

The Construction of Global City: Invisible Work and Disposable Labor

Li-Fang Liang

In 1992, in order to satisfy demographic necessities and increasing double-salary families, the Taiwanese government allowed the immigration of domestic workers and caregivers as part of the short-term contract labor force to shoulder the responsibilities of caring for patients, the elderly and younger children. The number of domestic workers and caregivers has reached 151,747 in 2006, more than one-third of the population of migrant workers. Around one third of migrant domestic workers and caregivers are concentrated in the metropolitan area of Taipei, the largest city in Taiwan. In this essay, I situate Taipei as an emerging “global city” that is the theoretical concept proposed by Saskia Sassen to explain the relationships between global capital mobility and the flows of labor migration. On the one hand, I elucidate the increasing availability of domestic and care work in order to satisfy the physical and emotional needs of white-collar and professional class workers in global cities through the gendered-racialized division of labor. On the other hand, I emphasize the role of state in terms of facilitating to create the gendered-racialized market that serves the economic interests of receiving state and the specific class privileged group. I explore how the coordination of state’s migrant labor policy, regulations and bureaucratic procedures that marginalizes these female workers’ lives and treats them as disposable labor in the context of improving economic development.

Li-Fang Liang
Ph. D Candidate, Sociology Department
Maxwell of Public Affair School, Syracuse University
E-mail: liliang@maxwell.syr.edu

Oct. Berlin

It was my first time meeting Ming in the advocacy group working with Vietnamese migrant workers in Taiwan. I always remember that she addressed me as “Lao Ban Niang” (老闆娘)¹ in Mandarin, with a bow and a thrilled voice. I had a difficult time in reacting to Ming’s attitude and was wondering what she had experienced in her previous employment relationship that made her feel inferior and subordinated to a local Taiwanese woman. Ming had worked in Taiwan under the official category of live-in caregiver² for fifteen months; at that time she was looking for shelter and legal help.

During Ming’s working period, she did not have a regular day-off and was not allowed to go out alone during working days without her employer’s company. It usually took several weeks for Ming to have a few hours off from her work. It was the only time she could meet her counterparts, who provided her the contact information of the advocacy group where she was sheltered later. On the first day of her employment, Ming’s employer took over all her official identification documents, such as her passport and working permit and later her national health insurance card issued by the health department at Taiwanese government. In addition, Ming did not receive the full salary that was regulated by the contract and Taiwanese law. Every month, her employer deducted from her salary for various reasons. Ming was required to wear the mouth mask while she was working. She was not allowed to talk if her employer did not ask her. Her salary was reduced by the words she spoke. Her employer made a list for each deduction. If Ming broke glasses, plates, or bowls, her employer always asked for “compensation” from her salary. On salary days, Ming was asked by her employer to sign the receipt that indicated she

¹ It is a term referring to female boss in Mandarin.

² But what Ming actually did in the fifteen months when she lived with her single-mother employer and her 8-year old child was the household work. In this essay, I adopt “domestic workers” to refer to the actual job performed by these female workers who work in households. They not only provide health care but are also asked to do household work (e.g. cooking and cleaning) and give child care.

Oct. Berlin

received the full amount. Ming could not reject her employer's request. Indeed, Ming never got her full salary.

Ming's employer(s)³ had kept abusing her in various ways since she was hired. Her employer squeezed her upper arm, pushed her into the walls, and slapped the back of her head. She described one incident that happened in the kitchen. One day she was cooking with the heavy wok. Her employer got mad about her and turned over the wok on the floor. Ming got burned in her arm. About a month before Ming searched for help in the advocacy group, her employer grabbed her violently by the thumb and pushed her down to the floor. She showed her thumb, which she could not either fold or make function like the other digits

Ming's employment ended with her run away from her employers' apartment to the advocacy group, which was almost one hour away, by driving from where she lived with her employers' family. The only things she had with her was the small piece of paper that had a written address of the advocacy group; on the back was some record about her salary, and the evidences of mistreatment and abuse on her body. She got a taxi that drove her to escape the abusive treatment of her employer(s), to fight for her rights through the legal process, and to become an "illegal" worker according to the relevant Taiwanese laws.

