Identity Politics and Migrant Domestics in Hong Kong

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Against the assimilation paradigm of past studies, current theorization of migrant identities tends to stress and celebrate interconnections across borders and negotiations of multiple affinities and relationships, notably in a transnational framework with related concepts of diaspora and hybridity. This theoretical (re)orientation is generally linked to the contemporary condition of globalization, characterized by an increase in the intensity and frequency of movement across borders and the attendant deterritorialization of nation-states. With the increase in border-crossing movements, it is argued, comes a destabilization of the link between place and identity, and a concomitant weakening in the sense of settlement. Thus, rather than an identity tied to a singular “imagined community” in which one currently lives, migrants simultaneously maintain multiple connections with, and define themselves in relation to, kins, relatives, and ethnic communities in different places besides the society they reside.

Without denying the insights of this general theoretical (re)orientation, it is noteworthy that the key concepts of diaspora and hybridity therein are theorized and developed primarily by male “immigrant” intellectuals drawing on the experiences of “ethnic minorities” in Euro-America that are similar to, if not exactly the same as, their own. The influential works of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Homi Bhabha in advancing these concepts are well acknowledged. That the concepts are developed on the basis of similar experiences, of course, does not necessarily detract from their relevance and illuminative potency for other migrant experiences. However, insofar as the concepts are rarified into general theoretical pronouncements dissociated from specific social conditions and contexts of migration, there is a tendency towards an abstract celebration of liminality and in-between spaces across borders as progressive sites of ideological interruption and counter-hegemony. Such abstraction calls for renewed attention to the specificities of the contexts and conditions of migration in deliberating the concepts’ pertinence to particular groups of migrants and their identity politics.
In rehashing these, by now, familiar arguments, I intend not another general critique. Rather, I seek to bring to bear on our conceptualization of migrant identities the experiences of a sizeable population of migrant women who have recently drawn much scholarly attention but whose experiences have yet to be incorporated into theoretical discussion of migrant identities, namely contract migrant domestic workers in Asia. Specifically, in this presentation, I discuss the identity politics of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong by drawing on their public performances, and explore whether/how we need to rethink current theorizations of migrant identity under global capitalism in light of their experiences and practices.

In many ways, contract migrant domestic workers seem to fit the bill of transnationalism rather well. As “temporary” workers on service contracts in a foreign land, migrant domestic workers are generally excluded from legal settlement in the host country. In the case of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, for example, all are recruited under a standard contract specifying live-in domestic employment for a specific employer for two years. The contract governing their immigration status forbids any change in not only the type of employment but also employers, and categorically denies the possibility of gaining Hong Kong citizenship no matter how long the migrant domestic workers stay and work legally. There is, however, no limit to the number of contracts they can have consecutively with the same or different employers. What results is a large contingent of migrant domestic workers who have been in Hong Kong for over ten years as, ironically, “temporary” contract workers. Short of marrying a local resident with citizen rights – a highly unlikely prospect given the class and racial discrimination predominant among the local Chinese majority – settlement is nowhere in the future of these and other migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. This denial of settlement structures the stay of the migrant domestic workers as a series of supposedly temporary sojourn, making it necessary for the women to keep an eye on the eventual return home during their, often prolonged, stay abroad. In other words, their immigration condition disposes the migrant domestic workers towards a transnational perspective and, arguably, a diasporic identity.

Indeed, the pertinence of the transnational framework for migrant domestic workers finds evidence in numerous studies which document their maintaining close connections
with their families back home in various ways. Of particular importance is the common practice of “transnational mothering” found among migrant domestic workers, who arduously continue to mother their children back home by providing material and emotional support and keeping up frequent communication across national borders (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, Parrenas 2005). With specific reference to the concept of diaspora, Yeoh and Huang (2000) broaden this close transnational connection with the family back home among migrant domestic workers beyond mothering. Based on a survey of migrant domestic workers in Singapore, they quote Barber (1997) to observe that the women’s “identities are clearly bound up with being ‘dutiful daughters, who are often, themselves migrant mothers engaged in maternal sacrifice for the well-being of their families’” (418). They conclude that “diasporic existence often serves to strengthen women’s gendered identifications as sacrificial sisters, daughters, mothers, and wives” (422). Significantly, reflecting an implicit assumption in the diasporic perspective, Yeoh and Huang affirm these identifications as vital connections to home that make the often painful sojourn abroad bearable for the women. Absent from their discussion is the specific conditions of migration that over-determine the continued predominance of these identifications, and the possibility that the migrant domestic workers may experience the “diasporic” connection to home as an oppressive burden from which they long for some kind and degree of relief. This latter possibility is staged in the public performances of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong, to which I will now turn for an alternative reflection on the politics of identification for migrant domestic workers.

