

Imagination of Self and the Other: Inter-ethnic Attitudes between Filipino Domestic Helpers and their Employers after the Manila Hostage Crisis

YU Hiu Yan¹

Abstract

The Manila Hostage Crisis took place on 23 August 2010 when a tour bus with 25 Hong Kong passengers was hijacked by a former Filipino police officer in the national capital, resulting in eight deaths and seven injuries. Anti-Filipino sentiments were aroused among the general public in Hong Kong, where Filipinos comprise one of the largest groups of foreigners due to the importation of foreign domestic helpers. This study mainly focuses on Hong Kong employers and Filipino employees, as there is a close relationship between the two groups in many households in Hong Kong. It examines inter-ethnic attitudes during this “moment of crisis” that reveal the different perceptions of the two groups towards the ethnic “other.” This research also explores the inter-relations in terms of structures of gender, racism, ethnicity, migration, and the nation-state under a global framework, and how these relations can be examined in the discussion about the crisis.

¹ YU Hiu Yan is a graduate of the Department of Anthropology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. She can be reached at her e-mail, candy4inlove@hotmail.com

Introduction

On the morning of 24 August 2010, as I was enjoying my breakfast in the Gold Coast, Australia at an international resort, my Chinese tour guide rushed to me and asked, "Have you heard the big news from Hong Kong? Last night, a few Hong Kong tourists were killed by a Filipino in Manila!" I was very shocked when I learnt that a bus hijacking in Manila had ended tragically. How can we make sense of the relationships between the Hong Kong people and Filipinos during a critical event such as the Manila Hostage Crisis? How do Hong Kong citizens perceive Filipinos and the Philippines after the crisis and vice versa? In other words, how do the two groups imagine and conceive of each other?

The Moment of Crisis

Previous academic research and discussions about foreign domestic helpers from less-developed countries coming to developed societies have focused on the reasons for migration, their working conditions, migrants' political, social and economic status in the host society, ill treatment and abuse of domestic helpers, globalization and commodification of women's bodies (see Constable 1997; Bakan and Stasiulis 1997); Parrenas 2001; Gatmaytan 1997; Yoeh, Huanh, and Gonzalez 1999; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004). However, little has been discussed about the inter-ethnic attitudes between migrant domestic helpers and their employers. Constable (1997) focuses on conflicts in the daily lives of Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong, and the discipline-and-resistance relationship between employers and employees. Inspired by Michel Foucault, she argues that there exist constant negotiations in power relations between Filipino domestic helpers, their employers, recruitment agencies and the state.

In contrast to these other studies, I present an anthropological study of inter-ethnic attitudes between Filipino domestic helpers and their employers by looking into the Manila Hostage Crisis at the "moment of crisis." Anthropologist Max Gluckman, known for his "situational analysis" and "extended case study," was influenced by Freud who ascertained that "a thorough investigation of unique cases of crisis revealed deep underlying themes of motivations" (Kapferer 2006:121). Gluckman developed the theory of situational analysis, in which the term "situation" refers to the total context of a crisis. The Manila Hostage Crisis is a "moment of crisis," which has revealed a lot of underlying ethnic and social issues that are products of a "segregated co-existence" of Hong Kong people and Filipinos in a geographical and cultural context.

First of all, the concept of ethnicity that I use in the anthropological discussion here is largely based on Lan Law's (2010) definition in *Racism and Ethnicity: Global Debates, Dilemmas, Directions*. Here, I take his definition of ethnicity, which refers to "the differentiation of groups of people who have shared cultural meanings, memories and descents, produced through social interactions." Max Weber (1978) further refers to an "ethnic group" as a group of people who believe in common descent and share collective memories of colonization and migration, collective customs, social practices, common language and physical similarities.²

² "Human groups that entertain a belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be

There exists an ethnic boundary between Hong Kong people and Filipino domestic helpers working in Hong Kong, where the clear economic distinction, social stratification, unequal social status of the two groups further strengthen the discourse of “rightful” and “innocent” Hong Kong people and the “shameful” and “disloyal” Filipinos in the Manila Hostage Crisis. It is undeniable that socio-economic differences and ethnic otherness between the two groups are the fundamental reasons for prejudices and conflicts; however, it is just one side of the coin. Some research, such as Nicole Constable’s work on employer-employee household relationships, portrays employers as “demanding,” “unreasonable” and “evil”, while employees are shown to be “subordinated,” “ill-treated” and “victims under global capitalism” (1997). It is not my intention to argue against the main discourse; nonetheless, there are other perspectives to discuss rather than just the exploitation of foreign domestic helpers. The relationships between foreign domestic helpers and their employers are not necessarily hostile. In fact, “normal” relations are very common. Most of my Hong Kong informants discussed the Manila Hostage Crisis with their domestic helpers and expressed concerns about their emotions. Some of them shopped with their maids in the first two weeks after the crisis to protect them from oral or physical attacks by other Hong Kong people.

Ethnographic Methods and Negative Stereotyping

I aim to show that class and ethnic differences between Hong Kong employers and their Filipino employees do not necessarily lead to hostility in employer-employee relations, that healthy and mutually respectful relationships can be built; however, undeniably, sexual abuse and domestic violence toward Filipino domestic helpers does happen in Hong Kong. My hesitation in writing this paragraph was due to the fear of confirming stereotypes of Hong Kong employers as mean, abusive and demanding. I am aware of the power of interpreting and selecting data that I hold as an author, and thus feel strongly that I should not just select the parts that could strengthen my argument. Therefore, at risk of confirming stereotypes and contradicting my main argument, I have decided to recount Julia’s frightening experience of working for her first employers, a Hong Kong couple, when she was 19 years old.

My first employer was a woman and she had a crazy husband. One day, I was cleaning the toilet and my employer was not at home. Her husband and I were alone. I didn’t close the door when I was cleaning. I was bending. He went in and watched. It was weird but I thought he might want to observe my performance. And he started to touch me...my hip. I was nineteen and I was scared. I turned around to face him. When I was about to shout, he touched my breasts. I immediately hit him with something. I forgot what it was, probably just something you can find in bathroom. He fought back and hit me. I was not badly injured. He went away. I cried. I didn’t know how to face my employer. When she came back, I told her everything. She told me her husband had a bad temper but reassured me that nothing would happen again. The man came back three weeks later. He told me that he was a rich man. He had 300 employees in Mainland China and I should respect him for that. He was totally crazy. I worked for them for 2 years. Just when the contract was about to

important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists” (Weber 1978).

terminate, my employer pleaded [for] me to stay. I was moved and planned to re-new the contact. But then, the man did it again. He pushed me to the sofa and my employer was just back home. She fought with the man and told me that she would protect me if I stayed. No way! I wouldn't stay any longer with these crazy people. I found another employer and have worked for her for 6 years.

