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Positioning the Product: Indonesian Migrant Women Workers in Contemporary Taiwan

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POSITIONING THE PRODUCT: INDONESIAN MIGRANT WOMEN WORKERS IN CONTEMPORARY TAIWAN

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INTRODUCTION

Globally speaking, the migration ‘industry’ is both immense and complex, exhibiting a multitude of variations on many different levels in its processes of the provision and delivery of labour from one part of the globe to another. The range of mechanisms that fuel this process remain fundamental to any understanding of the diversity of experiences undergone by migrant workers. Taiwanese labour brokers represent one such mechanism as these agents facilitate the placement of migrant workers in the Taiwanese labour market.

In this paper, I seek to acquaint the reader with an issue which lies at the heart of my doctoral research, that of the relationship between ethnicity and the labour market and its relevance for migrant Indonesian domestic workers in Taiwan. I focus on a process of ethnicisation engaged upon by Taiwanese labour brokers in the management of service sector migrant workers. Specifically, my paper considers the importance that Taiwanese labour brokers place on country of origin and the way in which they promote essentialist stereotypes linked to nationality to channel workers of a particular nationality into specific sectors of the labour force. This process then influences these

1 My sincere thanks to Professor Ken Young, Assoc. Professor Andrew Wells (my supervisors), Dr Ivan In derbitzin and Robert Loveband for their valuable input. The research included in this paper was supported by an Australian Research Council Linkage International Project Grant for the project Migration, Ethnicity and Workforce Segmentation in the Asia Pacific. The grant facilitated the collaboration of researchers at SEARC, City University of Hong Kong and at CAPSTRANS, University of Wollongong.

2 I purposefully use the term ‘channelling’ to indicate a tendency or trend rather than an absolute or automatic positioning of workers of particular nationalities into specific jobs. On a wider scale, the arena of labour migration is one that is marked by all manner of blurriness. Although trends are easily observable, for example in the feminisation and intra-Asian nature of migration, the task of understanding the complexities of this movement of women from one place to another is enormous. Further, it would seem that there are relatively few if any clearly demarcated boundaries which are ‘conveniently contained’ — as evidenced in the movements between documented and undocumented labour migration by individual migrants and their agents (see Jones 2000), or in seeking some distinct location where the state interest stops and private enterprise starts. This lack of clear or absolute divides at times can lead to a degree of vagueness or elusiveness in discussions. Two further factors contributing to this elusiveness are firstly that migration experiences are so diverse — there exist important variations in terms of sending and host countries’ politico-legal and socio-cultural frameworks, in terms of actors in the migration ‘industry’ across and within nation-states, in terms of individual experiences and so
workers’ conditions and thus experience of employment in Taiwan. An examination of this kind implicitly argues the heterogeneity of experiences of domestic workers in Taiwan as well as highlighting the facts that statistics do lie and that state mechanisms of control are both porous and open to manipulation. On a more personal level, this paper represents a preliminary attempt to unravel some rather surprising outcomes from four months of fieldwork in Taiwan for my doctorate in late 2002.

A SNAPSHOT OF THE TAIWANESE CONTEXT

In October 1989, Taiwan passed legislation allowing the importation of foreign labour from a limited number of countries in order to meet the demands of planned construction projects. Then, in 1992, migrant women were legally allowed to work as domestic labourers and as carers for the elderly and very young. In 1991 there were 1,610 foreign workers (Chan 1999: 391); by the end of 2002, there were 308,489 foreign workers. This represents a marked change in the visual ethnoscape of urban Taiwan over a rather short period of time. Currently there are 308,489 documented foreign workers in Taiwan: 117,701 Thais, 97,756 Indonesians, 68,346 Filipinos, 24,656 Vietnamese and 30 Malaysians. The majority of migrant workers are placed in manufacturing (160,346) or 52 percent working mainly with plastics, textiles and electronics, with the next highest category being caregivers and domestic helpers (120,515) or 39.1 percent of the total number of imported workers. Of the caregivers and domestic helpers, 71 percent are Indonesian women (85,677), 16.85 percent Filipinas (20,310), 9.7 percent Vietnamese (11,689) and 2.35 percent Thais (2,837).