Unlike most migrant workers elsewhere, foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong are not denied the rights to form organizations and gather for public demonstrations by their host society. With the help of non-governmental organizations active in migrant issues, many of them make good use of these rights. Filipinas and Indonesians, the two main nationalities of roughly equal numbers of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, have each organized hundreds of groups and associations. Among these are political groups that periodically organize public rallies and protest marches to voice their concerns over exploitation and discrimination, and fight for policy changes in Hong Kong and their home countries. These cross-border activism and political activities constitute another
prominent dimension of transnationalism that is frequently noted. Besides political speeches and messages, performances play a central role in the public rallies, which may be either nationality-based or joint efforts of the different nationality groups. From Islamic singing and dancing, ethnic traditional dances, to modern dances, jazz, hip-hops, rock bands, pop songs, poetry-recitals, mimes, and dramas, the performances vary remarkably in media, modes, and styles, highlighting different identifications among migrant domestic workers. While national and ethnic identifications clearly stand out in the traditional dances that are a staple of the performances, reinforcing an arguably essentialist configuration of identity for the migrant women, other performances make visible different identities that the migrant domestic workers enact outside national boundaries. In light of the “diasporic” strengthening of the gendered identity of sacrificial daughter/mother that binds these women to their families back home, as Yeoh and Huang note, and my own ethnographic fieldwork among migrant domestic workers corroborates, the sexily dressed figures in the modern dance performances are especially significant. These figures highlight the migrant women’s literal incorporation of cultural practices markedly different from the gender performances sanctioned or permissible in their home countries, especially for the Indonesians, the majority of whom are Muslims from rural villages. The prominence of these “sexy” figures and the enthusiastic responses of the migrant domestic workers audience to their dance performances signal a process of identification outside national space that parallels, if not necessarily interrupts and challenges, the gendered identification of the migrant woman working abroad for the benefits and well-being of her family back home.

That this identification can interrupt and challenge the identity of the sacrificial migrant woman is discernible in another mode of performance in the rallies – dramas occasionally staged by the theatre group of the Indonesian Migrant Workers’ Union (IMWU) to educate and mobilize Indonesian domestic workers to make good use of their time in Hong Kong by joining the union to fight against exploitation and abuse of their rights, and to learn new skills in the courses the union offers. One such drama staged in a rally celebrating Kartini Day (the Indonesian version of Women’s Day) in 2005 makes clear the perceived “danger” of Indonesian women forgetting themselves and their objectives in labor migration by featuring an Indonesian domestic worker who becomes
completely lost in materialistic consumption in Hong Kong. Neglecting the baby and husband she left behind in Indonesia, this woman assumes a new identity, “Madonna - the material girl,” and finds herself a man who promises to buy her everything she desires, from the newest electronic gadgets to expensive jewelries and all kinds of “foreign goods.” Though not a main thematic concern as in this drama, similar “material girls” showed up repeatedly in other IMWU dramas as excesses to be poked fun at and negative examples to avoid in joining the constructive activities of the union.

While the migrant woman being seduced into a materialistic consumer in the urban settings to which she has relocated is a recurrent figure in migrant literature, her representation in the IMWU dramas is instructive for our consideration of migrant identity politics in a transnational frame. Her neglecting her family back home, assuming a diametrically different identity, and going after foreign goods in the drama representation weave together her ideological function as a symptom of the migrant’s forgetting their familial and national origins, a forgetting that will undermine the transnational activism necessary for organizing migrants in political struggles. In other words, the migrant “material girl” in the drama makes visible the ironic dependence of transnational familial and political connections on the maintenance and consolidation of national identifications and their underlying essentialist gender norms. Thus, the observations in previous studies that transnational movements of people and capital across state borders have generated cultural narratives that erase the totalizing boundaries of nation-states yet reinscribe essentialist identities may not be incidental. It behooves us to attend closely to the inter-dynamics between transnational erasure of borders and implicit mobilization of essentialist national assumptions in every exploration of migrant identities.

This also puts into question any claims of inherent progressiveness for the “liminality” in between (national) boundaries. More particularly, if the cultivation of a transnational activist identity in the public rallies of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong can be understood in terms of negotiating in-between national boundaries, it involves the development of a “hybrid” identity that retains a sense of self and responsibility inscribed in the home culture and articulates to it the consciousness of self as an exploited labor under globalization yet with rights and protection underwritten in the laws of the host
society and international human rights instruments. Inasmuch as intersecting ideologies of gender, race, class, and nation inform the cultures and discourses on both sides, the progressiveness and counter-hegemonic potency of this hybridity cannot be assumed. Nor can this hybridity be seen as in an abstract state of “ambivalence” (Bhabha 1990). Though not entirely fixed, the possibilities of forming a new ‘hybrid’ identity in the specific boundary-crossing conditions of the migrant domestic worker are heavily structured and carefully articulated. As the IMWU dramas show, there are a few structured positions among which migrant domestic workers act out their identities. Besides the transnationally connected subject position of a dutiful, sacrificial daughter/mother, and its opposite of a “material girl” lost in the new pleasure-ground of consumption, there are also the different positions structured by relations to the employer/host society, specifically, a class-marked, gendered and racialized position of the servile migrant domestic, and its alternative of a correspondingly class-marked transnational migrant activist armed with internationally defined and locally legislated rights to struggle against servitude, exploitation, and discrimination. Insofar as hybridity is a useful trope to elucidate the identification process here, it is not so much on account of an inherent ambivalence in the process. Rather, hybridity’s valence lies in the illumination of the constitution and negotiation of these structured positions and the incommensurabilities therein that define the contours of (im)possible identities for migrant domestics in Hong Kong. As such, it entails a consideration of not only the ideological structures in both the home and host societies, but also material practices in the specific migration process. This concrete consideration reminds us that hybridity may well describe the process of migrant identification, but not all identities embraced by migrants are necessarily hybrid in the sense of mixed, blended or anti-essentialist. Whether transgressive or essentialist, migrant identities cannot be totalized or generalized, but must be situated in concrete processes of negotiations across various social boundaries.
Works Cited:


