuse* – consistent patterns, regulations and expectations across the maid trade system that open up the potential for abuse, after all the various actors and their respective agency and choices are brought into play. The remainder of this dissertation will focus on the myriad large-scale and underlying causal factors that lead to abuse and exploitation.

Actors and Motivations: Interacting Bourdieusian Fields

Asia’s “maid trade” is complicated and constantly changing. Soon into my fieldwork, I came to understand that no one side fully understands all the other actors or their relationship to

³⁵ I will elaborate on the way maids modify their behavior in response to this “unfreedom” at length in Chapter 6.

³⁶ See also the literature on undocumented migration: De Genova 2002; Dreby 2015. Here, however, the same oppressive fear of deportation (and many other forms of interference/abuse) persists even when the migrant is documented.

³⁷ Or at least that actors in the market will be satisfied enough to not make a scandal.

one another, even if they had been in the trade for many years. The different groups and their interactions perfectly embody the Bourdieusian social fields that many sociologists have theorized (2005). The theory illustrates individuals and groups invoking multiple hierarchies to define their own or another person's/group's standing, all in terms of various kinds of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic). Fligstein and McAdam describe fields as “mesolevel social orders,” “the basic structural building block of political/organizational life in the economy, civil society, and the state” (2012:3). The heart of the theory lies in how all these different fields constantly intersect and interact, causing both social change and persistent social order (Ibid.). Individuals are never isolated within one group, and may even move between multiple groups. Calling these groups “fields” is a vital check on the tendency to see groups in markets like the maid trade as monolithic. This theory achieves a rare balance between strategic action and social inertia, explaining “how embedded social actors seek to [both] fashion and maintain order” (Ibid.:3). Scholars have generally agreed upon two sets of fields: the fields of power (political, economic, etc.), and the social group fields (people who share a common trait or role).

Within the maid trade itself are power fields: of culture, of politics, of economic relations. Many aspects of these power fields were elaborated in Chapter 2 in the Case Selection and Justification section. To recap, relative international standing favors the host societies economically, even if Taiwan and Hong Kong are not true sovereign states. The internal politics of home states renders both the Philippines and Indonesia schizophrenic: dependent on remittances, but also ashamed of the abuse the women suffer. In the economic power field, the desire for profit is all-consuming, but demand outstrips supply. The imbalance leads both states and agencies to be aggressive in creating supply through recruitment, and in the overt control of women's bodies and attitudes (Killias 2018). And finally, in the cultural/social power field, citizens and migrants grapple with Chinese norms of family care/filial piety, as well as the servile stereotyping of Indonesians and Filipinas (to be elaborated in Chapters 4 and 5).

Within these power fields are “social group” fields, or the actors in the maid trade. In this section I introduce the main actors briefly to set the stage for the rest of my dissertation. Each will be elaborated upon in more detail in the following chapters.

A. Domestic Workers/Maids

The women that go abroad to do the work of a domestic worker are the most visible actors in this market. They are the most frequent victims of abuse, and the subjects most frequently written about in mass media out of all those listed here. In general, the women who go abroad as domestic workers are from relatively poor backgrounds, often from the countryside, and almost always are going abroad in search of money because there are few jobs in their home economy. While the Philippines has traditionally had better-educated migrants, recently the demographics have been shifting towards more remote areas where education and opportunities are less (PH-Gov 1; PH-NGO 2).

Maids can be virtually any age and of any family background. In Hong Kong, 41% of domestic workers are aged 25-34, 39% aged 35-44, although I also interviewed several that were over 60 (Legislative Council 2017). In Taiwan, the average age is younger, with 45% of domestic workers being younger than 35, and 44% between 35-44 years (DGBAS 2019). Official statistics for these populations – including marital status and length of stay – are surprisingly sparse, and what statistics exist must be taken with a grain of salt. For example, officially 82% of Hong Kong-based foreign domestic workers achieved secondary education (see Legislative Council 2017). But this is in direct contrast to surveys done by NGOs and my own findings. The discrepancy could easily

be due to rampant falsification of documents (see Nugroho and Cahayani 2012). These women might be pressured into going abroad by their family, or might choose to go abroad against their family's wishes. Once abroad, however, everyone expects these women to provide substantially not only for their immediate family but often extended family and friends as well. Such circumstances can exert enormous pressure on them to remain abroad and send remittances, and can also induce embarrassment if the women do not bring back as much money as hoped or expected.

B. Employers

The ones that ultimately employ foreign domestic workers in this market are always an individual or private family, never companies or collectives. The new maid must live in the employer's home, and according to regulations, the employer must provide all room and board for her (though there is no oversight as to quality of what they provide most of the time). In Hong Kong, the only requirement an employer must meet is proof of income of at least HK\$15,000 (US\$1,916.42) per month (a minimum that has not been increased for many years). In Taiwan, employers have to undergo a more stringent screening process to prove they have a "need" for a maid (a disability, young twins that a mother cannot care for alone, or a low standard of living). If employers have decided to hire a maid, it usually means they themselves are going through some life transition – a newborn baby, a parent that has deteriorated in health, a new house or job, etc. They themselves will often be under pressure from multiple sides, from money to familial matters to excess working hours. Local women often seek a maid to fulfill their traditional feminine role in the home while they work outside (Chan 2006). Other families may appreciate domestic workers as "status symbols" that show off their wealth (Constable 2002:127).

C. Training Agencies in Home State

Before going abroad, maids must go to a training agency – a company/facility that (supposedly) trains and prepares her to work in the host country. Training agencies are scattered throughout Indonesia and the Philippines, are privately owned, and come in all various sizes. Most agencies use "sponsors" that go out to remote villages and recruit women looking for work, since most don't have websites or public recruitment. Training agencies have curriculums set by the Indonesian and Filipino states respectively (three months in Indonesia, two weeks in the Philippines) that include practical training and language instruction. In Indonesia, training agencies are the institutions that have connections with the placement agencies in the host states (below), and can find positions for the maids that comes to them. In the Philippines, a training agency does the training and partners with a placement agency that finds the job openings abroad. Ultimately, training agencies are for-profit businesses, and the fees they charge the domestic workers can make the business incredibly lucrative. They are often found working together with lending companies or loan sharks (which are very hard to trace) that help the maids pay their fees over time using their salaries abroad – and charge high interest. Agencies' primary source of funding comes from the domestic workers themselves. While the arrangements vary by each agency, they may also be paid by agencies in the host state, or have to pay a fee to the host state agencies to place their maids.

D. Placement Agencies in Host State

In Taiwan and Hong Kong, the placement agencies are also private for-profit companies that range widely in size and scale. They find employers in the host (quasi-)state and

convince them to hire a maid that they have never met to live in their home. By Indonesian and Philippine law, host state agencies must be separate entities entirely from the training agencies in the home state: these placement agencies have no presence in the home state, and the training agencies have no presence in the host state.³⁸ While training agencies are (legally) paid only by the domestic worker, the placement agencies are legally supposed to get their money primarily from the employer. In Taiwan, placement agencies are allowed to charge maids a monthly fee in exchange for translation work and mediation, but the level of services they are required to provide in return are not set. Placement agencies primarily find employers (their clients) through informal means, such as, references from friends, incentives to current clients, etc.. As demand grows, these agencies told me they are finding it harder to get enough maids.

The pursuit of profit for these agencies can lead to conflicting behaviors. On the one hand, if the agency wants to remain in business long-term, they would want to make relatively good matches between employers and maids so that there is less discontent among their clients and they receive good references. On the other hand, however, if the placement agencies can get away with charging illegal excess fees every time an employer has to change a maid or a maid has to find a new employer, it is also in their short-term interest to encourage termination of contracts so they can charge both maid and employer for new ones.

E. Home State Governments

My case focuses on two sovereign island states of Southeast Asia: the Philippines and Indonesia. In terms of GDP per capita, both rank in the bottom half of the world and the Asia-Pacific (CIA 2017). These governments are primarily driven to find work for their people to grow their home economies and national wealth. Building local economies has proven difficult for myriad reasons, causing many parts of these countries to rely on remittances from migrants. Consequently, the governments will naturally strive to keep the outlets for migrants open, to continue bolstering the local economies that have no other alternatives. Home state governments also wish to quell any social discontent that might arise from poverty, joblessness or abuse of citizens abroad. After all, that discontent might lead to upheaval or challenges to their legitimacy and power. In the past few years, these governments have become willing to attack such threats more aggressively. For example, both Joko Widodo and Rodrigo Duterte have become more vocal in defending their citizens while abroad (in a sense, “repairing” the subservient and underclass image host states have of their citizens). The island nations are, after all, sovereign states in the Westphalian sense, Indonesia being the fourth most populous one in the world; and they wish to be treated and respected as such. This desire for respect as equals may (and already has) come into conflict with the desire to find enough jobs for their migrants abroad – a conflict that will be explored in Chapter 5.

F. Host State Governments

For Hong Kong and Taiwan, it is debatable whether they are “states” as such (elaborated above), but in this particular market they operate with almost full independence: the PRC has shown no interest in interfering in this side of politics. Even if the Philippines and Indonesia do not politically recognize either as a sovereign state, practically speaking the

³⁸ This does not preclude underhand dealings, of course. Both sides can find backdoors to combine their business and profits. For example, in one case I discovered, the husband owned the Hong Kong agency, while the wife owned the Indonesian agency. But it is still significant that agencies must adhere to this split in legal terms.

sending states must still negotiate with both bilaterally as they do with other host states. Hong Kong and Taiwan's governments also wish to keep their economies growing. In their case, this means freeing their local populations (such as women) to work in white-collar and high-skilled jobs. However, both face a similar conundrum: their social safety net is notoriously lacking (He 2019; Gao 2011). Neither have enough senior care homes or resources, and outsourcing childcare to the market is generally not socially accepted. Childcare and eldercare were always the responsibility of the Chinese family and wife in particular (see the Gender section above). Yet public opinion in both populations has increasingly leaned towards making care of the vulnerable the government's responsibility, leading both to seek cheap migrant labor to meet these basic needs where domestic infrastructure fails to. However, both governments also wish to maintain an image of a fair and liberal society, and do not wish to be seen as abusive towards vulnerable migrants. Once again, these goals can and do conflict in practice.

G. *NGOs and Activists*

NGOs and activists in the maid trade can come from any background: a former victim or local employers, privileged or poor classes, or a completely foreign nationality. In my experience and the experience of other scholars, these activists were generally altruistic: they wanted to help those abused or in need, and that was enough for them even if they personally did not benefit (Constable 2007). As the extensive literature on political altruism attests, such motivations cannot simply be dismissed out of hand (Fowler and Kam 2006; Batson and Powell 2003; Giugni and Passy 2001).

At the same time, these NGOs do have motivations of their own. They are primarily directed towards helping domestic workers, and only a few focus their efforts on employers. Beyond giving maids the immediate help they need, many also seek policy change. To achieve change, they need to garner attention and sympathy from a wide audience, and so are often seeking the newsworthy stories. Many of the NGOs also depend on outside funding, and they need to continue to look worthy of receiving the funds they raise. "Looking worthy" often means they need to show results of some kind. Additionally, these organizations often get a biased sample of domestic workers coming to them: only those who are in desperate need of help would come to them, while the maids who have good experiences in their host countries do not need to seek them out.

Bourdieu's theories of social fields and social space provide an excellent framework for illuminating the diversity within the seven social groups (and their many subgroups) involved, how they map onto each other, and how each is shaped by the involvement of the state(s) (2005). None of these groups operate in isolation from each other, but they are also not homogenous entities.

Social space theory centers on how groups take shape in society, and the different groups' proximity to each other. Bourdieu generally describes social space as a stable structure of symbolic classifications underlying social interactions. The hierarchies and classifications used both result from and reify inequality and domination. As both a metaphor and an acknowledgement of material outcomes, social space describes commonsense ideas about the world, emplacing different groups where they "belong." Some groups are considered superior, others middle-road, others as having specified responsibilities, still others undeserving; but all have their symbolic "place" in relation to each other. Some may try to contest their place, but most often these social groups already share wider society's view of themselves and where they

should be.³⁹ As such, they participate in their own emplacement, accepting and even rejoicing in what they are given and “refusing what they are refused” (Bourdieu 1987:471).

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of social space, however, is its ability to *naturalize*. In other words, everyone’s participation in social space makes its divisions and orderings appear natural and unquestionable, when in fact they are highly social and imposed (Bourdieu 2018). One of the greatest perpetrators of any commonsense ordering of the world (social space) is the state, with its power to name and officiate “truth” to resolve any tensions that might arise (Bourdieu 2015).

On the other hand, social *fields* in the above social space are non-homogenous social-spatial arenas with their own power structures where people maneuver and compete for material or symbolic resources. A field can be a single company, an entire profession (such as law), or merely all individuals trying to buy the same thing (e.g., homebuyers). The concept of fields bridges the theoretical camps of social structure and individual agency: all individuals are semi-independent and can make their own choices. However, those choices must be within the confines of historical legacies and the expectations of others connected to them (in their own field, or in adjacent fields). Individuals in the same field all want a similar goal (to buy a house, to earn the most money, achieve recognition, etc.), but to achieve it they must jockey for position with not only others in the same social field, but also with other fields. A person’s ability to compete for position and influence depends on three things: 1) his/her *habitus* (a deep-rooted system of dispositions acquired over a lifetime of immersion in a particular social group), 2) the capital (social, economic, cultural, symbolic) he/she can bring to bear, and 3) the specific rules of the field in which they play (Bourdieu 1987).

By this definition, each of the actors described above constitutes a field in their own right. Each one has particular goals, different for each field (elaborated above); and they relate to each other on the plane of “commonsense” social space (which may or may not be uniformly shared). Each group’s experiences and place are a product not only of their own aims and perceptions, but also of the other groups’ goals and perceptions of them in turn.

The maids themselves do not qualify as a social field per se, because they have so little recognized social capital. In short, they are at the bottom of the host society’s social space, which means their skills and knowledge are not valuable in the wider market. The only skills and capital MDWs do acquire (docility, language, hard work, etc.) is more often used by agencies or employers to exploit them further. Maids also do not compete for said capital (skills or knowledge) among each other, a crucial part of being a “field” in Bourdieu’s terms.

That said, MDWs can attain forms of capital that are beneficial to them, and different nationalities do not have equal capital. For instance, Filipina maids often speak English, which gives them greater access to outside resources should they need help. Maids that have been abroad for longer, as well, passively acquire more knowledge and connections in the host society that they can use. I never encountered an instance where such experience and knowledge could be used to negotiate higher salaries; however, maids could use said capital to call on help in dire situations, or threaten to leave abusive employers. If the maid has friends in an NGO or enough connections that she is likely to find another job, she becomes less exploitable. At the same time, she may also become less desirable for some employers, who prefer a maid that does not

³⁹ One prominent exception is cases of migration – where individuals are transplanted out of one shared social space into another. In the case of migrant maids, they have to learn to inhabit a completely new position that did not exist in their old social space, as well as relearn what all other groups think of the maids and each other. But to survive in the new host society, migrants cannot completely shun its social space (see Reed-Danahay 2017)

know her rights and does not know to object their unreasonable demands. Social capital, in the case of maids, plays an inconsistent role, its helpfulness being highly dependent on context.

In practice, maids all congregate by nationality to speak in their mother tongue and have respite in a home away from home – a surrogate family, without which many claim they could not survive (Yu 2009). Despite the comradery maids of the same nationality may feel for one another in a foreign land, their field is not uniform. Each Indonesian and Filipina maid goes abroad to work in Hong Kong or Taiwan with a very different level of human capital. Some are teenagers that have little formal education; others are in their 40s and have worked elsewhere overseas before; and many carry burdens of family problems back home. Such diversity necessitates maids feeling out how to relate to and build connections with very different women they have never met before. Once they migrate, these women are cut off from the social fields they have grown up in, and must find their place in a field that has very little contact with itself. After all, the maids live and work in the confines of one home, virtually cut off from outside contact (employers even prohibit many from using phones while at work). Their only chance to leave that sphere to socialize with one another is on their day off – once per week in Hong Kong, once per month in Taiwan.⁴⁰ These conditions of isolation and foreignness make the migrant domestic worker quasi-field unique. Integration into this space is, for many, the only way to attain the social capital and resources necessary to mobilize and protect against abuse.

The social space of maids is worlds apart from that of their new host country, specifically that of their employers. Employers of maids inhabit a high-stress and mostly Chinese social field in which Hong Kongers and Taiwanese negotiate their cultural and economic capital among friends, family, and work environments. Distance between them may seem counterintuitive given the intimate contact that maids and employers are forced into, living in the same small household for years. However, that close contact often heightens the distinctions between employer and maid (see Chapters 5 and 7; see also Ray 2000, Qayum and Ray 2003). Employing a maid is a part of the employers' jockeying for status amongst each other (see above), as well as a way to free the wife to take on a job and earn more economic capital. This brings the social fields of employers and maids into direct contact whether or not they fully understand one another. Maids must attempt to understand employers and all the pressures they are feeling in order to do their jobs; and employers must (in theory) learn enough about their maid and her context to manage her. However, with social fields this disparate in social space (thanks to culture, class, ethnic identity, education, etc.), such direct contact is rarely frictionless – even if that contact is mediated by the employment agencies.

The placement agencies, like Bourdieu's housing agencies, are fields in themselves as well, with individuals within firms negotiating position and competing for influence and clients even as agencies compete with each other for position and recognition in the market (2005). Even though many activists and maids lump all agencies together (often in a profiteering, negative light), my own fieldwork found this lumping to be unjustified: a domestic worker's experience was highly dependent on which individual gets assigned to her in a particular agency, even as the corporate cultures of some agencies encouraged exploitation. I observed a few agencies that endeavored to help domestic workers, and by the maids' own admission were friendly and caring. I also observed many agencies verbally abuse and intimidate maids.

⁴⁰ Just as my fieldwork was wrapping up, Taiwan changed its laws to require a day of rest every two weeks for domestic workers. However, maids on contracts signed earlier were still grandfathered into the old system of once-per-month rest days, and in practice I encountered several maids signing contracts that only allowed one day off per month with no additional compensation, even after the laws changed.

Sometimes I learned of both in the same agency, and that diversity cannot be ignored. The tactics of these agencies often copy one another, however, maybe playing up either a good brand name or cheapness of service.

Much of agencies' competition is inextricably tied to the dynamics of the maid and employer fields (in crude terms, their supply and demand). In short, to snatch a comparative advantage, agencies must not only find a way to themselves "get along" with the maids and employers they meet, but also find a way to get the two fields to accept one another. Matching "supply" and "demand" requires a plethora of social actions on the part of agencies: to relate to clients, earn their trust, and foster dependency, convincing both to come back (Bourdieu 2005). The agencies make up the core of the economic power field. The life of an agency's business depends on two social fields outside their immediate control – which explains their desire to minimize the shocks the two social fields of maids and employers can have on their business. To earn a profit, agencies need the demand to continue (i.e., let employers continue to believe that the right maid can fill their needs), and they need domestic workers who will do the work needed. And it also highly benefits them if neither side questions the agency's service, and continues to return to it for business and not seek out any competitors for better service. But this need for ongoing business does not encourage transparency – far from it. In fact, agencies have little incentive to correct misinformation or opacity if it favors dependency on them from the maid and employer fields. That is exactly what will bring them more business (elaborated in Chapter 4). Indeed, almost identical to the housing market in France, employment agencies used the disconnect between the private and highly personal nature of employing a live-in maid and the cold, bureaucratic requirements of Hong Kong and Taiwanese regulations to increase employer anxiety about the process, which could "be resolved only by the client placing himself in the salesperson's hands" (Bourdieu 2005:167)

In addition, each of these social fields is dependent on and organized by the bureaucratic structure of the state behind them – or in this case, the *interaction of the multiple states involved*. Employers, maids and the agencies must adapt to the specific policies put forward by each state simultaneously, not to mention the attitudes and leanings of particular individuals within that state. Indonesia, for example, underwent a regime change with the election of Joko Widodo in 2014, and since then the government has become more aggressive in its defense of its citizens abroad. The country's ban on sending migrant labor to Saudi Arabia and 20 other Middle Eastern countries is just one example (Agence France-Presse 2015). Indonesia's choices over many years have built up a regulatory framework dictating what training agencies can do and how maids should behave (Chang 2018; Rudnyckyj 2004). Indirectly, Indonesia's framework and rhetoric also impact placement agency's marketing choices as well as employers' perceptions, I found in my fieldwork.

However, the Indonesian state cannot develop or implement its policies and bureaucratic practices in isolation. Since this particular market is transnational, the Indonesian, Filipina, Hong Kong and Taiwanese states must also contend for position and power vis-à-vis one another. The international hierarchy and relative authority these states negotiate shapes not only their own actions, but projects onto the other fields mentioned above. In Chapter 4, I will focus on how this interaction impacts market dynamics; in Chapter 6 I will elaborate further on the political implications of inter-state interactions.

Bourdieu's analysis also illuminates a crucial clash of understanding between these fields: conflicting understandings of "rationality" (2005). When speaking to me, both maids and employers tried to appeal to logic and common sense to explain their actions or why the actions

of those in other fields made little sense. For example, if a maid was in trouble, why did she not simply run or call the police (HK 2015-Maid 3)? When crossing oceans and cultures, however, everyone from maids to government officials have to reinvent and rediscover what those in other fields consider rational and reasonable. Suddenly, what was “common sense” is not so common anymore. Individuals and societies base their “logic” and “rationality” on certain assumptions or circumstances that most often are not universal. When suddenly confronted with individuals who do not share those assumptions (due to a different upbringing or different experience of power), entire societies may view their actions as stupid or even malicious.

The most obvious example in my data emerges in public perceptions of maid abuse. Host country actors believed that if maids were truly in trouble, they would seek help; whereas maids were often terrified to seek that help, they told me, because they feared corruption – for many, the only form of authority they’d ever experienced. Both are perfectly rational from their own perspective, but fail to see the other’s reasoning thanks to mismatched assumptions (this will be elaborated in Chapter 7). Not even state officials were exempt from misunderstandings like the one above. Bourdieu hit the nail on the head when he equated believing in universal rationality to ethnocentrism, an attitude that disguises unique conditions and assumptions upon which economic rationality is built. Indeed, individuals in the different fields might use the same words, but mean different things by them; yet only the host country really had the power to decide what was meant. The disconnect became particularly problematic in deciding what counted as evidence in a court of law. For example, the maids often considered their testimony and story to be paramount, while courts always referred to paperwork and signatures first and foremost. The emphasis on hard evidence often meant that documents signed under duress often discredited a maid’s case (Constable 2007). Combined with the gendered perception of the migrants I elaborated above (and the racial stereotyping I will elaborate in Chapter 5), this mismatch of “common sense” is deadly. In my own fieldwork, I also found the maid’s *posture* and *demeanor* when giving her testimony to be a deciding factor. If she was hesitant or shy, labor tribunals and courts tended to interpret that as guilt rather than fear or stage fright (HK Fieldnotes 2015; see Chapter 7 for further examples).

The Process of Migration and Interactions

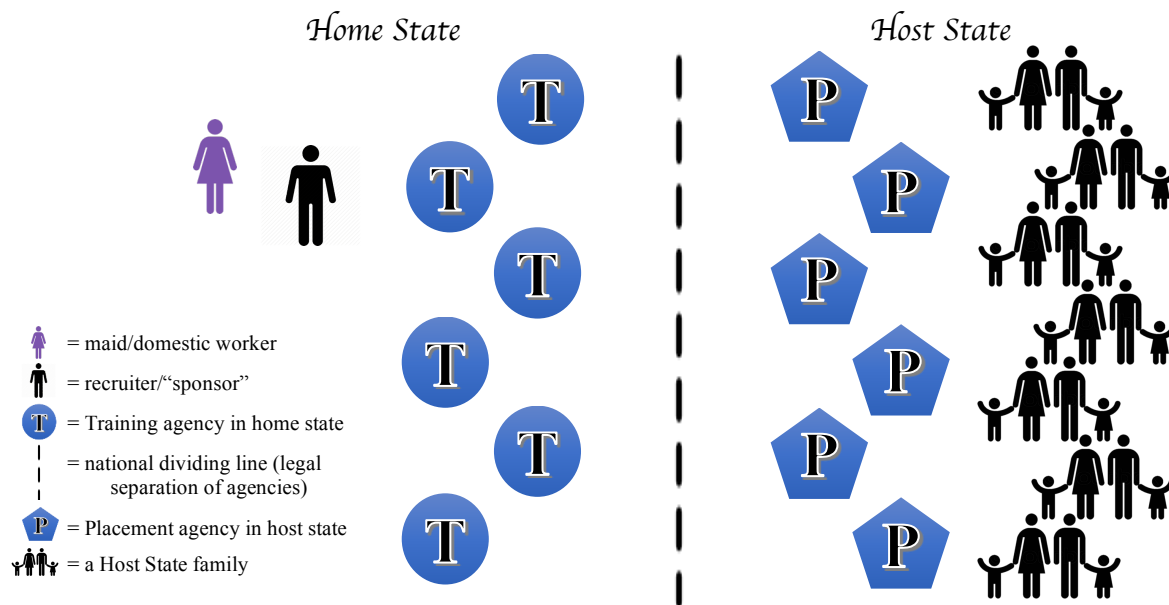
How these fields collide is a complex process, one which I discovered none of the groups fully understood. Most maids and employers did not even attempt to understand the entire system. And even if they tried, there were high barriers to obtaining accurate information. Others thought they understood it, but often revealed misunderstandings about aspects they were not personally involved with. I encountered governments misunderstanding how agencies operate, to name one, or agencies being oblivious to a domestic worker’s culture shock and struggles in a new environment as a second highly common one.

Later chapters will elaborate details of these misconceptions and how they impact actions and reactions. But before delving into such complications, I must first describe a bare-bones description of how the market functions as a whole. In short, I will explain what other scholars call the *migration infrastructure*, or the systems of technology, institutions, and actors facilitating and conditioning migration. This infrastructure is what makes migration “intensely mediated” to the point of impeding mobility (Xiang and Lindquist 2014: S122; Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012). The literature is often limited by a focus on infrastructure within a single state. Therefore, here I elaborate the infrastructure into the transnational realm and its continued impacts long after the process of sending migrants abroad is finished.

The “maid trade” can only begin to function once state actors agree to allow migration specifically for the purposes of domestic work. Allowing such migration often requires a bilateral agreement outlining responsibilities and protections on both sides. The host state grants the domestic workers a unique visa explicitly stipulating that they will always remain foreign workers: no matter how long they are in the host country, they can never apply for permanent residence and have no right to the social security or safety nets that native citizens have. As stated in the introduction, maids are perpetually citizens of one state but residents of another. In host states, domestic workers are not protected under ordinary labor laws (to be elaborated in Chapter 4), and so the two states negotiate different regulations of protection. In the case of Hong Kong and Taiwan, however, both the Indonesian and Philippine governments considered the local regulations sufficient to protect domestic workers, and thus did not negotiate any additional protections (c.f., the international political field).

Once that groundwork has been laid, five primary non-state actors present themselves: a maid currently living at home in her village in need of work, a “sponsor”/recruiter employed by the home state agencies, the home state training agencies, the employment agencies in the host state, and the employers seeking a maid. These are presented in the diagram below, with the added note that the two agencies must be separate (Figure 3a). For simplicity, I will focus on the journey of just one maid seeking work abroad in these diagrams, an “ideal case.”

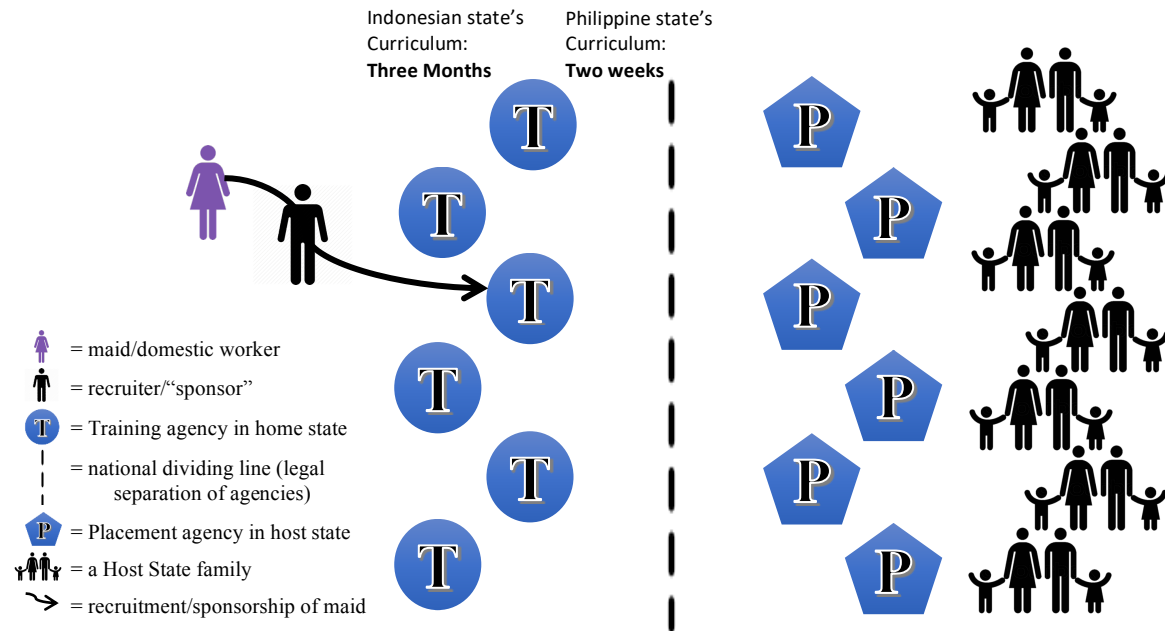
Figure 3a: Maid Migration, Step 1



As will be explained in later chapters, agencies on both sides must obtain a license from their respective states to legally recruit, train or place domestic workers. Once the training agency in the home state has one, they usually employ a recruiter (called a “sponsor” or PL locally) to travel to villages and tell women about “lucrative” opportunities to work abroad. With few jobs available locally, working overseas for a few years often sounds like a good option. However, there is no publicly available way for these women to research and compare different training agencies, or even to find them. The only route towards migration (particularly in Indonesia) is for the sponsor to introduce a prospective maid to the agency he/she happens to

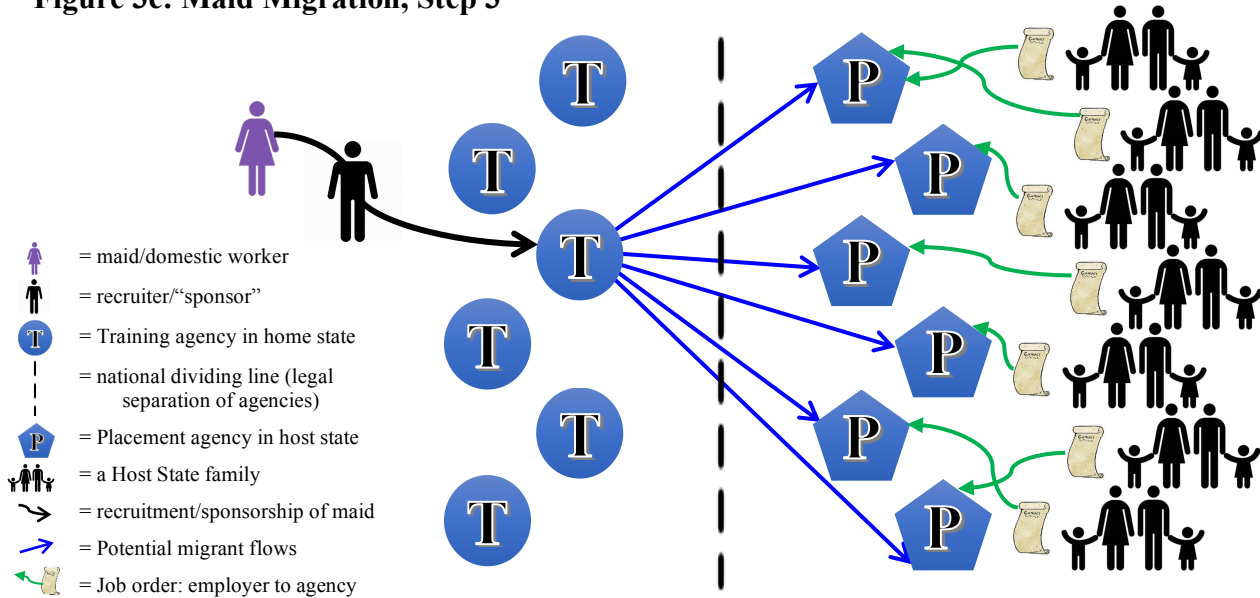
come from, and begin her training there – often without the woman knowing whether this agency has a good or bad reputation. The curriculum she has to undergo is set by the home state, but agencies implement said training with little oversight – three months in Indonesia (600 hours, including language training), two weeks in the Philippines (Figure 3b).

Figure 3b: Maid Migration, Step 2



As the maid goes through her training, her agency looks for a “job order” (a request for a maid by a Taiwanese or Hong Kong employer conveyed through the placement agency) that suits her. These orders come from a legally mandated maximum of 10 (Indonesia) or 5 (Philippines) placement agencies in the host state, all of which have partnership agreements with the home state training agency. The domestic worker has some input at this stage (for example, deciding that she does not want to work in a house with dogs, or prefers caring for children over elderly), but in practice she often has to relax her standards in order to secure a job. The domestic worker might be able to have a short phone or Skype conversation with the employer before deciding to accept the job (and her new home), but not necessarily. The job is decided based on which employer is willing to take her, however, and not the placement agency in the host state. Whatever placement agency the employer happens to be with will be the one that the maid gets “stuck with,” for lack of a better word. Once in the host state, a maid is transferred to the same agency as her employer, and most of the time she will know next to nothing about that agency before she arrives in the host state. She could end up at any one of the placement agencies her training agency has a partnership with, and she will be prohibited from changing placement agencies as long as her first contract lasts – even if that agency turns out to be exploitative and extortive (Figure 3c).

Figure 3c: Maid Migration, Step 3

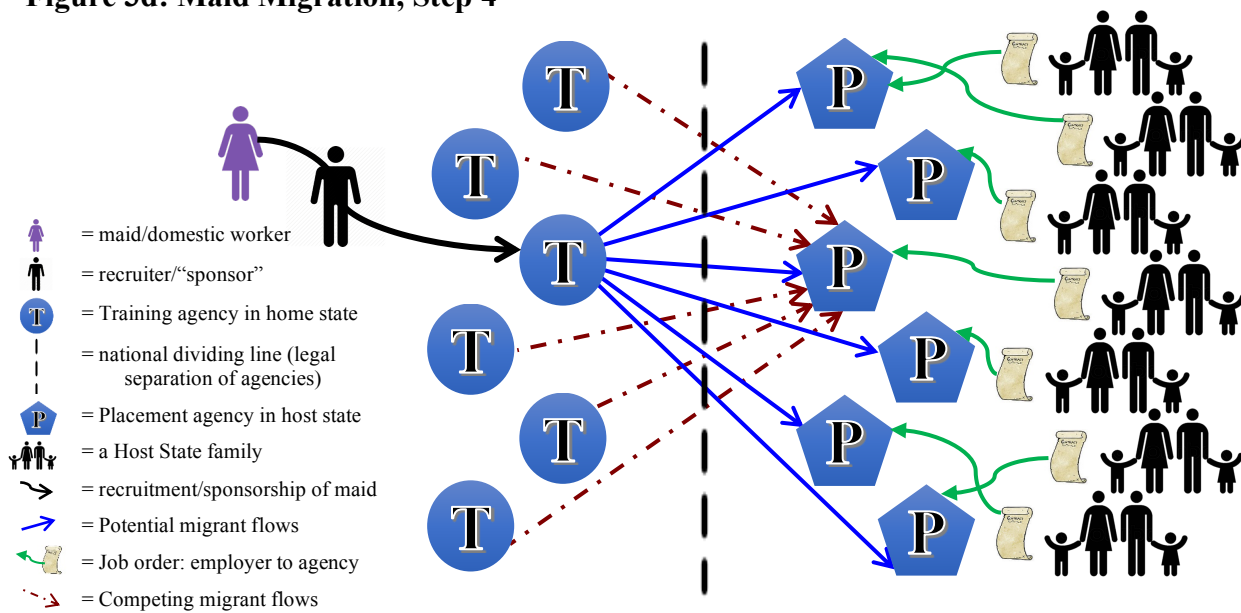


This point regarding a maid’s placement agency in the host state is crucial, as it shows how little control these women have over their own fate in the host country. Not only must she choose her boss, living conditions and new household/family to serve from merely a piece of paper and (sometimes) a short video chat, but also the institution that is supposed to be responsible for her while she is abroad, is an entity chosen for her by confluence of chance – which placement agencies her training agency has partnered with (which she cannot find out beforehand), and which agency her employer has chosen. In the absence of an office of her training agency in the host state (non-existent in the case of Hong Kong and Taiwan), it is the placement agency that must field a domestic worker’s questions and mediate for her in case of conflicts with the employer. Consequently, being placed with an exploitative agency can be devastating for a maid’s life abroad (elaborated in Chapter 4).

However, a domestic worker cannot afford to be too picky about her job: turning down any job offer she receives carries a high risk for her. For just as training agencies can partner with 5-10 placement agencies in each host state, each placement agency can have partnerships with 5-10 training agencies in each home state.⁴¹ Thus, she is not only competing with other trainees in her own training agency, but those in all other training agencies. Turning down a job offer can mean waiting for months to a year for another one to come (see Figure 3d).

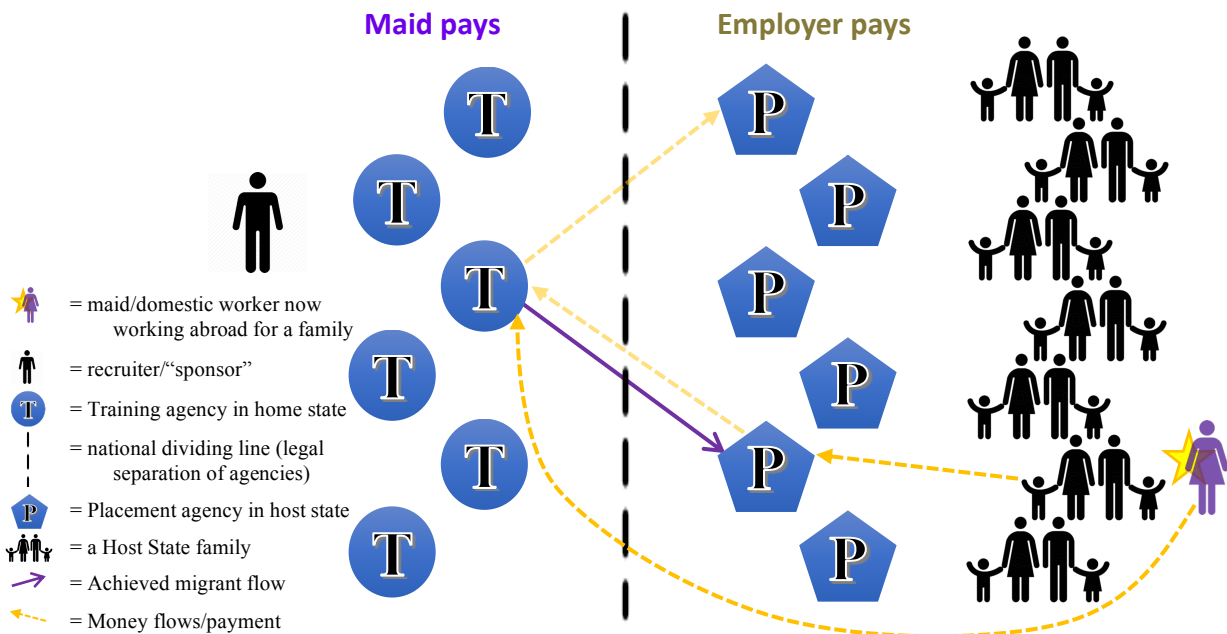
⁴¹ This was more recently changed in the Philippines, subjects told me. Now, host state placement agencies can only have partnerships with two Filipino placement agencies and their training partners. There is, however, no reciprocal limit on how many host state agencies Filipino agents can partner with, as of the conclusion of my fieldwork.

Figure 3d: Maid Migration, Step 4



And now a final death knell: who pays which agency. At least legally, payment is clear-cut: the maid only pays her training agency back in the home state (a debt that can take as much as 6 months of her entire salary to pay back), while the employer pays the placement agency in the host state. Given the absence of any training agency offices in the host state, the domestic worker is forced to rely on its proxy: the placement agency, which truly gets most of its business from employers. As will be elaborated in Chapter 4, the basic incentives are skewed to disfavor the domestic worker from the moment she sets foot in the host state (Figure 3e).

Figure 3e: Maid Migration, Step 5



This is not to say that placement agencies do not receive money from domestic workers illegally. They do, and some activists I spoke to in Hong Kong estimate that as many as 80% of all placement agencies extort illegal fees from domestic workers to boost their profits. For example, charging a maid HK\$10,000 to find a new employer is illegal. The maximum placement fee in Hong Kong is 10% of the first month's salary (one-time charge only), in this case just over HK\$400. However, according to activists and maids themselves, a HK\$10,000 fee is quite common. Since such fees must be gotten from the domestic worker illegally, though, that corner of the market operates under shadier rules. Such extortion seemed to be less common in Taiwan, where the domestic workers were required to pay a fee to the local Taiwanese agency every month (a little less than 10% of her salary every month). These rules and patterns – as well as their perverse “stickiness” – will be elaborated in Chapter 4.

Training and placement agencies also exchanged money as businesses. However, the money flows in this segment of the market were far more opaque. In contrast to fees charged to domestic workers or the publicized cost to employers for getting a maid, no agencies are required to disclose these transactions. From what I could gather in fieldwork, every agency has to negotiate these terms with every other agency independently, and the terms are constantly subject to renegotiation. Some agents confirmed that the training agency pays the Hong Kong/Taiwanese placement agency for the “privilege” of placing the maids with their employers. Others confirmed that for every maid brought to the host society, the placement agency needed to pay. However, these agents also refused to disclose the exact terms of these transactions. Figure 3e shows this with the semi-transparent arrows, showing that the money flows can go both ways for different agencies.

Conclusion

This chapter has described three sociological theories that form the foundation of the maid trade: gender, unfreedom, and Bourdieusian fields. In the foundational structure of the maid trade market, all three are at play simultaneously. With the bare bones of the maid trade explained, the remainder of this dissertation will elaborate the details and operations under the surface. As I progress into deeper analysis of the market's different facets – economics, race, politics, and victim empowerment – these three theories will show up repeatedly, even if I do not always reference them explicitly. In fact, these three social theories *interact* with the four fields of power. For example, unfreedom plays an enormous role in market opacity (Chapter 4) and empowerment (Chapter 7). Gender plays a significant role in the kind of racialization maids face in the host country (Chapter 5) and the way politicians view the need to protect them (Chapter 6). And every chapter will refer to the different actor fields. Theoretical models like these cannot merely be additive, but reciprocally impact one another and substantially change how each operates (see Glenn 1992; McClintock 2013).

CHAPTER 4

Market Inefficiencies, or Market Dysfunction?

How Opacity and Misinformation are Exploited in the Maid Trade Market

The employer told me confidently that they paid for the maid's plane ticket and her visa. She was confident that this was her responsibility, and it was something that the agency had charged her for. But when I interviewed her Indonesian maid, I discovered that she also paid her agency in Indonesia for that same flight and visa before she left. I was surprised and confirmed it twice, though neither could produce receipts after so many years. I think back on it on my way home, and realize that the employer might be lying, or it could be two agencies double-dipping to increase their profits while lying to both parties (and even possibly lying to each other). Unfortunately, after my work with NGOs and other maids, neither would surprise me. [TW-Fieldnotes 2018]

While the above example might seem like a simple one-off misunderstanding, I uncovered a pattern to these stories over my time in the field. One party (often the maid, but employers and agencies themselves could also be the target) would not understand the proper regulations, culture, or procedure, and another would take advantage of that misunderstanding to demand more than the legal stipulations allowed. And since there are often few (if any) checks in place for anyone to figure out that they had been taken advantage of, the manipulation and exploitation goes unquestioned. In an atmosphere of *opaque* rules, little communication and incomplete information, deception seemed to be the rule of the day.

However, I simultaneously found the reality behind most cases of exploitation to be much more complicated than a villain merely inflicting harm on a victim. Many an NGO and newcomer activist will paint a picture of domestic worker “victims” and agency, government or employer “villains” in the maid trade. Even Amnesty International is guilty of this oversimplification to some extent (2013; see also Siu and Lau 2018a, Creery 2018, and Hong Kong Helpers Campaign). Yet no group is fully victim or fully villain; and all these individual cases sit within an intricate transnational system of policies, negotiation, money, and businesses. This market is so intricate, with so many moving parts and so little transparency, that almost no one fully knows how it all works together – including NGO workers, agents, even researchers (see Chapter 3). Additionally, those that think they do are often wrong.

For example, almost no employers I encountered were aware that their maids had a separate training agency back in their home country that deducted so much of their salary. They were often deceived as to how much training she had received, as well, frequently believing she had received more than she had. With few exceptions, MDWs could rarely make out all the various responsibilities and paperwork required of them, and relied on the agencies to do it for them – which of course led to more fees. I encountered approximately 1500 distinct mentions of paperwork across my 135 maid interviews. Even the government officials I spoke to could not keep up with all the ways agencies and migrants maneuvered around various legal loopholes. All signs pointed to a similar pattern: obscurity and opacity giving a smokescreen to deception and error, intentional or not. In fact, the market seemed to thrive on this obscurity.

Now, certain cases deserve the characterization of villain harming a victim intentionally. As I have state multiple times, the treatment of Erwiana Sulitsyaningsih at the hands of her ex-lawyer employer was horrendous, and rightly condemned worldwide (see Lau & Chan 2015;

Mam 2014). Unreported stories like those of Analy and Miah⁴² are more common, yet might make some sick to the stomach:

“Two years and one month, I stay. Every day when I wake up, she's told me that, "Stupid. Fuck you. Fuckface. Crazy. You're like a dog. You go to the zoo. You are not a human being, you are animals." Then until I-- Sorry... [cries for a bit] July, I lost her necklace, so I renew my contract because I'm scared to go to the jail because I have two kids. Sometimes, when I lost her necklace, because 170,000, I want to kill myself because it's so expensive. My salary is only 4,000, how I can-- Seven years, I need to pay?” (HK Maid (F) 2)

“My PT [1999] was like... For instance, taking bath. It's just like pigs. We line up with no clothes on, so when we finish, we were all naked as well. It's horrible to even remember it. The bathing place was far, so it could be a thousand people wait in the line with no clothes on. We were like swine [babi] lining up ready to be washed, so horrible. The PT was also very cruel and inhumane; when we did something wrong the punishment was to not only stand for one or two hours, but from morning till dawn, on one foot. Yes you may change feet as long as stand on one foot only, and stand inside a circle. Or maybe you would have to clean a long and smelly sewage-line. It's totally inhumane. When they scolded/insulted you, all dirty nasty word come out, sometime they hit you.” (HK 2015 Maid 12)

Scholars must acknowledge these cases of exploitation and human rights violations if we are to remain academically honest. Villains and victims are present in this market, and should be decried when encountered.

Yet the majority of cases I encountered in fieldwork were far more complicated than that. The ever-present opacity and misinformation in the maid trade can hardly be overstated – it is a fundamental cornerstone to the operation of the market itself. The lack of transparency, misinformation and opacity in Taiwan's “maid trade” are part of a continuous cycle perpetuated by a pronounced distrust of formal market systems. Always suspicious of official figures and statistics, the Taiwanese and Hong Kongers (as well as the Indonesians and Filipinas) I spoke to universally preferred informal means and personal connections. Easily overwhelmed by a system they know little about, the relationship network seems to provide a proxy for security.

It was in fact shocking how little research most of my subjects had done into their new jobs or employees before jumping in. Even if public information is available, they do not make use of it consistently, they all told me: they dismiss it as nothing but advertising, instead turning to friends or acquaintances to get “the truth”.

Such patterns should look familiar to scholars of economic sociology. Granovetter and many after him have noted the importance of personal ties and acquaintanceships in market operations, be it in finding a job or in organizing collective action for better wages (1973; 1995). Studies on mass communication also find that while information may circulate freely, people rarely act on it unless it is transmitted through a personal tie (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1966). Scholars of Asian markets have detailed the thinking behind these trends before: companies and individuals in many countries of Asia have very low institutionalized trust (trusting the system to keep people in line). Instead, they rely highly on personal trust like friendships and family, very

⁴² As in other chapters, all names used for domestic workers are pseudonyms, as are individuals referenced in fieldwork. The one exception is Erwiana herself, who did speak to me on the record.

similar to the traditional Chinese concept of *guanxi* (關係 – personal connections) (Witt & Redding 2013; Bourdieu 1990).

However, I wish to take this line of reasoning one step further. Is opacity nothing more than a social solution to an (inefficient) economic system? Is it merely a cultural/institutional preference in my selected countries, however reasonable? Or does it have another reason to exist and be maintained? How crucial is the maid trade's opacity to the life and survival of the market, and what role does it play in abuses that occur?

I argue in this chapter that the only way to fully understand the “maid trade” as a market is to consider opacity and obfuscation as one of its most crucial cogs. It allows the circulation of perpetual misinformation and misdirection in the market, with little need for centralization of resources and efforts (as would be required in a classic cartel or monopoly). This opacity is the foundation for systemic abuse like debt traps, commodification, and intimidation, while it also paves the way for the more individualized forms of abuse.

Literature Review: The Long-Neglected Role of Opacity in Markets

Defining “Opacity”

Before proceeding, it is crucial to define what I mean by “opacity” in this context. Synonyms and concepts similar to it have been prominent in economic sociology for decades, such as non-transparency, misinformation and informality. However, what I explore in this chapter encompasses informality, but goes much further. In essence, opacity is the driving force of informality and misinformation in the maid trade. I define opacity as an intricate, self-sustaining system of legal, financial, technical, cultural, even intellectual roadblocks which: 1) filter information to allow only select facts to reach individuals and groups in the maid trade, while 2) also preventing them from learning more, and 3) encourages certain shortcuts or perversions of facts (e.g., informality or “back doors”) to bridge gaps in information. The opacity system, I argue, is one of the primary reasons why ill-suited regulations and corrupt practices are able to thrive and define the modern maid trade.

Opacity here is an *asymmetrical, differentiated system* in the maid trade, because it works differently for every group in the market – and even individuals within groups. I must emphasize that every group in the maid trade, from maids to government, can be both *perpetrators* and *victims* of opacity.

The easiest way to understand opacity is placing maids as the sole victims, kept in the dark by the powerful actors like agencies and government. However, this would not be an accurate portrayal, and we must be willing to dismiss that trope if we are to understand the practice and acceptance of opacity. Maids are both victims and perpetrators of opacity in their own right, even if they often have no malicious intent. The same applies to agencies and government, though in their case malicious intent (profiteering) is more relevant.

For example, employers have a set of facts and claims to sort through, such as addresses of agencies and tips from friends about which ones have good service. Maids will not be given that same information, but at the same time have knowledge of their own training agency and their home country which employers do not have access to. The divide is maintained purposely in this case: giving maids enough information about local agencies could give them more confidence to quit bad jobs and seek better situations. On the flipside, giving employers knowledge about poor and incomplete training in the home countries might make employers hesitant to hire a maid in the first place.

I also call opacity a *system* because, like many other economic systems, part of it has a conscious design and purpose, yet it has expanded far beyond what any market actor can control (see Ferguson 1994 on how failure can serve an instrumental purpose for institutions). Those with power in this market – lawmakers, agencies, loan sharks and corrupt officials – maintain opacity because it acts as a shield for their power and wealth. Some of the most lucrative practices in this market are highly questionable, and opacity staves off most prying eyes.

However, while certain parts of the opacity system were designed by those in power for that purpose, others seem to emerge from nowhere and *may not always favor* the most powerful actors. For example, domestic workers are by and large given very little information or preparation for their new life; even attempting to seek out this information before they leave is difficult. Opacity, in this way, makes maids dependent on agencies: the maids cannot find their own way. Yet the same lack of information also causes MDWs to implicitly trust one another above all, often counting agencies and employers as liars – making the MDWs less pliable and less willing to accept whatever an authority figure tells them. Not only has a mechanism of opacity had an unintended consequence, it has created another mechanism of opacity. The second mechanism undermines trust in authority figures (even those that might want to help), but also gives the maids access to information that agencies cannot control (through each other).

Hopefully, this definition helps explain why the system of opacity is so enduring, and also why it is so difficult to eliminate. My argument in this chapter is that without the system of opacity (which I will elaborate and deconstruct), the entire market of the maid trade in its current form would likely collapse. The maid trade could not continue without opacity unless it made drastic changes to its operations. I can make this argument because eliminating opacity is not as simple as teaching the maids their rights, or even better government implementation. The maid trade is built on this opacity – it is a crucial cog without which the market could not function. The system of opacity is not invariably negative, but it has many negative consequences that must be dealt with.

The Well-Known Role of Informal Ties and Non-Transparency

Now, the role of informal ties, culture, politics, and even clashing values is not a new concept in economic sociology or even economics. Such concepts have been theorized and applied for decades, from Granovetter to Bourdieu. Although (neo)classical economics is still a dominant theory and force in the world outside academia (many of my subjects referenced it, in fact), sociology has long accepted that economies do not function as worlds unto themselves, and are certainly not frictionless.

Yet theories regarding the informal and opaque side of markets have only rarely been put in serious conversation with theories of power. On the one hand, economists have recognized “that information is imperfect, that obtaining information can be costly, that there are important asymmetries of information,” all of which allow unequal power to emerge in markets (Stiglitz 2000:1441; Chakravarti 2017). Economists and sociologists have exposed these patterns primarily in markets of monopolies or adverse selection (Lerner 1934; Hillman and Katz 1984; Rothschild and Stiglitz 1976). The power that economists and economic sociologists discuss most is price inefficiency, including an “opacity price premium” in products like insurance or hedge funds (Cohen and Siegelman 2010; Sato 2014). The advantages that asymmetric information provides incentivizes actors like financial engineers to “render transparent assets opaque deliberately” (Ibid.:3502). Sellers wish to control information to keep prices high, but must balance that with preventing a “fire sale” (like a run on the bank) or buyer flight (Guerrieri

and Shimer 2014). Greenwald made a particularly insightful application of adverse selection to the labor market, showing how employers use their knowledge of their workers' skills to prevent the better workers from leaving, thus decreasing the overall bargaining power of those who do leave (the low-wage, less skilled workers) with other potential employers (1986). In these studies, power is generally regarded quite simplistically as market advantage.

However, I am interested in not just economic power or possession of resources, but in social and political power that develops without a monopoly (which the maid trade clearly is not – see Chapter 3). A theory of power is distinctly lacking from much of Granovetter's work, appearing mostly as an afterthought (elaborated below). Even Orru, Biggart, and Hamilton overlook the role of power and dominance in their new institutional approach to East Asian economies (1997). Bourdieu is a notable exception, with his discussions of housing firms competing for dominance by monopolizing information (2005). His theories on how the economy of "symbolic goods" (goods with little inherent value but with inscribed cultural meaning) perpetuates self-deception are also tangentially germane, but focus on opacity in *culture* rather than in an economic market (1998). This particular critique – that informal network theory fails to account for power – has been leveled at economic sociology before (see Moulaert and Cabaret 2006), but has yet to be answered substantively.

Furthermore, and more importantly, none of the theories seriously analyzing opacity see it as crucial to a market's very life. Opacity and informality are needed in practice, of course. Without such shortcuts and connections, scholars agree that the process of finding a job, mobilizing collective action, selling financial packages, or making business deals becomes more cumbersome and difficult. However, if opacity was removed from the picture (hypothetically speaking), the markets studied by these scholars would not die out. They would change, perhaps drastically; but scholars have yet to claim that any market would collapse without the aid of informality or opacity. Speaking very speculatively, individuals would still be hunting for jobs from a more distant application process; homebuyers would still be looking for homes, but would be more aware of their rights and less dependent on agencies constructing their demand; and even hedge funds have the model of mutual funds to fall back on, even if it eats into their profits. These market actors and entrepreneurs take advantage of market inefficiencies/opacity as grease on the wheels, but that's precisely all opacity is: grease on the wheels, and not a wheel unto itself in the machine of any market.

In the maid trade, however, opacity can no longer be relegated to merely "grease on the wheels." Consciously or not, the Asian maid trade is founded on opacity, and without it would break down. More so than any other market studied in economic sociology, the maid trade relies on power and power relations, as I will show below. To maintain that power, opacity is key. In certain regards, the maid trade is most similar to the colonial slave trade; and it shares much of its weaknesses and (sadly) its practices (see Maher 2004; Baptist 2001; Nunn and Wantchekon. 2011). While agencies and employers do not use physical chains, ignorance and deception can be just as binding (see Douglass 2018, and Phillips in Douglass 2018, on ignorance as a tool of slavery; see also Hargreaves 2013). Opacity is involved in every step of maid trade migration and operations, and not just tangentially or optionally. Whether it was hiding rights or job opportunities from maids, lying to employers about the MDW's qualifications, or governments using poor information systems to avoid responsibility, I found opacity central to most – if not all – steps of the maid trade. In many ways, opacity was required for every step to succeed. I was quite surprised by how often it came up once I looked back over all my data. In short, the maid trade as it functions today does not merely use opacity as a convenient shortcut. I argue

that the opacity system is one of the crucial wheels that makes the machine turn. In a market that is so reliant on maintaining multiple relationships of power, a system of opacity is indispensable.

Given the peculiarities of the maid trade, scholars might think to dismiss it as an outlier, an abnormal case that cannot apply to economic sociology as a whole. However, while it is an extreme case, I no longer believe it is abnormal. There are other markets like the maid trade, ones that rely on their own systems of opacity and obfuscation. Two that come to mind immediately are the seasonal Mexican farmworkers in the US, and prostitution (see Legrain 2019; Hoang 2015). Whatever one's political leanings on their legitimacy, these are indeed markets – and enormous ones. The maid trade is simply one example of such a market that has been legalized. Furthermore, as I showed in Chapter 1, migrant labor is growing worldwide; and as it grows, markets like the maid trade – which use recruiters, illegal fees, unmonitored agencies and regulatory loopholes – have been multiplying. From a theoretical and methodological standpoint, scholars must keep the role of systemic opacity in mind as they watch these new and even old markets evolve.

The Ever-Present State(s) in the Maid Trade Economy

For decades now, modern sociologists and many economists have considered politics and political culture to be crucial to a market's formation (e.g., Dobbin 2001, Krippner 2010). In Asia specifically, scholars have explored the market/state connection from too many angles to count (see Chan et. al. 2016; Khan and Jomo 2000). Even maid trade-exclusive literature has rarely explored the economics of the maid trade divorced from the state. For this chapter, then, I must begin by acknowledging how the states have worked to shape the market, and how their long arms continue to play a role in the operations of the migration-based trade. Such background will be crucial to explain how different methods of state involvement can benefit and/or detriment economies and migrant workers, following in the footsteps of Loveband's work in Taiwan (2004) and Rodriguez' Philippines study (2010).

We can see the state in the maid trade best through the lens of Lynne Haney's state decentralization framework (2010). In a fascinating account of community-based prisons meant for the re-education of women, Haney describes how the penal state delegated its power to rehabilitation NGOs. When it did, state and NGOs functioned together as a "hybrid state" with many disconnected, autonomous arms (Ibid.:19). In this way, the US state actually increased its own power. It continued to manage the day-to-day operations and discourses "from a distance" by setting the criteria these organizations had to meet (87). However, with the smaller NGOs being closer to the ground, the state was simultaneously able to achieve a more granular level of control. In short, Haney finds "systems of social control actually expand as they become more decentralized and diffuse" (213).

The case of Indonesia and placement agencies makes the efficacy of diffuse control abundantly clear. With the number of maids in Hong Kong growing 21 times from 2000 to 2016, and almost tripling in Taiwan, the Indonesian government has come to rely on the placement agencies to keep track of them all (see Chapter 3). Indeed, in 2004 the Indonesian government made it illegal for migrants like maids to go abroad without an agency, even if they already had a job lined up (Killias 2009). Similarly, the government also puts the responsibility of teaching the maids their rights and enforcing said rights in case of abuse on these agencies (Chang 2018; Killias 2009). This arrangement gives employment agencies an inordinate amount of power over maids: they are simultaneously maids' employment company and government, with control over their paycheck, living conditions, visa and basic rights, and with the power to

decide whether to enforce policies (see Chapter 3). Scholars have likened the agency requirement to the colonial coolie system: cheap, tightly controlled labor, a limited timeframe, workers have no choice of “master” even though laws legally bind them to whomever they are assigned, and employers often extracting excess labor to compensate for the placement fee they had to pay (Killias 2009; Parreñas 2010; Pande 2013). Thus, identical to Haney’s case study of women’s reeducation prison centers, a hybrid state in practice swells the “real” control and management of Indonesian citizens abroad, even when rights are not always enforced (2010).

On a more macro level, Hoang’s study of sex workers in Vietnam and their relations to the high-class business world demonstrates the growing economic importance of inter-Asia national relations (2015). In Vietnam, Hoang describes how global hierarchies have to be played out in and through gendered bodies (women’s bodies) in order to capture global capital. The sex industry was one field where Vietnamese businessmen tried to negotiate the recognition of Asia’s ascendance. Vietnamese businessmen would turn down deals with Western firms just to demonstrate that they could get better deals with Asian investors, signaling the decline of Western hegemony. The Asian men would bond over their displays of power and masculinity vis-à-vis the women, with Vietnamese businessmen often showing off the prostitutes as proof of how far their country had come (and why it was a good investment). The newly-wealthy Vietnamese also used extravagant spending to “assert[] a classed masculinity that trumped previous national and racial hierarchies” (Ibid.:73).

The pattern once again carries over to the maid trade. Sending states naturally wish to be recognized as full legitimate states on the international arena (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 6). Such assertions, in Hoang’s terms, claim power and masculinity. However, the host societies can assert a different “masculinity” of capital and wealth – a power developing nations cannot ignore. That capital and wealth is becoming far more visible in the societies of East Asia, as the region’s radical economic growth has “few precedents in world history” (Arrighi, Hamashita and Selden 2004:1). Thus, in order to win a place for its women in host societies, sending states instead have to play a subservient, feminine role (to be elaborated in Chapter 6). As Parreñas so eloquently puts it, “the lesser economic power of sending nations vis-à-vis receiving nations means their lesser political power” (2001:1138). Hoang’s “Asian ascendancy” framework sheds light on the importance such power negotiations hold for the individual countries: the nations are striving to win a place in the new world order by means of economic growth. Scholars have found these negotiations to be a delicate balancing act (Parreñas 2001; Paul 2017; Hall 2012).

Capitalizing on the demand of families in these richer, growing societies, poorer nations like the Philippines and Indonesia have systematized the export of their citizens en masse. And like any seller, they seek a niche for their migrants. Earlier on, governments were more involved in promoting their workers abroad (see Rodriguez 2010, even current terms of bilateral agreements), but more recently have taken an indirect role through private agencies (Chang 2018; Killias 2018). Agencies that place the maids “market their ‘labor products’ by nationality,” playing off stereotypes of subservient, traditional third-world women, while portraying certain nationalities as better suited for different tasks (Lan 2006:68). For example, maid agencies describe Filipinas as intelligent and good at English, while Indonesians are caring and obedient. However superficial these stereotypes are, Loveband finds they do indeed affect the lived experiences of maids in Taiwan, and are even reified and believed by the maids themselves (2004; 2009).

Performative Language, Shirking Responsibility

I see here a clear incarnation of Holmes' theory of language in markets: the representation of a market and its products is not external to a market, but is a "performative" act that market players have to embrace (2014). In other words, the language used to describe a product or a market shapes the way actors and the public at large think about and value them. Advertisements (to a large extent) make the product, not the other way around. Recall the housing market in France, where Bourdieu found that housing agents sold houses not by propounding the objective qualities of the building, but by attaching symbolic value to buying a house (2005). The maid trade's poor physical and information infrastructure (see Chapter 2) amplifies the power of language rooted in emotions and narratives. Indeed, it can become so powerful that "the dominated collaborate in their own exploitation through affection or admiration" (Bourdieu 1998:111; see also Ueno 2010, Platt et. al. 2013). Performative language is the perfect foundation for opacity.

In the maid trade, we encounter another level of performance in Holmes' theory, because the person herself *is* the product. Feminist economic scholars have often dealt with such commodification of humans, though more often focus on the commodification of labor (see Cameron 2000; Rosewarne 2010). For example, Hoang revealed how sex workers had to mold their bodies, sometimes taking extreme measures like surgery to make themselves pleasing to the men (2015). In her insightful analysis of flight attendants, Hochschild also elucidated the costs of making the human into labor, and making emotional labor a commodity (1983). When on the job, normally private feelings come under the purview of the company's profit motive, and must be managed for the purposes of a positive organizational image. Flight attendants (especially women) must be happy and pretty all the time, even when customers are being abusive. And not just appear so – the women she studied had to manufacture feelings constantly (Ibid.).

However, Hoang focused on an area that did not have the legal legitimacy (and by extension, state-backed commodification) that domestic work has. Hochschild's market was also not so all-encompassing as live-in domestic work. Since MDWs live and work in the same place, their private lives are also under the watch of their employers, and the women never get a break from that managed emotional labor. Even Hoang's prostitutes had lives independent of their male clients. Scholars of domestic work have identified the same emotional labor in domestic work and MDWs, but generally blame it on employers rather than the market system that enables it (Glenn 1992; Lan 2001; Huang and Yeoh 2007).

Using performative language to commodify and "sell" a living human with free will does not come without complications for a state or market. Sadly, both are often able to shirk responsibility for citizens in the maid trade thanks to (I would argue) opacity. Thus, even the rhetoric championing migrants' rights is a political performance.

Take the example of the Philippines. The government markets its workers as a solution to the contradiction between global neoliberal labor demands and the sovereignty of nation-states, according to Rodriguez (2010). They are "a reserve army of labor... uniquely 'flexible' as short-term, contractual, and incredibly mobile workers" that will come when needed but return home as soon as the work is done (Ibid.:xii). Rodriguez also notes a distinct gendering in how the Philippine state portrays itself and its women particularly. In short, the Philippines bows to global hierarchies favoring "Western capitalist masculinity" and reinforces them for its own economic benefit (37). A sending state's efforts to maintain its place in the global labor economy makes workers replaceable, even "disposable" at states' whims, and the costs are laid squarely on migrants' shoulders (115). Home state marketing such as that, and the marketing it allows its agencies to do, affects maids' reception in host states. If Indonesians are marketed as

more submissive, for example, they become more popular because employers believe they can demand more of them – a “double exploitation,” in a sense (Loveband 2004:84; also Platt et. al. 2013). Parreñas called this “commodified reproductive labor,” wherein unskilled care is a commodity always in demand but always regarded as low in market value (2015:41).

The combination of language and commodification in the maid trade becomes especially problematic when home states are called on to defend their workers. Home states nearly always consider maintaining an open market for future migrants more important than any individual worker’s rights, and thus frequently side with host states. As an example, Rodriguez points to the 2001 Brunei garment factory strikes, when Philippine workers called on their state to negotiate for grueling overtime compensation (2010). In the end, the settlement reached was far below what workers hoped – the Philippine state conceded to Brunei’s reading of the contracts over what Philippine workers signed in Manila. Not wanting to anger Brunei factory management or government, the Philippine government ordered its citizens back to work, and repatriated those who refused so they could seek compensation through state mechanisms – which up to 2010 still kept workers in bureaucratic loops (Ibid.:116-140).

Migrant labor may technically be the purview of the market, but many factors of the private sector are guided by the state(s), which leaves room for corruption and collusion (Olken & Barron 2009; Naidu et al. 2014). Thus, if the state sanctions an attitude as insidious as “expendable workers,” why wouldn’t agencies and employers squeeze as much out of the workers as they can? In fact, some scholars have gone so far as to say work as an MDW is no different from contract slavery (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004).

The Narrow Focus of Market Transparency Research

Intuitively, scholarly literature on market and political transparency would have much to say in regards to a market like this. After all, facts and clear processes might expose at least some of the falsehoods. However, most of that literature focuses on the *benefits* of transparency to states and economic growth (e.g., Kolstad and Wiig 2009; Vishwanath & Kaufmann 2001; Shambaugh 2004; Halter et. al. 2009; Jensen 2008). Even research that explicitly focuses on non-transparency tends to regard it as a temporary problem caused by external factors (especially politics), rather than treating it as legitimate market condition in itself (see Klyueva & Tsetsura 2010; Kaufmann & Wei 1999). Lindbom, as one exception, acknowledges that obfuscation was an effective government blame-avoidance strategy vis-à-vis the media (2010). Schwarcz’s study of state insurance regulation elaborates how a slow and flawed implementation of transparency-oriented reforms was a form of maintaining aggressive control for the state – although he insisted it turned out to be “costly and ineffective” (2014:462). Klieman attributes the Nigerian oil industry’s tendency to “enshroud Nigerian oil policy in opacity, often viewing that opacity as a stabilizing force,” to historical and political conditions that severely harmed the country (2012:164-165). In currency trading, Chan and Chiu found that non-transparency was more effective in preventing crises when fundamentals were positive, but only considered their findings an expansion of a general argument in favor of transparency (2002). Even scholarship on adverse selection sees opacity as a detriment to markets, which governments should fix when it gets out of hand (Tirole 2012).

The most direct analysis of opacity in markets was undertaken by Cargill and Parker, as they analyzed how governments used non-transparency to limit bankruptcies, minimize disruption from them, and “enhance the mutual support nature of the system” (2002:300). However, their analysis centers primarily on the implications for the nations involved rather than

the markets themselves. This is a crucial gap in the literature, as certain markets as a whole can benefit and profit from a lack of transparency, to the point of superseding market forces of competition. However, beyond monopolies, the power of opacity remains critically undertheorized.

I believe that this gap comes from a misunderstanding of opacity: we often define it as a “lack” rather than a legitimate state of being in a market. In short, scholars for the most part regard opacity as a lack of information circulating. While that is one legitimate way of looking at it, in the maid trade I found it was more than that. Certainly, the “lack” of available information, of understanding, of proper preparation, etc., were key to understanding the market. But I wish to follow more along the lines of Heimer, where “strategic ignorance” and the “illusion of knowledge” are actively pursued by some parties (2012). Actively sticking to what they do know, and judging the situation based on their own knowledge, is the path many of my subjects chose to take (for more details from the MDWs’ perspective, see Chapter 7). When employers don’t know what to ask, for example, they will stick to the societal norms they have been brought up in. Agencies and government, on the other hand, may benefit from maintaining their *own* ignorance and the ignorance of others. They have a set way of doing business or following the law, and actively pursue that either because they know profit is to be made, or because they genuinely believe the status quo is right. This was especially a problem in courts, for example, where host states were fully committed to the ideals of objectivity and their own standards of evidence – even if in practice this led to unequal treatment. From a purely economic standpoint, I argue that all these different factors of opacity make for a system that actively *externalizes costs*, rather than merely floundering in a lack of information.

Contribution

The contribution I hope to make in this chapter is not revolutionary, but is significant. In the first place, literature on the maid trade has rarely attacked the migration system from a purely economic standpoint. It has always been in the background as a reason for migration or power imbalance (see Yeoh, Huang and Gonzales 1999; Lutz 2011; Gibson, Law and McKay 2001; and Chapter 2), but the economics of it has rarely been the central focus. Instead, scholars have often paired economics with a gender, human rights, or political lens (see Chapter 2 and below). These pairings are essential, given the exploitation and politics so deeply entrenched in the market. But in this chapter, I wish to contribute to the maid trade literature by offering a more explicit economic lens.

Secondly, I hope to contribute to the literature of economic sociology more generally in regards to the importance of opacity. I see this contribution as twofold: first regarding the crucial role of opacity and incomplete information in market functioning; and secondly regarding the concept of a person as a commodity. Scholars expect that *all* market actors will try to thwart market rules in their favor, using whatever means available. Overall, however, economic sociology has rarely grappled with a market where opacity is *necessary*. While it might be employed in practice (and no scholar is surprised when it is), few markets depend on it so totally as the maid trade. In the maid trade, opacity as I define it above is everywhere, and without it, the market could not continue in its current form. Contrary to many theories, I find the maid trade proving that as long as the opacity can be maintained and demand keeps up, long-running profits are entirely possible. In fact, my results below will show that that market opacity in the maid trade prevents market forces that politicians and scholars take for granted – like competition, customers seeking higher quality, and *caveat venditor* (seller beware) – from being

brought to bear, meaning that some agencies in some countries can get away with murder (not a metaphor). To continue the market without opacity, every part of the maid trade would have to undergo such drastic changes so as to make the market nearly unrecognizable. In short, because the maid trade has made opacity one of its central cogs, part of its foundation, the entire market machine would have to be redesigned if opacity was eliminated.

Related to the opacity above is the commodification of the person/woman as opposed to their labor, work or time. Some studies have elaborated on this possibility (see above), but I must stress that the commodification I mean is very distinct from the regular understanding of commodifying labor. When employers in this market want to hire a maid, they do not just want her labor-power – they want her to *be* a certain way, to fit a certain stereotype 24-7 (preferably one they can boss around), and to love their family as if she is one of them. In Parreñas words, the maid should be “one of the family,” which justifies squeezing out maximum labor for minimum pay (2014). These expectations effectively deny the MDWs’ individuality, and their identity as women and mothers in their own right; all of her identity is subsumed in her work (Glenn 1992).

Misleading advertising and rumors perpetuate racialized, feminized and submissive stereotypes, which become the ideals that employers hoped for and sought to force maids to become. As Baptist described in his study of the US slave trade, “Commodification is a process that takes place in the eye of the commodifier, not the commodified” (2001:1626). The maid was no longer her own person in the eyes of employers, but a programmed servant who had to conform her personality and body to their wishes. As Hondagneu-Sotelo has documented, reasoning often goes something like “[s]he paid for the worker, the employer is getting a life” (2002:62). My data suggest that opacity is one critical factor contributing to this commodification of the MDW, and without opacity it would be much harder to maintain – not impossible, but more difficult.

Results: An Inextricable Cog in the Machine

As stated above, opacity must be understood as a complex system encircling all different groups in the market. Furthermore, it is an *asymmetrical* and *differentiated* system that impacts these groups differently, and brings different forces to bear on each one (see Staveren and Odebode 2007). From a business/economics point of view, this ignorance and opacity is an ideal vantage point for market entrepreneurs to enter and use market inefficiencies to turn a profit (see Zhang 1999 on the importance of a “probabilistic edge” in markets to exploit). After all, domestic work is necessary for survival (health, food, cleaning, etc.), but the highly educated women of Hong Kong and Taiwan have a great deal else to contribute to the labor force, and so are reluctant to restrict themselves to domestic work or caregiver jobs. Meanwhile, I found that locally available options (like maids for hire, house visit caregivers, or babysitters) are expensive or unreliable. “It’s just not a concept here,” one of my fieldwork employer subjects in Taiwan told me (TW-Fieldnotes 2018).

Foreign domestic workers are a solution to this conundrum: it meets a crucial need in Hong Kong and Taiwan, while simultaneously giving unemployed Southeast Asian women and their families a chance at a better income (see Chapter 3). In Hong Kong alone, migrant domestic workers are estimated to contribute approximately \$12.6 billion to the economy per year (Leung 2019). But reducing these foreign domestic workers’ contributions to a mere dollar number can be deceptive, given the vital and personal nature of their work. Indeed, the chief editor at the *South China Morning Post* asserted that the city’s 350,000+ domestic workers

“could bring Hong Kong to its knees” if they stopped working – that is how dependent the financial hub city is on their work (Lhatoo 2018).

Yet there is an insidious side to market inefficiencies in this case: if businesses or officials wish to increase and maintain profits, maintaining or creating more inefficiencies pays most – ones that keep clients dependent and hamstringing competition. The way the maid trade is set up, there is no incentive to improve operations or do “the right thing” by their clients. Opacity rewards the easy way, and so actors trying to operate above board remain a minority (a reality that even some long-standing agencies lamented: PH-Training 2, HK-Agency 1). So far, governments have been largely unable to curb that tendency. Lacking the needed infrastructure, sending countries are largely unable to conduct enforcement and monitoring, leading to many illegal agencies and copious falsified documents (Liu 2017; Yu 2017). There is little reward for agencies in doing a quality job, because neither employers nor maids can easily switch agencies. Agencies are instead primarily rewarded for their breadth of connections with employers, recruiters, pliable government officials, etc. If they do try to conduct their business honestly, it is most often out of “the goodness of their hearts,” and even comes at a cost to the agencies (such as employers getting angry that the agency will not let them order their maid to do whatever they want, paying for maids’ legal fees, etc.) (ID-PT 1, PH-Training 1, PH-Training 2, HK-Agent 3).

To understand an asymmetrical economic system like this requires examining its impacts from the perspective of each group. My methods of participant observation and interviews from all the different groups make this possible.

Opacity from the Domestic Worker Perspective

The domestic workers going abroad are the most obvious victims of market obfuscation and the lack of transparency. As detailed in Chapter 3, the women going abroad often have little knowledge of what will happen to them or the process they need to undergo. They also have few resources to turn to for information; approximately 76 maids (out of 139) indicated that they wished that someone had told them more about the risks or possible hardship they could encounter before they left. However, the crucial point here is that this ignorance is not due exclusively – or even primarily – to their supposed negligence. The system of opacity for maids is quite involved, so I will detail it step by step, beginning with their recruitment and departure in the home society and progressing towards their eventual return home from the host society.

I. Recruitment and Departure from Indonesia and the Philippines

In the first place, there is no central directory that lists out all the various legal training agencies, whether in Indonesia or the Philippines. The reason that informal referrals and personal introductions remain dominant in the sending countries is because any formal, public information is largely unavailable or very underdeveloped.

In fact, one NGO I spoke to in Indonesia was in the process of trying to create a ratings site for training agencies, but he complained that he was having trouble getting the domestic worker contributors to be honest. They would leave 5-star ratings even if they had been horribly abused. But their hesitation was understandable: “I woke up to the realization that if you are a customer, you use the agency services you pay for – even if the salary is deducted later – there are some maids that are afraid they will still be bound by the contract [*takut ya terikat kontrak*]” (ID-NGO 3). Aside from the more obvious threats from agencies (getting them fired, approaching their families, etc.), he and others I met mentioned that the non-confrontational values of Indonesian culture were another obstacle (ID-Fieldnotes 2017).

At the end of the day, the lack of any central directory or reliable public information means that new maids are left on their own to navigate the system, and whether they find a “good” agency is largely left to luck. One official I spoke to declared that the most important need for migrant maids before they leave Indonesia is “access to information for the wider prospective migrant community” (ID-Gov 5). Unfortunately, with limited budget and reach in the rural area, she and others admitted that the government is “*masih lemah disitu* [still weak there]” (ID-Gov 5). Certainly, prospective maids will try to make use of personal networks of former maids and family, and some did. However, for 31% of my maid interviewees, the agency’s paid recruiter *was* the personal network – the maids didn’t ask for any further recommendations.⁴³ This complements the findings of Killias in Indonesia, how the recruiters are paid handsomely to encourage labor flows that would not otherwise happen – without the recruiter, there’s no connection to the agency (2009).

Despite its shortcomings, maids’ dependency on recruiters is understandable. Indonesia is, after all, the fourth most populous country in the world; and by landmass, it is the largest archipelagic state in the world. Villages in the island nation are often quite remote, and contact with the outside world is very limited; not even cellphone signal was always reliable on my trips. The Philippines, though significantly smaller by population and land area, suffers from the same problem. Leaving aside difficulties of internet access in villages (a tangible barrier in both home countries), many of these training agencies change names and move facilities so frequently that candidate maids have little prayer of finding them without the aid of a sponsor/recruiter or friends. Consequently, personal networks (like recruiters) are indispensable.

Furthermore, domestic workers I spoke to rarely went to recruitment agencies close to their hometowns – they usually had to travel, sometimes even to different provinces, since agencies were often spread out. Unfortunately, in return for introducing the women to these agencies, sponsors/recruiters can charge high fees, which add to the debt burden MDWs carry when they first go abroad (see Chapter 2 for more details). From the interviews and data I could gather, it seems that the sponsors in Indonesia cost more than their Filipino counterparts, up to several millions of rupiah (IDR3 million, a common figure I heard, is US\$219; Filipinas rarely mentioned paying sponsors). Indeed, sponsor fees are such a well-known problem that the Semarang city government in Central Java was implementing policies and crackdowns to eliminate sponsors due to the additional burden and corruption they placed on the women’s shoulders. However, they admitted to me that they were unsure how successful they would be in the short term, or how long it would take to change such a long-established system.

Additional opacity comes from a neglect to teach domestic workers their rights in the host country – or at least inadequate teaching. Of the Indonesian maids that came abroad prior to c.2010, almost none of them recalled being given any instructions or emergency numbers in case they got into trouble; and for those that came after that time, the teachings were rarely consistent or helpful. “We didn’t know any of our rights [*Gak tahu hak kita apa*], and immediately met the employer to start work,” one told me (ID-Maid 22). In fact, of the Indonesian maids that could recall being taught anything about rights, approximately 30% were explicitly told something like “Working hard. Don’t misbehave and finish the job contract well” or “they just teach us how to be a good maid, how to be an obey [sic] person and how to be not to answering [sic] back to the

⁴³ The way this pattern breaks down by nationality is fascinating, actually. For Indonesian maids, the percentage is 37%: 34 out of the 92 maids that could remember only relied on the sponsor, a total stranger to them. But for Filipina maids, that proportion dropped to 18%. Whether this is a difference due to cultural (gender) norms or societal experience with this kind of migration, I can’t say for certain, but seems to be a combination of both.

employer. We have to stay low” (HK 2015-Maid 3, HK 2015-Maid 6). In fieldwork, it was eerie how consistently that kind of submissive behavior was understood to be an Indonesian’s “rights” abroad. One even described such obedience as a nationalistic duty: “we should work well... work as good as you can... then when you go to HK, you also bring a good name of your country, Indonesia [*membawa nama baik Indonesia*], so your behavior and your manner should be as good as you can make them” (HK 2015-Maid 7). Such patterns have the hallmarks of imposed ignorance: for the purposes of better marketability and exploitability, opacity and ignorance mold the maids into more receptive (and by extension, exploitable) “commodities.”

The Philippines is far better off in this regard, since its Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) rights seminar (known as Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar, PDOS) has been in place for decades, and the Philippines appears better at enforcing it. Not only did 77% of my Filipina interviewees recall that seminar, many also claimed to have mostly *understood* what rights they had before coming to Taiwan or Hong Kong, even if they still encountered difficulties. As one Filipina told me, “we need to hold our passport. Yes, we need to hold the passport. If we have any problem, we have, here, the Philippine Consulate to go in there to seek some advice, like that” (HK-Maid (F) 11). To be fair, only 36% of the Filipina maids that attended PDOS thought it was very useful or helpful at the time. In general, however, the training seemed to bore basic rights into the maids’ heads, even for newcomers. Absolutely none of my Filipina subjects recalled being conditioned or told to simply “obey” whatever employers or authorities told them – in stark contrast to the Indonesians.

One of my Atlas.TI codes reveals the difference between Indonesian and Filipina maids as regards authority and their rights best. I created a code “Obedience,” used whenever maids agreed that they should be more submissive and obedient to the powers that be – employers, agencies, and the government – for any reason. It was not a common code, showing up only 274 times across the 135 maid interviews. However, proportionally, the code showed up almost twice as much for Indonesians as it did Filipinas: 2.32 times per Indonesian transcript, versus 1.1 times per Filipina transcript. Suffice to say, the Filipinas were significantly less inclined to submit to whatever authorities told them to do without question. I would argue (and several of my subjects agreed) that their OWWA/PDOS training is at least partly to thank.

Applying the rights they knew wasn’t always straightforward, though – for Filipinas or Indonesians. Enforcement almost entirely depends on the maid standing up for herself, which is risky in situations of such blatant power disparities. One woman had been taught that “if you deduct your salary in your employer, only HK\$300 [maximum],” and that if her employers demanded that she “‘Clean my house friend, clean my mother's house,’ this is not allowed.” However, when her employer did do such things, she didn’t fight. “Because I don't want to lose this job, so I said, ‘It's okay. No problem, ma'am.’... I said, ‘I need this. This is dollar, dollar, dollar.’ I said to myself, ‘I need money’” (HK-Maid (F) 2). To no one’s surprise, the teaching and implementation of law is different. But at least the teaching was provided for that 77% of my Filipina interviewees, as compared to the dismal 37% of Indonesians.

This is a gap that the Indonesian government is aware of, and has been trying to redress with its own pre-departure seminar. However, based on my interviews with Indonesian workers abroad, the seminar does not appear to be as consistently enforced or as effective. Only 37 of my Indonesian interviewees claimed to have even attended one before flying out; and of those that received it, only 6 thought it was useful. The remaining 31 either could barely recall anything from that seminar, often describing it as confusing or not giving enough detail to apply it to their lives. Several complained to be about being “*bosan* [bored]” during the day-long seminar, which

didn't help with retention. One explained that "it wasn't enough because in so short a time the human mind likes to forget. I feel like I could not embrace all that they said, because it was a lot" (ID-Maid 9). Fortunately, this seems to be improving with time – Indonesian maids that had arrived in the past 5 years were more likely to have gotten a pre-departure training.

What remains constant across both countries, however, are the debt traps. When officials and scholars declare that maids do not have to pay anything to go abroad, that is deceptive (Beh 2017; Mandap 2014). They may not have to front the money, but they incur a large debt from their training that is then taken over by loan sharks. This was the one form of exploitation that I could count on to be universally consistent: only 14 maids (10 Filipinas) out of 139 did not have to take out a loan to cover their migration expenses for their current term abroad.⁴⁴

To expand on what I described in Chapter 3, the cost of training in Indonesia and the Philippines is massive for MDWs. The fee is so high – as much as PHP130,000 (US\$2610) or IDR38.6 million (US\$2707) in my interviews, including interest – that agencies do not expect maids to pay it up front. Instead, the maids are referred to lending agencies, which may be connected to or the same as the agencies themselves. Only one or two maids I spoke to over the entire course of my fieldwork could produce any kind of paperwork for this loan. The women were simply told how much they would pay, and would then go to a local store like 7-11 (only rarely going to a bank) and send the money back to Indonesia when they received their salary every month (the Indonesians called this *potong gaji*: salary deduction). I will elaborate this further below; but I must be clear that the debt traps begin in the home nation, before the maids even have a sure job.

II. *Arrival in Host Society*

With departure already fraught with oversights and neglect, the system of opacity is already primed to dominate a maid's life once in her new host society. In the cases of Taiwan and Hong Kong, however, years of advocacy on that front is beginning to pay off – at least on paper. Not wanting their citizens to begin work in these host countries without a clear understanding of the environment and their rights, the various Consulates in Hong Kong have set up post-arrival orientations, which are supposedly mandatory for all maids. However, most of the women I spoke to, whether Indonesian or Filipina, had not attended that seminar (or at least could not recall it) – 92% and 79% of Hong Kong interviewees, respectively, and even more that I met in fieldwork. In fact, many had not even heard of these orientation programs.

On my second trip to Hong Kong, I discovered part of the reason why. I attended one of these seminars at the Indonesian Consulate, and found it to be relatively thorough. The Consulate had teamed up with a number of NGO workers to teach the women in their native language. However, I then discovered that the Consulate had only recently implemented a system of ID checking at the seminar entrance, which they could then cross-check with the Indonesian domestic workers with visas in Hong Kong. Before that, it had been little more than an honor system on the part of employers and agencies to send the maids over to the Consulate (HK Fieldnotes-2018).

On a structural level, as I explained in Chapter 3, domestic workers are powerless to choose their agency in the host state. Such a limitation keeps them even more in the dark about alternate options. As detailed prior, training agencies in the home state and employment agencies in the host state are (legally, anyway) separate entities. However, because training

⁴⁴ Those that didn't take out loans explicitly weren't necessarily off the hook, however. Many maids that avoided the loan sharks or agency fees had to take out loans from families, which sometimes also charged as much as 5%.

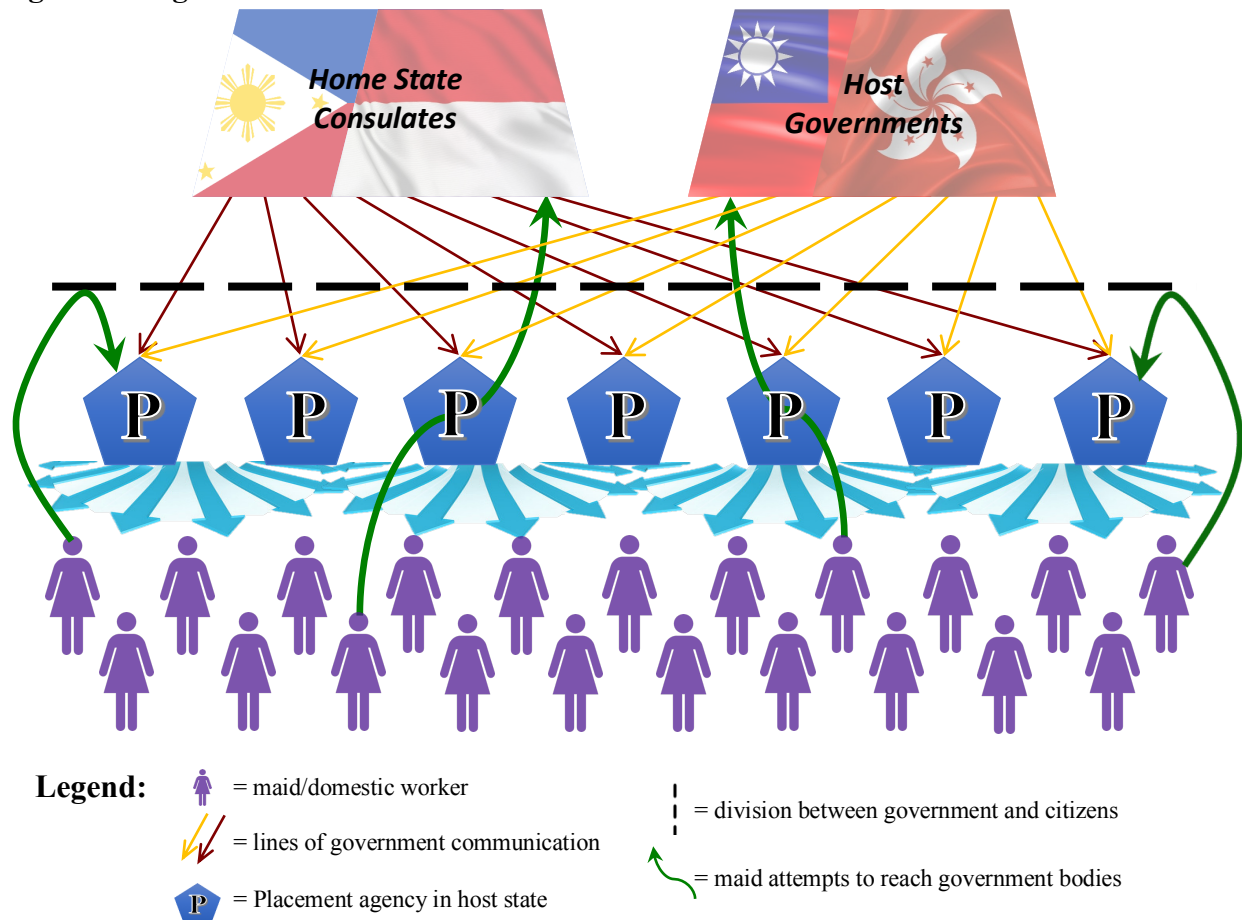
agencies often have several partner employment agencies (maximum of 10 in Hong Kong and 5 in Taiwan), the maid will be stuck with the one their employer happens to choose, even if it is an unscrupulous one. Many maids I spoke to didn't even know the name of their employment agency, some didn't even know the address. Once in the host society, that agency is the primary authority that maids can appeal to if things go wrong; but agencies almost always side with the employers, for a multitude of reasons (emotional and economical – see Chapters 3, 5 and 7). One even said explicitly that if they discovered a maid in distress,

“Because our role is somewhat awkward [尴尬]: we are an agency, so we will ask the foreign maid to directly call 1955 {Taiwanese hotline}, and file a complaint directly... Because in Taiwan, in reality, we have signed a contract – on the one side is the employers, on the other side is the foreign maid, so we have to serve both sides. So we want to refrain from this- maybe this- serving something like the above, the conflict [冲突] part... Sometimes we get into a situation where, we help them call, but afterwards she gives a random testimony, orally or by her actions time and again, and then it ends up being us who are hurt [受伤].” (TW-Agency 7).

In short, these agencies are more concerned about the trouble it will cause them to get involved in these situations, even if the maid is in life-threatening danger.

Even if such a stance is questionable, it would not be a devastating blow to maids if the women had other authorities to appeal to. However, as detailed in Chapter 3 and in this chapter's literature review, there is no other authority they can directly access. Both home and host governments stressed the need for agencies in this market. NGOs and activists advocated for abolishing the agency system repeatedly, but no government official I met thought that was possible. “The first point of contact is the employment agency,” said one Hong Kong official (HK 2015-Gov 5.1). A Philippine official even confessed to me that the change she wanted to make in the maid trade was “Do not involve recruitment agencies. [laughter] [But] it is impossible” (Ph-Gov 4). In short, the number of domestic workers in these host societies was just too much for the limited staff of the consulates to handle (HK-Fieldnotes 2018). Once in the host society, then, the employment agencies became the state's arms; conversely, the agencies became a maid's only link to the government.

Figure 4a: Agencies Control Access to Governments



To illustrate, the above diagram (Figure 4a) should be helpful. Each maid gets assigned to a particular placement agency upon arrival in Taiwan or Hong Kong. Those agencies report to the Consulates of the maid’s home country (or are at least licensed by them). In turn, those agencies are supposed to care for each domestic worker, to lessen the burden of the Consulate staff. What this system does in practice, however, is make the agency a maid’s only link to her government (as well as the host government, which has to give them a separate license). Even if a maid happens to know how to contact her Consulate, she is expected to defer to her agency. One maid explained that “if we go to the Consulate, the Consulate will connect with the agency. And it’s going to be a very difficult process” (HK 2015-Maid 3). Whenever the maids I worked with tried to circumvent the agency and go directly to the government for help, the first question they always got was, “Have you spoken to your agency yet?” – and help was often refused if they had not (HK-Fieldnotes 2015, 2018). Instead, a maid must go through her agency to get to the government – which, as discussed in the literature review, gives her agency immense power over the women’s life. Not only do the placement agencies control her contract, visa, and place of residence, they also control when she gets to ask the government for help, and when she gets

to have her rights enforced – the only accepted legal advocate, but one that does not really wish to advocate for her.⁴⁵

A system like this highly disincentivizes any challenge to the established power structure. Not only is it very difficult for maids to learn about alternate solutions to exploitative/abusive situations, attempting to find any is rarely successful. One maid’s story might have been humorous if it hadn’t been so frustrating for her: “Nope, the Consulate will not help at all, in fact just make me cross, because I feel, what the use [*apa sih artinya*]? How to say, the Agent said go look for help from the Indonesian Consulate myself, but when it’s my turn to look for them, it’s like I was being played with [*saya dipermainkan*], was throw from there to here and here to there, like a pingpong” (HK 2015-Maid 10). Furthermore, any attempt might carry high costs, since the agency is likely to find out and might be angry at the maid.⁴⁶ For example, one MDW, who had been made to do illegal work by her employers, decided to seek help from a Taiwanese shelter when her agency did not respond to her concerns about being deported for doing work outside her contract. When she did, “it was the agent that complicated my permits for a whole month, would not let them come down. The agency was angry with me, saying why did I run to the shelter, when I was told to be patient for 2 years” (TW-Maid (I) 2). Hence, this system is clearly a tool in favor of opacity: the only sure way to beat it is, in the words of dozens of maids, “don’t make trouble.”⁴⁷

Arriving to an unresponsive or exploitative agency would not be devastating to a maid in itself, if she were allowed to change agencies and find a better one. However, this is not allowed in Hong Kong, and is difficult to achieve in practice in Taiwan. In Hong Kong, it is virtually impossible for a maid to change agencies before she has completed her first two-year contract. One Hong Kong agent described it as “when [the Indonesian Consulate] set up the online system, the system written there is to... the window is two years. So therefore, I think they don’t have the [technical] system for them to change... supposedly, the worker [needs to] fulfill their responsibility [i.e., debt] to the PT [Training Center]” (HK 2015-Agency 7). In other words, to make sure the maid pays her debt to her training center, she is held hostage at her first employment agency until the two years of her contract expire – a condition that even this agent found ridiculous. In practice, he and multiple other agencies found that special applications to change agencies for a new employer were highly dependent on whether the particular staff person at the Consulate in charge of the case was helpful or not: “the particular responsible person [might be] easy going or tough [laughter] or they don’t want to do something like that. It just depends” (Ibid.). In my own observations, I watched several maids apply to change agencies only to be stonewalled at the consulate or the placement agencies repeatedly. Only one of my friends was lucky: one of the largest agencies in Hong Kong decided to use its influence to pressure the Indonesian Consulate to let her be under their responsibility, and it worked (HK-Fieldnotes 2015). The powerlessness of maids to freely choose agencies for their quality makes the maid trade into more of a monopsony than a free market – one that these domestic workers are thrown into with very little prior knowledge.

⁴⁵ The only exception I found to this was the police. More and more workers who had recently arrived were being encouraged to call the police in case of emergencies, and those that had been in host states for longer knew that they should call the police. That pattern is still far from universal, however.

⁴⁶ These examples accord perfectly with Pande’s claim that Lebanon’s exploitative recruitment/sponsorship system (the kafala system) is in fact the root cause of many abuses usually attributed to culture or individuals (2013).

⁴⁷ This mentality will be elaborated in Chapter 7.

Again, in accordance with my overall thesis, this structural disadvantage is worse in the Indonesian case. The Philippine government allows direct hire (i.e., maids and employers do not need an agency for a contract), even if it is difficult to achieve with paperwork (HK-Gov 1). The Philippine representative body in Taiwan (the Manila Economic and Cultural Office, or MECO) has also been stricter about repealing licenses for agencies that violate terms, but that was a more recent development (TW-Gov 4). If enough Filipina maids reported violations, the Philippine consulates could and did repeal an agency's license for placing Filipina maids. The Philippine consulates could not, however, repeal an agency's local license or their license to place other nationalities of maids. The key, officials told me, is getting MDWs to report violations *and* provide some proof – all of which agencies strive to minimize with all the tactics described above. Furthermore, I noticed that whenever I went to the Philippine consulates, there were always a large number of domestic workers there, either transmitting money, consulting with staff, or getting ready for seminars. I rarely found such groups in the Indonesian offices.

In fact, the Philippine Consulate in Hong Kong changed its hours to be open on Sundays, the only day that most maids get off from work (HK-Gov 1). Indonesian offices, on the other hand, do not open on Sundays apart from passport services. Such differences might seem minor, but when domestic workers are stuck working in the home every day except that Sunday, just an open door to the government apart from their agency has the potential to make a huge difference.

III. Functioning in a New Society

Once the introductory shock has worn off, and the new maids gain some experience in their host society, the challenges do not disperse. As one Indonesian activist pointed out, whether these workers are Indonesian or Filipina, “it's the situations of their employment that create the vulnerabilities. When you have to live with the employer, you can't walk off the job site” (ID-NGO 2). The debt trap begun in the home country is still a factor, moreover – having to make constant payments of up to 90% of their salary every month impresses on the maids that they cannot afford to lose this job, no matter how undesirable it may be. I encountered story after story of maids putting up with toxic employer relationships just because they knew they had to pay back that money, and if they tried to quit, they were not guaranteed to find another job. Fear, in this case, is a crucial tool perpetuating opacity, deterring the women from even trying to learn more. Furthermore, even in the best of circumstances, the differences in culture and expectations can be so vast as to take years to learn everything needed for the maids to thrive.

Inadequate preparation for their new job plays a noticeable role in the market opacity I observed. Approximately 71% of the maids I interviewed claimed that their training was irrelevant or inadequate – with some even saying that it “*Nggak ada manfaatnya sama sekali!* [had no benefit at all – it was useless!]” (HK 2015-Maid 12). Time after time, the maids complained that although they had paid a figurative arm and leg for their training, they essentially had to start from scratch when they reached the employers' house. Filipina maids, for example, were taught formal European table settings (which Chinese employers never use), but they are taught little about Chinese customs. It has become such a pervasive problem, in fact, that the Philippine government is considering changing its required training curriculum to be country-specific (PH-Gov 4). Poor training is a relatively minor form of opacity, in that the maids are not told exactly what kind of job they will have. Ultimately, they only get one short interview with their employer prior to going abroad, and once there have to learn anew exactly what each employer wants and how to adapt. But this pervasive problem causes some of the most friction and verbal abuse once maids are in their new home.

In particular, the language training was inadequate for Indonesians, as employers almost universally expected them to speak Mandarin or Cantonese. However, as described in Chapter 2, the women were taught one of the world's most difficult languages by former domestic workers, not native speakers. Not surprisingly, all but approximately a dozen of my first-time domestic workers claimed that the way employers in Hong Kong or Taiwan spoke was different, in both accent and speed. It made communication nigh-on impossible: "the Cantonese we learn in the Training Center is just basic. But once we come here, I'm surprised that the language in Asia-Hong Kong... talking so fast. And that was so very difficult. I need to focus ... before talk. Then I feel so foolish" (HK 2015-Maid 3). Indeed, there were 613 independent mentions of language being a source of culture shock or difficulty adapting in MDW interviews, with an approximately even split between Hong Kong and Taiwan. The Indonesian women confessed that, after only three months of learning Cantonese, they were not nearly fluent enough to understand their employers, and certainly not as fluent as many employers wanted them to be.

Every single maid had stories of miscommunication (funny or tragic) between them and their new employers. But most of the time, they were so embarrassed to ask for clarification (considered disrespectful to authority) that they just tried to guess at their meaning. When they guessed wrong, however, employers would easily fly off the handle, calling the maids "stupid" or "dog" while the maid can only apologize.

While likely unintended, this communication barrier bolsters the market's larger opacity system. When I was able to compare what maids and employers knew, I realized how much maids could benefit from the knowledge their employers had, or how differently employers would regard the maids' situation if they knew what the maids had seen. In fact, such comradery was striking in the cases where employers and maids managed to establish good communication. For example, one maid told me how her employer completely changed his mind about Indonesian maid stereotypes when he saw that she was smart enough to stand up for her rights, and actually sided with her against the agency illegally overcharging her (HK 2015-Maid 25). In Taiwan, one Indonesian maid was able to express to her employer how her agency was harassing her for more money than she owed, and that employer ended up supporting her court case against the agency (TW-Fieldnotes 2017-2018). As long as that language barrier remains, however, such a joining of forces remains confined to a lucky few – and the system of power remains unchallenged, thanks to the shield of opacity.

In some circumstances, though, communication was not the primary problem. Many maids were able to tell me stories of how the contract they signed was not the contract honored. The violations I heard of ranged from minor to shocking;⁴⁸ stories of "I was not even allowed to see the contract" before signing were not uncommon, for example (HK 2015-Maid 13). But whatever the violation, the fact that these changes to a legal document went unchallenged was most disturbing. Rodriguez notes similar problems from the Philippine side (2010). Overall, I found such contract incongruencies to be more common in Taiwan, where a maid's duties are usually more clearly demarcated by law (a fact many employers resented). Asking a maid hired as a caretaker to cook and clean on top of her caregiving duties constitutes a contract violation, for example. In Hong Kong, maids' job descriptions have them doing anything and everything anyway, and the vague terms make violation less likely; but employers could still lie regarding the home's situation.

⁴⁸ A minor infraction might be an extra dog that wasn't mentioned in the contract; major ones would be the maid being forced to take care of three extra children, or being forced to clean an additional house (illegal).

Multiple facets of opacity conspire to make these violations possible: a maid's imposed ignorance, a sense of entitlement to a maid's labor among employers (see Groves 2015), and an undeveloped system for reporting such violations. As more and more maids encounter these violations, however, mistreatment becomes a norm they accept (if resent), making maids more hesitant to question the host-interpreted contract. A veteran maid in Taiwan explained how "in Philippines, we sign- Of course all of us, we sign we have one day off every week, just on a Sunday at least once a week. When we arrive here, it doesn't happen. They don't allow the caretakers- especially caretakers, why they don't get the once a week day off? [And don't pay required overtime?]" (TW-Maid 8). But, she explained, current maids have to accept those terms if they want to keep that job. As more contract incongruencies go unchallenged, employers and agencies grow more confident that maids will agree to the terms. Violations become normalized. Thus we see opacity become a self-sustaining system in this case.

In addition, I frequently found that the technicalities of law and evidence in host societies were confounding and treacherous for the domestic workers that tried to navigate them. Every country's laws can be quite different, so this is understandable to an extent; but native Hong Kongers and Taiwanese often expressed much frustration at how maids did not understand what they considered common sense. For example, when I asked Hong Kong employers about the Erwiana case, they all condemned the employer and expressed pity for the maid. However, several of them or their relatives couldn't help but criticize: "Why didn't [Erwiana] call for help?" or "Why didn't she run away?" (HK-Fieldnotes 2015; HK 2015-Employer 3; 5). That is, after all, common sense to someone who lives in a place with a strong rule of law. In places like the US or Hong Kong, one can simply run to the police and (most of the time) expect justice to be served.

However, that is not an environment either Indonesian or Philippine women grew up in. To call the police is a dangerous gamble in both their home countries, and corruption is rife in the court, education, and business systems (Business Anti-Corruption Portal 2018a; 2018b). And even when some domestic workers muster up the courage to fight back, much of what can count as evidence is lost on them (this will be elaborated in Chapter 7). I would argue this is hardly their fault – they simply haven't been taught, nor is it easy to obtain the necessary evidence to prove what happened entirely in the purview of the private home, with no other witnesses.

For example, they can testify that the agencies required them to pay HK\$10,000 (US\$1290) to change employers, an illegal fee (as described in Chapter 3). However, as all my subjects attested, the agencies refused to write receipts for it even when asked, and so in court their claims do not stand up – it becomes little more than their word against that of their agencies. One Filipina maid claimed in frustration that she had demanded a receipt from her Hong Kong agency for a similar fee, even refused to pay if she didn't get one; but when she did, the agency just threatened to call the police on her and have all their staff claim she was harassing them (HK-Fieldnotes 2015). An Indonesian maid confessed that her agency overcharged her several times before she caught on, claiming they would pay her back; but when she asked for that money back, they retorted that she did not have a receipt, so they did not owe her anything – even though they were the same people that had taken the money from her hands. "So stupid, Indonesian people. [laugh] Because my government... [tell us to] call the agency, that's it. Me is wrong [sic] because I don't have the receipt, that's it... I feel stupid la. Last time. Now, no. I have experience" (HK 2015-Maid 20). Even when they get to a court, I observed that their reception is generally one of intimidation and disdain for their ignorance – which only worsens the problem of opacity (elaborated in Chapters 6 and 7).

So far, I have depicted maids as primarily the victims of the system of opacity. However, I would be remiss to neglect their role as contributors in some circumstances. While I personally did not encounter any instances of it, employers and agencies were convinced that some domestic workers learned how to game the system by “job-hopping.” Since domestic workers have the right to terminate their contracts at any time in Hong Kong and Taiwan, locals believed some workers would quit whenever there was even one thing about their job they did not like. Furthermore, locals claimed these migrant maids would successively quit each job without regard for the fees each employer had to pay or how much they “needed” a maid to do the work, until they found an “easy” job.

To the point, a Taiwanese agent told me that some (though very few, in his opinion) Indonesian workers came abroad with the *express intent* to run away – they already had friends in Taiwan and an illegal job waiting for them with a higher salary, so they only needed to get to Taiwan (TW-Fieldnotes 2018). A government official confirmed, “Most often migrants running away [逃跑] is because they want to make more money – they hope to be in Taiwan for five/ten years, and get enough money to return to their home country” (TW-Gov 5). Overall, just how much of this “job-hopping” is “gaming the system” and how much is simply running from jobs with excessive terms is debatable, given how overworked many domestic workers are. Yet in this context, the possibility of maids “job-hopping” (however rare) does present a conduit for opacity. Namely, employers and agencies come to believe that they cannot be sure of a maid’s intentions, and consequently regard all foreign domestic workers with suspicion. I will elaborate this further in following sections.

On another note, maids can also perpetuate opacity with each other with silence. Shame is a powerful emotion among these women, particularly in the face of their families back home. The fact that these women do not generally publicize stories of abusive agencies should be telling not only of the power differential, but also of their hesitance to share failure (see also Sayad 2004). One domestic worker that had been in Hong Kong 20 years lamented that “Indonesian maids fall into debt too easily. There are many who do not succeed. Many of them go back to Indonesia with no result (no success – *tidak berhasil*); instead they bring back with them a huge debt” (HK 2015-Maid 8). Another told me, “I used to think that those who work overseas always find success. But after came to Hong Kong, I just found out that there are more people who do not succeed compare with those who really succeed. From what I knew in the past when I was still in Indonesia, most of people only talked about the good thing in working overseas. In my village, bad news about it was never heard at all” (HK 2015-Maid 14). Thus, without meaning to, the maids perpetuate the cycle of opacity.

Families and communities place significant pressure on the migrant domestics to succeed abroad and send back a lot of money for everyone; and if they cannot, maids told me that the blame is usually placed on them. I only understood the extent of this problem when Erwiana herself told me that after she returned home and was hospitalized, she didn’t want anyone to know what had happened to her at first. Her reasoning was alarming: “I was actually ashamed that I was mistreated [*malu saya dianiaya*], I was not successful – even ashamed that my case was covered by reporters. I was not brave at first, so stupid, because I felt that it was my fault that I was not successful” (ID-Maid 13). In other words, she blamed *herself* for her abuse and the injuries her employer inflicted on her. It was not until several NGOs and the Hong Kong government insisted that her employer was in the wrong that Erwiana was willing to come forward. Because of mindsets like hers, necessary warnings to new migrants and information

about abusive conditions or agents does not circulate. These women don't mean any harm by not speaking up. Yet thanks to their silence, many other MDWs after them are left without crucial knowledge of the maid trade's flaws, and thus are doomed to repeat the same patterns.

The idealist might wish to believe that such problems could be fixed with education: teach the maids their rights and all they need to know about the host government's legal system, and they can fight for themselves. However, as an Indonesian government official insisted to me privately, "fighting for one's rights isn't as simple as knowledge – it's a mindset" (ID-Fieldnotes 2017). It is a mindset that many in the West take for granted, having been raised in it: that every person is worth fighting for, that one does not have to merely accept the hand dealt to them, and most importantly that justice *can* be won. Without those attitudes as a foundation, many of the domestic workers I spoke to expressed resignation to never getting justice. As long as their plight wasn't dire, their default strategy seemed to be to "grin and bear it," so to speak – "*sabar, sabar* [be patient, be patient]" in Indonesian. In interviews and fieldnotes, I became scared by how frequently an employer was called "good" or "good enough" simply because they did not physically abuse or beat the maid, no matter how many other exploitative practices they might have. Though far from a majority, that mindset is terrifying to see in 15% of interviewees. Unfortunately, it coincided with a favorite phrase of the Indonesians in my ethnography and interviews: "Don't want to make trouble." It was like a vicious cycle: aspects of culture and shame contributing to opacity, then the structural and environmental aspects of that opacity encouraging further silence.

While that all-accepting attitude was frustrating for me when I started my research, I finally realized that when confronted with a world they knew so little about, resignation was the safest option. It was a *habitus* of resignation, to use Bourdieu's terminology: a trained response from their social upbringing as Indonesian (mostly Muslim) women and training as domestic workers. But it was also much more than that. These maids recognized, much better than I did for a long time, that they were in a world in which they had no real power to change anything, and that any challenge to their powerless position was little more than a gamble (see Chapter 7). The environment of opacity had done its job: it hamstrung many maids' will to fight.

Opacity from the Employers' Perspective

Yet domestic workers are not the only victims of willful ignorance and skewed incentives in the maid trade. Surprisingly enough, I found that employers were just as often the victims of misinformation and opacity. They do have some advantages over the domestic workers: technically, Hong Kong and Taiwan both have public lists of employment agencies, and the governments keep careful track of which ones are registered. Taiwan even has a rating system of agencies (see Workforce Development Agency 2017). However, the employers I spoke to rarely knew about these lists or where to access them, and certainly did not refer to them when choosing their agency. "How could I have time to look for that?" several told me. Convenience was prized far more than thorough investigation. One explained, "It's not too difficult because my colleague actually told me to use her agency again, the one that she hired the maid. So she already have all the documentation of the maid, so it's much easier" (HK 2015-Employer 10).

There was a certain amount of distrust expressed towards official ratings systems and agency advertisements, as well. To me, each other and maids, employers often dismissed these systems as nothing but "marketing." They simply did not believe they could truly know how good an agency is based on advertisements or official ratings. From the other side, only a very small percentage of agencies even have websites for employers to peruse: they put almost no

public information up for employers to compare and research (even to the point of this dissertation's completion). The few exceptions are the largest agencies (like Overseas and Sunlight in Hong Kong and the Southeast Asia Group 東南亞集團 in Taiwan), some of which also did marketing in the maids' countries (HK 2015-Agency 8). But by and large, these employment agencies operate under the radar – not even their prices are always publicly available. It was only when I called some of these agencies directly that they would give me estimates. One agency even attested: “we do not have any advertising, we do not have some customer [sic] we don't know. All our customer is [sic] from referral” (HK 2015-Agency 3).

Indeed, just as Granovetter would predict, employers in Taiwan and Hong Kong universally preferred to ask friends for referrals (1973; 1995; see also Cox 1999). Unlike in Granovetter's case, however, personal referrals have morphed into the legitimate system rather than remaining merely a complement. In line with Witt and Redding's institutionalized vs. personal trust elaborated above, approximately 10 of my 30 employer interviewees explicitly declared that only a friend or personal reference could give them honest answers. About 70% of the rest implied it in various ways, in the interviews or in private conversations. Many expressed skepticism at the idea that a cold payment-for-service relationship will achieve the best results for something so close to home: the system can always be twisted to exploit or hurt them in some way. However, a longer-term personal relationship is more likely to have their interests at heart, they told me. Thus, employers generally sign on with the agency their friends referred them to, and often don't look for new agencies even if they've had a bad experience. One activist/businesswoman in Hong Kong bemoaned that even when her employer friends recommended an agency, they would turn around and say, ““They're terrible. They never return your phone calls. You'll never know when she's coming. Just wait and then one day they'll call. It's really bad.” Then I realized, people are using the same old, same old... there's something comforting about familiarity even if we don't like it” (HK-NGO 1). Ultimately, they prefer to remain with the devil they know.

Such behavior runs completely contrary to the economic theory of quality and consumer demand (Murphy 1980; Leland 1977). However, from an emotional point of view, the behavior is somewhat understandable. Finding a maid to take care of one's elderly parents or young children 24-7 and live in your house with your family is considered too intimate, too important to leave to strangers. Even in Western countries, references and personal connections are preferable when finding roommates or housing, for instance (see Ward 2019). Several agencies I spoke to (along with several activists and employers) described having a live-in maid as something of a “marriage,” with all the high-strung emotions and conflicts that come with it. “This is a very intimate relationship: [the maid] is living with this family, they have to be in the same house all the time, so she is like an outsider becoming part of the family,” said one (HK 2015-Agency 12). But perhaps the best description of the maid-employer relational dynamic comes from the words of one Hong Kong employer:

“Ultimately, if we treat the maids nice, we just trust that the maid will—this is reciprocal. I think it's a mutual trust, and respect, and appreciation. I think that the maid is a good friend to us because I can share with her some of the situation in the family, because she watch how we interact. I think we just have to be nice to each other... The thing is mutual, it's a relationship. We just take her as part of our family, but of course in a different role” (HK-Employer 4).

Another employer also expressed fear over this kind of intimacy, as she realized that having a maid would mean the end of her family's privacy:

“Employer: I didn't want anybody to be my maid and then we come to the same church. It's too close. You go to your different church.

Interviewer: Yes, give her her privacy.

Employer: Us too. I always tell her, ‘What happens in this house stays in this house. If you're unhappy with anything, come to me. Before you go and complain to somebody else, come to me.’ Always, I had to sit down and ask her, ‘You're not very happy today. You're not talking. Is something wrong?’ Once when I did that to her, she said, yes, she's not having a good time at home with the husband... I wish she would open up even more, but maybe she's just a happy person [generally].” (HK-Employer 2).

Thus, for something so invasive in their private lives, using informal channels to get a maid seems like the best option. This matches well with Cox's research in Britain, where employers “found it easier to trust domestic workers who came to them through personal recommendations”—employers sought maids they could trust, not just highly-skilled ones (1999:143) Employers put their friends in something of a matchmaker role. Sometimes that meant bringing them to an agency (I noticed that agencies often had reward programs or incentives for such referrals during my fieldwork). Other times that could mean finding them a maid that was being let go or who wanted to change employers. Other times, it was to get advice and tips for how to manage a maid.

However, when I spoke to them, few to none of the employers seemed to consider that their friends might just be uninformed, or simply have limited knowledge. The words of one's friends were trusted above all. In coding my employer interviews, I quantified this with the two codes called “rumors” and “informality.” The first was used whenever employers repeated back what friends told them (and often the friend's subjective interpretation) as fact. The second referred to any instances where employers chose to handle anything by informal means rather than through formal channels. Combined, these two codes showed up a total of 146 times out of 30 employer interviews, or almost 5 times per interview on average. And sadly, in accordance with Burrell's research on rumors spreading in Africa, this chain of information was able to make the nonmaterial, material – a self-fulfilling prophecy (2012).

Consequently, employers often hired a maid with unrealistic expectations. The belief that she would be proficient in Cantonese after just three months of learning back in Indonesia was the most common misconception I encountered. Others expected the maid to already be trained in everything they needed her to do before arriving, or assumed that coming to Hong Kong or Taiwan would require little adaptation on her part. Unfortunately, agencies also perpetuate these expectations (to be elaborated in the Stereotypes section below). Furthermore, trusting information only from one's limited circle of friends had the unfortunate tendency to perpetuate caricatures, distrust, and a self-entitled attitude – a pattern which will be discussed at length in Chapters 5 and 7.

Sometimes, I believe employers didn't even realize how unrealistic their expectations were, especially in regards to how much emotional labor the maid should put forward. One employer in Taiwan said quite bluntly:

[Because she calls my mother ‘mother’ just like me, so I said, when {disabled} grandma is doing anything, you have to be by her side. How could you let grandma go to the toilet by herself, since it’s possible the floor around the toilet is slippery and she may fall... So I said how could you do something like this? Would you act like this toward your own mother? ... So every day I remind her, ... ‘Big sister [referring to herself, 姐姐] is going to work, today you must remember that whenever mother is doing something, you must be by her side... you must remember to stay by her side, big sister is making a request of you.’ (TW-Employer 6)

Many employers seemed to imply, intentionally or not, that the maid’s work was her life. Ergo, in their minds, the maid should be caring for the employers’ family with just as much affection as the employers themselves feel – to the point of having the maid call the grandmother “mother” and call the employer “big sister,” in this case. The maid was supposed to sacrifice every minute of the day to care for the employer’s mother as if she were the maids’ own mother. I can hardly call opacity the sole culprit for such attitudes, of course. Dynamics like gender, racism, class, and politics play an enormous role here (and are discussed in other chapters). However, market opacity is indeed one of the most important factors here, as it allows these expectations (and agency claims) to persist largely unchallenged.

Additional opacity that employers encountered was also in part due to the lack of assistance or information offered by their governments. In their eyes, the various government bodies responsible had left them to navigate these large societal problems completely on their own, when they felt the government should be taking charge of solving some of the larger-scale societal problems that necessitated foreign domestic workers. As elaborated in Chapter 3, the foreign domestic workers are a market solution to an aging society and an overworked (arguably underpaid) population (Zhao 2019; Ng and Leung 2018). These are larger-scale problems, due partly to poor social services, that impact Taiwanese and Hong Kong families. However, whenever the employers felt lost or frustrated, the one thing employers could agree on was that help was “完全没有[completely non-existent]” (TW-Employers 3-7). They receive no training or preparation, and from my observations were just as clueless as the domestic workers when it came to interactions and communication. Frustration seemed worse in Taiwan, where the paperwork to apply for a maid is more cumbersome, the wait-time is often longer, and employers had to pay a monthly fee to the government just to have a maid. None of the Taiwanese employers I spoke to knew how the government used their NTD2000-5000 (US\$68-170) monthly fee. I had to go to the government offices to find out that it was being used to fund NGOs housing and provide help to abused maids. When told that, the employers I spoke to considered it reasonable enough; but the fact that they did not know shows the problems of non-transparency even more. The lack of clarity also prompted a significant amount of resentment:

“When the worker is in her [probation] window, we have absolutely no guarantee of anything [完全就没有保障的]. Even if we want to retain the same worker we don’t have a single right; including times when we even have a contract [with the maid], we have nothing to- to retain them, and let us find the next caregiver, we don’t have that right. There’s not the slightest trace of [our] rights, it’s just like we really are pleading for help but there are no doors [求助无门].” (TW-Employers 3-7)

It is difficult to say how much of this ignorance is self-imposed by employers. While Hong Kong has essentially no services available for maid employers, Taiwan does in fact have some educational programs (describing rights, limitations, contract law, etc.) that the government requires employers to undergo before hiring a maid/caregiver. However, one government official confessed to me that “A lot of people [employers] feel that, ‘If I find an agency that will be fine. The agency will know everything.’ So then they will not really take the initiative to participate” (TW-Gov 7). Accordingly, when I asked Taiwanese employers about the training programs, only a small minority remembered that they even existed. Required though they are, legally, even the employers that listened to the trainings hardly seemed to take them seriously. They were considered nothing more than legal hoops to jump through, not anything that changed their way of living or their expectations of the maid (TW-Employer 9). As one employer summed up, “Usually, it’s not easy for us {employers} to apply by ourselves in the beginning. Because sometimes you are not familiar with foreign countries. But if you go through an agency, they can help you interview, help you do the training... Do everything for you. So we will go through an agency [透过中介]” (TW-Employer 8).

These patterns indicate just how rampant employers’ reliance on agencies is throughout Hong Kong and Taiwan. Some activists I met called it laziness on the part of employers, but I discovered it was not that simple. Rather, it was yet another side effect of market opacity: employers often feel that the laws and logistics surrounding the hiring of a foreign domestic worker are too much for them to handle, and thus chose to depend on agencies for everything without researching all their options. Most employers simply want to hire on a maid who will do the work needed in the home – be that cooking, childcare or eldercare (and the attending emotional labor) – as fast as possible. Understandably, employers often wish to minimize the effort involved in such an undertaking. Attitudes like “I don’t need to because the agency will handle everything. So I just really sign, pay the money, and wait” were very common (HK 2015-Employer 10). Unfortunately, that extends from avoiding paperwork to minimizing any

reciprocal changes or compromises on the employer’s part. Agencies make themselves out to be the easiest way to achieve that goal – they handle the paperwork, and find the perfect “match” for the employers’ needs (see Stereotypes section below). Such attitudes spurred many a slogan in domestic worker rallies and protests: “We are workers, we are not slaves!” in Hong Kong, to “*Kami Bukan Robot: Hargai keringat PRT!* [We are not robots: please respect the sweat and hard work of

Photo 4a



Protesting with migrant workers on a rainy January day in 2018. The red sign reads “We are not robots: please respect the sweat and hard work of migrant workers.”

migrant workers!]" in Taiwan (HK-Fieldnotes 2018; TW-Fieldnotes 2018; see Photos 4a, 4b).

Photo 4b



Migrants preparing for the long protest march on Hong Kong Island wearing symbolic costumes. One of the many chants these MDWs shouted was “We are workers, we are not slaves!”

Even if employers’ ignorance is more self-imposed, it indicates a different kind of opacity: the employers are unprepared for how much work it will take to accept a person from a completely different country into their home. I found most employers were unaware of how stressful such a task would be. They seemed to have little concept of how much training and helping the maid adjust would demand of them, not to mention how they would need to adjust their own lives. The theme of adaptation was also one of the top five Atlas.TI codes in my employer interviews, showing up a total of 178 times across 30 interviews. One employer in Hong Kong summed it up perfectly:

“It’s also not so much how you prepare the maid, it’s actually how you prepare the employer, because for the employer, like for us, we expect-- “Okay, clean this.” We expect it to be clean to our standard, but their standard is different from ours and we don’t know what is their standard... Then for the employer, this is not what I want. That will show the differences. A lot of misunderstanding because we don’t know each other’s culture and talking, or communication isn’t quite good... That is how problems start. For us, I think for the employer, actually, we don’t know enough of the background of the maid. I think that is initially-- It takes a long time to get used to each other.” (HK-Employer 2)

In my fieldwork, I was also fortunate enough to meet some close relatives of employers, who could give me some insight into adjustments for families from an outside perspective. One, Lydia, described how her family complained about their maids' moods. For example, one was a little depressed when she first came, which was frustrating to the grandparents. Then there was a period where the maid's husband was in an accident, and she was crying for at least three days, which also frustrated the employers even if they sympathized. Lydia explained to me that employers will always reason that they're treating the maid well – “they are paying her, feeding her, so why is she still sad? It doesn't make sense to them. But the fact is that the maid is feeling a pressure that is outside the employers' control, and the employer doesn't know how to handle that,” she told me (TW-Fieldnotes 2018).

Given employers' obvious advantages vis-à-vis maids (in their home country, wealthier, surrounded by friends), I was surprised by how accepting employers were of their own ignorance – they didn't see a need to know. The head of a Hong Kong employer association even exclaimed that “some of these maids even know the laws better than their employers!” – particularly the Filipinas, who can read and speak English (HK 2015-Employer 4). However, just as with the domestic workers, opacity among employers serves a purpose: the employers become dependent on the agency they pay. The more difficult and overwhelming the market seems, the more these employers need to rely on their agency's help. I cannot exclusively blame the agencies, of course – the governments design the regulations that require so much navigating and paperwork, after all. But the fact remains that they are the primary beneficiaries, whether officials intended it or not.

Ultimately, the attitude of the employers towards this opacity and uncertainty is surprisingly similar to that of the domestic workers: resignation. For the Taiwanese and Hong Kong employers, it is a resignation to luck and chance. One of the activists I spoke to described this market as highly “unprofessional” – it is not believed that quality work or quality matching programs have anything to do with getting a “good” domestic worker. The way they see it, it is a gamble every time, and they just have to hope that the dice turn out favorably. That was part of the reason that employers did not change from agencies they thought had awful service: they did not think it would make any difference in their chances. The same activist explained: “people can't wrap their mind around that this could be an area where you could get professional help in. They will get guidance and all other things, in parenting, in coaching and management, all other aspects of relationships... But when it comes to this very all-important one, we tend to treat it with such dismissiveness” (HK-NGO 1). In point of fact, when employers I spoke to (in interviews or observation) said they had good domestic workers, almost every one of them described themselves as “lucky” – not as having the best agency, not a good judge of character, not a good home manager, just “lucky.” If luck is all employers believe they have to rely on, then it makes no sense for them to do much further market research – and the maid trade remains opaque to them.

Opacity for Profit: Agency Perspective

When our lens shifts to scrutinize the more powerful actors in this market – namely, agencies and the government – opacity remains a dominant force, surprisingly. Neither of these parties have the absolute advantage: there are aspects of the market, activities, laws and regulations that remain obscure to each. Agencies are better positioned to take advantage of the opacity, even as they remain somewhat in the dark themselves; and government officials were sometimes unaware of their own ignorance. Furthermore, the way agencies and government

operated was often counterproductive: local officials especially seemed to guide the market towards protecting fragmentation and imperfect competition (in the vein of Naidu et. al. 2014), whether or not that was their intent.