The decision to import labour represents a cautious move within a tightly controlled arena rather than a throwing open of the doors to all and sundry. Unlike the case in many other labour importing countries, Taiwan greatly restricts who may employ a foreign worker in order to control the influx of ‘outsiders’ and also to safeguard her own workers after the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997-98. The state limits which sectors of the economy can utilise foreign labour — the main sectors where migrant workers can be employed are forth — and secondly, that government data and available research do not always provide an accurate reflection of the ‘application of migrant labour’ on the ground. Hence, the importance of keeping in constant touch with the empirical.

3 We must be careful to avoid either reductionism or over-emphasis on structural forces when considering the migration experience of domestic workers — as Chandra Mohanty (1991:71) pointed out when she warned against locking non-Western women into ‘the debilitating generality of their “object” status’ by ignoring important issues of diversity.

4 My fieldwork location was the small city of Fengyuan, (pop: 162,735) 15 kilometres north of the large industrial city of Taichung (pop: 889,807) and approximately two hours train travel south of Taipei.

5 The remainder being: 24,914 (8 percent) in construction and 2,714 (0.87 percent) working as fishermen (HMWC 2002).

6 Statistics from O’Neill (2001) and Hope Migrant Workers Center (HMWC 2002), Chungli where they were sourced and translated from the Chinese language website of Taiwan’s Employment and Vocational Training Administration (www.evta.gov.tw).
in construction and manufacturing (with limitations on the percentage of the total workforce), as caregivers and domestic helpers (officially all now subsumed under the category of carers) and as fishermen. Eligibility for a foreign carer takes two main forms: firstly, families with 2 or more children under the age of 6 or a dependent person over the age of 75 are entitled; and secondly, carers can legally work with chronically ill or paralysed family members in the family setting as well as in institutions like nursing homes and hospitals caring for patients suffering from one of the 32 diseases listed by the state (Battistella 2001: 7).

Whilst the state officially suspended import of domestic labourers in 1996\(^7\), it has not done so in the case of carers – in reality, however, the distinction between these two categories is so blurred that often women may be hired to do one job but actually are forced to be both domestics and carers whilst entering the country on a carer work contract (Cheng forthcoming: 10). Unlike Singapore, there is no minimum income requirement for households (Lan 2001: 96).\(^8\) Nevertheless, Taiwan is not the clear-cut case it may appear to be on paper.

Whilst there has been a drop in the total numbers of foreign workers in Taiwan since September 2000, these cuts were in the manufacturing and construction sectors in contrast to an increase in foreign carers and domestic workers.\(^9\) In November 1999 their combined number was 71,654 (AMC 2001:148) and by October 2002, there were 109,196 (HMWC 2002). The monthly wage of domestic workers and carers in Taiwan is set at NT$15,840 (US$468) as compared with live-in Taiwanese domestic workers earning NT$30,000-35,000 a month (US$1,000-1,200).\(^10\) It often takes from between one year and eighteen months to pay off debts to brokers and agents (being only one of various deductions e.g. health insurances, tax etc) before a worker is able to save any money at all. Domestic workers must be at least 22 years old and have passed

\(^7\) The ostensible reason for this suspension was that unemployment was rising and domestic workers should be local Taiwanese women not foreigners (see the web site http://www.evta.gov.tw/english/foreign.htm, accessed 8 February 2003). This was not a popular move – the wage differential between a foreign worker and a local worker is significant, almost double, and employers also argued that local workers were too fussy and opinionated, refusing to do all the jobs that they were asked to do and gossiping about the family in common social networks.

\(^8\) In fact the Council of Labor Affairs (CLA) now plans to ban rich families from employing foreign caretakers and subsidise families willing to hire local housemaids and caretakers in order to address unemployment (Central News Agency 12 January 2003). The wage disparity between foreign and local housemaids and carers is so significant that the likelihood of this plan coming to fruition is questionable.