My ethnographic data was mainly collected from in-depth interviews with Hong Kong employers and Filipino domestic helpers conducted from September to November 2010 when people's memories towards the Manila Hostage Crisis were still fresh. I interviewed 10 Filipino domestic helpers and 8 Hong Kong employers in total. Each interview took at least an hour and some more than three hours. Two key informants, Annie and Jean, who are employees of my uncles, introduced me to their Filipino friends, who also introduced their own Filipino domestic helper friends to me. I also accompanied my uncles to participate in three gatherings with their friends, where I observed how middle-class employers talked about their domestic helpers.

My research on inter-ethnic attitudes was also supplemented by Hong Kong and Filipino newspapers; however, I paid more attention to the portrayal of the Manila Hostage Crisis by the Hong Kong media. I collected different public opinions towards the crisis from the major Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong, such as *Ming Pao*, *Singtao*, *Apple Daily*, *The Sun*, and Filipino newspapers, including *The Philippines Daily Inquirer* and *The Philippines Star*. *The South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong also provided an English *vox populi*. Data was collected from popular Hong Kong magazines such as *Next Magazine* and *Ming Pao Weekly*. Online forums, such as Uwants.com, Hong Kong Discuss (www.discuss.com.hk), and Hong Kong Golden Forum (www.forum.hkgolden.com) can also be gages for public opinion about the Manila Hostage Crisis in Hong Kong. The three online discussion forums were specifically chosen because of their popularity among Hong Kong Internet users and because of their different political positions.

Filipino Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong

"The history of entry of foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong began in 1969, when expatriates were allowed to bring along their domestic servants from overseas." (Tam 1999: 264) In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the number of Filipinos who worked as foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong increased dramatically. At the time, Hong Kong was experiencing an economic boom. The expansion of the manufacturing sector "freed" women from the private domain and allowed them to enter the public sphere, as more women participated in the labour market. In the late 1970s, Hong Kong shifted from being an industrially based entrepôt for Mainland China to becoming an international commercial and service centre. Hong Kong's women were able to take jobs in restaurants, banks, and other kinds of tertiary industries. However, with more and more women in the labour market, imported labour from less developed regions was needed to fill the gap in the domestic sphere. By employing foreign domestic helpers, local women were able to free themselves from household duties to contribute to Hong Kong's economy (Constable 2008).

A foreign domestic helper only works for one employer; it is illegal to require foreign domestic helpers to perform duties outside the household. The job description of foreign domestic helpers can be loosely defined as doing housework and taking care

of children and the elderly. Most middle-class families in Hong Kong require “all-round” foreigner domestic helpers who are responsible for all the cleaning, washing, cooking and grocery shopping. She has to take care of children and accompany them to school and extra-curricular activities after school. If her employer has a dog, it is also her duty to walk the dog. Some of them also have to wash cars for their employers. Nowadays, many foreign domestic helpers are live-in workers, which allows employers to call on their services anytime they want.

There is a large body of research concerning the working conditions and difficulties encountered by Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong. Anthropologist Nicole Constable’s (1997) book, *Maid to Order* describes the harsh working conditions of the Filipinos and the unequal relationship between them and their employers. In the 1990s, she started to collect lists of chores set by Hong Kong employers. These lists showed how employers control and discipline their employees in various ways, such as the way they dress, the time they come home on their rest day, etc. Employers also set up rules and regulations for managing their time and schedule of work. Constable’s early studies of Filipino domestic workers were more focused on cultural and ethnic conflicts, and household rules and regulations imposed by employers; Filipino domestic helpers were not considered to be members of the family, and housework was never “real work” in people’s perceptions. Filipinos’ low and subordinate social status was the result of the devaluation of domestic work and the reality of being the ethnic “other” in Hong Kong.

Constable’s more recent research pays attention to Filipino domestic workers’ use of public space in Hong Kong and their political activism. They actively participate in protests and demonstrations for wage increases, labour rights and exploitation of their labour under the themes of globalization, neo-liberalism and capitalism (Zoitl 2008: 10-19). Filipinos’ active participation in fighting for political goals serves as an indicator of their increasing empowerment in Hong Kong.

Prior to Constable’s ethnographic study, Carolyn French had studied Filipino migrant workers and published *Filipino Domestic Workers in Hong Kong: A Preliminary Survey* in 1986. She addressed the problem of Filipinos being a segregated group that was hardly integrated into the local community.

As of November 2009, approximately 261,500 foreign domestic helpers lived in Hong Kong, mainly from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam. The number of Filipino domestic helpers, who used to be the second largest foreign group in Hong Kong, has declined in the past decade from over 130,000 to 128,000. With detailed descriptions of the life of Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong and a brief introduction to previous studies related to the importation of foreign domestic helpers, I aim to provide a general picture of what it means to be a Filipino domestic helper in Hong Kong.

Inter-ethnic conflicts and violence between domestic helpers and employers have been visible throughout Hong Kong’s history, and were not necessarily restricted to the household. Occasionally, domestic violence involving foreign domestic helpers turned into ethnic conflicts between the Filipino domestic worker minority and mainstream society. More recently, the Manila Hostage Crisis provoked ethnic tensions between Hong Kong and the Philippines as eight Hong Kong tourists died from gunshots inflicted by a Filipino. Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong seemed to become scapegoats for the local Hong Kong population, receiving severe verbal attacks on the Internet in the first two weeks after the crisis. From the empirical data that I collected

from Filipino domestic helpers and their Hong Kong employers, however, no obvious tension arose as a result of the crisis.

The Manila Hostage Crisis

My research on inter-ethnic attitudes between Filipino domestic helpers and their Hong Kong employers uses the Manila Hostage Crisis as an entry point. Gluckman (1967: XV) suggested that using “situational analysis,” one can take a critical event or a case study, which involves serious or dramatic conflict, to see how it reflects and reproduces cultural views and patterns. Besides understanding normative life patterns by studying incidents, one can also see how a series of crises cause alter and polarize cultural views. In other words, a critical event is not simply a mirror of cultural expression, but also a process of cultural reproduction.

I begin this section with two anthropological theories to explain why the Manila Hostage Crisis is significant for understanding inter-ethnic attitudes and employer-helper relationships. In Hong Kong, occasional attacks on foreign domestic helpers are not uncommon. The mass media constantly covers stories of child abuse by foreign domestic helpers or helpers being sexually or physically abused by their employers. However, these cases do not necessarily reflect the nature of the relationship between employers and employees in general. Similarly, if one discusses the crisis on a superficial level with only newspapers or magazines as supplements, a conclusion that “all Hong Kong people are racist” can be easily drawn.

The Bus Hijacking, Negotiation and Assault

On 23 August, 2010, at approximately 10 a.m., a Hong Thai Travel Services tour bus carrying 25 people, including 20 Hong Kong tourists, 1 Hong Kong tour guide and 4 Filipinos, was hijacked in Rizal Park, Manila, by a former senior inspector Rolando Mendoza. He took the Hong Kong tourists hostage in an attempt to have his case re-investigated and his former position reinstated. The mass media in Manila, including government-owned National Broadcasting Network (NBN) provided live coverage of the event. 11 hours after the tour bus had been hijacked, the Manila Hostage Crisis tragically ended with 9 dead, including 8 Hong Kong people and Mendoza, and 7 injured.

I don't know how they are doing. Why didn't they save us? Was it for money? [Mrs. Leung was one of the survivors whose husband and two daughters died in the crisis, with a son who was badly injured]. (Mrs. Leung, quoted. in *The Standard*, 24 August 2010).

Reactions of Hong Kong: Outraged by the Bloody Ending

Prompt actions were taken by the Hong Kong government once it had been informed about the Manila Hostage Crisis, including sending officers from Hong Kong to Manila for assistance and forming a taskforce within the Hong Kong Security Bureau. Chief Executive Donald Tsang commented that he was “highly concerned” about the hostage situation, but was unable to successfully contact the President of the Philippines. After confirming that eight Hong Kong people had died in the crisis, Hong

Kong immediately issued a black travel warning against the Philippines and urged Hong Kong citizens to leave the country for security concerns (BBC News, 24 August 2010).

On the day after the assault, Donald Tsang openly expressed his disappointment with the handling of the incident and demanded a thorough investigation: “The way it was handled, particularly the outcome, I find, is disappointing,” he said (BBC News, 23, August 2010). At the same time, some of Hong Kong’s political parties organized demonstrations outside the Philippine Consulate in Hong Kong. The general public was skeptical about the cause of death of the victims. Some suggested that not all victims were killed by Mendoza, but that some were shot down or physically harmed by the Filipino SWAT team. The strong position taken by the Hong Kong government and a series of similar responses from Hong Kong people towards the Manila Hostage Crisis sparked ethnic tensions within the Hong Kong community. Not long after the day of assault, there was a rumour about Hong Kong employers terminating contracts with their employees as revenge for the Philippines’ perceived incompetence in handling the hostage situation.

Reactions of the Philippine Government: “We were being told, in very minute detail, what we were supposed to do”

In response to the strong demands by the Hong Kong and Chinese governments, President Benigno Aquino III promised that a “thorough investigation” would be conducted. He told the media that he “wasn’t exactly impressed with the way police handled the bloody hostage-taking drama at the Luneta Park” (Avenidaño 2010), and defended the “poor performances” of the police, arguing that Mendoza did not show signs of potentially wanting to harm the hostages in the first place. When asked if there were defects in handling the crisis, he said, “how can I be satisfied if there are people who died? But, as you know, even in Russia—they have resources and sophistication—when they had that theatre hostage taking situation, the casualties were even more severe” (Kabiling 2010). He further criticized the mass media for providing live coverage of the crisis on TV. The response was criticized by the Hong Kong public, together with the Philippines mass media for his attempt to shift the burden of responsibility onto the mass media in order to divert the attention of the public from the government.

On 9 September, Aquino said he received a letter from the Hong Kong government, which he found insulting as instructions were given to tell him what to do: “I decided not to respond to the official letter from the Hong Kong government that in my view was insulting. [Instead] I conveyed through the People’s Republic of China government that maybe sending that letter to me was not right. I did not like its tone” (Robles, Liu, and Tsang: 2010). The Philippines political strategist, Billy Esposito, stressed that the insulting letter was a severe problem that “in other situations could even provoke a war” (*ibid.*); the Hong Kong government denied these accusations and said the letter was “polite and respectful” (*ibid.*).

While the Hong Kong public was not happy with almost everything that the Philippines government had done, The Philippines public also voiced resentment towards the “arrogant attitude of Hong Kong people” (Parry 2010). One of the Philippines’ media columnists, Ramon Talco, expressed his displeasure in the Philippines Daily Inquirer by calling the Hong Kong people “the most arrogant in the world” (*ibid.*). He further wrote, “in trying to appease the Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong people, we’re making other countries trample on our dignity and pride as a

nation,” and that, “we are feeding on Hong Kong people’s arrogance by our seemingly servile stance to them” (Parry 2010).

The Manila Hostage Crisis and Mass Media

It is not surprising that the mass media from both Hong Kong and China portrayed the crisis as a “heart-breaking tragedy,” and mainly focused on the poor performance of the Philippines police and government, of which they were highly critical. Using some of the headlines in the *South China Morning Post* in describing the crisis as examples, one can see how language was used to portray the crisis and channel the emotions and attitudes of the public towards the Philippines. For instance, “Survivor outraged at omissions in report,”³ “Appeals for justice mark Mass for Manila dead,”⁴ “Behind the scenes of a bloodbath,”⁵ “Anger must run its course before the healing can begin.”⁶

If one reads Hong Kong Chinese-language newspapers regarding the crisis, one can find that the headlines became more “emotional” over time; for example, *Oriental Daily News* used “Philippines owe Hong Kong a bloody explanation” (菲律賓欠香港一個血的解釋),⁷ while the *Apple Daily* used “Acting like Boy Scouts, messy operation” (「童子軍式」強攻 行動一團糟).⁸ At the same time, the mass media in the Mainland shared a similar tone with their counterparts in Hong Kong. The *Global Times*, an English newspaper based in Beijing, stated, “Philippines should understand HK’s grief” on 25 August 2010.

One can also easily find public opinion on various online discussion forums after the Manila Hostage Crisis, where many people expressed their personal feelings by making negative comments about the Philippines government and Filipinos in general. It was common to find messages addressed to the Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong on the forums related the crisis. As mentioned above, I have collected public opinions from popular forums in Hong Kong, including Uwant, Hong Kong Discuss, and the Hong Kong Golden Forum. The general opinions posted on the Hong Kong Golden Forum are clearly radical and against the People’s Republic of China. On the other hand, to a certain extent, both Uwant and Hong Kong Discuss are relatively conservative. It should be noted that the forum managers of the latter two discussion forums showed a higher degree of control and authority over posts. In contrast, the management of the Hong Kong Golden Forum tends to have less control over messages posted on the website. After the Crisis, Internet users vented their anger towards the Philippines by leaving messages and posts on these forums. Using the post “Hong Tai bus Hijacking Event” (康泰旅行團被脅持事件專帖)⁹ on Hong Kong Discuss, which contains more than 5000 messages, as an example, I summarize a few popular points of view held by the public:

- 1) Filipinos are described as dogs

³ Phyllis Tsang, and Simpson Cheung, 21 September 2010. *South China Morning Post*.

⁴ Raissa Robles in Manila, 11 September 2010. *South China Morning Post*.

⁵ Raissa Robles in Manila, 28 August 2010. *South China Morning Post*.

⁶ Rex Aguado, 27 August 2010. *South China Morning Post*.

⁷ *Oriental Daily News*, 24 August 2010.

⁸ *Apple Daily*, 25 August 2010.