In the first place, there are numerous small but significant loopholes that officials seemed to consistently miss, and which agencies were ripe to take advantage of. While I could not name all of them, some of the most prominent ones involved agency licenses. In Indonesia and the Philippines (as well as in Hong Kong and Taiwan), it was fairly easy to get maid placement or training license – too easy, according to the agencies themselves. The head of a Hong Kong employment agency association complained that “especially the new employment agencies they're not follow the law, easy money... [and that's partly because] it's very easy to apply for a license – no criminal records, I am citizen, I can apply then. No matter how big your office or even I have a home office, you can apply for legal license – no one knows. I think this is one of the reasons that we still have [maids being] overcharged” (HK-Agent 1). A Philippine training agency concurred that unscrupulous training agencies may only be set up for a short time, but in that time they “are using some bad techniques to convince people” and can make a killing (PH-Training 2). These accusations have to be taken with a grain of salt, of course, as these agencies are referring to their competition; but what they say does match what domestics themselves described to me. Furthermore, several NGOs confirmed that they knew of several agencies that had been shut down, but were able to reopen just a few months later under a different name with the same people and practices (PH-NGO 1; PH-NGO 3; ID-Fieldnotes 2017). Once I understood this licensing system, the dozens of maids who could not locate their agencies made sense. Only a small number of government officials I spoke to were aware of this loophole, and activists confirmed the government's ignorance and/or complicity. Such a system is almost begging for profit-hungry agencies to repeatedly violate the law, since having a license suspended is nothing but a temporary bump in the road.

Several other loopholes lie in domestic worker protections prior to departure. The legal language surrounding agency responsibilities and restrictions is just vague enough (combined with the aforementioned worker opacity and confusion) to be toothless. For example, in the Philippines agencies are not allowed to charge domestic workers a placement fee, as opposed to Indonesia where that is still legal (even if regulations have been tightened). So I was surprised when I found that my Filipina respondents universally reported having to pay anywhere between PHP30,000 to PHP120,000 (US\$593-US\$2373) to come abroad! The agencies, it turns out, skirted around the regulatory restriction by charging the maids an excessive number of fees – which would be called anything *but* a placement fee. Some of the stranger ones included a Skype call fee, a driving fee, and an application fee, as my subjects recalled. Domestic workers could rarely name all the fees they were charged, and of the 135 I interviewed, only one kept her own record of what she was charged – the agencies would not provide it otherwise.

In Indonesia, another loophole involved the regulation regarding certification: after their 600 hours of training, Indonesian maids are *supposed* to receive a certificate indicating their competency in domestic work (cooking, cleaning, etc.). It is the same national certification system for all professions (the *Sertifikasi Nasional*, operated through *Lembaga Sertifikasi Profesi* (Professional Certification Institute), one which only began to include domestic work from 2015 on (see Nusantara 2016:KEPMEN No. 412 tahun 2015). That certificate is meant to give the domestic workers proof of experience and training when applying to other jobs in Indonesia (ID-Gov 2). Yet none of the recent maid arrivals I spoke to could produce this certificate – they had either not received it from their agency, or their agency was holding it for them until their return

(whether they would actually receive said certificate then is unknown at this point). Many of these women expressed the belief that they had no right to said certificate until they paid off their debt – a misconception that agencies were likely taking advantage of.

Furthermore, these certificates expire after two years in Indonesia.⁴⁹ For any domestic worker who finishes her contract in Taiwan or Hong Kong, that certificate that she paid as much as HKD21,000 (US\$2698) for is useless by the time she returns home. She would have to undergo and pay for the same training once again to get that certificate again and use it for jobs locally. Since Indonesia currently does not have an established testing system for these certificates (as the Philippines does with its Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA)), maids find it difficult to bypass that training on grounds of work experience (ID-Gov 2). The vested interests of training agencies are a problem here, beyond simply maid agencies: having an expiration date on all professional certificates ensures that training agencies for all professions (from programming to grade school teaching) will get repeated business.⁵⁰

An oversight that both the Philippines and Indonesia shared was the use of loan sharks for payment after the maids departed for the host state. This was not an issue agencies admitted, but I was able to piece together what happens through long interviews with NGOs, maids themselves, and a few helpful officials. To find a job, domestic workers do not have to make any payments to training agencies up front, but instead incur a large debt from staying at the agencies and taking their classes. To pay this off, the agencies usually recommend a loan company or individual lender – one that has connections of some kind to the agency. The maids told me time and again that they rarely knew anyone who could take on the amount of money they had to pay, so they often chose to use the agency-recommended lender. Actually, many of them could not tell whether the lender and the agency were even separate. That lender takes on the debt (and gives the maid extra “pocket money” in Indonesia), and then demands monthly installments from the maid once she begins working. While the agency-lender connections are reminiscent of cartels, this system of payment is not criminal in itself: the woman finds a job, is given the means to pay fees she would have had no prayer of paying on her own with the lender, and the agency makes its profit.

Once again, however, the loan payback is inseparable from an intricate system of opacity. In the first place, these lenders are almost never registered – individual maids are considered too high-risk and small for banks, so these maids must borrow from a lender they know very little about. Furthermore, as stated above, the fees are rarely itemized, and neither are the interest rates made clear. Once or twice, maids were able to show me invoices of what they were being charged. Yet even these were not itemized, and nor was the base debt separated from the lender’s interest rates (only one exception in my entire fieldwork: HK-Maid (F) 3). Maids paid the money to a specific account, often through a convenience store like 7-11 or an international wire (since they rarely had bank accounts even after they arrived in Hong Kong or Taiwan), and if they questioned the amount they were charged, they were threatened (most often by agencies).

⁴⁹ I and other Indonesian scholars (who have asked for anonymity) suspect that corruption is involved in this limit, but we cannot prove it. All Indonesia’s work certificates have an expiration date, and two years just happens to be the one set for maid certificates. Other certificates can expire at 2 years, 5 years, etc. I and other scholars have searched for any documentation as to why, but came up empty. See footnote 9.

⁵⁰ Indonesia only recently adopted a law requiring information about lobbyists to be disclosed in 2010 (Public Disclosure Information Act), but official after official confirmed to me that dollar figures and names of donors were still not available – it is still mostly done under the table (Feulner 2015).

To give a poignant example (one that actually went to court), one maid in Taiwan (pseudonym Dara) showed me a Whatsapp conversation where she questioned the amount she was being charged for – the “pocket money” specifically. She insisted that the lender had only given her 2 million rupiah, but the lender claimed that she had taken 3 million (US\$146 and US\$219, respectively). When Dara refused to agree to the lender’s interpretation, the lender/agent issued a veiled threat: “Mau pulang? [do you want to come home?]” In essence, the lender was threatening to make her lose her job (since they had connections to her Taiwan agency, as explained in Chapter 3, they could encourage the employer to terminate her), and make her return home with the debt still hanging over her head to discuss those terms face-to-face if Dara did not comply. Lenders/agencies could do this in part because there was no receipt (a hallmark of opacity in the maid trade), and also because they held greater influence. Fortunately, Dara had a supportive employer who did not fire her and let her take the case to court – something she knew most maids were not so fortunate to have (TW-Fieldnotes 2018). Most stories were more along the lines of: “If you do not pay on time, they will send you a letter from a card and then that letter it costs NT\$ 500, but you don't know [why] that NT\$ 500 will charge you” (TW-Maid (F) 11).

In Hong Kong, I encountered the same problem repeatedly, but nowhere more blatantly than at a Labour Day protest:

“[One Indonesian] maid I speak to tells me about some problems: she is being way overcharged (HK\$3000 [US\$387] for 6 months – I see the texts and the invoice showing the expected payment schedule), and she has been threatened by her agency that if she doesn't pay, they will call the police. Her employer is also a bit crazy, often does not let her sleep until 3am. She seems quite frustrated but also unsure of what to do, saying she's very scared to report what's happened – and if she changes employers, she thinks she will have to pay again... [So an NGO leader helps me take] her to the reporting station, where I find her later giving all her details to one of the workers – they say they are getting a lot of cases today, and seem happy that people are speaking up about all the overcharging cases, if a bit overwhelmed.” (HK-Fieldnotes 2018)

Thanks to the veil of opacity, loan sharks and agencies operate mostly with impunity. In fact, opacity is crucial to their operations in this case. With no itemized receipt (if there even is a receipt), no registration, and only a 7-11 wire transfer to trace, barriers to accurate information are quite high. This metaphorical slight of hand not only avoids regulations and courts – it also shields them from the court of public opinion when cases do come up: the evidence is on their side. Compound that with the intimidation tactics used (which I found many and varied), and even the motivation to find truth and facts dries up. These practices are not merely the outcome of opacity – they create opacity as well. Without these tools, agencies and lenders could be more easily challenged, whether by maids or by governments.

Lending was also a tricky situation to handle legally: several Hong Kong officials I spoke to, for example, were aware of these excess charges that went far beyond Hong Kong’s legal limit of 10% of the first month’s salary. However, the agency charging the fee was always domiciled outside of Hong Kong – and therefore outside the Special Autonomous Region’s jurisdiction (HK 2015-Gov 5; HK 2015-Gov 3; HK-Fieldnotes 2018).

Even the Indonesian Consulate, which should have the authority to bring such cases back to Indonesia, told me that it felt largely powerless. I had joined a meeting that one particular

official had initiated between himself and several maid activists around the city. I watched them discuss for hours at length all the difficulties that maids go through, and brainstorm solutions; they would tell him what frustrated them about the government, and he in turn told them what he needed from maids to file a case (HK-Fieldnotes 2018). Activists told me that this particular official was much more open to their ideas and suggestions than anyone they had met prior. When I was able to meet this official alone, however, I discovered that he was struggling with figuring out how to move the cases forward:

“He keeps emphasizing that the problems originate in Indonesia, and that the government there is very poorly integrated: there is the Ministry of Manpower, then Immigration, BNP2TKI, etc. – and they all have vested interests, and don’t normally talk to one another. The problem [of overcharging and poor training] is there, but it’s the Consulate here [in Hong Kong] that has to ‘*cuci piring* [wash the dirty dishes].” (HK-Fieldnotes 2018)⁵¹

The situation was surprisingly not much better in the Philippines. Only very few Filipina maids could afford the training price tag without help, so the use of lending companies was commonplace. As in Indonesia, not all of the maids I interviewed were sure that the lender and agency were entirely separate entities. One agency that tried to run itself more like a non-profit (a claim I confirmed with maids from there and government officials), told me outright “We don’t help them [to find a loan agency]. If they want to make a loan somewhere else, they have to do it on their own. We don’t recommend any lending companies because I think they all charge too much” (PH-Training 3).

An activist in Taiwan also explained that:

“The training fee is still the most expensive for Indonesians. However, Filipinas usually take a loan out to pay back those companies, and actually many of those loan companies are owned by Taiwanese. In fact, [he] even knows one man who owns both an agency and a loan company! So basically, all the money goes to him. And additionally, no one really knows what the interest charged on those loans really is. What is most frustrating [to this activist] is that the courts don’t even seem to care – they just say that’s what’s in the contract, and that it’s outside their jurisdiction because the loan companies are domiciled outside Taiwan. [The activist] said he’s actually stood up and yelled at a judge in court before, and the judge just responded that he didn’t know [about all this].” (TW-Fieldnotes 2018).

The system of debt traps is so well entrenched that it is very difficult even for business partners to unseat it. Two host placement agencies I met in Hong Kong – recommended by activists, maids and some government officials – were dedicated to not charging domestic workers any fees. In fact, one of them (Fair Employment Agency) was registered as a charity rather than a placement agency. However, they found that operating solely in Hong Kong could not fix the debt burden: “They’ve already had a job before most probably where they did incur debt and we’re getting them on that next step. We’re not getting them in a situation of debt, we’re not really either removing the debts that they had before” (HK-Agent 3). The only way for them to guarantee that no excess fees were charged on the home side was to set up a training agency from scratch, sending over a business partner from Hong Kong to monitor it. However, they

⁵¹ The difficulties surrounding government jurisdiction will be explored further in Chapter 5

could only do this in the Philippines – Indonesia was more complicated (“the process is much more difficult” and longer, more expensive, many more legal hoops), and they had to “break, take a pause” to figure it out before they dove in (HK-Agent 3). Yet another agency confirmed:

“Many years ago, the Hong Kong agencies provided the training. But Indonesian government have actually set a rule, I think maybe 10 or 15 years ago, and changed the regulation that the training must be owned and operated by local Indonesian people... Every agency charged employer a little bit, and then they charged helper a lot. The reason that they did this is because they wanted to attract more employers to hire the helper... So they charged the employer a couple thousand, and then they charged the helper, maybe, let's just say about HK\$ 20 grand... Unfortunately the Indonesian agency and the government got greedy in the past 5 to 10 years. So when I say that they got greedy, the Indonesian government has enforced a rule that Hong Kong agencies are not allowed to dip into the HK\$20,000 [US\$2580].” (HK-Agency 2)

Only when putting all of these pieces together does market opacity begin to look like a “system,” even if it is decidedly *not* a monopoly or a mafia. Despite having regulations on the books, actors in this market can easily skirt around poor implementation or explicitly flaunt them behind closed doors. The maid trade can hardly even be called an oligopoly, since there are hundreds of these training and placement agencies, most of them quite small, and as far as I was able to find, they don’t consistently communicate. Yet each one, according to the triangulated perspectives of all the major groups in this market, shares a similar pattern of opacity and loopholes. In fact, agencies’ business models almost always depend on the opacity to thrive. Each individual loophole may seem minor; but combined, they pave the way for extensive exploitation of these women. In accordance with my above definition of opacity, each one of these loopholes – easy licenses, charging excess fees by another name, withheld certifications, the use of loan sharks, and intimidation – either restricts information from other parties, makes it more difficult to parse out fact from fiction, and/or encourages shortcuts or passive acceptance of the agency’s point of view.

So far, I have described agencies as primarily the perpetrators of opacity. However, they can be on the receiving end of opacity. Particularly thanks to the legal requirement of home states that training agencies must be domestically owned and separate from host placement agencies (see Chapter 3 for more details), neither side could always be entirely sure of what the other was doing. In fact, I encountered some instances of complete misconceptions – e.g., the host agencies believed their maids were getting a certain kind of training, but the maids I spoke to from that training agency clearly had not been given that training. This might have been deception on the training agency’s part, since host agencies had little to no control over the training of maids – that is in the purview of home state governments in both Indonesia and the Philippines (see Chapter 3). It is possible that host agencies could be deceived by their partners; in fact, some of the largest agencies had decided to take extra measures to prevent this: the larger agencies only formed partnerships with training agencies that were will to exclusively partner with them, and no other host placement agency. According to one host agency, this gave him better quality control over the maids and their training: “I provide [the training agency] the information, what we get our customer... So easy to fill [the needs of] our own user. We’re uniform... We know everything we are doing” (HK 2015-Agent 8). But without the kind of bargaining power that the largest agencies have, opacity is given plenty of room to thrive.

On the other side, some of the home state agencies would profess powerlessness. For as long as I was in my research, I could not find one home state agency that had a presence in the host state, and everyone from agencies to governments to maids confirmed this to be true. The distance alone already serves as a barrier to information: they only ever hear information second hand, aside from the few training agencies that try to keep in touch with their maids while abroad (which, according to my maid informants, did indeed happen, but was rare).⁵² On that same note, training agencies claimed that they couldn't always predict whether the maid candidates would get jobs, and were also unable to control some rather capricious reasons for termination. One Philippine agency described incredulously how many of her maids sent to Hong Kong were terminated on the spot because they were "too fat" or some other superstitions that had nothing to do with her ability to work (PH-Training 2)). Some of these agencies also complained about how state involvement hindered rather than helped not just them, but the maids. According to a lawyer in an Indonesian firm:

"Indonesian migrants don't understand them [government rules], or understand why the process is made more difficult... the problem is that these amendments often change with the ability of the government [*kemampuan pemerintah*]. If we are in the field we are OK, but then they change the Minister, and we have to go along with it – even if things were already going well we just go along. The government makes the regulations even though they don't see the field directly, and even though we become the feet on the ground we don't know the core problem if the law is changed, or how we could change the rules in order for the government to know the field directly." (ID-PT 2)

Other contributors to opacity emerged around cultural/linguistic misunderstandings or prejudice, to the point of some agencies bending their own rules (most often to disfavor the maids), making unreasonable demands, or disbelieving stories of abuse even in the face of evidence. I still consider these sociocultural factors contributors to opacity, primarily because they encourage shortcuts/perversions of information, with very real consequences. These will be discussed at length in Chapters 5 and 7, but we must not forget that such prejudices have economic impacts here, just as they do in every other market in the world.

Opacity from Above: Apathetic Government(s)

My interviews and participant observation made it clear that certain government officials didn't see the opacity and misinformation described above as a problem. For example, one Indonesian official I spoke to was aware that Indonesians were advertised as "obedient" and submissive, as the workers that would do everything the employer asks without complaint, even when the demands are unreasonable. From the perspective of several NGOs I spoke to, this kind of framing suggests to employers that they have license to mistreat the workers: "in mindset of employer, they bought the maid" (PH-NGO 3; Hans Ladegaard in Liu 2014). But the official's only response was: "Why should I worry? It can be misused by the agency or the employer. But I think... a lot of the compliment later from the employer" (HK 2015-Gov 2). In other words, the high opinion of employers and gain in market share was more important than potential and ongoing abuse of Indonesian women. Keep in mind, this was said not long after the high-profile case of Erwiana Sulistyarningsih in Hong Kong (Lau & Chan 2015).

⁵² It happened only 8 times throughout the Filipina interviews (three in a group interview), and only 5 times in all the Indonesian interviews – proportionally, about 20.5% and 5%.

To their credit, none of the officials wanted abuse to happen (for altruistic or selfish reasons). However, of the 28 officials and departments I interviewed, only 2 recognized that opacity or poor transparency was a cause of abuse, and thought measures were needed to stop it.

Another contributing factor to market opacity is the lack of infrastructure in the two sending countries. This is difficult to grasp for those who have not visited the countries personally; but suffice it to say that everything about Indonesia's and the Philippines' infrastructure – from roads to public transportation to maps to accurate addresses for businesses to their bureaucracy – is poor. The two countries consistently rank in the top ten most congested countries in the world, and their capitals (Jakarta and Manila) in the top 15 most congested cities in the world (Numbeo 2019). There were very few working roads going out to the countryside and villages where these agencies and domestic workers were, and with bumper-to-bumper traffic all the way on potholed one-lane roads through the mountains, getting to the right destination just a few miles away was often a full-day trip. That is, if we could be sure we could even find the right destination; several times on my Indonesian road trips, I and my Indonesian colleagues had to make several phone calls to find where the various training centers were located if we didn't have a local guide (once again, the Philippines was slightly better in this regard) (ID-Fieldnotes 2017; PH-Fieldnotes 2018). With these fundamental barriers, how can a government check on the activities of the hundreds of agencies around the nation? How could they find the illegal ones if they simply change addresses? Logistically speaking, implementation and enforcement are already a nightmare – and those logistics provide a cloud of obscurity in which illicit activities can rarely be confronted.

To be fair to Indonesia, the government has been taking measures to track down and capture those involved in corrupt or illegal schemes. For example, every maid I spoke to was relieved when President Joko Widodo ended the “Overseas Working ID card” system. The old migration system required every migrant maid to have one, which entailed registering for insurance through their agency (a stressful process, according to them). The card was regularly used to file maids into a separate line in the airports upon their return home. From there, officials could extract money from them just to let them leave, and they could not return to their host country without it (HK-Fieldnotes 2015; HK 2015-Maid 15). NGOs received “a lot of complaints about it, how it's not convenient to get, how it takes a lot of time, and how it's expensive in terms of fees as well as bribes if you don't happen to have it. There really is no transparency on the fees charged for this card, which makes it very difficult for the maids and even us to know what's legal and what's overcharged” (HK 2015-NGO 2). But early in my fieldwork, use of that card was discontinued.

The government has also added more procedures and paperwork to departure, supposedly to catch any maids (and by extension their agencies) that were leaving illegally – though the efficacy of these measures was hotly debated by NGOs (see ID-NGO 2). A Javanese city government's commitment to end the sponsorship/recruitment system is also commendable (ID-Gov 5). Some agencies (speaking explicitly off interview) claimed that just a decade ago, agencies ran this industry “like a mafia,” and they essentially had free reign to do whatever they wanted; but they also claimed that those days were over, and that the government was shutting down illegal agencies left and right (ID-Fieldnotes 2017). One official explained that his office still has “a fair number” of cases where “in truth it's often not the training agency that's illegal, but the individual placement actors... the individuals do not follow the legal mechanisms. Or maybe we already revoked [*cabut*] the agency's license before but over there they don't have permission, we hand the case over to the police because that's a criminal charge” (ID-Gov 10).

However, these claims remain questionable: neither agencies nor government officials I interviewed could produce solid evidence or clear numbers indicating increased arrests/shutdowns or decreased illegal activity. The efforts at least should be commended, but so far the results remain unclear or ambivalent.

The Philippines has also been taking some strides to improve the opacity around the market, but it showed up less during my fieldwork. Perhaps because the export of labor is an older system in the Philippines, or perhaps thanks to successful lobbying and awareness raising on the part of NGOs, the opacity of government regulations and actions was less severe there already, even if it had not disappeared. Illegal recruiting was recognized as a problem demanding national action by President Rodrigo Duterte in his first State of the Nation Address (July 2016). Certain officials were putting measures forward to improve training and the testing requirements for maids, after receiving extensive feedback from maids and agencies that country-specific courses would be much more useful (PH-Gov 4). Unfortunately, the government official put in charge of reforming the maid trade industry in the Philippines is himself the owner of a large maid agency. Filipino NGOs and activists have cried corruption and cronyism, trying to show that he has a definite conflict of interest. However, the official has ignored their demands to step down (PH-NGO 1). On this particular front, the Philippines has not been making as much effort as Indonesia has.

Furthermore, in all four countries, old and outdated systems of regulations and laws tend to prevail – ones that cost much time and frustration. Almost nothing in this system has been digitized. This is particularly egregious in the sending countries, where old colonial systems have yet to be updated, and nearly everything to do with domestic workers has to be completed in hard copy. I was stunned to see how the paperwork in Indonesia and the Philippines had to be completed, with papers like contracts and visas piling up everywhere and every detail needing to be checked by hand. The host state governments are better by comparison, but still require hand signatures from home state representatives on every single contract for verification in the case of the Philippine consulates. In fact, one Philippine Consulate official complained to me that he had to sign as many as 800 contracts per day, and all of them had to be signed by hand; unsurprisingly, he was beginning to have wrist pain (HK-Fieldnotes 2018). Many officials complained that the grueling paperwork took up the vast majority of their time, leaving little room for other, more important tasks. The complicated paperwork is also part of why the domestic workers and employers rely so heavily on their agencies – navigating all this paperwork, I discovered in my interviews and ethnography, could be a labyrinthine maze.

The fragmented organization of the governments is another enormous cause of market opacity. In Indonesia, no less than 19 different ministries and departments are responsible for maid migration – from Labor/Manpower to Immigration to Human Rights, not to mention all the local and provincial level departments (ID-Gov 1). The Philippines has consolidated much better, but departments involved remained no less than eight. In fact, it was quite a debate when President Duterte was first elected, whether to create a single government department that would consolidate the responsibilities of the various departments – and though it faced some opposition, its creation was approved by the House of Representatives in November 2019 and is awaiting approval by the Senate (Asis 2017; Atienza 2019; Pacquiao 2020). This consolidation, of course, would only affect my research subjects retroactively, since I interviewed them when they were already abroad, and it is unclear just how effective such a department would be as of yet.

The host societies also suffer from problems of fragmentation, though not as severe. Migrant domestic work is a market that spans Immigration, Labor, Social Welfare, the Justice

Department (in cases of disputes) and the various Consulates/foreign representatives. I generally found the host societies to be much more streamlined, and it was clear in interviews as well as in observations that host government departments had developed better means of communication. Taiwan, for example, had developed a 24-hour government hotline (1955) with native speakers for all nationalities of domestic workers (primarily staffed by NGOs), which domestic workers could call at any time with complaints or questions, and which could in turn contact the correct department or agency (TW-Fieldnotes 2017, 2018). But as my employer informants complained above, the actual process of meeting all these different entities' requirements could be grueling. Resources in host countries were at least available, if one looked hard enough; but they were not always easily accessible or well promoted. Furthermore, legal documents were not always translated as needed, primarily as regards the domestic workers. Finding resources in Indonesian was a frustrating task, and usually in fieldwork I had to translate government documents verbally for domestic workers that were asking questions.

Lastly, I cannot omit the role of corruption. Although I was unable to witness it happening first-hand (my appearance likely put all actors on their guard), I received complaints of it from all five of my major populations: maids, employers, NGOs, agencies, and the governments. All parties were aware of it, but struggled with how to curb it; and predictably, there were varying accounts about who was the most to blame. But even the agencies I interviewed were surprisingly honest about the illegal and immoral practices of other agencies, wishing the government would crack down on them (ID-PT 2). The Hong Kong agency-charity described the process in the Philippines as: "it is illegal for domestic worker agencies to charge fees and there are inspections. We've seen them because they come to us, but those inspections aren't very useful... because if the inspection is asking me as the branch manager, 'Do you charge domestic workers any fees?' I say, 'No.' You do tick [on the box]," with no further verification (HK-Agency 3). Thus, agencies could easily get away with illegal practices, so long as they knew when an inspection was coming so they could clean up and provide the expected answers (even when those answers were lies).⁵³

The fact that corrupt practices were confirmed by NGOs and maids leads me to believe the agencies were not lying for their own gain. One maid told a story of being hidden in a closet with other candidate maids while in her Indonesian training center, in order to hide her from a government inspection. The agency was in fact harboring too many maids for its facilities to handle, and so had to convince visiting officials that it had fewer maids than it actually did, as well as hide some illegal recruiting practices. "The government is coming to see the people that are going to be maids. But then... my friends that under 18, 19, not have a qualification. They put it- the officers in the Training Center, they put them in one big place and they locked the door. So the one people who have the qualification, they let them to stay outside to do classroom and then the government come. But the one who have not qualification, they all in there. They hide it. They hide them" (HK 2015-Maid 6). Sadly, it seemed to work: government officials never opened those rooms, and did not bother to make their inspections very thorough. It is hard to say whether this was mere incompetence, or if some money changed hands to make the inspections less thorough. Such bribery was not something maids would have been privy to, and agencies would have striven to keep me from seeing it when I was watching. But I would be dishonest to dismiss the possibility.

⁵³ It is also possible that these inspectors were taking a cut. Both Hong Kong and Taiwan were ranked in the top 30 least corrupt societies worldwide, but that doesn't mean corruption is nonexistent (Transparency International 2018). However, I have no immediate evidence that corruption played a part in these inspections.

Home state government officials noted that payouts were hard to prove, particularly since cash is the primary medium, but would not rule them out in the case of local officials or police. Perhaps most telling, however, was that everyone from NGOs to maids to government were rarely even surprised when I told stories of payouts or neglect – corruption had simply become a part of life. On this note, my findings echo what other scholars have noted about corruption: it has an enormous impact on the functionality of the government and citizen trust, as well as what maids come to expect of authority figures in general (see Olken & Barron 2009, Mann 2013, Aidt et. al. 2008). The theme of distrust in systems (both government and agencies) was a common theme in my maid interviews, with approximately 590 independent mentions.

Spread of Misinformation: Lucrative Stereotypes

With opacity and obstructions to transparency firmly in place in Asia’s maid trade, the floodgates are open for the spread of misinformation and rumors that market actors cannot confirm or challenge. As detailed above, the only way employers or maids could navigate the market was to rely on word of mouth, and the stories of acquaintances or friends. Even agencies and governments had little reliable research to turn to in this case. As such, each of these actors would try to enlighten those they knew by sharing what they thought to be true (whether or not it was true), or taking advantage of the opacity to spread the misinformation they wanted to be accepted.⁵⁴ The findings of Loveband (2004) and Rodriguez (2010) hold true even a decade later: the trend of making workers into commodities. The individuality and complexity of maids had to be suppressed and condensed into easily-digestible numbers and characteristics in order to be made into a product for hire (read “for sale”) on the open market. A protest in Taiwan blatantly addressed this attitude, where workers’ favorite slogan to chant was “Kami Bukan Robot [We are not robots]” – they felt that employers saw them as nothing but objects that did work for them rather than people (TW-Fieldnotes 2018). The domestic workers were sold/portrayed as ever-working robots because that was the *demand*: employers wanted a servant that would wait on them hand and foot, so that is how they were advertised.⁵⁵

In order to make that portrayal convincing, very specific characteristics of Indonesian maids especially had to be promoted by the agencies and even the government. These characteristics often corresponded to nationalized racist stereotypes for both Indonesians and Filipinas. The Filipino state has been far more aggressive regarding rights and wages for a longer period of time (as scholars before me have detailed – see above). In return, however, Filipina maids must live with the stereotype that they are “picky” troublemakers, which may or may not make up for their stereotyped intelligence and English abilities (HK-Agency 9, HK-Employer 5; TW-Fieldnotes 2018). Such national stereotypes played a large part in the hiring process. One Hong Kong employer told me that “Filipino maids are better in that they can communicate with employers and all that. But at the same time, they also-- I mean, they fight back, in a way. They are not that obedient. They are very clean and they are very hospitable, but they know how to protect themselves” (HK 2015-Employer 10). The racial undertones of these stereotypes will be addressed in Chapter 4.

⁵⁴ See Bai 2016 for example of sellers taking advantage of information asymmetry in another market

⁵⁵ It could be argued, more in line with Bourdieu’s concept of fields in housing, that this demand has been socially constructed: over time, as more employers see these images, they are primed to expect that kind of service and behavior from maids, and thus the advertising and supply must continue to cater to the demand it has molded (2005). However, testing this hypothesis would require extensive longitudinal data that goes beyond the scope of this study.

However, I found the stereotyping to be more obvious in the Indonesian case. The Indonesian case has also garnered less attention in scholarly literature in this regard, so this section will primarily focus on the Indonesian stereotypes I encountered. The three most prominent characteristics I distilled from my fieldwork were *submissiveness*, *flexibility*, and a *caring* nature.

Submissiveness was most clear in agency advertising, and much more explicitly in Hong Kong. Agencies there often characterize the domestic workers by nationality. In fact, the few agency websites I found often had a rough chart where they directly compared the various nationalities on many levels. Some of the comparisons were practical (for example, the amount of training they received, how many are already working in Hong Kong), but other comparisons were problematic. For example, their religion was put in a chart as if it was universally true – Indonesians are Muslim and Filipinas are Catholic. Although this is true statistically, it can create false expectations (as it did for a Filipina Muslim that I met, whose employer couldn't understand why as a Filipina she wouldn't eat pork and often became upset) (TW-NGO 2). But the most explicit demonstration of the submissive characteristic did come from the same chart that put “Submissiveness [服従性, or ‘obedient nature’]” as a distinct characteristic, in which Filipinas were flagrantly described as “Low,” while Indonesians were “High” (Sunlight Employment Agency – one of the largest agencies in Hong Kong; see Image 4a).

Image 4a

Methods of Selection for FDH		
Philippines vs Indonesia		
When selecting domestic helpers, the employer could also have considerations on many aspects based on the characters of domestic helpers from different countries in addition to the individual needs of each family.		
Philippines vs Indonesia		
	Philippines	Indonesia
Education	University/Junior college	High school
Language Skill	English (High level)	English / Cantonese (Simple level)
Religion	Catholic	Moslem
Training Period	Around 14 days	Around 3 months
Submissiveness	Lower	Higher
Overseas experience of housework	Possess work experience in all countries	Possess work experience in Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia and Hong Kong
Number of Maid in Hong Kong	Around 150 thousand	Around 150 thousand
Comments	<p>Philippine maids' education are normally at high school level or above and with higher skill in English as English and Tagalog are their official languages. As Philippines is once governed by western countries for a long time, their living style and level is relative modern and advanced, and are easier to adapt and learn the living style in Hong Kong. Philippine maids are welcomed by most of Hong Kong employers mainly because they have strong adaptability and are able to help a little on children's English.</p> <p>Major domestic helpers in Hong Kong are maids from Philippines, however following the increasing number in Hong Kong as well as the influence of partners from the same town, they are focusing too much on the contract terms with reduced submissiveness. It is also often to have 'picking employer', 'job-hopping' and 'shirking' as they have rich employment experiences in Hong Kong.</p>	<p>Indonesia domestic helpers are hard-working, honest, suffering, integrity and submissive. The Government of Indonesia is actively encouraging employment agency in providing more professional training and stricter examination on the work ability of household domestic helpers, which greatly improved the quality of Indonesia domestic helpers. Plus that many Indonesia domestic helpers have once worked in Singapore, where living condition is similar to Hong Kong, therefore Indonesia domestic helpers are increasingly welcomed by employers in Hong Kong. Employer usually believes that those Indonesia domestic helpers worked in Singapore will be good at housekeeping and hygiene.</p>

Perhaps the clearest sign of how dominant this stereotype of submissiveness is, lies in my document analysis. Across training and placement agency websites (the few I could find that had websites or Facebook pages), the theme of submissiveness in maids (words such as “submissive,” “obedience,” and “patient”) explicitly showed up 5138 times across 11,545 different webpages across 88 agencies. The submissive idea was further reinforced by overt or subliminal messages agencies would send in their advertising about what being a “good maid” should look like – how they should act, talk, look, etc. The words I selected through qualitative analysis to represent this code showed up 7346 times across the same agency webpages, with a surprising majority showing in Hong Kong. Table 4a gives an explicit count of every code I used in my document analysis, with some surprising results (see Appendix D for all the words used for these codes, and each code’s explicit definition).

Table 4a: Webscraping Analysis

	<i>Hong Kong</i>		<i>Taiwan</i>		<i>Philippines</i>		<i>Indonesia</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Raw</i>	<i>Per page</i>	<i>Raw</i>	<i>Per page</i>	<i>Raw</i>	<i>Per page</i>	<i>Raw</i>	<i>Per page</i>	
<i>Submissiveness</i>	2505	0.61867127	1442	0.604358759	1019	0.382651145	172	0.070290151	5138
<i>Flexibility</i>	1384	0.341812793	641	0.268650461	112	0.04205783	44	0.017981201	2181
<i>Industriousness</i>	1883	0.4650531	321	0.134534786	153	0.057453999	355	0.145075603	2712
<i>Boundaries/ Limits</i>	2733	0.674981477	960	0.402347024	727	0.273000376	203	0.082958725	4623
<i>Responsibilities</i>	18683	4.614225735	1542	0.646269908	1010	0.379271498	1972	0.805884757	23207
<i>Employer's Needs</i>	1059	0.261546061	650	0.272422464	136	0.051070222	301	0.123007765	2146
<i>"Good Maid"</i>	5013	1.238083477	967	0.405280805	624	0.234322193	742	0.303228443	7346
<i>Rights</i>	2126	0.525067918	1058	0.44341995	2248	0.844160721	1976	0.807519412	7408
<i>Institutional Involvement</i>	5444	1.344529513	2752	1.153394803	2203	0.827262486	156	0.063751532	10002
<i>Leisure</i>	2782	0.68708323	553	0.23176865	798	0.299662035	67	0.027380466	4200
<i>Inferiority</i>	51	0.012595703	28	0.011735122	14	0.005257229	51	0.020841847	144

Beyond the written material detailing submissiveness, I also heard the same stereotype repeated in my interviews and ethnography. Agencies confessed that they would describe this characterization to employers during consultations all the time; in their minds, it was a way of helping the employers find the domestic worker that is “right for them”. Even if they didn’t use those exact words, their undertones implied it, with words like “Indonesians are just better... they very [sic] honest... They obey to the employer, not like Philippines. Philippines, uhh, they do all their way, they don't listen to any employer,” or “In my experience, Indonesians are the best workers out of the maids we have placed. Filipinas, by contrast, are more haggling/bickering, as well as more strategic [计较] in the way they work: there are a lot of things that they don’t want to do because they think it is beneath them. Generally, they are more educated, and thus think that means they can talk back and refuse to do certain things that they don’t like. Indonesians, alternatively, are willing to do pretty much anything that the employers ask of them” (HK 2015-Agency 9; HK 2015-Agency 12).

The attitude of employers I spoke to was also shocking: even after most condemned the characterization of “submissive” Indonesians as nothing but marketing, approximately 67% of the ones I interviewed would turn around and repeat the exact same stereotype in their own

words. They would often tell one another (or were told by friends) that Indonesians were “simple,” “serving,” “easygoing,” that “they would listen” and wouldn’t talk back, whereas the Filipinas were “smart” but “troublesome,” because they would refuse to work too much overtime or forfeit their day off. Both of these stereotypes are problematic, and are highly racialized and gendered (see Chapters 3 and 5). While an opaque market is certainly not a prerequisite for such stereotypes to flourish (stereotypes of this ilk have persisted even in transparent markets), I would argue that the system of opacity does not help the matter. When so little information is readily available, even poor information can seem like truth, take on authority, and entail few consequences for those who act on it.

The stereotype of *flexibility* was also favored with Indonesians: in documents as well as interviews, they were described as “easygoing” and “not so picky” (showing up 2181 times in scraped agency websites, and mentioned dozens of times in employer and agency interviews, as well). In their official advertisements as well as consultations, agencies described Indonesians as “not as set in their own ways” and willing to learn to do things the employers’ way, suggesting that employers can make the maid do whatever they really want. They could mold her, convince her to do things how they wanted. Some might argue that this characteristic, in and of itself, is not necessarily a hazardous one to advertise. After all, to work for any employer, one needs to learn what they expect; and more than any other workplace, the needs of each individual home can be vastly different. So it is necessary to find workers that can adapt to those needs.

However, this flexibility was often taken much too far, because there were no concrete limits placed upon it. Agencies hinted that Indonesians were willing to take days off only when convenient for the employer, and that they would be the ones willing to arrange their schedule around the employer’s last-minute demands. The Filipinas, on the other hand, would almost always demand Sundays off for church, and also knew what their rights were and would be “stubborn.” Indirectly, this was also implied in the advertised language ability of the maids: Indonesians were the ones who learned Chinese or Cantonese (a language they had never spoken before), while the Filipinas were expected to only be fluent in English, the language they already knew. The Indonesians were the ones making the effort to adapt to the employer’s language, and spent an extra three months in training to do it (although the actual language ability of the maids varied widely, and was often much less fluent than implied). It was this trait that particularly attracted employers in Hong Kong and Taiwan – they wanted a worker who “hard working – she’ll look for things to do” without being told, and “can adapt when needed.” (HK-Employer 4).

The last stereotype characteristic, that of *caring*, was less explicit but no less powerful. Agency advertisements and documents all carried heavy intonations of a maid needing to treat the employer’s family “like your family,” with pictures of domestic workers mothering the children to explicit commands like: “You must be honest, respectful, initiative, polite, frank, and hardworking. Always keep a pleasant smile on your face”; and “You must show care and responsibilities to your employer’s home as if they’re your family” (Further Creation, Guidelines for Domestic Helper). Exactly 53% of the Indonesian maids I interviewed told me that this particular attitude of caring, along with submissiveness and flexibility, had been instilled in them since their training back in Indonesia – as compared to 13% of the Filipinas I spoke to. This aligns well with Chang’s findings in his ethnography of training agencies, and how mental submission and obsequiousness were considered equivalent to skill preparation for maids (2021). Agencies also confirmed that they recommended Indonesians mostly for elderly care, or very

young children – the jobs that required both intense work and a family-like succor (although in Hong Kong, they were always expected to do everything else as well). When employers described a good or “ideal” maid, this was frequently the characteristic they referred to: it was considered the foundation for both their submissive and flexible traits. As long as the maid truly cared for the employer’s family, they could be trusted more, and could be relied on to do whatever was needed at the time even at great personal cost. One small Hong Kong agency summed up the expectations of self-sacrifice very well:

“we tell the maids that they should protect themselves but they must always 关心 [care for] their employer. Because this employer is a person, and no matter how terrible they act, their children would still have to care for them – we try to put it in that kind of perspective. If they don’t care for the employer, the children will have to suffer through the same bad attitude and they can never walk away. But I always tell our maids that if you really care about and care for employers like that, at the end of the day there is not one person in that house that won’t be happy.” (HK 2015-Agency 12)

In fact, several Indonesian government officials indicated that they were proud of this “caring culture” stereotype: they believed it gave their workers an advantage, and made employers happy and relaxed. Once again, compassion is not a negative trait to have in and of itself. However, in very few of these advertisements, instructions or interviews was there mentioned the need to treat the maid as a member of the employer’s family in return.⁵⁶ Employers are expected or entitled to be the recipients of that caring nature, with no obligation on their part to reciprocate. Employers were of course expected to provide the basic needs – food, a place to sleep, salary, etc. – but certainly nothing like friendship or emotional attachment.⁵⁷ Even though the employer is the primary social contact of the maid (often the only social contact they will have for 6 days out of the week in Hong Kong, or all but one day of the month in Taiwan), employers expect all the maid’s social needs to be met elsewhere. As one stated explicitly, “So if they [have] family problem, it [must] not affect their daily performance. They will cry maybe inside their room, but after she come out from the room, she must- like, normal... I don't need a maid that always cries in front of me or showing me unhappy face when she work” (HK 2015-Employer 3).

To put this in better perspective, I looked at the co-occurrence of two codes in my employer interviews: Expected of Employers and Family Feeling. The first code encompassed any mention of employer responsibilities towards maids, one of the top five most common codes; the second was used whenever employers talked about maids and employers becoming close, most often the maid treating the employer like family. Out of the 231 times that Expected of Employers showed up, only 14 times was Family Feeling brought in. All other times employers talked about their responsibilities, it was strictly business. If they did treat the maid that well (and I will not deny that some did), it was considered a privilege above and beyond what was called for, for which maids should be grateful. Thus, the position of maid is a (not-so-subtly) gendered role: the invisible wife/mother that does all the most difficult and thankless emotional work in the background (see Hochschild 1983 on emotional labor; Chapter 3 on

⁵⁶ Oddly enough, Lotus Employment Agency is one exception, encouraging “Empathy [同理心],” “Praise [常讚美],” and “Intimacy/Amiable Feelings [親切感]” in their employer handbook.

⁵⁷ Though recall from domestic worker interviews that a good number of employers do not provide those basic needs.

gender). While this role has been challenged in more transparent systems like the United States, the opacity surrounding the maid trade leave such assumptions and stereotypes largely unproblematized – they are considered a matter of personal preference and market forces, supply that “objectively” meets the demand.

It would be wonderful to say that these characterizations were little more than marketing techniques, and that once employers and maids actually met one another, these stereotypes could be dispelled. However, the data elaborated above (in line with existing literature) clearly shows this to not be the case; the employers that repeated the same stereotypes put forward by agencies had often employed domestic workers of their own for years. Additionally, almost no actors in the market ever strove to find better information than that which was spread by rumors. Even if they knew they were not getting the whole story, they resigned themselves to perpetual ignorance. Indeed, the opacity and misinformation were so pervasive in the maid trade that the various actors – employers and maids especially – did not even have a concept how much they were being deceived, and consequently did not even seek the information they needed most.

The misinformation spread through opacity also affected maids’ actions: approximately 89 of my maid interviewees admitted outright that they felt pressured into playing a certain part when they arrived in Taiwan or Hong Kong, while many more implied similar feelings. Many maids themselves also repeated and reified the stereotypes that host cultures had set out for them, for any number of reasons. Even when speaking to me privately, away from everything else, these stereotypes were just a part of life. I saw that perspective clearly in a random conversation with an Indonesian maid with whom I was close friends:

“Lia recalls a conversation between her employer and her old employer’s sister, in which the sister said: “If an employer has a Filipina, they have to listen to her.” Lia explains to me that this means Filipinas are just bolder and more demanding: whatever a Filipina maid says about off days, her living conditions or accommodation, etc., the employer has to follow and fulfill. Otherwise, the Filipina maid simply becomes discontent and just leaves... When I ask Lia to compare the Filipinas’ attitude with that of Indonesian maids, she says she believes Indonesian maids usually follow what the employer wants and obey what she says. They also don’t complain so much.”

Another maid (Fitri) that came to the education center I worked at was frequently in distress over how her employer was treating her: she was constantly verbally abused, overworked and hardly fed enough to live. I and other workers at the shelter did our best to support her and constantly encouraged her to stand up to this employer or simply leave to find a new employer, but she was scared to do so. She was constantly blaming herself for not being good enough at Mandarin to understand her employer⁵⁸, feeling that it was all to do with her own incompetence. The role she should have played, in Fitri’s mind, was an obedient worker that could do everything the employer wanted – then the employer wouldn’t be angry. It was not until she fainted dead away in our center and we had to take her to the hospital that she finally decided to terminate her contract (HK-Fieldnotes 2015). As another example, even Erwiana Sulistyaningsih, one of the most famous and horrific cases of domestic worker abuse in Hong Kong, confessed in her 3-hour-long interview with me that when she returned from Hong Kong beaten and unable to walk, she still blamed herself for her plight – she must have been a bad

⁵⁸ This particular Hong Kong employer happened to speak Mandarin, but with questionable fluency

maid for her employer to have abused her so. The ideal of the obedient, submissive maid was so ingrained into their psyche that they didn't want to fight back at first.

Fortunately, these two did fight back, but it required the help of many friends surrounding them with support. Those that did stand up for their rights realized that they navigated treacherous terrain – a market defined by opacity and misinformation will always be treacherous to those that wish to reveal the reality behind it. They risk being disbelieved and ostracized; some know none of the support structures that transparent markets take for granted (like courts, police, etc.); and there are plenty of groups stronger than the victims that will use any number of underhanded means to silence them. That was certainly the case for Amirah, who decided to stand up to an illegal \$500 charge from her agency. She had taught herself the laws of Hong Kong (even after this agency had ordered all maids to hand over their rights and legal information booklets, she had hidden hers), and realized that this charge was larger than the maximum allowed 10% of her monthly salary. The agency was naturally upset at her bravery, and tried both intimidation and pleading tactics with her. In order to win against them, Amirah needed to solicit the help of her employer – but even that was not easy. The employer had hired her to be little more than an uneducated servant, and was shocked when she demonstrated knowledge of law and her rights. Amirah said it took effort and tactics on her part to convince her employer that she was not stupid, as the employer had expected her to be – the employer had believed the stereotypes elaborated above wholeheartedly, Amirah told me, and Amirah was breaking them. “*Insyallah* [thanks be to God],” she says, the employer sided with her – he came to respect that she was a thinking individual, and broke ties with the agency so that Amirah did not have to pay. But Amirah told me that she knew she had been lucky: she could just as easily have been placed with an employer that would have been angry at her for causing trouble rather than working, as many of her friends had been (HK 2015-Maid 25).

Conclusion

Taken together, all these sources and vantage points of market opacity point to myriad opportunities for exploitation and profit. It is dysfunctional, to be sure, but at the same time serves a critical purpose: the confusion and opacity precludes much of the scrutiny that would otherwise take place, instead prompting both maids and employers to rely on “experts” to get through it for them. With the opacity as a cover, the more exploitative market actors can facilitate many sub-standard transactions while still maintaining a veneer of legality. And here, the limits of “normal” competitive economic forces are forefronted: without a transparent system and institutions from which to judge, agencies and states cannot be compared openly, and thus the power of the consumer to choose the best quality is greatly diminished. Such behavior might be expected in a monopoly or even an oligopoly, but as detailed in Chapter 3, the maid trade is anything but. The most it could be called is a monopsony, but even that is questionable.

In economic sociology literature, very few have considered how opacity, misinformation, and inefficiencies can in fact *contribute* to a market's growth and survival without a monopoly. My data above have shown that, if done right, opacity can turn a market into a powerful machine of profits and inequality, manipulating the various social spheres into fear and dependency. Maids and employers are both victims in this opaque system, both prevented and discouraged from freely exploring and choosing the best of all available options. In a way, the maid trade represents a perversion of Fligstein's “social solutions to competition” and stability (1996:656). The agencies are shielded from most competition and from taking responsibility for mistakes or failures by the thick cloud of opacity that certain social institutions (including government

policies, culture clash, and the primacy of *guanxi*) have established. In essence, the agencies and government have used the system of opacity – including market fragmentation, misinformation and informality – of the maid trade to solidify their power and position as groups without the need for a monopoly. Yet without said opacity, that power could evaporate, along with the maid trade in its current form – the market would have to change drastically in order to survive. Thus, I argue that a state of opacity should not be considered an aberration from a “normal” transparent market, but one of many situations that can turn a profit.

It should be clear from the above that no party in this market is truly fully informed, or even fully “rational” (to use a classical economics term). The methods of running a household and finding personalities, living habits and working styles that match is not something that can be boiled down to a simple spreadsheet formula. It is an emotionally charged issue, with high stakes for the domestic workers and even their employers much of the time, and it is highly personalized (to be elaborated in Chapter 5). Likening the process of matching a maid with the right employer to a “marriage” is hardly an exaggeration: even if both are well-meaning, they may not get along in terms of work requirements or personalities. And since they will have to live in the same home for at least two years, conflicts are almost inevitable.

Apart from the personal dimension, the maid trade in itself is highly complicated and obfuscated, and there is simply no way to get all the information that would be required to make a well-reasoned decision. Employers and maids have neither the resources nor the time that I had as a Fulbright Fellow to travel to four different countries, search for the domestic workers and trainers in the remote countryside, and get 245 interviews from all the involved parties. As described in the employer and domestic worker sections, even doing basic market research is nearly impossible with very little public information available or formal standards in place, and thus most people fall back on informal networks and rumors to make decisions. However, unlike in Granovetter’s findings and other informal markets, this fallback is not a choice – it is a necessity to people in this market. In some cases, actors (including government, agencies, and employers – not just maids) have been threatened if they try to correct the opacity concealing exploitative practices. This might be expected for a black market or cartel, but this is a fully legalized market that has managed to maintain fragmentation and imperfect competition for decades.

Consequently, we see that past theories regarding market transparency and even social fields is not enough to explain the market dynamics of Asia’s millions-strong maid trade. Most economic theories of competition implicitly assume fully informed actors, which does not hold in this case; many theories of political economy and development only see non-transparency as a temporary (costly) obstacle that hinders economic progress; and theories of social fields elaborate very little on how opacity can bolster the status of a market actor or field. The opacity that I have elaborated above plays a crucial role in keeping this market functioning: it serves not only as a cover for illicit activities such as overworking and overcharging of domestic workers, but also cultivates a cycle of dependency and resignation. In the end, three of the four main parties in the maid trade have reason to keep this opacity intact, my findings indicate.

In the first place, home and host governments benefit from the opacity because it allows the immediate needs to be met. The economies of Indonesia and the Philippines are struggling, especially in the countryside, and those communities have become overly dependent on the remittances that these working women send back (due in part to the poor infrastructure of the two nations). As such, these Southeast Asian nations rely on continued employment from host governments and host employers, and do not wish to offend them and jeopardize the flow of

human workers and money. In my data, it was clear that the Indonesians especially realized that employers preferred more control, and had few qualms about promoting submissive and potentially dangerous stereotypes about their women as long as they could ensure employment. Additionally, the critique of the Erwiana case mentioned above – how it was her agency’s fault – also shows an advantage of this opacity for governments: for the most part, they are shielded from direct responsibility for any individual cases (though NGOs and maids will blame the government in a broader sense).

Secondly, agencies were the clear winners in this non-transparent environment, both in the home and host states. Opacity and low transparency aids or leads to poor enforcement, meaning that if they wish to, these agencies can operate as a law unto themselves. They are easily able to extort money from unknowing and intimidated maids, in the form of their training fee back home or an illegal placement fee for changing employers – and as long as there is no paper trail, they almost never have to be held accountable despite years of protests and testimonies. These agencies certainly know the law, but that knowledge is most often used to skirt around it – such as by calling the fees everything but a placement fee, refusing to provide a receipt, etc. Additionally, since there is no transparent system for employers to compare all agencies (and since the culture generally mistrusts anything but personal referrals), agencies are largely protected from free competition, and rely on reluctance to change and friend references to get them the business they need. This does not mean there is no competition – the smaller agencies I spoke to in particular complained about the struggles of making ends meet in Hong Kong’s high rent market; but it remains less than it would be in a transparent market.

Lastly, even employers have incentives to keep up the cloud of opacity surrounding the maid trade. Especially if the maids are unaware of their rights (and are not protected by labor laws in the host country), the employers are able to squeeze all the work they can from the maids without much protest. It was surprising to hear the prejudices and preferences of some of these employers, many of whom said they preferred newer maids because they were less aware of the host country and therefore would be less demanding. As one said:

“If the maid has some background [in Taiwan], they can think a bit like, because here it is not so good, so I will go there... If you have knowledge or experience before, then you know too much. And if you know too much [知道太多的话], for example, sometimes you can say, you are- I am a caretaker. I don’t responsible for the cleaning, house cleaning! If you want me to do the house cleaning, pay me more. And they will argue with me like this.” (TW-Employer 9)

Evidence from employers indicated that employers were most concerned about the service they would receive, and had very little understanding or care for how much their demands required of their maid (emotionally or physically). For example, many of the domestic workers in Hong Kong were required to prepare breakfast in the morning and still clean the dishes in the evening *on their day off* – even though by law employers are required to give their domestic workers 24 hours off. Such demands often required maids to arrive late and leave early from gatherings (HK-Fieldnotes 2015, 2018). In their interviews and casual conversations with me, employers seemed baffled when they were told they could not do this; even her day off did not excuse her from washing the dishes, in their minds. Some agencies confessed to sometimes arguing with employers over a maid’s chores on her days off, and that it wasn’t easy to demand a full 24 hours off (e.g., HK 2015-Agency 12; HK-Agency 1; none in Taiwan even tried). How of

much this is attributable to ignorance and how much is attributable to self-entitlement varies by each employer; in interviews I often noticed attributes of both. In the end, however, such demanding terms of employment are only possible when the market is not transparent, when holding employers accountable for violations is difficult.

Thankfully, not every government official, agency, or employer I met in my fieldwork was like this – quite the contrary. There were a surprising number of organizations and individuals who were unhappy with how the market was run. Governments and even domestic worker agencies are not monolithic entities, and some demonstrated a genuine desire to help in their interviews as well as their actions. I have had the privilege to build relationships with agencies in Hong Kong and Taiwan that are genuinely trying to help both employers and domestic workers find placements that genuinely work for them. These were in fact some of my best informants. I was able to observe and heard stories of some of them going out of their way to reconcile misunderstandings and even counsel foreign maids who are adjusting to their new life. Additionally, certain maids I met were fortunate enough to have employers that truly did treat them like a member of the family; some Hong Kong employers came to events and performances that their maids put on, even though they could not understand a word of Indonesian, and brought flowers to congratulate her on her acting ability; others had been in the employ of the same family for over 20 years, and felt closer to their Taiwan or Hong Kong employers than their own families back in the Philippines or Indonesia. Recently, sending countries have also recognized the opacity and uncertainty in the market as a problem, and have been striving to correct market injustices. Even a handful of training agencies back in the sending countries are trying to improve, at great personal cost sometimes. Several of my interviewees even described being threatened, directly and indirectly, for trying to be honest and correct serious legal flaws.

However, these positive cases remain the exception rather than the rule while the fundamentals of the maid trade market remain the same: opaque, fragmented and power-driven. This is not an aberration, but a stable condition that will be able to continue unless great efforts are taken to correct it – perhaps even requiring upending the market. As long as opacity remains dominant in the maid trade, the potential for abuse and exploitation will always be present – while recourse from it will remain largely inaccessible for those that most need it.

CHAPTER 5

Racialization of the Servant:

The Role of Racism in Perpetuating National and Ethnic Hierarchies in the Household

So far, this dissertation has focused on gender, unfreedom, and economic opacity through the lens of Bourdieusian fields – what I consider the most obvious dimensions of MDWs' lives. However, there is another core sociological tenet that my case speaks to: *race*. As two very different nationalities become members of the same household, misunderstandings and culture shock are inevitable (Oberg 1954; Ward et. al. 2001). If conflicts were relegated to mere culture shock and adaptation on both sides, racial differences would remain of secondary importance. Unfortunately, in the context of ethnic differences, colonial history, and both international and in-household power disparities, both host societies and migrants fall back on racial prejudice and “othering” in their day-to-day interactions.

Racism is one of the global “wicked” problems for which there is no final resolution. However, the sociological discourse on racism has been dominated by attitudes of the West (see Hanchard and Chung's (2004) excellent critique; also Waters 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Brodtkin 1998); or by a fixation on colonialism and the racist attitudes colonizers developed toward natives (Said 1994; Young 2005; Fanon 2008). Yet Western racism is not the only form of racism alive in the world. In places like Asia and Africa, one's race is not so simple as the color of one's skin. In the Asia-Pacific specifically, many countries have mixed a powerful sentiment of nationalism into the concept of race and racial divisions/hierarchies. In Asian societies like Japan, Indonesia, Korea, Hong Kong and others, racial superiority and hierarchies are not just a method of boosting an ethnic group's ego, but are central to national identity, pride and place in the world order.

These attitudes play out on the international arena, in labor relations, and even in the home. I contend that the maid trade in general – between Hong Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia, and the Philippines specifically – is the perfect site to examine modern Asian racialization projects, particularly the effects of “nationalized racism” (as I term it). In this transnational migrant labor market, the nuances of racism infused with ethnic pride and national identity come to the forefront where members of different racialized nationalities are forced to accept each other not merely as neighbors or friends, but as members of the same household. The context makes clashes of identity and expectations not only inescapable, but highly personal. The hierarchy of national power – in this case, between East and Southeast Asia – becomes embodied in the “employer/maidservant” relationship. In turn, that relationship can naturalize/disguise inequality, or even justify harsh treatment of the domestic workers.

Nationalized racism stands as a distinct concept because it is bound up in national identity, and cannot be fully separated from the political realm. The pride of one's country – and by extension, one's place in the world – hinges on living up to the national image and enacting the in-home relationship according to the expectations of the existing national hierarchy. In my case study, this nation-building project takes on a distinct racial tone, as the region has ideologically equated national identity with racial purity in postcolonial times. The people embody the nation, through descent and behavior; and each person can take pride in their nation's history and current achievements because they are the “pureblooded” heirs of its racial and cultural legacy (Shin 2006). Thus, even if they do not mean to, many Hong Kong and Taiwanese maid employers and even the MDWs themselves fall back onto racialized stereotypes

of each other as a way to reinforce their own national identity and solidify the form of their unequal relationship.

My research intervenes in contemporary debates regarding racism by bringing the importance of national identity to the forefront of racialization processes. What might seem like purely macro/international dynamics become embodied in very personal interactions between members of different nationalities. Thus, when these different races are put in inherently unequal relationships consistently (like maid and employer), those inequalities are then read onto racial differences and reinforce the belief in racial hierarchy. I will analyze this process of racialization and hierarchization from several distinct angles (agencies, employers, and maids), as a relational process ongoing simultaneously in the home and in the broader political economy.

In short, the maid trade connects the two faces of racialization: the macro-political and the micro-relational – the two sides of Brubaker’s work. Brubaker’s more recent work on the interactive creation of ethnic (and national) identities, whereby relations are (re)made in the local context, and broken away from his prior Weberian civic/ethnic nationalism work (2004, Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Brubaker 1999, 1995, 1992). I concur with his findings regarding the micro negotiation of ethnoracism/nationalized racism and national identity, but I found it to be grounded not just in the nation-state, but in inter-state relations. The international is lived out in the intimate relations of the home. To flesh out this connection, I explore in this chapter 1) the prevalence of racial markers or rationalizations in private and public encounters with MDWs; and 2) which actors/groups employed racialization more strictly.

Clarification of Terms

Before proceeding, I must clarify why I apply the term “nationalized racism” instead of something more along the lines of “ethnocentrism.” These nation-building projects are, after all, based more on ethnicity than the broad phenotype-based “race” term as Western academia commonly defines it (Hill 2002; Herring, Keith and Horton 2004; Brodtkin 1998; Waters 1999). However, “ethnocentrism” or even “xenophobia” only focus on one ethnicity’s concept of being superior to or exclusive of others, fostering intense in-group loyalty to fellow ethnics for no other reason than that they are coethnics. Different nationalities might insist on the superior quality of locally-produced goods by virtue of the superior nature of fellow nationals, for example (Pereira et. al. 2002; Hamin and Elliot 2006). Yet ethnocentrism does not put forward any clear idea of *how* the others are “inferior”. The core of ethnocentrism – moral absolutism – pits one’s own cultural mode as the only right way to behave at all times and places, making all other options “wrong” (Reynolds et. al. 1987). Why they are “wrong,” or the specific characteristics of other cultures/peoples, are relevant only insofar as they are different. There is no ranking of the ways they are wrong. Thus, ethnocentrism alone cannot explain my case.

Racism, on the other hand, connotes discrete conceptions of other races (whether or not they are based on fact) which allows one to place members of other races on a more distinct hierarchy. The study of race has a long and checkered history as one of the three foundational pillars of Sociology. From Social Darwinism “scientifically” justifying slavery, to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, to even the anti-racism protests in the summer of 2020, the field of race studies has constantly been evolving (Hirschman 2004; Scharfenberg 2020). It is also one of the most prolific fields (see Brubaker 2009). With so much diversity and change over time, the closest sociologists have come to a single definition of “race” is “physical differences

that groups and cultures consider socially significant” (ASA 2020).⁵⁹ In US-focused scholarship, these differences have remained broad, grouping many migrants and ethnicities into large categories such as “Asian American,” “black,” “white,” and possibly “Hispanic/Latinx” (Aranda and Rebollo-Gill 2004; Brubaker 2009; Lowe 1996; Torres and Charles 2004; Spencer 2019; Winders 2005; Mora and Okamoto 2020).

Scholars also agree that the significance of physical differences do not remain relegated to mere opinion. Solidifying such differences as socially significant, into *social structure*, is always a political project – the aim being to seize power, justify exploitation of the “other,” or limit the influence of a particular group (Katznelson 1973; Winant 2000). Race and ethnicity are two primary tools people use to dehumanize others (Goff et. al. 2008; Leyens et. al. 2003; Haslam and Loughnan 2014). Racial projects (often lasting generations) solidify mere phenotypical differences as *social structure*. “Race assumes meaning only when it becomes a criterion of stratification,” allowing the perceived differences to grow into systemic, institutional racism (Katznelson 1973:14; Jones 2000). In short, racism is about power, dominance and justification of said domination based on “inherent” traits. Those at the top of the racial hierarchy wield that power to divest others of their rights or equal share of access, resources, etc.

However, the guise of “race” naturalizes the political goal, more so than ethnicity. Race, after all, appears natural and simple – immutable, based on observable features, supposedly inherited at birth, and presumed to correspond with certain character traits (Goffman 1963). Racialization also creates more concrete stereotypes of other races, focusing not just on how one’s own race is superior, but finding aspects that prove the inferiority of other races (Hirschman 2004). Consequently, boundaries created by race look scientific, practical, even inevitable, despite being ridden with social values (Omi and Winant 1994; Winant 2000; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Bourdieu 1987). Imperialism serves as the best example. For centuries, colonialism obliterated nuance in favor of constructing a manageable “other/Orient” to ground the colonizing West and justify its rule (Said 1994; see also McClintock 2013 on the intersection of race and gender in colonialism). Fanon’s excellent work on colonialism problematizes the assumption of any unified “race” – for “black soul is a construction by white folk,” created only to infantilize the black individual as the perpetual other and build up whites’ self-image (2008:xvii; 2004). Sadly, the 18th- and 19th-century notions of a permanent “race” type explaining human difference continue to influence scholarly and public racial discourse globally (Banton 2009). The shadow of those old thought systems looms over history, politics, and interpersonal interactions to this day, despite race having no solid biological basis (Chou 2017; Reardon 2004; Koenig, Lee and Richardson 2008; Hanchard and Chung 2004).

Racism and racialization are much closer to what I observed in the maid trade. Implicit claims to the superiority of the host “race,” official or informal, were consistently defended by referring to racial attributes in MDWs. Such generalizations may seem odd, as many Southeast Asians are what many sociologist would call “mixed race.” However, the political dimension often outweighed such considerations, lumping these women into raced national groups. My findings align with Omi and Winant’s depiction of “racial construction” as an “unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle” (1994:15). In other words, what societies make into a “race” is arbitrary and can change depending on the political climate – which it did in my case. Yet that social construction is real in itself, tangibly impacting the actions and attitudes regarding who these others are (Ibid.:12).

⁵⁹ Depending on where one is in the world, descent can also play an important role in determining race. See, for example, the “one-drop rule” in the US (Khanna 2010).