\(^9\) The drop was in response to a promise by President Chen Shui-bian. Unemployment now stands at around five percent. Under increasing pressure from specific domestic groups, such as indigenes and blue-collar workers, in September 2000, President Chen promised to cut the number of foreign workers by 15,000 annually, the goal being to reduce the number by 60,000 by 2004.

the mandatory health check. Like other migrant workers, foreign domestic workers are on a three year contract which until 1999 was non-renewable — from 1999, it could be renewed for a further three years provided the worker left the country for at least 40 days between contracts. Even under intolerable conditions, women will continue to work on account of their debts and fear of repatriation: they are not allowed to change employers freely so once a contract is terminated, they cannot legally work and must return home. Construction, factory workers and fishermen are protected by the Labour Standards Law, which covers them for labour insurance and regulation of their industries in terms of hours and conditions. They live and work with other migrant workers which affords them a certain solidarity. In contrast, domestic workers and carers are more vulnerable both personally and legally. They are not covered by the Labour Standards Law as they are considered contract workers thus many work 14 to 18 hour days without overtime, days off or a clear job specification — they must work according to the employer’s whim (AMC 2001: 151). Therefore, on the whole men are better protected both in a regulatory sense and in an individual physical sense; as is commonly the case, women by the nature of their employment in the home are far more vulnerable; a position which is exacerbated by the fact that they are not covered by the Labour Standards Law of Taiwan.

Each year thousands of ‘pahlawan devisa’ or foreign remittance heroes leave Indonesian shores to work in service sector employment overseas. Currently there are over four million Indonesians working overseas, 70 percent of whom are women (*Indonesian Observer*, 19 December 2000). Of these, 97,756 are working in Taiwan, a highly favoured destination due to the perception of relatively high wages. Eighty-one percent of these are women working as caretakers and domestic workers (HMWC 2002).

The movement of these workers is facilitated in both sending and host countries by labour brokers who reap huge profits from providing the opportunity to work in Taiwan. I am interested not so much in the profits that brokers earn off the backs of migrant workers, but the way in which brokers facilitate the

11 It is common that the ages of Indonesian women workers are falsified in order to secure work in Taiwan.

12 The actual figures for Indonesian workers in Taiwan from *Depnaker* are significantly less than those cited by the CLA in Taiwan – this is a matter which I intend to investigate further at a later stage of my research. As Graeme Hugo (1975: 1) stated ‘…demographers carrying out research in Indonesia are confronted with the twin dilemmas of a lack of statistics for some of the most basic demographic measures, and the existence of errors of unknown size and direction in much of what is available.’

13 It has been suggested that part reason behind the increasing popularity of Indonesian carers and domestics in Taiwan was the greater financial benefits that brokers derived from placing Indonesians compared to Filipinas. It would seem that placement and brokers’ fees vary depending on country of origin and which sector one is working in. As at the end of 2001, factory and construction workers: Thais, Indonesians and Vietnamese pay between NT$200,000-250,000 and Filipinos pay NT$150,000; for domestic work and care giving: Thais, Indonesians and Vietnamese pay between 160,000-200,000 whilst Filipinos pay 80,000-120,000 (HMWC 2002). Therefore Indonesian women carers pay the highest fees.
positioning of specific nationalities in particular segments of the labour market. Specifically, I wish to explore the way brokers formulate and promote essentialist stereotypes which tend to channel workers into specific sectors and which, in the case of Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers, hierarchically position them with the single official category of carer. Further to this, I trace the way in which employers (and indeed society in general) seemingly wholeheartedly subscribe to such stereotyping to such an extent that it may well facilitate a tendency for the ‘double exploitation’ of Indonesian women.

**ESSENTIALISM AND NATIONALITY: MARKETING THE MAID**

In interviews with both employers and labour brokers, it struck me over and again that they both shared a rather profound belief that workers from particular countries held certain distinct and inalienable traits. This ‘truth’ (occasionally with slight variations) was echoed many, many times in different interviews with a range of different people, both men and women, including employers (both middle and working class), politicians, shop workers, doctors etc. — however, what was most surprising was that the foreign workers themselves shared many of these stereotypical beliefs about the ‘other’ foreign workers.

It was said that Thai men make the best factory and construction workers because they are hard-working and honest. Filipino men are also good in the factory but for different reasons — they are not as hard-working as Thais but they can read English so they are useful in interpreting English language instruction manuals; on the down side, they can be more ‘troublesome’ and militant. Being interested in the category of carers, I enquired as to who would make the best choice if one were seeking a carer. I was given the following advice. If one were looking for a carer for one’s children, one would of course choose a Filipina because they are clever and possess English language skills — most Taiwanese children now learn English at school and English proficiency is held in high esteem, it is in fact social capital (the fact that Indonesians are more proficient at Chinese seems not to win any points at all). However, I was cautioned many times, Filipinas were cunning, at times troublesome and tended to steal but in the final analysis, the pluses associated with Filipinas outweighed the minuses — they can advance one’s child’s English skills, they are better educated and seen as ‘more civilized’ with better hygiene habits than the

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14 Public rhetoric about migrant workers on the various stages of their journey is also fertile ground for contemplation but lies beyond the scope of this particular paper (see Loveband 2002).

