

FOREIGN DOMESTIC HELPERS IN HONG KONG:

Occupation, Resistance, Autonomy

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Doctor of Philosophy – Design

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This thesis is dedicated to the Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong,
and to all those who labour within the global contingent of migrant domestic work.

Certificate of original authorship

I, Evelyn Kwok declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Philosophy in Design in the School of Design in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research has been supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

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Record of Interviews with Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong (2013–2015)

Thirty-five Foreign Domestic Helpers were interviewed in Hong Kong between November 2013 and February 2015. My ethnographic research was granted permission by the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee: UTS HREC REF NO. 2013000252. As the majority of Foreign Domestic Helpers are women, all of the participants listed below are female. The interviews took place in public spaces in Central Hong Kong where the Filipino Foreign Domestic Helpers gathered every Sunday. For this reason, all of the participants are from the Philippines. Their names have been altered into pseudonyms to uphold anonymity, however all participants consented to their age, years of service and their monthly wages (at the time of the interview) being recorded. A standard list of questions was designed to prompt the interviewing process, engaging the participants to tell their stories. A detailed account of the interviewing process is provided in Chapter One. Once again, I extend grateful thanks to the Foreign Domestic Helpers who spent their valuable time participating in the interviews and recounting their stories on their only weekly day off work.

Name	Age	Years of service in Hong Kong	Monthly wage (HKD)	Date of interview
Georgie	41	11	\$5200	24/11/2013
Christine	28	4	\$3900	24/11/2013
Nila	32	6	\$3900	1/12/2013
Yasmine	30	3	\$4800	1/12/2013
Rachel	33	6	\$4300	1/12/2013
Dorothy	32	4	\$3900	8/12/2013
Josephine	38	9	\$5200	8/12/2013
Janet	39	11	\$5000	25/01/2015
Emma	31	4	\$4400	25/01/2015
Diana	35	8	\$4800	1/02/2015
Rose	41	11	\$5300	1/02/2015
Lina	36	5	\$5000	1/02/2015
Susan	29	5	\$4700	1/02/2015
Shana	28	2	\$4400	1/02/2015
Lila	36	8	\$5200	1/02/2015
Belinda	27	2	\$4200	1/02/2015
Christina	30	3	\$4500	1/02/2015
Kate	28	4	\$4300	8/02/2015
Mary	35	7	\$4600	8/02/2015
Danielle	31	4	\$4600	8/02/2015
Paige	32	7	\$4200	8/02/2015
Nina	36	7	\$5100	8/02/2015
Melissa	32	6	\$4600	8/02/2015
Lily	29	3	\$4400	8/02/2015
Belle	37	7	\$4800	8/02/2015
Paula	27	2	\$4200	8/02/2015
Maria	28	5	\$4100	8/02/2015
Jill	30	3	\$4200	8/02/2015
Lynne	42	10	\$5000	15/02/2015
Rita	34	8	\$5100	15/02/2015
Caroline	29	5	\$4300	15/02/2015
Vanessa	25	1	\$3600	15/02/2015
Sophie	27	2	\$3800	15/02/2015
Beth	33	5	\$4700	15/02/2015
Matilda	30	4	\$5000	15/02/2015
Mariam	33	6	\$4800	15/02/2015

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Note:

This thesis uses the term Foreign Domestic Helpers as it is the legal terminology used in Hong Kong. Variations of the term appear as ‘migrant domestic workers’, ‘migrant women workers’ and ‘migrant women’ which all refer to Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong within the context of this thesis, unless otherwise specified.

Abstract

350,000 Foreign Domestic Helpers live in Hong Kong. Due to lack of personal space in the homes of the employers – where they live and work – many of them occupy public spaces to gather and socialise on their weekly day off work. This construct organically evolved over time and has become what is known as Little Manila, where thousands of Foreign Domestic Helpers construct temporary ‘homes’ of their own in the public cityscape of Central, Hong Kong every Sunday.

This spatial phenomenon is not an isolated issue specific to Hong Kong. Currently there are nearly 53 million domestic workers worldwide and nearly 80% are women migrants. As such, what occurs in Hong Kong illustrates the global issue of the socio-spatial inequality of female migrant workers, especially those who participate in domestic labour. In Hong Kong, Foreign Domestic Helpers attend to the domestic chores of local households, raising children and caring for the elderly, yet every aspect of their lives are regulated by laws, giving power to the employers at the expense of exploiting the workers, who are restricted to no private space in the homes, disciplined, overworked and underpaid, without citizenship rights in the city-state.

Every Sunday, what appears as a collection of women engaging in domestic activities in makeshift cardboard units on elevated walkways and underpasses is a manifestation of resistance, in the form of nomadic spaces, motivated by the need to have space. Over time, this ritualistic occurrence has evolved into a spatial phenomenon that is created by and accommodates the city-state’s disenfranchised residents.

This thesis draws on ethnographic observations, spatial analysis, photographs and interviews conducted in Hong Kong between 2012 and 2016 to understand the spatial phenomenon. The research reveals a contrast between the spatial condition of the Foreign Domestic Helpers’ workplace and their temporary constructions in public space. The reduction of space experienced in their employers’ homes significantly contributes to the weekly expansion of space. The research analyses the socio-spatial consequences that emerge from global migrant labour by examining the capacity of the disenfranchised to have space and autonomy. By reassessing the migrant women who appear to be voiceless yet consistently reassert themselves in the public cityscape through their disruption to the hegemonic spatial order, this thesis gives voice to a silence that operates across the labour market and reveals the importance of having space, not as a commodity, but as a human condition to live a dignified life.