Ming is one amongst the female migrant care workers⁴ who work as caregivers or domestic workers in Taiwan after the government allowed the importation of short-term contract workers. Her story not only raises several issues, such as improper salary deduction, verbal and physical abuse, long working hours, no days-off and so forth, that live-in care workers usually confront in the isolated work setting of the private household but also demonstrates how state

³ Ming told us her employer's 8-year old child also spoke bad words to her or yelled at her.

⁴ In this study, I use the term "care workers" to refer to those who take care of the sick and elderly. Most of them work in private households and sometimes in medical institutions. Those working in the households not only provide health care but are also asked to do household work (e.g. cooking and cleaning) and give childcare.

Oct. Berlin

sovereign power has objectified the human body in every single moment of daily life through employers' practices in the private domain. This study looks at the problematic of Ming's lived experiences and takes them as an entry point to investigate the role of nation state as well as the institutional and ruling relations that coordinate Ming's experience as a migrant care worker in general and a worker who received improper and unjust treatment in particular. On the other hand, I emphasize the role of state in terms of facilitating to create the gendered-racialized market that serves the economic interests of receiving state and the specific class privileged group. I explore how the coordination of state's migrant labor policy, regulations and bureaucratic procedures that marginalizes these female workers' lives and treats them as disposable labor in the context of improving economic development and satisfying the social needs in the emerging global city.

Context

During the economic booms of the 1980s and 1990s, there was a rapid expansion of employment opportunities for short-term contract workers in Asia. Industrial countries, such as Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and Korea sought cheaper labor to support economic development, and thus they became major labor-importing countries. In October 1989, as a result of the labor shortage, the Taiwan government began to import migrant workers for fourteen key national construction projects. In 1991, the importation of migrant workers was applied to the traditional manufacturing industries, which require cheap labor to remain competitive in the market. In 1992, in order to satisfy demographic necessities and increasing double-salary families, the government allowed the immigration of domestic workers and caregivers as part of the short-term contract labor force to shoulder the responsibilities of caring for patients, the elderly and younger children. In June 2006, the number of migrant workers in

Taiwan reached a stunning as 336,945 compared to 151,989 in 1993. The number of migrant workers has increased by more than two times. Almost all migrant workers in Taiwan originate from Southeast Asian countries. They usually perform unskilled or semi-skilled jobs in a segregated labor market.

Among the number of migrant workers, the female workers number total 204,736⁵—more than half of the entire population of migrant workers. According to the official categories, most female migrant workers work as caregivers (few are domestic workers) and the rest work in manufacturing plants. The number of caregivers has reached 149,387⁶ (while domestic workers are 2,360), more than one-third of the population of migrant workers (Council of Labor Affairs 2006). Around one third of migrant domestic workers and caregivers are concentrated in the metropolitan area of Taipei, the largest city in Taiwan. The employers' qualifications for applying for domestic workers and caregivers are different. In addition, the workers hired under different occupational categories have different obligations and responsibilities. The government regulation defines the work content of these two: domestic work includes cleaning, cooking, providing carework to family members and the other relevant work in private households. Live-in caregivers provide care to disabled people and the sick in private households. It is illegal to ask workers to perform work that is beyond their job duties. However, in everyday practice, these two categories are blurred.

In the Taiwanese context, migrant care workers are living for “survival.” Not only do their families depend on their remittances to maintain basic needs, they are also confronted with structural constraints on their options and agency in everyday life. Migrant care workers

⁵ Until May 2006, the number of female workers was 204,736 and the number of males was 128,741.

⁶ The distributions of migrant caregivers' nationality are as follows: The number of Indonesian caregivers is 65,347, the number of Vietnamese is 51,716, and the number of Filipina is 29,806. The rest are Thai (2,498) and Mongolian (only 21).

experience distinct problems because of their marginality in the gender- and racially-segregated labor market. Their job is regarded as informal work or less valued in comparison to the jobs taken by their male counterparts and the native Taiwanese. The Taiwan state relies upon migrant caregivers to shoulder the governmental responsibility of long-term health care and childcare. On the other hand, because most of the workers work in places, like households and private medical institutions, which are regarded as the “private domain,” they are excluded from applications of the national labor law that regulates basic working rights, such as minimum wages, days off, and so forth. In addition, female workers are at a high risk of being exposed to abuse and sexual harassment, which results from the lack of legal protection and the unequal power relations exercised through the binary of domination and subjugation (e.g. employer and employee, native and foreigner, us and other, male and female).

Feminization of Labor Migration: From Productive to Reproductive Labor

Feminization is one of the distinguishing characteristics of labor migration today. Compared to other regions in the world, the feminization of labor migration has been especially salient in Asia. The number of migrant Asian women has increased significantly since the late 1970s. The majority of them are temporary migrant contract workers who travel from one country in this region to another (Oishi 2005). Asia is now not only a supplier of female migrant labor but also a major destination for those laborers. This phenomenon is framed within the concept of global patriarchal capitalism, in which a gendered system and global capital work simultaneously to exploit women’s labor, particularly that of women located in the Third World. Women working in offshore production zones are commodified as “nimble workers” by the nation-states to serve the interests of global capitalists as soon as they are first incorporated into the global capital system (Sassen 1984; Ong 1987; Salzinger 2004). The incorporation of

women's labor into capitalist expansions is associated with the local patriarchal system and a gender ideology that not only confines women's roles to reproductive labor but also devalues women's status in both spheres of production and reproduction. Chandra Mohanty (1997) further elucidates the gendered and racialized ideologies that legitimize the capitalist exploitation of Third World women to increase profitability. Mohanty indicates that "naturalized assumptions about work and the worker are crucial to understanding the sexual politics of global capitalism" (p.5). Gender ideologies of femininity and masculinity intersect with racialized images to facilitate specific gendered and racialized divisions of labor that construct Third World women as desirable workers who are often perceived as docile, cheap, and disciplined—easy for the multiple transnational corporations to control and utilize.

The recent research dealing with female migrant care workers (particularly on domestic workers) in transnational context exemplifies the specific gendered and racialized politics of labor that legitimize the exploitation of Third World women in order to maximize the accumulation of transnational capitals as well as to satisfy the needs of nation-states and privileged groups. In the past three decades, Third World women have become a new commodity sold by their home countries as a strategy for improving economic development. At the other end of the exchange, they are purchased by the host society as a measure for resolving labor shortages in low-paid service industries, such as domestic work, caregiving, entertainment, and the sex trade.

Situating Global Care Chain

The theoretical concept of the "global city" (Saskia Sassen 1991) elucidates the increasing significance of the service sector, including domestic and care labor, that satisfies the physical and emotional needs of white-collar and professional workers by exploring the

Oct. Berlin

relationships between global capital mobility and the flows of labor migration. The theoretical framework of the global city has been used to understand the increasing flows of migrant domestic workers in places such as Hong Kong, New York, Los Angeles, Rome and so forth (see also Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parrenas 2001). In addition, it points to one scene that has resulted from global transformation where the “global care chain” is situated.

Arlie Russell Hochschild (2000) proposes the concept of the “global care chain” to develop a theoretical understanding of the relationship between care and migration within the context of globalization. The “global care chain” is a term for the “series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring” (2000: 131) which embodies the daily practices in global cities addressed in Sassen’s theoretical work. Hochschild develops the concept based on the phenomenon of the international migration trends of domestic workers in general, and Filipina workers in particular (Chang and Ling 2000; Chin 1998; Constable 1997a; Parrenas 2000, 2001). The flows of migrant domestic workers are explained through the unequal relations of economic development between wealthier and poorer countries, especially in regard to domestic labor supply and demand. The concept of a global care chain evokes the multiple oppressive systems affecting women by describing women’s experiences of providing/consuming care work in various local settings. An analysis of the global care chain not only focuses on the flow of physical labor between women and nation-states but also emphasizes the transfer of emotional work. Hochschild notes that the “global care chain” performs as a mechanism that extracts “emotional surplus value” from the migrant domestic workers to satisfy family needs in general, and children’s needs in particular, in developed countries. Hochschild’s work highlights experiences of Third world women that are usually ignored in discussions of globalization, on the one hand. On the other hand, she indicates that

Oct. Berlin

the phenomenon of the “global care chain” does not challenge the gendered assumptions of carework. Instead, it reinforces the gendered nature of carework and creates more inequalities around class and nationality.