In all my fieldwork and interviews, “race” proved to be the most relevant concept, in line with Chung’s description of Asian countries’ “descent-based citizenship policies that link nationality with ethnocultural identity” (2014:48).

For the sake of clarity, I use this new term, “nationalized racism,” to denote the peculiar form that racism takes in the Asian transnational context. Nationalized racism bears many similarities to the racism known in the West, including attitudes and behaviors reflective of a deep-seated belief in the other’s inferiority, and degrading (often baseless) stereotypes. However, the Asian racism I observed was more fine-grained and nationalistic, based on perceived ethnicity rather than only skin tone. But ethnicity was not merely “cultural,” as much of Western sociology understands it (ASA 2020). To the minds of my subjects, Filipinas, Indonesians, and Vietnamese were inherently a certain way, each nationality different from the other. Identity was inextricably bound up with the corresponding nation’s position as “backward” or “poor,” organizing each nationality/ethnicity into clear hierarchies. These characterizations justified treating migrants in such ways that “befitted” their character, however discriminatory (reminiscent of Said’s *Orientalism* (1994), but here perpetuated by non-Western powers). The behavior of an individual did not just reflect on her personality or even her people group, but on the nation from which she hailed. Hence, throughout this article, I use the term “nationalized racism” to distinguish it from racism based on broad, skin-color phenotype (“blacks,” “Asians,” etc.), and from ethnocentrism that only focuses on loyalty to one people group rather than belief in a hierarchy of “races”.

Literature Review: Race Meets Asia in the Home

Up until about two decades ago, race scholarship also remained US-centered, only rarely comparing different race systems/lexicons across societies (Chung 2014; Zanotti 1993). As late as 2004, Telles complained that US-based race relations studies “too easily get translated into general knowledge despite their narrow empirical base” (2). Fortunately, scholars of Latin America and South Africa especially have since stepped up to expand the literature’s horizons.⁶⁰ Other scholars have problematized the phenotype-centric race system by highlighting the experiences of those who do not fit into its neat categories (Aranda and Rebollo-Gil 2004). Latinos, for example, have become the permanent “anomaly” subjected to a totalizing “racial matrix of domination resulting in ethnoracism” in the US (Ibid.:910). In a review of the modern race literatures, Brubaker described two themes: 1) a growing realization that race, ethnicity and nationality overlap and intertwine in many contexts (“a single integrated family” of concepts); and 2) an aversion towards treating races or ethnicities as pre-determined, substantive groups (2009). Both are massive leaps forward compared to the scholarship of the mid-20th century.

Yet for some reason, in race theory proper, the Asia-Pacific remains underrepresented. The gap in race literature is unfortunately matched by the underuse of race theory in Asian scholarship, as well (Kowner and Demel 2015). In general, racism does not feature prominently in the regions’ public discourse, with some public figures vehemently denying its existence in their countries (Ng 2018; Lee and Law 2014:125-126; Banyan 2018).⁶¹ However, an emerging

⁶⁰ See Loveman et. al. 2012 on Brazil’s yearning for a “mixed” racial schema; Fitzgerald and Cook-Martin 2014 on the “anti-racist” rhetoric of less democratic nations; Wade 2001 on racial identity and nationalism in Latin America; Moodie 2005 on the colonialist underpinnings of Afrikaners’ fight for race-based cultural independence; Seekings and Natrass 2005 on interracial and intraracial inequalities in South Africa; and Wimmer 2002 on how nationalities come to be racialized as part of the modern political world order, to name a few.

⁶¹ Of note, even Said’s *Orientalism* received a hostile reception from Asia scholars for a long time (Palat 2000; see also West and Martin 1997; Palat 1996; Bencomo and Colla 1993; Kopf 1980).

body of scholarship demonstrates that racialization and racial tensions have always played a crucial role in the region (Al Syechabubakar 2013; Stokes 2016). For example, studies of discrimination against overseas Chinese have burgeoned since Purcell's seminal work (1951). Studies of Chinese identity have shown "Han" to be a hegemonic bioracial identity, rooted in a long history, for which cultural performance is key (Mullaney 2012; Dikötter 2015). Kowner and Demel's two edited volumes on race in Asia demonstrate the critical intersection of nationalism, lineage, and racial constructions (Western and local) in the region (2012, 2015). Thus, I join a growing number of scholars in claiming that the region both needs a race/process of racialization lens applied (as opposed to a merely ethnic one), and has much to offer race scholarship in return.

Asian Ethnic Nationalism: A Historical Foundation

It is impossible to understand modern-day nationalized racism in the Asia-Pacific without delving into the region's history. For centuries, Southeast Asia was a center of trade and commerce, and extensive contact led to ethnocentric, essentialized conceptions of various groups (Willmott 1967; Tarling 1992). Chinese traders (and diaspora) were usually dominant in the economy, and their accounts of racial hierarchy and (unflattering) characterizations of other nations can be traced as far back as the 11th century (Trocki 2003; Dikötter 1997). Southeast Asian ethnicities also developed racialized (often negative) stereotypes about each other (Reid 1988; Lieberman 2009). For example, foreign traders (including Chinese and Indian) viewed Southeast Asians as generally inferior due to their lower levels of technological advancement and societal organization (Tarling 1992).⁶²

When Europeans arrived, they heightened patterns of racial differentiation to excess. Their tactics were not limited to differentiating Europeans from non-Europeans, but further established a hierarchy of the local ethnic/racial groups. For example, colonizing powers displaced resentment towards themselves by blaming regional insecurity, tax farming, and even diseases on local minorities – dividing the people they conquered (Tarling 1992). A good example is the Chinese diaspora. The Europeans, jealous of Chinese commercial success, worked to incite racial hatred and envy of the Chinese as exploiters of the indigenous populations (Trocki 2003; Walujono 2014).⁶³

Indeed, the Europeans elevated racial hierarchies into impermeable barriers – of descent/blood, education, and culture – and maintained those distinctions despite many challenges (Stoler 1992). Such distinctions supposedly bestowed Europeans with the moral right to rule those deemed "inferior", implying that such races (like Southeast Asian and Chinese) needed European leadership to attain "civilization". In many accounts, European rulers and conquerors describe the racialized relationship in highly sexualized terms, feminizing the other races as backward, submissive but beautiful – revealing a rather perverted desire to colonize, dominate, and depower the "other" races (McClintock 2013; Stoler 1992). European leaders even described such violent subjugation as their moral duty, to colonize and regenerate the lower races by destroying their local institutions (Ibid.; Young 2005).

⁶² Religion was a far less prominent racial marker in the Asia-Pacific than it was historically in Europe, as many Southeast Asian nations adapted multiple religions to their local customs (Tarling 1992; Hall 1985). Although religion was a source of political power, it did not usually fall along racial or ethnic lines (excluding India).

⁶³ In fact, these relations are part of the reason Bonacich named the Chinese as one of her prime examples of "middleman minorities" in race relations in her seminal work (1973).

The twist in Asian colonialism, however, was that the acceptance of these racial/ethnic labels and stereotypes ended up bolstering independence movements. Before the First World War, Sun Yat-sen's defiance of colonial attempts to carve up Chinese territory and Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War suggested that Asian races could equal and defeat their European colonizers (Kucha and Llewellyn 2019; Cox 2006). Subsequently, racialized boundaries once used to justify colonization now worked against the Europeans. Heightened awareness of racial/ethnic identities bolstered nationalistic sentiment across the Asian continent, just as WWII left European powers weakened. In Southeast Asia, ethnic nationalist independence movements grew so strong that colonizers had to concede to their demands (Christie 1998).

From History to Modern Day

The historical link between racial/ethnic identity and nationhood has not dissipated even today. Modern Asian nations by and large still emphasize ethnoracial homogeneity and local descent as the foundation for national unity and strength (Yeoh and Huang 1999b). Policy and public attitudes manifest a distinct pattern of othering that alienates minority races (Ibid.; Blanc 2003). This, of course, plays out very differently based on class and prestige in the local context. Chinese ethnics, for example, may be revered as rising capitalists of Thailand as long as they maintain a veneer of Thai identity; and races may be further segmented into inferior positions by virtue of the jobs they take (such as reproductive or low-paying) (Blanc 2003; Yeoh and Huang 1998; see also Pereira et. al. 2002).

Yet overall, policymakers in both receiving and sending states in Asia have refused to accommodate longer-term migrant settlement (Castles 2003). The only legitimate migration patterns must be temporary, each ethnicity eventually returning to their "home" nation (for example, Korean migrants in China returning to Korea decades later as an uneasy modernization project) (Ibid.; Chung 2018). Such political ideology makes the Asia-Pacific vastly different from the US and Europe, where most traditional race and migration scholarship focuses on assimilation and integration into the host country (Bloemraad, Korteweg and Yurdakul 2008; Alba 2009).

Knowing now the intricate connection between race and nationality, the question remains: how do these macro-level dynamics of nation-building play out in the interactions of citizens from different nations? Unfortunately, this is a question that current scholarship on race is ill-equipped to answer. Most scholars focus on race relations within a single country (Zanotti 1993; Aranda and Rebollo-Gil 2004). Others fail to link the micro and the international aspects of race and racialization (Han studies; Kowner and Demel 2012; 2015). For the case of migrant domestic work, none of these studies can offer a full analysis of racial dynamics in the home.

Only two notable scholars broach the intersection of race and nationality on the interpersonal level. Chung's stellar study of non-citizen Korean returnees, and the hierarchical stereotypes attributed to them based on their country of origin, stands as a prime example (2019). Her call to deconstruct citizenship as a spectrum, and to unveil "racial politics coded in nonracial terms," is equally compelling, but has yet to be answered substantively (2014). Hoang's excellent study of the sex trade in Vietnam demonstrates how international power struggles played through women's bodies and interactions in prostitute bars where the deals were clinched (2015; described in Chapter 4). Even so, race and racialization were not her primary focus, causing her to fall back on the more generic "Asian" and "Western" hegemonies. Thus, the

dynamics of nationalized racism shaping personal interactions between different nationalities remain largely unexplored.

Racialization in the Maid Trade: Seen, but Not Analyzed

Attention to race in international domestic work is critical for two reasons. First, this market normalizes economic exploitation and class divisions internationally, as one nation/race always serves another for low wages and at a high personal cost. Second, the maid trade personalizes particular characteristics of maid work into racial characteristics of Indonesians, Filipinas, etc. These are the two sides of Brubaker's ethnic racialization come to life.

In the Asia-Pacific maid trade specifically, I argue that each nation's identity is built on not just its self-conception, but also its conception of other nations and their reciprocal relationships (redolent of "othering" and imagined communities (Anderson 2006)). In Hong Kong and Taiwan, this nation-building project takes on a distinct racial tone. As stated above, what might seem like purely international dynamics become embodied in very personal interactions between members of different nationalities. An intimate workspace like live-in domestic work requires citizens of different societies to interact on a personal, intimate level on a daily basis. Behavior, nationalist sentiments, and stereotypes all converge to form distinct relational patterns based on suspicion and distrust of other ethnicities/races. Furthermore, with an almost universal hierarchy between the races (as is the case with Indonesians and Filipinas always being the MDWs, and Hong Kongers or Taiwanese being the employers), that inequality can become naturalized as part of race. All these factors combined make the maid trade the perfect site to answer the above question: how do macro-level dynamics of nation-building play out in the personal interactions of citizens from different nations?

Select scholars have given great insights about racialization in non-migrant domestic labor. For example, Glenn found that in multiracial areas, "being served by members of the subordinate group was a prerequisite of membership in the dominant group," with racial characterizations being so powerful as to neutralize the non-white maid's womanhood (1992:9). In industrializing America, Katzman discovered that "ethnic stereotyping was the stock in trade of employers of servants, and it is difficult at times to figure out whether blacks and immigrants were held in contempt because they were servants or whether urban servants were denigrated because most of the servants were blacks and immigrants" – degrading stereotypes were reinforced through enactment (1978:221).⁶⁴ In Ecuador, domestic work reproduces racial and class hierarchies for women striving to escape rural poverty (Radcliff 1999). In post-apartheid South Africa, the black-white divide persisted in the institution of domestic work: a black maid serving the white family became so commonplace that it did not even merit mention (Jansen 2019; Ally 2010). The single-country domestic work literature confirms that the obvious hierarchy between 'servant' and 'served' is normalized and easier to manage when the two sides of this economic relationship are also different races.

However, temporary cross-border migration compounded on racial dynamics separates the Asian maid trade from these prior studies of domestic work. As explained in prior chapters, Asia's maid trade depends on governments establishing bilateral agreements to permit flows of MDWs, primarily from less developed Southeast Asian countries to more developed nations like

⁶⁴ One of the issues in this literature has been the primacy of gender as an analytical lens. While unquestionably valid (see Chapter 3), it has unfortunately led to racial dimensions being underemphasized and undertheorized.

Hong Kong and Taiwan – reinforcing a hierarchical ordering of races.⁶⁵ Sending nations must convince host societies to accept their migrants, and often do so by appealing to pre-existing national stereotypes to create a “niche” – the racialized characterizations emerging from colonial history (explained briefly in Chapter 4). Agencies placing maids “market their ‘labor products’ by nationality,” playing off conceptions of subservient, traditional third-world women, while portraying certain nationalities as better suited for different tasks (Lan 2006:68). For example, they describe Filipinas as intelligent and good at English, while Indonesians are caring and obedient. These racialized stereotypes, rather than work experience, are what most affect demand for and even wages paid to different MDW nationalities (Oishi 2005).

Not surprisingly, such characterizations make the work environment of many maids one of abuse and devaluation. Working exclusively in the private home makes rights almost impossible to enforce, and host societies have repeatedly declared such conditions unproblematic (Groves 2015; Siu and Lau 2018b; Tham 2019). Reasoning like “[paying] for the worker [means] the employer is getting a life” justifies withholding salaries and keeping the women on call 24-7, in the minds of many employers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002:62). MDWs must live with employers, giving employers the ability to control the maid’s food, rest, and social life, while employers’ reciprocal responsibilities to the maid (provide “suitable accommodation”) remain vague (Cheung and Mok 1998; Constable 2007). The common practice of confiscating legal documents “reduces the relationship of employment to a form of slavery” (Chan 2008: 845). Such treatment has led activists and media to hail MDWs as “second-class citizens” or “modern-day slaves” (Haumont 2017; Liljas 2014).

In a field with such a backdrop, one would think race and racialization would be at the forefront of MDW scholarship. However, race analysis has remained surprisingly shallow in MDW literature. It is not ignored, but has not been dissected at great length, either. Most scholars take a different line of inquiry and simply mention race in passing, with little analysis beyond the observation that MDWs are racialized below their host employers (Lee, Johnson and McCahill 2018; Platt et. al. 2013; Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004; Killias 2009, 2018; Yeoh and Huang 1998, 1999; Constable 1996, 2007; Ueno 2010; Parreñas 2001). The few scholars that do explicitly analyze race in migrant domestic work either focus exclusively on one nationality (most often Filipinas), or simply lump all nationalities of maids together.

For example, Guevarra talked about the “racial branding” of Filipina maids as “supermaids” in Europe, with agencies and employers inscribing care and work ethic as “natural qualities” of these women (2014). Politics and racialization became inextricably tied in the case of Filipinas because of a combination of colonial history and migration, a neoliberal agenda to silence dissent, and essentializing the careworker as a body (Ibid.; see also Loveband 2004; Parreñas 2015; Lan 2003; Constable 2002; Loveband 2009). Additionally, Sanjek and Colen describe class differences melding with ethnic/racial differences in household work (1990). In other words, when certain minorities consistently serve dominant groups because the minorities are poorer and have few other options, the differentiation can form ethnic and racial hierarchies where before there were none (Ibid.; see also Yeoh and Huang 1998, 1999; Oishi 2005; Chan 2008).

These studies, even if not explicitly racial, have led to important insights. For example, in Taiwan, Lan uncovered racist perceptions of MDWs (especially from Southeast Asia) as lazy,

⁶⁵ The other “Asian Tigers” – Korea, Singapore and Japan – are certainly part of this growth story, as well as the emerging migration and racialization patterns (see Chung’s work, for example). My work on Taiwan and Hong Kong complements the research in those countries.

unable to take care of themselves, or prone to bad behavior (2003). In the same vein, she argued that “intimate interactions across ethnic and national divides... exacerbate the process of Otherization” (Ibid:547). The explicit gendering of MDW races (i.e., how as a people/race/nationality they are “naturally suited” to feminized domestic work) is also a keen observation (Constable 2007; Guevarra 2014). However, almost none have looked into comparing the racialization of different maid nationalities in Asia. I believe that neglect blinds us to not only nuance, but to crucial dynamics of how the racialization of different people groups and individuals plays out in intimate spaces like the home.

Only a handful of scholars have even broached the concept of competing nationalized racism in migrant domestic work. Cox’s excellent analysis of domestic work in Britain delves into market demand based on nationalized stereotyping – locals as professional but “not subservient enough”, Portuguese as “the best,” and the tendency to conflate nationality/ethnicity with personality (1999:140). “Nationality was perceived to be the best guide to personality and skill-level of a domestic worker,” Cox found of employers and agencies alike, making for a finely tuned, self-reinforcing cycle (Ibid.:141). However, Cox explicitly states that nationality and race were not interchangeable in her case: there were often multiple races from the same nationality. Lan, in her highly regarded ethnographic work on Indonesian and Filipina domestics in Taiwan, unveils racialization of foreign maids as part of a “multi-layered process of stratified otherization,” including negative ethnic portrayals in media (2006:16). She also highlights the contrasting stereotypes of Indonesians and Filipinas put forth in Taiwan, and how even the maids utilize those stereotypes.

These are the works I wish to build on, showing racialization from several distinct angles as a *relational* process not just in the home, but in the broader political economy. In the maid trade, racial/nationalistic borders remain tangible for MDWs. The international hierarchy embodied in home relations is also how I believe my work can contribute back to the literature on race more generally, as well as MDW literature more specifically. In the international maid trade, the maid is forever the outsider, welcome only as long as the employer is pleased with her work. Her situation will never allow her to be more than “Indonesian” or “Filipina” under the law; and by extension, that ethnoracial imprisonment of her identity places her firmly on an international hierarchy that must be lived out within the home. It is a vivid example of the two sides of Brubaker’s work – the macro-political and the micro-relational – made flesh.

Guiding Questions/Hypotheses

The primary criticism leveled at any research on racism is that it is difficult to falsify; if a researcher looks for racism, they are likely to find it. Thus, guiding questions for research on racism need to be concrete and falsifiable, with clear predictions and accounting for evidence that might disprove them. With that in mind, I pose the following two questions:

- 1) *Do racial identity and nationalized racial preconceptions shape the MDW-employer relationship and their beliefs about each other?* Racial formation involves both conscious and subconscious efforts, analogous to Goffman’s social game of appearances: it involves conceptions of the other, self-conceptions, and beliefs about how the other perceives the self in a constant feedback loop (1978). This makes racism, unsurprisingly, the most difficult thing to measure “objectively.” Racism can be in play even when none of the individuals name “race” directly. However, it is possible to measure the outcomes of these psychosocial processes.

- a. Evidence in favor will include public descriptions of or references to “inherent” traits in culture or nature; describing said traits as persistent or “always there”; depictions of employers and MDWs as consistently distinctive in news media and agency advertisements. Emphasis on individual personality and mutual adaptation would be counter-evidence.
 - b. In the private sphere, broad generalizations about each other, stereotypes driving actions, and negative reactions when the MDW or employer does not play their expected role will be taken as supporting evidence. Conversely, if employers and MDWs approach each other as individuals first, and discuss personality or work expectations independent of “culture” or preconceived notions, that will indicate a reduced importance of racial identity. Stories of struggle, resistance, or acceptance of a racialized role can be evidence of racial identity’s importance; while if MDWs find themselves to be treated equally, that will be counter-evidence.
- 2) *Is racism and the use of race as status more commonly practiced by Hong Kongers/Taiwanese or by MDWs?* This follows in the footsteps of Qayum and Ray, who found that Indian employers of domestic workers (of different castes, in their case) were the most anxious to maintain a distinction between themselves and their “servants” as a way of maintaining control (2003; Ray 2000). On the other hand, domestic workers challenged those divisions, wishing to be seen as equals. Answering this question relies on a nuanced comparison.
- a. I do not expect racial/ethnic identity to be absent in MDWs’ conceptions of themselves or employers. But, if they more frequently challenge those stereotypes or selectively use more empowering frames, that will be evidence that racialization is less central to MDWs than to host state citizens. Constantly falling back on racialized/essentialized stereotypes and the absence of other frames of identity-making, however, would be evidence to the contrary.
 - b. If employers readily fall back on stereotyping of MDW nationalities, explain various traits/actions with nationalized racial qualities, and are less willing to accept their MDW’s individuality and independence, that will be strong evidence for host citizens being common practitioners of nationalized racism. It will also demonstrate that racism can be practiced by any people group in power. On the other hand, if employers, agencies and other host citizens refuse to make judgments about MDWs without context or personal contact, that will indicate a lessened importance of racialization for the host society.

Results

The results of my fieldwork and the data collected strongly support both hypotheses, and the evidence is strongest when comparing the actions and reasoning of three critical populations in the “maid trade”: specifically, agencies, employers, and the maids themselves.

Agencies: State-Supported Portrayals by Race

A powerful way to examine nationalized ethnoracial portrayals of nations is in the way placement agencies advertise the maids. Their choice of words and images both reflect and perpetuate pre-existing nationalized racism and ethnic stereotypes. For example, across my interviews and participant observation, the stereotype that Indonesian maids are more submissive and obedient was almost universally repeated by people in Hong Kong, and about three quarters

of the time in Taiwan. Everyone from employment agency officials to Indonesian domestic workers themselves observed this pattern. Placement agency advertisements reflected this almost universally: Indonesians were almost always being compared to Filipinas as a nationality/race, with advertisements portraying racial characteristics and comparisons like scientific facts. For example, in multiple brochure and website advertisements, Indonesians were described as having “high” submissiveness and a willingness to work around their employer’s schedule, in contrast to the “low” submissiveness and more highly educated Filipina maids, who were described as being more demanding. Many agencies even had tables comparing aspects of the two races directly (see Chapter 4, Images 5a and 5b).

Image 5a

Nationality of foreign domestic helpers

Most of the foreign domestic helpers are from Indonesia and Philippine. Generally, Indonesians are unsophisticated with lower education level. They are willing to learn new things and obey. In contrast, Filipinos are well educated and speak fluent English.

Maid Search

Source: VIVA Employment Services, Hong Kong, 2015

Image 5b

Notes to Employer

■ **Select a “Suitable” Helper**

What types of household chores or what targets need to be cared may vary for different helpers. Employers must realize their family needs and understand the helpers’ characteristics, experience and background so as to find a “suitable” helper.

The personal willingness of helpers (e.g. like caring for the elderly, infants or children) cannot be ignored. Therefore, we, as an intermediary, must not only understand the needs of Employers, but we also realize the helpers’ work experience and background, especially her personal work preferences. Employers should try to conduct interviews with helpers and allow both parties to understand each other’s employment conditions. It helps both employers and helpers to have better matching!

Filipino Helper vs Indonesian Helper		
	Filipino Helper	Indonesian Helper
Language	English, Tagalog	Indonesian, higher ability to learn Cantonese (lower level of English ability, some may speak Mandarin)
Education	High school to University level	Primary to High school level
Religion	Most Catholics, Christian minorities	Most Muslim (do not eat pork because of religion, but can cook), Christian minorities
Features	Strong autonomy, Flexible thinking, understand work	Introverted, behaved, Hardworking, obedient

Local Helper vs Overseas Helper		
	Local Helper	Overseas Helper
Application Time	About 1.5 months	About 2-3 months
Selection Mode	Interview in person	Read the helper’s bio-data file & video, directly talk via IDD calls, or interview via web cam
Adaptation	Usually shorter time (Since the helper has work experience in Hong Kong, she should realize Hong Kong and the living style of HK people, she can adapt to new job more easily)	Usually longer time (Since the helper has never been worked in Hong Kong, Employer may need to train the helper in person for a certain period of time. But this kind of helper is usually much behaved and obedient)

Source: LOTUS Employment Agency, Hong Kong, 2015

Maid racialization didn’t always have to be explicit to be powerful, however. Racialized prototypes of MDW races were also communicated non-verbally and implicitly, with sterilized

photos of maids caring selflessly for Hong Kong or Taiwanese children or families. Almost every time, the maid's skin was also noticeably darker than her employers (often with distinct ethnic features – see Image 5c as one example). I could not find one instance of a maid being pictured alongside her employers as an equal or even an accepted part of the family – instead, the (darker-skinned, racialized) maid was always smiling as she served, happy in her role as a traditional caregiver and servant. The subliminal message is obvious: the maids of the non-Chinese races are naturally servants, and will be happy in their role serving the “superior” employers.

Image 5c



The same patterns were present in Taiwan, but downplayed. According to several agencies, Taiwan has “stricter laws” that prohibit such stereotyping in advertisements (TW-Fieldnotes 2017). Furthermore, “If a migrant does work they are not supposed to [in Taiwan – i.e., work beyond what a contract stipulates], there will be fines for that. We get fined NT\$300,000 to NT\$600,000 (US\$10,234-US\$20,468)” (TW-Agency 2). Hong Kong has similar fines, but the job description of “domestic helpers” in Hong Kong is so broad that I never encountered a case of fines being enforced in Hong Kong. Therefore, the racialized servant portrayal in Taiwan had to be more controlled to avoid the government’s punishment.

I also found many agencies’ official rules (and many agency trainings, as well) exhorted maids to treat employers like family, caring for them just as if they were caring for their own parents or children. However, there was rarely any mention of a reciprocal obligation on the part of employers to treat the maid like she is part of *their* family. In fact, the clear differences highlighted between employers and MDWs – and even different races of maids – strongly implies that employers have no obligation to their maids apart from paying their salaries.

In my webscraping analysis, for instance, one of the most disturbing themes I encountered was the concept of the “good maid” – which included some patronizing exhortations for maids to treat their employers “like their own family,” and be “tidy,” “proper,” how to bathe, and to be “polite.” Things like instruction booklets to maids often implied that these women didn’t know basic human hygiene or manners. Yet it emerged an overwhelming 5980 times

across Taiwan and Hong Kong alone – averaging a little under one mention per page. Following implications of being “uncivilized,” mentions of “obedience,” “patience,” and other such words (which I coded under Submissiveness) showed up 3947 times across Taiwanese and Hong Kong agencies, which averaged to about one mention every 1.65 web pages. Taken together, the sheer volume of these codes drills home the standard that MDWs are inferior, and must follow their employer (and agency’s) instructions in every facet of her life to be a good worker. In this regard, the family dynamics between maid and employer were highly patriarchal. For the MDW to treat the employer “like family” meant not only providing emotional labor that the host family did not have to return, it also meant accepting their authority over her (c.f. Table 4a and Appendix D).

As if to make the undertones official, several agency websites and brochures listed out extensive rules and regulations for maids regarding how they should behave and carry themselves while in Hong Kong. These rules were almost entirely regarding keeping up a maid’s appearance of racial difference and submission – making sure she did not put herself forward too boldly. She was not supposed to make herself look equal to her employers. At least, as long as she was at work. For instance, some agencies had rules about how to keep one’s hair, rules against dressing up nicely or with any kind of jewelry, and even rules forbidding maids to wear makeup (Image 5d). The implication in all these rules is that a maid’s primary concern should not be herself or her self-image, but rather her work and staying invisible: she should not look equal to her employers or stand out in any way. These rules are detailed for the foreign maids – Indonesian, Filipina, Vietnamese, etc. – but not for the local Hong Kong maids (who also do not live with employers). Thus, such restrictions are not only classist, but also racial in tone. Since these are publicly available (and translated into Chinese and Indonesian), employers are able to see these rules too, and thus infer how maids will (or at least should) behave.


Image 5d

GENERAL GUIDANCE

Dress

61. Do not paint your fingernails and/or toenails during work days.
62. Do not apply makeup during work days, even if heading out with Employer’s family.
63. Do not wear tight, transparent or sexually arousing clothes at all times especially on work days.
64. Dress properly before or after shower, you are not allowed to cover your body simply with bath towel.
65. Do not wear sleepwear/nightdress unless going to bed.

Source: “Guidelines for Domestic Helper,” Further Creation Employment Centre, 2015



The “caring” stereotype that I mentioned in Chapter 4 resurfaces here yet again. Apart from the racialized images and rules about looking the part of a servant, agencies gave explicit commands about how servile and loving maids should be, such as:

“Must have care and loving heart toward you employer’s children. Let them feel that you are a member of the family.

[Sayangi dan cintai anak seperti anak kamu sendiri. Perhatikan seperti anggota keluarga sendiri.]

{悉心愛護僱主的小孩，將他視為你的親人一般}” (Lotus Employment Agency, Helper Guidelines)

In this particular example, the contrast between the languages is telling. The English may say “Let them feel that you are a member of the family,” which sounds fairly inclusive. But the Indonesian says “love the children like they are your own children” and “care for the family members like they are your own family,” saying nothing about the employers making the maids a member of their family in return. The Chinese is similar, a more direct translation being “come to see them the same as your own relatives/family,” once again placing the onus on the maid to be the caregiver and not expect acceptance into the family in return. Thus, to Indonesian and Chinese speakers especially, the power hierarchy is made into a moral imperative. The (Indonesian) maid is raced and gendered as servile, the Chinese employer as the boss that deserves the maid’s loyalty.

That agencies still maintain racialized portrayals of the MDW-employer relationship after decades is telling, but gives little authority to said racialization. After all, agencies are for-profit, and these portrayals are advertisements. Scholars already expect that advertisements will be twisted in a way that appeals to the most people in the local culture, whether or not it is factual (Albers-Miller and Gelb 1996). I myself find it fascinating (if depressing) that agencies consider racialized depictions of maids the best option for promoting the business, even in highly internationalized and capitalistic markets like Hong Kong. Whether that is because agencies cling to the older stereotypes after decades of using them, or because such implicitly power-infused portrayals of the employer-maid relationship remain the most appealing or most readily accessible to locals, is the subject for another study. My data suggested that it was a combination of both (see next section).

However, these portrayals take on a new form of power and authority when they are state-sanctioned – as is the case in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Each placement agency in these societies must be licensed by both the host government and each Consulate/de-facto embassy in order to place maids with local employers, and those licenses must also be renewed every year after inspections. Even in the sending states, training agencies have their curriculums handed down by the state (see Chapter 3). This arrangement means that agency advertisements have (at least in theory) been looked over and approved by both the host states and the home state government, giving advertisements the authority of state approval whenever they are shown.

Since there is more than one state involved in this market at all times, each state’s officiating power might be more limited (to be elaborated in Chapter 6). Yet when governments agree to license certain portrayals, individual citizens seem powerless by comparison. Stereotypes and statistics are *officiated* when they come from the state, changing them from mere opinions to become widely accepted *judgments* carrying the weight of truth (Bourdieu 2015). Once the state has spoken, contradicting opinions can no longer hold equal importance – they must conform to the state’s viewpoint or be dismissed. Even characterizations that would normally be considered insults are given a force to be reckoned with when the state backs them: “authorized judgment has the whole force of the social order behind it, the force of the state” (11). That force is unmistakable for MDWs working in Taiwan and Hong Kong. As the source and sender of Indonesian maids, for example, the Indonesian state claims for itself the power of “naming” these workers. Whatever the Indonesian state calls Indonesian MDWs, that is law. It is a power these workers cannot reclaim on a large scale.

Advertisements portraying the Indonesians as uneducated and submissive are perhaps the most clear-cut example here. The ads are little more than marketing tactics, but the stereotype

carries enough weight in this context that it becomes genuinely believed by many people (as I will describe below). As described in Chapter 4, some government officials saw little problem with this stereotype or the abuse it could lead to (HK 2015-Gov 2). The approval of employers and continued employment of their workers was more important than the protection of the maids, and was worth the risk of vulnerability and even abuse. Fortunately, by 2018, more government officials were questioning the usefulness of the stereotype and were more intent on demanding “dignity” and “respect” for Indonesian workers (TW-Gov 3). Still, stereotypes remained inescapable: across my government interviews, my codes for stereotypes and submissiveness showed up almost 200 times altogether across only 29 interviews. Both showed up in all 14 of my Indonesian government interviews, all of them implying (if not stating explicitly) that submissiveness was either good for growing the market or helped the maids adjust better. Thus, even the exaggerated and twisted market advertisements are implicitly infused with symbolic power (a la Bourdieu 2015).

Sadly, stereotypes are not limited to media and brochures. Placement agents often defended racialized portrayals to me as fact. As one prestigious agency told me, “If someone needs to be stereotyped, then [those characteristics are] actually true. Yeah, if you're saying that Indonesians are more [genuine or obedient, Filipinos more educated,] most of the time they're right,” even though he made allowances for individual differences (HK 2015-Agency 2). Or as another in Taiwan added, “Taiwanese chose Indonesian migrant workers because they are better. They are easier to organize, more polite and friendly [*lebih ramah sopan*]; if you are Vietnamese, you work in a factory. To treat and care for parents, Vietnamese people are more rough... [Philippine people] aren't [so polite as Indonesians] either, because... maybe first of all, Filipinos have the advantages of English and being smarter. If Indonesia and Vietnamese, those things are a bit lacking... They are better working hard – if you want them to be helpers, maids or whatever kind of laborer, yeah it's okay. But if it's Filipinos, no way.]” (TW-Agency 4).

Beyond their justifications to me as a researcher, I saw that those stereotypes were passed down to employers and maids in the process of matching. The first question that agencies would ask any employer was (justifiably) the job description – caring for children, caring for elderly relatives, housecleaning, etc. And based on those needs, instead of looking at individual maids' skills or stated preferences, they first turn to which nationality of maid best suits those needs. For example, Filipinas were recommended to care for children (since they could teach children English), while Indonesians were recommended for elderly care and housework. Indonesians were always depicted as the underclass, and thus frequently selected for less skilled household tasks – making the dying elderly comfortable, rather than molding the next generation. Agencies described Indonesians in blanket terms as more “obedient” and “flexible,” more willing to sacrifice their own wants and conveniences to respond to employers' needs. One agency explained that while Filipinos always demand to have their holidays on Sundays, “Indonesian maid is not like that. When they want to have a holiday, they will ask the employer which day the employer will- can easier for them to have the holiday. And employer tell them maybe on Wednesday, this Wednesday. Then the maid will take holiday on Wednesday” (HK 2015-Agency 3).

Such racial bracketing conveys that employers have no limits on what they can demand with an Indonesian. While employers and agencies alike labeled Filipinas as more “troublesome” and less willing to take these demands (even the maids repeated that word), Indonesians are depicted more like feudal servants, willing to care for their employers at the expense of their own quality of life – a simultaneously racialized and gendered depiction.

Indeed, several Hong Kong agents remembered that in the 80s and 90s, Indonesian maids used to be advertised as willing to work for below the legally stipulated minimum wage (HK-Employer 4; HK-Agency 7). Although that practice no longer continues (at least officially), that was the introduction of Indonesian maids to Hong Kong, and it likely continues to affect perceptions. Indeed, some employers' associations confirmed that some employers still try to get away with paying their maids (disproportionately Indonesians) less than the minimum, even when they know it is illegal (HK-Employer 4; HK-Fieldnotes 2018). In Taiwan, I also counseled several domestic workers (all Indonesians) who were being pressured into signing contracts that paid them less than the legally stipulated amount or restricted their legally mandated days off with no extra pay (TW Fieldnotes-2018). In the end, racialized depictions did have real consequences on wages offered, and said fed back into further racializing the maids.

Employers: Defensive Distrust

Advertisements, even those "officialized" by governments, hardly guarantee societal belief. Employers are just as able as anyone to express criticism of ads and question their accuracy. And in my research, many of the employers I interviewed and met in fieldwork were aware that the advertisements were a marketing ploy. However, those exact same employers would turn around minutes later in the interview and repeat the same stereotypes they criticized. They claimed to know that calling all Indonesians quiet and submissive was an oversimplification, for example. But just a few questions later, they would explain that they chose to hire an Indonesian maid because they are more "obedient" and "flexible" (in fact using those exact terms in almost a dozen cases). One employer in Hong Kong explained: "I had heard some of my friends saying Indonesian maids are more – how do you say – better, more serving... I think Indonesian maid, they are more simple. They are more simple and then they're able to work with-- they're more easygoing, in a sense that they will obey what you say or what you want them to do" (HK 2015-Employer 10). One group of employers in Taiwan listed off the major stereotypes of all maid nationalities:

"Employer 3: Maybe Vietnamese will be one way to your face, but behind your back [背后] they will sort of lie..."

Employer 3: Most people tell me that the Filipinos are smarter, but-- they also may have better hygiene habits, but they may have a rather high opinion of themselves [自视比较高], that is, they think "I really am amazing [了不起]." So sometimes the employer will talk to her about something, and she won't really care...

Employer 4: They, the Indonesians are a little-- they are afraid of the boss]...

Employer 6: Then the Indonesians, they may not be that smart, but they can be relatively behaved and obedient [乖, 听话]. I see a lot of websites say they are more listening, relatively simple and pure [单纯], also much more willing to do what you ask... But, their hygiene practice might not be that good." (TW-Employers 3-7)

When describing and justifying these stereotypes, employers would point to their own and their friends' experiences of Indonesian and Filipina maids as proof, continuing to use nationality/ethnicity as a basis for comparison. Constant mass media inundation might also have played a part in changing beliefs over time (see Lynch 1999; Lane 2000). Whatever the reason, these employers expressed these beliefs to me with strong conviction.

Moreover, employers frequently stated surprisingly negative beliefs about maids, such as one who insisted that “if you put ten Indonesian ladies here, standing in front of you, maybe, you will find that more than five people have some bad history. Like stealing. Stealing is a very common thing” (HK 2015-Employer 6). In Taiwan, employers also feared MDWs running away to seek illegal work, and thus might be reluctant to let MDWs step outside the house. Employers always emphasized that maids were not from Hong Kong or Taiwan, and therefore had no sympathy for the employer’s plight, and could not understand the pressure locals were under. One employer in a wheelchair insisted that “The handicapped have become a springboard [跳板] for foreign workers to come to Taiwan; just after they come, she will say ‘I won’t do the work, I want to change employers’” (TW-Employer 3-7). These were generalizations for which employers could give no evidence, but which I learned were based on very strong sentiments regarding inherent racial/nationalized characteristics.

And according to both employers and maids, many employers act according to these beliefs. Behavior that I and many activists considered exploitative and abusive, employers justified by describing negative, inherent racial traits in maids that they had to counter (see Lan 2003 on “boundary work”). I encountered employers withholding a maid’s passport as insurance repeatedly, because the maid “couldn’t be trusted” to keep it safe herself, or would become “disloyal” and switch to another job. Of course employers’ actions stem from pursuing self-interest when they can get away with it, but it also demonstrates an alarming level of racial distrust. Other employers came up with minute-by-minute schedules for maids to follow, making sure the maid never had a chance to rest during the day. Maids described some insulting justifications that employers’ gave for their controlling attitudes, such as the belief that maids couldn’t learn on their own, that the employer was already paying her “so much,” or suggesting that the maids didn’t know how to manage their own time (HK-Fieldnotes 2015, 2018; TW-Fieldnotes 2018).

Employers in Taiwan and Hong Kong would get especially frustrated over cultural understandings of efficiency or work speed, calling the maids “stupid”, “slow” or “lazy”. When in Taiwan, Lydia (the relative of employers introduced in Chapter 4) also told me that “her sisters-in-law are very demanding, keep complaining that Pria has all this free time, so why can’t she also do this and this and that – and it angers [Lydia] to no end. It’s like they don’t even expect Pria to be human, to not have any needs of her own” (TW-Fieldnotes 2018). For a maid, even trying to take care of herself could be condemned by employers, and living in the home meant there were no boundaries on the racial condemnation.

To be fair, when I was in Indonesia, I myself was often frustrated by the locals’ very different concept of time: two hours late was considered “on time,” by my subjects’ own admission. I missed a flight once because a government interviewee held to that understanding of appointments with me (ID-Fieldnotes 2017). Whatever my own thoughts on it, that kind of tardiness is culturally intolerable in the fast-paced environments of Hong Kong and Taiwan. Furthermore, every Indonesian MDW I met confirmed that the speed of work and life was always the most difficult aspect of their new lives to get used to.⁶⁶ Almost every day I was in the field, maids would share about employers yelling at them to be faster (though verbal abuse was worse in Hong Kong), and how they had no choice but to “*sabar* [be patient]” and get used to it. However, employers interpreted that cultural inclination (and many others) as a racial trait:

⁶⁶ Oddly enough, once MDWs got used to that pace of life, many preferred it to Indonesia’s slow pace, where “they like to talk about people, others and... waste time” (HK 2015-Maid 6). In fact, some described reverse culture shock once they returned home – getting used to Indonesia’s slower pace could be difficult for them.

“Indonesians are...” or “they are just better at...” as if these characteristics were not learned, but inherited by blood or “national character.”

Employers also expressed strong opinions that maids should be grateful to them for giving them days off, for paying them, and teaching them to live in their new host country. In fact, in my interviews and fieldnotes, I confronted a persistent “resentment” in employers regarding giving MDWs days off or rest times during workdays – as if by resting, the maid was stealing precious time and resources. In Hong Kong, some employers would monitor their maid through CCTV in the house, scolding them for even a moment’s rest (HK-Fieldnotes 2015, 2018). One Hong Kong employer claimed that allowing her MDW to return home for her grandfather’s funeral was being exceptionally generous, insisting that the maid “owed” her in some way for that generosity (HK 2015-Employer 6). In Taiwan, several employers told me that “the law protects these maids more than it protects Taiwanese workers! It’s not fair,” and therefore people should be more concerned about employers’ rights (TW-Fieldnotes 2018). And yet another: “I think [the maids’] work is caring work [照顾工作], accompanying us and focusing on the invalid’s needs – of course the demands are nothing unreasonable [不合理]... in fact, for the ideal maid in our minds, we just hope that the times when we need her, she can provide assistance, be it for going to the toilet, bathing, sleeping, or eating” (TW-Employer 4). The relationship in these cases went far beyond that of mere employer-employee – it was one of ownership, where the employer had to squeeze every ounce of work from the maid, and felt justified in doing so.

The most extreme examples of the ownership attitude were provided by maids themselves, when they told me:

“there are also times when employers think that their dog is actually more important than their maid. For example, if the dog becomes sick, the employer will take them right over to the vet and pay all of the HK\$1000 (US\$129) or more needed to get him the treatment he needs; but if the maid gets sick, the women [at the learning center] tell me that the employers often ‘don’t even want to pay just \$200’ for them to get medicine or go to the hospital, and may not even let her go to the doctor.”⁶⁷ (HK-Fieldnotes 2015)

The employers saw themselves as the superior not just in work, but in life – an attitude showing vestiges of both feudal and racist systems. Consistent with past research cited above, many employers in both Hong Kong and Taiwan developed a mentality that justified being controlling of their (racialized) MDW.

A key issue that laid the foundation for this mentality, I discovered, was a general distrust of the maid trade system – a mistrust that, as I elaborated in Chapter 4, is not entirely unjustified. Based on stories from friends, their maids and possibly news reports, employers were very aware that maids would falsify records in order to get jobs. Government-stipulated limits on the required age and education of Indonesian maids preparing to go abroad were easily bypassed with a false birth certificate or fake diploma, which even the maids confirmed were rampant – the Indonesian phrase was “*asli tapi palsu*” [official but fake] (see also Liu 2017). Employers were aware of this duplicity, and they were also aware that agencies would bend the truth to benefit themselves and get more profit. “They [placement agencies] are out to get profit; so why would they provide us [employers] help?” some employers would say cynically (HK-Fieldnotes

⁶⁷ To be clear, this is not a victim’s delusion. There were multiple cases in my fieldwork where maids who were clearly ill were prevented from going to the doctor, and several times where I intervened.

2015). “They make money, you know. That's what they are there for. Yeah, it's just like selling some product to you” (HK-Employer 6). Employers inferred from the incompetence and profit-motive that the system was not sophisticated enough to catch the “bad” maids (with poor qualifications or criminal history).

Several employers felt personally cheated by the system of agencies. In Taiwan, an elderly employer complained that “If things become more expensive, it is the buyer that should pay the extra fee for the agency. That is, the caregiver needs an extra fee for him... [however,] when the agency has to buy the extra things, and demands an extra fee, it is the employer that has to pay it out” (TW-Employer 1). In his mind, the MDWs should be the ones paying, not the employers, and agencies are squeezing money out of employers like him. One employer in Hong Kong even experienced monetary extortion from an agency: “So [the agency] bullied [欺负] those newcomers, who just came from Indonesia. Those that don't know people, she will continue to charge them very expensive fees, and even threaten them... My maid was very scared, very scared... Before going, the agent would tell [her]: ‘If you don't stick with me and you can't transfer, you have to go back [to Indonesia]’” (HK-Employer 2). In other words, the agent used gaslighting and intimidation tactics to convince the employer and the maid that the maid would be deported – unless they remained with her and paid every one of the fees she charged them. A few years later, this same employer and maid found out that this was a lie, and changed agencies without any problems. Hearing many other stories like these, I couldn't help sympathizing with some employers that felt victimized by the system.

One concept in employer interviews perfectly embodied the distrust of the system and the default “untrustworthy” maid: luck. As mentioned in Chapter 4, many employers in my fieldwork and interviews firmly believed that “good luck” was the only reason they had gotten a good maid – be it luck of the draw or luck that a friend had referred a good maid to them. Not one expressed the belief that an agency's skill and hard work was to thank for a good match. As an Atlas.TI code, it showed up explicitly over 40 times across 30 employer interviews. On the one hand, no employer I spoke to did much research into a maid's history before hiring her, beyond learning the basic stereotypes of her nationality. As stated above, 20 of my 30 employer interviewees explicitly repeated the nationalized racial stereotypes as though they believed them; and still more referred to the stereotypes more subtly. Once they got their new domestic worker, however, employers attributed both success and failure to luck. “I did not do much research about the whole [laughter] thing before when I made the decision to hire helper. It **happened** that she's very good and I think she has been very good to my mom and then we get along very well” (HK 2015-Employer 9). Taiwan even had a special saying about this, one employer relayed to me: “we have a saying in Taiwan, that is, ‘whether the maid meets a good employer, or we meet a good helper, this is all luck.’ It all depends on luck [运气]” (TW-Employer 1).

I explained in Chapter 4 why this firm belief in luck reflects and reinforces an opaque market system. However, that is not the only impact of a fixation on luck. I also found that this attitude reflected an ethnoracial bias against maids by default. A fear of strangers is natural – it is one of the first rules of self-protection we teach children. But unlike other fields of employee hiring, employers will not give MDWs the benefit of the doubt when they first come. They are on trial from the first moment they set foot in an employer's home. Even positive experiences with certain nationalities may not be enough to break negative stereotypes: “[my friend had a] really bad experience with Indonesian maid. So I think I work with her. I brought my maid to her home and her mom see my Indonesian maid. She say, ‘You really got luck to have a good maid.’ She says, she never see this kind of good Indonesian maid” (HK 2015-Employer 3). Even seeing

good MDWs is not enough to dispel the negative stereotypes. The good ones are the *exceptions*, and employers are “lucky” to have found them. The fact that these maids have left their families and perhaps the only home they’ve ever known was not enough to overcome employers’ distrust. Any maid that came to a new employer was “lazy” or “slow” or “suspicious” by default, and was guilty until proven innocent.

This distrust provides an interesting contrast regarding state “naming” authority” – showing how employers may unconsciously come to accept the authority of the state on some matters (like the racialized nature of maids) but not others. There are some areas where personal experience or the words of friends (rumors) will carry more weight (see Burrell 2012). With so little reliable official data to go on (see Chapter 4), I found that most employers I spoke to had come to trust experiences of their friends and other employers much more than official statistics or what agencies said. They knew their friends and equals would be honest; they did not trust agencies or the maids to be the same.⁶⁸ Whenever I asked employers or even agencies to tell me *why* they believed certain stereotypes, or why they were mistrustful, the answer was invariably a personal story from a friend or several friends: one bad experience, one negative rumor, was enough to taint their perception of the entire nationality. How accurate or representative that story was, was irrelevant. One negative example was enough to make all other Indonesians or Filipinos “tainted by association.”

Unfortunately, this translates into a more personal distrust of maids on the part of employers on a day-to-day basis. Maids are not the honorable, transparent Hong Kongers or Taiwanese, but are from another place that the employers have (most likely) never been to, and therefore must be held in suspicion. From the moment they arrive, the maids themselves lamented to me time and again that they could feel the distrust of their employers. Their employers are constantly watching them, often set very detailed schedules of what to do (down to the minute), become angry if the maids take breaks, and often hide away their money or valuables (Fieldnotes). In Taiwan, the added fear of maids running away to seek illegal work and the complications of seeking a replacement led many employers to be quite controlling of their maids. Even on their precious once-per-month day off, I saw many MDWs taking their elderly charges with them, meaning they were never free of the employer’s gaze (TW-Fieldnotes 2018). In the words of one Taiwan employer, “their hearts are not here at all, yes... so they can just run” (TW-Employer 1). And that seemed justification enough to never trust them.

In both interviews and participant observation, I also heard of many employers setting aside separate utensils for the maids and forcing her to eat separately from the family, relegating her to the kitchen or forcing her to make do with the leftovers. Such a separation, to the maids I spoke to, implied either that she was “dirty,” of less inherent value, or didn’t deserve as much food for her work. Reminiscent of black slavery in the US, this pattern was more pronounced in Hong Kong. I cannot say with certainty whether employers would do the same for a local maid, because no local maid is ever asked to live in anymore (according to agencies, employers, and government officials). Hong Kong maids are considered their own person, with their own life, and go to their own home to eat. They are paid more for their work in lieu of food and housing. This demonstrates how employers categorize foreign maids into a separate category (racial, class, or both) and make that fundamental to her identity. Their behavior towards her reflects

⁶⁸ I must clarify that for some employers, this distrust is not simply out of spite. Some have had terrible experiences with maids, such as one employer whose maid stole a large sum of money, and another whose maid took sexualized pictures of her three-year-old daughter. However, these experiences often take on a racial nature that is extrapolated to all other maids of that nationality, rather than isolated incidents.

this racial othering process. Even employers who consciously fought against this tendency and tried hard to treat their maids like equals – and I had the fortune of meeting several – confessed to me that certain aspects of this racial distrust mentality could take years to break.

Employers often described different bases for their distrust and “othering” by nationality, in accordance with my racialization hypotheses. I mentioned above that Filipinas were considered “troublesome,” and almost all employers anticipated specific behavioral traits of all Filipinas. Employers believed Filipinas were “smarter,” and thus would be “calculating” and “manipulative,” looking to get the most from the employers in exchange for the least work. Filipinas were regarded as a higher caliber of maid, because they came from an English-speaking country that was colonized by the US most recently. Hence, they would be more “picky” about the work they did, which made employers resentful that Filipinas did not give them the care employers thought they deserved. “They become more lazy. Become more laid back. They count the hours that they work... Even the employer are good, the helper, if they have this kind of mindset and they stay at your home, it will be so dangerous for the family... So if you don't have the heart to work for the family, just don't bother,” said one employer that was raised with MDWs herself (HK-Employer 3). Even if said Filipina was trying to keep to the rules in her contract, employers often described it in terms of “taking away” from the employer and their family, so to speak. Taiwanese and Hong Kongers were particularly frustrated by Filipinas’ “talking back” and boldness, and the maids’ ability to get help from churches and NGOs. In fact, that boldness might be why Filipinas declined in popularity in Taiwan (Loveband 2004).

Indonesians, by contrast, were “dumb,” “simple,” and “lazy.” Many an employer laughed as they recounted how bad Indonesians were at multitasking. They would put a pot of water on to boil, and just stand there watching it until it boiled rather than doing another task while she waited, or some such inefficiency that local employers would never dream of (HK-Fieldnotes 2015). Rather than interpret such actions as the result of different values, employers could only see the Indonesian as “stupid” or inept, and would either yell at her or work to train that “inefficiency” out of her. Every Indonesian I met could recall at least one instance of being yelled at because they were too slow, by Hong Kong or Taiwanese standards.

Indonesians’ language ability also earns them ridicule, with most employers dissatisfied with their Mandarin or Cantonese levels when they first arrive. One Taiwanese NGO marveled at how Taiwanese can be so judgmental on that score, thinking that if the maid cannot speak Chinese (“our language”) or English, she must be stupid (TW-Fieldnotes 2018). In line with that stereotype, many employers believed Indonesians were incompetent at their work and slow to learn, requiring a lot of guidance from employers (as though guiding a child). Some blamed these traits on the poverty and lack of education that much of Indonesia has suffered. However, most of the same employers believed Indonesians could make up for that by being humble, open to learning, submissive and “听话” [obedient/willing to listen], even if they were “slow”.

I found yet another racialized aspect of employers’ attitudes towards maids in their conception of the “ideal maid.” When asked, employers named characteristics like diligence, honesty, and loyalty as the most desired traits in an MDW. Every business wants honest, loyal, and diligent workers, no doubt; but in no other industry are those traits part of the job description per se. Hoping for trustworthiness or honesty, while natural, does expose fears about MDWs elaborated above – employers do not see foreign maids as being honest by default.

Unfortunately, agencies could worsen this fear. When agencies shared experiences where it appeared an MDW was dishonest about abuse, the agencies imply that employers “have to be careful, because [MDWs] will lie” (HK-Fieldnotes 2018). They might recall instances of

maids “faking” abuse, refusing to work until the employer was forced to fire her, or making friends with the “wrong” kinds of people that would lead them to leave their employer or take out loans. In so doing, agencies cast doubt on the character of all Indonesian maids as a nationality (or Filipinas as a nationality, though agencies described Filipinas in this light less often). The few stories I found circulating about maids stealing, incurring debts or lying were enough to fuel this fear for even the employers who had never had bad personal experiences. The expressed desire for trustworthiness is related to their hope for a loyal, caring maid. In this regard, Taiwan and Hong Kong employers were equal: they wanted maids who would do whatever needed to be done, and would do so without being asked. After all, the maids were being paid, so they should do whatever employers expected of them, employers often reasoned – without regard to the limitations in the contract or excess working hours.

Employers also wanted a maid who understood the dynamics of family – who understood that things come up unexpectedly, and would be willing to change around her schedule according to the employer’s needs (see the “flexible” characteristic in Chapter 4). Many employers underscored how important it was for maids to be “like family,” to love and care for the employer’s family like their own and do for them just what they would do for their own (in line with agency advertisements). Such demand for loyalty, while understandable on the surface, gives the possibility for exploitation when there are no “within reason” limitations placed on that loyalty, and when there is no reciprocal loyalty or understanding on the part of the employer. Out of the 30 employers I interviewed, only five mentioned any need for the employers to help maids in troubled times. And only thrice in all my fieldwork did I see employers supporting their maids or helping them through any difficulties; most of the time the maids were left to solve any problems on their own or with friends. The idea of “family” in this case was unilateral: the salary being paid to them, on top of room and board provided, was considered payment in kind for the emotional labor that employers demanded of maids.⁶⁹ These are demands employers never made on local domestic workers. Hong Kong or Taiwanese workers had their own lives and own homes, and were too much like equals. But for Indonesians uprooted from their homes, of a completely different nationality? Many employers didn’t think twice about relegating their needs to secondary importance. They are, after all, “humble,” “flexible,” “obedient” – as a nationality they don’t mind, the implication was.⁷⁰

Indeed, I was surprised by how resentful some employers could be regarding the pay and protections that maids were granted under the law. Indeed, some employers resented their maids for even bringing up their troubles. I made a new code for employers regarding emotional distance – drawing boundaries against relational closeness to the maid. It showed up 69 times in all employer interviews, but maid interviews had no such code and no such patterns; for maids, telling employers to not burden them with their problems was not an option. The idea of an equal sharing of burdens was not really a concept for employers. Maids were supposed to be on a different level from their employers (similar to what Ray and Qayum find, and Loveband). Although it is not as stark as the caste system in India, employers still demanded a division between themselves and their maids, one that would reaffirm the inequality between them in the

⁶⁹ See Chapter 3 on gender, in particular Hochschild 1983 on emotional labor. Also Chapter 4 on cooccurrence of Family Feeling and Expected of Employers.

⁷⁰ Filipinas were characterized as a class above Indonesians, but were still class-wise and racially “below” the locals. Employers often expected Filipinas to be more responsible and “professional,” but rarely saw the Filipinas’ work as deserving of reciprocal emotional labor or care from the employer.

employer's favor. The ideal distinction, and ideal standing of a maid, was expressed in clearly racialized terms, reminiscent of the submissive Indonesian stereotype described above.

MDWs: Finding Dignity in Continued Discrimination

One of my more somber findings was how the maids themselves would repeat the exact same stereotypes about themselves described above. They would describe themselves and other Indonesian maids being more flexible, more caring, and more obedient as a race – and they would even be proud of it! Whether in formal interviews or informally as we walked to the subway, they would declare that these characteristics made them better caregivers, and helped them better sympathize with their employers (see also Parreñas 2015 on Filipinas preferring to be “one of the family” sometimes; and Romero 2016 on Chicanas).

They also felt their obedience and caring traits distinguished them from Filipinas, whom some maids I spoke to felt would demand too much of employers (such as forcing the family to sleep in the living room while the Filipina maid takes the only bedroom). “I think the Filipino maids are too demanding – we [Indonesians] are more flexible, more understanding,” several said (HK-Fieldnotes 2015).

They would also repeat the idea of Filipinos being “smart” and better at English. Conversely, some Filipinas I interviewed described the Indonesians as more flexible and complaining less, even if they knew few of the other nationality personally (e.g., TW-Maid (F) 8). In my 139 maid interviews, independent mentions of nationalized stereotypes and nationalized racial characterizations showed up a total of 486 times.

As I neared the end of my fieldwork, I realized many maids did not draw the line connecting these submissive stereotypes to the discrimination they experienced. They would not challenge the stereotypes unless they personally had something to lose (such as an agency overcharging them – HK 2015-Maid 25). Having such characteristics was something of a moral stance for the Indonesian maids, a way of declaring that they were not self-centered and had human sympathies – “I am so sad for Hong Kong employers, they have to work so hard,” they would often say. Taiwanese Indonesian MDWs also described how their elderly charges missed their children when said children so rarely visited them. Cultural preferences likely played a small part, as Indonesian culture values being less confrontational, particularly for women in a patriarchal society (Davis 1979).⁷¹ Locals might misinterpret maids' actions as submissive or obedient, when Indonesians are just trying to be polite. Some Indonesians themselves also complained to me about how their fellow nationals were too “soft” or “scared” to speak up. While the maids did not explicitly work to racialize themselves, their self-characterizations helped perpetuate racialization.

Most of these self-characterizations were based around nationality. I encountered a few instances where place of origin and language divided the nationalities (for example, Javanese domestic workers would congregate together to speak their own dialect). But these cases were rare, and were never absolute boundaries – other Indonesian MDWs were still welcome in these

⁷¹ Readers will notice a tension here between what I call racial stereotypes and what I explain as cultural difference. Based on my own data, the stereotypes perpetuated had some vague, distant relationship to a few social norms in Indonesia and the Philippines. The submissiveness trope, for example, might have some roots in Indonesian values, particularly as regards *gender* in a patriarchal society. The few bits that *seem* true make the stereotypes that much harder to dislodge in host societies. As a scholar, I am also aware that I have to be wary cultural racism, as well (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Here, I chose the words “values” and “confrontational” carefully. I see these tendencies as a combination of culture/values and personality. And I don't hold it as true for all Indonesians. This could easily become a stereotype if I neglect to give the full context, which I tried to do here.

circles, and the women most often made an effort to welcome everyone (Fieldnotes 2015-2018). While abroad, nationality always took precedence.

Their racialized self-image helped define what role the maids themselves believed they should play and the relationship they should have with employers. The general trend in my interviews and fieldwork was that only the Indonesian maids who had been in abroad for years were bold enough to defy these stereotypes and demand that employers see them differently, with some notable exceptions that mostly came down to education and confidence (e.g., HK 2015-Maid 25). Those new to Hong Kong or Taiwan often capitulated in the end, even if they expressed a desire to stand up for themselves and were seeking help.

Religion was also, unsurprisingly, an enormous differentiating factor. Indonesians are most easily distinguished by the *hijab* (headscarf) they wear outside (even if not all Indonesian women wear one), and agencies portrayed Indonesians as universally or “usually” Muslim. Conversely, employers in Hong Kong or Taiwan are generally Buddhist, Christian, or nonreligious (the vast majority being Han Chinese). Each side was foreign to the other; several times, I was surprised by the level of ignorance that ordinary Hong Kongers and Taiwanese showed regarding basic Muslim religious practice (TW-Fieldnotes 2018; HK-Fieldnotes 2015). I observed that this religious difference was a constant source of misunderstanding and tension between employers and maids. For example, Chinese food often uses pork, and many employers simply could not understand why their Indonesian maid couldn’t just eat pork (my MDW informants described many a heated conversation where employers would say “you’re in Taiwan/Hong Kong now, so just eat like we do!”). Many employers also confessed to being unable to wrap their minds around why something as “trivial” as avoiding pork was so important (HK-Fieldnotes 2015, 2018; TW-Fieldnotes 2018).

Another point of contention was Ramadan, the month of fasting. When MDWs insisted on observing it, all the employers could see was how dangerous it was for their health (and some were upset that it might reduce the quality/speed of her work). Several times I had to mediate extensively for both sides to understand the concerns of the other and convince the employers to give the maid freedom to observe her religious choice. There is an entire article’s worth of discussions around religion itself in this context; but from the perspective of racialization, it was yet another distinguishing factor that Indonesian MDWs often took pride in. Each individual had varying levels of piety, or might not even be Muslim, but all Indonesians knew and said that Islam was part of their national and ethnic heritage. Consequently, they knew it was part of their racialized ethnic identity in their host country and affected the expectations employers/agencies had of them. Individually, Indonesian maids could either embrace this identity (boast of it and even become more devout), accept it passively (not talk about it much), or actively fight against it (if, for instance, they were Christian).

On the other hand, in line with Qayum and Ray’s findings in India, maids’ racialization of themselves and their employers was far less pronounced than what I uncovered with employers. Maids made generalizations about employers, not surprisingly. They would tell each other that Hong Kong Chinese are often “rude” and that new maids simply have to get used to employers yelling at them; or that Taiwanese employers are more prone to scolding maids than Western employers. I heard from a handful of my informants that Western employers are generally better and nicer than Chinese employers, though Western expats also had their own quirks to adjust to. (There are also much fewer expat employers generally, so fewer maids have experience with expats.) But the maids were more likely to attribute the generalizations they made to the conditions of the host countries, their economies, and the pressures that jobs and

family put the local people under, rather than any racial or inherent characteristics. MDWs still understood the international hierarchy implicit in the employer-maid relationship, but perceived it more through an economic or systemic lens, rather than inherently racial. This pattern is consistent with Glenn's findings in the US, where black maids saw more clearly how white women were oppressed by and playing into the system of power run by their white husbands (1992). In fact, Glenn's subjects often criticized their white female employers for not standing up for themselves.

Moreover, when discussing the submissive stereotype about themselves, the maids insisted on finding dignity in it. Indonesians (and even Filipinas) did not want their values and work to put them in a devalued racial box. They were not afraid to work – that is, after all, “why we came here,” they told me. But they wanted to be acknowledged and recognized for that work. One maid wished she could tell all employers, “we come here because we need money. But you also need us. You need us help you... It's the same human, right? Don't think about-well, I have the money and I can do whatever I like. No!” (HK 2015-Maid 5). They told me repeatedly that they would happily work as long as they weren't taken for granted or looked down on, and the maids that had good employers were continually grateful for their employers' thanks. But for most MDWs, their work remained overlooked. There could be many reasons for the employers' disregard (neglect, classism), but all the evidence I have presented strongly suggests that racism is one of the reasons.

