

A Qualitative Study on the Living Conditions of Filipino Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong

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Abstract: While Filipino domestic assistants in Hong Kong are not entitled to get the Hong Kong Permanent Identity Card, they do have access to complimentary medical care in Hong Kong, which includes the option of receiving childbirth services. In light of the aforementioned context, a pertinent concern that arises pertains to the potential mistreatment of Filipino domestic workers, encompassing issues such as discrimination, access to adequate healthcare, and equitable treatment of local citizens. This study aims to investigate the experiences of Filipino migrant workers regarding discrimination and labor alienation. This study aims to examine the potential experiences of racial discrimination and challenges in cultural communication faced by individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. In relation to the economic dimension, it is important to examine the feasibility of individuals leading a satisfactory lifestyle within the confines of their employer-provided remuneration. This study aims to examine the potential for individuals to integrate into Hong Kong society in terms of interpersonal relationships. This study aims to examine the issue of labor protection, specifically focusing on the potential exploitation of workers by their employers and the availability of aid from relevant institutions. Filipino domestic helpers, Hong Kong, Living conditions.

Keywords: Filipino domestic helpers, Hong Kong, living conditions

1. Introduction

The living conditions of Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong have drawn academic attention. Their children can obtain permanent residence if their parents are Hong Kong permanent residents, and if their parents are not Hong Kong permanent residents, their children must stay in Hong Kong for seven years before they can apply for permanent residency [1-3]. Although Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong are not eligible for the Hong Kong Permanent Identity Card, they are eligible for free medical treatment in Hong Kong, including the possibility of giving birth in Hong Kong [4]. Given this context, the topic of worry that naturally arises is whether or not Filipino maids would be treated unjustly (including whether or not they will be discriminated against, whether or not they will have access to protected medical care, and whether or not they will have equal rights with local citizens). Concerns include whether or not cultural differences will have a significant impact on the ability of Filipino maids to integrate into Hong Kong society, whether or not their financial income can be protected, and whether or not it is in line with the market value (i.e. whether or not they have

been exploited, and whether or not they have a low income for long working hours), and whether or not their employment conditions are in line with Hong Kong labor laws [5-7].

This study is designed to explore the discrimination and labor alienation encountered by Filipino migrant workers, on the aspect of ethnicity and culture, and investigate if they encountered any racial discrimination or difficulties in cultural communication. On the aspect of the economy, it investigates if they could live a comfortable life under the salary conditions given by their employers [8, 9]. On the aspect of interpersonal relationships, it investigates if they could get involved in Hong Kong society. On the aspect of labor protection, investigate if they are exploited by their employers and if they could get assistance from the related institution [10,11].

2. The survey process illustrated with the first round

2.1. The routine and process

On the 3rd, of August, from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 a.m., the group members came to Central to seek interviewees who looked Filipino, Due to the rainy and wet weather, more potential interviewees were staying at the metro station than before, some of them were waiting for their friends from the same country, some of them were using their smartphones to communicate with their family members staying in the Philippines. As the metro station was frosty and noisy, the group came out and continued the search for a targeted group of people.

Because of the rainy weather, almost all of the Filipinos were standing or sitting under tall buildings with eaves or overline bridges to help get rid of rainwater. One could notice that because of the crowded gathering of Filipino workers, the transportation institution of Hong Kong set roadblocks and notice boards to block part of the roads near Lan Kwai Fong, which is also a special scene in Hong Kong as the government would specially arrange some rest areas for the domestic workers to maintain the transportation order at their holiday on Sunday or Saturday. They either used a waste carton or portable chair to sit and chat; they also used the space made by plastic sheeting to sell hand-made goods, enjoying some snacks that suited their Southeastern Asia taste, too. After the party, the garbage could be easily cleaned up without causing any pollution problems, and there were often police patrols in terms of public security. This kind of gathering has also become a major feature of Hong Kong culture.

After arriving outside of Exit D of Central, instead of finding the interviewees directly, interviewers stood for a few minutes and watched the basic appearances and features of those domestic workers: Most of them had yellow skins and medium shapes, seemed to be energetic, wearing clean and tidy clothes and shoes, some of them wore famous brands of clothes and shoes. They talked to each other in their local language, Filipino. Some of them also owned popular models of smartphones in Hong Kong, the ornaments they wore and the smell of perfume made people comfortable.

The interviewers prepared five statements to indicate our purpose for the interview is to conduct sociological qualitative research to investigate the living situation of Filipino migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, with our way of contacting and the address of our university to relax their vigilance and make the investigation more formal. It was also promised that their faces would not be able to speak to us about their experiences as they wanted to do and they did not have to be scared of losing their jobs because they expressed something negative about Hong Kong and their employees. The statement paper was shown by the interviewer before every section of the interview.