Invisible Workers, Disposable Labor: The Practices of Taiwan State

The feminist scholars argue that care work should be unbound from the private domain and women’s responsibility in order to create a caring society and diminish the inequality of care. In this context, the nation-state needs to take the responsibility of deprivatizing care work and propose it as a public issue. However, the way the Taiwanese government has responded to the increasing numbers of aging people in its society has been to rely on migrant care workers. From 1992, when Taiwan started importing migrant care workers, until 2006, the number of migrant caregivers increased rapidly from less than 10,000 to 150,000. In contrast to the strict quota system that is used to regulate the importation of domestic workers, the Taiwan government gradually lowered the standards for caregivers in recent years. On the one hand, the Taiwan government enacts a bilateral agreement with the receiving states to facilitate the labor flows between these two countries. On the other hand, the government utilizes migrant caregivers as a tool that not only remedies state public health care policy terms of but also reinforce the process of privatizing care work. The nation-state creates a gendered and racialized labor market of migrant caregivers with low wages in order to guarantee their availability for private households and medical institutes. However, the privatization of care work and the ideology of importing caregivers do not relieve the overload on care work arising from all the families with elderly, the sick and disabled members. Families with low income do not “benefit” from the cheaper care labor, or from the gendered and racialized labor market. The issue of

Oct. Berlin

health care is not resolved through importing migrant caregivers. Instead, the policy creates and reinforces the class inequalities of access to and redistribution of resources.

I. Devaluation of Carework

The receiving state not only acts as the important social agent in relation to protecting migrant workers. At the same time, state sovereignty and policy are practiced to regulate, manage, and discipline workers (Cheng 1996; Huang and Yeoh 1996). The practice of nation-state demonstrates how the phenomenon of labor migration is constructed and maintained through state sovereignty and implement of relevant policy. In addition, it also illuminates how patriarchy system in general, and gender politics of labor in particular are incorporated into the practices of nation-state. The example of female migrant care workers in Taiwan illustrates how individual experiences in everyday life are mediated and impacted by nation state.

Female migrant care workers perform their jobs in the private household and take up “female responsibilities” that are traditionally assumed of Taiwanese women. The increase of labor participation of Taiwanese women does not change the gender division of labor in the household. The female migrant workers continue to abide by the traditional gender divisions between women and men. Although the Taiwanese government does not treat importing migrant care workers as a measure to encourage women’s employment and improve economic development (as does the Singapore government’s policy), the increase in the number of care workers is indicative of the Taiwanese government’s assumption. However, when female migrant workers contribute to the Taiwanese women’s labor participation, they are excluded by Taiwanese labor law. In other words, their working conditions and basic rights are not protected by the Taiwanese government. The separation between private and public results in the devaluation of carework. Women who perform such kinds of work are not regarded as workers.

Oct. Berlin

Also, they do not possess the same rights as a worker. However, compared to their counterparts who work in factories, female migrant care workers are more vulnerable to abuse, violence and harassment. The Taiwanese government does not consider any differences between care workers and factory workers. Furthermore, the government's policy excludes care workers from legal protection.

II. Practice of State Sovereignty in Private Domain

Recruitment agencies and employers are two important non-state actors in shaping labor migration. These two non-state actors are involved in the migration of care workers but also work together with state actors to coordinate female labor migration and the workers' experiences. Recruitment agencies not only participate in the process of formulating the 'market' of migrant domestic workers (Bakan and Stasiulis 1995; Constable 1997a) but also train these women to perform as 'domestic workers' who are hardworking, submissive, and obedient in order to satisfy the prospective employers' needs (Chin 1997, 1998; Constable 1997a). After receiving the proper training, the workers are regarded by the agencies as a commodity or product that is ready to pack and sell in the market. Through the recruitment and matching process, the workers are objectified as the tool to make profits for the agencies (Chin 1997: 377-378; Constable 1997a: 59-67). The labor market of care workers is hierarchal, based on the workers' nationalities and races (Bakan and Daiva 1995; Chin 1998; Huang and Yeoh 1998; Loveband 2003; Lan 2006). The recruitment agencies play an important role in (re)producing and reinforcing the hierarchy amongst workers and the gendered-racialized segregation of labor market.

Carework is not only gendered as women's work but also is associated with nationalized stereotypes: 'Nationality is thus an important signifier and often conflated with race and

culture—including perceived associations with linguistic ability, religion, personality-types and even the color of the person's skin' (Huang and Yeoh 1998: 35). The term 'Filipina', which is equated with 'domestic worker' or 'maid' exemplifies the process of stereotyping based on workers' nationality. Anne Loveband (2003) elucidates how national stereotypes are utilized by Taiwanese recruitment agencies to market migrant domestic and care workers in different ways. For example, the image of Indonesian workers, who are homogenized as submissive, obedient, loyal, but less civilized, is constructed to fit the idea of care providers for the elderly and patients, while Filipina workers, who are portrayed as smarter, more educated and civilized (associated with their English ability), but more aggressive, are marketed to perform child care (p.5-7). Racial and national stereotyping, which creates a hierarchy amongst migrant domestic workers, occurs in various contexts to legitimate different kinds of care labor performed by specific groups of workers. The discussion of recruitment agencies is not only limited to perceiving them as a facilitating mechanism in the labor migration but it should also examine how workers are disciplined by the agencies. The recruitment agencies attempt to maximize their control of workers through disciplining workers bodies, practicing medical examinations, creating economic dependence, and dehumanizing them (Constable 1997a). The recruitment agencies actively participate in the process of creating gendered and racialized stereotypes of migrant workers through recruiting and matching. In addition, the agencies pass the gendered and racialized ideology on to the employers, as well as the 'tips' for stereotyping, controlling and disciplining workers (Chin 1997, 1998; Cheng 2003).

The nature of the household as a private regime causes more vulnerability for migrant domestic workers compared to their counterparts who work in factories or other public spheres. When the intimate space turns into a workplace it engenders several dilemmas and tensions

between workers and their employers. The power relations between these two parties are embodied in daily practices and interactions. The inequalities and tensions are not only present in employment relations but also including the hierarchy amongst women, workers and their female employers, as well as class tensions between employers and workers from middle-class backgrounds (Cheng 1996:142-143; Lan 2006). The embodiment of unequal power relations between workers and employers is practiced through disciplining and controlling workers. The employers develop various strategies to exercise their power over the workers. The isolation of the household maximizes employers' power and workers' vulnerability. In addition, because of the isolated nature of the household, the household is regarded as a context of violence, and the interconnection of abuses that happens in households (Cheng 1996: 143-145). The employers display their power over workers through setting up household rules, controlling the workers' use of their time, pace and space, and regulating the workers' physical appearance and body. These practices of employers demonstrate how power relations and inequality are (re)produced in private households, the intimate regime, and how the hierarchies between workers and employers are (re)created (Constable 1997a, 1997b; Chin 1997, 1998; Cheng 2003; Lan 2006).

The state and non-state actors that participate in the migration of domestic workers should be considered as interdependent with each other. Migration of care workers is mediated by the relevant actors and these workers are managed and controlled at various institutional levels and in private households. Shu-Ju Ada Cheng (2003) uses Taiwan as an example to illuminate that the employers' discipline and control of workers embody the state's policy' regulation and ideology toward migrant workers. The relevant research highlights the relations between the nation-state, recruitment agencies and employers in disciplining and regulating workers as well as the continuities of inequalities between public and private spheres through

implement of state policy and everyday interactions between workers and employers. The racialized-gendered interactions that happen in family settings reflect an ideology similar to that of different social agents, such as nation-state, recruitment agencies, mass media and so forth at various scales. However, more empirical research needs to be done in this regard to map out the actual processes that work together to connect these social agents in different trans-local settings.

Conclusion

This essay uses the migrant labor receiving country, Taiwan as an example to illuminate the role of nation state in understanding migration of care workers in the context of globalization in general, and in the emerging global city in particular. The phenomenon of migrant care workers explains how racialized-gendered labor is practiced by state sovereignty in the transformation of political economy. Additionally, the objectification and commodification of female migrant care workers who are utilized to serve the state interests and economic development aims are reinforced through the practices of relevant social agents in every single moment in private domain. The investigation of the state not only provides the opportunity to discover how local milieus are (re)constructed by broader structures in different spaces and times, but also add to our understanding of the role of nation-state in participating the process of labor migration in general, and migration of female care workers in particular.

Bibliography

- Bakan, Abigail, and Daiva Stasiulis. 1995. "Making the Match: Domestic Placement Agencies and the Racialization of Women's Household Work." *Signs* 20(2): 303-335.
- Chang, Kimberly A., and L.H.M. Ling. 2000. Globalization and Its Intimate Other: Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong. Pp.27-43 in *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites and Resistances*. eds. Marchand, Marianne H., and Anne Sisson Runyan. London: Routledge.
- Cheng, Shu-Ju. Ada. 1996. "Migrant Women Domestic Workers in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan: A Comparative Analysis." *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 5(1): 139-152.
2003. "Rethinking the Globalization of Domestic Service: Foreign Domestic Workers, State Control, and the Politics of Identity in Taiwan." *Gender & Society* 17(2): 166-186.
- Chin, Christine. 1997. "Walls of Silence and Late Twentieth Century Representations of the Foreign Female Domestic Workers: The Case of Filipina and Indonesian Female Servants in Malaysia." *International Migration Review* 31(2): 353-385.
1998. *In Service and Servitude: Foreign Female Domestic Workers and the Malaysian "Modernity" Project*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Constable, Nicole. 1997a. *Maid to Order in Hong-Kong: Stories of Filipina Workers*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- 1997b. "Sexuality and Discipline among Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong." *American Ethnologist* 24(3): 539-558.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2000. "Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value," Pp.130-146 in *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*. eds. Will Hutton and Anthony Giddens, London: Jonathan Cape.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. 2000. "Feminism and Migration." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 571: 107-120.
- Huang, Shirlena, and Brenda Yeoh. 1996. "Ties that Bind: State Policy and Migrant Female Domestic Helpers in Singapore." *Geoforum* 27: 479-493.
- Maids and Ma'ams in Singapore: constructing Gender and Nationality in the Transnationalization of Paid Domestic Work. 1998. *Geography Research Forum* 18: 22-48.
- Lan, Pei-Chia. 2006. *Global Cinderella: Migrant Domestic Workers and Newly Rich Employers in Taiwan*. Duke University Press.
- Loveband, Anne. 2003. "Positioning the Product: Indonesian Migrant Women Workers in Contemporary Taiwan." *Southeast Asia Research Center Working Papers Serious* 43: 1-15.
- Oishi, Nana. 2005. *Women in Motion: Globalization, State Policies, and Labor Migration in Asia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Parrenas, Rhacel Salazar. 2000. Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers and the International Division of Reproductive Labor. *Gender & Society* 14(4): 560-580.
2001. *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Salzinger, Leslie. 2004. From Gender as Object to Gender as Verb: Rethinking how Global Restructuring Happens. *Critical Sociology* 30(1): 43-62.
- Sassen, Saskia. 1984. "Notes on the Incorporation of Third World Women into Wage-Labor Through Immigration and Off-Shore Production." *International Migration Review* 18(4): 1144-1167.

Oct. Berlin

1991. *The Global City: New York London Tokyo*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.