15 Lin (1997), Lan (2000) and Cheng (2001) write not only about how English constitutes social capital but also how English is used as a tool of resistance by Filipina domestic workers. They too have noted the existence of ethnic stereotyping of migrants in Taiwan particularly with regard to Filipinos.

16 Filipinas often speak little or no Chinese whereas Indonesians have some training in Chinese before they leave Indonesia. But it is deeper than this, Filipinas often say they don’t wish to learn or speak Chinese because then they would have to work harder. One woman told me how she could avoid many tasks by pretending not to understand what she was being asked ‘then they just give up (she laughs) … if it is really important they can telephone the grand-daughter who speaks English and she can tell me (laughs again)’. 

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Indonesians. Indonesians also exhibit positive and negative attributes which affect their suitability for particular jobs. Despite their ‘questionable toiletry habits’ and lack of educational levels equivalent to Filipinas, Indonesians were praised for their loyalty and willingness to work hard but damned for their stupidity. As one broker noted ‘they are good at simple, repetitive tasks that are not too challenging’ [nodding knowingly]. According to the common truth Indonesian women are best suited as carers of the chronically ill, the paralysed and elderly patients because they are more ‘caring’ and ‘loyal’ and they can cope with the repetition of washing, cleaning of people, clothes and households more easily than the cleverer Filipinas who tended to argue about their rights and precise job specifications. Indonesians are also supposedly more accepting because, as one employer suggested to me, they are Muslim.18

I was surprised to learn that this nationality based stereotyping is not just engaged upon by brokers and employers but it is also reproduced by the Indonesian and Filipina workers themselves. Many Indonesian domestic workers I spoke with thought Filipinas were arrogant [sombong] because of their higher levels of education. One said ‘people from the Philippines think we are stupid because we don’t speak English — they are just like the Taiwanese — Taiwanese think Indonesians are stupid [bodoh] too’. Likewise, Cheng (2001) and Lan (2000) reported that Filipinas spoke of Indonesians as uncivilized and stupid — ‘Filipina workers also enhance their social status by drawing a hierarchical distinction between themselves and their Indonesian counterparts’ (Lan 2000: 55), seeing them as lower down the social hierarchy. They portray them as ‘those Indonesians [who are] uneducated, short of English skills, stealing employers’ belongings’ and ‘lacking sufficient knowledge and experience to handle housework in a modern household’ (Lan 2000: 216).

Caring for the sick and elderly is a far more demanding job than looking after children. Both types of carers usually clean the house, wash clothes and often cook meals but the Indonesian carer tends to be on call 24 hours a day. 19 If her charge is chronically ill or elderly, she will often share a room to care for him/her on demand — this may involve waking up many times during the night, cleaning the bed sheets in the case of incontinence or vomiting etc.20

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17 This perception of Indonesians’ alleged stupidity informed the decision of several employers not to allow their Indonesian domestic worker to use the washing machine because they felt she would not be able to cope following ‘complicated’ instructions (pressing a sequence of electronic buttons) therefore she was forced to wash the family’s clothes by hand.

18 A local activist and various researchers have put the presence or absence of assertiveness down to historical background: Filipinas come from a democratic system inheriting individualist values associated with the period of American colonisation whereas Indonesians hark from an authoritarian state with little or no consciousness of individual or workers rights so are less likely to complain. This is a point upon which I expand in my thesis.

