

Remapping Identities across Borders and at Home:
Filipina Migrant Domestic Workers and Taiwanese Employers *

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Domestic employment is characterized by an ironic combination of distance and intimacy (Glenn 1986; Hansen 1989). Employers and workers, with diverse class and racial backgrounds, have frequent and personal interactions with each other in a home setting. Their daily interactions thus become a critical field for both parties to construct and reproduce social boundaries, based on which they identify themselves and exclude others. International labor migration in the contemporary era has facilitated a division of domestic labor among women across national boundaries. It is estimated that over one million women from South and Southeast Asia are employed as maids or caretakers in East Asian and Gulf countries (Heyzer et al. 1994). The international division of domestic labor among Asian women indicates a further differentiation and restructuring of the global economy, and reveals a dynamic and contested process of identity construction involving the intersection of class, race/ethnicity, and nationality.

My research focuses on the migration linkage between Taiwan and the Philippines. Currently approximately 80,000 registered migrant domestic workers reside in Taiwan, and over half of them are from the Philippines. Based on in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation, this article explores the micro-politics of boundary making and identity formation behind the structural picture of dividing domestic labor across borders. I will illustrate how Taiwanese women employers and Filipina domestic workers enact symbolic domination and resistance in an employment relationship, and adopt different strategies to negotiate social distance and identities during their daily interactions with each other.

REMAAPPING IDENTITIES IN THE RESTRUCTURING GLOBAL ECONOMY

During the last two decades, rapid industrialization in the East Asian “four tigers” has produced a switch in these countries from net emigration to net immigration. These countries have become major destinations for labor force from Southeast and South Asia (Skeldon 1992). Contemporary intra-regional migration in Asia, distinct from the earlier emigrant flows, characterizes a further differentiation and restructuring of the global economy. Globalization of production has resulted in a rapid acceleration in international trade and finance flows, and, at the same time, a restructuring of the international landscape on a hierarchical basis. While global cities such as New York, London, Tokyo, and Los Angeles function as the apex of the international investment flows (Sassen 1988), lower order global cities, such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taipei, are interwoven as control nodes in the international spatial division of labor (Friedmann 1986). These circumstances have stimulated two kinds of migration flows in East Asia. The first one involves highly skilled professionals, managers, and service providers from the Western core countries, and the second migration flow is low-cost workers from Southeast Asia (Findlay et al. 1998). Taiwan’s government did not open the gate for the employment of low-order migrant workers until the early 1990s. Nowadays diverse migration policies are adopted towards these two groups of migrant workers. Semi-skilled or unskilled migrant workers from Southeast Asia are usually employed on a temporary contract basis and are strictly prohibited from permanent settlement, while white-collar migrants from the West are under none of the above regulations.

The majority of migrant domestic helpers and caretakers in Taiwan come from the Philippines. Today the Philippines is the biggest labor exporting country in Asia and is ranked second in the world after Mexico. Filipina workers possess a competitive advantage

in the global labor market due to their adequate education and English proficiency, both legacies of the US colonization. In 1974, the Marcos administration initiated the “labor export policy,” which was announced as a “temporary measure” to ease massive unemployment and to bring in foreign currency, but became “permanently temporary” in the following decades (Constable 1997). The stagnant economy in the Philippines has continued to stimulate migratory flows to seek jobs overseas, but the predominant destinations have gradually switched from North America and Europe to the Middle East and East Asia. In 1999, half of overseas Filipino/a workers were located in the Middle East (26.5 percent) and Asia (23.5 percent), 42 percent in North American, and 8 percent in Europe. Taiwan has now become the second major destination for Filipino migrants, next to Saudi Arabia and followed by Hong-Kong and Japan.¹

A transnational division of domestic labor reveals uneven development in the global economy. The hierarchical memberships in the global village are not only maintained by border control and regulation of citizenship (Zolberg 1991); they are also consolidated in the local practices of social distinction, in which subjects construct their identities related to the other party through the construction of binary oppositions such as us/them, self/other, and Taiwanese/Filipino/a. The following analysis will focus on the local consequences of transnational migration and domestic employment. I will examine how Taiwanese domestic employers and Filipina migrant domestic workers negotiate and reconstruct their class identities, intertwined with hierarchical orders of nationality and race/ethnicity, in response to their upward or downward mobility in the global economy.

TAIWANESE EMPLOYERS: CREATING SOCIAL DISTINCITONS

¹ Data provided by POEA, the Philippines government.

Previous researchers have written about the significance of hiring women of different class and racial backgrounds in order to validate employers' superior status (Rollins 1985; Romero 1992). However, most literature in this field tends to conceptualize class and racial identities of domestic employers and workers as internally stable categories in parallel to their structural positions within an employment hierarchy. Instead, I emphasize that social differences between employers and workers are being contextually constructed and constantly negotiated (Ozyegin forthcoming). Taiwanese employers reconstitute their class and racial/ethnic identities over time and space, as they perceive, practice, and internalize the scheme of social classification from their interactions with migrant domestic workers and other Taiwanese.

Highlighting Social Distinctions

The majority of employers participating in this research had no previous experience of hiring a live-in local domestic worker. Few of them had a maid or babysitter in their childhood. Taiwan has experienced a rapid industrialization in the last few decades, which has facilitated upward class mobility across generations. The introduction of migrant domestic workers has lowered the cost of domestic employment and expanded the stratum of domestic employers in Taiwan. Mr. Wang, 60 years old, grew up in an agricultural family and migrated to Taipei in the 1960s to start a wholesale business. Although he has only a high school diploma, he is proud of his children's college degrees and their newly achieved class status that is marked by the employment of a migrant domestic worker:

Do you remember what you said when you came in? You said, "Your Filipina maid is pretty."
That's right. Our maid looks classy, not like some others. They look plain like a maid. Ours is not. So she is a good match for our family. My children are all college graduates, although not as high as you to study abroad, but all well-educated. Our maid has to match our social status.

Domestic workers serve as a status symbol for employers to mark their upward social mobility. Many employers pay attention to the physical appearance of migrant domestic workers in the recruitment process. They associate dark skin in migrant workers with a “lack of civilization” and consider “plumpness” a symbol of “laziness;” both accord with prevalent stereotypes of Southeast Asians among Taiwanese. Filipina domestic workers are keenly aware that, in addition to being a laborer, they were also symbols that could enhance their employers’ social status. Theresa introduced her sister, Eliza, to work for her employer’s sister-in-law. They talked about how their employers displayed them to friends and visitors:

Eliza: You know one thing I notice? They will show us to their friends. Sometimes [when] they have guests coming, they call me. I don’t understand what they are saying, but I think they are saying who she is and what she can do.