Domestic workers also expressed resistance to their stereotypes in certain circumstances, but usually felt there was very little they could do to combat them. It was particularly frustrating to them when they felt discrimination in public, which was quite frequent in my data. They explained how they had to get used to shopkeepers treating them curtly or not even wanting to serve them; how restaurants would constantly look at groups of maids with disdain; and how even in their agencies the maids would be asked to serve and clean while the employers were treated like royalty. They had to get used to locals disdaining them and displaying resentful attitudes whenever they asked for help – so much so that when I accompanied them on outings, I saw that most maids only ever asked other Indonesians for directions, turning to Hong Kongers or Taiwanese only as a last resort. Whenever I accompanied the women on outings, the maids were sometimes surprised by how differently they were treated:

“[While on a special outing to Macau, the group of Indonesian domestic workers with me say] there is a definite difference with me there, particularly when I [as a white woman] stand next to [the maids] and give indications of our friendship. [Ari] told me that if they are with me, “they give us service, but you're not here, we would have to wait.” She and [Siti] both agree that everyone also listen to them when they are with me, and they also act a little friendlier than they do otherwise” (HK-Fieldnotes 2015).

Unsurprisingly, I noticed many Hong Kongers and Taiwanese show surprise when I identified myself as the maids' *friend* rather than employer: even eating with them, taking pictures with them, sitting in Taipei Main Station on the ground to talk to them in Indonesian – as if it was something they would never have imagined. The maids themselves were often surprised by my actions, and one of their first questions to me was always why – why I would want to learn about their lives when I wasn't Indonesian myself. The idea that someone from the other side of the world could care for them enough to learn their language, seek them out, spend time doing what *they* wanted to do, and hear their stories was for the most part foreign to them –

even the activists serving them often had some connection to Indonesia or the Philippines. Over time, I came to realize that this reflected more on the isolation these women felt – they had come to expect that no one in the host country would look on them as equals.

Some maids also told me that they felt very hurt by the lack of trust employers displayed toward them – it made them feel less than human, and it was insulting that no matter how well the maid served, she might never earn that trust. The maids I spoke to in interviews and in fieldwork were very aware that these acts of public and private discrimination were racially-based. They knew locals could single them out by their skin, their dress, their language and demeanor, and would judge them on that basis primarily. They knew that being Indonesian carried with it a particular stereotype, and that in Hong Kong or Taiwan they would be treated first and foremost on the basis of that stereotype and the associated expectations.

Even if they could not get locals or employers to grant them respect and thank them for their work, they tried to reclaim dignity in their own way, personally or among friends. The one day they got off from their work was crucial for them – a retreat into a sanctuary of equals, so to speak, where racial hierarchies were no longer a factor (to be elaborated in Chapter 7). Additionally, they often talked about sacrifice for their families as a means of reclaiming a moral and respected identity as “good” Indonesians, mothers, wives, and daughters – much like how domestic servants in India strive to redefine moral and proper social roles (Ray 2000). As long as they were providing for their families and helping their children pay their way through school, the maids felt they were fulfilling their motherly role and they could maintain their self-respect. “All of this is for my kids; we need the money” replayed in my interviews like a broken record.

In fact, I got to know one maid who took this obligation so seriously that she would not go home to see her family on her two-week annual leave (which employers are required by law to grant her), and instead chose to keep working and send the extra money home to her family. She reasoned that “my children need the money more than they need to see me.” She kept getting calls from her husband and her 6-year-old daughter, whom she hadn’t seen for two years, asking her to come home. She was quite torn up about it: she cried with me, and we talked about it several times over the course of my fieldwork, but she maintained her stance and sent the money home instead of herself – even though she knew this meant she would not see her little girl or the rest of her family for another two years. That was just one of many instances where I discovered how hard maids were willing to work, as long as they could find meaning in it. And to them, this moral stance warded off any moral judgments that a racialized depiction of them implied in their host society. “All of these I am doing this for the future of my children because if I’m working for the money I send for them, they are working hard also to make me pleased... I can sacrifice my own happiness in order to have a good future of my children,” one maid declared (TW-Maid (F) 1). In so doing, these women were repurposing the racial stereotypes in the host society into a positive self-image.

Conclusion

The data strongly support the proposition that racial identity/racialization are one of the primary modes by which employers and MDWs in Hong Kong and Taiwan construct relations with one another, and that it is more commonly practiced by members of the host country. Maids know they are judged by their race first, and in many cases may not even be able to overcome those stereotypes. Indonesians especially are slotted into the role of servant as “naturally” suited to their race, reflected in the generalized advertising about them and the beliefs of employers. Employers were also prone to fall back on racialized stereotypes not just in their

discussions and stated preferences, but also in their actions – even after they expressed skepticism of those same stereotypes put forward by agencies and states. Although some of the employers I interviewed and observed had gotten to know their maids on a more personal level, employers simply believed they happened to get lucky with an exceptionally “good” maid. Hence, racism remains a salient element in Taiwan and Hong Kong’s maid trade, reinforcing avenues toward exploitation and even justifying judgment and abuse. In short, nationalized racism is a simple way to justify extreme demands on MDWs.

Scholars have long highlighted how closely race is tied to identity politics, distinguishing one group from others (however ingenuously) to justify privilege (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 2005; Fanon 2004; Said 1994). Postcolonial Asia is no exception to this rule, even if it has a much more fine-grained definition of race, tightly bound up with national honor and integrity. History has unconsciously bound up race and racism in the Asia-Pacific with nationalistic stereotypes carrying significant colonial baggage. Europeans used racial divisions as a primary mode of enslaving “weaker” populations and justify domination. Each nation (which in the popular imagination corresponds to a single ethnicity) is described as a distinct stereotype, though the stereotypes vary slightly by nation and locality. Hence, putting members of a particular “race” in service to another consistently doesn’t just hierarchize the individuals, but also the national ethnicities and the nations themselves in the international order. Nowhere is this more starkly demonstrated than in migrant domestic work, where people of different nations and “races” must live under the same roof. The horizontal, supposedly equalizing state-state relations are used to reinforce and justify a racialized hierarchy: the Southeast Asian woman serves, the East Asian (Han Chinese) family gives orders. This chapter has shown that in migrant domestic work, what might once have been abstract and distant becomes embodied in the relations closest to home. Culture, expectations and power dynamics between MDWs and their employers can clash on a daily basis, sadly leading to deeper distrust of the other ethnicities more often than not, and reinforcing racial hierarchies.⁷²

However, this chapter only begins a dialogue surrounding the nature of nationalized race and racialization outside the traditionally-studied Western nations. Racism is not solely perpetuated by whites: it can be utilized by any group of people with power. As colonialism expanded to cover the entire world, racism and racial divisions became a primary mode of dominating and enslaving the “weaker” populations and justifying domination. Even if the overt military and empire dimensions of colonialism have been eliminated, the impact it left can still be felt, and nowhere more starkly than in migrant domestic work – where people of different nations and different “races” must live under the same roof. This chapter has shown that in migrant domestic work, what might once have been abstract and distant suddenly becomes embodied in the relations closest to home. Culture, expectations and power dynamics between domestic workers and their employers can clash on a daily basis, sadly leading to deeper distrust of the other ethnicities more often than not, and reinforcing racial hierarchies.

⁷² As my other chapters prove, racism is hardly the only method of discrimination for MDWs – far from it. Classism was a problem that several NGOs brought up as distinct from racism. Mistreatment and dehumanization of servants (regardless of race) also goes back even to feudal times, and vestiges of that system are clearly visible in this modern recreation (Laslett 2015; Ebrey 1993; Hua 2014). Indeed, some scholars argue that slave-like conditions never truly disappeared from much of Asia (Momsen 1999)

CHAPTER 6

Porous Sovereignty: Tensions that Accompany States Sharing an Indivisible Jurisdiction

When Sri collapsed to the ground in a dead faint, we all rushed to her side. The frail Indonesian maid had only been coming to our volunteer shelter in Hong Kong for two months, often distraught from verbal and mild physical abuse in her employer's home. Today she was particularly distressed. She had not eaten for the entire day (neither her employer or agency had given her the food they were legally supposed to), and had been running all over the city since early morning running errands for her employer, even though today was her one day off for the week. There was a dead look of hopelessness in her eyes, and she barely had the strength to speak to us; the heads of the shelter had to comfort her in private. They attempted to go over her options for changing her employer, but nothing seemed to lift her spirits. Once she passed out, we knew that Sri needed to get to the hospital. Yet we could not take her without permission from her employer – who was not answering our calls. As had happened many times in the past, the employer had the right to refuse medical leave to “their” domestic worker. She technically could force Sri to keep working until she collapsed – just as she had collapsed now. Even as Sri woke up crying and trembling from weakness, barely able to swallow the water we gave her, we had to remind ourselves that Sri could be punished or fired if we took her to get medical care without the employer's permission, as stipulated by government regulations.

As has been detailed in previous chapters, Sri's case is hardly unique: live-in domestic workers often have little recourse from abuse, since their work is entirely in the private home where there are no witnesses. Moving thousands of miles alone to live with an employer they have never met, these women are essentially left to fend for themselves in a legal system and culture they know next to nothing about. In situations like this, the “perpetual state of limbo” that I described in my Introduction (Chapter 1) comes to the forefront. These women always will be citizens of one state but residents of another; paid workers hired on the open market but confined to the intimate sphere of the home; earning more than they would back in their country but still at the bottom of the host state's social hierarchy. Pei-Chia Lan also described migrant maids as the quintessential “intimate Other—they are recruited by host countries as desired servants and yet rejected citizens; they are termed ‘part of the family’ by their employers while being excluded from the substance of family lives” (2003:525). The past few chapters have described much of the exploitation faced by migrant maids, be it systemic or individualized. In that moment on the shelter floor, all the dynamics I have heretofore described played a part in our inability to take action when we wanted to.

However, there and in all previous chapters of this dissertation, one actor(s) has been lurking in the shadows, intertwining itself in the various social and economic processes: the state. Or, the multiple governments and government ministries that touch on the maid trade. This is, after all, a transnational market that directly impacts citizens on both sides – not to mention its potential to bring in a hefty profit (see Chapter 4). The state cannot but involve itself in such a market. Scholars before me would agree that the various states and their myriad departments have a direct impact on how the maid trade operates (Rodriguez 2010; Xiang and Lindquist 2014; Chang 2018). Our struggle of figuring out what to do to help Sri was actually part of a larger story of how two states/governments – Indonesia and Hong Kong – had negotiated their relative power and responsibilities in a transnational market. The tension we felt in that center was not mere coincidence, or a fluke convergence of factors. It was the same tension felt by many migrant domestic workers I spoke to. The limbo, precarity, and tension are the result of

institutional structures (like government policies and support networks) that perpetuate inequalities and disadvantages (see Chapter 3).

Yet it would be disingenuous to limit the activities of the state to the three realms discussed so far. In my fieldwork, I watched the very system of rights, regulations and protections meant to support the domestic workers repeatedly break down just when they needed it most – be it in the courtroom, with police, or right on the shelter floor with Sri. Such issues cannot be understood without examining the state(s) as a separate actor, ever-present as the one(s) writing the regulations, negotiating rights, and enforcing the law (however inconsistently).

At the same time, wielding such power does not come without consequences for the state in question. If we are to consider the states here “actors,” then we must consider not only how the states impact the market, but also how the *market/environment* impacts the operations of the *states* in turn (see Gourevitch 1978). I propose that circumstances impact not just the states’ actions, but their fundamental identity and power. The state does not remain static when it acts on any market. It is true that, given the power differential, government can affect more change than MDWs or employers or even agencies. But I wish to depart from past scholars and look at the state(s) as Bourdieusian fields not only shaping and impacting all the other fields discussed so far (see Chapter 2), but being reciprocally shaped by the other actors and systems, as well as other states. Being involved in the molding and operations of such a complicated transnational sector, I argue, dramatically impacts the states themselves in turn.

In fact, I wish to argue that in the context of the maid trade, a state’s monopoly on legitimate violence no longer holds. Instead, it is called into question by the presence of *another state* that can claim authority over its citizens or territory. The maid trade thus becomes the *shared jurisdiction* of multiple states, a jurisdiction that can no longer be easily divided. This precarious position of sovereignty leads these states into perpetual micro-negotiations over sovereignty and enforcement, a hybridization of their power, and towards preserving the precarious “limbo” of the maids for the sake of defending their power.

The implications of this kind of arrangement are massive. It means that ultimately, in sites of cross-border markets and migrant labor like this one, the cardinal, Weberian definition of a state is subverted: neither host nor home state is able to maintain a monopoly of legitimate violence (1958a). In practice, each state has to acknowledge the power of another state in their territory or over their citizens, and in the same breath surrender certain aspects of their sovereignty (see Parreñas 2015, 2001; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006). Even if we extend that definition to include Bourdieu’s symbolic violence, I was surprised to find that monopoly still breaking down for both home and host state (2015). In short, because it never truly accounted for the impact of *temporary migration*, the classical Weberian/Westphalian understanding of the state becomes inadequate here. The classical boundaries of state power are no longer sufficient to explain international, national or even subnational political dynamics. In regards to temporary migrant labor, governments and states are brought into too intimate of contact to maintain complete sovereignty. The resulting tension of macro state power has very real implications for all actors in this market. The only way to resolve this tension, short of ending the relationship between the states, is for both governments to continuously negotiate their relative power on a granular level – in this case, through the lives and bodies of maids. The way this is negotiated impacts not just the maids, but the very nature of the relationship the states maintain with one another. To account for the conditions of temporary migrant labor like the maid trade, I propose a theory of “porous oligopoly” that can no longer prevent different levels of society from making claims against state sovereignty or legitimacy across borders.

Literature Review: Undermining the old canon

I know that the theory I intend to support is more than just the proverbial “tall order.” The cardinal definition of a state that the social sciences have held sacred for almost a century, and here I attempt to call it insufficient. But I believe this is a necessary challenge, given current scholarly literature on the state and the growing importance of migration and globalization. Consequently, I present a thorough dissection of the two most prominent camps of state theory, demonstrate where each is lacking, and then present an alternate theory of shared jurisdiction and porous oligopoly. Without the conception of porous oligopoly/porous sovereignty, I do not believe we can understand the actions of the different states in the maid trade.

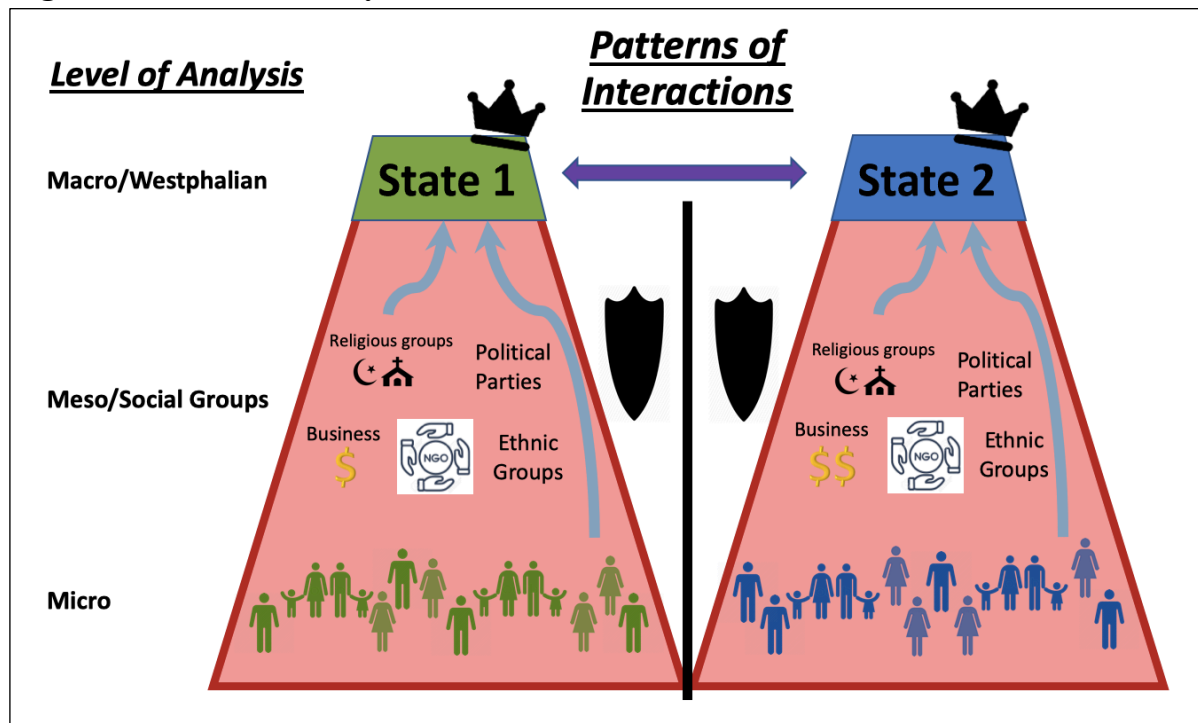
To be clear, while I believe my findings and theory have implications beyond my case, my data are limited to temporary migrant labor. I argue that it is possible to expand it (almost certainly, given increased instances of extradition, increased migration, the actions of multinational corporations, and citizens held prisoner in other states), but in this dissertation I do not have the data or authority to expand it outside of migrant labor. Instead, I wish to begin a conversation that has been strangely absent from political sociology. In this chapter, I propose a model that unites the divisions in the literature, and strive to lay one stone to its foundation. But many more stones are needed to confirm my theory.

The role of the state has become one of the most prominent topics of debate in sociology since Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol edited their groundbreaking collection of essays *Bringing the State Back In* (1985). There is hardly any major sociological theorist or piece of research that does not have something to say on the state or state involvement, with some calling the state and its relationship with society one of the central questions of sociology (e.g., Tilly 1985). However, the definition of a “state” has remained largely unchanged: an entity that holds the monopoly of *legitimate* violence within a specific territory, à la Thomas Hobbes and Max Weber (1958, 1978). In practice, this monopoly is understood to exist on a spectrum, with some states more successful in upholding the claim than others within their societies (Wimmer 2003). As globalization has raced forward, interrelations between states have had increasingly greater domestic impact, as well (Drezner 2001). Whatever happens in the international arena – policy or economic – often has some impact on domestic affairs. Yet some kind of monopoly over legitimacy must be held for a state to be possible, so the theory goes. The state remains the final authority within its borders. Some scholars have called for a shift towards a global, multi-level monopoly over violence as opposed to the current Westphalian nation-state system (Wulf 2007). However, in practice as well as in academic theory, that call has gone largely unanswered, revealing just how dominant the Weberian definition is.

Holding to that cardinal concept of the state has led sociologists and political scientists to focus their theorization of the state on two primary components. The first theoretical camp revolves around the micro-level impacts of a single state on its own people or citizens, within its own borders. After all, if the state has a monopoly of legitimate violence, then it is the only ruling entity that matters within its territory. The second strand focuses on the macro-level interactions between the states themselves, regarding each state as an autonomous entity. The imbalance of power and influence among states can make their relations complicated and changeable. However, their status as legitimate, recognized states over a certain territory grants them a certain voice that, at least since the formation of the United Nations (and arguably long before), guarantees sovereignty, non-interference, and negotiating power (United Nations 1945, Chapter 1, Article 2; Simpson 2006; Croxton 1999).

Both approaches are crucial interventions in our understanding of the state, as all states are active on both those fronts constantly. One cannot fully understand the power and position of the state until one understands its influence over the people it administers – through direct control, ideas, and symbolic validation. At the same time, states form self-conceptions in relation to *other states*, and have to manage economies, migration, and violence in conjunction/competition with other states. Skocpol eloquently described the state as “Janus-faced” (referring to the two-faced god of Roman mythology), having “an intrinsically dual anchorage in class-divided socioeconomic structures and an international system of states” (1979:29). To survive, a state must always and forever have one foot in both the internal and the external workings of politics, which can cause friction and revolution. To put these two theories into visual form, Figure 6a illustrates the internal theories (within each state), and the external relations (state-state ties). In this model, only states interact with other states (government-to-government level), while citizens and meso-level groups can only make claims on *their own* state. The state, in return, only protects its own citizens on its own territory.

Figure 6a: Current Theory of States



Legend:

- = State/government
- = Interstate relations
- = Government territory
- = state jurisdiction boundary
- = solid, impermeable border
- = citizens of the various states
- = government defense of its citizens, interests, etc.
- = social claims made on the state (for protection, redistribution, etc.)

However, as the world grows increasingly interconnected and globalized, completely separating the micro and macro levels of power has become less defensible. The present literature on the state continues to consider the internal and external dimensions of state power

and action largely independent. Both spring from the same (Weberian) concept, two contrasting aspects of the same “Janus-faced” structure, but nary the twain shall meet. In fact, over 40 years ago, Gourevitch made a similar criticism in his seminal analysis of state theories (1978). Synthesizing six different schools of comparativist state theories, he declared that domestic politics within states could be a cause or consequence of the international political and economic environment, and vice versa (Ibid.). The situations in which states exist both constrain and shape their actions, similar to the old proverb that “no man is an island” (Donne 1923). Even in his extensive critique, however, Gourevitch and the many theories he proposes remain tied to the Weberian concept of state. He maintains that the practice of legitimate violence remains in the purview of states even if their free will is compromised. And sadly, even since his seminal essay, few scholars have moved past the internal-external dichotomy in their study of states (see the critiques of Ayers 2018, Eriksson and Rhinard 2009, and Starr 2006).⁷³

I argue that such an oversight leaves the understanding of states as holistic fields incomplete. In our modern world, with rapid information flows and interconnected economies, these two sides of the state intersect and impact one another constantly. Even if territories have remained somewhat constant since the Westphalian system was enshrined into international law, the *people* and *economies* have not. Trade, movement/migration, and international integration are growing at an unprecedented rate (Bordo et. al. 1999). Hypothetically speaking, it has now become entirely possible for a person to be under the jurisdiction of three or more states simultaneously, given dual citizenship, marriage across borders, and the rise of migrant labor. The maid trade of Asia is only one such market where this simultaneous state power becomes tangible. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to bridge the internal-external gap in state theory if we are to fully understand the positionality and actions of the multiple states involved.

Theories of Single-State Internal Dynamics

The role of states has evolved and expanded over the past few centuries, and with it, academic research has scrutinized every facet of state power. And political sociologists have found many facets. There seems to be no limit to where or how far the modern state can reach – to the point of controlling its citizens’ very minds and identity. This literature, however, has metaphorically sacrificed breadth for depth. The insights of theorists like Bourdieu and Foucault only ever focus on a single, unrivaled state and those under it. The role of other, potentially equal or more powerful states, do not factor into the power a state holds within its “territory.” This is a blind spot, I argue, that leaves single-state theories open to fallacy.

To begin with, Michel Foucault’s work on granular-level state power is foundational. In *Discipline and Punish*, he shows how the state’s ever-present gaze, typical of the modern era (“panopticism”), ensures nothing in a person’s life is exempt from discipline or power (1995). What makes modern state authority so pervasive, however, is its gaze at the individual level rather than society as a whole. “Each individual receives as his status his own individuality,” and that individuality is used to make him fit like a cog in the state’s societal blueprint (Ibid:192). The state’s unmatched power of surveillance over the bodies and souls of its people normalizes their actions and thoughts into controllable and classifiable types. The worst of it is,

⁷³ I would also argue that conditions at present necessitate a break from the internal-external paradigm even more than when Gourevitch wrote his seminal essay. At around the time of its publication, worldwide migration had reached only 84.5 million (UN 1996; Zlotnik 1998). As of 2019, however, the total number of migrants had reached 272 million globally – a more than three-fold increase (UN 2019). The amount of migration and movement across borders inevitably has repercussions for states, both sending and receiving (see Conclusion).

the rationality of this “scientific” system makes the state’s actions appear right and natural – so studied, minute, even impartial, that they cannot be questioned.

The key is to make subjects themselves buy into this power. Knowing their every movement will be observed, citizens learn to correct their behavior to fit the standard, normalized expectations. Power is then no longer practiced with coercion or outright domination, but the willing submission of those subjected – the watched become the watchers (Foucault 1995:136). And if any stragglers must be convinced, the market serves as a site of veridiction for state power and policy, where “success replaces [legitimacy]” (Foucault 2010:16). The people’s own belief “supports, reinforces, multiplies the asymmetry of power and undermines the limits that are traced around law” (Ibid:223).⁷⁴ While very relevant to the case of migrant maids (racist undertones, pre-departure training with eerie similarities to Foucault’s surveillance concept), Foucault’s framework is restricted to one dominant state (Chapter 4; Killias 2009). His theory in itself does not address transnational dynamics, or how multiple claims to power would cause conflict or fractures in a system that relies on perfect totality.

How the state *maintains* its power has been explored by too many scholars to count. State capacity literature, for example, has explored how different regimes have aided or damaged various powerful groups, as well as how the state protects/controls its citizens by building itself up (see Geddes 1994; Belsey and Persson 2009; Hendrix 2010). Out of the myriad works detailing state power/capacity building, though, two in particular are relevant to this case.

Firstly, in her analysis of the Turkish state, Yael Navaro-Yashin sees people and state as “the same domain”, with the public constantly producing the political arena locally and nationally (2002:2). Her “fantasy of the state” concept illuminates how the state relies on its people to regenerate and re-erect it through crises and change. This symbiotic relationship with its citizens gives the state immense power, even if everyone’s “fantasies” about what the state should be are not in perfect harmony (e.g., secularism vs. Islamism in Turkey). Secondly, Haney’s research shows how mixing formal state institutions with non-government management adds layers to the exercise of power – a “hybrid state,” as described in Chapter 4 (2010:19). Intuitively, diversification and decentralization should reduce state power, but Haney finds the opposite: decentralized systems give a hybrid state more capacity for granular social control (Ibid.). In my case, each placement agency can interpret and apply state regulations more fluidly, even as they follow the state’s general (patriarchal) guidance on how to mold citizens into the “right” workers (see Chang 2018).

As insightful as these two analyses are, both remain limited to the reification or the hybridity of one state. Public and hybrid arms are concerned with only one state, with no room for external forces to impose on national debates or the exercise of power. Yet how might these dynamics evolve if they had to respond to the demands of multiple states simultaneously, as is the case in the transnational domestic worker market?

Fortunately, not all single-state theories assume a state to be all-powerful within its territory. Joel Migdal’s theory of state in society focuses on state-society interaction not as merely superior-subordinate, but a relationship full of conflicts and challenges (1988). The state must day-to-day compete with social groups and organizations of varying sizes for control over social life. Strong states have the capacity to effectively “*penetrate* society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways,” while

⁷⁴ One modern area where this kind of state power is becoming unmistakable is in fact China. Under the Communist Party’s rule, with its “social credit” system and AI technology being slowly implemented in its cities, no action goes unnoticed by surveillance cameras (Carney 2018).

weak states have limited capabilities for doing so (1988:4-5, emphasis in original). In his later work, Migdal challenged Weber's idealist definitions of the state, insisting that competing sets of rules within a society were not merely byproducts of a weak state (2001). Once again, however, Migdal's complex theory falls into the same trap of assuming that a state is concerned with controlling and regulating social interactions in only one society, or social organizations within its borders only. Associations or challenges to legitimacy that come from outside a state's sovereign territory or people are not discussed, by Migdal or by other scholars that have applied his theory (see Forrest 2003).

Another dimension of state power elaborated in single-state theories lies in its ability to construct what people believe. Bourdieu believes that the state system's supposed "natural" and "scientific" authority extends to it the power to decide the "right" way of ordering its world. Stereotypes and statistics are *officiated* when they come from the state, changing from mere opinions to widely accepted *judgments* carrying the weight of truth (Bourdieu 2015; see Chapter 4 on stereotypes). Once the state has spoken, contradicting opinions can no longer hold equal importance – they must conform to the state's viewpoint or be dismissed. Even characterizations that would normally be considered insults are given force to be reckoned with when the state backs them: "authorized judgment has the whole force of the social order behind it, the force of the state" (Ibid.:11). Bourdieu's framework is groundbreaking, but he also limits himself to analyzing this dynamic within one single state. He acknowledges competition within that state, with the struggle over "the distribution of access to the collective, public, material or symbolic resources" always waging (Ibid.:36). Yet competition over that distribution and the exclusive power of "naming" takes the form Bourdieu describes only when there is a "monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence" by one state (Ibid.:4). When that monopoly is questioned by the simultaneous presence of multiple states, however, each state's officiating power might be more limited. In the case of a sending and host state in migrant labor, for example, both sides might even dictate certain aspects of the other's officiating power.

In sum, although this camp of state theory has explored a host of dynamics within the internal workings of states, the state is still considered autonomous and self-containing. Be it in Foucault's surveillance, the public fantasy, the hybridization of power, the management of non-state social institutions, or Bourdieu's symbolic power, the state has no equal. Coming from the foundation of Weber's definition, this framing makes perfect sense. To have a monopoly of legitimate violence requires there to be no rival for that claim. Whether or not that theory holds in practice, however, remains to be seen.

Theories of Macro Interactions between Multiple States

On the opposite side of the spectrum, two competing theories focus primarily on the macro level of state power, particularly on the interaction and competition between states: world systems theory (Immanuel Wallerstein, then Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly J. Silver) and social power (Michael Mann). In these theories, states must constantly take other states into account in their actions, striving to balance the benefits of integration into the larger network of nation-states with their own sovereignty and independence. The driving factor in these theories is relative state position – how the states see themselves compared to other states, the relations they want with other states, and the limitations placed on them by the international social, economic, and power dynamics between states. These theories, reverse of the single-state theories, often fall into the trap of seeing each state as monolithic without exploring the diversity under the surface. They underestimate the power that states have to shape the lives and even desires of

those under their power, and consequently miss how states can indirectly impact political and economic processes with means other than traditional state-level power.

Wallerstein's classic model of core, periphery, and semi-periphery – where the industrialized “core” nations extract labor and resources from the “periphery” states and leave them poor and underdeveloped – is still considered classic (1974). Though it began in sociology, world systems theory is now a multidisciplinary field crossing political science, international relations, political economy, anthropology, and more (Chirot 2001). Wallerstein's approach always took the world-system (the global division of labor) as a whole to be the primary unit of analysis, as opposed to nation-states (2004). Wallerstein's theory was fundamentally Marxist, with the international division of labor constantly reinforcing the wealth and dominance of core countries (like the US and European nations) and extracting labor and resources from periphery regions (like Africa and much of Asia) (Ibid.; Chirot 2001). States in developing countries were largely dependent on the political and economic support of the core regions; and core states primarily served the interests of multinational corporations that wanted to exploit cheap labor in the periphery (Barfield 1997). But he didn't see it as a simple battle of nation-states. The world economy, wealth, and global inequality were always the primary variables to explain for Wallerstein and those in his camp.

Arrighi and Silver take Wallerstein's world systems theory further in the political realm. For them, there is a global distribution of power between states that is always in flux depending on market and military dynamics in a “zero-sum-game” (1999:27-28). To establish and maintain power over other states, states must make concessions – such as expanding military presence or opening markets. Consequently, a sustained tension between legal sovereignty and de facto sovereignty emerges: even as a state achieves more and more recognized autonomy and power from the global system, even to being a hegemon, it becomes more integrated with (and thus limited by) other states (Ibid.:93). Unfortunately, depending on how things play out, this integration can “reproduce interstate inequalities,” such as the reliance on informal networks in the Asia-Pacific (Ibid.:280). To put this in concrete terms, nations like the Philippines and Indonesia are politically independent, but economically dependent on wealthier societies like Hong Kong and Taiwan to take their citizens as laborers (see Chapter 3). This position of dependency means they must curb their autonomy to keep the more powerful state appeased. As Parreñas so succinctly puts it, “the sovereignty of the Philippines [and other sending states] diminishes with its inability to protect its overseas nationals” (2001:1138). Such failures and concessions only demonstrate “inequalities underlying the relationship of sending and receiving nations in globalization: the lesser economic power of sending nations vis-à-vis receiving nations means their lesser political power” (Ibid.:1138).

And yet, as crucial as world systems theory is to understanding inter-state dynamics, it is still incomplete in its analysis of how this game of states impacts individual citizens. Arrighi and Silver broach the possibility of citizens and “social movements” driving systemic change when the current order proves unable to meet social needs (especially regarding labor) (1999:282). Yet how states internally shape what their citizens want and what they think is possible (and thus, the demands they will make) falls outside the immediate purview of world systems theory. In modern times, however, the internal dynamics of a state are never divorced from its choices on the global level, and vice versa. I argue that the constant feedback loop between home state, host state, and the individual/social level complicates the “zero-sum-game” theory of state power relations – especially in temporary migrant labor like the maid trade.

Mann, on the other hand, theorizes globalization and the integration of nation-states as far more incoherent and contingent. Looking back over centuries of history in his four-volume *Sources of Social Power*, Mann contends that nations adapt their use of the four primary sources of social power (ideological, economic, military, and political) to fit current events and interests (2012). The process of adaptation is always flexible, with individuals like Hitler and Napoleon able to play crucial roles in moving history forward (Ibid.:345). From Mann's perspective, globalization in itself holds no power, but permits the spread of ideas that give birth to social change. Each nation's acceptance or rejection of various social changes are inextricable from its past (path dependency) and internal/cultural logic; the combined choices of nations in turn shape the world state system (Mann 2013:247-261). This theory makes the development of each nation-state less predictable and more bottom-up than world systems theory. Once again, however, Mann's theory prioritizes the macro level of analysis – how social movements impact the national and international level, how the spread of ideas depends on macro-level power dynamics, and so on. He does not analyze how individuals are impacted by these macro-level choices, or what states might do to enforce social change on their citizens. Internal state dynamics are thought to have little impact on the international system by and large, outside of shaping the individual state's choice. Conversely, he also conceptualizes states as having full autonomy over their response to social change. These two gaps blind Mann to more complicated cases of change and development, where certain micro-level elements bypass their own state altogether to impact both the international system and their own state.

Even classical international relations as a discipline falls into the macro-only camp. Whether in realism or liberalism, a state is always construed as fully sovereign and fully in control of its own choices. The pluralism that some IR theorists propound is primarily limited to dynamics *within* states, and never extends past a state's borders (Jackson 1992). Only the neoliberal concept of "complex interdependence" introduced transnational entities and different ways for states to take action, and its tenet that states do not act as coherent units was a vital contribution (Keohane and Nye 1997). However, it still neglects the way the meso and micro levels in one state might impact the choices of *other* states.

What is missing here is ultimately an integration of these two sides of state power – the power of states over their individual citizens and the reciprocal pushback, and the international game of different states competing for position and influence vis-à-vis one another. As demonstrated above, Foucault, Bourdieu, Migdal and others all have the same critical limitation of assuming there is but one central state to contend with, and one state only. The state is theorized at various levels of fragmentation or homogeneity, but it is still one more or less cohesive state functioning within its own borders. However, in a world where ideas, capital and labor are becoming less bound by territory, this framework is becoming less defensible. What one state does within its borders is no longer secluded from what other states do or their reactions to it – a fact that Bauman alludes to in his analysis of "frontierland" (2002). Thus, the monopoly of legitimacy becomes more and more contested as markets, regulations and state actors *from different states* are increasingly thrown together on the micro level. How do individuals balance two competing officiated statements? How can different states meet competing social demands while upholding their relations with one another? And how do states change their actions and judgments in response to feedback or competition from other states?

The theories of Arrighi and Silver and Mann have the opposing limitation of focusing too much on inter-state dynamics, to the point of neglecting the importance of individual-level,

seemingly mundane interactions. To be fair, both world systems theory and Mann's theory of social power emphasize how social movements and the spread of ideas can impact not just individual states but also the global system of interstate relations. However, social movements are for the most part only considered important in aggregate, as a cumulative force that makes states adapt their position and strategy in the global order. Little significance is given to how state and interstate power dynamics shape and direct the individuals under each state's jurisdiction. Nor do Arrighi, Silver, or Mann explore the way their global systems of states and social power play out in individual cases, or how those cases can feed back into the global state system over time. Why do some cases garner more attention and seem to have more at stake than others? Can states use micro-level cases to subtly struggle against the order of the current state system? Or do most cases simply reinforce the existing power relation of states? However such dynamics play out, I believe it will have a lasting impact on political sociology's understanding of the state.⁷⁵

Alternate Theory: Bridging the Gap with Porous Sovereignty over a Shared Jurisdiction

An ideal case study would throw multiple states and state actors together with individual citizens from different states, forcing them to interact at levels neither theory would account for. I submit that I have such a case study in the maid trade. The field on which states parley rights and powers is indivisible here: it is the citizen herself – more specifically, the lives and bodies of MDWs. Thus, the several competing claims involving the same people in the same space must be resolved again and again, with the positionality of the states involved rarely staying static. Which state is a migrant domestic worker ultimately answerable to: the host state or her home state? She is considered a guest on foreign soil and must obey the host state's laws while there; but she also can never become a citizen or resident of the host state, even if she remains there most of her life (a condition of her work visa). Her home state and its enforcement arms are physically and symbolically distant from a domestic worker's day-to-day life, hundreds of miles from the state's territory; but when her rights are violated, the onus often falls on the home state to step in (either the Consulate or its many employment agency arms), judge her situation, and support a course of action.

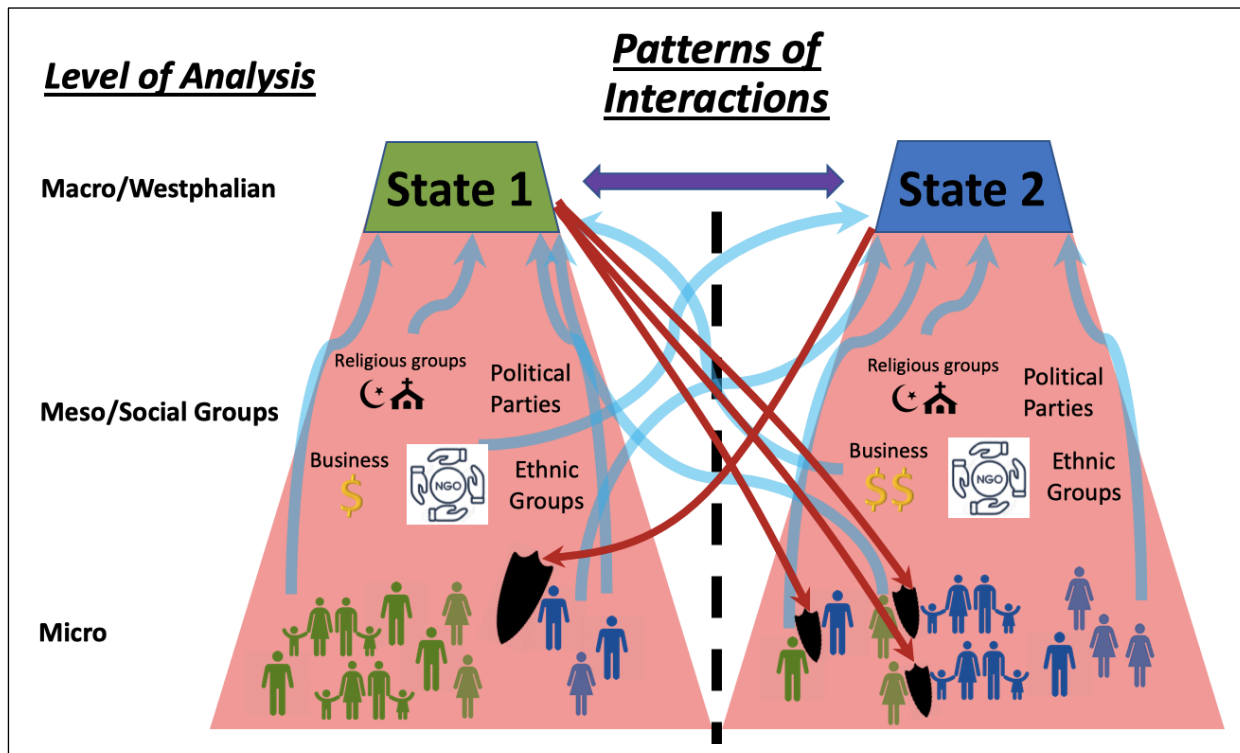
Additionally, how each state plays its part in the lives of migrant domestic workers depends on the power dynamic between the states, not just the details of each case. The more time I spent in the field, the more I realized that neither state is completely autonomous from the other, and both have to make concessions to one another. The integration of each state's sources of social power through globalization and migration entails a power dynamic that is never completely stable (but often leans in the host state's favor). Which state has the right to enforce the law, which has the right to discipline, and which has the right to make the final judgments? At the end of the day, it cannot be forgotten that the states still want to maintain a functioning relationship. Both sides need this market to continue functioning for different reasons (see

⁷⁵ Some minor literatures have already begun to suggest this. For example, research on massive multinational corporations begs the question of just how autonomous states are anymore, since conglomerates can pressure many states into changing their laws (Murtha and Lenway 1994; Tarzi 1991). Repeated political scandals surrounding extradition (or refusal to extradite) are also relevant to this discussion, since it makes state sovereignty over territory or citizens less clear-cut (Lipkowitz 2019). However, none of these cases have gone so far as to suggest that sovereignty is porous or *shared*, as I do here. Authority still clearly lies with the state in question, while MNCs and other states have to directly appeal or negotiate through that state's channels, and set clear rules. Or so the theories have said so far. I believe my theory can actually shed new light on these cases, as well. But that is the subject for a later study.

Chapter 3). This macro-level tension of competing claims over symbolic power has very real effects on the lives of migrant citizens, as each side tries to fit into the other's claims while insisting on legitimacy of their own. Furthermore, the boundaries of these claims lie within one individual – meaning that on the macro level, the states are suddenly no longer the only actors of interest. The groups and individuals that once fell solely under the domain of the internal state, suddenly now have a stake and claim in the international arena.

To revise the common understanding of the state illustrated above (Figure 6a), I here propose a more complicated model of state interaction over migrant labor – one that I will elaborate through my results and in my discussion section below:

Figure 6b: Alternate Theory of States



Legend:

- = State/government
- = Interstate relations
- = Government territory
- = state jurisdiction boundary
- = permeable border
- = citizens of the various states
- = government defense of its citizens, interests, etc.
- = social claims made on the state (for protection, redistribution, etc.)

If the intersection of these two dynamics of state power plays out as constant negotiation on the micro level, we would expect to see that reflected as *instability* and *liminality* in both market structure, as well as the expectations of the subjects involved. Both states must make their respective power felt in the individual cases if they are to appear like legitimate states. Infusing that power into how the market operates from the start makes it impossible to avoid. The state will want subjects to know what is expected of them from the outset, as a maid or employer or agency. Yet when both states seek to do this simultaneously in the same market, to

the same subjects/citizens, the rivalry should also destabilize any claim to absolute power. The once-monopolized jurisdiction of citizens or territory has now become shared. Cases of contested state power playing out on a micro and corporeal level reveal a crucial dynamic of the modern state that political sociology has left undertheorized. I intend to bridge this gap with my analysis of “porous oligopoly/sovereignty,” demonstrating how states can share claims to legitimate violence and still remain sovereign.

Results

To put my overall argument more concretely, both states have a stake in keeping this market going – either to provide jobs to their citizens and receive their remittances (home), or to free their population from domestic demands like childcare or elderly care for skilled/lucrative labor (host). To keep that arrangement, however, this market must be maintained as *temporary labor*, where the migrants never fully integrate into the host state. After all, if migrants permanently resettle, the home state will cease to get remittances, while the host state will become responsible for the maids’ care and equal rights as citizens, undermining their purpose as “a secure source of low-wage labor” (Parreñas 2001:1134). The visa arrangement of migrant domestic work handles this conundrum by forbidding permanent residence (see Chapter 2). Prior literature has termed this status “partial citizenship,” meaning a “liminal legal status” that maids occupy due to being “not full members of host countries, but at the same time not fully protected by their home countries” (Parreñas 2015:x).

However, that arrangement of permanent “temporary” status comes with complications: it necessitates each state/government remaining involved throughout the duration of a maid’s stay. With permanent settlement forbidden, both states must remain involved constantly and simultaneously, even after the bilateral negotiations are finished – after all, it is Hong Kong/Taiwan territory, but Indonesian/Filipino citizens, and always will be. Suddenly, the border of state sovereignty is no longer a clear line in the sand. A state cannot control what happens in another’s territory, nor can it command the loyalty of, nor take full responsibility for, another’s citizens. And yet, sending states must reach into the host society’s territory to take responsibility for their own citizens, while host governments must enforce their own local regulations but cannot control what happens to a migrant maid outside their territory – even if those practices violate their own laws. In the case of the maid trade, either one state has to enforce the will of another, or will be prevented from enacting its own will by the sovereignty of another state. Thus, the command of legitimate physical and symbolic violence is no longer under the monopoly of one state, but shared in an oligopoly, where both shy away from taking full responsibility but still want all the corresponding rights/power.

To support my theory of a porous oligopoly of legitimate violence among states, I present five pieces of evidence that show how states in the maid trade no longer have a monopoly, and are constantly renegotiating how to share and divide their hold on territory and/or citizens.

Specifically, I will be looking at:

- 1) specific unresolved cases of disputed jurisdiction, where addressing cases of abuse required the states to cooperate, but not resolve anything final;
- 2) the management of agencies overcharging maids, where states maintain policies of deferral to each other rather than enforcing their own decisions;
- 3) each state’s struggle with projecting the right kind of image, balancing the demands of other states and of their own citizens
- 4) state’s passive acceptance of dependency on the maid trade system; and finally,

- 5) an analysis of which different actors in the maid trade can make demands on the different states involved now, even the ones they are technically subjects of.

1. *Unresolved Jurisdiction*

While the theory I've given is extensive, it means nothing if the tension I have described never becomes concrete. Fortunately (or unfortunately, however one chooses to view it), the tension of shared sovereignty and porous oligopoly becomes very tangible in *public cases of abuse*. Whenever there is a case that is severe enough or which garners enough attention to warrant arbitration, governments have to step in. Then they are faced with the same conundrum I have repeated throughout this dissertation: which state? In most cases, when there is a claim to be made or a crime committed, the *subject's state* must prosecute on behalf of its citizen, within its own system of law⁷⁶ (Slaughter and Burke-White 2006). Here, however, one of those fundamental state rights/powers must be compromised: either a guest state prosecutes within the host state's legal system, or the host state must prosecute on behalf of one that is not its citizen. To finally resolve the situation either way is problematic, leaving one or both states with permanently damaged sovereignty. Consequently, sending and receiving states in my research chose to leave the final jurisdiction unresolved, settling for a shared oligopoly of power.

The lack of clarity over jurisdiction becomes clearest when contrasting two widely-publicized cases of maid abuse in Hong Kong. The first was of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih in 2014, when the 23-year-old Indonesian maid was beaten, denied food, and repeatedly threatened by her employer for six months. As detailed in Chapter 1, thanks to some activism, both the Indonesian and Hong Kong states became involved in a "thorough and in-depth investigation," culminating in Hong Kong police (not Indonesia) filing a lawsuit against Erwiana's employer (*Guardian* 2014). Interestingly, beyond offering assistance, the Indonesian government did not actually do much to help Erwiana in her case – NGOs and activists took over most of the work (a fact some officials in the Consulate were still resentful of: HK 2015-Gov 2). Erwiana herself was instead cared for by NGOs like the Mission for Migrant Workers (HK-Fieldnotes 2018).⁷⁷ But it was in Hong Kong and under Hong Kong law that the case was finally tried – in a way reinforcing the power dynamic between states, but also challenging the legitimacy of that dynamic. It was, after all, a Hong Kong citizen that abused Erwiana so horrifically and necessitated the trial.

Another case emerged just over a year later, with Indonesian maid Elis Kurniasih being crushed by a concrete slab at her agency's boarding house while waiting for her visa. She died in the hospital three days later. Numerous protests and appeals were made on her behalf, and in Hong Kong the outrage was similar to that following the Erwiana case. Here, however, it was not clear which state the complaints should be directed towards, or from whom the family should seek compensation (Lau 2015). Indeed, many maids I spoke to during my fieldwork were upset that complaints against that agency – and there were many – didn't seem to go anywhere, no matter who they were filed with (HK-Fieldnotes 2015). Hence, the outrage surrounding Elis' case withered away to nothing. Here, it might be argued, the negotiation of state power and jurisdiction was never resolved: who had jurisdiction over the maid while her visa was in limbo?

⁷⁶ To a lesser extent, states may also prosecute on behalf of their citizens in the international arena, but legal scholars have conceptualized that arena as one of all states or no states, as opposed to another state entirely (see Slaughter and Burke-White 2006)

⁷⁷ Interestingly, Erwiana herself told me that the NGOs she stayed with were afraid that the Indonesian government would try to bully her into dropping the case. So although the consulate offered free boarding, she did not accept it, and instead stayed with the Mission for Migrant Workers (ID-Maid 13).

Who had jurisdiction over the agency (because, after all, these agencies have to be licensed by both states)? And who was ultimately responsible? Despite challenges coming from below, the states never engaged to give final answers – leaving such things open for future debate.

Cases such as these confused many of the maids I spoke to or interviewed regarding where to go should they need help. The most common source of help was fellow maids or shelters; few thought going to agencies or the Indonesian government was a good idea, “because they will not help you when you are in desperate situation” (HK 2015-Maid 10). In fact, a particularly cynical maid told me “Well, usually they will not take any action until magazines or the news covers the incident. Otherwise, if there is no voice [*suara-suara*], they don’t care and they will not handle it” (HK 2015-Maid 12). In this case, the rules are not set in stone, so there is no higher legal authority for the maids to appeal to. All they can hope for is that their individual judge or employers will be sympathetic to their plight. And when the outcome depends on luck, fighting for one’s rights begins to lose its purpose – a state of mind I found repeatedly in my fieldwork. If they ever had to go to the government for anything, they were often unclear as to which state they should appeal to, leading many to seek help from peers first (see Chapter 3). It seemed the maids were aware not just of the power of the states over their own situations, but also of the ever-in-flux dynamic of both states, making them hesitant to approach either.

Sadly, even the Erwiana case reinforced the distrust of the government in the end. Despite being convicted, Erwiana’s employer only ended up serving less than half of her jail time (Creery 2018). She also never paid any of the damages the court awarded Erwiana and the other MDWs that brought charges against her, which local NGOs said “shows how little remorse or regret she has to her actions” (Ibid.). The Hong Kong government never gave a reason as to why the employer (Law Wan-tung by name) was released just after my fieldwork ended, and now her whereabouts are unknown (*Home Kong* 2019).

From the government perspective, constrictions on their sovereignty were very tangible, and it was often a point of contention in the bilateral relationship. To me, government officials in consulates and local departments would express disapproval of how the other government ran things in such a way that disadvantaged their citizens, or created problems that they had to deal with (“*cuci piring* [washing dirty dishes],” as one Indonesian official put it: HK-Fieldnotes 2018). For example, an official in the Hong Kong Labour Department said “It’s not our requirement for these maids to go through an employment agency, but sending governments may have this requirement; they consider it protection for maids, because they [maids] don’t know Hong Kong culture or services. They also want a middle man to help the consulate manage the tens of thousands of workers” (HK 2015-Gov 5). Unfortunately, this requirement has led to a “problem of agencies abusing, overcharging [these women] – all governments involved are committed to stop this, but for agencies overseas, we [Hong Kong government] can’t do anything; but we’ve been advising agencies in Hong Kong to offer better help to maids when they need it” (HK 2015-Gov 5). The Hong Kong Immigration department also reiterated that Indonesian training agencies were an issue “beyond HKSAR Government’s jurisdiction and should be tackled at source” (HK 2015-Gov 3). Note the repeated mantra: it is outside their jurisdiction, therefore rendering their monopoly of legitimate violence within Hong Kong useless to uphold their laws elsewhere, even if these women live and work in Hong Kong now.

Taiwanese officials expressed similar frustrations, though less often. For example, the Immigration Ministry complained about needing to house many runaway Indonesian maids that were not able to pay the fine or pay for the plane ticket home. If family or friends also could not come up with the money, they could be stuck in the bare detention facilities for as long as two

months (TW-Fieldnotes 2017). One official confessed that most don't like keeping them in that situation for so long, but would not forgive their debts and felt powerless to help them. That is, until the Indonesian government chose to step in and pay the fine for all those who were unable to. "There is nothing to do [没办法], if they say they have no money. But then they just had to say they had no money, and we would get the [Indonesian] government to help them pay, so that was a very big burden [负担]" (TW-Gov 1). Another official expressed frustration at how unresponsive sending states were to Taiwanese suggestions for changing regulations in the home markets, even when it would benefit their migrants:

"Well, they aren't giving a very positive response at the moment. Besides that, we have several times before given the suggestion that Vietnamese laborers, or Indonesian laborers, couldn't they reduce [调降] the agency fee? Of course, in this part, we can only make suggestions, and there is no way to regulate [没有办法规范]. In this part, we can only respect them, because that is their country doing the regulating. So, this, how much money can their foreign intermediaries receive, yes. That's one of the problems that Taiwan is currently facing." (TW-Gov 6)

At the same time, sending state officials would shoot back with "now you're in Hong Kong you have to follow the Hong Kong regulation. Because we are all here the guests. We're not Hong Kong people. We're guests in Hong Kong. So we have to follow the regulation of the Hong Kong government" (HK 2015-Gov 2). A veteran Philippine official also complained about host states' ability to "cover up" any legal violations in order to favor their own citizens at the expense of the host state's own laws (and of course, the guest workers): "It's human nature to cover it up; and then sometimes the police officer would be the brother or somebody related to the employer. Yes, it's going to happen" (PH-Gov 1). It was a strange combination of trying to assert sovereignty, but also declaring their impotence to do anything because of the involvement of another state, or the power of the wealthy agencies it backed.

The theme of being unable to do what they wanted as a state – what they would have done had they had full authority – became so common throughout home and host state interviews that I was forced to create a new code for it when analyzing my data: Constrictions. That code showed up 244 times independently, the sixth most common code in my 34 government interviews.⁷⁸ All the issues these states dealt with involved the *same* people in the same space and time; but sovereignty and jurisdiction remained murky, because multiple states had to be involved at the same time – an unstable balance.

Individual cases that require arbitration make the challenge to each state's monopoly of power tangible. If it was perfectly clear in each case who should enforce the domestic workers' rights, who should prosecute, and laws were perfectly transparent, there would be little room for arbitration between the states. With the rules set, states' respective power would have minimal friction or overlap. And yet, that is not what I observed – just the opposite. In Erwiana and Elis' cases, as well as in the words of government officials, final jurisdiction was never decided. The process was left vague and divided, even if one of the cases was finally resolved (perhaps because of the attention Erwiana garnered). But the states left behind no permanent regulations

⁷⁸ The constricting party in this code was most often another state and its laws; but it could also be private agencies or NGOs.

for following cases (seen clearly in Elis' case), and so the process for resolution must be decided anew every time.

To understand why this uncertainty and vagueness is maintained, we need to think from the perspective of the governments themselves. If the states decided finally on a single process for resolution, splitting the responsibilities finally and deciding what or whose laws were final, it would mean permanently hamstringing one or both sovereignties. Practically speaking, either the host state would receive full control and responsibility for the migrants (not something they want to be burdened with, as Parreñas put it so eloquently above); or sending states would gain the right to challenge and enforce a host state's laws independent of the host state itself; or any of these states would suddenly be able to enforce their laws in another's territory. None of those outcomes are desirable for a state. And so the governments have chosen to eschew clarity in favor of a vague sharing of responsibilities that can be renegotiated in every case.⁷⁹ The obscurity could serve to both disempower the individuals involved (meaning power negotiation happens primarily at the inter-state level, maintaining oligopoly), and leave the respective roles of each state in this market open for change. And obscurity is indeed what I observed, an eerie reflection of the market opacity discussed in Chapter 4.

2. *Overcharging and Deferral*

I have elaborated this topic in previous chapters, so I will not go into too much detail here (see Chapter 4). What is significant in regards to the governments and states, however, is the issue of jurisdiction and their policies of *deferral*. As detailed in Chapter 3, every domestic worker has two agencies (or three, in the case of the Philippines): one (two) in the home state, and one in the host society. These for-profit agencies fall under the jurisdiction of their respective governments, naturally. They do not even have offices in the other states. However, the clients of these agencies – the maids they train and place – do fall under the jurisdiction of both states, and thus the tension arises.

In regards to the fees maids are charged, the different states have different policies. Hong Kong, for example, maintains the strict 10% of first month's salary rule. Taiwan allows the host agencies to charge NTD1800 (US\$60) per month the first year of the maid's contract, NTD1600 (US\$53) per month the second year, and NTD1500 (US\$50) per month the third year, but has no restrictions on what the home agency can charge. For the longest time, Indonesia left its agency fees unregulated, but in the past few years has been trying to restrict them to a maximum of IDR 29 million (approximately). The Philippines, on the other hand, maintains that domestic workers should be charged no fees to go abroad. All these distinct regulations contribute to misunderstandings and an opaque market (see Chapter 4), and agencies are perfectly aware of this. And since this market is inherently cross-border and in multiple jurisdictions, agencies can take advantage of these policy disparities to extort fees where they normally wouldn't be able to. As I have detailed before, home agencies will collect fees from women while they are working abroad, far from the watchful eyes of the home state. On the other hand, the host agencies can extract some money from domestic workers by charging the home agencies a fee, which in turn is put on the domestic workers.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ For a similar case, see Dezalay and Garth on international commercial arbitration (1996). Though that case was not quite expounded to state sovereignty, political struggles between states was key to their argument.

⁸⁰ However, as detailed in Chapter 2, this is not always the case; sometimes, the home agencies are the ones to charge the host agency a fee.

Of course, most will be quick to dismiss this element as a story of profit and greed. While that is a primary driver of the cross-border overcharging maids experience (and I have elaborated that in chapters prior), I also became convinced on my fieldwork that this was not the whole story. That profit and greed, after all, is regulated – the regulations are simply not (or poorly) enforced. The broken enforcement is a story of two or more states competing for sovereignty and the right to enforce their own regulations beyond their borders, without offending the sovereignty of another state. In a market that is inherently cross-border, that perfect balance is nigh on impossible. Hence, in each case I encountered, I found that the governments had to weigh which was more important to them: defending the regulations they had set up to defend their own citizens, or not offending the other state involved. Most often, in accord with the findings of Loveband and Rodriguez, the other state was the more important party to please (2004; 2010). Instead, when it came to something as mundane as overcharging, neither side really wanted to make a big deal of it, and instead adopted policies of deferring to one another and turning a blind eye.

To put this in concrete terms, take the perspective of the Hong Kong government. Their 10% regulation is clearly being flaunted in the case of maids, almost all of whom are charged far more than that. About 78% of the 51 Hong Kong maids I interviewed remembered the amount they paid being in the thousands. Only two knew for certain that they had paid less than HK\$400. That money comes from their territory, is sent through banks (or 7-11s, as was often the case) on their soil, for services rendered in Hong Kong. However, Hong Kong authorities won't chase that down, because the entity collecting the fee is not domiciled in Hong Kong. An official in the Labour Department that I spoke to outside of an interview had an interesting (if discouraging) perspective:

“She agrees that agencies using debt traps is a problem, and it’s a struggle because it is technically **outside of Hong Kong’s jurisdiction**. When she asks for possible solutions that activists and I have thought about, I recommend fining agencies here in Hong Kong if their partner agencies in Indonesia or any sending country overcharge the maids. That will discourage agencies here from making partnerships with bad agencies abroad – it could be handled under accusations of conspiracy. She doesn’t seem too keen on that idea, however; but as we continue to speak, she doesn’t give any concrete argument against that approach.” [HK-Fieldnotes 2018, emphasis added]

This particular official didn't seem to want to bother with chasing down the agencies overcharging if they were not on Hong Kong soil. Instead, she leaned toward dodging the problem and perhaps letting the home states handle it.

On the other hand, the home states are not in much better shape. The overcharging happens to their citizens, but outside their territory. Hence, Indonesia and the Philippines must go through the Hong Kong or Taiwanese system to pursue the case, even if said case is violating the local laws. The home states do not have their own courts or their own police to enforce their will in another government's territory. Instead, the home states must rely on the host state to enforce the ruling, which host governments may be reluctant to do it, if said enforcement disadvantages the host state's citizens and/or businesses (see the quote above). At the end of the day, this can put the maids in a terrible position. Sometimes they might wait for months for their monetary settlement if employer or agency simply stalls paying. One interviewee was in just such a position, with her children unable to go to school because she could not send them money.

She had taken the employer to the Labour Tribunal, and had won the case. But a month had passed since then, and she had received no word on whether or even if the employer would repay the months of salary she had withheld illegally (HK-Maid (F) 2). One Indonesian official lamented, “implementation also sometimes depends on the *political will* in the foreign country” (ID-Gov 9).

Agencies also know how to find slippery ways to skirt around legal restrictions on fees where they do exist, and often use state borders as their primary defense. As one official explained to me, “there is a prohibition on interest in the Philippines, but what they're doing is, they take the law in the Philippines, but the collection is in Taiwan. It's some sort of circumnavigating the loan. That is another issue that Manila is addressing now because we cannot constitute the lending institution there because people say that they're just agents. The actual institution that lends the money is in Taiwan” (TW-Gov 4). Indonesia confronted the same problem. Only the Philippines attempted to find a way around the stalemate. If they found a case of overcharging in Hong Kong or Taiwan, for instance, they would sue her training and placement agencies in the Philippines – they found both agencies “jointly and severally liable for the claims of the domestic worker” (Ibid.). Unfortunately, that solution depends on finding enough evidence, and does little to aid the MDWs with no lifeline currently being overcharged. Officials mostly hoped it could be a deterrent to overcharging agencies in the future.

When it all comes down to it, the cases of overcharging that I encountered served to prove how the enforcement of a state’s legitimate violence no longer relied on monopoly, but on divided, shared sovereignty. The individual states are unable (unwilling?) to enforce their own rules. The prevailing attitude I found among home states in regards to overcharging cases was similar to the attitude in the previous section: they are guests, and so must act as such. Their citizens may have to follow Hong Kong or Taiwan law in terms of obligations and restrictions, but because they straddle two jurisdictions in the case of agency fees, the maids are not guaranteed the corresponding rights that come from host state laws. Unfortunately, that attitude is met with a similarly dismissive attitude from host states, when they look on issues like home state overcharging as simply not their responsibility or beyond their power.

In fact, this attitude was so prevailing that I yet again created an entirely new Atlas.TI code that I had not planned for: “passing the buck.” Across 34 government interviews, that code showed up 166 times. In various and sundry ways, the states were surrendering the full rights and responsibilities of sovereignty, and instead letting another state take on that responsibility. As one official so poignantly said above: “we can only make suggestions, and there is no way to regulate. In this part, we can only respect them, because that is their country doing the regulating” (TW-Gov 6). At the end of the day, if these officials want their rules enforced, they realized clear as day that they had to rely on another state’s legitimate violence.

3. *The Right (Paradoxical) Image*

Sending states must balance trying to appear strong and protective (a legitimate state) but accommodating to the host state simultaneously, for a very simple reason. Whether sending or receiving, states in the maid trade are perpetually contending with an equal in power that can affect *their* citizens with its own legitimate violence. Home states oversee the training and flow of migrants, and technically have the ability to repatriate all their citizens from any particular host – leaving host state citizens stranded with no one to do the essential household or care work. Conversely, host states choose how much to pay the migrants, what rights to enforce, and retain the ability to revoke the right to work for certain nationalities of migrants. And unlike in normal

Westphalian theory, the decisions of the other states won't simply have indirect impacts on the citizens of the state in question through economic policy or tourism. No indeed – thanks to the highly involved transnational structure of the maid trade, the various states now have the ability to reach directly to citizens that are not their own. Host states watch the migrants; home states influence employers; and both impact each other's for-profit agencies. Thus, both states are left vulnerable to the whims of the other, and seek to minimize shocks from their counterpart. Strategies to appease one another *and* the citizens involved will of course change with circumstances. Sometimes it may require one state to posture and make a visible statement; other times it may require the same state to make itself deferential and accommodating.

As states struggle to find that balance and adapt with the times, their seemingly schizophrenic actions can send conflicting messages to individual citizens like maids and employers. Take the case of Indonesia. In order to ensure that its migrant maids remain “desirable” commodities for host states, the Indonesian state must play into each host state's narratives and schemes. More than that, it must make sure its own subjects play the role expected of them by the host state, or Indonesia could risk losing the market. At the same time, the Indonesian state is still a “state” in the Westphalian sense, and must not appear too much like a doormat to either the international stage or its own citizens. Otherwise, it could lose legitimacy as a state. The paradox is most clearly evident in the public statements and posturing of the respective states. While no official I met claimed the current situation was perfect, increasing public advocacy by groups such as Amnesty International served as a challenge to state authority and legitimacy (2013). It could perhaps even be considered paramount to accusations of powerlessness. Some officials regarded the criticism of rights groups with a surprisingly bitter tone: “I just give up on the NGO, because no matter what we do, we will never be right – they will always complain” (HK 2015-Gov 2; HK-Fieldnotes 2015, 2018). But the state cannot silence that challenge to their standing. In response, sending states in particular have invoked images of a paternal protector when addressing the needs of migrant maids.