19 Sometimes the cooking still remains within the domain of the wife or mother (see also Lan 2000).

20 There are many carers who look after their charges in the hospital. They either share the hospital room or stay in a dormitory together with carers (with a loudspeaker issuing calls 24 hours a day). My research, however, primarily focused on carers who lived in the homes of their charges.
Most migrant women hired as carers work looking after the sick and elderly. It is has been impossible to locate statistics on the exact numbers of Filipinas and Indonesians looking after children and those looking after the sick and elderly as both are subsumed under the general category of carer. However, whilst we do see Filipinas caring for the sick and elderly, Indonesians are far more popular due to their ‘natural’ suitability for the job. This popularity is reflected in their numerical superiority — there are 85,677 Indonesians and only 20,310 Filipinas working in this sector. This factor combined with a number of others has resulted in a rising popularity of Indonesian women filling such positions. Initially, Filipinas dominated this sector then as they became more demanding of their rights and as their support structures such as the Catholic Church, various church affiliated NGOs, the Manila Economic and Cultural Office\(^\text{21}\) and other migrant advocacy groups became more vocal in their support, Indonesia became the prime locale for obtaining carers. It would have been interesting to witness the changing rhetoric from brokers associated with national stereotyping over the last decade as Filipinas declined in popularity and Indonesians climbed.

In essence, brokers advise employers on which nationality best suits their particular needs and employers tend to follow their advice. So we see a trend whereby migrant workers are channelled by gender and ethnicity into particular hierarchically structured segments of the labour market. However, the story does not end there.

**A DOUBLE-EXPLOITATION?**

On many mornings and afternoons, I would accompany one or several Indonesian carers wheeling their charges around the streets. These women would call hello to other Indonesians working in noodle shops, in fabric shops, in flower shops, in the market, to those Indonesians putting out the garbage outside cafes and restaurants. They would tell me about other Indonesian women working in this or that family business — not only shops but in a variety of jobs including kindergartens, dental clinics and cram schools — where they would clean and, if required, cook.

Two things perplexed me about this situation. Firstly, I knew that there was no legal category of employment allowing work in shops, cafes or family businesses – migrant women were allowed to work in factories (although more often men worked in the factories) and they worked as domestic workers and carers (subsumed under the category of carer) provided their employers achieved the legal criteria. Secondly, I found myself asking why I did not see any (fully documented) Filipinas doing what is termed ‘illegal work’ in these shops, cafes etc? In a nutshell, ‘why are there no Filipinas in the noodle shop?’ There may well be ‘Filipinas in the noodle shops’ but they were certainly not evident as were the highly visible Indonesian women in this provincial

\(^{21}\) Generally speaking the Philippines government has been more proactive, at least superficially, in their support of their migrant workers since the 1995 execution of Flor Contemplacion in Singapore that caused a huge public outcry.
Taiwanese city of Fengyuan. All the research available in English focuses on Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan who are working as domestic workers. There is only passing reference that Filipinas might work in the family business on occasion but it seemed not to be viewed as of any great significance nor were Indonesians mentioned.\(^{22}\) I knew that this was illegal work and recently had witnessed a great deal of rhetoric coming from the government on the huge fines which would be faced by any employers found to be illegally employing a migrant worker. When I asked if employers weren’t afraid of being caught and fined, a common reply was ‘Maybe in Taipei but not out here.’\(^{23}\) Some were a little careful, keeping their Indonesian worker out of public sight but other Indonesian women ‘manned’ the counters or were easily visible in the cooking area of the cafes. Was this a provincial aberration from the norm or was this a commonplace manipulation of the system that was better hidden in a more regulated Taipei? More and more, I began to notice Indonesians in all sorts of places that they ‘shouldn’t’ be but again, I did not see Filipinas in these places. It seemed to be an ‘open secret’.

Slowly I started to unravel the story.

I began to understand that the system was often manipulated. The cases of Siti and Endah clearly illustrate the situation.\(^{24}\)

Siti was a 27-year-old Indonesian, mother of a four year old boy, from Blitar, East Java who was in the third year of her contract as a carer. She initially came to Taiwan to look after an elderly male stroke victim in his son’s home. After only six months, her patient died. In one sense, she was relieved as she had suffered regular slaps across the face and head for her lack of fluency in Chinese and was sleeping in the space under the stairs with no privacy; that is, when she could sleep and wasn’t attending to Agong (grandpa). In another sense she was desperate. Another employer could not be found so she was faced with repatriation and huge debts to her Indonesian broker and others stemming from her investment to get her to Taiwan for work. Her employer had a daughter working as a receptionist in a cram school, he also had a son work there from time to time and he knew that the owners were overworked trying to cook and clean and run the school. The families had a good relationship so he ‘offered’ them his Indonesian maid. It was relatively simple to get around the regulations. He took his mother who was a very healthy 80 year old to the local doctor, paid him NT$20,000 (US$576) and came away with a medical certificate.