⁹ Hong Kong Discussion Forum

<http://www.discuss.com.hk/viewthread.php?tid=12931818&extra=page%3D1>

- 2) The Philippines is a backward country and cannot be compared with advanced Hong Kong
- 3) Verbally attacking Filipinos on their sexuality and criticizing them for being too materialistic and talkative
- 4) They should be thankful”: focusing on the unequal relationship between Hong Kong (employer) and the Philippines (employee)—master and slave relationship.
- 5) “Forgiveness”: placing Hong Kong in a morally higher position and stressing the superiority of Hong Kong and the backwardness of the Philippines.

Undoubtedly, many of the messages are clearly racist. There was a tendency for people who left messages on discussion forums to manipulate the employer-employee relationship between Hong Kong people and Filipinos. Despite the relationship’s legal applicability to only a majority of the Filipinos living in Hong Kong, the forum posters exaggerated the idea to also attack the Philippines in general by claiming that “all” Hong Kong people are the bosses and “all” Filipinos “should have” an inferior status because “they work for us.” Further, issues regarding ethnicity and gender were also brought to public attention during the Crisis. However, one has to note that most of these racist messages were posted during the first two weeks after the Hostage Crisis; these forums served as a way to channel the raw emotions of the public, especially after many Hong Kong people witnessed the whole process of the tragedy in the live-broadcast. It must also be noted that one can easily leave messages on the Internet without taking serious consideration of the consequences, as one does not have to reveal one’s real name or any personal information. Some of the posters might not have been aware that they would have to bear responsibility for what they posted; and even if they did have this awareness, it may have been neglected in times of such a crisis. Therefore, I argue that these public opinions only superficially reflect the ethnic relationships between Hong Kong people and the Filipinos. Similarly, these messages on various discussion forums, to a large extent, are the immediate responses to the tragedy, which cannot be interpreted as a complete representation of the ethnic attitudes of all Hong Kong people.

On the one hand, the Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese mass media expressed their strong opposition to the Philippines government; on the other hand, the mass media in the Philippines generally showed their grief and shame towards the victims’ families. The media did not show great support to their government. One of the most important reasons for this was that the mass media was heavily blamed by the government for the live-broadcast that allowed Mendoza to be fully informed of the whole situation. The government also charged some journalists who had contributed to the investigation report handed over to Hong Kong. Having been scapegoated by their own government, defending it was not the main discourse among the mass media in the Philippines.

The Hong Kong government has slammed Philippines authorities for bungling the crisis. The world has slammed Philippines authorities for bungling the crisis. They have every reason to. (de Quiros 2010: Philippines Daily Inquirer)

Dan Mariano: For the moment, our government officials should stop saying that Monday’s carnage was just an isolated incident. The more urgent business is to make sure it never happens again—and to try to make amends to the victims and their families. (Mariano 2010: The Manila Times)

I have outlined the Manila Hostage Crisis and how the media of Hong Kong, Mainland China and the Philippines portrayed the crisis. It may seem that much of the aforementioned material strengthens the discourse of the “rightful and innocent” Hong Kong people and the “shameful” Filipinos; however, it is just part of the picture. After conducting in-depth and semi-structured interviews with both employers and employees in Hong Kong, more can be revealed on the inter-ethnic attitudes between Hong Kong people and Filipinos when we examine their relationships.

A Home with Filipino Domestic Helpers

In the past few weeks, I have been watching TV, reading newspaper and browsing online discussion forums all the time. Everyone is talking about the Manila Hostage Crisis. I feel sad. The city is now in deep sorrow.

(Wendy HO, 43 year old, financial planner)

The mass media played a significant role not only in reporting every detail of the Manila Hostage Crisis to the general public in Hong Kong, but also in expressing specific attitudes about the crisis, which, to a certain extent, influenced the perceptions of Hong Kong people. The effects of print media in creating a unified society and a sense of solidarity among a group of people have been well elaborated in Benedict Anderson’s (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. From an anthropological perspective, the nature of newspapers, magazines and television are symbolic and do not necessarily depict reality, however, the language that journalists use and the messages behind their words influence how the recipients think and feel, especially in such unusual times as a crisis. Looking at newspapers, magazines, and messages on discussion forums and Internet chat rooms collected from late August to November, one can feel the tense atmosphere between the two groups regarding the tragic outcome of the Manila Hostage Crisis. Here, mass media functioned to channel societal emotions. It also produced a culture by interpreting the events and creating a social atmosphere with the use of particular language in each publication that carried with it strong symbolic meanings.

I started this section with the role of mass media, as this is important to the following discussions of Hong Kong employers’ perceptions towards their Filipino domestic helpers after the Manila Hostage Crisis. In order to gain insights into their perceptions, we have to contextualize the strong influences of mass media in shaping and creating the discourse of “guilty Filipinos” and “innocent Hong Kong people.”

Ambivalence over Filipinos

There are two levels for understanding the inter-ethnic relationships between Hong Kong people and Filipinos. One is largely based on an “imagination of the other” that is largely based on coverage by the mass media. For instance, I interviewed seven Hong Kong informants who had neither hired Filipino domestic helpers, nor visited the Philippines before. These informants generally expressed their opinions towards the crisis and Filipinos based on information provided by the media. They tended to describe the Philippines as “developing,” “backward,” and “only earn[ing] [a] reputation recently due to the development of tourism.”

Another level of understanding is the Hong Kong employers' attitudes, which were largely based on their experiences of hiring Filipino domestic helpers and their daily interactions with them. Despite this direct contact with Filipinos, most Hong Kong employers' perceptions of Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong, the Filipinos in the Philippines, and the country as the origin of foreign domestic workers, were initially all based on the "imagination of others." They rely on their hiring experiences and the work performances of their Filipino helpers to imagine the national qualities or characteristics of the larger Filipino ethnic group in Hong Kong, before constructing ideas of Filipinos in the Philippines. Finally, they imagine what the Philippines is and how, as a country, it is different from Hong Kong, in order to make sense of their daily encounters with the ethnic others living with them. Of course, these imaginations vary between different employers. For instance, while some employers told stories about Filipino men migrating to the Middle East, others criticised Filipino men for being lazy and irresponsible for not supporting their own families, saying that they were not performing "men's duties."

According to most Hong Kong informants, allowing women to leave home and work overseas while the men stay at home and take care of children was something improper, which undermined the dignity of Filipino men under normative constructs of the gendered division of labour. Men's individual and collective failure to be the breadwinners for their families was believed to threaten their masculinity and manhood, and was seen as the main reason for exporting Filipino women to work overseas. Hong Kong informants tended to overlook the agency of Filipino women in making the decision to work overseas; the structural problems in the Philippines, including economic restructuring in the global economy, high unemployment and underemployment rates, as well as serious corruption in business and government agencies have equally been disregarded. At the same time, Hong Kong society has witnessed a continuous devaluation of domestic work, making it an undesirable career. The weakness and inability of Filipino men to feed their wives and children was, hence, seen as the logical reason for the women being "forced" to leave their homes, families and country to make a living in Hong Kong.

The two groups of Hong Kong informants – those with and those without Filipino domestic helpers – generally ignored the connection between the Filipinos in the Philippines, such as Mendoza (the killer) and the Manila Police and government officials, and the Filipinos working in Hong Kong. While all eight Hong Kong of my employer-informants clearly expressed the view that, "what happened in Manila had nothing to do with my maid(s)," those who had no travel experience to the Philippines, or did not know any Filipinos themselves, were not certain about their feelings about Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong.

It is wrong to blame the Filipino maids in Hong Kong for what has happened in Manila. But the fact is that the government of the Philippines is not doing its job well in the rescue process of the Hong Kong hostages. I feel sorry for them...for having a weak and useless government. That is it. I don't have any contact with Filipinos even before the Manila Hostage Crisis. I guess I won't be friends with them. After all, we are just the same. We just want to make a living. (Wendy HO, 43 years old, financial planner)

While Hong Kong employers generally do not tend to blame their helpers for the crisis, the attitude of non-employers is different. Non-employers, who do not have any contact with Filipinos in their everyday lives, do not believe that an inclusive society is

possible; despite acknowledging the current co-existence of other foreign groups in Hong Kong, they prefer to keep a social distance from these foreign groups, including Filipino domestic helpers.

“Disloyalty” of Filipino Domestic Helpers

I have discussed how the mass media in Hong Kong and the messages on various Internet forums and chat rooms portrayed the Manila Hostage Crisis and the Philippines. Here, Michel Foucault’s (1978) concept of power is a useful tool to illustrate the reasons for this portrayal, and the implications and symbolic meanings behind it.

Anthropologists have explored the interrelation between the structures of racism, ethnicity and migration of a given society within a global framework (cf. Parrenas 2001; Tyner 1999). Many families in Hong Kong hire foreign domestic helpers, such as Indonesian, Filipino, Thai and women from other Southeast Asian countries. In spite of the visibility of Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong society, the group usually does not receive much attention from the mainstream public.

Below I present some of the messages regarding the Manila Hostage Crisis posted on the Hong Kong Discussion Forum a few days after the tragedy on 27 August 2010, revealing the hostile attitudes of Internet users towards the Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong. Some of these messages were clearly mean and racist and used foul language.

你們賺香港人的錢，卻如此對待港人，不炒晒你們這班人都不知道我們港人有多憤怒！ [“You people {Filipinos} earn money from the pockets of Hong Kong people, but you treat Hong Kong like this! If we don’ t fire you, you will not know how angry Hong Kong people are!”] (Posted by Xi Men Chui Xue at 12:08am on 27 August 2010).

養隻狗都好過養你地！起碼唔會忘恩負義，冷血成性。主人死左佢唔會响旁邊歡呼，你遇難佢唔會踩多你一腳。 [“Feeding dogs is better than feeding you people. At least {dogs} will never be ungrateful and cold-hearted. When their master dies, they {the dogs} will never cheer beside him. When you get killed, they will not step on your body disrespectfully.”] Posted by semipiob. Posted by semipiob at 12:10am on 27 August 2010).

Nonetheless, it needs to be stressed that not all messages on these discussion forums were racist and aimed at blaming Filipinos. Some people attempted to maintain a relatively calm attitude, adopting more rational language while conversing.

唉，真係要冷靜，唔係搞針對啦，人地國家政府辦事不力同佢地有 q 關係咩... 係咪因為佢地當時煮緊飯所以人質被挾？定係因為洗緊衫所以槍手開槍啊？對於呢件事，可以有不滿，但係反對無理針對菲傭!!! 反過來想，如果我地特首或政府做錯野(都經常架啦)，唔通又要我地普通市民代佢地公開道歉？這不可能吧。 [“Sigh! Calm down. We shouldn’ t discriminate. How are they {Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong} linked to the incapability and inefficiency of their government? Is it because they were cooking at home at that time so that the hostages were taken? Is it because they were washing clothes at that time so that the killer shot the hostages? We {Hong Kong people} can be disappointed about the sad result of the crisis.

But we shouldn't discriminate against Filipino domestic helpers for no reason! Just to think, if our Chief Executive does something wrong (which always happen), does it mean that all our citizens have to apologize openly? It is just impossible!" Posted by Lu Wei at 12:14am on 27 August 2010).

While Foucault's analyses of knowledge and power, as well as discipline and sexuality have received much attention in the academic realm, in his later work, *History of Sexuality* (1978), he started to turn to the question of racism. He also emphasized the linkage between racism, sexuality and class, and linked racism with the idea of bloodlines. "Blood" functions as an important element in the mechanisms of power and it is all about the manifestations of power. According to Foucault, "racism took shape at this point (racism in its modern, "biologizing", statist form): it was then that a whole politics of settlement, family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, and everyday life, received their colour and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race." (*ibid*: 149)

As we can see from some of racist messages on discussion forums, there existed a discourse of "innocent Hong Kong people" and "guilty Filipinos." People who left such racist messages on the Internet, basically created and justified the concept of a "master-and-slave relationship" between Hong Kong people and Filipinos, showing how Hong Kong employers enjoy a higher status in terms of social status and economic power, illustrating an unequal relationship between the two groups. Interestingly, even though only a small proportion of the Hong Kong population hired foreign domestic helpers, some people tended to think of "all Hong Kong people as bosses" so that domination over Filipinos could be further justified. At the same time, some people stressed the importance of expressing forgiveness towards the Filipinos, which could equally be perceived as racist, as forgiveness is often believed to be given by someone who holds higher moral and ethical status. Saying that Hong Kong people should forgive implied that they had already elevated themselves to the level of saints, allowing them to cleanse an entire country and its people of a sin that it had not really committed.

The perceptions of the eight Hong Kong employers who hired Filipino domestic helpers, towards their employees were quite different, illustrating an alternative perspective to the inter-ethnic relationship after the Manila Hostage Crisis. In contrast to mass media that focused and reported on the outrage of the general public of Hong Kong, in-depth interviews with Hong Kong employers and Filipino employees painted a different picture. There were informants who talked with their Filipino employees about the crisis and tried to reassure that they were safe staying in Hong Kong. There also existed positive comments about the relationship between employers and employees from both sides.

It is not my intention to claim that the discourse of a "master and servant" relationship between Hong Kong employers and Filipino employees is not relevant, nor do I attempt to turn a blind eye to the difference in the social class and inequality in the economic and political power relations between the two groups. However, it would be equally unfair to assume that it is impossible to establish and maintain a healthy relationship between employers and employees of these different ethnic backgrounds.

Beyond the Employer-Employee Relationship

All of the eight Hong Kong employer informants felt that the Manila Hostage Crisis would not have a long-term negative influence on the employer-employee relationship in their own households. Nonetheless, a short period of apprehension was apparent, especially in the first week after the Manila Hostage Crisis, when some employers claimed that they felt slightly uncomfortable when facing their helpers; some Filipinos felt the same way towards their employers. Kevin Ho, a 45 years old, self-employed middle-class man with a monthly income of above HKD\$60,000, expressed his feelings on the issue:

On the evening of 23 August, I watched TV together with my maid. She was very shameful, I could tell. I told her not to worry about that. I would not blame her. The tragedy happened in Manila and has nothing to do with the Filipinos in Hong Kong. I think...it is already painful enough for them to leave their family to earn money overseas. It [The Manila Hostage Crisis] is just the fault of their government. The Philippines government neither protects its citizens, nor the tourists.

Most of the Hong Kong employers did not tend to associate the Manila Hostage Crisis with the Filipino domestic helpers working in Hong Kong. They commented on the “national characters” of the Filipino domestic workers, stating that they were hard working, devoted to the family and optimistic. Hong Kong employers thought of Filipinos as entertaining very strong family ties that were more important than any other kinds of social relations.

Filipinos are very willing to sacrifice everything for their families and country. Look at those Filipinos working in Hong Kong; they spend 1/3 of their lives to make sacrifice and work here just to make their family happy. (Kevin Ho).

Hong Kong employers also fostered the idea that Filipinos living in the Philippines are completely different from those working as domestic helpers in Hong Kong; they criticized the former for their materialistic nature, inefficiency, backwardness, low moral value, contempt for human life and low national character (*su zhi* in Chinese).

For Filipinos living in the Philippines, the Manila Hostage crisis is just nothing...developed countries have security, they [The Philippines] don't. Filipinos only care about making money and surviving in that backward country. (Kevin Ho)

Even my old Filipino maid, who retired recently, discouraged me to visit the Philippines. She said it was not a safe place and suggested me to join a tour group if I really wanted to go. But now, after what happened in Manila, I think it is not safe to travel to that country even if I join a tour group. (Caly Wong, 38 years old, an insurance agent)

Filipino and the Hong Kong “Other”

I am not surprised that Hong Kong people are so angry. You know, Filipino police is so stupid. Look at how they acted on TV! If I were there, I would do better. I am ashamed to be a Filipino, at least at this moment.
(Jenny, 30 years old, former domestic helper for 8 years)

Many of the Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong were concerned about anti-Filipino sentiments and worried about losing their jobs after the Manila Hostage Crisis. There was also a rumour spreading among Filipino domestic helpers via text message, saying that 30 helpers had been fired and that some were stabbed and killed. Some of the Filipinos were concerned about their personal safety and employment. However, the rumour was soon dismissed. The Filipino Migrant Workers' Union, in response to the rumour, confirmed, almost immediately, that only a few cases of ill treatment and dismissals of helpers had occurred. Such reports of dismissals included one employer who refused to renew a contract and another who backed out of a contract. The Philippines Consul General, Claro Cristobal, said the two cases were completely unrelated to the Manila Hostage Crisis. He also warned that the hate-induced rumour would only worsen the current situation.

By the time I started to interview Filipino domestic helpers, it was mid-September, three or four weeks after the Crisis. While memories about the crisis were still fresh, most people had already begun to move on. All of my Filipino informants told me that it would not have any long-term negative effects on the relationship with their Hong Kong employers. However, they were concerned about public anger towards them, especially in the first two weeks after the event.

One of my informants told me that her family called from the Philippines right after the crisis and asked if she had been fired. Another said that a friend of hers was temporarily suspended from the household. Her friend could only wait for her employer's phone call before getting permission to return home. Some said they experienced unfriendly looks and verbal abuse when buying groceries. But there were also informants who said that their daily lives were not affected by the crisis at all. Among the 10 Filipino domestic helpers that I interviewed, four said their employers were willing to talk to them about the crisis; this seemed to greatly influence their perceptions of Hong Kong people, especially after the tragedy. One of the informants claimed that she was “very lucky”, as her employer was concerned about the anti-Filipino sentiments and any potential danger that she might be exposed to. For the first two weeks my Filipino domestic helper informant, Maria, was reminded by her employer to shorten the time that she spent on grocery shopping in the nearby market and to take her mobile along so as to be able to contact her employer immediately in case of an emergency:

One Saturday morning, I went out to buy pork in a nearby Wellcome [supermarket]. That man... selling pork is a very bad guy. Every time when a Filipino wanted to buy pork, he was always moaning something to himself and saying something bad about Filipinos. I noticed that a long time ago. But when a Chinese came, he would not do that. He disliked Filipinos. That morning, after the crisis, I went to buy pork and he shouted at me... some dirty words I guess. I thought, fuck you! But I did not argue with him. I just went home... I just went home. My employer noticed that I

didn't buy much food and she asked why. I was ashamed. But I told her what happened. Madam grabbed her bag and forced her husband, who was reading the newspaper, to go down with me and argue with that man. So my employer told the man that he would receive a complaint if he kept doing this to me. He said my maid is treated well even at home. How dare you treat her like that? I was very touched. My employer always protects me. Maybe for them (people like the man working in the supermarket), I am just nothing. But for my employer, I have become a treasure. And before I left the supermarket, I told him [the butcher] my employer never treated me like that. You and I are also employees. We all work for someone. But you treated me like a shit. (Maria, 45 years old. 20 years and 3 months in Hong Kong)

Informants, whose employers were willing to talk to them about the Manila Hostage Crisis with an open-minded attitude, usually regarded the employer-employee relationship as good or satisfactory. They believed that mutual respect and psychological comfort was earned, which was greatly valued in their living experience in Hong Kong.

While most of the Filipinos did not feel that domestic helpers in Hong Kong should be held responsible for the Manila Hostage Crisis, the idea of equating the nation-state with its people was strong enough to create a sense of shame; even though Filipinos in Hong Kong had nothing to do with the tragedy in Manila, some felt the need to apologize on behalf of their country.

I was not watching TV when Mendoza took the Hong Kong hostages. My madam called and told me that something big happened in Manila. I turned on the TV and I was so upset. Later that night, Madam came home and we had dinner together. At around 8 o'clock or something, we were watching the live report and heard the shooting... [Stopped for a while and continued with a broken voice], we knew something very, very bad must have already happened. I held my breath. It was like watching someone in great danger but you couldn't help because you were not there. I didn't look at the expression of my employer. We were quiet. And I felt so ashamed... [Her eyes were a little red and there were tears in them. She took out some tissue and continued] ashamed to be a Filipino at that moment. Later on, the news reported on the deaths of seven Hong Kong people. And I was so sorry. I felt so sorry. I told my employer that I was sorry. And she looked at me for a second and looked away. She waited for a few more seconds and said it was not my fault... it was not until the next night that she could talk with me calmly. But at least she tried to reassure me that it was not my fault. (Lora, 29 years old. 7 years in Hong Kong)

Comparing and Contrasting Hong Kong with the Philippines

Filipino Police and Customs were severely criticized by my informants for their corruption and inefficiency. The corruption problems in the Philippines also came to the surface in the provision of hospital services and medical treatment. Some Filipinos complained that most public hospitals in the Philippines charged extra fees. It was not surprising that hospitals refused to carry out surgery or provide medical treatment unless these extra fees had been paid. "I am not saying that Hong Kong is better than the

Philippines in every aspect. But in the Philippines, even if you were dying, they would not have treated you if you have no money," Maria said. Further:

We don't have laws in the Philippines. Our infrastructure is poor. The government has great corruption problems. In Hong Kong, things are not like that. You know what? I hate the Filipino police and customs officers. I remember five years ago, I went back to the Philippines. At the airport, the customs officers knew that I was from Hong Kong and I was a rich Filipino. He asked for money, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to take my luggage into the country. What could I do? I had to pay. (Maria)

After a long stay in the Philippines, I planned to go back to Hong Kong. My friend drove me to the airport. We were stopped by a Manila policeman. He accused us for speeding. We didn't! And he said if we didn't pay the fine right now, he would confiscate my friend's driving license. I was in hurry. I had a flight to catch on. I paid the so-called fine at last. (Lora)

I remember working for a very nice Hong Kong employer before. Later, she migrated to Canada and left her new TV set to me. I visited the Philippines and took the TV set with me. At the Custom, the bastard asked me to pay taxes! I knew my rights and I didn't have to pay for it, so I argued with him. I was so angry and then I broke the TV screen in front of him, and said I won't pay a shit!... the TV was a free gift. Why should I pay for it? He wanted to collect money from me? No way! I rather broke it. (Jenny)

Many of my Filipino informants shared stories about corruption in the Philippines, as well as the lack of social order and security there. Not all of the stories were based on personal experiences; some were more like urban legends that contradicted the national discourse of the glorification and heroism of Filipinos working overseas, sending back large remittances to the country, and the supposed treatment of these heroines and heroes. The urban legends usually consisted of a young and attractive Filipino migrant who worked overseas and had just come home, a corrupt police officer or taxi driver, and how these men took advantage of women. The fragility of women and the wickedness of men who manipulated their career or position to get material or sexual gain from the female returnees were emphasized. The messages for Filipinas behind these urban legends were clear: not to show off your wealth, not to wear fancy clothing when you come back to the Philippines, and ask your family or friends to pick you up from the airport. Here is an example of such an urban legend:

I remembered my friend Sally told me that her friend's second cousin had a terrible experience for the first time she returned to the Philippines from Hong Kong after five years of working here. She bought a lot of beautiful clothes and toys for her family. She didn't ask her friend to pick her up from the airport. Instead, she found a taxi. The driver drove for half an hour and she started to realize that she was not familiar with the surroundings. The driver drove her to somewhere very remote. And when he finally stopped, he raped her. He took all her luggage and clothes and drove away, leaving her alone in some remote area. She was naked when she was found. She had lost everything. That's why I don't trust taxi drivers in the Philippines. [She went on to compare the Philippines with

Hong Kong]. We don't have laws in the Philippines. But in Hong Kong, I feel safe. At least, Hong Kong police will not collect money from you. (Amy, 32 years old, 7 years in Hong Kong)

In the minds of many Filipino domestic helpers, "Hong Kong people work very hard. But unlike Filipinos, it is not hard for Hong Kong people to find jobs. The Philippines have a large population. But we are a poor country. Jobs are not enough" (Virginia, over 45 years old. 15 years in Hong Kong). At the same time, consumerism, expensive tastes and the pursuit of luxury goods in Hong Kong society were commonly criticized. The pursuit of the most updated electronic gadgets, brands, fashionable clothing and extravagant trips during vacations were perceived as celebrations of hedonism and materialism. While many informants expressed the idea that "Hong Kong people know how to live," they thought that Hong Kong people often placed individual interests above family interests – something that is highly discouraged in Filipino culture. The lack of "proper" neighbourly relationships was also often criticized: "In Hong Kong, everybody seems to mind their own business. They always close their door. They seldom talk with their neighbours. But in the Philippines, we always go knock other people's doors. We share everything."

Internalizing Gender Stereotypes

Hong Kong people perceive Filipino men as weak and irresponsible, accusing them of not "doing the men's job" and questioning their masculine dignity. In contrast, Filipino women are thought to be "forced" to work in an "undesirable" job in foreign countries. This kind of blame-the-victim interpretation does not necessarily depict reality: while people tended to see merely individual failure as the root of problem, they usually neglected the historical and structural transformations in shaping and influencing agency. In the same vein, developed regions all over the world have shown a preference for employing females from less developed countries to do domestic work so as to allow the women of economically more prosperous countries to move from the domestic to public spheres, further strengthening the gender stereotypes of women doing domestic jobs. The substitution of domestic labour by women from the third world reflects the long-existed gender stereotypes on family-based masculinity and its contradiction with "feminine" domestic work. In other words, both exporting and importing countries of domestic labour internalize and consolidate the aforementioned discourse.

Moreover, in view of the macro-structural transformations in gender relationships under the global capitalist economy, exportation of female labour and the imbalance of income between men and women are believed to "endanger" masculine dignity not only on the part of the individual, but also on a national level. Due to their limited encounters with Filipino men, Hong Kong people generally disregard the contributions of Filipino men in supporting their families and country despite noticeable numbers of them working overseas. When comparing Filipino men and women, Hong Kong people tend to glorify the latter, praising them for their self-sacrifice and being national heroines, while commenting negatively about the former – usually referring to them as lazy and unfaithful. One of my informants expressed his views on the absence of Filipino men in Hong Kong and their "non-existence" even in the Philippines.

There are no men in the Philippines. I mean logically I understand that there are of course males in Philippines. But at the same time, I don't think of Filipino men when I think about this country. There are only Filipino domestic helpers in my mind who are all female. (Hugo Cheung, 20 years old, university student).

In the same vein, Filipino women internalize the "weaknesses" of Filipino men, criticizing them; "many of them are lazy," "unfaithful" and "don't give enough care to children and elderly." In order to prevent their husbands or boyfriends in the Philippines from being unfaithful, finding prostitutes or keeping concubines, many Filipino domestic helpers refuse to send remittances to their spouses directly. They entrust their natal family members, especially their mothers and sisters, to handle the money. Some of the Filipino domestic helpers, mainly those who are young and single, also express their wishes of finding Hong Kong or foreign men for romantic relationships. One of them is now 30 years old and has been in a long-distance relationship for over a year with a British man. Another example is a Filipino woman who is 36 years old and in a relationship with an African man who frequently goes back and forth between Hong Kong and South Africa. The man also has a wife and three children in his home country. That is not to say, however, that foreign men are preferred; there are still many Filipino women who work in Hong Kong, and return to the Philippines to get married. Generally, a common cultural background and language are regarded as important considerations for starting romantic relationships.

The negative attitude towards Filipino men also became a topic during the live coverage of the hostage crisis. The severe criticisms directed at the operational mistakes of the police force and the SWAT team turned into an overall attack on the masculine dignity of the Philippine police force, which not only put the entire nation in a negative light, but further reinforced the prevalent image of Filipino men as impotent and powerless. Being a policeman was thought to be a "very masculine" and "manly" job, which required strength, physical fitness, crisis solving and investigative skills, as well as courage. The failure of SWAT team in the Manila Hostage Crisis seemed to confirm that the Filipino police lacked these attributes and showed their inability to protect the lives of the hostages. "Our police are useless. Our men are useless," an informant said, hereby showing how the gender stereotype of Filipino men has already been internalized.

Conclusion

Some crazy people said that we should fire all the Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong in order to put political pressure onto the Philippines. This is just nonsense. How can Hong Kong people live without Filipino maids? Employing Chinese maids from the Mainland? No. I trust Filipino maids more than Chinese.

(Alice Au, 57 years old, clerk)

There is no way to examine inter-ethnic attitude and employer-employee relationships between Filipino domestic helpers and their Hong Kong employers without considering the framework of globalization, capitalism, migration, and the commodification of the body and gender. Living in this globalized world, we are

constantly undergoing processes of inclusion and exclusion mediated through ethnicity, class and gender. In all of the above sections, this paper has elucidated the inter-ethnic attitudes between Filipino domestic helpers and their Hong Kong employers after the Manila Hostage Crisis. After the crisis, Hong Kong employers generally did not take out their anger on their employees and were able to rationally see the fact that Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong had nothing to do with the Crisis. While informants criticized the police force and the Philippine government for failing to rescue the hostages and causing many deaths and injuries, ill treatment of Filipinos in Hong Kong was generally not an inevitable consequence. In fact, many Hong Kong employers were willing to share their thoughts on this matter with their domestic helpers.

The differences in socio-economic status and unequal power relationships between the Hong Kong employers and their Filipino employees seem to have provided the basis for the discourse of “the exploiters” and “the exploited.” But the agency of foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong should not be neglected. The Manila Hostage Crisis has provided us with a cultural lens to rethink the ethnic relationships between the two groups. It is precisely this moment of crisis that has revealed the fundamental cultural traits underlying the relationships between Hong Kong employers and Filipino employees, in which ethnicity has become a focus of attention. For many Hong Kong people who relied on their domestic helpers for the provision of child-care and other household chores, terminating the contract with their helpers merely because of the crisis was not even a consideration.

Hong Kong people are very practical. It makes no sense to fire our maids. After all, they cook for us and take care of the elderly and children. Some people said we can replace Filipino maids with Indonesians to express our anger towards the Philippines. It is just nonsense. It is not easy to find a good maid. It is not easy to train a maid all over again. If you get used to living with your Filipino maid under the same roof, it would be hard to find another one and let her enter your house. Employing a domestic helper is different from other forms of employment, as she has to live with you. Why on earth would I fire my maid just because of a tragedy that she is not responsible for? (Alice Au)

Hong Kong people have a preference for employing Filipino domestic helpers instead of women from other nationalities despite their relatively higher monthly wages. Many informants told me that Filipino domestic helpers were preferable because they were more “experienced,” in the sense that Filipino women were the first ethnic group coming to Hong Kong to work as domestic helpers. They are also regarded as “more culturally adapted” to the environment of Hong Kong. Also, their English proficiency is an advantage for raising Hong Kong Chinese children. On the other hand, they are also perceived as “more aggressive,” “learning bad things quickly,” “having more bargaining power” as they know the Labour Law and their rights better. In contrast, Indonesian domestic helpers are perceived to be “not very intelligent,” “generally younger” and “fluent in Cantonese.”

As a researcher, one should refrain from victimizing ones targets of study; one should not only focus on structural oppression that is imposed without considering human beings’ agency. Many people tend to see that foreign domestic helpers have little agency as a two-year contract can be terminated very easily with just one month’s notice. However, from closer examination of the employer-employee relationship by conducting in-depth interviews with both groups, we are able to see that the longer the

employee has been working for the family, the greater the agency and negotiation power she may have. It is especially true if an inter-dependent relationship has developed between the two parties.

Ideas of global capitalism, indentured servitude and commodification of women's bodies seem to turn women from Southeast Asian countries into products that are available for employers from the First World to pick and choose; the laws too often grant employers a greater flexibility for the dismissal of maids. However, once trust and mutual respect have been built, it is very likely for many Hong Kong employers to renew the contracts every two years. According to the "Practical Guide for Employment of Foreign Domestic Helpers," which is distributed by the Labour Relations Division of the Labour Department, a foreign domestic helper is entitled to long service payments and/or severance payment under some conditions. There are cases that Hong Kong employers refuse to pay when they choose to terminate the contract. However, there are still many employers who are willing to pay as they consider the payment as a kind of reward for the employee.

In recent decades, foreign domestic helpers have increasingly become the subject of anthropological and sociological studies. Unequal power relations, ethnic conflicts, discrimination and abuse of domestic helpers are often the focus in most of this research. The fact remains that there is great demand for women from the less developed countries to take up paid domestic jobs in place of the women in the First World that are encouraged to participate in the local workforce. Indeed, we cannot turn a blind eye to the oppression of foreign domestic workers, but with much of the research focused on the abuse and exploitation of women in this job sector, it is time for us to rethink our own preconceptions on the issue, as well. Is it a product of anthropological bias that foreign domestic helpers are always under structural oppression? Is abuse a "normal" experience for maids? Are these women the new slaves of the global capitalist system? In spite of the apparent class and ethnic differences in an employer-employee relationship, is it possible to develop or maintain a relatively equal and peaceful relationship? There is no doubt that not all employers abuse their maids and not all employees are dissatisfied about the treatment they receive. From what I heard from my Filipino informants, some really regard themselves as part of the family that they work for. In the same vein, not all Hong Kong employers are unreasonable, bossy, mean, and cruel. Most of the Hong Kong employers that I have interviewed, do not regard their helpers as slaves, but rather as valuable assets. Their contributions to Hong Kong families are appreciated.

In this paper, the perceptions of Filipino domestic helpers with regards to their job, identity, Filipino men, employers, Hong Kong people and Hong Kong have been discussed through the lens of a particular incident – the Manila Hostage Crisis. From this crisis, we can examine employer- employee relationship in a bigger context. While ethnic tension and social disharmony seemed to be obvious in the first few weeks after the crisis, relationships between Hong Kong employers and Filipino employees were not necessarily hostile. Rather, supportive relationships have can be seen from the empirical data that I have collected from my Hong Kong and Filipino informants. Structural oppression has been a main theme in studying foreign domestic helpers. Nonetheless, these domestic helpers do have agency, a fact that we tend to neglect. Filipino domestic helpers are part of the everyday lives of many Hong Kong families. Their life stories should be heard and their living experiences in Hong Kong should be a concern of a society embracing social integration and cultural diversification. The Manila Hostage Crisis provided us with a good opportunity to re-examine the inter-

ethnic attitudes or perceptions between the two groups. It has revealed that the imbalance in power relations between the two is not the only perspective to the relationship between these two groups, but that the agency of foreign domestic helpers as well as the individual decisions of Hong Kong employers must equally be taken into account.

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