The first informant (A) was a middle-aged woman with glasses and a short braid found below a small eave who was sitting with her friends, During the process of interviewing, there were near 3 her friends came to her and doubted what we were asking, some of them even participated in the interview and made some supplement for the informant's answer, she was talkative and often

answered our questions with smiles and laugh. The interviewer, Zhou sat next to her though the footstep was wet as he thought it could pull the distance between the interviewees and interviewers, as well as make them willing to have in-depth communication.

The second informant (B) was found near the bus station, she was waiting for someone who would get there by bus, and she said it was all right to accept the interview because she was just waiting and no one was coming with her. However, different from the previous informant, she usually used yes or no to answer our questions, both the informant and the interviewer laughed embarrassed when the times of yes or no were a bit over. The connection between questions was also a bit rigid.

The Third informant(C) was a middle-aged woman in a black shirt and black cap found on the roadside who was sitting with four of her friends, during the interview, she was keeping her head down and sorting things out. However, she always answered our questions very briefly and tried her best to avoid speaking too much. During the whole process, the interviewer's attitude was indifferent. Even though her friends didn't answer any questions, they were there to observe our questions and behaviors. To make her feel comfortable, our interviewer, Wang, crouches down and stays level with her to show our kindness and make them willing to have in-depth communication.

2.2. Emerging questions and reflections

All three informants were friendly and accepted to be interviewed as soon as they were made aware of the purpose of the interviews. Each interview was conducted for nearly 15 minutes. All of the group members were responsible for an informant's interview, and audio of the interview was also recorded. All three informants answered positively about their working experience, but also expressed their difficulties in getting involved in Hong Kong society from the perspective of culture and language, and refused to stay permanently in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, different from the scholars that had been searched previously which implicated the serious problem of labor abuse and alienation, those informants all thought their workload was not large and their employers treated them kindly. The contradiction between the interviews and the academic paper made one confused and it became necessary to make some differences in the next round of interviews. Would it be different when the informant is alone and when they are gathering with their friends? Why do circumstances where the informant only answers yes or no would sometimes happen? How to conduct deeper communication with the informants? Would it be possible for the informants to have difficulties understanding the questions?

3. The second round of survey

3.1. Daily activities

The Filipino maid has the following responsibilities daily. Picking the kids from school. This is an activity that is often done at 4 p.m. The kids are often dropped off by 4 p.m. and they must be picked by a recognized individual. The second activity is making sure they have been cleaned and also ensuring that their home takeaway assignments are done. This is an activity that takes around one hour.

The other key role played by the Filipino maid is ensuring that they have bought meals meant for supper. Using the household cash card, she budgets for the daily meal. The other role which is often done on occasion is doing house shopping.

3.2. Detail of participants

The field activity seeks to focus on the Filipino maid. The individual is a 21-year-old lady from the Philippines working as a maid in a Filipino household. She was raised in Filipino and has been working in the house for the last 2 years. As a house help, she is expected to carry out basic and specific activities related to cleaning the houses and the environment, going shopping, picking up the children from school, purchasing other home things, preparing food, helping the children finish their assignments, and also taking kids out for socialization activities during the weekend.

The field activities aimed to examine the activities of the maid will help to understand and inform if the maid carries out the expected activities. To the employer, it would be a better ground of understanding if the maid is carrying out activities she is expected to carry out. It's expected that in the first field, the maid might present to be carrying out some activities which she might not be often carried out when not observed.

3.3. Observed the interaction

After school, she was responsible for all activities helping the kids take a shower, cooking children's evening meals, and also helping carry out children's assignment activities.

After the school activities she went to sleep as she left the kids to play around alone. The researcher thinks at the time she found it better to go conduct her activities while she let the kids play around with their friends.

However, the nature of play and the playing ground for the kids were not very safe for the kids considering that they were playing at high grounds and exposed to a risk of even falling. Furthermore, the connection the maid has created with the kids is not satisfying as she always sounds too demanding of them.

Furthermore, during the period the researcher was in the house she was not welcoming, she did not welcome me to any meal as a visitor. Furthermore, her nature of communication with the employers though good, was not a humbling one as sometimes she sounded rude. In matters of meal preparation, she was extremely slow; it took 2 hrs to feed 2 kids from around 6 pm to 8 pm. This meant that the period of preparing other meals was already late. Even by the time the researcher was getting off by 8: 30 she had not started preparing the main mail. Furthermore, by the time the researcher was leaving, the kids had not slept considering that the following day was a school day.

Emerging inquiries arise around the potential alteration in the mode of responding if the individual in issue were to remain uninformed of my identity.

Could it be attributed to her discomfort with my presence?