Theresa: When they tried to find a maid, they told me they wanted someone young, tall, white, and beautiful, like looking for a Miss Philippines!

Eliza: But they end up having me! [*laugh*] The first time they saw me, they looked at my eyes, my feet, my ears. They want someone white and beautiful, not from Africa. They asked me if I know how to drive.

PCL: They let you drive?

Theresa: Yes, they will just ring the maid: “Theresa, I am here at school. Why don’t you pick me up?” It’s a bossy, choosy, social world. That’s why we are here now!

The employment of a live-in domestic worker becomes as a means of “conspicuous consumption” to evidence the pecuniary strength of employers (Veblen 1994). This mode of consumption indicates a luxurious lifestyle that is validated by many ceremonial tasks performed by domestic workers, such as chauffeuring and squeezing fresh juice for guests. Yu-Mei described her uncle, who also hired a Filipina domestic worker, used the act of squeezing juice, in contrast to purchases of mass products, to symbolize his upgraded status:

My uncle said he is living like royalty now. Every time we go to his house, he asks the Filipina maid to squeeze fresh juice for us.

Furthermore, I emphasize that status attribution of Taiwanese employers is not always a conscious or intentional process. Bourdieu (1977) argues that the structure of class inequality is reproduced and constituted in the practices of *habitus*, which refers to systems of durable “disposition” internalized and shaped by members of the same class. Although both emphasize the significance of consumption in the reproduction of class distinction, Bourdieu diverges from Veblen in his argument that “status signals are mostly sent unconsciously, via the habitus, or unintentionally, because of the classificatory effects of cultural codes” (Lamont and Lareau 1988: 164).

Upper-class employers internalize class disposition in their long-term practice of hiring help in the house. Emily, a 30-year-old mother of a newborn baby, lives with her parents-in-law. Her father-in-law is a retired banker. Two migrant domestic workers were employed in this household. I was invited to join them for lunch after my interview with Emily. While we were eating, the domestic workers were left in the living room to take care of the crying baby. Emily looked uncomfortable with this, at least during my presence. In contrast, the mother-in-law was quite used to the marginal status of the domestic workers. After the lunch Emily explained to me:

Probably because my mother-in-law has a longer history of hiring someone in the house, she hardly talked to them [domestic workers]. It seems kind of natural for her to ignore them. I guess if you have had a maid since you were a child, you got used to a position like that. But I am not. I am not from a rich family, so I am more polite to her [*smile*].

Many middle-class employers, without previous experience of hiring a maid, gradually receive and internalize class codes as they gain experience as employers. Mr. Yu went to Manila with his broker to interview candidates for his children’s babysitter. He described how he gained a sense of superiority while he was conducting interviews:

There were hundreds of people over there waiting for me. When I walked in, everyone said to me, Good morning, sir. Good morning, sir. Wow, I really felt puffed up with pride and vanity.

Employers can also receive messages regarding class categorization by seeing themselves through the eyes of other Taiwanese. When I asked employers how their friends or acquaintances responded to the fact that they hired a Filipina maid in the house, many employers had experiences similar to like Pei-Chi's:

One day my son's teacher called us, and the maid answered the phone. The teacher was freaked out and hung up when she heard someone speaking English. The next day she said to my son, "Is your family very rich? How come you have a Filipina maid?" They made a big deal out of this. Well, to answer your question, this is how people think.

I have so far argued that Taiwanese employers intentionally purchase a superior identity or unintentionally internalize class codes. I will further discuss how employers enact different kinds of boundary work in their interaction with workers to maintain their class and racial superiority. Based on her observations of the gendered interaction of boys and girls in school, Barrie Thorne insightfully argues that "boundaries can be created through *contact* as well as *avoidance*" (1993: 64, my emphasis). Similarly, domestic employers can mark status distinction through either *avoiding* or *enhancing* personal contact with their workers.

Upper-class employers in general prefer maintaining a distant and hierarchical relationship with their domestic workers. Theresa's employer, who grew up in a middle-class family, lived with her husband and his wealthy extended family. Her intimate relationship with Theresa attracted objection from other family members, as reported by Theresa:

My Ma'am is very close to me. They [the mother-in-law and sister-in-law] don't like my Ma'am to be close to their home sisters, the maids, because they will look low in that way.

A distant and hierarchical employment relationship is grounded on deferential performance of domestic workers in different aspects.² Linguistic deference is indicated by the fact that Filipina domestic workers are called by their first names, while Taiwanese employers receive respectful terms like “Ma’am” and “Sir.” Deference is also embedded in job requirements that display subservient ceremonial performance. For example, some Taiwanese employers request their domestic workers to answer the telephone, although the employers are at home and the domestic worker speaks little Chinese. Some employers ask their domestic workers to open the door upon their arrival at home, instead of opening the door with keys themselves.

These domestic employers establish a distant hierarchy by drawing a borderline between the lives of their family members and those of domestic worker. Racial differences often enhance the consolidation of the boundaries. Some employers reported that it was easier to maintain a distant hierarchy with migrant domestic workers, who are unfamiliar with local language and social networks, than with Taiwanese workers:

Honestly speaking, we do treat a Filipina maid and a local maid differently. I’m not sure if this is as bad as racial discrimination. But, because a local maid is our country fellow, it’s somehow more difficult to put her in a lower position.

In contrast to a distant hierarchy, other employers enhance personal contact with their domestic workers as a way to enhance their self-satisfaction and superiority. Previous studies have identified maternalistic practices of female employers through playing a role of nurturing, loving, and attending to the affective needs of domestic workers (Rollins 1985). Similarly, some Taiwanese employers view themselves as surrogate mothers or

² According to Goffman (1956), deference is a type of ceremonial activity that symbolically functions as a show of appreciation to the superordinate by the subordinate. Deferential behaviors may be linguistic,

custodians of their migrant domestics and intervene in the workers' private lives. These employers arrange travel plans for workers' vacations, withhold part of wages for the alleged reason of saving money for workers, check workers' whereabouts on Sundays, and are privy to workers' social and dating activities. These practices define workers as needy, immature, and inadequate to master their own lives, while strengthening the employers' perception of themselves as generous, thoughtful, and superior moral guardians.