For example, in response to repeated abuse cases and even executions in Saudi Arabia, the Jakarta government has begun taking a stronger stance on protecting its citizens' rights overseas. As described in previous chapters, the island state set bans on many Middle Eastern countries that they deemed to be flaunting their citizen's rights. The masculine rescuer undertones were quite overt, implying that the women were walking into terrible situations they did not understand and from which the state must “save” and “protect” them (Shaffer 2015). Indonesia has also expressed the intention to refocus its labor export flows, focusing on specialized and more “professional” workers (childcare workers, cooks, cleaners, etc.) instead of catch-all “maids” (ID-Gov 5). The newly-elected government (at the time) justified this drastic step – and its intention to cease the export of maids altogether – by framing the issue not as human rights, but a “matter of dignity” (Kuo 2015). In its statements, the government's focus has been not so much the wellbeing of its women as national pride.

The question arises, of course – dignity and pride for whom? The phrasing of the Indonesian state implies that the nation's pride as a whole is equated to each woman's dignity and pride. That dignity has been violated by the continuous stream of abuse in foreign countries, and the only way to reclaim it is for these women to return to the fold of their benevolent, protective state. At least, that is how the Indonesian government makes it appear. When the Indonesian government highlights its success in saving its citizens (even in the face of apparent failure), it is also attempting to reaffirm its power and strength, and position itself as the masculine protector of all its “helpless” women working abroad (see Quiano and Whiteman

2015). This is, after all, what a “benevolent” paternal protector is supposed to do: it is the basis of the state’s legitimacy, in the eyes of its own citizens and in the eyes of other states.

However, this image of strength is undermined by simultaneous actions of deference and appeasement towards host states. Such actions are usually not as overt as the public declarations of protection, but they are no less impactful. For example, the system of training domestic workers to be “obedient” and “submissive,” as described in Chapter 3, instills deference to host state authority before these women even begin work (see also Chang 2018). Advertising their workers according to that image through the agencies, moreover, directly conflicts with the above image of protection and strength. But as I’ve shown before, advertisements of “submissiveness” and “obedience” and “diligence” abound in this market. While this may not seem like a horrible characteristic to advertise, recall from Chapter 3 that such messages can have unintended consequences. When this “submissiveness” is not kept in check with limits on what employers can reasonably demand of a domestic worker as a person, they can easily slip into feeling they are entitled to cheap labor and complete servitude – especially given the gendered nature of the work (Groves 2015; Chapter 3; Chapter 4)

On a more intimate level, state and agency exhortations to “just endure it” or “*sabar*, *sabar* [be patient]” could be viewed as a home state’s way of silencing conflict before it becomes a problem. Unfortunately, almost every MDW I spoke to in interviews or ethnography could name a time they had been instructed to “endure” like that, even in the face of horrible circumstances. Lack of food was a common problem: “my employer just only give me a basic food... it’s not enough for me as a human. I report it to [the agency]... and they said ‘you must be patient. [That food] is good enough actually for you. That’s it. You just be patient, you have no choice. If you don’t like them, just... I’ll terminating [fire] you... so it’s only have 2 choices: you accept your job... and if not, you should be go home” (HK-Maid (I) 3). One Filipina domestic worker that had worked in Taiwan for 15 years lamented, “Even now our MECO? It’s like- [laughs] Same procedure. They just only teach how to mingle, to do good things and just listen and not even complain, complain, always complain. Just follow your boss, follow your employer, whatever. Show the good things to your employer so that you can stay for good here, or what” (TW-Maid (F) 8). Deference is a more “behind-the-scenes” image, meant primarily for the host states themselves as opposed to the public. The less trouble their maids make, the more “preferable” or “desirable” that state’s workers appear. Mixing subliminal and/or overt messages in advertising with the training of workers *naturalizes* the deferential image, making it appear as though the state has not interfered.

In a way, the combination of these two images is more oppressive than the deferential image alone. By propounding both, the states put themselves in the position of a traditional patriarch: the one who leads and defends the family, who instructs the children on the “correct” way to live, and who decides what is important enough for his attention. The combination becomes incredibly disempowering for individual workers when coupled with a state’s *lack of* action or regulation. Since the state has supposedly “done” something by making a statement, maids and activists are left with fewer grounds to challenge the state. By choosing to focus on certain aspects of problems faced by these migrants but remain silent on others, states essentially replicate a hierarchical power structure between themselves and their citizens. The patriarchal position comes across vividly in the Kurniasih case above, as well as in the distrust expressed by my 139 maid interviewees over 590 independent times – “they will not help us,” “government never do anything” and just stays “quiet” (HK 2015-Maid 5; see Chapter 4 for more).

Constructions of the state as patriarch are not unique to Indonesia, of course. Many other East Asian countries, like China and Singapore, construct the political apparatus as a patriarch, ruling over its citizens as a father governing the extended family (Tan 2001; Chan 2000; Dahlerup 1987). Though patriarchy is a global phenomenon, in Asia-Pacific cultures it most often takes on a uniquely Confucian tone that directly links it with state power, albeit to different degrees (Agarwal 1988). Research on the East Asian Crisis highlighted the enduring importance of the patriarchal state concept, when “the resurgence of patriarchal state ideologies in the form of so-called ‘Asian values’” became all the more blatant, sometimes with tragic results (Sen and Francisco 2000). Indeed, many scholars concluded that despite their nominally contradictory goals, globalization and patriarchy grew into a symbiotic relationship in the developing East Asian countries, with women (often mothers) bearing the brunt of the costs (Ibid.; Chan 2000).

In effect, the state’s paternalistic protection combined with inaction fosters continued dependency of MDWs on an arguably inefficient state system, while also undermining the power of grassroots challenges to the state or the state system. The state claims for itself the power to decide what is worth fighting for and what is not. Inaction is the state declaring that such matters are not worthy of its/“his” attention, without the state needing to explicitly dismiss such cases. Except in extreme cases (such as Erwiana’s, which garnered international attention), a state as patriarch is able to limit power and status negotiations to the states themselves. Theoretically, everyone else is subsumed under the patriarchal state, dependent on its care and goodwill (see Weber’s theories on patrimonialism and traditional authority: 1948, 1978). In short, the Indonesian state is seeking remain deferential and “feminine” in relation to the richer host states, and yet appear protective, controlling, and even paternal over its own citizens’ rights – all while monopolizing the power to negotiate with host states.⁸¹

The fact that a balance between state strength and complaisance is even in question highlights an undermined monopoly of legitimate power. In both the major theories I described above, strength should be the primary image that states care about. Be it through proving its legitimacy to its own citizens, or on the Westphalian stage commanding the respect of other equal states, strength and power are supposedly a state’s core identity. But in the maid trade (and I will argue later, in many other markets and circumstances), that strength cannot be a state’s sole concern anymore. Because these state’s citizens (particularly the sending states) live under two monopolies of legitimate violence simultaneously, propounding strength only can jeopardize the citizens’ livelihood. Instead, a state must find a way to maintain its power over its citizens and/or territory while still allowing another state’s system to coexist with its own.

4. Dependency on the trade

I mentioned far back in my introduction that both sending and receiving societies are dependent on the maid trade economically and socially, due to failings in their own societies. The host states need the domestic workers to act as their social safety net, caring for the elderly and managing the essential household labor. Neither Hong Kong nor Taiwan prepared well for an aging population, for example (see Lin 2010; Wong and Yeung 2019). Home states depend on remittances and employment in relatively stagnating economies, particularly in the rural

⁸¹ While sending states are the most obvious cases, promoting a deferential image is by no means limited to the home state. Host states, for example, have condemned horrible cases of abuse and, in indirect ways, apologized for them to reassure sending states of being a good location to work (Erwiana’s case). Hong Kong and Taiwan have also chosen to raise minimum wages of migrant workers at different times to make themselves more attractive destinations (see Chapter 1).

areas. Host states certainly have the advantage in this situation, as the wealthier societies; but as confessed in Chapter 4, they know that a mass exodus of workers or a strike “could bring Hong Kong [or even Taiwan] to its knees” (Lhatoo 2018). Though not from my particular cases, the Kuwait-Philippine row of 2018 demonstrates host dependency quite well. In fact, Kuwait knew that if the Philippines repatriated all of its domestic workers – like it threatened to after finding one maid hacked to pieces by her employer – the Kuwaiti economy would collapse. To prevent that, Kuwait was willing to take drastic measures: it expelled the Filipino ambassador, and held the entire Filipino embassy hostage until Filipino president Duterte reversed the decision (PH-Gov 1; Pazzibugan 2018). Home states, on the other hand, frequently make concessions as the underdog in the relationship, including the mentality of being “guests” and especially encouraging their workers to remain domicile and obedient (Chapter 4; Chang 2018).

Examples like Kuwait, and a quick look at government negotiations, show that each nation is painfully aware of this dependency. In subtle ways, they make concessions to one another to keep this market alive. Hong Kong, for example, has consistently raised the minimum wage of domestic workers to ensure that the city remains an attractive destination for domestic workers (Government of Hong Kong 2019). Indonesia, furthermore, also curried some favor with these two host governments by explicitly stating that Hong Kong and Taiwan would not be included in the (now defunct) ban on exporting domestic workers it hoped to establish in 2017 (Chou and Chen 2016). Even the Philippines has allowed its “no fees for maids” rule to be flaunted in Hong Kong and Taiwan, because the island nation sees the local laws in these two host societies as already being so favorable – not to mention being highly desired destinations for Filipino migrants (TW-Gov 4). When citizens demand the “right” to overseas employment, sending states like the Philippines are put in a terrible bind (Rodriguez 2010). To upset a receiving nation could potentially cut off a potential destination for employment. In short, angering another country would anger the sending state’s own citizens – leading to the kind of social and political unrest that all states dread.

Here’s the rub: this kind of dependency in fact compromises each nation’s sovereignty. Regarding diplomacy on the Westphalian stage, and internal actions with their own citizens and within their borders, sending and host state must refer to one another before making a final decision now. Or more specifically, the demands of the other state’s society. This kind of intertwining sovereignty may not be intentional, but in my interviews, officials seemed to grant passive acceptance to their loss of autonomy. One even confessed to feeling “无奈 [helpless]” in the maid trade system (TW-Gov 1). Another complained that “the change needs to start in their country, only then can it take a step towards our country... but to get to our local government, the time it takes will be very long. So until now I haven’t felt any of the changes they say” (TW-Gov 6). In fact, across my 29 government interviews, the second most common Atlas code in my interviews was “Interactions Between” – indicating every time officials mentioned having to work or communicate with other governments in some way. It showed up a total of 384 times. This code coincided with the Constrictions code 72 times, and with Passing the Buck 38 times. In short, when in this market, government officials were almost used to being unable to do everything they wanted, often deferring responsibility.

From a theoretical standpoint, this pattern of deferral and dependence morphs state monopoly of legitimate violence into a shared, porous sovereignty. Decisions regarding anything in the maid trade can no longer be unilateral. States *share* their sovereignty, and must reach an agreement (whether overtly or tacitly) before executing any policy, or risk the wrath of others in the oligopoly. Just as in any oligopoly, certain members have more sway and

bargaining power than others; but none of them is all-powerful. Home and host states share a dependency on this market for their own reasons; and that dependency requires sacrifices. Involvement in this oligopoly is not merely a market concern, but a political one. A state must be careful to not offend any other state's pride or image too much, or it risks very real retaliations. Nor can it afford to put citizens out of jobs (or conversely, force their working women to stay home), which might cause political unrest. In the end, these states participate in the maid trade for self-serving reasons (keeping their population employed, allowing educated women to work, cheap labor, millions of dollars in remittances). But that participation requires compromises to state sovereignty.

Implications/Discussion: Who Can Make Demands?

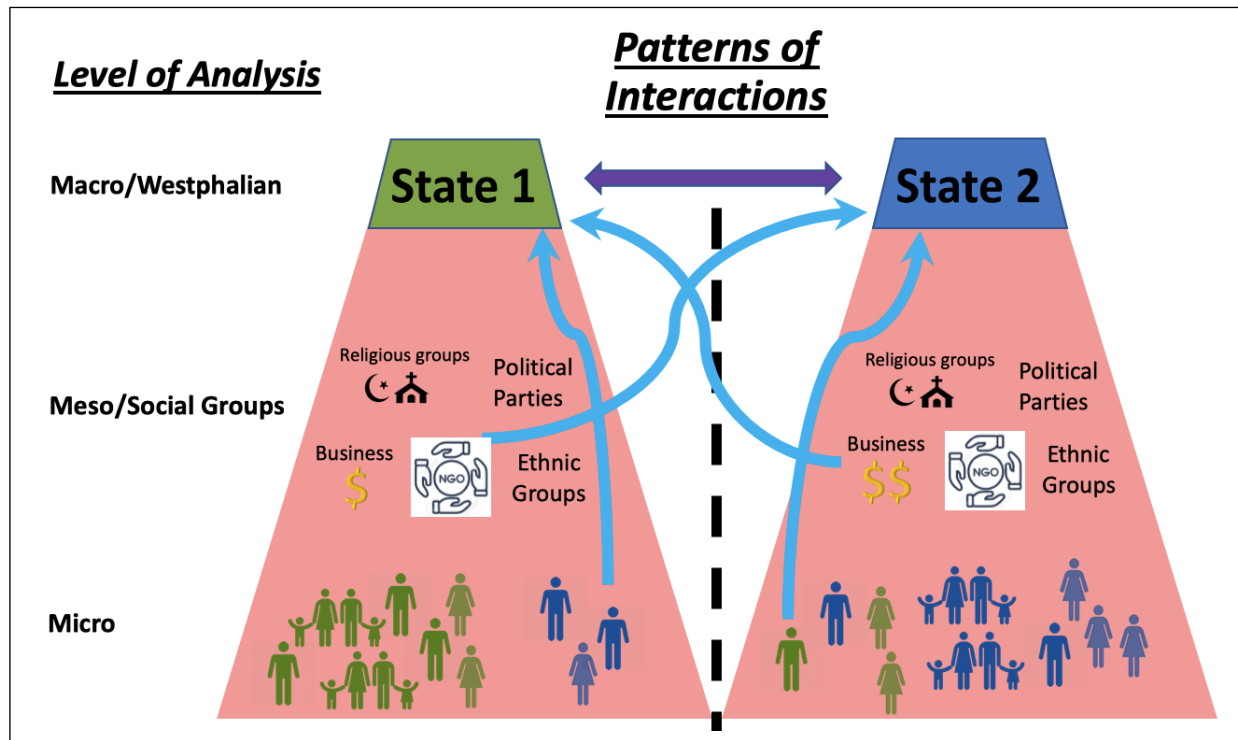
What these four points of evidence demonstrate is a change in who states must respond to. What groups can make demands that a state must answer? And how far must states go in order to answer those demands? Two parties that continue to make demands on states in this market and in any other market are agreed upon by most sociologists: citizens making claims upon their own state, and states making demands of each other. These are in line with the two theory camps elaborated above. Whether democratic or autocratic, a government cannot completely cut itself off from the needs of its people. It may not always respond in desired ways, but it has to respond to demands and communicate with citizens at least to a minimal degree (see Truex 2016; Miller 2015; Gerschewski 2013). In turn, the state orders/rules the citizen's lives, demanding they follow its laws in exchange for protection. States making demands of each other and negotiating around them, even around something as simple as borders, is also hardly a contentious claim. In a way, it is the basis of International Relations.

However, I contend that there are now four other lines of claimants on states that do not match up with previous theories:

- 1) groups/societies (NGOs, corporations) can make demands of states where they are not domiciled;
- 2) citizens of one state can make demands of another state directly;
- 3) a *state* can make demands of certain groups or organizations in another state, over which said other state should be sovereign; and
- 4) a state can make demands of citizens of another state, even if said citizens never leave their own state's territory.

To elaborate these four lines of claims, I refer back to diagram (Figure 6b) I introduced in my literature review. Different parts of the diagram that correspond to the four different lines of claims will be detailed in stripped-down versions of the more complicated diagram. I will go over each one of them briefly, referring back to the evidence I have elaborated above. Keep in mind, of course, that claims made along these lines are by no means absolute. States may respond to or ignore them, deem them legitimate or illegitimate. But with two states, for-profit agencies, and NGOs with wide publicity all involved, a single state's word is not always final. Taken together, these points demonstrate the issue of porous, shared sovereignty.

Figure 6c: Alternate Theory of States, Claims on States

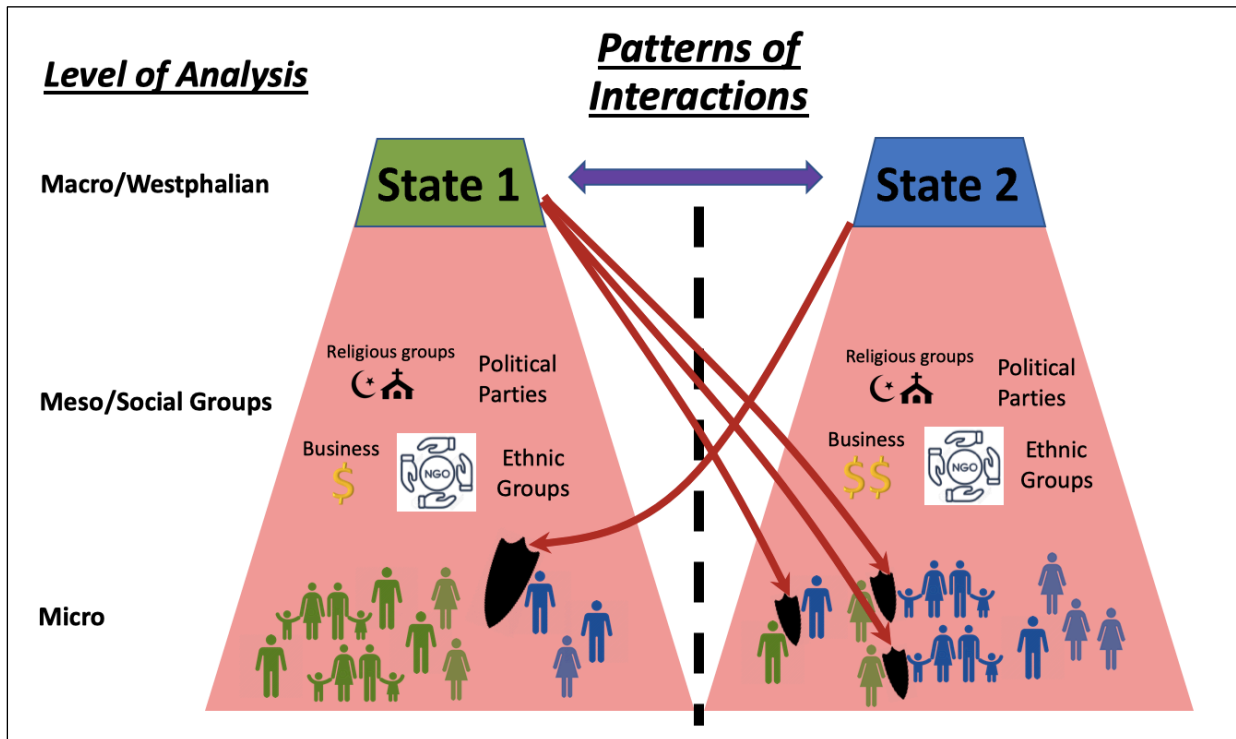


1 + 2: Groups/organizations and citizens of one state demand that a different state take action (see Figure 6c). External groups or people making demands on a state became obvious in the unresolved cases of jurisdiction, where NGOs in Indonesia or the Philippines could call on the states of Hong Kong or Taiwan to prosecute a certain case. From the classical standpoint, Erwiana had no claims on Hong Kong – she could not vote, she was no longer in Hong Kong’s jurisdiction (having been sent back to Indonesia), and she had no real ties to citizens in Hong Kong. There was certainly no obligation for the Hong Kong police to go all the way to Indonesia to hear her testimony (Lo and Ngo 2014). And yet they did, and even ruled against one of their own citizens. Similarly, an NGO I interviewed domiciled in Indonesia founded its work on suing placement agencies in various host countries for rights violations on behalf of Indonesian workers (ID-NGO 2). Such claims would have no basis unless, in some way, the responsibilities of host states were extended to the citizens of home states. In other words, home states are no longer the only states responsible for their citizens, and host states are required to extend their legitimate violence over those not their responsibility (arguably by their need to project a good image, as elaborated above). Even in the mundane act of raising the wages of maids, the state is extending its legitimate violence to cover those that only have an indirect impact on it.

Meso-level demands also become obvious in the dependency on the maid trade system I encountered. For-profit agencies can also demand that the state not governing them accept certain terms. For example, host state agencies in Hong Kong and Taiwan demand extra language training is added to the sending state’s required curriculum for maids. The Indonesian state has acquiesced to this demand, but the Philippine state (which prefers advancing Filipina maids as English speakers) has not. As alluded to in Chapter 1, the discrepancy of state responses to these demands underscores the different bargaining power that different sending

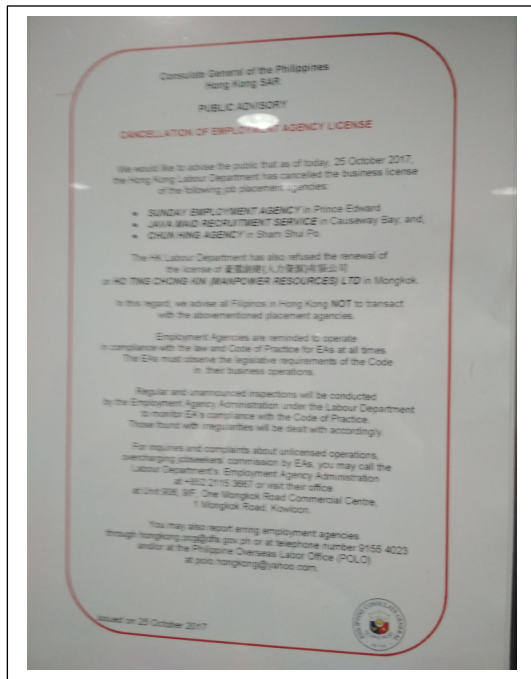
states bring to the table. The Philippines already had a market foothold; but to break into the market, Indonesia had to acquiesce.

Figure 6d: Alternate Theory of States, Claims from States



3 + 4: One state can make demands of groups/organizations and citizens under the jurisdiction of another state (see Figure 6d). The dynamic of states making demands primarily takes the form of negotiations with the host state, and thus are more limited. For example, if a host state wishes to bring in Indonesian or Filipino workers, agencies and employers in that host state must agree to abide by certain terms laid out by the home state in the bilateral agreement (minimum wages, etc.). More directly, in Hong Kong and Taiwan, any private agencies that wish to place Indonesian and/or Filipina domestic workers must first pass an inspection by that nation's government. If they pass, they are given a license. However, if at some later date the agency fails to meet the requirements set forth by the sending country, that agency will have its license revoked by the local consulate. The agency's license with the host state is not affected, so technically the agency can still place maids; but it cannot place maids of the nationality in question until it changes its standards to match those of the sending state (HK-Fieldnotes 2018; TW-Fieldnotes 2017). The license can also be revoked if the agency has enough complaints brought against it (TW-Gov 4; HK-Fieldnotes 2018; see Photo 6a). I consider such licensing to be a direct intrusion into a host government's monopoly of control over its territory. Even if it is to protect the sending state's citizens, it directly impacts the host society businesses and how the host government must enforce the laws and regulations pertaining to them.

Photo 6a



A sending state is also able to make demands of individual citizens, in the case of the maid trade. Because the employers of maids are individual citizens, the Philippines and Indonesia can set out certain requirements for them. For example, the Philippine consulate in Hong Kong requires that employers provide a certain level of accommodation for a Filipina maid, and not have a record of abusing maids in the past. If employers are spot-checked (often with the help of the Hong Kong government) and fail to meet these requirements, or a maid comes to the consulate with proof of abuse, the consulate will blacklist them (HK-Gov 1). Under Hong Kong law, the employer is still allowed to get a domestic worker; but the Philippine Consulate will not approve any contract sent to them with that employer. Since other nationalities of MDWs are available, this is less constricting than a blacklist by the host government. But the consulate's blacklist is independent of the

host state, and remains a legal restriction on host state citizens even when they have no obligation to the sending state.

Conclusion

The findings above attest to the credence of the overarching theory – that in a transnational market like Asia's "maid trade", the states involved no longer have a complete monopoly of legitimate physical or symbolic violence. Instead, each state's symbolic power and rights/responsibilities is challenged, necessitating each state to either take on more responsibility than they would normally (for citizens or groups not technically theirs), or surrender power that they normally take for granted. This might manifest in a home state acquiescing to the host state's ruling over a particular case, but resisting it in others (*unresolved jurisdiction*). Or in the constant dodging of responsibility as financial abuse (*overcharging*) crosses borders and flaunts multiple laws. Or in the deferral to one another necessitated by their *dependence on the system*. Or in the states' needs to balance *the right image* of strength and submissiveness simultaneously. But in whatever circumstances, governments involved in the maid trade become inextricably intertwined, and must act more like an oligopoly rather than independent monopolies.

Yet the way the legitimate violence oligopoly must be resolved is on an indivisibly micro level – the individual lives of Indonesian maids. The states must continuously reevaluate and re-determine their power and roles in each case, on the granular level. Each case of contention, in turn, feeds back into the relationship the states can maintain with one another. Although governments will often try to return to the status quo, large cases like that of Erwiana require some adapting. My research shows that such adapting has not led to states defining their own borders and power more starkly, but has conversely led to the governments sharing power in an (albeit unequal) oligopoly of legitimate force and symbolic violence.

The evidence also suggests that while state power is demonopolized in this case, it is also more insidious. In the cases observed so far, the uncertainty that results from the challenge to

state monopoly does not empower grassroots activism or rights work; instead, it cripples the maids in many cases, such as in the case of Sri mentioned at the very beginning. In this transnational market, the macro inter-state and granular level of state power are no longer separate. Perhaps they never fully were, but here the two sides of state power feed into one another constantly. The macro political relationship of two states can be destabilized by the outworkings of power on individual citizens, causing states to slightly alter their roles. Furthermore, individual citizens have to absorb and contend with the dynamics of multiple states simultaneously, accepting a perpetual state of liminality and uncertainty. Even a citizen making a claim on her own state is no longer as simple as it once was. For if said citizen is a migrant, in another state's jurisdiction, the citizen has to make her claim across borders. In essence, she will be asking her state to enforce its legitimate violence in a territory that is not its own. Most often, the host state must somehow agree to said enforcement before the home state can do anything. States connected by the maid trade agree to sit in a precarious *oligarchy* over legitimate power, where they constantly negotiate and do not always agree.

As suggested in my Introduction, none of these patterns of state behavior are exclusive to the maid trade. In fact, a cursory glance reveals similar dynamics in other forms of migrant labor, like seasonal agriculture or cross-border contractual work. With labor shortages growing in the US and many other developed countries, particularly in the low-skilled or low-paying sectors, migrant labor is growing into a necessary crutch for those states (Campbell 2019; Strack et. al. 2014). Moreover, former President Trump's diatribes against Honduras and Guatemala over not doing enough to curb emigration and refugees fleeing to the US could be considered yet another extension of this sovereignty tension of (Semple 2019). In short, the US wants the Central American countries to take full sovereignty of their citizens back, rather than deal with a tenuous/incomplete sovereignty over refugees and migrants itself. He sees the management and control of migrants as the sole responsibility of the sending state, which in the case of refugees is highly problematic (Willis and Seiz 2019). And Trump has further driven this point home by effectively dismantling the asylum system and beginning to send refugees back to "their" countries, out of US hands where their home governments must deal with them (Narea 2019). As time goes on, we can expect more and more state to be drawn into the mix of migration and migrant labor, with many international organizations like the UN now grappling with how to manage it (McAuliffe and Khadria 2019).

I contend here that if scholars wish to understand how states balance the myriad demands, claims, and hopes that come from modern-day migrant labor and increased interconnectivity, we must move past the rigid theories we have grown used to – in particular, the concept of the state as a completely bounded entity with a full monopoly of legitimate violence. We must also move past the divide between the inward-facing and outward-facing aspects of the state, as with migrant labor they are no longer so clear-cut. Instead, my research in the maid trade suggests that scholars must recognize a more fluid reality of sovereignty, one that tends more toward oligopoly and constant negotiation of power.

CHAPTER 7

Sanctuary of Equals: Where Migrant Domestic Workers Seek Solace and Empowerment

With all the large-scale mechanisms of abuse I have described thus far – economic systems, racism, and political instability – it is easy to lose sight of the choices the individual women have. Yet no research about oppression and abuse can be complete without looking at the so-called “victims” as agents in their own right, doing their best to cope, adapt, and even defy their situations. After all, advocacy and outreach for domestic workers has been ongoing for decades. As abuses continue to surface, many NGOs, scholars and activists continually encourage the migrant maids to come forward, to tell their stories and report abuses. They have worked hard to make the avenues for complaints and recourse as simple as possible, and do their best to walk with the women through their cases (HK-Fieldnotes 2018). Several domestic workers have been able to pursue and win their cases, showing that maids can indeed stand up for themselves and win justice despite the systemic disadvantages (see Lau 2017).

However, at the end of the day, only a small proportion of maids seek help through official channels, even when the law would be on their side. When I accompanied maids on their days off, they almost always complained about problems at work or with agencies. Some of the problems confessed were explicitly abusive or illegal (such as overcharging or passport confiscation). And yet, despite my encouragements, the women rarely shared these problems outside friend circles. The response I heard most often was, “don’t want to make trouble.” Rather than try to change their circumstances, MDWs limited themselves to venting their stress and exasperation to a trusted community. These women planned to wait out their contract, and hope for better luck with the next employer. When some problems finally became unbearable, few felt confident enough to navigate the legal system without significant help from their friends or NGOs. Yet even an NGO’s support did not guarantee that maids would follow through with the case. Even if they had a good chance of winning, the maids I met and heard about often chose to drop the case and simply move on from the injustice dealt them.

Most traditional academic literature, whether on domestic workers or victimization generally, would consider such cases “failure.” A failure to report, a failure to get justice, a failure to change the systemic problem, a failure of empowerment (see below). They are failures because migrant maids always have a choice to act, so the general wisdom goes (Agustin 2003; Ladegaard 2016). That is not to say scholars or activists directly blame domestic workers for such “failures,” even if they are disappointed. After all, most are aware of how badly the odds are stacked against MDWs systemically and personally (Amnesty International 2013). However, the mantra of seeing domestic workers as “agents” can be difficult to support with so few cases of classic empowerment.

Consequently, scholars often prefer to focus on the successful cases of empowerment, like court cases or public protests (see Constable 2009, Yeoh et. al. 2017). In the opinion of many scholars and activists, the only way to empowerment in the oppressive systems I have described is for maids to go public, to make statements and fight the system outright (Hayashi 2010). Yet such cases continue to make up a tiny minority of all the exploitation occurring on the ground, as I hope previous chapters have already convinced readers. By focusing only on the large success stories, the subliminal message scholars send is that any other choices are not true agency or empowerment.

I argue that such a blanket claim is disingenuous. It is easy for scholars to claim maids always have a choice when they themselves sit in a position of safety and privilege (Ladegaard

2016:106-107). There is no question that MDWs' reluctance to make use of the few official channels provided to them has been a source of exasperation for everyone from government officials to activists. However, I argue in this chapter that this exasperation stems not entirely from low MDW empowerment, but too narrow an understanding of empowerment. I regard each maid as a thinking person, taking into account all she knows and all the (presumed) risks when she does or does not take action. But if she does not come to the same conclusion I would, should I automatically dismiss her actions as unempowered? Or, is there another dynamic at play, with these women striving for a kind of empowerment that most scholars overlook?

In my 15 months of fieldwork, I gradually learned how the structures of power, cultural prejudice/stereotypes, and (dis)trust intertwined with a struggle to *own* one's empowerment. The many identities maids have to balance abroad (foreigner, woman, paid worker, stay-at-home caregiver, absentee mother/wife of a family an ocean away, and so on) can be confusing and overwhelming. That balance is also *isolating*, because no one else can truly understand what the maids have been through – not their employers, not their agencies, not the police, and certainly not the government officials who make laws.

There is only one exception to this isolation: being among fellow MDWs. In fact, among each other is the only place migrant maids are not at the bottom of Hong Kong or Taiwan's social hierarchy. That shared community fosters implicit trust in each other. And that trust (and the reciprocal suspicion of those not explicitly in their group/community) is what drives much of their actions as they negotiate their place and power.

I have spent the past four chapters of this dissertation detailing exactly why maids would be reluctant to come forward to authorities. Yet I do not believe that to be the whole story, either. To be sure, there are reasons *against* pursuing cases; but in my fieldwork, I also found there to be reasons *for* only speaking to other maids. Systemic abuse and disparaging dominant narratives necessitate creativity and even compromise as MDWs seek recognition, independence, and empowerment. What traditional scholarship might dismiss as silence or failure of empowerment, I came to understand as *group self-reliance*. Two facets of MDW life are the primary drivers of that pursuit: 1) a deep-seated *distrust* for authority/power in all its forms, on the one hand, and 2) a search for an *empowerment all their own* on the other. Rather than regarding these women's silence as complete victimization to systemic abuse, I propose that we regard it as a pursuit of empowerment that is not dependent on the goodwill of others.

Literature Review: Carving Out a New Path of Resistance

In this chapter, I undertake a rather ambitious task of bringing four different literatures into conversation with one another. Obviously, MDW literature has much to say about empowerment and giving abused women a voice. However, I believe that development literature, exit and voice literature, and “weapons of the weak” scholarship all provide fresh lenses through which to view my research. At the same time, I also believe that my case study can contribute back to these additional literatures, as well – such as adding a new category to the exit and voice literature. While complicated, analyzing my data from so many theoretical perspectives opened my eyes to my own biases of how “empowerment” was supposed to look like. I refused to force my data to fit easy, pre-constructed theoretical models when it – and particularly, the MDWs I spoke to – had more to say. Bridging four related literatures is my attempt to make theoretical sense of what my data was telling me.

Migrant Maids Shouting Loud

Looking at migrant domestic workers as individuals exercising agency continues to be a preoccupation of certain scholars (see Fernandez 2014; Yeoh et. al. 2017; Pande 2012). However, such research has been primarily focused on outright defiance with the help of community, whether interpersonally, through official channels, or in public. The implication of much of this research is that maids must “fight” to be agents. While said defiance and “fighting” can take many forms, this view of agency and/or empowerment in the maid trade is incomplete. To demonstrate, I will detail the forms of empowerment scholars most often focus on: meeting informally with a community of MDWs, participating in public protests, and getting involved in organizations directed towards their needs.

Almost every scholar in the field has highlighted the importance of fellow nationals for migrant maids, particularly as regards empowerment. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, MDWs make themselves a visible part of the landscape on their days off to spend time with each other. Indeed, maids claim both the physical and social space of these informal meetings unyieldingly, “colonizing” public spaces like Victoria Park and Taipei Main Station (Yeoh and Huang 1998:583; Constable 2007). Even when Hong Kong residents complained about having roads shut down for these women to meet, maids “demanded to be seen, and they refused to be moved” (Constable 2007:8).

Although most freedoms have been curtailed by their jobs, maids use the few freedoms they have to make a powerful statement, and to build up their own identities independent of their employers. Most workers rely on these regular group meetings as one of the only safe havens where they are more than mere servants. Such gatherings came to be like surrogate families or “sisterhoods” for domestic workers (Constable 2007:54; Yu 2009). Kaur-Gill and Dutta found that these social spaces for listening to one another were crucial for MDW mental health, as everywhere else maids suffered “erasure of [their] voice” (2020:1). Some Filipina workers went so far as to claim “they could not survive overseas – not even for a month – without the Sunday gathering” (Yu 2009:107). Having thousands of fellow nationals in one place suddenly means migrant maids are not “foreigners” anymore, “temporarily disrupt[ing] their position within a hierarchy of employer/employee social relations” (Ibid.:99). At the same time, these informal gatherings are usually careful to stay within the limitations host societies impose, “both contest[ing] and embrac[ing] power structures” (Constable 2007:14).

However, not all maids limit themselves to said informal gatherings. Those that face more egregious circumstances can often find NGOs willing to provide more direct help. Much of the research on NGOs empowering maids has been in Hong Kong or Singapore, where NGO regulations have remained relatively permissive (Venanzi, Chong and Batke 2018). NGOs are critical players in advocating for transparency and better safeguards (Rudnycky 2004). Government shortcomings on migrant protections have made NGOs vital. In one year, they receive thousands of cases, ranging from physical abuse to exposing endemic corruption (Yeoh and Huang 1999b). Since maids are not allowed to work or earn money while they have an ongoing court case in most countries, few (if any) would be able to bring their case to court without the material and legal support of NGOs (Constable 2007). The help maids received from NGOs inspired some to get more actively involved with them – to the point of sacrificing their salaries and security (Ibid.; Chan 2008). Though more common for Filipinas than other nationalities, these organizations serve as a local refuge where the domestic workers can care for others like them and be cared for.

At other times, scholars have focused on more public displays of resistance. Several maid protests, such as the 2014 and 2018 marches in Hong Kong, have been prominent

(Constable 2009; Lopez-Wui and Delias 2015; Shadbolt 2014; Moss 2017; Sum 2018). Protests often organize around stories “close to the personal experience of the domestic workers,” such as excessive and illegal placement fees and suspicious deaths (Lindio-McGovern 2012:54). Constable found that “domestic worker protests are born in part of their realization that their personal and individual troubles and difficulties... are not just private and personal... but are linked to larger political issues and deeper global economic inequalities” (2009:161). Some workers would make special trips for protests like the 2008 anti-WTO march, expressing “growing class consciousness and sympathy,” even for other nationalities (Constable 2009; 2007:154). Lai found that participating in protests creates “a tangible connection between [maids’] particular woes and poor people’s struggles all over the world” (2007:125). MDWs in this way create a global community of women facing similar circumstances – collective resistance becoming “collective identity” for these groups of maids (Lindio-McGovern 2012:16). Attempts to silence the protests – even police tear gas attacks – have only made the workers more resilient (Constable 2009).

These three types of resistance and empowerment are important. However, focusing only on direct resistance and defiance can blind scholars to other choices that domestic workers make. Indeed, in situations so haunted by exploitation, maids choose many ways to empower themselves. Thus, I wish to break slightly from past research on the maid trade. To understand agency and empowerment in a market that borders on modern-day slavery, I bring three divergent clusters of academic scholarship into conversation. Fortunately, many concepts in these three literatures overlap. However, each has insights that the others need to understand the nuances of empowerment in my case.

What is Empowerment?

The semantics of “empowerment” and “agency” are complex. The concepts have been around for centuries, undergoing much change in that time. Arguably, one of the first scholars to focus on the empowerment of the weak was Marx. He attacked growing inequality and rampant exploitation in the industrial revolution, and abhorred how the oppressed accepted their plight. He explained such passive acceptance of domination with “false consciousness,”⁸² wherein the poverty-stricken workers feel connected to the wealthy capitalists, and work diligently for them in the hopes of obtaining benefits (Marx 1978). However, Marx claimed that only a worldwide class conflict could end the perpetual subjugation of exploited workers/proletariat by exploiting capitalists/bourgeoisie. That class conflict needed to not merely change who was in power, but overthrow the entire capitalist system (Marx and Engels 1969). Marx and Engel’s vision of “communist society” is perhaps the most idealist conception of human emancipation and empowerment (Marx and Engels 1978:160).⁸³

Marx’s predictions have not panned out, but modern scholars still harken back to his work for a few aspects universally agreed upon. Scholars of development, for example, regard

⁸² Marx himself never used this phrase, but the concept is his.

⁸³ Cf. their contrast of work in capitalist and communist societies as regards the division of labor: “For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic” (Ibid.).

agency and empowerment as both ends in themselves and means towards improving societies (Sen 1985; 1999). Agency and empowerment are also considered multidimensional: individuals might have agency/empowerment in one sphere of life but not another (e.g., women can be empowered as mothers but excluded from politics) (Alkire 2008; Mason 2005). Empowerment is also relational: certain people or groups become empowered or disempowered in relation to those they interact with. For instance, empowering an ethnic minority necessarily entails that the majority group will no longer have the power over them they once had (though such relations are not zero-sum games) (Narayan-Parker 2005; Ibrahim and Alkire 2007). Scholars also consider empowerment highly cultural: it is pursued and takes root based on the values and norms of a particular society (Malhotra and Mather 1997; Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001). Domestic workers, for example, often strive to earn respect they could never ordinarily earn by providing for their family financially, but gain that empowerment through the traditional gendered value of caring for the family and children.

However, not all scholars or activists agree on the definitions of “agency” and “empowerment.” Sometimes they are synonyms, other times agency leads to empowerment, and other times the environment is a deciding factor. The World Bank, as one perspective, defines empowerment as “increasing freedom of choice and action to shape one’s own life” (Narayan-Parker 2005:4). Empowerment thus requires two building blocks: 1) *agency* (ability to make purposeful choices by means of the assets⁸⁴ they personally control); and 2) *opportunity structure* (context of formal and informal rules) (see Narayan 2002; Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006). In short, a person or group must have the will to do something, and be in an environment that allows them to pursue that choice – making a favorable environment a prerequisite for empowerment (Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland 2006). Some scholars find this definition too broad, suggesting that what the World Bank calls “empowerment” would be better described as development itself (Samman and Santos 2009).

Other scholars focus more narrowly on individual agency, claiming that empowerment can improve in spite of the environment. In this alternate framework, agency is defined simply as what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of their goals or values (Sen 1985:203). Empowerment is thus the expansion or growth of agency itself, which can happen independently of external opportunity/institutional change (Ibrahim and Alkire 2007). This conceptualization favors the individual over dependence on the institutional context, emphasizing the ability of individuals to enact change in their own lives through isolated or collective activity (Sen 1999).

In all these definitions, one thing remains constant: agency and/or empowerment requires *change* and *action*. Yet what if change is exactly what the victim fears? What if action carries great risk that the subject does not want to take?

Importance of Environment and Structure

In contrast to both definitions above, sociology has traditionally been less concerned with *agency* than *structure*. The modern world relies so heavily on *institutions*⁸⁵ that it is easy to emphasize how these institutions shape the individual, even their will, rather than the other way around (Greif 2006). Bourdieu’s *habitus* theory – one of the most enduring in Sociology – underscores the difficulty sociologists generally have with agency as a concept. The crux of the

⁸⁴ The World Bank defines such assets as including psychological, informational, organizational, material, social, financial, and human (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006).

⁸⁵ Defined here the same as in Chapter 1: systems of social rules, beliefs, norms, or organizations that conjointly generate regularity of behavior in societies

theory lies in how the institutional context in which every individual was brought up gets internalized and continues to live inside him or her, shaping their actions, thoughts and values whether or not he/she realizes it (Bourdieu 1990). In short, societal structure writes itself onto the lives and psyche of each person. While individuals might have the freedom to choose in the present, they cannot choose (or retroactively change) the environment in which they were brought up. Indeed, the *habitus* shapes what individuals want in the first place, and how they will pursue said desires (Ibid.). Weber's "iron cage" gives a chilling image of how sociologists generally see agency unfolding: what individuals see as choice and freedom is nothing more than a social system making these individuals *happy* to be cogs in its machine (1996; 1958b).

At the same time, sociologists must grapple with agency and individuality in their theories, because humans are not automatons. Somehow, humans are inextricably shaped by their environment, yet have ingenuity and creativity within those boundaries. Sometimes, they even have the ability to break and revolutionize their environment (Mahoney and Thelen 2009; Skocpol 1979). Even if social patterns and institutions rarely change, they can only be reproduced if they are enacted by knowing individuals in a social process. In a seeming paradox, agency and structure presuppose one another: structure indicates the tendency of social and relational patterns to reproduce themselves through people's agency (Sewell 1992). Swidler's concept of the "cultural toolkit" is a clever heuristic for linking agency to environment: people obtain different sets of "tools" from their environment that they do not just swallow passively, but selectively use in daily life to guide their behavior and explain the world around them (1986). The feminist tradition (and sometimes scholarship on race) has typically depicted any "true" agency as resistance to (male/white) domination (Chowdhry and Nair 2003; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 2005). However, there are some vital critiques of this perspective – particularly from studies of women in Islam, which posit that agency should be understood as the *capacity for action* (Mahmood 2001). Agency thus might express itself in either chosen submission or resistance (Ibid.; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2014).

Focus on context is crucial in the case of the maid trade. I have spent the last four chapters of this dissertation detailing that context, and how constricting it can be. Indeed, it fills many MDWs with a sense of powerlessness. To flippantly call every maid an "empowered agent" is to disrespect the difficulty they all face, and the courage it takes to stand up to the powers that shape their lives (see Ladegaard 2016). Sociology's discourse of structure and powerlessness puts the context of empowerment at the center – success in empowerment is not always possible, meaning attempts at change carry great risk.

However, we must also avoid the simplistic binary between "victim" and "empowered agent." Beyond empowerment itself being multidimensional, individuals and even groups may target and pursue different degrees of empowerment. The Exit and Voice literature has addressed this dynamic best.

Exit, Voice, and Silent Endurance

In the context of companies, scholars find that employees react to negative situations in four ways: Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect. All are quite close to what one would expect. Exit is the path of leaving the company and situation; Voice is speaking up in an attempt to change the situation (protesting, talking to management, etc.); Loyalty⁸⁶ is holding one's peace and enduring difficulty, expecting that someone else will come to make things better; and Neglect is

⁸⁶ The definition of this term has been debated (see Leck and Saunders 1992), but the definition I give is the one that most scholars seem to agree on.

allowing one's behavior to get lax in retaliation to difficult circumstances (Hirschman 1970; Farrell 1983). Voice is generally considered the only positive option that will consistently motivate change, the only one considered empowering to workers (Ibid.). Hirschman's framework has been applied to international and transnational migration before, with some suggesting that the categories are not mutually exclusive in that context (see Hoffmann 2010). In Hong Kong and Taiwan's maid trade, different maids exercise each of the four options.

- 1) Exit: MDWs in Taiwan and Hong Kong are able to terminate their contracts, usually giving one month's notice or one month's pay in lieu of notice. Even if termination is a gamble (getting another employer is always uncertain), maids sometimes opt for Exit if things became unbearable.
 - a. As a side note, Exit is a right that must NOT be taken for granted in the maid trade. In many other host countries, maids do not have the right to quit – in Saudi Arabia's kafala system, for instance, maids are only allowed to leave if the employer explicitly grants them permission (see Table 2a). Hong Kong and Taiwan, however, do make Exit a viable option.
- 2) Voice: though it carries great risk, maids have some (relatively limited) ways of making their complaints heard through official channels. They can speak to the employers directly about changing work requirements, speak to the placement agencies, or make their case public (like Erwiana).
- 3) Loyalty: while this might appear close to the actions of maids, I actually found it quite rare in practice. Contrary to how scholars have defined this option, if maids choose to stay on with a bad employer, maids do not expect things to get better, nor do they expect anyone else to speak up on their behalf. They also do not expect to stick around forever, since their contract is temporary.
- 4) Neglect: maids can choose to do poorly in their work, or even outright sabotage it. However, since employers in Hong Kong and Taiwan do not need to provide much of a reason to fire their domestic workers, this option carries a similar risk to the Exit option. If an employer becomes dissatisfied enough with a maid, the employer will simply terminate her, and will not help her find another employer.

However, the behavior I observed in my fieldwork often did not fit into any of these four categories. Instead, what I discovered appeared like a fifth option: *silence* or *endurance*. While it is similar to Loyalty, speaking with the women who took this fifth option convinced me it was a sort of *defensive empowerment*. Essentially, their silence takes power *away* from the forces around them, even if the maids cannot change their conditions or gain power themselves in the classic sense. By remaining silent or enduring, contrary to what all these literatures claim, the maids are *limiting* the power and disruption that *others* can have on their lives.⁸⁷

Weapons of the Weak

I base the fifth option above on foundational works in political science and psychology – specifically, Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* and Kidd and Chayet's work on victim's failure to report. In a Malaysian village, Scott found subsistence villagers preferred covert forms of resistance to outright revolution as their means of fighting domination by the wealthy (2008). Still clinging to older norms and community ideals, peasants could make no overt claims on their wealthier neighbors. They instead showed their discontent through occasional strikes, petty

⁸⁷ See also the republican idea of “unfreedom” – Chapter 2

theft, and minor disturbances.⁸⁸ Such resistance does not conform to academic definitions of resistance or empowerment, because it is simultaneously conformity and rebellion, failing to change anything substantive about their lives. But for peasants so dependent on subsistence living, that form of resistance makes the most sense.

In their study on victim psychology, Kidd and Chayet argue that emotional and cognitive responses to victimization are highly dependent on context (1984). They find nonreporting to be the result of three factors: 1) fear (of anything, but usually of the perpetrator); 2) feelings of helplessness and perceived powerlessness of police to give any meaningful help; and 3) threat of further victimization from authorities. In many circumstances, all three are justified concerns. Many victims behave rationally by declining to report, Kidd and Chayet argue. Their silence helps them avoid piling on additional costs to their victimization, reclaiming some form of control over their lives. Reporting would hand control of their situation over to the authorities – authorities that victims may have reason to distrust.⁸⁹

Alternate Theory

The psychology of non-reporting and the “weapons of the weak” outline a form of agency and/or empowerment that manifests in the maid trade: *silent endurance*. Maids exhibit every one of Kidd and Chayet’s factors. First, they have reason to fear reprisals from the employers and agencies, who control not only their salary, but their visas and their housing. Second, the police and courts have long shown bias towards Hong Kongers and Taiwanese. Third, victimization and harassment by authorities is also common (see Constable 2002, 2007; Chan 2008). Finally, just like Scott’s peasants, maids are dependent on the system run by the wealthy to get a job, making overt resistance equivalent to painting a target on one’s back (2008). Thus, indirect resistance cloaked in conformity might be their weapons of choice (see also Fernandez 2014). And yet, faced with all these circumstances, academics continue to treat non-reporting and refusal to pursue cases in court to be *failure*. In other words, if MDWs cannot pursue these limited avenues decided upon by activists and academics, they are not empowered.

I wish to argue here that this fifth option – *silent endurance* – is *not* a failure of agency or empowerment on the part of migrant maids. On the contrary, it is a rational choice to reclaim what little power they can – a choice these women make once they take all their circumstances and all the knowledge they have into account. When maids realize change is impossible for them personally, that does not undercut all possibility of agency or empowerment. Instead, some women strive to regain control of their lives by neither flouting nor affirming power over them. This is an easy form of empowerment to overlook, unfortunately, as Western societies are still prone to see inaction as cowardice or indifference (Ladegaard 2016).

The weight of this choice grows more prominent when we study Indonesians, but it is apparent for many Filipina maids, as well. In this chapter, I will show that keeping problems within friend groups only – within the sanctuary of equals – is MDWs’ way of *taking back* limited control of their lives from those more powerful than them. That inward determination may be one of the only things these women have to call their own. To give that up – to submit to a system built by distant authorities, to put their lives in the hands of NGOs and strangers – might actually be the powerlessness they fear most. Sometimes, the weapon of choice for the weak is choosing *self-reliance* and *isolation* from the wielders of authority.

⁸⁸ These choices are a mix between Neglect and the defensive empowerment I describe in the maid trade

⁸⁹ Look no further than people of color facing police brutality in the US: Swaine and McCarthy 2016; Brooks 2020.

To best describe how I understand *silent endurance* and *defensive empowerment*, I use the image of a woman (maid) shackled with multiple chains. These chains are all the different authorities that can meddle with her life: agencies, employers, government, family, even NGOs. Depending on context, religion and culture might also be considered chains. These chains are always tugging at her back and forth, trying to knock her over and drag her around. If she tries to tug at them, they inevitably tug back even harder, and she has no way of unlocking them. The traditional concept of empowerment can be conceptualized as breaking the chains. While those chains wouldn't necessarily be destroyed (government and family, for example, will never disappear), they wouldn't be attached to the woman anymore. The chains could no longer yank her to the ground or control her, and she can then walk around freely. To do that, however, takes extraordinary effort and some luck. In fact, we could consider it just as difficult as breaking real iron chains.

However, the "empowerment" that I observed and wish to describe here is not breaking the chains, but instead *holding them still*. When she does this, the chains cannot pull her around anymore. She just sits firm on the ground. The chains can tug and pull, and they are still attached to her (she will always have an agency and employer, she will always be under the law), but she won't let any of them move her. To do this, she chooses to sacrifice some freedoms. She cannot walk around freely, as she would if she broke her chains. She may not be sitting exactly where she would like to sit. However, she also prevents the chains from dragging her along the floor, the way they would if she agitates them.

A Clarification

One clarification must be made before I proceed: the definition of empowerment I am advocating does not make every action one of empowerment or agency. Restrictions on choice and oppression remained realities for many women, as previous chapters have proven. Agencies and employers crippled the resolve of many MDWs I met using intimidation or threats. Uncertainty of future job offers and additional fees made maids' position precarious, instilling a fear of challenging the status quo. Many of the women lamented that they did not have the courage or requisite knowledge to resist when they wanted to. Other times, circumstances outside their control dictated that these women could not pursue their chosen course of action. Perhaps the most poignant example I heard came from an agency that wished to sue an employer over beating their Indonesian maid:

Speaker 1: We have a case... The employer bring the worker-- the worker have a wound.

The man, the male employer, also admit this is the beat by the wife... Then we call police. So, finally, the worker didn't want to sue the employer.

Speaker 2: Yeah, because they always think they're [the courts] taking too much time.

They don't have money. They don't have time. They prefer to go back to Indonesia. Really we support that you're supposed to go because it's already criminal. But she say, "I don't have money. I don't want to waste time here. I needed work. I cannot work because I don't have visa."

Speaker 1: ...But normally whenever it come to a criminal case it takes a few months... it's not very easy to prove or to find guilty... The government will not take care of them, but... When there's a court case they can extend the visa [for only two weeks at

a time, paying out of pocket for each extension⁹⁰], but the worker is the one responsible for everything. For the food, accommodation, this and that.

(HK 2015-Agency 7)

In this case, a combination of Hong Kong laws and the pressure to provide for the maid's family back home meant the employer got away with abuse. This maid had to choose supporting her family over pursuing justice. In an ideal world, that is a choice she should not have had to make. But in reality, her freedom to choose was limited, and she had to abandon the case. An instance like this would *not* be defensive empowerment, by my definition – it is unrealized classical empowerment, a failed attempt to break the chains.

However, there is not always such a clear divide between “oppression” and “agency/empowerment.” While shedding all forms of oppression may be desirable, it is not always possible, and I argue it is not a prerequisite for empowerment. Indeed, some women I met felt that they were taking back control of their lives by not speaking up, by choosing to handle these problems in their own way with the support of the maid community. However unjust and constraining their circumstances, people can find ways to reclaim their humanity and a modicum of power. My fieldwork showed me many ways that MDWs found creative ways to take back control over their own lives, even within the constraints placed on them. Simplistic definitions of agency and empowerment can obscure the choices of people in dire circumstances. To avoid these oversights, I contend that scholars must allow the “victims” of abuse or oppression (like MDWs) to define their own empowerment.

Results

To corroborate my hypothesis of defensive empowerment/silent endurance, I will present five strands of evidence from all parts of the maids' experience. In the first place, I wish to elaborate on *why* maids might distrust authorities in host countries. To uncover their reasoning, I delve into their experiences back home, and demonstrate how those experiences carry over into their lives as foreign workers. Second, I will go over how the distrust maids learned while in their home countries is reinforced in the host countries, whether intentionally or not. Unfortunately, what many agencies or employers in the host country see as professionalism and efficiency may come across as coldness or disrespect to MDWs, who often prefer a more personal and caring approach. Combined with some very real discrimination, such misunderstandings all but guarantee that maids will never trust agencies or other authorities. Third, I will briefly elaborate an attitude of victim-blaming that I uncovered in locals.

After these points are established, I will explore how the maids themselves respond. My fourth strand of evidence will describe what I call “non-compliance” – when domestic workers actively choose to not pursue their cases or seek help despite encouragement from authorities or NGOs. In this section, I will also elaborate how the different standings of non-maid actors affect how maids perceive them and their intentions. And finally, my fifth strand of evidence fleshes out the patterns of group reliance among maids. I show how there really is no one else who can

⁹⁰ As described in previous chapters, each visa extension costs HK\$230 (US\$30) (HK Immigration Department 2019). To put this in perspective, Erwiana's case lasted eleven months (April 2014-February 2015, not including the time when police went to Indonesia to investigate), meaning she would have had to pay for 18 visa extensions to stay for its duration – a total of HK\$5060, well over a month's salary. Including the lost salary from nine months of not working, this comes out to costing an MDW approximately HK\$53,460 (US\$6898) overall. In my fieldwork, I found Taiwan to be more lenient in this regard.

be a peer to these maids, and thus they rely on each other as the only possible confidants. Only when they are among each other are the maids truly *independent* of all the authority they have come to distrust. They are still constrained by it, but it does not actively interfere in their lives. That independence, I argue, is the key to understanding *defensive empowerment*.

A Different Perspective: From Back Home

One of the most fundamental characteristics of MDWs anywhere in the world is their migrant status: they have not lived in the host country before and are outsiders to its way of life when they first arrive. That seems obvious when said out loud, but in my ethnography and interviews I found many non-maid actors rarely acknowledged how much it changed maids' perspectives (and their options) while abroad. Having grown up in an entirely different society, foreign workers bring their own experiences and assumptions about how the world works, and those experiences cannot be overturned in one day or even six months. In particular, having negative experiences with authority back in their home country – a relatively common occurrence – colored how these domestic workers understood authority in Taiwan and Hong Kong, often to the point of not seeking help when they needed it. This aspect of maid experience pertains to the facet of *distrust*: their reluctance to come forward stems not from guilt or ignorance or exaggerating the problems, but from life-long negative experiences garnered back in their home villages that they would be foolish to forget.

To begin with, Indonesians have the unfortunate honor of having grown up in what is considered one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Whether it be business or government, 80% to 90% of Indonesians claim that corruption is widespread in their country, a much higher rate even than their neighbors (Gallup 2012). Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Indonesia as one of the most corrupt countries in the world for many years, going from dead last (41st out of 41 countries in 1995) to tied for 85th out of 180 countries in 2019 – having climbed ranks primarily because poorer, war-ridden countries are now included in the rankings (2019). The international NGO blamed “vested interests and politically connected networks, poorly paid civil servants, low regulatory quality, and weak judicial independence. In addition, local officials are given wide discretionary power and resources without proper accountability and enforcement mechanisms” (Martini 2012). Even international businesses complain about officials “exploit[ing] ambiguous legislation to extort informal payments and bribes,” and they have lawyers to defend them (GAN Integrity 2017a).

My own data found maids' distrust to be particularly prominent with police and courts. Many Indonesian interviewees (maids and NGOs alike) confirmed that in Indonesia, one has to pay to get the police to come, and bribe judges to get any favorable hearing; and both were still considered unreliable anyway. One maid explained to me that “because maybe police... they don't want- They don't care. Maybe we are poor. We are poor. We don't have anything. Yeah... that's why. They don't care the others” (HK 2015-Maid 2)

The Philippines arguably fares even worse on that score, ranking 36th out of 41 countries in 1995 and tied 113th in 2019 in terms of corruption (Transparency International 1995; 2019). International businesses called out “extortion,” “favoritism,” and “time-consuming and unfair dispute resolution” (GAN Integrity 2017b). Indeed, a report by DC-based think tank Global Financial Integrity found that the Philippines saw approximately \$410.5 billion in illicit financial flows between 1960 and 2011 to (Kar and LeBlanc 2014). The annual average swelled to approximately \$9 billion per year between 2004 and 2013, putting the Philippines at 19th place

out of 149 developing countries for most illicit finance (Kar and Spanjers 2015).⁹¹ The Philippines has also struggled with police violence and organized crime (gangs) for decades, and to this day the government has been unable to halt it (Jensen and Hapal 2018; Harding 2007).

I only came to appreciate how expectations of corruption like this carried over to host countries when I went to a labour tribunal case in Hong Kong. A long-time rights advocate from Indonesia explained to me:

One of the major problems for Mary [then in Hong Kong Labour Tribunal to settle a case] and many Indonesian maids coming to court is that Indonesia is so corrupt that the maids have a very firm concept engrained in their minds about legal proceedings: “The rich will win and they will lose,” no matter whether they are actually in the right. Speaking the truth against the rich is never rewarded, and that is just their instinct. This means, unfortunately, that when maids like Mary are put under pressure, when they speak or respond they just beat around the bush and “can never say their point.” Shows of authority (like in this court) tend to terrify them. (HK 2015-Fieldnotes)

One maid echoed: “I am not believe Indonesian government. Because some people said that Indonesian government not good. Sometimes take [sic] a lot of money from Indonesian maids... Sometimes we don’t trust [*ngak percaya*] Indonesian government in Hong Kong because they say they want to help us but never did... it’s all nothing but talk [*cuman ngomong doang*]” (HK 2015-Maid 7). Another added, “I remembered when I came back from Malaysia, the government even took some of my money,” and that experience led her to believe that she should always expect that kind of corruption – even from Hong Kong officials (HK 2015-Maid 4). Even government officials and professors in Indonesia insisted that the police and courts in Indonesia were corrupt and unreliable, and wanted nothing to do with them if they could help it.

I encountered this corruption personally in Indonesia when my phone was stolen. Though it was a long shot, given how many cell phones are stolen per day, I chose to file a report with the police anyway because I wanted to see (a version of) what the maids had to live through at home. I found the process grueling. I was in a better position than most: I knew the theft happened in an elevator right under the watch of CCTV; and my phone model was made for a particular US carrier, which made it unmistakable and unusable in Indonesia.

However, I had to spend more than an hour in the first police station arguing over why I did not have the original box that the cell phone came with (I had bought the phone two years ago and could produce the receipt), asking me to fill out several copies of the same paperwork, insisting that they could do nothing to help until I filed a paper report, making excuses for themselves about “being under outdated Dutch laws, we could be fined if we disobey, it’s *pusing* [a headache],” only to finally be told because I was a foreigner I would have to file a report at the central office after the weekend. When I managed to get to that central office (which was miles from where I lived), I had to spend another three hours waiting in line all while the police at the reception desks were watching ball games and laughing with each other. I only rarely saw the men handling any paperwork, even as other people were crying in line, clearly distraught and waiting for them. I only got through before the end of the day because I refused to sit down and kept coming up to ask about my number.

⁹¹ Granted, this is not as bad as Indonesia’s 9th place in this same ranking, with its annual illicit flows averaging \$18.1 billion. However, as a proportion of GDP, these illicit flows are 2.7% for the Philippines, as compared to 1.7% in Indonesia

After filling out seven copies of the same report, they told me that they still could not do anything until I was contacted by the local police chief in the district where I lived. I finally received a call from said chief – nearly two weeks later. And when I spoke to him, it was as if I had never filed the report at all: he had no knowledge of all the details I had given repeatedly in the reports and verbally to the other officers (ID-Fieldnotes 2017). In something so mundane and simple as a lost cell phone, the official police system was so disconnected and ineffectual that I had no hope of retrieving what had been stolen. If that is how Indonesian police handle all cases of theft and crime, is it really any wonder that my Indonesian friends warned me throughout the process, “We never go to the police”?⁹²

Another place where maids have negative experiences with authority is in their agencies, before or upon their arrival in Hong Kong. Recall from Chapter 3 that each maid has two agencies: one in the home state (a training agency), and one in the host state (a placement agency). In contrast to the Philippines, all Indonesian maids are required to undergo a three-month training curriculum before obtaining a job in Hong Kong, during which time they live at the training agencies in Indonesia.

There, mistreatment is not universal, but not unheard of either. A domestic worker that had been in Hong Kong for 20 years recalled how her agency repeatedly canceled her job appointments with Hong Kong employers for six months and lied to her about it, saying employers were cancelling of their own accord. While she stayed at the center, she had to do much of their grunt work and paperwork for them for free: “only in truth I was not paid. So I was doing all that work without any wages” (HK 2015-Maid 12). The only reason she escaped that situation was because she found her personal file and figured out what the agency was doing.