Could it be possible that she was experiencing physical discomfort throughout the visits? Would her performance be enhanced if we were to do online observation? Even though the maid was not family, she never even demonstrated to be effective. She was slow in her activities, never had good interaction with the visitors, and also never had a good connection with the kids. From the visits, it would thus be established that she had a very poor planning structure of time management.

4. The third survey

4.1. The routine and process

One group member knew a relative who employed a Filipino domestic worker called Cristina. As a result, this group member was contacted, and one of the group members was admitted to observe in his home. Due to the limitation of privacy, in the field note, we could only describe the scene in a written way.

After the observer enters the employee's home, the first thing is to check the Filipino worker's living conditions. As the employer has a boy, when the family has some urgent business to do, or they cannot go home because of work or other reasons, the domestic helper has to take care of the child and sleep in the same room with him. According to Cristina, the child is a bit naughty, he often yells and cries because of a slight emotional wave, same as the peer, he is also addicted to smartphones and internet games. Therefore, Cristina always makes a great effort to pull him down for a sleep, sometimes the boy has to wait for a long time to fall asleep and wakes up at midnight, so she cannot have a high-quality sleep every night. However, even though she did not need to sleep with the child, she could not have a comfortable rest as well. Because of the restriction of room, she could only rest on the sofa in the reception room near the television. As one could see, the sofa was really hard for people to have a comfortable sleep; it was easy to fall from the sofa if one was not careful. As the host usually sleeps at 1:00 a.m., Cristina could only have 6 hours to rest most of the time as she has to wake up early and prepare breakfast for the family at 7:00 a.m. After sending the boy to primary school, Cristina went back home and started to clean the house, the employer asked her to clean the room 3 times per week, she had to first use the broom to clean the dust and tiny rubbish like paper scraps then used the mop soaked with disinfectant to mop the floor, she even had to use a lift to clean the lamps and lie on the ground to clean the chink under the sofa.

After she picked up the boy at home, she started to help him with his homework because the host and hostess were still working at the offices. Due to most domestic helpers having basic literacy skills, it was not hard for Cristina to handle the work, she even graduated from university, and the boy's workload was not heavy. After he finished the math and English work, he started to watch the television.

Then, the observer pays attention to the daily communication between the employer and the domestic helper. As Cristina could not speak Chinese, they spoke English to contact. The communication between the employer and the employee is mainly focused on her daily routine, if the host is not at home, they would communicate on WhatsApp. Besides, they hardly have any chat about the worker's family matters, her physical and mental feelings, and entertainment at weekends. The observer listened to some of their dialogues and recorded them. Cristina is responsible for almost all domestic work, such as cleaning the room, washing clothes, buying raw materials for cooking meals, and picking up and dropping off children from school. Some particulars were noticed by the observer:

Even if the employer has a washing machine at home, some clothes still require the worker to wash by hand. Cristina's hands were coarse due to she has to wash clothes every day for 5 people and chemicals in laundry detergent are harmful to hands.

When having meals, Cristina was not allowed to eat with the family although she made a great effort to prepare for them (including buying, washing, cutting, and cooking) and the dishes tasted delicious, she could only have meals in the kitchen. The house is equipped with a CCTV system and a safe deposit box so that the host can make sure of the security. The employee is not allowed to sit on the sofa used by the family, when she is resting, she can only sit on the floor.

4.2. Reflection on the Third Field Visit

Through a practical observation in an employer's home, one got a deeper understanding of the Filipino domestic worker's living conditions, combined with what was learned on the internet videos and from sociological scholars, it could be concluded that there exists a hierarchy between the employer and Filipino home workers in Hong Kong. The dignity and confidence of those workers might be seriously affected, which might also be one of the reasons they do not want to live in Hong Kong for a long time.

In addition, in the observed case, the domestic helper usually has to work from 7:00 a.m. to 1:00 a.m. the next day, her workload is really large. Nevertheless, the minimum salary of a domestic helper is only 4630 HK dollars, which forms a strong opposition.

5. Conclusion

Following three rounds of field investigations, it has become apparent that the initial assumptions regarding the emotional tendencies associated with sociological research on Filipino migrant workers were somewhat inaccurate. While it was expected to be predominantly negative emotions due to the severe exploitation and abuse experienced at the hands of employers, the findings from informant interviews, surveys, and literature reviews have revealed a contradiction to the initial viewpoint. In conclusion, it can be observed that there is significant variation in living conditions among individuals. It is noteworthy that migrant workers in Hong Kong can secure salaries that exceed the minimum wage mandated by the government. However, it is important to acknowledge that a subset of these workers face instances of verbal or physical abuse, as well as unfair treatment from their employers. This issue represents a major concern within Hong Kong society, particularly when considering the gatherings of ethnic minorities that occur during weekends.

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