Benevolent maternalism is most clearly illustrated by "gift-giving," an almost universal practice in domestic employment around the globe. Employers give away second-hand, discarded items, especially old clothes, as "gifts" to their domestics workers, and the latter are expected to respond with an appropriate performance of "no return" (Rollins 1985; Romero 1992). A Filipina domestic worker, Maya, told me:

They [the clothes from her employer] were very old and ugly. You could have used them to mop the floor! When she gave them to me, I said, OK, thank you, then I threw them away. She asked me later why she never saw me wearing those clothes. I said, Ma'am, I want to keep them and wear them in the Philippines. Then she was happy. She doesn't know that even though I am a maid, I want to buy new clothes...³

However, employers may request to get these "gifts" back, as Jovita described her experience with her employer:

All my clothes are from her. She bought so many things, all expensive. Then she threw them away in a bag. She said I could try [them on]. If I like it I can keep it, or give it to other people. Sometimes when she sees me wearing her clothes, she said, "I don't know why I threw that, it still looks nice." Then I said, "Well, you can have it back."

Did she ever take it back?

Sometimes. She said, "Do you still have the bag I threw away last time? Can I borrow just once? Because it fits my clothes tonight." I laughed in my heart and said, "Sure, they were yours anyway."

gestural, spatial, task-embedded, or part of the communication structure (who initiates speech, who speaks more frequently, who receives more attention, and so on).

This example reveals an asymmetrical relationship behind this “gift-giving” practice that is distinct from a reciprocal gift-exchange among family, friends and relatives (Mauss 1990). Although maternalistic employers analogize employment relations as family ties, domestic workers are nevertheless placed in a marginalized and subordinate status in the family. Nevertheless, the class and racial hierarchies claimed by Taiwanese employers may receive challenge from their Filipina domestic workers, especially through symbolic struggles around English. I will elaborate this topic in the last section.

Obscuring Social Differences

Not all employers enjoy a privileged class status. A substantial proportion of them, especially middle-class employers of younger-generations, tend to downplay class differences between them and their domestic workers. Some employers feel uncomfortable, uneasy, and even guilty about the status hierarchy and class differences inherent in domestic employment:

Some people said there is a more obvious class distinction when you hire a Filipina maid?

I think it is Filipina maids themselves who act like that. I never request that. Actually it's more difficult for me to get along with them when they are acting like that, like they want to SERVE you. Many things, I just want to do them myself...

Like what?

For example, when I am cooking, to move the food in the pan to a plate, that's no big deal! But she thinks that's something she should do, if you don't let her do it, she becomes really nervous. Or when we are talking, she would say, “Your family is rich, mine is poor, I envy you, etc.” (Wen-Jen, 38 years old, a college professor).

In some aspect, I feel kind of sorry for her. Because here we have better economic conditions, whatever the children want, we can easily satisfy them. But not for her children... Sometimes when I buy stuff for my children, she will look at us with an envious look on her face. (Melissa, 36-year-old, a business manager)

Domestic employers' liberal guilt is magnified when a status hierarchy is located at

³ However, it is worth noting that domestic workers do not necessarily perceive gift-giving as demeaning, and

home. Home is considered a private haven marked by intimacy and affection, in contrast to the public sphere characterized by depersonalized bureaucracy. For example, John, a 35-year-old copywriter, explained to me why he felt uncomfortable about the hierarchical distance between his family and his domestic worker:

My impression is that she feels kind of uneasy, or, put in a stronger way, inferior. She has been together with us for such a long time, but she is still very reserved, overcautious.

Could you be more specific? Like what kinds of situations?

Oh, for example, she never initiates a conversation with us, unless we ask her something, and she always answers very briefly. We want her to sit at table to have dinner with us, but she'd rather eat after we are done. I am really not used to that, but if we force her to eat with us, she actually feels very uneasy. Then we look at her, we feel uneasy ourselves, too. I keep wondering why she wants to keep some distance from us...I don't like the feeling of living in a class hierarchy. This is very different from eating in a restaurant. I don't know why, but being served by a waiter or waitress is much more OK.

Why different? Because this is at home?

Yeah, home is a very private setting, not a public space. So when your home becomes something like a restaurant, doesn't this make you nervous?

When these employers downplay class difference between them and their domestic workers, they are, intentionally or unintentionally, validating their middle-class identity. Chin (1998), based on her study in Malaysia, argues that hiring a migrant domestic worker becomes a way to mark Asian employers' recent achievement of middle-class status. Although this argument is true, I further found that middle-class employers in Taiwan emphasize their "difference" from a traditional kind of employer. They underscore their achieved class status in opposition to the heritage-based prestige of upper-class people that is associated with a feudalist tradition of domestic servitude:

Today is no longer the age of authoritarianism. We are just a middle-class family. We hire a Filipina maid only because of need. So we don't treat her like a servant. We told the children that you have to say thank you whenever you ask her to do something. We know it's an issue of human rights. We respect that. (Yasmine, 40 years old, a travel agent)

Moral values such as self-reliance, democracy, and liberalism constitute the core of the

may see gifts from employers as "payment in kind" (Ozyegin forthcoming; Parrenas forthcoming).

middle-class identities, especially for the generation of Taiwanese who were growing up and establishing their career during Taiwan's dramatic economic transformation and political democratization in the last few decades. Some employers, as shown in the remarks below, are thus concerned that their children may become spoiled or snobbish under the care of a migrant domestic worker, or their family is destroying the moral principle of self-dependency:

The maid goes to school to pick up my son every day. You know kids talk to each other, he said my Filipina maid this and that. The teacher told him, don't say "Filipina maid," say "caregiver."
How did these kids talk about the Filipina maid?

He [the son] said [to other kids] that we have a Filipina maid at home, and your family doesn't. My Filipina maid can do this and that for me...Children compare everything nowadays. They compare who has better toys, whose family is richer. It's really bad.