Another maid related how before she left for Hong Kong, “I was not even allowed to see my contract, the first time” (HK 2015-Maid 13). Indeed, the agency covered the contract and made her sign the paper without being able to read it. This is the same contract which will be legally binding upon her arrival in the host society; without seeing it, she has no way of knowing what the job expectations are, or even if she’s signed away some of her freedoms. But if she wanted that job, she had no choice: sign blind, or forfeit her chance of income.⁹³

Extreme overcharging was almost universal. I have already gone over Hong Kong’s one-time 10% limit on placement fees many times. So a maid’s maximum legal fee could only be HK\$400-450 (US\$51.57-\$58), depending on the year.⁹⁴ Yet in my interviews and in a Mission for Migrant Worker-sponsored survey of 1,100 maids in Hong Kong, almost 77% and 86%⁹⁵ claimed to have been charged over HK\$10,000 (US\$1289, or more than 2 months’ salary) for a placement fee, many paying over HK\$21,000 altogether (including interest). Taiwan had a

⁹² As one of my advisors noted, I refused to pay a bribe to the police here. Things might have gone differently had I chosen to fork over a few hundred thousand rupiah (the equivalent of US\$10). While I have no proof that a bribe would have changed anything, it is merely evidence to the same point. My experience is consistent with the expectations of maids, that the police are unreliable and ineffective unless you offer them money.

⁹³ The language barrier can also be a problem, since it is the host country’s language that will prevail as opposed to the mother tongue that the maid reads. One Filipina maid in Taiwan signed her contract in English, since she couldn’t read the Chinese, only to learn that “This contract, it’s not the English translation that will prevail... It’s the Chinese. I said in my mind, ‘What’s this contract for? It should be torn out and--’... Useless. Because English translation is a bit different from Chinese” (PH-Maid 5).

⁹⁴ The minimum wage of Hong Kong domestic workers is increased periodically, and thus the maximum fee correspondingly increases.

⁹⁵ There was a persistent problem of non-response or mis-entered answers on this question, unfortunately, so it is entirely possible that the true number is higher.

similar pattern: maids would be sending at least half of their salaries to Indonesia for an entire year to pay off the agency loan. The fees from the Philippines were more variable, but could be just as high (see Chapter 4 for more details). In my ethnography, I was sometimes able to see the receipts and the thinly-veiled threatening WhatsApp or SMS messages from Indonesia (including the mantra, “Do you want to come back home?” if a maid tried to dispute extra fees).

Furthermore, even after paying exorbitantly for months of training meant to prepare them for work in Taiwan or Hong Kong, over 71% of my respondents claimed that the training they received was worthless. The language training was inadequate, the skills taught were often not what employers needed, and they essentially had to learn everything on their own. That lack of preparation could be devastating. Once in the host society, the MDWs had essentially no lifeline, because their host placement agency either wouldn’t respond or might try to charge additional illegal fees. The neglect of domestic workers by said agencies was worse in Hong Kong than Taiwan overall, I found. In Taiwan, the maids did pay a monthly fee to the host agency, and most of the time could expect some translation services for that. Furthermore, many Taiwan agencies had native Indonesian translators, eliminating the language barrier (TW-Fieldnotes 2017). My interview code of institutional distrust reflects these differences, showing up 319 times in Hong Kong interviews and only 145 times in Taiwan (6.65 and 3.625 times per transcript, respectively). It also showed up slightly more for Indonesians, averaging 4.67 times per transcript as opposed to the Filipina’s 3.91 times per transcript.

This distrust of authority naturally extended to the governments in host societies, not just the agencies. After all, Indonesia may have emerged from a decades-long dictatorship in 1998, but its transition to democracy has been ridden with problems – particularly in regards to the military (Jaffrey 2020; McWilliams 2018). Whatever happened on the national level – even the 2014 national election, which many MDWs considered a turning point for their country – they themselves could only expect more of the same. One better-educated maid gave perhaps the most pessimistic view of the infamous Erwiana case: “Erwiana’s case was handled by the government because it had been exposed by the media [*ketahuan media*]. If the media did not find out, yeah... probably it would be like any other cases. Nowadays, many Indonesian maids encounter many problems but nobody is willing to lend a hand to help, right?” (HK 2015-Maid 14). Even when maids believed that by rights the governments should help them, they didn’t think they actually would. Additionally, few maids said they would ever consider going to the Consulate for help, because “I think they always... not- not helpful. And then second one, they always take the money from us” (HK 2015-Maid 2). A maid in Taiwan added that “People rarely know about the Indonesian office KDEI. It’s only been in recent years – when I came years ago they weren’t around much. The embassy only knew the agencies” (TW-Maid 29).

Both Indonesian and Filipina maids shared the understanding that agencies and government were in cahoots throughout my interviews. Apart from always being directed to call their agencies first, maids felt that the rules were stacked against them from the outset. An Indonesian maid explained: “Most of the regulations from the Indonesian Consulate (KJRI) and the agencies here in Hong Kong are supposedly design for better cooperation. But it seems like the Indonesian Consulate is more pro-agencies. I wish that the Indonesian government would care more about [*lebih memperhatikan*] the domestic helpers. It should be the Consulate and not the Hong Kong people who care more about us” (HK 2015-Maid 14). An NGO confirmed from the many maid cases he received that “the proof is in their [salary] deductions, always overcharged and not many cases are solved there [in Taiwan]” (ID-NGO 4). And of course, money was often a primary concern in this collusion, as though the government made rules

explicitly to give agencies more money. Such rules often forced maids to jump through unneeded hoops, like repeating training: “It’s either you can just stay for a week and then pay the rest to be able to get a certificate... so I just paid to be able to get a certificate that I finished the training because the government required. Sad to say” (PH-Maid 12).

The attitude of Filipinos was only slightly more optimistic. Many Filipinos had grown tired of corruption and crime in their country – one of the main reasons Rodrigo Duterte won the 2016 election (Timberman 2019; PH-Fieldnotes 2018). Corruption went hand-in-hand with the business of government, and so of course they expected to encounter it in host societies. Some were resentful that their government “did not tell what is the right of the helper in Hong Kong” (HK-Maid (F) 1). Another felt frustrated that “Mostly the government don’t care our situation. They are look like cannot heard our voice... Because the cry of the migrants worker is long, long time ago already. Then until now they are crying, but it’s still [the government] cannot hear” (TW-Maid (F) 1). However, overall I saw fewer of these negative comments about the government from Filipinas, and a greater proclivity to demand more of their government. Once again, however, the perceptions of those in Taiwan were slightly better, thanks largely to the 1955 hotline the Taiwanese government set up. All but a handful of the maids I met knew about that hotline and felt comfortable calling it, even if they did not believe they would always help.

Friendship over Professional(?) Efficiency

Distrust of authority does not imply distrust of everything, naturally. I found some agencies and government could overcome the defensive distrust the maids had built over time, but it required a drastic change of perspective. My data indicated that the help and assistance MDWs desired was not always what host agencies, NGOs, or governments were willing to provide, nor did it always coincide with what host citizens believed the maids needed. The primary pattern I saw emerge in both interviews and ethnography was the preference of *friendship over efficiency*. The former was defined as support (emotional or practical) from those considered their peers – other domestic workers or grassroots NGOs that the domestic worker had grown close to. The latter, however, was strict adherence to rules and maintaining emotional distance to enhance the speed of business and confer nominal respect. And when maids did not receive friendship or support from their agencies, the distrust remained, and drove them to seek such friendship and support from their peers instead.

In approximately half of my 139 interviews with domestic workers, when asked where they would go for help if they encountered extreme problems, maids preferred to seek advice and help from friends.⁹⁶ The reasons they gave were multiple. There was, of course, the element of distrust elaborated above. But there was also *proactive* trust: the workers trusted the *intentions* of their friends. As other scholars have noted, the community of other domestic workers becomes something of a family away from home, and is of such importance to them that some maids claim they could not survive without it (Yu 2009). Indonesian MDWs often called each other “*kakak*” or “*jiejie*” (“sister” in Indonesian and Chinese), and eventually gave me the title (Filipinas used “*ate*” or “sister,” but less frequently). The term of affection says it all: their community allowed them to feel safe, as if they belonged somewhere. For example, one middle-

⁹⁶ This was an open-ended question in the interviews: I simply asked, “If you were in trouble, where would you go for help?” to see what their first response was. Even in cases where they chose other institutions first (like police, consulates, host government, agencies, etc.), they still didn’t believe these others would really help them (with the exception of the police sometimes). Qualitatively speaking, friends and peers were by far the favorite for serious help, even when other options were considered.

aged domestic worker declared that if she was in trouble, “Then I go to [this friend group of Indonesian maids], or Christian Action [where many of her friends had gone before]. Not agent, agency is last time [resort] maybe... Thanks so much to God this time in Hong Kong, I have family like mother, like you [author], like *jiejie*, very honest, so all my family in Hong Kong” (HK 2015-Maid 15). One even contrasted the interactions in the Indonesian-run center where her friend group met with her agency:

“...the agency helped me and gave me services but they will not bring me any water to drink... For example in here, I feel we have a very good communication, I feel we have a good relationship here. But with an agency, it is not possible to be this close.” (HK 2015-Maid 17)

Whether it was for serious help or building a support network, the domestic workers explicitly chose routes outside their agency or what the system provided. The emotional and mental burden of being alone could only be resolved by talking through their experiences and feelings with one another. The Indonesian workers actually developed a particular word for it: “sharing.” It was how these women processed the trauma of separation from families, any abuse in the home, the stress of a new home and new life under the constant vigil of their employers, and culture shock. As one shared, “What I like here [in Hong Kong] the most is I get free on my holiday. It means that I have a holiday, so, I can do whatever I want. I want to study. I have uh... time to pray with friends. I have uh... sharing with them too when I have a problem. So I have... I feel free” (HK 2015-Maid 3). It was among other domestic workers that they felt they could have good relationships, good communication, honesty, a *family* – and that was what they felt they could rely on to solve large problems that came up.

It was not only emotional support that domestic workers and friends could provide each other, however – there was plenty of practical support offered that bolstered their sense of community and their trust in one another. Small gestures of practical help – from helping with group cooking to looking for places to find legal counsel – was one of the most common themes to emerge from my fieldwork, coded a total of 500 independent times. They ranged from tiny gestures like making a friend’s favorite food for a picnic, waiting to take the subway together, to the more dramatic interventions like finding help for a maid trapped in a horrible situation. One Filipina woman trapped in a physically abusive home told her story:

“One day after seven months, I go day off and then I met an old girl-- I eat in the coffee shop. I look problematic. I eat and then *ate* Julie [another Filipino maid] approached me, the old lady approached me, "Sister, do you have problem?", "*Ate*, I have problem with my boss", "Why you didn't tell to your broker, to your agency?" "I already told about that but they don't care me" "You have a friend who know someone?" "No", "You come to me, I will bring you to my friends who can help you". I go with her, it's the first time. I didn't know where she going to bring me, but she bring me to... the Migrante... I met [the leader]. They even see me some bite that time [from where the employers were scratching and biting her]” (TW-Maid 1).

Such gestures were mostly reserved for their days off, of course, when they could meet together, have picnics, cook in shelters or teaching centers, buy meals or gifts for each other, and the like. And that practical help was something the maids learned they could count on even at

inconvenient times – something they could not rely on from the professional agencies. In the experience of one of my interviewees, “Because it happened one time, eh, I was fired late at night, when I was in Central, ten o’clock p.m. I was fired. I called the Agent and there was no answer. Then I called my friend who works with the agency, she helped, my friend helped [me find a place to stay]. Not the Agent” (HK 2015-Maid 10).

The way this maid saw it, it was her friend that chose to help her because she was a friend, because they had a relationship outside of the professional system. The domestic workers are often faced with difficult situations that fall outside what professional companies would consider normal employment issues. Getting kicked out of one’s house late at night certainly wasn’t an unprecedented situation. I encountered similar situations repeatedly.⁹⁷ Yet her agency seemed to have no system in place to solve it, perhaps because (in her mind), they didn’t care.

In fact, one of the most common criticisms that maids would voice against their agencies (especially in Hong Kong) was that the agencies were not *caring* enough. When domestic workers first arrived in Hong Kong, the most common feelings expressed were fear and being overwhelmed, as well as myriad struggles in adjusting to a new home and new life. Directly or indirectly, 60% of maids I interviewed expressed a desire for a more personal touch from their agencies. After all, agencies usually were the first point of contact after leaving their home and arriving in a strange land; they were often the ones to pick maids up from the airport and always processed all the host-side paperwork before handing them off to the employer. And yet, efficient processing and orderly management of logistics simply wasn’t the most important thing in their minds. As one maid declared:

“My expectation/hope? They [the agency] should help. Yeah, especially when you just arrived in Hong Kong, you need to adapt in so many ways, especially the language, also how to cook, and adapt to the surrounding, because everything was so different. Of course I hope they can help. Well... they should help, the bottom line is how to encourage [*mendorong*] me or other maids so they can pass those periods of adaptation or adjustment well. Agent can also guide and stand alongside us [*mendampingi*]; I don’t really mean stand next to us, but they can show their concern, after few months passes by, maybe they can ask, ‘Are you lacking anything?’ and so forth. We really need that care and concern during that adaptation period.” (HK 2015-Maid 12)

Another maid in Hong Kong (dealing with her own abuse case in courts at that time) echoed that “it’s very difficult... if you are not feel telling what is your problem, what is your situation, so that means you need to go in that safe which you are very comfortable. Sharing your problem, understand your problem also, that’s very important... Not only by financial. Of course, we need financial but the most important for me is comfort. Because it’s very important. So that you know how to pick up yourself, to be strong” (HK-Maid (F) 13). For that reason, this maid did not want to go to the government or agency for help. She wanted help from people who understood her, she told me – from people who were her “friends.”

A small number of agencies understood this need, and responded accordingly. One agency in Hong Kong even hired Indonesian pastors to serve as counselors (HK 2015-Agency

⁹⁷ Skeptics will insist (and agencies keep saying) that an agency is not at fault for not answering the phone at 10pm. But the fact remains that the maid was thrown out into the street at that time of night. At times like that, the agency is a maid’s only official lifeline, and they neither prevented the problem (laying down rules forbidding employers to kick maids out so late) nor provided a solution to what they knew could happen.

8). An agency translator in Taiwan described how he would spend hours on the phone with some of these women, sometimes even at midnight, just letting them “share, vent about work problems, and maybe about how they’re not so comfortable in that place” (TW-Agency 4). When domestic workers did receive what they perceived as care from the agency, the women described it as one of the most prominent and admired traits. They most appreciated being able to be in a tight relationship with the agencies, because that indicated an ability to understand what the maid was going through, and a break in their isolation. The definition of doing a good job was simple: “my agency right now, eh... she do a good job. Because like- she never say ‘ok, you pay us already so we don’t care about.’ But she sometimes call, ‘how’s your employer’ or she’s like asking like, ‘[if you are] in the trouble, you just come here. Or if your employer no good and you want to break your contract or whatever – we always help’” (HK 2015-Maid 5). They just wanted an outside voice to be there, to say that they were not forgotten. Care like this was not even about practical help – something as simple as a call, a reassurance that they are not trapped in a desperate situation (“we always help”), was enough to relieve a huge amount of the maids’ tension, I found. Simple gestures of friendship could make an immeasurable difference to maids in their day-to-day lives.

Unfortunately, such closeness and support were far from the norm in Taiwan or Hong Kong. In fact, several agencies explicitly told me that they only wanted to place the maid in the home, and wash their hands of what came next (HK-Fieldnotes 2018; TW-Fieldnotes 2018). Given the amount of paperwork they have to handle and complaints they receive from the MDWs they place, a more distant, efficient, paperwork approach is an understandable choice for a business. As one Taiwanese agency explained, “because employers and maids cannot communicate in [the same] language... the first few months will be the busiest for me, because I need to communicate, whether that is by phone or going to the site” (TW-Agency 6). A Hong Kong agency also insisted “we are not a charity” (HK 2015-Agency 1). Furthermore, participant observation and interviews showed me that competition is so intense in this business that agencies consider any extra effort an unnecessary burden that eats away precious minutes. The pervading culture of work in Hong Kong is already prone to overworking, with companies stripping all processes down to prioritize speed and efficiency above all (see Leung 2018). Taiwan is not much better off, though the fees charged to the maids seemed to motivate better service (Spencer 2018; Lubin 2019). If domestic worker agencies were not efficient or profitable enough, branches would shut down – it happened even to some of the largest agencies (HK 2015-Agency 11). In this environment, just getting the job done is enough – feelings and emotions cannot be part of the equation (Leung 2018).

But that is not how the domestic workers see it. Many times, the maids I spoke to interpreted this efficiency as coldness, and even felt disrespected: “Most of the people- eh, when they see us, they look down. We are poor, no skill, no language. So... [my fellow maids] don’t have confident... Sometimes when we came to the employer’s house, sometimes we don’t have smile” (HK 2015-Maid 2). In other words, many maids can easily become discouraged and depressed, knowing that everyone in the host society does not view them as equals. In fact, the desire for respect from agencies and employers was the second most common code to show up in my maid interviews, appearing a total of 1270 times. Being respected and seen for who they are was one of the most important ways to encourage these women, many told me again and again. I became convinced the efficiency model that so many agencies adopt is at least partly to blame for the discouragement maids feel (aside from overt discrimination: see Chapter 4). One maid in Taiwan explained how isolated that attitude made her feel: “You don’t have the rights for

yourself because [the agencies] are just thinking about the communication between the boss [employer] and the agencies, but the feelings of worker, they don't actually thinking about how we feel. They don't really care. They don't care. [laughs] That's the reality of being here in Taiwan” (TW-Maid (F) 4). Efficiency and professionalism implies *distance* to the domestic workers, a lack of attachment and indifference to their circumstances. To some respondents in my fieldwork, this distance implied a hierarchy and necessitated fear and silence – exactly what the maids did not want.

Problem of Victim-Blaming

Domestic workers’ attitude towards authority is unfortunately bolstered by yet another tendency in host states: victim-blaming. The fact that domestic workers suffer abuse and exploitation is no longer headline news. But just how victimized they are is a topic of hot debate. While activists and the news media generally side with them, politicians, local employers and agencies try to emphasize how rare abuse cases are. Indeed, very few major cases really make it to big-time news. When I spoke to them, employers and authorities tried to interpret this as a sign of Taiwan and Hong Kong being such stellar examples of maid protection. In fact, one official told me that the rights granted to maids by Taiwan law is something “almost all of them know, because their news- in Taiwan, mobile phones are very convenient; so practically all of them know, it’s just whether they’re willing [to act] or not... then here there are a lot of organizations caring for them that know, too” (TW-Gov 1). Consequently, he didn’t see the need for promoting or teaching the maids about basic rights. Mantras like “real abuse is very rare” or “things are much better now” were repeated like a broken record in employer and agency interviews, and sadly in some government interviews too. Locals tended to dismiss extreme cases like Erwiana’s as “one-off” cases, or “bad eggs”. As detailed in previous chapters, locals were far more reluctant to discuss systemic discrimination in the maid trade.

To be sure, compared to nations like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain or the UAE (widely considered the worst places for maids), Hong Kong has a much better system of law and far fewer extreme cases (see Table 2a; Rullo and Varia 2013; HRW 2013). One Filipino official who used to work in Kuwait, for example, explained that the embassy there would get approximately 800 cases per month, ranging from rape to imprisonment, while in Taiwan and Hong Kong the range is closer to five to several dozen at most per month (see Table 2a for more detailed comparisons). In fact, conditions and enforcement became so dire in the Middle East that Indonesia outright banned sending domestic workers to 21 countries (all in the MENA region) in 2015,⁹⁸ and only lifted that ban in 2018 once new protection laws were in place (AFP 2015; Ganesha 2018). The Philippines intended to do the same in Kuwait once a maid was found hacked to death in a freezer, but was prevented when its embassy diplomats were held hostage (AP Staff 2018; discussed more in Chapter 5).

However, even in the better societies like Taiwan and Hong Kong (where conditions have arguably improved recently), there is an important distinction between the *occurrence* of exploitation, and its *reporting* (Cheung 2018). Yet many locals do not fully understand that distinction: if a maid is in trouble, she will of course try to get help, they reason. And if she does not get help, that must mean her situation is not so bad. I was shocked multiple times when local Hong Kongers, in interviews or ethnography, wondered aloud why Erwiana herself didn’t just call for help before things got so bad. It took extensive explaining from me for them to understand how trapped she was, from not having a phone to being locked in the house to her

⁹⁸ It is questionable whether this ban was effective; see Yi 2017.

agency dismissing her complaints.

News stories about maid abuse receive many supportive comments, but a fair number of those comments and Facebook comments fall along the lines of “If the helpers don't want to come here, they don't have to,” or “The worker must be lying because it's taken her so long to come forward.” One Filipina maid who tried to challenge Hong Kong's “live-in” rule – hoping to make it legal to live in her own apartment while working as a maid – confronted such bullying on social media. Locals essentially “told her to leave the city if she did not like it” (Siu and Lau 2018b). In keeping with public opinion, the High Court of Hong Kong threw out the case. The judge declared that being forced to live with one's boss did not constitute any rights violation, since maids are “free” to walk away from the employment if they do not like it. (How free they are, of course, is debatable, given all the evidence presented in prior chapters – including debt traps, deception, and the like). While local groups appreciated the ruling, the Filipina's lawyer regretted that the judge has reinforced the stereotype that domestic helpers are second-class citizens” (Mark Daly in Siu and Lau 2018b).

The public case of Kartika Puspitasari demonstrates victim-blaming at its finest. Starved, beaten, and denied her wages for two years, Kartika was finally brought to the Indonesian Consulate to pursue a court case against her employers in Hong Kong (Chu 2013). While the Hong Kong court jailed the employers for physical abuse, the magistrate refused to grant Kartika backpay for two years. His reason was: “if she did not get paid at all, why did she stay on for two years?” He was unaware, however, that withholding salaries until the end of the contract was common in Singapore at the time, where Kartika worked for seven years. The agency did not correct the maid's misapplication of Singapore law, and the employers took advantage of it. Rather than taking into account Kartika's experience, the Hong Kong government imposed its own logic onto the maid, insisting on common sense that in truth isn't “common” (Ladegaard 2016:107; HK 2015-NGO 2).⁹⁹ In short, if these women do muster the courage to come forward in their host countries, they are met by a thinly-veiled form of victim-blaming, which tries very little to understand the circumstances or constraints placed on the women.

Sadly, without someone to spell it out for them, locals often cannot understand the reasoning behind the migrants' choices thanks to stark disparities in privilege and background.¹⁰⁰ MDWs must approach their life in Taiwan and Hong Kong without many of the assumptions and privileges locals can take for granted. A maid and employer may live in the same house, but face very different contexts – differences so stark as to be illegible to native citizens. The disconnect only deepens the isolation felt by maids, as many locals and authorities resort to stereotypes and victim-blaming to make sense of behavior. In fact, the reluctance of MDWs to come forward to authorities has allowed narratives like “[maids] are lying or exaggerating” to burgeon (Pu 2018). Consequently, “unless the media catches wind of the story, many cases of abuse are buried under bureaucracy and ignorance” (Ibid.). For example, an Indonesian maid in Hong Kong could only express resignation when she first came to work abroad: “I had said to my agency that I wasn't being given breakfast and the agency just said I was lying [*bohong*]. They didn't help... the employer would say things to the agent, and the agent would believe them” (HK-Maid (I) 7).

As I elaborated in Chapter 5, by default the employer is in the right, and the maid is

⁹⁹ My interviewees also blamed the Indonesian Consulate, who provided Kartika's lawyer, for not presenting the background well enough. Kartika only received HK\$5000 for the entire two years, a little over a month's salary.

¹⁰⁰ See Delpit's deconstruction of “unspoken rules” in US schools, demonstrating that power and privilege is often least recognized by those who wield it (1988). In other words, those that have power often don't realize they have it, or don't realize how pervasive its effects are. Only those subjected to that power can really see it for what it is.

misunderstanding or exaggerating. I cannot overstate the importance of that cultural narrative. Host society citizens and employers still control the dominant narrative about migrant domestic workers – particularly that they are stupid and incompetent (Ladegaard 2016). This attitude emerged several times in my employer interviews, though muted. It would manifest in innuendos and offhand comments like “some people say that the Indonesians is dirty. But I think it's because of their culture; it's not because they want to be dirty” (HK 2015-Employer 6).¹⁰¹ Or sometimes “Indonesians, maybe they are not very smart”; or sometimes “Filipinos... they can think more highly of themselves, think that they themselves are really amazing, so don't listen” (TW-Employer 3; TW-Employer 5). And since I am certain my sample suffers from self-selection bias, it was shocking to still see these attitudes.

One maid described a similar story of dismissal with the Philippine Consulate:
“I experienced one of my friends in the church who was in the prison. We don't know her Hong Kong ID so we go to the consulate, but the consulate didn't believe us. Even we write the statement that this is what happened, they just said maybe this lady have owed money to us, that's why we are looking for her. We were very upset because it's really serious that somebody was in the prison and then that's the response” (HK-Maid (F) 14).

It's only human to worry about friends that go missing; and yet the Consulate staff in this case seemed to have used that concern to throw dirt on the characters of the concerned friends. The friend in trouble might never have been addressed had not an NGO gotten involved in this particular case. Yet another maid had a worse experience with her agency:

“Even I have already the complaint, [NGO worker] complained, [the agency] doesn't want me to be in shelter. The worst thing is the lady is no experience that day. They can say yes to the employer... They don't want to believe that *Ama* [grandma] can still hurt me, can bite me or what. They don't believe, so I cannot be go out. They doesn't know that I have video. I get my telephone, I show to them... *Ama* push my-

Interviewer: Pulled your shirt off.

Interviewee: -shirt. She see all my scratches there. Every day that is my life. I almost naked everyday just to change diaper, change anything to *Ama*. At the time, the lady believe me, because I cannot make a video with-- It's not easy to-

Interviewer: You can't fake that. Not easily.

Interviewee: Yes. At the time they agree to let me in shelter.” (TW-Maid (F) 1)

The suspicion cast on this maid is morbidly laughable. Without the absolute proof of video evidence – even with scratches and marks all over her body – this maid would have been dismissed by her agency and forced to keep working for a physically abusive employer. Even the word of a reputed NGO was not enough to override the agency's narrative of blaming the victim first. Cases like these are only the tip of the iceberg of how pervasive victim-blaming and suspicion of maids is in host countries.

Perhaps the starkest demonstration I encountered of this mentality was an agency that withheld a maid's passport from her. When I went to retrieve it with the maid (Tiana), the agent was verbally abusive and went out of her way to put the maid down in front of me. The head of the agency tried to kick me out despite Tiana asking me to stay. At the time, the agency struck

¹⁰¹ C.f. Bonilla-Silva 2003 on cultural racism

me as angry, probably because she could not excuse holding Tiana's passport from her with a white female scholar/activist in the room (one who could speak both Indonesian and Chinese). "She then turns to me (being sure to speak in Mandarin so that Tiana can't understand) and says that if I'm working with organizations, I need to be careful, because it is common for maids her to take little things and exaggerate them into huge problems, just because they want attention. She says I must not believe all their stories: '骗人也是他们的文化 [It's also their culture to cheat people],' turning my own argument [that there is some cultural misunderstanding] back on me and Tiana shamelessly, and citing her many years of experience... As we walk out, the lady agent repeats her warning to me: that I need to be careful about the maids I help, because many are bad, and it is in their culture to deceive and trick" (HK-Fieldnotes 2018).

Unfortunately, this particular attitude was not an isolated incident. Another Hong Kong agency with decades of experience in the field echoed her sentiments, albeit less maliciously:

"So one helper [MDW], she came to our office and she claims that her employer used boiling water and threw it at her body. Okay? And then she said she will call police and we say that, "Okay. We should call police," if that's true. Because she didn't when she came to our office the next day. And then to show us, and she said, "See this is where I got burned." Okay? Okay. So we saw-- I saw it personally, the burn... But here's the kick: it was from an iron. It was so obvious that it was from an iron mark on her arm. But she claims that she was thrown with boiling water. So what do you think of that? So maybe the employer didn't do anything. And then because of her claims, she decided to press an iron against her arm just to show that she's been burnt? I mean, otherwise, why would she make that up, right? Why wouldn't she just say that she was pressed against an iron by her employer?" (HK 2015-Agen 2).

The domestic worker was still clearly hurt, but this agency surmised that this woman had hurt herself, and that the employer was innocent, simply because the maid's story didn't quite match up. And worse, he knew how to make blaming the injured woman sound credible. What exactly happened in this case is impossible to know for certain. Fortunately, this particular agent was also smart enough to know that *employers* could do the same thing – invent abuse that never happened and create evidence to justify their lie. So he approached both sides with some skepticism. Not all agencies expressed the same knowledge in regards to their fellow countrymen (see Chapter 5 for more details on racial prejudice). All the same, if blaming the victim is the locals' first instinct when an injured maid's story seems just a little off, is it any wonder that the women often choose to bury their problems?

Non-Compliance/Passive Defiance

Knowing that abuse is happening more frequently than the statistics claim, government officials and police in Hong Kong have expressed frustration at these women for not coming forward about their problems, or not going to their agencies or consulates for help when they need it (Ladegaard 2013; Heifetz 2017). As one high-level Hong Kong official claimed, "we have been urging the [domestic worker/migrant worker] unions for [assistance] if the helpers come up. If you are really overcharged, then come to us and then we'll kickstart the investigation" (HK 2015-Gov 5). But because Hong Kong had only received 200-300 official reports of overcharging over the past year (out of 390,000 maids), the government could not take much action, she explained.

Such non-reporting and silence is frustrating not only for the government, but also for the activists. Almost all those that I interviewed – be they in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Taiwan, the Philippines, or elsewhere – were able to describe instances of what I can only call “non-compliance” – the maids not doing what the NGO workers or authorities suggested for one reason or another. In my 21 NGO interviews, there were over 60 independent mentions of it. A great many of these failures to “comply” with the NGOs wishes had to do with not reporting cases – a possible side effect of the pattern of distrust elaborated above. As one activist reflected on the Erwiana Sulistyaningsih case in Hong Kong (see Chapter 1), “Just before the case started [in 2014], we had fewer abuse cases coming in. Many of us here thought this could be a good sign, as long as everyone was actually getting their rights. What we were worried about, though, was that abuse cases were still happening, but just weren’t coming to light... and unfortunately this case proved us right” (HK 2015-NGO 2). Before Erwiana publicly sued her employer for damages (with NGO and the Hong Kong government’s help), maids were simply suffering in silence. This activist believes that the famous Erwiana case in some ways provided a precedent for maids to report their cases, since now they know it’s possible to win.

However, even after that landmark case, many maids still choose to not come forward. Such choices made little sense to the more privileged officials or local citizens, even when they tried to be understanding or well-meaning. As another NGO explained, “Some of these ladies don’t listen to us even though we tell them where to go. They may have their own opinion about how to get a solution, even insist on not going [to get help]” (HK-NGO 3). In one poignant case, one maid refused to be housed in a shelter’s hostel for free, and instead slept outside in a public park for two weeks, though the police reprimanded her for it (Ibid.).

Another frustration in this same vein was difficulties around organizing. Effective activism (as it has been envisioned so far) requires the maids standing up and making their own voices heard. However, it has not been easy for activists to gain traction in this area – and they did not believe the deleterious market system to be the only cause. Even in the Philippines, which has a much longer history of migrant activism, one activist expressed his frustration over “how [NGOs] should be more effective in organizing with migrants and families; it’s really hard to organize migrants, especially when they are back home” (PH-NGO 3). Even when activists may pour their hearts into training some migrant leaders to take up the cause, there is no guarantee they will stay on. “What’s most frustrating is if you train a lot of people, and then they go home. So it’s like our empowerment just stops there, they become [a] domestic wife” back in their home country (HK-NGO 2). Activists were mostly sympathetic to issues like this, though. They acknowledged that migrants face many social pressures, such as supporting the family and getting married. Whether in non-reporting or in difficulties organizing, interviewees indicated that Indonesians seemed to get the worst of it. They surmised the difference might be due to greater social pressures or a greater fear instilled by their cultural upbringing and training.¹⁰²

While the reasons behind “non-compliance” could only be speculation on their part, the

¹⁰² Oddly enough, few of my informants explicitly blamed Islam (and its view of women) for these problems. Religious values and expectations were always in the background, but activists, maids and even government officials blamed bad policies and cultural gender norms more than religion. Of course, academics will insist that Indonesian culture especially is informed by religion, and adherents would never blame their own religion even if it is at fault. However, Indonesian Islam is far more progressive when it comes to the role of women. Indonesian women are involved in politics and business, and the feminist and gender equality movements have gained significant traction in the country, with staunch Muslims as supporters (Arbi 2020; Blackburn 2008). Thus, while I and other scholars believe religion contributes to the submissive attitudes I observed (see Rinaldo 2013), Indonesian Islam was not named a primary culprit in my data.

activists' most common guesses were fear, ignorance or stubbornness. Other times they wondered if the maid's desperation was to blame, particularly if the employer or agency is extremely abusive or threatening the life of the maid. Many activists were frustrated that their words could not completely overcome what governments and agencies had hammered in. "Indonesians themselves, while working, don't complain or file cases. Because they feel that if they do, then [host countries] will be angry" (INT-NGO 2). Thus, the message of governments and culture generally is "Just work, don't make noise" (Ibid.). My activist informants all wished maids would fight back against oppressive systems more than they did.

I have already mentioned the refrain I heard from MDWs in interviews and ethnography, over and over again – "don't want to make trouble." To speak up, to "make trouble," was to risk deportation and repercussions, such as increased harassment, additional fees from agencies for finding another job, or withholding of her salary. To fight for her rights was nothing more than a gamble for a maid; and oftentimes, there is too much at stake. One maid put the risk very simply to me: "As my friend's experience, her problem with her employer-- She shared to the agency. Instead to help her, the agency communicate with the employer and they make bad things to the helper. I don't want that thing happen to me. All happening in my house, it's only me and the sisters here. I don't want to share in my agency because I'm frightened. Maybe they are close each other, so I will be the one down or to suffer. I prefer to, guess, shut my mouth and share here in the church... Not to be in trouble. As they said, you better, as long as you can, to be silent" (HK-Maid (F) 8). Another maid chose to take the risk, and shared with me how she regretted it: "like with the Indonesian consulate, the agent will not stand on our side [*nggak akan berpihak ke kita*]... For instance when I make a report that my employer was like this or that. In turn they will tell me: you just need to obey, you just need to obey [*harus nurut*]. Bottom line is instead of giving us the solution, they scolded us. But then when the employer was the one who report, saying we did something wrong, we are being scolded too [*dimarahi*]. So, whether when we report regarding our employer's wrong conduct, or when they report regarding our mistake, we are the one being scolded no matter what" (HK 2015-Maid 12).

The inherent risk in fighting back became most clear with two experiences in my ethnography: the reflections of a more educated maid, and the experiences of an abused one.

"Faria (a domestic worker with a Bachelor's degree) told me that she was especially confused by the [other] maids who put up with employers beating or hurting them. She just could not understand why they would not tell the agency or tell the government, because that is breaking the law and breaking the contract. She said she has been talking to a few of her friends about it, and the reason many of them choose to stay silent is because they really do need the money, to send their children to school or take care of elderly parents. Faria is single, so she knows it's hard for her to understand those pressures. But still, in cases like that the employer is at fault, and the maid should go to tell the government or the agency, as it is her right. As we talk about it, though, she does recall a fairly recent case of the employer cutting the maid's hand and the maid bringing them to court; and though the employer had indeed broken the law, the maid still lost. She wonders if that's why maids just don't trust the government to help them." (HK Fieldnotes, 2015)

So even though Faria herself is rights-oriented and is aware of how her fellow maids are being abused, she admits that fighting for your rights will not guarantee getting your rights. The

difficulty in obtaining justice increases exponentially under Hong Kong and Taiwanese law, which (as detailed above) forbids domestic workers from holding employment while they have an ongoing case. Given that such court cases can take from eight months to a year to be resolved, according to my informants, trying to fight for her rights will mean the maid's family goes without money for that entire time. Aside from pressures to provide for her family, there is no guarantee of a good outcome for the maid anyway, as Faria realized.

This risk of a poor outcome seemed to hold Tiana – the maid I introduced in the victim-blaming section above – captive. Another maid friend referred me to her because Tiana had a verbally abusive and threatening employer, and her agency had been illegally holding her passport for months. Though she couldn't talk Tiana out of taking her passport back with me present, the boss certainly maligned and shouted at Tiana for a good half hour before giving her the passport (see above). Now that Tiana did not have to fear being found by authorities without a passport and possibly called an illegal migrant, the next step was to try to find another employer and get away from the one that was constantly threatening to send her to jail. I even introduced her to a shelter and several Indonesian activists that could help her do just that.

But even with the backing of the domestic worker union and a long-established NGO in Hong Kong – the same one that helped Erwiana win her case – she couldn't find the courage to do it. She had heard from other friends that because she was in her first two years in Hong Kong, it would be nearly impossible to change employers. The agencies would fight it, the government would stall it, and other employers simply wouldn't want her, they warned. And if she did choose to hand in her notice, she would have one month to find another employer (a *good* employer), or be deported with a crippling debt. Tiana called me several times over the phone in tears, asking me to pray for her because she was so stressed and saw no way out of her situation. No matter how many times I encouraged her to quit and find another employer, she always sounded terrified of that option and the uncertainty it would bring. Though I and the NGO staff encouraged her that we would be there for her many times, we were not maids ourselves – and she trusted those who had had her same experience more than us. In the end, she chose to not fight, and instead returned to Indonesia after a few months, as soon as she had paid back her debt (HK-Fieldnotes 2018).

The stories and ethnographic data I gathered suggest most maids do not fully trust NGO workers. To be clear, maids rarely doubted NGO workers' intent or sincerity (something they *did* doubt for government and agencies, as described above). Instead, the maids I spoke to doubted the NGOs' power to do anything against what they saw as impossible forces in the host government and agencies. When choosing to plead a case, maids of course have to take everything they know into account – an NGO's word will not be gospel to them. They will balance what an agency has told them, what other maids have told them, their past experience with authority, and what they have observed in the host country. To some extent, sleeping in a park is one way a maid knows she won't be cheated by an agency, nor will she have to commit to fighting back with an NGO when she is uncertain of victory. To stay silent is perhaps the surest way to avoid repercussions, while standing up guarantees that she will become a target. There is more at stake than a maid's rights when she chooses to speak out in Hong Kong or elsewhere: her very livelihood and that of her family are put in jeopardy. In a contrary way, this *distrust* of everyone around them is the best way for Hong Kong maids to protect themselves: it means they do not have to rely on anyone that could let them down or cause risk.

Reliance on One Another

Thus far, this chapter has focused on the negative side of migrant worker empowerment – what they do not want, what they do not trust, what they wish to avoid. Such claims can only be complete, however, with a thorough exploration of the positive side: what they *choose* to do, and especially what kind of help they *wish* to receive.

I have called a domestic worker's community of fellow nationals a "sanctuary of equals" – and the views from maid gatherings in Central, Causeway Bay and Taipei Main Station on weekends certainly attest to that. Sundays are one of the few days domestic workers can be free to laugh with friends, tell jokes in their own language, and complain about the culture shock and difficulties they have with their employers. In fact, once I learned Indonesian, I discovered that was a primary topic of discussion: how to cope in their new homes and demanding jobs. A second topic was family in Indonesia, and how to manage demands from children, husbands, relatives, etc., while being homesick themselves. Sometimes the conversations around picnics would end in jokes, sometimes in tears, other times in calls to activism, other times in prayer. Filipina gatherings often followed the same patterns, just in English or Tagalog. Obviously, none of these issues had simple answers.

However, these topics had one thing in common: those who were not domestic workers could never experience these issues the same way they did. For example, I cannot pretend to understand everything these women went through, though I myself have been a migrant most of my life and spent so much time with MDWs in fieldwork. Other migrant workers do not have to live with their employers 24-7 with no space of their own; the wealthier NGO workers are able to return home and see their families if needed; and local Taiwanese and Hong Kongers can rarely comprehend culture shock to their own culture (see Schütz 1944; Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2005). These differences do not mean that others were unable to become friends, or that they never attempted to help. Activists from Indonesia and the Philippines wandered Central and Causeway Bay constantly, distributing pamphlets and advising the domestic workers about any problem they might have. Some employers and a few agencies knew how to express empathy and comforted the maids in difficult times (see above). One employer family I met even came to see their maid perform in an Indonesian Independence Day skit with her friends, and brought a huge bouquet of flowers for her (HK-Fieldnotes 2015).

However, despite all their good intentions, none of these other groups could be *peers* – they were always the employers or agencies first, while the activists were only rarely domestic workers. I noticed in my ethnography that even when others were helping them, there was always a sense of hierarchy in the interaction, with the domestic worker generally *being told* her options and strongly recommended to do one thing. These were recommendations other people could make from a place of safety, with the best of intentions but without being a part of the domestic worker's life. My data confirmed prior literature's findings. I was guilty of making those flippant recommendations myself at times when maids asked me for advice, such as with Tiana above; and I had to remind myself of my own privilege and positionality repeatedly.

As I have stressed above, in only one situation was a maid not under authority: with other maids! They have shared experiences that even as an ethnographer I can never fully share. They know without speaking that other maids have undergone the same training process, endured the pain of leaving a family behind, confronted enormous culture shock, and often been subjected to similar employer demands. And they also know other domestic workers have experienced it from the same position of powerlessness that they have.

In one shelter I worked at, one domestic worker was having particular problems with a verbally abusive employer, and came in crying nearly every week. However, talking to the NGO

staff there was never enough – she needed to vent her feelings to other domestic workers there.

“Everyone [at the shelter] sympathizes with her and tries to comfort her, but they reassure her that this kind of experience is actually normal in Hong Kong: in Hong Kong, employers always yell and scold, and many maids have to put up with getting placed with angry employers. Even the slightest thing can set them off. The maids who tell her this do not seem happy about it, and make some slightly disgusted faces to prove it; but it is to let Sri know that she is not alone, that they all understand what she is going through.” (HK-Fieldnotes 2015)

That assurance that the MDW is not alone in her sufferings is invaluable. Many women at gatherings or outings confessed that having that community was the only thing that protected them from suicide in the face of pressure and abuse (HK-Fieldnotes 2015). Indeed, contact through social media was a constant in my Taiwan fieldwork. When the maids didn't have that one day off per week, they would vent their frustrations and sadness through LINE and receive community support virtually. Those first few months when they didn't have friends to contact through their phones were always the most difficult, they all told me (TW-Fieldnotes 2017). Throughout my interviews with domestic workers, Isolation was one of the most prominent themes to emerge – stories and experiences of feeling like they had nowhere to turn in the face of uncertainty, that there was no one really on their side. That particular code also emerged organically the more I read the interviews, and ended up appearing 235 times. The importance of getting support from friends also came up 380 times. A long-time activist in Hong Kong put it most succinctly:

“More than anything, maids... need a confidant: they need someone they trust and share their feelings with to tell them that what they are experiencing is wrong, and also tell them where to go. Most maids do not understand the law, especially when they first come here – from their perspective, it's only natural to think that whatever their employer does, however odd, is normal. When it comes down to it, they need to know that there is a place they can sleep outside the employer's house if they are having trouble – that they have somewhere to go and they won't need to sleep on the street.” (HK 2015-NGO 2)

That confidant is the only thing that can combat the feelings of intense isolation in a new, not-always-welcoming host society. In my fieldwork, that confidant was almost always another maid, a peer that the domestic worker did not have to be mistrustful of. This pattern has been noted outside domestic work, as well: when testing a call-back system for farmers in India, those needing information preferred to get it from peers over experts with a statistically significant difference – which could be explained by language/jargon difficulties with experts, India's collectivist culture, or the feeling that peers would understand their particular situation better than the distant scientists (Patel et. al. 2013).

When outside the safety of that sanctuary, many MDWs still tried to find little pockets of it, such as when maids in Macau would only ask directions from other Indonesian maids (in my fieldwork). For Indonesians, finding fellow nationals was doubly important as a language sanctuary. Filipinas have at least been taught English from school (though they prefer Tagalog), giving them an extra medium of communication. But Indonesians are taught Cantonese or Chinese by non-native speakers for approximately three months before beginning work in Hong

Kong or Taiwan, and generally speak no other non-Indonesian languages.¹⁰³ This language isolation was why learning Indonesian for my ethnography was so crucial: I crossed a barrier that almost no one else would cross, and it opened more doors in my research than I can count. I could not offer the same culture or work environment, but I could at least speak to them in their native tongue. Meeting them individually and in groups, I noticed that being around each other was the most refreshing and most relaxing activity for them. There were many things they needed to cry about, and found in each other a safe place to do that. Their community was a safe space, where they did not need to be dependent on an authority's goodwill.

Discussion

To bring this chapter back to my theory of defensive empowerment, I will here interpret my five points of evidence above in light of the chains analogy I described before. In every point, MDWs gave me plenty of reasons to not risk breaking the chains, but showed the tenacity to hold them steady.

First of all, I found distrust to be one of the most powerful determinants of maids' actions, in line with previous chapters in this dissertation. When they have no experience in Taiwan or Hong Kong, newly arrived MDWs naturally carry experiences from Indonesia and the Philippines with them (see Schütz 1944). Authorities like government officials, police and agencies have hurt them in the past, and it would be naïve to assume that the same officials will be benevolent in a new society when they have had little experience of benevolent authority. Thus, maids logically view authorities like agencies and government as a sleeping threat – powerful forces that can hurt them, should the maids give them reason. From the perspective of women who have seen so much injustice from authority, seeking help from said authority merely makes them targets. Only maids that had been working for many years came to trust local police and government departments; and even then, the distrust never disappeared, in my fieldwork. In short, the specter of distrust leads MDWs to view agencies and governments as chains shackled to them, to use my analogy. The maids cannot get rid of these authorities, and if disturbed the authorities may harm them.

To make matters worse, conflicting expectations for the agency-maid relationship led to perceptions of hierarchical distancing. Domestic workers came to see efficiency-driven agencies as not only chains they cannot escape, but *unfeeling* chains. Chains that did not care what happened to any individual maid, or her personal situation. No maid I met ever perceived that distancing as “objectivity” – it always felt more malicious to them, in interviews or ethnography. Combined with the distrust elaborated in the previous section, as well as the racism elaborated in Chapter 4, that perception is not unjustified. If it suits the agency or brings more profit, it has the power to tug and drag the maid around against her will. Without the assurance that the agency is a friend, making trouble can spell danger. The agencies that did act friendly made a world of difference; but the fact remains that few did. In situations where authorities appear uncaring, invisibility is a smart survival strategy. Just hold the chains steady, don't make waves, and they won't look at the maid.

Patterns of victim-blaming reinforced the belief that trying to break the chains was a useless endeavor. Thanks to attitudes like these, coming forward like the classical theory demands will not empower the maids. In many cases, the metaphorical chains will refuse to break. Their pleas simply give ammunition to those suspicious of them to make their conditions

¹⁰³ To provide a comparison, the US State Department estimates that 2,200 class hours are needed to reach fluency in Mandarin or Cantonese. This breaks down to approximately two years of intense language study.

worse. However, given the reasoning and experiences these maids presented to me in the face of victim blaming, I argue that “not coming forward” is in no way the same as “doing nothing.” It is a choice to hold on to what control they have, and avoid the risk of the metaphorical chains dragging them about in retaliation for speaking up (rattling the chains). In most cases, as long as their lives are not in danger, silent endurance will keep judging eyes (and accompanying retaliation) away.

Maids’ experiences and suspicion of authority led many maids to defy what we consider classical empowerment. NGOs and even certain officials, for example, want the women to break their chains. Many NGOs that I spoke to are fixated on the classical form of empowerment, as all my examples above showed, and unfortunately put the burden of action on the maid herself. However, breaking those chains (agencies, government, employers) implies rattling them – and rattling will get the attention of these authorities that the maids so distrust. And once those authorities set their sights on this maid trying to break free, they can make her life miserable. They can take complete control of a maid’s life, getting her fired and refusing to find her another employer, dismiss her case, and even sending her back home when she wants to keep working. If the chains pull back like that, the maids know they don’t have much bargaining power. So what is the surest way to reclaim control over their lives? From the perspective of the maids I met, it was to not draw attention to themselves, and wait for the worst to pass. By doing so, they may not gain power or control over their lives, but they prevent any more power from being taken from them. Contrary to what NGOs would like, the chains are held still rather than broken.

Thus we come to maids being each other’s sanctuary of equals. When faced with such an unequal system, choosing help from one another instead of authority was a way – perhaps the only way – to subvert the hold that the chains had. It was the one sanctuary where they were their own masters, not subject to or dependent on anyone else. And herein lies a crucial point: to achieve empowerment as academics understand it in the classical sense, migrant domestic workers have to throw themselves upon the mercy of other authorities. They leave themselves dependent on forces and actors they have little influence over. Perhaps academics and activists like to see classical empowerment as the women standing up for themselves and being strong, but that is not the reality most MDWs perceive. Should maids pursue fully breaking the chains, they essentially surrender their fate to the police, the courts, their agency, and the NGOs that have committed to helping them. The maids themselves cannot control the outcome. The local courts or labor tribunals are authorities with no connections or sympathy with the maids themselves, they explained, and the maids often viewed their rulings as arbitrary (not surprising, given the negative cases I described above). Perhaps 1000 maids step up to rattle their chains in an attempt to break them; but only one of those succeeds. After all, Erwiana only received justice because the media got wind of her case, maids pointed out. Certainly no NGO claimed a 100% success rate on the cases they pursued, either. Success depended on an authority’s goodwill, be it of an NGO, an agency, or the government. Goodwill which every maid I spoke to firmly believed was arbitrary.

To become fully empowered thus requires powerlessness in the first stage, with no guarantee that the classic empowerment of “breaking the chains” can be achieved. Only when I looked back over all my interviews and observation notes did it fully hit me how *terrifying* that surrender could be. Especially when combined with the deeply-embedded trends of distrust, perception of coldness towards them in host countries, and victim-blaming. Suddenly, the idea of just holding the chains still seemed appealing even to me. When the maids do that, when they “don’t make trouble,” then at least no one else can take over control of their life (or, it’s far less

likely). It is a defensive empowerment: not claiming power for oneself, but *preventing others* from claiming power over oneself.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to demonstrate how and why domestic workers choose their own methods of resistance and help in difficult circumstances. Previous literature, while extensive, suffers from a fixation on only what Western dissidence and civil disobedience defines as “success” – the maids that do speak up, that protest until they achieve what they want, that fight for their rights, that win lawsuits. I showed in this chapter, however, that this is an unnecessarily narrow definition of “empowerment.” Silence and the strength of character to endure these problems, in the right circumstances, can be just as important an aspect of empowerment. Furthermore, the choice to rely only on each other, and to share each other’s troubles and pains, can be seen as *reclaiming* power and control. It is a strength that belongs solely to the maids, and one which does not require them to rely on a (sadly inconsistent) system of law imposed by authority figures they often do not trust.

To clarify once again, this definition of empowerment does not connote that MDWs’ every action is one of empowerment. I encountered many instances of maids being suppressed by fear; many lamented that they did not have the courage or resources to stand up when they wanted to. However bleak that picture is, scholars must not assume that only the stark opposite of such oppression can possibly be empowerment. In academia or in the political world, empowerment and exploitation should not be defined as simplistic binaries. While scholars like Constable, Yeoh and Huang have allowed for some nuance in their definition of empowerment and defiance, I argue they have not gone far enough. Instead, I believe that we as scholars must allow the domestic workers to define their own empowerment.

First and foremost, MDWs share a vast sum of experiences that others in host societies almost never understand – from conditions of poverty in their villages, to exploitation by training agencies, to living through experiences of culture shock. My fieldwork showed that having these shared experiences without even needing to speak of them fosters a “sanctuary of equals” – a community that they know (or believe) they can trust implicitly. In a world where they are always at the bottom, having this sanctuary gives them the strength to defy dependence and condescension by being among each other rather than among the more powerful. Even in times of crisis, this may not change. When the problems are less severe or more common (such as verbal abuse in Hong Kong), the domestic workers would often choose not to report it to authorities, but share it with each other. This preference persisted even with NGOs and government officials encouraging the domestic workers to come forward. That is a choice I believe cannot be reduced to fear or cowardice. In a life where distrust is the only proven method of survival, maids choosing to confide only in each other is to refuse to put themselves at the mercy of those they do not trust.

My data also shows that the domestic workers almost uniformly prefer the informal over the formal, in stark contrast to what Hong Kong and Taiwan citizens expect. They prefer “sharing” over “reporting,” and they prefer friendship and caring from their agencies rather than efficient processing. In accordance with past research on Asian business systems, they have low institutionalized trust: they trust the people over the system. Explicitly and implicitly, maids told me they wanted to know what the intentions of the other people are – something they can only be sure of with people that are like them. To earn their friendship and alleviate the stress in their lives does not take much effort. Even before I could speak Indonesian, just saying hello and

giving hugs was enough for the Indonesian maids to welcome me. A few calls from agencies could make a world of difference in how MDWs adjusted to their new life and work. But few agencies chose to make that effort, according to the maids I spoke to. Instead, many of the authorities reciprocated the maids' suspicion with victim-blaming and discrimination.

Observing these trends in aggregate led me to picture my metaphor of a woman in chains. These "chains" are inevitable – arguably, every person carries them to some extent. We are all subject to the authority of governments, police, employers, law, cultural expectations, poverty, and so on. The MDWs I studied are bound by these chains to a far greater extent than the average person, of course, and they were also far more aware of them. MDWs knew that these various chains had the power to ruin their lives. If the classical empowerment is breaking the chains, maids knew that an attempt to do so involved great risk, because the chains would not break immediately. Acts of defiance would get the attention of the authorities, and maids knew to expect retaliation most of the time. Furthermore, successfully breaking free of the chains was largely a matter of luck, from their perspective. Thus, the women I met developed a different way of keeping these chains at bay: remaining silent and holding back all complaints (metaphorically, holding the chains still). Choosing silence often meant defying what NGOs and officials wanted out of classical empowerment – maids wouldn't report, they would sleep in parks, they would complain to friends and put on a smile to others. In doing so, however, maids prevent the chains from claiming any more power over them than they already have. Agencies, government, victim-blaming social media, and the like all leave the maid alone when she doesn't speak up. She hasn't claimed any more power for herself; but she has prevented these other authorities from stealing any more power from her. The chains are far less likely to yank her down and drag her wherever they wish.

The findings of this research have extensive implications for not just the academic understanding of victim empowerment, but also for NGO outreach, education, and even policy enforcement. No matter that Hong Kong boasts of having the same system of rights and laws for all domestic workers, police and political actors need to understand that domestic workers from places like Indonesia will not react to formal systems the same way, no matter how supposedly transparent they are. Laws in Hong Kong are written assuming that all domestic workers will think and act like native (educated and relatively privileged) Hong Kongers, and that is simply an unrealistic demand. Policy makers need to learn to understand what these various choices of empowerment – from silence to camping in Victoria Park to calls for friendliness – are a form of protest demonstrating on the part of the domestic workers. And perhaps then they can change their methods of enforcement and expectations of domestic workers accordingly.

CONCLUSION

In the summer of 2019, I returned to Indonesia to act as a bridesmaid in the wedding of one of my maid interviewees. Merpati reached out to me that Spring with the news that she was getting married, asking (half-teasingly) that I come see the ceremony in her village. We had talked about that possibility, with the caveat that my Ph.D. program would probably be consuming much of my time for the next two years as I tried to get my research published. As it turned out, however, Merpati's wedding was scheduled right between several conferences I was presenting at in Asia. Overjoyed, Merpati arranged for her family to pick me up from the Jakarta airport and bring me to her remote village in Central Java.

I soon found out that I was the only white person to visit that village in living memory. The roads were unpaved, there was very little running water, and trash lined the dirt gutters everywhere I went. The scorching sun and humid weather was oppressive, and I was grateful that this particular village did not expect all women to wear hijabs (some, like Merpati, would wear them by choice, but many other women I met did not). The houses I slept in were open-air and unfinished, and the villagers would laugh in wonder when I told them about the cold weather in the US. They could not imagine building houses to be airtight – the heat would be unbearable without the wind here! And in the 100-degree Fahrenheit heat that persisted year-round there, I could not but agree. It was particularly frustrating to have to sleep in full-length pajamas on the floor, but that was the only way to keep the mosquitos from biting. The cold and murky water I bathed with, using a bucket, was the only relief from the heat.

Staying with Merpati's family for just a few days reminded me so starkly just how impoverished so many of the Indonesian maids going abroad are. Some of Merpati's relatives were rather embarrassed by the condition of their home, so I made sure to give every one of them a smile every day and thank them for everything. I was touched by how accepting of me Merpati's family was, even as I barged in a few days before the wedding. There was hardly a dull moment, between preparing food for the wedding, exchanging life stories with some of the elderly family members, going to visit Merpati's soon-to-be in-laws, touring the fields and farms surrounding the village, and watching the men slaughter the goat and chickens fresh for the wedding feast. The pace was slow and relaxed, to be sure, but filled with jokes and laughter. The women especially seemed to love teaching me some of the local Javanese traditions as I helped them prepare some of the delicacies, like *rendang* (spicy beef) or *kupat* (rice dumpling wrapped in bamboo leaves).

I spent as much time as I could with Merpati, either for practical help or just offering emotional support. Merpati had only been introduced to her fiancé a few weeks ago via a video phone conversation. Her family had initiated the contact, heavily implying that he would be a good match; and without ever meeting in person, the two agreed to get married. While I knew these kinds of marriages were common in Indonesian villages, I also wanted to be sure that Merpati was happy with this. Fortunately, she seemed pretty sure of her decision the more I spoke to her, and glad that this man was willing to take a relationship with her so seriously. The man himself also seemed friendly, if shy, and was always attentive to Merpati whenever I saw them together.

That didn't mean Merpati didn't have some concerns about their future, though. Her husband-to-be was a farmer on his family's land, not far from Merpati's family. He wanted Merpati to remain in Indonesia with him, and not seek work elsewhere. He agreed that she should finish out her current contract in Taiwan, but after those remaining two years return to the

village. Merpati herself was not opposed to the idea, as she did want children and never intended to stay in Taiwan. At the same time, however, she was worried about money – especially when it came to giving her future children an education and better opportunities. She expressed some frustration at her own limited education (she had only finished elementary school), and how much that restricted her opportunities in Indonesia. Even I couldn't help being concerned, knowing that their lives would likely be hand-to-mouth without Merpati's income from Taiwan. She and I also knew how many Indonesian mothers ended up needing to work abroad again to put their children through school.

Just a few days after Merpati's wedding, I went to Hong Kong for another conference. I arrived just as the famous anti-government protests began to pick up in the summer of 2019. The pro-Chinese Communist Party faction of the Hong Kong government was attempting to pass a "national security law" that vastly increased the Mainland Chinese government's authority over the special administrative region. In particular, it would give the CCP the authority to extradite anyone they believed to be a threat to "national security," which in China is defined broadly to include sovereignty, development, and even internal politics (Hernández 2020). In the eyes of many Hong Kongers, particularly students, the passage of this law would mean the end of the One Country, Two Systems arrangement. Hong Kong would become no different from the rest of China. Those who go to protests for any political cause could be taken and tried in secret in China, where penalties can be severe (Feng 2020). For the tens of thousands of student protestors, seeing the government trying to pass this law without due process was both terrifying and enraging. It would mean an end to all political freedoms. Hong Kongers could not say or write anything the CCP did not approve of, could not protest without fearing for their safety, might be taken from their families, and would be given no say in the decisions that had the most impact on their lives (Creery 2019; Hernández 2019). Sadly, I was unable to see many of the maids and NGO workers I knew during that visit, as many were required to stay indoors at home for their safety as the protests got violent. The brutality of police that summer was yet another point of contention, with Hong Kong police behaving more like military.

In the time I was in Hong Kong that summer, however, I could taste the irony. In all the protests for freedom and protection from political interference, the idea of giving MDWs that same freedom and dignity Hong Kongers so cherished was lost. What these millions of Hong Kongers feared the Chinese Communist Party would do with the new extradition law, was already the reality maids faced from their employers, their agencies, and even the governments to a lesser extent. The threat of being fired, deported, treated unfairly by the law, or even imprisoned in the home has been an ever-present specter shaping the choices of MDWs since they began coming to Hong Kong in the 70s. An MDW most often had to obey her employer, not talk back, and work hard to fit her expected role, or she could face various and sundry repercussions. The 2019 protests made clear how little Hong Kong natives would be willing to put up with similar conditions.

Even a year after I finished my official fieldwork, I was reminded yet again that the potential of exploitation and ruin faced MDWs no matter where they turned. At home in Indonesia or the Philippines, there was poverty, familial expectations, limited opportunities, and corruption. Then in the host societies, they faced political silencing, the loss of most of their freedom, debt, and thankless work. An unanswerable conundrum, to say the least.

However, the crux of that conundrum lay in its plurality. The exploitation of MDWs never came from solely one angle. There were always many dynamics at play simultaneously, meshing with and substantively heightening each other's effects. For example, racialization of

maids is made more powerful by their gendered work, implying society-wide that their place is “naturally” that of the feminine other serving the superior Han Chinese of the host societies (see Chapters 5 and 3). When officials dodge their responsibilities in the political realm, they also leave economic opacity largely unchecked (see Chapters 4 and 6). The multiplicative combination of all these forces – political, economic, and social – is what makes the exploitative power of the maid trade so enduring, I have argued.

The overall goal of this dissertation has been to unveil the extreme intersectionality in Asia’s maid trade market. My findings show that in myriad ways, the intersectionality – and how gender, politics, race, etc. all interact with each other constantly – is what allows abuse and exploitation to pass unchecked. Solutions that work for Filipinas, for example, do not always work for Indonesians, who have a very different migration system and expectations placed upon them. For example, Filipinas have the option of getting hired without an agency; thanks to Indonesian policies and/or corruption, Indonesians do not have that option. Additionally, policies that work in Hong Kong may not take root in Taiwan. The intersections of these two migrant groups and host societies has led to differential treatment and exploitation, with some forms holding across the board (e.g., debt traps), while others remain quite localized and specific (e.g., racialized stereotypes that vary by host and migrant). The general pattern that intersectionality led to was the Indonesians being portrayed as a subservient underclass, one that employers and agencies could take more advantage of than the Filipinas, and which governments did little to repair.

The maid trade is a highly *relational* field, and never can interactions be separated from their context. None of the market actors I named in this dissertation – governments, private agencies, employers, NGOs, or maids – are uniform or one-note groups. Each actor behaves and reacts differently depending on the other party in the interaction. Not even the individuals maintain the same stance across all the different counterparts. For example, I found in my fieldwork that the same agency will treat a Filipina maid very differently from how it treats an Indonesian maid. Agencies often assume that Filipinas are more likely to know their rights, be “pickier” about jobs, and have external resources (like the Catholic Church and NGOs) to call on in case of violations, so agencies were often more careful regarding what they demanded of Filipinas. On the other hand, Indonesians were stereotyped as less educated and having fewer resources to call on, so the same agency would alter its behavior to be more demanding and threatening. If the agency believed it could get away with more demands and fees, they would often be more aggressive. The same can be said for employers. They might continually pressure an Indonesian maid to accept underpayment, for instance, but rarely broach the topic with Filipinas because employers know that Filipinas usually know better.

Given how differentiated behavior can be in the maid trade, I began this dissertation by describing each of the major market actors as Bourdieusian fields in themselves. Each one of the five main groups (domestic workers themselves; maid placement agencies; government officials; maid employers; activists) is highly differentiated, with individuals in each field jockeying for position within their own field as well as managing relationships across fields. They might use people in other fields to bolster their position in their own field (e.g., maids serving as status and wealth symbols for some employers), or might call on a third field to mediate relations with another field (e.g., maids calling on NGOs to help with agencies or employers, or employers relying on agencies to manage all state requirements for hiring a maid). These intense interrelations are the reason I have spent almost every chapter in this dissertation detailing various perspectives, showing how the groups and individuals fit together in a relational web.

Each of the given group-fields, however, also cut across the theoretical Bourdieusian fields. Whether maid, government official, or activist, every person I met dealt with the economic field, the race/racialization field, the political field, even the activism/empowerment field – all of them major subdisciplines in Sociology. The intersectionality of the maid trade necessitated that I detail different interpretations and applications of each subdiscipline’s major theories, or the concrete findings of this dissertation would seem nonsensical.

In the first place, intersectionality and a history of poor infrastructure lays the foundation for a very opaque market. But opacity in the maid trade does not function as mere “grease on the wheels” for a market so vast and differentiated. Instead, opacity takes on a life of its own, thanks to the myriad differences between cultures, nations, and individuals. There are so many relationships and legal jargon and mismatched expectations imperative to making the maid trade function, that few ordinary people can keep up with it all. Every step of an MDW’s migration to Hong Kong or Taiwan – as well as every actor along the way – relies on market opacity to succeed. Sociologists and economists would not be surprised by the presence of opacity and non-transparency in a market that borders on modern-day slavery. But rarely have scholars studied a market where opacity was such a central part of a market. In fact, it is one of the crucial cogs that makes the machine turn, and without which the market would be unrecognizably different.

In the field of racialization and race relations, intersectionality is once again not limited to the interpersonal field where it is most known. Instead, host societies and migrants in the maid trade overlay the macro-political onto the intimate sphere of the home. Borders and cultures are brought into the closest contact imaginable with live-in domestic work, both sides never truly free of the other. Clashes and conflict are inevitable when neither side is prepared for the cross-nationality relationship, further differentiated by host and home states. Thus, host societies more than migrants resort to stereotyping and racializing the MDW to make sense of all the disparities. Race in this context, however, is not merely the phenotypical, physical differences that US-based scholarship has gravitated towards. Instead, it is a mix of physical appearances, culture, and nationality, all fusing into an inescapable matrix of hierarchies and domination. Employers and host societies especially cling to the racialization hierarchy in order to justify the unequal relationship between them and maids, using whatever they need to deem MDWs inferior and typecast the women by nationality.

In the political sphere, states are constantly interacting and accounting for the many different fields they manage. But here, thanks to the intersectional and transnational nature of this market, states individually cannot hold the same officiating power that sociological theories have long assumed they do. Home and host states remain locked in a tug-of-war over an indivisible person over which both have some jurisdiction. However, both governments do not wish to offend the other (as they wish to keep the maid trade going), and neither do they want to take full responsibility for all the opacity and complications that full sovereignty would entail. Thus, in the context of migrant domestic work, the Weberian definition of the state no longer holds: neither state has a full monopoly of legitimate violence. Instead, states have chosen the perpetually precarious approach of “porous sovereignty” that shares state rights and responsibilities in an unequal oligopoly.

The maid trade I have described sounds overwhelming – and to the MDWs themselves, it often is. With so many moving parts – more than I could detail even in six chapters – maids themselves have to appreciate their relative insignificance in a massive, multi-billion-dollar market. The intersectionality and relationality of the market means that there is never a

consistent outcome for the same actions by different maids. Thus, these women must be unfailingly cautious and suspicious. They knew better than anyone that every step pursued towards empowerment is also a great risk. Yet I found that maids could gain some level of empowerment by metaphorically holding their chains stable. The many “chains” they are forced to carry merely to become an MDW – from the various actors with power over them to the systemic oppression detailed above – take excessive effort and quite a bit of luck to break. In this case, the intersectionality of an MDW is very depowering. But one efficient way that the women I met found to empower themselves was to prevent authorities from gaining any more power over the maids than the authorities already had: defensive empowerment. The MDWs’ ingenuity challenges the simplistic dichotomy of abused victim/empowered agent. Instead, there is a spectrum of empowerment, and scholars must respect people like the maids to define what kind of empowerment they want given their situations.

Though all my analysis of the maid trade across the Philippines, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, my data indicated one haunting similarity across the board. Despite Hong Kong and Taiwan being some of the best destination societies for MDWs, despite home states’ (inconsistent) policy efforts on behalf of their workers, and despite decades of civil society advocacy, the fundamental causes of the extreme abuse seen in the Middle East are still present in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The foundation may be more subdued and held in check by better regulations, but it is unmistakable. The gendered nature of the work, the persistence of the servant-master mindset, market opacity, racism, governments shirking responsibility, and the inconsistency of implementation all make for one of the most powerful lattices of disempowerment. Additional policies have kept this lattice from overrunning everyone in the market (i.e., minimum wages, the maid hotline in Taiwan, days off), but they have not eliminated it. Once again, the key lies in not the *inevitability* of abuse and exploitation, but the *potential* for abuse to happen.

Consequently, I conclude this dissertation with a number of practical policy recommendations for the four states involved. Some of these recommendations are simple, others may take generations to realize. But I believe all of them are achievable.

Policy Recommendations

I) Home States

- 1) *Change home state training to emphasizing professionalism, quality of workers, and rights over servility and submissiveness* – both the Philippines and Indonesia have publicly professed a desire to professionalize domestic work and market it as a skill, but have not maintained it in practice. The change would require a redesign of much of the current pre-departure training curriculum as well as the qualifying tests. The mentality of home state training agencies should also be monitored closely, and implementation strictly enforced (details below)
 - a) Marketing in the host states will also have to change to reflect professionalism. Expect some resistance to this from agencies and host state societies, as many employers are likely to still demand MDWs that are more like servants (see Chapter 4). Changing the nature of demand is no easy feat.
 - b) However, several agencies have already begun blazing this trail, which governments can learn from and collaborate with (Fair Employment Agency, Arrow Employment

- Agency, Helpwise – all in Hong Kong. All of these began as non-profits, but recently became profitable, showing that exploitation is not needed to sustain a business)
- 2) *Differentiate home state training by host country* – all host societies have different requirements, and thus require different preparation. Right now, curriculums are too uniform (particularly egregious in the Philippines, where most training is still geared towards Western culture). Ill-fitting training makes for ill-prepared MDWs, making their adaptation process much harder and increasing the likelihood of termination. Poor preparation also hurts any efforts to professionalize domestic work.
 - 3) *Digitizing the necessary paperwork* – a proposal already on the table in the Philippines, according to my sources, so I highlight it as a productive step forward. Digitization may seem trivial, but the importance of digitization lies in the amount of *time* it frees up for staff (see Chapter 3). If implemented right, such digitization can also incorporate digital forensics, making it much easier for government to detect and trace fraud and illegal practices (more information available upon request).
 - a) A rigorous system of checking credential and verification of documents should not be discarded, but it can be streamlined. Digital signatures and automated checking of licenses could possibly save officials hours per day, which they could use to handle the more strenuous cases instead.
 - b) It will also make exposing illegal agencies easier
 - c) Will likely require a three-way cooperation and extensive coordination between home states, host states, and agencies. Could be implemented incrementally, beginning with smaller host states
 - 4) *Improve physical infrastructure* – from roads to phone lines to registration of addresses, this is the foundation of enforcing rules and regulations. Current infrastructure serves as an obstacle to finding illegal agencies and loan sharks (see Chapter).
 - 5) *Cooperation with NGOs and religious organizations* – these are the most important community groups for domestic worker families, often having a much wider reach than government. Governments need to see these organizations as partners rather than accusers, listening to NGO suggestions, incorporating their ideas, and giving them leeway to accomplish their goals of helping MDWs and migrants.
 - a) NOTE: NGOs in this market can also be acerbic in their words to governments, which can discourage officials from listening to their ideas at all. While the anger is warranted sometimes, other times a cooperative attitude might be more beneficial.
 - 6) *Financial literacy training* – there are many voracious loan sharks in home and host countries that target domestic workers (whom they consider a vulnerable population). This training could be made part of the updated curriculum.
 - 7) *National Reintegration Programs* – Both Indonesia and the Philippines have these, but few maids seem to know about them. These provide entrepreneurial training, connections for loans, and networking. Services can be expanded, and promotion to returnee MDWs needs to be expanded greatly.
 - 8) *Expand pre-departure rights training (PDOS in Philippines)* – Neither program in either home state proved very effective in my research, though the Philippines was on the right track. The rights training should be integrated into agency training over a longer period of time, according to maids’ suggestions, and should include more tangible examples of what to do and where to get help in different situations.

- 9) *Make licenses for training and placement agencies harder to obtain* – right now, licenses are handed out like hotcakes, because standards for obtaining one are set low (which may or may not be aided by corruption, in certain cases). For example, in Hong Kong the only requirement for setting up an agency for a long time was a Hong Kong ID (HK-Agent 1). Consequently, there is little to stop would-be criminals, con artists, or incompetent managers from setting up maid agencies. And for businesses that place women in such vulnerable positions, that is problematic.
- a) Add in extra requirements that placement agencies need, beyond just connections in the host country. For example, regulations could require them to go through a rights training seminar with an NGO before setting up; submit their accounting books to you every year; submit to random checks each year (never telling them when those might be), have never committed a crime or received a license suspension (in the past 3 years or so), and other requirements.
- 10) *Extend suspension of agency licenses to the individuals running the agencies* – even after an agency has been suspended for repeated human rights violations, the exact same people can set up a different agency under a different name in almost no time at all, and continue the exact same practices of abusing your citizens (see Chapter 3).
- a) I recommend that after a home or host state agency has its license suspended or is shut down for repeated extreme violations (proof of overcharging, human trafficking, falsified contracts, and many others), that suspension should extend to the executive staff – at least for a few years. It holds the individuals more accountable.
 - b) The POEA (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration) has a watchlist for some agency executives. It should be expanded, and added to licensing in Indonesia.
- 11) *Increase random spot checks on agencies* – a practice that Hong Kong began to adopt in the middle of my fieldwork (year 2018). Unannounced visits to agencies preclude most possibilities for agencies to hide illegal activities. In the home states, such checks on all registered agencies would help expose many illegal activities.
- a) These spot checks must require speaking to domestic workers in training away from the presence of agency officials. Bringing in officials from outside localities (i.e., not the same officials that give the licenses and might possibly have been bribed) to do the checks is ideal.
 - b) Though such visits are difficult to arrange logistically, given the poor physical infrastructure (see #4), there is no other way to catch some corrupt practices.
- 12) *Closing regulatory loopholes* – Some of the biggest ones:
- a) Placement fees are forbidden in the Philippines, so agencies call the fees something else to get around it (see Chapter 3). So, change the law’s wording to ALL fees.
 - b) No limit on interest maids are charged when they take out loans to cover fees. One way to fix this might be to have a government lending system that charges minimal interest in both Indonesia and Philippines open to all MDWs – this arrangement keeps track of both fees and interest. Oversight would have to be extremely rigorous to prevent corruption, however.
 - c) Insurance is not always provided or reliable. So, require proof of purchased health insurance to be provided by every employer if they want to avoid a visit from police.
 - d) Require training agencies to give the certification of training to each maid before they depart. Both the Philippines and Indonesia have training programs that confer skill certificates for maids, but are implemented poorly (see Chapter 3). There should be

- no excuse for agencies withholding said certificate on grounds of unpaid fees. Border officials should not allow maids to leave without it, and should any delays be caused, agencies should be charged for the inconvenience.
- 13) *Consolidate government ministries involved in the maid trade* – too many government ministries involved just invites extra bureaucracy and corruption. I suggest creating one go-to ministry that can manage all necessary paperwork when difficult cases arise.
 - a) Many of the departments involved will not yield their power so willingly, so consolidation will likely have to be a top-down order. The devil will be in the details, of course, to streamline all the paperwork.
 - b) The Philippines already has this proposal in their parliament
 - 14) *Using social media to reach vulnerable domestic workers* – can be used to locate victims of abuse or as a more preventative measure. Several government bodies I met have begun to develop these competencies, primarily for explaining rights (e.g., an interactive app that helps explain Taiwanese laws from the local Indonesian KDEI (i.e., Indonesian representative office)). Most MDWs in Taiwan and Hong Kong have cell phones, and that fact should be used to help them.
 - a) Such connections can also bolster the trust MDWs place in their home government, giving a more direct line to help that bypasses potentially abusive agencies.
 - 15) *Increasing accessibility of information* – For now, focus especially on what employers and agencies *cannot* do, which agencies are legal, where to get help, etc. Hong Kong’s FDH website is a good start (<https://www.fdh.labour.gov.hk/>). Also look to television and news, as well as official visits to villages to remind locals (maids and their families) of certain rules, how agencies might deceive them, and how to protect themselves.
 - a) The most important facet is publicity and scale. Having resources in the government or consulates is useless if neither MDWs or their employers even know what questions to ask. The common conception that employers are the “boss” and have the right to make whatever excessive demands they conceive of, would also preclude maids even looking for resources (see Chapter 4; HK 2015 Employer 3). To reach these populations, public service announcements on news and advertisements around agencies or maid gathering places will be critical.
 - b) Additional resources like phone apps, small pamphlets (ideally incorporating cartoon depictions of common scenarios), dedicated Facebook pages, three-minute videos available online, and other simple resources also increases the likelihood of maids or employers encountering them.
 - 16) *Require agencies to follow up with MDWs abroad* – at least once after a maid has been placed, agencies should provide a report to the home government about the maid’s condition, including proof of a direct call to her cellphone. Certain agencies do this voluntarily, and all maids appreciate having the extra lifeline (see Chapter 6).
 - 17) *Arrange schedules of local consulate staff to attend local events* – in my fieldwork, the extra effort to attend public events or even host them proved a great way for governments to build trust with MDWs in Taiwan with KDEI, as well as getting the word out about options for help if needed. A trust deficit is devastating for government representatives abroad and for migrants, and this is one way to remedy it (see Chapters 3 and 6).
 - a) Can also be extended to local governments. Certain branches of the Taiwanese labor department made an effort to attend local events for maids and employers.

Consequently, I found those individuals much more up-to-date with the latest problems and needed regulatory changes and/or interventions.

- b) This may require hiring extra staff abroad. In the long run, I argue the increased trust between government and migrants will be worth it.
- 18) *Stricter punishments for host agencies that violate home state rules* – a practice MECO in Taiwan began and the Hong Kong Philippine consulate considered. Home states may not be able to shut down host agencies, but the home state can take away a host agency’s license to place migrants from its country. It gives home state rules “teeth”.
- 19) *Adapt middle and high school curriculum of areas that send large numbers of MDWs* – to incorporate the concept of rights and make it more of a “mindset” (see Chapter 3), it should be part of the required curriculum in certain areas. Teaching of the language and practice of rights for MDWs should begin in middle school to give women more exposure to it, on the one hand, and also to be sure the maids that do not progress to high school (factor of falsified documents – see Chapters 2 and 3) do not get left behind.
- 20) *Seek international certification of domestic work* – domestic work is often dead-end and not recognized internationally. However, experience in domestic work is crucial to many kinds of jobs, such as secretarial, hotel staff, nursing (for elderly care), teaching, cooking, even flight attendant jobs. A diploma or certification from someplace like the ILO, based on an updated curriculum across several countries, would be something maids could use to apply for many different jobs. An internationally authoritative certification would go a long way towards professionalizing domestic work, making it more of a stepping stone to pursue other career paths rather than a dead-end job.
 - a) The ILO has been considering such certificates itself or lobbying for country-specific certificates (Tayah 2016), but additional lobbying on the part of states would speed the process along.

II) Host States

- 1) *Public information campaigns against victim-blaming of MDWs* – see Chapter 6. Victim-blaming and racial distrust cannot be fully fixed this way, but exposing this mentality for what it is might change some minds and make it less acceptable publicly.
- 2) *Stricter laws on advertising* – primarily for Hong Kong, but a crackdown on stereotyping would be the first step of a mile-long journey to correct racialized stereotypes (see Chapter 4).
- 3) *Assigning Indonesian and Tagalog translators to police departments* – adopted in the Philippines’ recent arrangement with Kuwait (2018). When emergencies happen, you need an immediate response is needed, and having someone on hand (in person, by phone, or internet) who can cross the language barrier can make a world of difference in exposing abusive conditions.
 - a) NOTE: Please do not assume that just having the police arrangement will fix everything! The police can be used to silence problems just as well. Police as well as translators also need to be monitored in some way (this dissertation has presented a plethora of evidence to show that they will bend the rules when it suits them). You need to constantly monitor them, and always be aware of their personal agenda.
- 4) *Speed up processing times* – the time required to verify documents and obtain visas for incoming MDWs is unnecessarily long in both Hong Kong and Taiwan. Excess waiting times are costly not just for domestic workers, but also add pressure to employers who might desperately need a caretaker for a sick relative. Agencies I spoke to found the

delays particularly egregious in Indonesia, but the fault did not lie entirely with the home state. The reasons behind such long processing times are unclear, but I believe increasing the number of staff and paperwork digitization (#3 in Home States) will improve them.

- 5) *Make licenses for training and placement agencies harder to obtain* – see #9 in Home States. For businesses that place women in such vulnerable positions, the current ease of obtaining a business license is problematic.
 - a) Add in requirements that placement agencies for maids specifically need, beyond just connections in the home country. Regular reporting of maids placed, percentage terminated, percentage completing a contract, employing a translator, etc.
- 6) *Increase random spot checks on placement agencies* – a practice that Hong Kong began to adapt in the middle of my fieldwork (2018). Unannounced visits to agencies preclude many possibilities for agencies to hide illegal activities. In both host states, such checks on all registered agencies would help expose many illegal activities, such as harassment/intimidation, confiscation of travel documents, and unfit accommodations.
 - a) These spot checks must require speaking to domestic workers away from the presence of agency officials, as well as extensive exploration of paperwork. Bringing in officials from outside localities (i.e., not the same officials that give the licenses, and might possibly have been bribed) to do the checks is ideal for Taiwan, since it has a larger area and more cities to work with than Hong Kong.
 - b) Though such visits are costly, given the number of agencies, there is no other way to catch many corrupt practices.
- 7) *Extend suspension of agency licenses to the individuals running the agencies* – although less common than in home nations, suspended agencies can still reestablish themselves under a different name, and continue exploitative practices.
- 8) *Random checks on employer homes* – Hong Kong began this, and it is a good system. It has already caught several maids in squalor or illegal conditions. It will not catch every case, but it will catch some, as well as the agencies connected.
 - a) Publication of the successful rescues can also change public attitude.
- 9) *Expand system of blacklisting* – a sensitive topic, conflicting with privacy laws. But in this case, it is needed for the protection of citizens and migrants alike.
 - a) Agencies: expanded in suspension of licenses above. But the individuals should be banned from MDW work for at least three years, and agencies closed should be broadcast very publicly (to prevent employers and maids falling for con artists).
 - b) Employers: does not need to be public, but should be accessible by governments and agencies. Just because maids do not have the freedom to pursue a case does not mean employers have not been abusive, and there is nothing to prevent them treating the next maid just as badly (see Chapter 6). While individual agencies might refuse to serve said employers, the abusive employer can simply find another agency that is none the wiser (see Chapter 3). The blacklist should either have a time limit, or in less severe cases name some conditions employers must meet to be removed.
 - (1) The Philippine Consulate in Hong Kong actually has its own watchlist and blacklist for employers, but cannot make it public. Some cases are severe, and are banned from ever employing a Philippine MDW again (extreme physical abuse, recurrent nonpayment, etc.). Others are milder, such as improving accommodations, or providing proof of buying health insurance.

- 10) *Set up additional training for judges dealing with MDWs* – I found a good number of Taiwan and Hong Kong judges to be insensitive to the specific conditions and the cultural differences with MDWs (see Chapter 4 and 6). Judges in courts or labor tribunals should not be allowed to accept cases with MDWs until they have passed minimal background training on the conditions of the maid trade. Taiwan and Hong Kong both have legal cooperatives/volunteer associations who would be willing to assist with the training.
- 11) *Expand definition of proof in abuse cases* – over the years, agencies have become experts at doing their work without paper trails, pictures, or anything else that courts ordinarily consider evidence. But their illegal activities continue, to the detriment of maids and even employers. Evidence like texts, bank withdrawals, wage deductions or the testimony of other maids should be considered more solid evidence in these cases. Furthermore, signatures are often obtained under duress, so what host courts *do* count as evidence is flawed (see Chapter 3).
- 12) *Better enforcement on court rulings* – even when maids win a case, the settlement can be delayed for months. The defendant that lost (agency, employer, or other) should be given a strict deadline by which to pay damages or reimburse; and if missed, the defendant incurs a fine and a visit from the police.
- 13) *Set limitations on fees agencies can charge employers* – There is currently no maximum amount and no rules requiring a refund if agencies do not deliver what employers paid for. This is a loophole that begs the exploitation of employers. If agencies cannot deliver a maid to employers in the span of three months, or if the maid is terminated in that time, agencies should refund all or most of the fee charged to employers.
 - a) I expect a rule like this will drive agencies to pursue quality matches rather than fast ones with no regard to whether worker and employer are well-suited. In the current regulatory climate, fast matches are more profitable (see Chapter 3).
 - b) I expect this will also improve the attitude of employers, as they will be less concerned about losing all the money they paid.
- 14) *Set forensic accountants on placement agencies* – agencies, as described above, rarely make accounts public and find many ways to hide their sources of profit (see Chapter 3). Forensic accountants are experts at finding schemes and hidden accounts.
 - a) Forensic accountants should especially look for cash trails, since agencies often force MDWs to pay illegal fees in cash so that no receipt is needed. The investigators can also look for intimidating notes or phone records, often used to force “job-hopping” or force a maid to sign illegal terms. They should also investigate the content of emails and contracts, as agencies might be sending misleading information to clients.
- 15) *Expand the time maids have after termination to find a new employer* – a month is barely enough in Taiwan, but two weeks in Hong Kong just pressures MDWs into accepting poor matches or enduring abuse in the first employer’s home.
- 16) *Increasing accessibility of information* – important for both maids and employers. For now, focus especially on what employers and agencies cannot do, which agencies are legal, etc. Hong Kong’s FDH website is a good start (<https://www.fdh.labour.gov.hk/>). Also look to television and news, as well as signs in multiple languages reminding employers and maids of certain rules and how to protect themselves.
- 17) *Set up a 24-hour hotline for maids, providing all languages* – already achieved in Taiwan with the 1955 hotline. Despite some complaints (Chapter 7), it remains an essential

lifeline. Hong Kong needs such a lifeline, too, and it can easily be run by the city's many NGOs. The hotline will need extensive promotion to be effective, however.

a) Furthermore, set up a separate hotline for employers. Currently, both employers and maids used the same 1955 hotline in Taiwan, and that can be confusing.

The NGO workers that deal with prejudiced or angry employers complaining about their maids should be given special training in how to calm overly emotional people over the phone. They should also have many suggestions on hand for smoothing over situations or details that can help employers understand the culture of their maids.

18) *Require training for employers* – employers are often ill-prepared for the culture shock and management duties that come with having a maid, and many problems could be solved (not all, but many) with some preparation. Online trainings have proven ineffective in Taiwan, so in-person sessions during non-working hours should be required before contracts receive final approval.

a) Working with agencies and NGOs should prove a helpful partnership.

b) The initial training must be required, in-person and overseen by agency or NGO officials. Experience in Taiwan suggests that employers merely skip at-home learning, often believing that the agency and maid bear all the responsibility (Chapter 3). However, supplementary materials like three-minute videos of success stories, advice from real employers, pamphlets with instructions, illustrated comics that are easy to read, and other such resources should also be provided online and at agencies, easily accessible for all employers should they have more questions.

c) Especially emphasize recognizing and avoiding verbal abuse – the most prevalent form of abuse in my research.

19) *Require agencies to check on maids placed* – after a maid begins work, host agencies should call the maid on the personal line once per week for the first month, and speak to her independent of the employer

20) *International certification of domestic work* – see above

21) *Set up public website and brochures ranking agencies based on legal compliance and quality of service* – Taiwan has such a system in place in regards to legal compliance with an annual grading system. However, it is not easily accessible. It took me hours of searching to find it, and no employer I spoke to knew about it. Consequently, the extensive work put into assessing these agencies is of little use. The website and search function need to be better designed, and publicized broadly so that employers and maids can make use of it.

Non-Policy Interventions

1) *Local NGOs should advertise cheap/free translation services* – Such services could serve two purposes. On the one hand, should agencies prove to be failing in their duties, extra translation services could prevent small cultural or communication misunderstandings from escalating. On the other hand, those that enter a home or can speak with a domestic worker can also gauge whether certain situations are becoming abusive. NGOs can then offer advice to maids in trouble or report serious situations to the authorities.

2) *Send random flyers to houses with domestic workers that remind them of the law and possible fines for violations* – these flyers would primarily be a scare tactic, and could also suggest that random spot checks on employer homes are being conducted. It would also be a good reminder that many agencies lie about the law (see Chapter 3), and that

employers will also be liable if they follow false advice like underpaying, holding a maid's passport, or refusing to allow her days off.

- a) A phone number and email of a dedicated NGO office should also be included on the flyers, offering consulting advice should employers need it. While this would be a long shot, employers that do call that number will be easy targets for further investigation, as would be the agencies said employers used.
- 3) *Set up a separate hotline for maid employers* – while it would be better for the government to set something like this up, so that it is more universal, NGOs could launch their own version of such a hotline until then. It can be used to teach better cultural sensitivity, while also vetting out potentially abusive employers that might need to be spot-checked. See #17a under Host States for more details.
- 4) *Interactive phone application about rights* – as described in Home #14 above in regards to social media. As suggested there, KDEI in Taiwan already has such an app, but it is largely in legalese and consists of a lot of reading. I did not encounter many MDWs that used it. Consequently, designing an app that is more streamlined, interactive, and visual would be a great asset. Using cartoon strips or animation videos for examples would also help maids relate the different laws to their personal situations.
 - a) Having multiple apps that repeat the same thing about rights and resources would be beneficial and mutually reinforcing. So even if the government(s) have their own versions, I would encourage NGOs to make their own.
- 5) *Organize a peer call-in service where maids can speak to peers about problems* – this can be run by either agencies or NGOs, but would require the help of MDWs waiting for visas, MDWs with free time, or former MDWs in each home state. As described in Chapter 6, the sanctuary of equals is critical for maids to adjust to their new home. Many maids trust their peers more than authorities or even NGO workers. Being able to speak to more experienced maids at any time, who are free to speak over phone in the heat of the moment, would be an enormous asset. The maids on the other end could offer practical advice and emotional support.
 - a) I conceive of this call-in service working in tandem with the government/NGO hotlines. While the hotlines can be reserved for explicit abuses or more extreme situations, this can serve as a resource for less serious issues, like homesickness, asking for directions, looking for educational resources, etc. However, this line should also be prepared to confront some rights violations.
 - b) Practically speaking, this call-in service will probably be difficult to maintain, given how quickly maids must start their new jobs, leaving for visas, and time demands on maids already employed. Thus, a system of maids leaving messages and waiting for other maids to respond might be the only way to manage this.
- 6) *Post videos on YouTube and other video-sharing sites showing conditions of maids abroad* – for both current and prospective MDWs, these videos would describe common living conditions, common job expectations, where to go for support, and the limits on what employers can demand. These should be given by current maids in each host country, letting them describe their lives in their own words. Where possible, videos/pictures of employers' homes would be helpful.
- 7) *Campaigns aimed at employer education* – once again, the primary goal is scale and mass exposure. As detailed in Chapters 2 and 3, few employers understand all the expectations, responsibilities and pressures that come with employing a live-in maid.

The point of these campaigns would be to show that employers must compromise on some things, explaining the limits of what employers can demand of a maid and reminding them of legal requirements (days off, salary, etc.). It could also point them to further resources that can help them organize their maid's work, and train them to be more like managers.

- a) These campaigns should also work to dispel the common notion that success in finding a "good" domestic worker is nothing but "luck" (see Chapter 3). These campaigns should portray domestic work as a profession requiring skills and compatibility, and that honest effort on both sides is crucial to making a good maid-employer match (see #1 in Home States).
- 8) *Agencies arrange for veteran maids to visit new maids while waiting for new visas* – all maids have a certain wait time between finishing a contract and starting a new one, even when continuing on with the same employer. I propose an arrangement by which these maids waiting for government paperwork could still be employed while helping out newcomers. These would be shorter visits, where the veteran MDW can help the new one with her work, offer advice, and suggest better adaptation strategies.
 - a) These visits would probably last 2 to 3 hours each, and the visiting MDWs should be paid for each visit. A visit during working hours and in the home will let the veteran give hands-on and practical advice about the work and living conditions.
 - b) These visits could also aid agencies in their requirement to check up on domestic workers after they arrive.
- 9) *Maid-sharing business* – a longer-term version of #8, but for employers in transition who do not have maids yet. The maids waiting for paperwork, or currently looking for a new employer, would spend a day working for one employer, and alternate an employer every day. In this case, MDWs would be more like day-laborers, and return to their agencies by night. If possible, this arrangement can be shared between all agencies in a locality.
 - a) Having such an option not only gives certain employers a lifeline in emergency situations (ill health of a family member, paperwork has an unexpected delay), but lessens the pressure on both sides should the first arrangement between employer and maid not work out. Firstly, the maid will not feel pressured to stay on in abusive or ill-suited conditions because she needs to make money – although the day-laborer work would pay less, it would buy her time to look for a better match. Furthermore, employers would also feel less of a need to keep on a maid (or use illegal means to keep her on) if there is a temporary stop-gap option.
 - b) The day-laborer arrangement could also help employers and maids explore different kinds of work. Maids can get a better sense of what kind of work they enjoy doing (and what kind of employer they want), while employers can get to know different maids and even find one they like.
- 10) *Make public websites ranking all agencies on the quality of their service* – see #21 in Host States. While it is better if governments coordinate all this data, NGOs can begin to rank agencies if the government drags its feet. In fact, having a separate website of rankings would provide a good check on government rankings
 - a) Be sure to get feedback from maids and employers separately. Anonymity will likely be required to get honest responses.
- 11) *Extensive social media support for both employers and maids* – see #14 in Home States. This kind of outreach will work best if several NGOs coordinate, and offer it for both

employers and maids. Particularly for employers, such support will help keep rumors and resentment in check (see Chapter 3).

- 12) *A video series showing the lives of MDWs back home and their journey to the host state* – while minor, showing the real struggles of maids leaving their families behind and the debt they have to incur just to work in Hong Kong or Taiwan can hopefully encourage empathy and understanding in locals.
- 13) *Seek extensive media coverage of bad agency practices* – NGOs and even governments should pursue this in both home and host states. Once an agency with illegal practices is found, it should not be brushed under the rug, but instead exposed on local news as a negative example. Showing the poor practices and their consequences publicly will raise awareness and hopefully encourage both employers, maids, and prospectives to look for better agencies and avoid some common pitfalls or tricks.

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Appendix A
Maid Law Across Nations – Sources

Sources for Table 2a – these are largely informal, as most laws for MDWs are not publicly available in many of these countries

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3	http://www.oit.org/wcm5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_631089.pdf
4	https://www.mom.gov.sg/documents-and-publications/foreign-workforce-numbers
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6	https://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/2012/weekly-rest-days-for-foreign-domestic-workers
7	https://www.helperchoice.com/singapore/hire-domestic-helper
8	https://www.mom.gov.sg/faq/work-permit-for-fdw/is-my-fdw-allowed-to-end-her-two-year-employment-contract-prematurely
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10	http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2019/12/25/2003728138
11	https://silo.tips/download/recruitment-costs-brief-taiwan
12	http://statdb.mol.gov.tw/html/mon/c12040.htm
13	Direct communication with Hong Kong Immigration Department
14	https://www.mom.gov.sg/faq/work-pass-general/can-an-employer-keep-a-workers-passport
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17	Paul 2017, Pgs. 107 & 192; Seow, Joanna. 2016. "More Transparency urged in Agency Fees for Maids." <i>The Straits Times</i> . October 30. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings.
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20	https://www.arabianbusiness.com/saudi-sets-min-wage-for-domestic-workers-452156.html
21	https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/saudi-arabia-maids-to-get-day-off-every-week-1.1209886
22	https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191111-saudi-arabia-introduces-new-domestic-worker-rights/

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25	https://www.migrant-rights.org/statistic/domesticworkers/
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27	https://psmag.com/social-justice/why-are-migrant-workers-passports-still-being-held-hostage-in-uae
28	https://poseidon01.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=937027118025007085067064091067088002015011046006095011102005005125086118098071023112012063127057051019035112086109126095108090038047089019092069117003002031067012028055062004105124021119091069120009114116103088080097004017077065124022086070085089103105&EXT=pdf; Pg. 5
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30	https://blog.bayzat.com/all-you-need-to-know-about-health-insurance-for-maids/
31	https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/07/uae-domestic-workers-rights-bill-step-forward
32	https://www.thenational.ae/uae/is-minimum-wage-for-maids-taking-advantage-of-uae-nationals-minister-to-be-asked-1.253525
33	https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/22/united-arab-emirates-trapped-exploited-abused
34	https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/kuwait-sets-minimum-wage-domestic-workers-160714143830769.html
35	https://www.arabtimesonline.com/news/minimum-monthly-salary-of-kd-120-agreed-for-filipino-domestic-workers/

Appendix B

Webscraping Code

I and my eight students in the webscraping lab put all our coding documentation on a GitHub project. All eight students are named in the Acknowledgements of this dissertation. In all, the project has almost 500 lines of code. As of publication of this dissertation, the project is still a private project.

Access is available upon request: <https://github.com/clairehhw/Webscraping-project>

Appendix C
In-Depth Interview Questionnaires (English only)

Migrant Domestic Workers

1. What motivated you to go abroad to work the first time?
 - a. When did you first hear about working in as a domestic helper abroad?
 - b. Why did you want to come abroad? What was your reasoning?
2. Where did you first hear about working abroad?
 - a. After you heard about it, who invited you to go abroad (friend, sponsor, etc.)?
 - b. What did they do or promise to convince you to work abroad?
3. What kind of paperwork was required from you to work abroad?
 - a. Before you went to your training agency, did you get insurance? Or later?
4. What was the process for preparing and going abroad like for you? Please describe what you had to do in Indonesia/the Philippines in as much detail as you can (visa requirements, training, etc.).
 - a. While in the process, how did you feel?
 - b. Do you think that the training you received in your home country matched the work you were required to do abroad?
 - c. Did your agency or government teach you anything about your rights as an Indonesian citizen?
5. In times of difficulty, did you get help from the government or your agency?
 - a. Did that help change over time?
 - b. If yes, do you think this help was what you needed? What else would you have liked the government or your agency to help you with?
 - c. If no, what kind of help were you expecting to receive? What help would you have liked to receive?
6. What was/is a typical workday like for you?
 - a. When do you start work, and when do you finish? When do you usually sleep?
 - b. Where do you sleep? Do you have your own room or not? Do you feel you have privacy?
 - c. What kind of work does your employer have you do?
 - d. How do you feel about your work abroad?
7. What were/are your employers like? What did you think of them?
 - a. Have you had a problem or disagreement with your employers before?
 - b. If yes, how did you solve it? Where did you go or who did you contact to get help resolving the conflict?
8. How much of your salary was deducted to pay back your agency debt?
 - a. And for how long?
 - b. Any other details about how you paid it back, or additional fees.
9. If you were in any kind of major trouble, where would you go (or who would you go to) to complain and get help?
 - a. Do you feel that you can go to your agency, the consulates, or the host government?
 - b. Why or why not?
10. When you go to your agency, what were/are they like?
 - a. What was their attitude towards you like? How did they treat you?

- b. Did you notice a difference in how they treated you, and how they treated your employer?
11. When you go to government offices, what were/are they like?
 - a. What was their attitude towards you like? How did they treat you?
 12. Did your employers ever talk to the Indonesian government about your work (can be things like your visa, staying longer, etc.)? Please describe.
 13. Did your employers ever talk to your agency about your work (can be things like your visa, staying longer, etc.)? Please describe.
 14. Do you have some personal experience with the local governments in host countries?
 - a. If yes, please tell your stories, including how it made you feel.
 - b. If you have experience in more than one host country, how do you think the different host governments compare?
 15. When you are out of the house for errands or your day off, how do you feel that ordinary local people in Taiwan and Hong Kong treated you?
 16. [Indonesian maids only] The Indonesian government and agencies tend to advertise Indonesian maids as traditional, domicile. Have these images/promotions had any impact on you?
 - a. How do you feel about them in general?
 - b. Do you feel like you need to play some sort of part because of them?
 17. [returnees or former returnees only] What has your life been like since you returned home? Please go into as much detail as you feel comfortable (family, money, culture shock, friends, etc.)
 - a. What are some of the biggest struggles you've had since coming home?
 - b. Did you have to do any check-ups or debriefing with the government or your agency upon returning? If so, please describe.
 - c. Have you kept in touch with any of your friends abroad? If so, please describe those relationships now.
 18. Is there a difference between your life now (after being abroad) and your life before you went abroad? If so, what kind of difference?
 19. Is there anything you wish you had known before going abroad? If so, what?
 20. Imagine for me: what would be the ideal working situation for an Indonesian/Filipina maid working abroad?
 21. If you could give all the Indonesian/Filipina maids going abroad one piece of advice, what would it be?
 22. Basic demographics:
 - a. What years have you been abroad (and countries)?
 - b. Age
 - c. Hometown
 - d. Education
 - e. Religion
 - f. Family (parents, married, children, etc.)

Activists/NGO Workers

1. When you are working as an activist, what does a typical day look like for you? What are the things that you usually have to do?

2. What are some of the most common issues you have to deal with (in Asia or elsewhere) for the domestic workers?
3. How many cases (legal and abuse) do you usually get in a month? A year?
4. How many nationalities of migrant maids have you worked with? Which ones do you work with the most?
 - a. *If they have worked with Indonesians:* In your experience, does anything set Indonesians apart from other nationalities of migrant maids? If so, what?
 - b. I'm particularly interested in comparing Indonesians and Filipinas. Can you give me a recent concrete case for each of those maid nationalities that you have worked on recently? What was the same? What was different?
5. As a rule, Filipina maids have usually been fairly well educated and good at English when they go abroad to work – and yet they are still considered vulnerable to abuse. Do you think this is true still? Why?
6. Do you ever have dealings with governments? How often do you have contact with government officials in a typical month? (can give a range)
7. What has been your best experience with a government? What has been your worst experience with one?
8. Do you ever have dealings with agencies (placement, training, etc.)? How often do you have contact with maid agencies in a typical month? (can give a range)
9. What has been your best experience with an agency? What has been your worst experience with one?
10. What made you want to be involved in this kind of work?
11. From all your time working with migrant domestic workers, what are three things that have been most frustrating to you?
12. Conversely, what are three things that you have been very happy about?
13. If you could change one thing about the domestic worker market – only one – what would you change?

Agencies (Hong Kong and Taiwan)

1. Give me the basic information and history of your agency – tell me your story:
 - a. When were you founded?
 - b. Where are you based?
 - c. What kind of maids do you bring to Hong Kong/Taiwan? How many?
 - d. How many people are in your agency?
 - e. Do you have an organizational vision? If so, what is it?
2. What is the process for placing and bringing an Indonesian maid to Hong Kong/Taiwan? (application, training, etc.)
3. Please explain the training process in more detail: What do the maids do in that time? What do you think is most crucial for them to learn before they come to Hong Kong/Taiwan?
4. What is your role when the maids first come to Hong Kong/Taiwan? (introducing them to their employer, paperwork, orientation, etc.)
5. Does a maid have to go through any kind of debriefing process upon returning to Indonesia after the completion of her two-year contract?
6. What does a typical day look like for your branch in Hong Kong/Taiwan?

7. When an employer comes to you looking for a maid, what are the typical questions they will ask?
8. What have you found to be the most effective way to market/promote Indonesian maids to Hong Kong/Taiwan employers? What attributes or qualities do you usually emphasize?
 - a. Examples of brochures/advertisements?
9. How do you distinguish Indonesian maids from Filipina or other nationalities of maids?
10. Do you think it's possible your marketing strategies of the maids could encourage employers to treat them differently?
11. How often in their two-year contracts are maids required to come to see you? Do they come more often than that on average?
12. What is the average placement fee you charge?
13. What are some of the most common struggles in adjustment that you have found maids face when they first come to Hong Kong/Taiwan?
14. For maids living in Hong Kong/Taiwan, what is the difference between your role and that of the Indonesian consulate?
15. How do you work together with the Indonesian consulate in Hong Kong/Taiwan to most efficiently help maids to work and live in Hong Kong/Taiwan?
16. If a maid is having any problems with her employer, do you encourage the maid to come to you to help resolve it? Why or why not?
17. If an employer has a problem with one of your maids, how do you usually resolve it?
18. When do you think it is justified for a maid to have her contract terminated early?
19. Imagine with me: one of your maids is undergoing terrible abuse, like Erwiana Sulistyaningsih [describe if case is unknown]. Ideally, what role would you want to play in resolving the situation?
20. Think back to one particularly difficult/complicated issue that you helped one of your maids to solve, and that you are particularly proud of. How did you handle all the sides of the problem? What did you do?
21. (In Hong Kong only) The publicity of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih's abuse has probably made Indonesian women more scared to come here; have you had to change your strategies for placing maids to reassure your Indonesian domestic workers that they will be safe in Hong Kong since the Erwiana Sulistyaningsih?
22. (In Hong Kong only) The fact that Erwiana won her lawsuit was also very unique; do you think that will set a good precedent for maids to know their rights?
23. (In Taiwan only) The Taiwanese government has been making a lot of laws recently trying to improve the situation and rights of foreign domestic helpers in Taiwan; is this making any difference in how you treat/educate your maid or how you have to educate employers to treat their maids?
24. Also, do you think these recent changes will be good for the Indonesian domestic worker business in Hong Kong/Taiwan?

Agencies (Indonesia and the Philippines)

1. Give me the basic information and history of your agency – tell me your story:
 - a. When were you founded?
 - b. Where are you based?
 - c. What kind of maids do you recruit/train? How many per month/year?

- d. How many staff are in your agency?
 - e. Do you have an organizational vision? If so, what is it?
2. What is the process for sending a maid to Hong Kong/Taiwan specifically? Start from the very beginning (referrals, application, training, etc.).
3. Please explain the training process in more detail: What do the maids do in that time?
 - a. What are some of the most difficult things for them to learn?
 - b. Are there things you have to teach the future maids that most employers in Hong Kong or Taiwan would find surprising (how to iron, etc.)?
 - c. What do you think is most crucial for them to learn before they leave Indonesia/the Philippines?
4. What are the various ways maids respond to the training? Does everyone usually make it through just fine?
 - a. Are there any aspects that are usually quite difficult for the maids? If so, what?
 - b. Do your teachers ever get frustrated with the maids? If so, over what?
5. What does a typical day look like for your office?
6. Describe the process of matching a maid to an employer in a host country – how is it accomplished? What do both sides need to do?
7. How do maids usually feel before they go abroad, in your experience? How do they process the upcoming change?
 - a. How often do you need to console or comfort outgoing maids?
 - b. How complicated is the paperwork before they go abroad?
8. How does a maid’s family usually deal with the change? Have their reactions or demands ever caused you any problems?
 - a. Please elaborate on this, as family roles are very different in the US.
9. What is your role after the maids have arrived in their host country? (introducing them to their employer, paperwork, keeping in touch, communicating with placement agency, etc.)
 - a. Do you think it’s important to stay in touch with a maid after she’s arrived?
10. What kind of relationships do you have with placement agencies in Hong Kong and Taiwan specifically? How many?
 - a. Please describe your week-to-week interactions: how do you communicate, what do you talk about, what things do you need to work through every day for this business to keep functioning?
 - b. Have you ever had a bad experience with an agency in Hong Kong or Taiwan? If so, please elaborate.
11. Does a maid have to go through any kind of debriefing process upon returning to Indonesia after the completion of her contract abroad?
12. Statistically, how many of your maids stay abroad after their first two-year contract, and how many choose to come home after just two years?
 - a. Also, how many choose to come home before two years or get terminated early?
13. In your time of working in this industry, how has the demand for Indonesian/Filipina maids changed?
 - a. Perhaps the kind of maids that overseas employers want has changed? Or the number of maids being asked for?
 - b. Also, how has the supply of maids changed (both qualities and quantity)?

14. What have you found to be the most effective way to market/promote Indonesian/Filipino maids abroad? What attributes or qualities do you usually emphasize?
 - a. Examples of brochures/advertisements?
 - b. How do you distinguish Indonesian maids from Filipina or other nationalities?
15. Describe your relationship with the local and national governments – how do you work together? Do you work together well when you do?
 - a. How often do you have to communicate with them?
 - b. What do you most often talk about? Do you do any events together for the maids?
 - c. Do you ever get frustrated working with them? If so, please describe the reasons and how you work to resolve the situation.
16. Recently, a lot of laws have been changing regarding overseas maid training and requirements; what do you think of the changes?
17. What is the average placement fee you charge?
 - a. How do the maids pay it back? Logistics?
18. Do you have any involvement with employers of your maids in Hong Kong and Taiwan? If so, please elaborate how you interact with them as distinct from the local placement agencies.
19. When do you think it is justified for a maid to have her contract terminated early?
20. Imagine with me: one of your maids is undergoing terrible abuse, like Erwiana Sulistyaningsih [describe if case is unknown]. Ideally, what role would you want to play from here in resolving the situation?
21. Think back to one particularly difficult/complicated issue that you helped one of your maids to solve, and that you are particularly proud of. How did you handle all the sides of the problem? What did you do?

Employers

1. Tell me in your own words: why did your family want a maid?
2. What made you decide to get an Indonesian (or Filipina) maid instead of any other nationality? How did you think an Indonesian (or Filipina) maid would be different?
3. What does a typical day look like for your maid? What do you make her do?
 - a. How many hours does she work per day? How many days off per month?
4. To you, what makes the ideal maid?
5. What is the process for you to hire a maid? How did you personally find the process? (Smooth? Transparent? Cumbersome?)
 - a. What institutions did you have to talk to (agencies, Indonesian government)?
 - b. Did you run into any frustrations?
 - c. Did you get what you expected?
6. What were some struggles you had while getting used to having a maid in your house all the time?
7. Did these institutions offer you or your maid any assistance or advice while your maid was adjusting to Hong Kong/Taiwan? If so, did you think it was helpful?
8. How would you describe your relationship with your Indonesian maid?
9. How often do you (personally) deal with the maid's national government regarding your maid? How have you found those interactions recently?
 - a. Have you noticed any change in the way they act, deal with you/your maid, etc.?

- b. Would you prefer to have more or less of these interactions?
10. Have you ever observed your maid interacting with her consulate or her agency directly?
 - a. If so, how would you describe those interactions?
11. How often do you (personally) deal with your maid's agency regarding your maid? How have you found those interactions recently?
 - a. Have you noticed any change in the way they act, deal with you/your maid, etc.?
12. Do you ever become frustrated or upset with your maid? What has caused this in the past? How do you react in those situations?
13. When you have outright conflicts with your maid, how would you like to resolve them?
14. What do you think a Hong Kong/Taiwan employer's responsibility is to a maid working for them in terms of living conditions and working environment?
15. [Employers of Indonesian maids only] Recently, the Indonesian government has become more active and more vocal in standing up for its citizen's rights (e.g., preventing executions, commitment to stop exporting domestic workers). Is that having any effect on your relationship with your maid? On the way you see Indonesian maids in general?
16. When do you think it is justified for a maid in Hong Kong/Taiwan to have her contract terminated early?
17. [In Hong Kong only] Did the Erwiana Sulistyaningsih case have any impact on your maid or your relationship with her?
18. [In Hong Kong only] What did you think of the way the Erwiana Sulistyaningsih case was resolved? (Did you think it was fair, disruptive, biased, etc.?)
19. [In Taiwan only] The Taiwanese government has recently been passing or implementing a lot of new laws regarding maid's rights (paid holidays, kind of work, etc.). Has this had any impact on you or your situation?
20. Given your experience and the political situations, would you like to continue hiring an Indonesian/Filipina maid (either the one you have now or another one)? Why/why not?
21. If you could change anything about the Taiwan/Hong Kong maid trade market, what would you change?

Government (Hong Kong and Taiwan)

1. [local consulates only] Give me the basic information and history of the consulate in Hong Kong/Taiwan:
 - a. When was it first set up in Hong Kong/Taiwan?
 - b. How many citizens do you represent in Hong Kong/Taiwan as of now?
 - c. How many staff are in the consulate? Roles?
2. What does a typical day look like for your department in Hong Kong/Taiwan? What kind of people come in, what kinds of meetings do you have, etc.?
3. Have you seen a dramatic increase in the number of Indonesians/Filipinos coming to Hong Kong/Taiwan?
4. What is the process for bringing an Indonesian/Filipino maid to Hong Kong/Taiwan, and as the government, what role do you play? (visa requirements, timing, training, etc.)
5. What is your role when the maids are adapting to Hong Kong/Taiwan? (introducing them to their employer, paperwork, orientation, etc.)
6. What do you think is most crucial for Indonesian/Filipino domestic workers to learn from the government before or when they first come to Hong Kong/Taiwan?

7. Do you ever assist your agencies in marketing or promoting Indonesian/Filipino maids in Hong Kong/Taiwan? If so, how? (Perhaps in speaking to governments or giving them publicity?)
8. How actively do you work to distinguish Indonesian/Filipino maids from each other and other nationalities of maids?
9. Some academics have worried that because Indonesian agencies market their maids as more traditional or domicile, they may be more vulnerable to abuse. Do you think that is true? Why or why not?
10. What do you think is the biggest advantage to Hong Kong/Taiwan in bringing Indonesian/Filipina maids to your society to work?
11. [to consulates] Have you ever had any difficulty or had to negotiate with the Hong Kong/Taiwan government to let your citizens come to work as maids?
 - a. If so, please describe what happened and how you handled it.
12. Have you ever had any difficulty or had to negotiate with sending governments over letting their citizens come to Hong Kong/Taiwan to work as maids?
 - a. If so, please describe what happened and how you handled it.
13. Recently, the Indonesian/Filipino government has become more active and more vocal in standing up for its citizen's rights (e.g., preventing executions, commitment to stop exporting domestic workers).
 - a. [to consulates] Can you explain to me why you are doing this now? Was there a trigger?
 - b. [to local departments] Has this had any impact on you and your operations?
14. [to consulates] With this talk of rights, what message do you hope to communicate to both your citizens and to international governments (like Hong Kong/Taiwan)?
15. How often in their two-year contracts are maids required to come to see the consulate/your department? Do they come more often than that on average?
16. What are some of the most common struggles in adjustment that you have found maids face when they first come to Hong Kong/Taiwan?
17. For maids living in Hong Kong/Taiwan, what is the difference between your role and that of the placement agencies? How do you work together with them?
18. If a maid is having any problems with her employer, do you encourage the maid to come to various government branches to help resolve it? Why or why not?
19. Do you ever have to deal with complaints from Hong Kong/Taiwan citizens or the Hong Kong/Taiwan government about Indonesian/Filipino maids or what they do (such as Sunday gatherings)?
20. When do you think it is justified for a maid to have her contract terminated early?
21. [Hong Kong only] In your own words, what role did the Indonesian government play in resolving the Erwiana Sulistyaningsih case?
22. If that or a situation like that ever happens again, what would you do differently?
23. Besides physical abuse, what are some situations Indonesian/Filipino maids in Hong Kong/Taiwan face that particularly distress your government, or that the government is trying to work towards bettering?
24. [Hong Kong Indonesian Consulate only] The publicity of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih's abuse might have made Indonesian women more scared to come here. Have you had to offer any kind of reassurances to potential applicants?

25. [Hong Kong only] The fact that Erwiana won her lawsuit was also very unique; do you think that will set a good precedent for maids to know their rights?
26. Recently, Taiwan has been implementing some stricter laws to give foreign maids more rights; do you think these attempts will be effective for your maids?
27. Also, do you think these recent events will be good for the Indonesian/Filipino domestic worker business in Hong Kong/Taiwan?

Government (Indonesia and Philippines)

1. Give me some history: how long has your government been involved in sending citizens abroad for work, especially domestic helpers?
 - a. Was it happening before you were involved? If so, how and why did the Indonesian/Filipino government become involved?
 - b. How many citizens does your country have abroad as of now?
 - c. Statistics of growth of migrant workers? Domestic workers?
 - d. How has your involvement changed over time?
2. What does a typical day look like for your department? What kind of people come in, what kinds of meetings do you have, common questions/problems that arise, etc.?
3. What is the process for bringing an Indonesian/Filipino maid to Hong Kong/Taiwan, and as the government, what role do you play before they go out? (training requirements, visa requirements, timing, etc.)
 - a. Please distinguish your department/ministry from other departments, as well.
4. What do you think is most crucial for Indonesian/Filipino domestic workers to learn from the government before they leave?
5. The Indonesian and Filipino governments have both chosen very different ways to be involved in the Asian “maid trade”; tell me why you have chosen to be involved the way you are.
 - a. In your personal opinion, is there room for improvement in some areas? How?
 - b. How would you compare your approach to the other government’s?
6. What is your role after the maids have left for their work abroad? (introducing them to their employer, paperwork, orientation, etc.)
 - a. Do you frequently communicate with consulates in other countries? In what manner?
7. Does the Indonesian/Filipino government require or suggest any check-ups or debriefing for a maid upon her return to Indonesia after the completion of her two-year contract? If so, how strictly are they enforced?
 - a. Is the government, national or local, at all involved in helping the maids settle back home?
8. Do you ever assist your agencies in marketing or promoting Indonesian/Filipino maids in Hong Kong/Taiwan? If so, how? (Perhaps in speaking to governments or giving them publicity?)
9. How actively do you work to distinguish Indonesian/Filipino maids from each other and other nationalities of maids?
10. Some academics have worried that because Indonesian agencies market their maids as more traditional or domicile, they may be more vulnerable to abuse. Do you think that is true? Why or why not?

11. What do you think is the biggest advantage to Indonesia/the Philippines in sending your citizens abroad to work?
 - a. Some government spokesmen have expressed a desire to change how domestic helpers are sent abroad, such as by making them more specialized; can you elaborate on this?
12. Recently, the Indonesian/Filipino government has become more active and more vocal in standing up for its citizen's rights (e.g., preventing executions, commitment to stop exporting domestic workers). Can you explain to me why you are doing this now? Was there a trigger?
13. With this talk of rights, what message do you hope to communicate to both your citizens and to international governments (like Hong Kong/Taiwan)?
14. What is the difference between your role and that of the training agencies here in the home country? How do you work together with them?
 - a. Do you ever get any complaints about training agencies? How do you handle them?
15. When do you think it is justified for a maid to have her contract terminated early?
16. (Indonesia only) In your own words, what role did the Indonesian government play in resolving the Erwiana Sulistyarningsih case?
17. If that or a situation like that ever happens again, what would you do differently?
18. Besides physical abuse, what are some situations Indonesian/Filipino maids abroad face that particularly distress your government, or that the government is trying to work towards bettering?
19. Have you ever had any difficulty or had to negotiate with the Hong Kong or Taiwan governments specifically to let your citizens work as maids there?
 - a. If so, please describe what happened and how you handled it.
20. Also, do you think these recent events (Erwiana Sulitsyaningsih, Taiwan enforcing stricter laws) will be good for the Indonesian/Filipino domestic worker business in Hong Kong/Taiwan?

Appendix D
Themes Used for Document Analysis, and Words Reflecting Each Theme

NOTE: Some words do not match perfectly across languages because an in-depth qualitative analysis revealed that the different languages used words and phrases differently. Furthermore, some phrases in English had multiple ways of being translated in Chinese and Indonesian, and vice versa. Few agencies did exact translations of all their pages, and thus I adjusted my word count accordingly.

Submissiveness: A primary selling point for maids (Indonesian especially), many agencies like to emphasize that a maid will not be outspoken or demanding, and that she will be completely obedient to her employer. Whether or not this turns out to be true, it perpetuates a common cultural stereotype (primarily Indonesian), and could easily affect an employer's expectations of what kind of maid they will get.

Keywords:

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>
submissive	服從 順從	penurut bersikap tunduk patuh mematuhi
less favourable [favorable]	減少優惠	kurang menguntungkan
obey obedient	聽話 服從性[高]	penurut patuh taat mentaati
servant serve	女僕 傭人 服務	pelayan menyajikan
patient	耐性 耐煩 耐心	sabar tabah
follow [employer's/your] instructions	款服指示 依照僱主的指示	sesuai [dengan/dgn] petunjuk taat aturan dibutuhkan
like [your/their] family	像[]家庭 親人一般, 家人	seperti [anggota] keluarga seperti keluarga [kamu] seperti keluarga sendiri
don't argue	不要[別]爭辯 忍讓	jangan melawan jangan berdebat

	忍受	
loyalty devote devotion	忠心	setia mengabdikan kesetiaan

Flexibility: Related to “submissiveness,” agencies will often highlight Indonesian maids’ willingness to change their schedules and work patterns to suit their employers (e.g., working on a weekend). It can also be phrased as Indonesians being willing to adapt to or learn an employers’ habits, less likely to argue and not being set in their own ways.

Keywords:

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>
agree to forfeit willing to forfeit	同意放棄 同意喪失	mengorbankan menyerah
flexible	彈性 懂變通	mudah disesuaikan fleksibel
adapt adaptable	適應 遷就	menyesuaikan menyelaraskan beradaptasi
responsibilities of/to	責任 負責 擔當	bertanggung jawab [atas]
substitute alternative	替代 代替	pengganti alternatif
willing to work on [weekends, rest day, etc.]	願意工作 假期安排較彈性 無假期	bersedia [be]kerja pada [akhir pekan, hari libur]
payment in lieu	[以]款項代替	pembayaran ganti rugi pesangon
accept feedback	[易於]接受意見	menerima umpan balik menerima saran

Industriousness: maids described as hardworking and clever, able to learn and willing to do whatever the employer needs, even working overtime.

Keywords:

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>
helpful	有幫助	penolong ringan tangan

well-trained	訓練有素 訓練好 現成	terlatih
efficiency efficient	得力 高效 能幹 效率高	efisiensi efisien hemat tidak boros
hardworking hard working	勤力 用心 勤奮 肯吃苦 吃苦耐勞	kerja keras perhatikan pekerja keras
industrious overtime	勤勞 辛勤	lembur berhasil
initiative	主動	[punya] inisiatif
success	[n/a]	sukses

Boundaries/Limits: In public instructions for maids (translated into both Cantonese and Indonesian, so presumably for the employers to see, as well), agencies often make a point of reminding the maids that the employer's home is not their home. There are often detailed lists of what the maids must not do, as well as what they must ask their employers' permission to do.

Keywords:

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>
rules command guidelines	規則 指引 規矩 指導	perintah[kan] aturan pedoman petunjuk
do not allow allowed by/to	不可 不允許 不行 不得	dilarang tidak diizinkan tidak diperbolehkan
permission permit	僱主批准	permisi izin

	獲准	
tell [your] employer inform [your] employer relay to [your] employer	通知僱主 告知僱主	kasihtahu majikan kasih tahu majikan beritahu majikan/atasan
avoid	避免 以免	menghindari mencegah

Responsibilities: Agencies also list out what is expected of maids in their new position. These instructions can be surprisingly detailed and seem designed to take up a maid's entire life. This will include cleaning, cooking, care of the family, and others.

Keywords:

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>
chores	雜務 雜事	pekerjaan rumah
domestic duties	家務	pekerjaan rumah tangga
clean wash	乾淨 清潔 洗 清洗 洗滌	cuci bersih bersihkan membersihkan
care caring	照顧 關照	jaga penjagaan menjaga perhatian
loving	護理	peduli mencintai
elderly	老人 老者 老年人	orang jompo nenek kakek orang tua
baby child	嬰兒 小孩 小朋友	bayi anak
disabilities	傷殘 傷殘人士 殘疾人士	disabilitas

cook cooking	煮飯 煮食 做飯	masak memasak
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Employer’s needs: In a diplomatic move, agencies often insist that a single kind of maid will not work for everyone, and often ask the employer exactly what they are looking for: then match those preferences to a maid nationality.

Keywords:

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>
relationship	關係	hubungan
consideration	考慮 考量	pertimbangan
your family	你【您】家庭	keluarga kamu keluargamu
affordable expensive	支付得起 貴 便宜	terjangkau sanggup mahal
reason for hiring	招聘原因 為什麼聘用	alasan untuk mempekerjakan alasan untuk mengontrak
suitable	適合 適當	cocok kecocokan
harmony harmonious	和諧 調諧	harmonis seiring sejalan
strike/maintain a balance	沖帳 衝帳 保持平衡	menjaga keseimbangan perhatian peduli
vacancy	候補	lowongan lowongan kerja [loker]
candidate	[N/A]	calon kandidat

“Good maid”: In disparate places, agencies can send subliminal or overt messages to the domestic workers about what being a “good maid” should look like – how they should act and what it takes to identify as one. Such insinuations will simultaneously shame those who do not meet these standards. The standards include appearance, behaviors, and speech.

Keywords:

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>
shower	洗澡	mandi
tidy //	整齊 整理 整頓 整潔	bersih jaga kebersihan rapi merapi
proper	合宜 保守	layak pantas pas
responsible responsibilities	責任 負責 主管	tanggung jawab
like your family member of the family	親人一般	seperti [anggota] keluarga seperti [anak/nenek/kakek] [kamu] [sendiri] seperti keluarga sendiri
discipline	自律 紀律	disiplin taat aturan
[not] complain [not] argue	[不要]抱怨 [不要]頂嘴 [不要]爭辯	[jangan/tidak] melawan [jangan/tidak] bertengkar [jangan/tidak] berdebat
polite	有禮 尊重 禮貌	sopan santun
greeting say good morning [afternoon/night]	打招呼 問候	kasih ucapan selamat selamat [pagi/sore/malam] salam pembuka
smile	[保持]笑容	senyum
borrow money loan	借錢 貸款	pinjam uang terima uang hutang
personality performance	個性表現	kinerja pribadi kinerja seseorang
appearance facial expression	儀容	penampilan raut muka/ekspresi wajah
loyalty	忠心	setia

devote devotion		mengabdikan kesetiaan
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Rights: Agencies may include a maid's rights in their writing or public announcements. Such descriptions may be found in instructions to maids and employers (regarding what is permitted and what to do if those rights are violated), or in descriptions of responsibilities.

Keywords:

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>
justice	正義 公道	keadilan
equal	同樣 均等 平等	sama persamaan
the right to rights	權利 人權	hak [manusia]
compensation	賠付 賠償 賠款 賠錢	ganti rugi kompensasi
law laws legal	法律 依法 規定	hukum peraturan undang-undang
minimum [allowable] wage	規定最低工資	gaji upah
contact [your agency; police; hotline] call [your agency; police; hotline]	聯絡【】 給【】打電話	kontak [pt/agensi kamu; polisi; hotline] hubungi [pt/agensi kamu; polisi; hotline]

Institutional involvement: When institutions like the agencies or government get involved, or when it is detailed how they could/should get involved for any reason. This is rarely described by agencies, which instead prefer maids and employers to pay them to handle these logistics; I expect to see it more in news and government sites

Keywords:

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>
police	警察	polisi
hospital	醫院	rumah sakit

	衛生署	
government	政府	pemerintah
translate	翻譯	terjemah menterjemahkan
investigation	處理	penyelidikan
supervision	管理	pengawasan
court	法院	pengadilan
labour [department]	勞工處 勞委會 勞動部	departemen tenaga kerja
immigration [department]	入境事務處	departemen imigrasi
consulate	領事館	konsulat kantor perwakilan
insurance	保險	asuransi
Executive Yuan [Taiwan only]	行政院	[N/A]

Leisure: As part of work, maids are supposed to get time off, but it is not uncommon for agencies and employers to dictate what can be done during leisure time (whether days off or when they are not working). Coinciding with “submissiveness” and “flexibility,” this can be framed as an employer needing to protect their maid or as the responsibility of being a good maid.

Keywords:

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>
statutory holiday	法定假日 國定假日	hari libur resmi hari libur nasional
day off rest day holiday	假期 休息日	hari libur liburan
rest	休息	istirahat beristirahat
makeup	化妝	dandan berdandan
friends	朋友	teman sahabat

Inferiority: When agencies indicate overtly or in undertones that foreign domestic workers are inferior to locals (Hong Kongers or Taiwanese). This attitude will usually manifest in said

media calling on stereotypes or casting some kind of judgment on the whole population based on one maid's actions.

Keywords:

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>
ignorant	懵懂 無知	cuek masa bodoh ketidakpedulian
[become] a burden	成為負擔	menjadi beban
servant	女僕 傭人	pelayan pembantu
prostitution	性服務 賣淫	prostitusi pelacuran
job-hopping	跳槽	pekerja serabutan berpindah-pindah pekerjaan