When people heard we hired two Filipina maids at home, they all envy us a lot. There is nothing to envy. I don't encourage people to hire a Filipina maid. You only do so when there is a need in your family. Employers become lazy, like getting addicted to drugs. It's better to do it yourself. Be self-reliant. (Jack, 42 years old, a business manager)

In addition, professional employers confirm their "middle class-hood" by drawing a distinction between themselves and working-class employer or middle-class employers who have sufficient economic capital but lack high education and appropriate cultural capital. During interviews, many middle-class professional employers highlighted their democratic attitude toward their domestic workers and their adequate capability to communicate in English:

Most of my friends have positive experiences [of hiring Filipina domestic workers]. Because most of us work in the computer industry and we all know how to speak English. Those who have negative experiences are less educated people. They don't know how to communicate in English and then they just complain about their Filipina maids. It's actually the problem of employers (Pei-Chi, an owner of a family-run small-sized computer business)

We are educated intellectuals. Of course we don't want to treat them like master and servant. We always eat together, interacting on the same level... Those abuse cases on the newspaper, I think their employers are mostly from lower levels. (Yi-Ling, a journalist)

No matter for purposes of relieving their liberal guilt or confirming their middle class-hood, these Taiwanese employers try to cover up class differences between them and their Filipina domestic workers by performing “emotional work”⁴ towards their workers. Ozyegin raises the term “class work” to describe how Turkish domestic employers strategically construct intimacy with their (also Turkish) domestic workers and manipulate a metaphor of older sister/younger sister. Similarly, Taiwanese employers use family inclusion as a main strategy to obscure class differences in domestic employment. They invite their workers to sit at the table while having meals, or invite them to join family outings. Some employers replace the derogatory title of “maid” with more status-neutral terms such as “babysitter,” “caregiver,” and “helper,” or analogize domestic workers as family members such as “sister” or “auntie.”

Employers also perform emotional work toward their domestic workers to solve another tension that happens when their private households become a public workplace. As childcare, the “labor of love,” is transformed into commodified work conducted by a family outsider, or even a foreign stranger, employers adopt family inclusion as a strategy to ensure the affective quality of emotional labor offered by their domestic workers. Fictive family membership enhances workers’ commitment to the welfare of employers, as well as the authenticity and sincerity of their emotional labor. Most employers spend time chatting with their workers and comforting homesick workers, in attempt to create intimacy and to ensure that no unusual problems are happening in the lives of their workers. Melissa clearly identified her emotional work with her domestic worker as a strategic act for the benefit of her children:

⁴ Here I adopt Hochschild’s distinction between “emotional labor” and “emotional work.” The former refers to emotional performance sold for a wage and has exchange value. The latter defines similar emotional acts

I wish her to completely understand that everything I do for her is for my children. My husband often complained, “We don’t even have time to take care of our children. Now we have to take care of her?” [*Sigh*] We hire her to help, but actually—She brings us more trouble than help!

The above discussion has revealed a practice of personalism/family inclusion that is essentially different from maternalism. Middle-class employers cultivate personal relationships with their domestic workers not to enhance a status hierarchy, but to minimize their class guilt or to assure good care for their children. My argument is confirmed by Hondagneu-Sotelo’s study on domestic employers in L.A. (forthcoming). She found that one-way, asymmetrical maternalistic practices mainly apply to homemaker employers of older generations. In contrast, contemporary middle-class working employers tend to adopt an attitude of “instrumental personalism” or “strategic intimacy,” which is a more balanced two-way relationship.

FILIPINA WORKERS: NEGOTIATING CONFLICTING IDENTITIES

Most Filipina migrant workers have no experience working as domestics in the Philippines, and a significant proportion of them possess high levels of education or prior professional occupation. While working overseas as a “maid,” an occupation labeled with social stigma, many of them experience conflicting class identities (Parrenas forthcoming). During interviews, many Filipina workers mentioned their previous status with a deep sigh or in a mocking tone:

A friend of mine worked in the government office, but you know what she’s doing now [in Taiwan]? She’s cleaning chicken every day! I always say I was a manager in the Philippines, and I am a manager in the house now!” (Venessa, previously a supervisor of a chain bookstore)

My friends in the Philippines were making fun about me. They said my instruments before were pen and papers, and my instruments now are knife, blender, and cutting board! (Jorita, a previous high school teacher)

done in a private setting where they have only use value (1983:7).

I was a *Maybahay* [Tagalog: Housewife]! I played majian every day, doing nothing!” (Priscila, previously a housewife whose husband was a doctor, now separated)

You know how I feel? Last time I had a babysitter. Now I am the babysitter! (Rosemary, a former secretary)

Although working overseas brings about a substantial gain in monetary terms, the job of domestic work is stigmatized as requiring little skills and education. Sylvia came to work in Taiwan soon after she finished her college degree in accounting. Upon leaving the Philippines, she received strong opposition from her family:

My dad was very mad in the beginning. He almost disowned me. He said to me: if your ambition is only [to be] a domestic helper, I would not have sent you to college or even high school!

The stigma of domestic work is exacerbated by a decline of social status for Filipina migrant workers while they are treated as inferior in host countries due to their nationalities. The uneven development of the world system is translated into unequal micro-dynamics in the interaction between Taiwanese employers and Filipina domestics:

Trina: Most Filipinas didn't have the experiences before. We were not maids in the Philippines. Some of us didn't even do housework!

Maya: You know the case in Kaoshong? The Filipina got abused? She was a teacher in the Philippines! Her employer must think she is stupid...

Trina: Difficult [at work] is ok, but they [employers] don't respect you.

Maya: They look down at us. Because our country is poor, we become very small.

Filipina domestic workers are not the only group of migrant workers who face conflicting class identities. Many Latina immigrant domestic workers in the Bay area, studied by Salzinger (1991), had professional careers at home but were trapped in the “occupational ghetto” of domestic service (Glenn 1981) after staying many years in the United States. However, Salzinger observed that these Latino domestic workers achieved an upgrading of this “dirty work” by establishing an informal contract specifying tasks and

creating a business-like environment. Such a scenario does not happen to Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan, who encounter different policy contexts and working conditions than their Latino counterparts. First, as detailed in earlier chapters, migrant domestic workers in Taiwan are bound by a live-in contract, which constrains their ability to negotiate with employers and transform their work. Second, migrant workers in Taiwan and other Asian host countries are only entitled to a temporary stay and lack the opportunity of immigration. Migrant domestic workers thus view their work as only a temporary status that trades off monetary gains against emotional costs. Judy explained to me why she had no regrets about working abroad as maid, even though she was previously a midwife with a college degree in nursing:

Working abroad is good, because even [if] you work 10 years in the Philippines, you still make no money. Most people working abroad have high degrees, because they want to have higher salaries.

But this is kind of a waste for your degree?

I would like to work in the Philippines to use my knowledge, but I cannot make that much money. Besides, working in other countries is not life-long. You only work for six to eight years, and you can have a business.

Although expecting to achieve upward mobility in the future, Filipina domestic workers have to cope with downward mobility that happens during their work in host countries. Research participants repeatedly mentioned how they have to bracket their previous background and “act like a maid”:

Since they work as a maid, they must act as a maid. If they think about they used to work in the bank, they cannot do a good job. They feel...down, then they feel conflict.

I think since you already come here, you shouldn't talk about if you have a car, you have a maid in the Philippines. If you have everything in the Philippines, why do you come here? Keep quiet. Now you are here, you need to follow the rules here. You are a domestic helper, you have to do everything. You cannot complain you don't know how to do this, how to do that.

The majority of Filipina domestic workers reconcile their conflicting class identities by

dissociating themselves from their current status as a domestic worker. Some Filipina domestic workers negate the identity of “maid” by distinguishing themselves from other domestic workers. For example, Rowena, who was a market vendor in the Philippines and decided to work overseas out of curiosity and the pursuit of adventure, emphasized to me how she was different from other Filipinas who migrated for financial needs:

I am a businesswoman type of person. I don't like to stay home, to clean this, clean that (laugh). I am not proud, but I can make 5,000 peso [US\$145] a day near New Year. You know I have a housemaid in the Philippines! I never did these things in the house, so [it is] very difficult for me to adjust. My friend is a pharmacist. She made good money. No need to work abroad. We are exceptions. Not like Eliza, she needs to make money to support her children.

Filipina workers also enhance their social status by drawing a hierarchical distinction among domestic workers along the lines of ethnicity or nationality. Parrenas (forthcoming) has made a similar observation about this aspect. She found that Filipina domestic workers in Rome and L.A. embraced a nationality-based racial categorization by claiming that they provided services of better quality than their African and Latina counterparts. Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan also assert their superior status over Indonesian domestic workers. Filipina workers claim their ability and reliability based on a negative construction of Indonesian workers. They describe “those Indonesians” as being undereducated, short of English skills, stealing employers’ belongings, and lacking sufficient knowledge and experience to handle housework in a modern household.

Another coping strategy of Filipina domestic workers is to maintain multiple identities at multiple social settings. I call this a “social topology of identity”—social actors construct and maintain multiple identities at segregated social spaces. The double lives and identities of Filipina domestic workers are well captured by Goffman’s (1959) metaphors of “front” and “backstage.” The first set of double settings refers to their divided lives between the

Philippines and host countries. While being frustrated by their demeaning social status in host countries, Filipina migrant domestic workers seek psychological compensation by validating their superior class identity at home. They maintain the glamour of working abroad by displaying material gains, such as purchasing expensive goods and renovating houses, and downplaying the dark side of their experiences in front of their national fellows. I consistently heard stories like this one, in which Filipina domestic workers conceal or obscure their actual situations in Taiwan from their friends and acquaintances in the Philippines:

I met a Filipina on the street in Taipei. She's my neighbor in the Philippines. She was an instructor. She asked me not to tell people I saw her in Taiwan. Many people don't even tell their family and friends what they are really doing here. They don't know we are just washing dishes and dogs!

When I first invited Jovita for an interview, she asked me, "Are you going to publish it on *China Post*⁵? Last time some reporters came and Sister asked me to let them take pictures. I said, no-no-no, I don't want my friends in the Philippines to see me mopping floors in Taiwan!" A few months later, Jovita told me she had to do more "aerobics" (part-time cleaning jobs) recently, because she just sent US\$100 to sponsor her high school reunion. I asked why she had to send money given that she could not attend the reunion, and she answered:

They asked for donation for school renovating. Those who work abroad are major donors. Other people give [money] also, like 500 peso (US\$14). Because we work abroad, they think we earn more money, we should donate more.

Filipina domestic workers not only maintain a front/backstage distinction at home and in Taiwan, but they also live a two-fold life during their stay in Taiwan. They behave and

⁵ An English newspaper published in Taiwan. Its Sunday version covers major news in the Philippines and issues regarding Filipino/a migrant workers in Taiwan.

identify themselves differently when they are within employers' houses and when they go out on Sundays. During the week in the residence of employers, domestic workers have to "act like a maid" to reflect the image held by the audience, their employers. They perform acts that manifest deference and subservience and refrain from open confrontation of the authority of employers. In contrast, on Sundays, the most common rest day for migrant workers in Taiwan, they perform an offstage identity beyond the direct observation of their employers.

Off-day dressing vividly indicates the identity shift of Filipina domestic workers (Constable 1997; Yeoh and Huang 1998). When they go out on Sundays, they dress up in blouses, brand-name jeans, or short skirts, and put on makeup, nail polish, and dangling gold earrings. With these material markers they project themselves with an urban, fashion-conscious, sophisticated, feminine image that is drastically different from the image at work. One Sunday I went out with Luisa and other Filipinas for lunch after mass. As we were sitting in a fast food restaurant, I saw a bag with clothes in it and I asked Luisa if she had just been shopping. She shook her head and explained to me, with an embarrassed smile:

No, those are the clothes I have to change [into] when I go home. When I go out, I want to look smart, fashionable, and intelligent. In these clothes [*points to clothes she is wearing*] I'm like a business manager. Those clothes [*points at bag*] I bought in the market, for a hundred dollars [US\$3]! I look like a "floor manager" in those! [*big laugh*]. So, before I go home, I change, I take off my makeup, I change my mini skirt... I look like a totally different person at home...Just like Cinderella [*bitter smile*]...

The backstage activities on Sunday are in dramatic contrast to their deferential performance toward their employers. On weekdays, Filipina domestic workers pretend to be stupid and compliment their employers. On Sundays, they exchange funny stories and

family secrets of their employers, mock their English, and criticize their manners or tastes. Shopping is another major activity on Sundays. Many migrant workers spend a substantial amount of time and money shopping for a variety of items including clothing, jewelry, and expensive appliances such as DVD players and cellular phones. To attract Filipino/a consumers, some electronic stores even sell appliances with a one-year warranty in the Philippines. Although domestic workers cannot refuse used items handed down from employers on the “front,” shopping becomes a way for them feel “empowered” backstage with the statement of “I can buy whatever I want.”

The public presence of migrant workers on Sunday has attracted complaints among local communities, and the government has been trying to relocate them to places with less public visibility. A Taipei City Councilor conducted a survey among 272 Taiwanese passengers in the train station. Seventy-six percent of the passengers said that they were either “disgusted” or felt “bad” at the noises and chaos made by migrant workers on Sundays. Ninety percent of the polled thought the phenomenon was a “negative subculture” that ruins the modern image of the city landmark.⁶ Local residents in the neighborhood near St. Christopher also air grievances about noises and dirtiness caused by migrant workers, and are concerned about their life quality and safety on Sundays.⁷ Similar “weekend enclaves” appear in other Asian host countries, such as Lucky Plaza in Singapore and Central District in Hong Kong. Yeoh and Huang, based on their observations in Singapore, have insightfully argued that the complaints among local residents reflect a sense of insecurity as a result of “an invasion of the us-them boundary and a reversal of the positioning of self and other” (1998:) The fear of being excluded by “subaltern others” is

⁶ *Taiwan News* (Taipei) 11 June 2000.

illustrated by a Taiwanese employer who told me about her experience on an early Sunday morning when she took a bus whose route passed by St. Christopher church: “Believe it or not. I was the only Taiwanese passenger on the bus! I felt so weird and even scared! That moment I really wondered where I really was!”

Most employers stipulate a certain curfew to announce the end of migrant workers’ rest day. When shifting from backstage to front, these Cinderellas take off their make-up, turn off their cellular phones, change clothes, and return “home” under the jurisdiction of employers. In addition, they attempt to present a version of their Sunday activities that is deemed “appropriate” by their employers. Disco dancing is the most popular form of birthday celebration among Filipina domestic workers. A few times when I went along, I noticed some of them changed their shirts before they left the disco. They explained to me why they had to take off the shirt that had absorbed too much cigarette smoke at the discos: “So our employers will think we go to the church! Not the disco!”

Jame Scott’s (1990) concepts of “public transcript” and “hidden transcript” are useful to describe the divided lives held by migrant domestic workers. Their performance in weekdays follows “public transcripts” that establish the authority and superiority of their employers, while their activities on Sundays embody disguised and undeclared resistance in “hidden transcripts” (Chin 1998). Paradoxically, an employer’s “private” residence now becomes a “public” workplace, the front, where domestic workers are assigned “appropriate” behaviors and inferior identity. In contrast, places like the train station and parks, which are in *public* but away from their employers’ homes, ironically provide them with more degrees of *privacy* and personal freedom (Yeoh and Huang 1998). The “public”

⁷ *China Times* (Taipei) 8 February 1999, and 6 April 1999.

backstage allows them to construct and maintain an identity different from being a “maid” at work, and empower themselves in their ethnic community.

ENGLISH: A FIELD OF SYMBOLIC STRUGGLE

The final section focuses on symbolic struggles and resistance around English, a field that demonstrates ambiguity and contestations in the process of identity construction between Taiwanese employers and Filipina domestic workers. I argue that English, as a globally dominant linguistic tool, embodies the economic and political hegemony of English-speaking countries in recent world history. English has become a prestigious cultural commodity that serves to consolidate and reproduce the symbolic domination of English-speaking cultures. The fluency in English also constitutes a specific kind of cultural capital, which I shall call “linguistic capital” for individual English speakers of varied nationalities.

My conception of “linguistic capital” draws on Bourdieu’s class theory (1984, 1986). In addition to *economic* capital (wealth, income, property), he identifies *culture* as a form of capital indicated by education, manners, taste, and command of prestigious cultural codes. Based on his observations of the educational system in France, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) found that its curriculum content and style offer advantages to those who possess the “educationally profitable linguistic capital” of “bourgeois language.”⁸ In a similar way, I describe English as a form of “linguistic capital” that is unequally distributed among different classes, ethnic groups, and nationals. My analysis will show that the linguistic capital of English not only can be converted into advantages in job market and monetary

⁸ The “bourgeois language” refers to a tendency to “abstraction, formalism, intellectualism, and euphemistic moderation” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

values, but also constitutes a terrain that embodies social distinctions and symbolic struggles.

Although English is a required subject for all Taiwanese students during six years of high school education, the average Taiwanese does not attain English fluency, even among college graduates. However, English has been recognized as a valuable source of human capital in the last few decades, as Taiwan has been incorporated into the global economy, indicated by both the outflow of exported products and the influx of foreign capital. The current generation of Taiwanese parents, who emphasize children's education in line with the influence of Confucianism, are eager to invest economic capital to equip their children with the linguistic capital of English. Upper-class households hire home tutors to teach their children English, and middle-class parents send children to after-school language centers or summer programs. Taiwan's government has recently decided to initiate English education in elementary schools in order to improve the quality of English education.

In contrast, most Filipino/as are somewhat proficient in English due to the half-century colonial rule by the United States. To this day English is still the dominant language in government documents and curriculum materials in the Philippines. With their fluency in English and their familiarity with American culture, Filipino/a migrants have gained a major competitive advantage in the global labor market. Taiwanese factory owners prefer Filipino/a workers to Thai workers because the former can read English instructions of imported machines and equipment. Filipino/a musicians are widely employed in prestigious hotels in major Asian cities, since they can sing English songs well but command a wage much lower than a band from the United States. The cultural and linguistic heritage of their colonizer ironically becomes the most valuable human resource for Filipino/a workers to

escape their stagnant economy and poverty in the post-independence era.

The migration linkage between the Philippines and Taiwan pieces together a fluctuating and complex picture of class formation. Taiwanese employers hold different and contradictory attitudes toward highly educated Filipina domestic workers. On the one hand, quite a number of employers prefer hiring college graduates to extract a side benefit of teaching children English and also to enhance glamour in this conspicuous consumption. On the other hand, highly educated workers may challenge the superior identity of their Taiwanese employers, especially employers who have no college degree or cannot speak fluent English.

A significant number of both employers and workers in this research reported difficulties in communicating with the other party in English. The situation is especially obvious among employers who have an education of high school or lower. In these cases, they usually rely on the assistance of a third party, such as brokers, or adult children, or even young children who are enrolled in English classes. Some employers use an electronic dictionary to mediate their communication with workers.⁹ When I asked Judy if her employers speak English, she answered:

No, only the young granddaughter. She studies in Canada. But she is not in Taiwan now. If I have a problem, I write it down on a letter, my employer brings the letter to the factory. The secretary there can speak a little English. It's very complicated. Sometimes I want to complain [about] something, they just say I am sorry, I don't understand.

Language barriers in Judy's case made it difficult for her to negotiate terms and conditions with her employers. For the same reason, employers whose English is not adequate face obstacles in making requests to or enforcing labor control over their migrant

⁹ These employers input Chinese words into this palm-sized machine, and workers can read the English translation that shows up on the screen of the machine. The workers do vice versa.

domestic workers. Shu-Hwa and Fang-Pin, who are both high school graduates and run family-owned stores, have similar experiences in this aspect:

Local workers—you ask them; they don't necessarily listen to you. Foreign workers—you ask them; they don't necessarily understand you. She [the foreign worker] would ask you, "Ma'am, what were you saying?" She was confused and so were you [*laugh*]. Everyday you are worried about how to express your request [in English]! Sometimes I think—forget it, I will just do it myself [*laugh*]. (Shu-Hwa, an electronics store owner)

Sometimes she [the maid] did something wrong, and I would want to scold her. But I didn't know how to scold her in English! Then I got even angrier! I had to wait until my English class to ask my teacher how to say what I wanted to say. (Fang Ping, a shoe store owner)

Some Filipina domestic workers consider language barriers beneficial, since their employers are thus not able to enforce many work regulations: "It's good if your employer doesn't know much English, then they cannot ask you to do much work." Some Filipina workers consciously manipulate English as means of resisting employers' demands. For example, Mercy, who worked in Singapore for five years and then came to Taiwan to work for an owner of a family-run factory:

Last time my employer told me to clean the factory office, I said, "What?" Then I kept mopping the floor and pretended not hearing anything. Then he didn't say anything more. Because he didn't speak much English!

But in Singapore you cannot do this. The employer there speaks English?

I still could [*secretly smiles*]. I pretended I didn't understand English!

Filipina workers with English fluency are often assigned duties that are beyond the scope of domestic work and signal a status more advanced than a "maid." Claudia, with a college degree in pharmacology, proudly told me that she could speak better English than her employers so she was asked to answer phone calls in an upper-class private club:

My employer used to be the vice president of a women's club. She always brought me to their meeting.

Why? Do you have to serve them there?

No, she just asked me to take phone calls, and told me to call this person that person. They have many Americans there.

So she wants you to speak English!

Yeah, I think so. I can speak better English than most of them [*smile*].

Tutoring is another English-related job requirement that is commonly assigned to Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan. While I was teaching a Chinese course at *Holy Spirit*, many of my Filipina students complained that they had no chance to practice Chinese, explaining, “Our employers like to talk to us in English.” “They want to practice English!” Many of their employers request that they instruct the employers’ children in English, like in the experiences of Olivia and Imelda:

My boss told me: When they were reading my bio-data, my lady employer didn’t like me. She said I looked old and ugly in the picture. But my boss said: “But she is a college graduate, and she has a BA in English! Maybe she can teach us English!”

They hire us because they want to learn English. Like the children in my house, they go to an American school. They don’t speak Chinese to me. They want to practice their English. I know if they hire an English tutor, it will be very expensive. But they hire us for everything and it is cheap!

The request of English tutoring usually comes from employers who possess less linguistic capital. In contrast, well-educated employers are concerned that their children may pick up a “substandard,” “bad,” or “unrefined” English accent from Filipina domestic workers. Some employers thus enroll their children in English courses instructed by American or British teachers to rectify possible negative influences from their domestic workers. Many parents are also worried that their children may learn Tagalog and other local dialects spoken by Filipina domestic workers:

Once I was talking to my Filipina maid and one customer heard us. Then she asked me, “So you know how to speak Tagalog?” I was shocked when I heard that. I said to myself, Oh my God, my English was mistaken for Tagalog. Have I been assimilated by them? No-No, my children cannot learn English from them.

Sometimes I heard her [the maid] speaking some local dialect to my daughter. I really cannot bear this. I am worried once she [the daughter] starts talking, she will speak their Filipino local dialect! So I am thinking that maybe I should send my daughter instead to a local babysitter.

Some employers object to the idea of having Filipina domestic workers as English tutors because they believe this arrangement will cause “role confusion”: the role of tutor/instructor involves a certain degree of authority and superiority that contradicts the role of “maid” that implies a subservient and inferior status. Evita’s experience in Singapore clearly exposed the contradiction between two roles:

I had an argument with the madam. She asked me to teach the kid English. I said ok, then I asked the child to learn, but he didn’t want to. He said bad words like “you bloody Evita, you shit!” I was angry. My son was in his age, but never said that to me, so I slapped him. Luckily the daughter was there, and she saw why I did this. I said to my employer, it’s not my fault. But she wanted to dismiss me. I said, ok, I will go.

Symbolic struggle around English is more significant in the context of Taiwan than other Asian host countries. In Singapore and Hong Kong, English is (or was in Hong Kong before 1997) the official language and is widely used at all levels of education. In contrast, English has never been a dominant language in Taiwan, a condition that increases the relative value of this linguistic capital. My conversation with two Filipina workers showed that they had more confidence speaking English to their Taiwanese employers in comparison to their previous employers in Singapore:

Grace: I feel more comfortable speaking English here.

Carlita: In Singapore, they correct our English. Because they learn British English, but we learn American English, more similar to here. In Singapore, they say vase/e/ as vase/a/, God/a/ as God/o/...

PCL: They think your English is wrong?

Carlita: Yes, they think we are wrong and we should speak in their way.

PCL: So when you said you feel more comfortable speaking English here, this is because English

is similar here or because people here speak English worse than you?

Grace: Of course it is the second reason [*laugh*]...

Carlita: My employer said, oh, you speak very good English. I am thinking, no, I speak lousy English. They ask me to speak slowly, but I think I already speak very slow!

Grace: My employer’s friends also said to her, oh, it’s very good you have someone teach English free of charge!

In an explicit or implicit way, these Filipina domestic workers gain a superior identity

over their Taiwanese employers based on their command of English, a form of linguistic capital inherited from their colonizer. As they embrace the symbolic hegemony of English, they devalue other languages in a way similar to how their employers belittle Filipino dialects. My Chinese course at *Holy Spirit* covered some basic Taiwanese, a dialect widely used in Taiwan, especially among older generations and in rural areas. Filipina attendants complained to me about the difficulty of learning Taiwanese. Helen bluntly said in a class:

I don't understand—Why people here don't speak English? Those ladies in the department stores, they are pretty and dressed in fashion, but they cannot even speak English! I don't know what they learn at school? They are wasting their time, and now we have to waste our time to learn this stupid language!" (Field Note 02/11/99)

Some Taiwanese employers complained to me that Filipina domestic workers with a college degree are difficult to deal with because they were “too smart, too opinionated,” and “not like a maid.” A Taiwanese employer, Yu-Mei, who is a college graduate and a government worker, sometimes felt intimidated by her Filipina worker's English:

She [the Filipina domestic worker] probably thinks highly of herself, so she likes to talk to us. But they [Filipino/as] have a pretty heavy accent. Plus, she likes to use rare or difficult vocabulary. So I often don't understand what she's talking about.

Mr. Yu, a college-graduate business manager, preferred hiring less educated Filipina workers after having frequent conflicts around English with one of his Filipina workers who worked in a bank in the Philippines:

Sometimes when we had different English pronunciation, she would want to correct me, to teach me. [*Mrs. Yu*: They had arguments like this all the time!] In the beginning, I thought my English was wrong. Then I went to ask my colleagues, and, well, I was right! In my perspective, she just couldn't accept her position. She didn't want to stay in the Philippines, but she didn't feel like being a maid in Taiwan, either. So she didn't want us to treat her like a maid.

Most Filipina domestic workers do not confront their employers as bluntly as the Filipina worker hired by Mr. Yu. They share and laugh hard at jokes related to employers'

English mistakes during their backstage activities on Sundays. However, in front of their employers, they consciously avoid correcting their English as a way of performing deference to mitigate their employers' feelings of insecurity or to avoid giving offense.

During my fieldwork I frequently heard scenarios similar to the following examples:

My employ called me from the office and said: "Luisa, 12 hours, don't forget to EAT my children!" She actually meant, "12 o'clock, don't forget to FEED my children!" [*laugh*]

Oh my God. Did you correct her?

No. Some employers don't like that. I just answered: "Don't worry! I already EAT your children!"

Do you correct them when their English is wrong?

Not really, because I feel they get offended. So now I don't correct them unless they ask me.

What made you feel they get offended?

[Once] when we talked at dinner, my employer said, "when I am a children..." I thought it was wrong, so I corrected her, "when I was a child." She repeated what I said, but I could tell from her tone [that] she was not happy about this. She was offended. So after that, I never do it again. I just pretend nothing. Like last night, the husband said to me, "four units of noodle," he means four packs of instant noodles, I tried very hard not to laugh in front of him!

You remember Carina? She likes to argue with her employer. She corrects her employer's English. I told her, whatever they say, you accept it! Don't correct them! They said, you "drop" the soup. They meant, "put it down." Carina said to them, "Ma'am, not right." That's why they don't like her! Never argue with your boss! They don't like you to be the higher place. I know everything, but I don't show it to my boss. I just bow and nod, yes and no.

Aihwa Ong (1999) studied Hong Kong affluent emigrants in California who deliberately converted their economic capital into the acquisition of cultural capital (British education, command in English and cultural tastes) to seek social recognition in the new country. However, their strategy of "cultural accumulation" is limited, since these Hong Kong emigrants are still categorized as inferior subjects in the US regime of racial difference and hierarchy. Along with, my study further explores the convertability between economic capital and linguistic capital, and underscores the significance of English in the distribution of and contestation over economic and cultural resources in transnational arenas.

Albeit in different directions, both Taiwanese employers and Filipina domestic workers pursue a conversion between economic capital and linguistic capital to upgrade their status in the transforming global economy and cultural landscape. On the one hand, Taiwanese employers attempt to invest their economic capital to equip their children with linguistic capital that the parents do not possess. On the other hand, Filipina domestic workers, based on their linguistic capital inherited from the American colonizer, secure opportunities to work overseas and enhance their status in the interaction with some Taiwanese employers.

However, we have to bear in mind that the empowerment of Filipina migrants based on English fluency is somehow limited for two reasons. First, the linguistic capital of Filipino/as is underrated as “bad,” “unauthentic,” or “unrefined” in contrast to the Euro-American version of English. Second, power dynamics in an employment relationship are ultimately determined by the distribution of economic capital. Facing the potential consequence of contract termination by employers, most acts of symbolic resistance around English remain hidden in their backstage transcript.

CONCLUSION

Identity formation in the contemporary era of globalization cannot be understood within the limited scope of a single society or country. Bourdieu’s class theory has been criticized for its holistic and structuralist scheme that was conceived in a relatively homogeneous and static social structure (Hall 1992; Ong 1999). The weakness of this theoretical scheme is further exposed when being applied to study the experiences of transnational migrants, whose identity is constituted in multiple settings beyond the scope

of national boundaries. My study, focusing on the encounter between Filipina domestic workers and Taiwanese employers, addresses this theoretical gap by exploring how transnational migration has remapped and complicated class schemes that are intertwined with national and racial hierarchies in the global economy.

My previous analysis has illustrated that transnational domestic employment becomes a critical arena for the construction of class and racial/ethnic differences. Taiwanese employers attempt to validate their newly achieved class status and racial superiority by spending their *economic capital* to hire foreign maids; in contrast, Filipina domestic workers develop strategies to cope with their downward class mobility when they work as maids overseas. The symbolic struggle around English further illustrates contestation and ambiguity in the process of racial and class formation. Taiwanese employers' purchase or attribution of class and racial superiority may be challenged by the fact that some Filipina domestic workers possess a higher education or a better command of the *linguistic capital* of English than their Taiwanese employers. These phenomena, as local consequences of transnational migration and global economic restructuring, present a small piece of the complex picture of identity construction in the contemporary world, a further globalized yet more divided world.

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