\(^{22}\) Lan (2000:109-110) makes mention of female owners of some family businesses (‘Taugaynewn’ in Taiwanese) using Filipina domestic workers in the family business but I feel she underemphasized the importance of this practice. Her doctoral thesis does focus on Filipina domestics and so it is understandable that she did not take the Indonesian case into consideration.

\(^{23}\) The question of variations between Taipei and provincial cities is interesting but one which lies outside the scope of this paper at this stage.

\(^{24}\) Pseudonyms are used throughout in order to respect requested anonymity.
saying his mother was ill and qualified for a foreign carer. Siti then went to live and work for the family that ran the cram school. She would cook and clean at the school, clean the home and look after the children thus working two jobs illegally. However, she was far happier than at her previous employment as she had far greater autonomy and respect in her new situation. She was fully cognizant of the fact that she was being employed illegally but it suited her as well as her new employer. She told me she had trouble working as a carer of sick people, particularly when she had to stay with her charge in the hospital for two months — ‘he would vomit then I would vomit. I could not sleep, being in the same room and the hospital was so noisy — I didn’t know how I would go on. There are many Indonesians like that.’ In her new job, she worked hard but she was also taken out with the family to restaurants, she was fond of the children and more importantly, she felt her dignity had returned.

The second case of Endah is not so happy. She is a single 24 year old from Surabaya, East Java at the end of her first year of a three-year contract. She was hired as a caretaker for a grandfather but never even saw the grandfather. From the first day she worked in the family-owned noodle shop outside Taipei. I met her at a shelter in Taipei when she was awaiting the outcome of a legal advocate’s efforts to secure her wages that had been withheld for most of her employment. She was forced to work from 7 a.m. until 11 p.m. Sunday to Thursday in the noodle shop, from 6 a.m.-1 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays then returned to the family home and did the housework. Most days she only had 2-3 hours sleep. She worked seven days a week and had not had one day off since she arrived. She had no copy of her contract which is commonplace among Indonesians. In response to requests for her wages, the employer and broker colluded, both arguing that she had never worked in the noodle shop nor did she have any proof like a contract. The situation only came to a head because she became so sick she wanted a day off, her employer refused and her broker threatened her with deportation. She ran away to the shelter. Her future looks bleak – justice is unlikely to be achieved and she faces huge debts on her return to Indonesia with no money for one year's hard work. Rather than focusing on the multitude of illegals associated with her employment or her extreme exploitation, she constantly reiterated ‘we don’t mind working hard, we just want to be paid’.

These two cases demonstrate firstly the ease with which the system is manipulated and secondly, the divergent experiences of two Indonesian women employed as carers in Taiwan. Once a medical certificate is obtained, either fraudulently or otherwise, a migrant women worker can be lent out to friends or relatives on a full or part-time basis at the whim of her employer thus being forced to engage in illegal work. This may be to reinforce existing social

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25 False medical certificates and falsifying illness both seem quite common thus making it relatively easy to acquire certification qualifying the patient for a foreign carer.

26 Officially if a migrant worker is caught doing illegal work, they can be immediately repatriated — this situation renders them extremely vulnerable as they are afraid to refuse the employer for fear of repatriation by the employer or broker, they can’t change employers at will and if they report the situation to the officials they are likely to be repatriated anyway.
relationships or family obligations or to create new ones. Such manipulations are commonplace. Sometimes it works out to the worker’s benefit as was the case with Siti and often it does not as Endah experienced. There are many other ways in which the system is manipulated and migrant domestic workers are lent out to relatives and friends which space does not permit me to pursue here. However, it is very telling that the slang term for migrant workers is ‘yong-ren’ [translation: use people]. These workers are highly commodified; they are products to use and exchange.

AN OPEN SECRET

The highly visible nature of Indonesian women engaging in illegal work in combination with one particular experience made me realize the degree to which ‘officialdom’ colludes in the ‘double exploitation’. One evening a bureaucrat who worked in a department dealing with foreign workers was giving me a lift back to Fengyuan. I had spent the day at the county court with an Indonesian caretaker who had been abused and was seeking compensation through the civil court. As we drove past a local restaurant which I had frequented a number of times because an Indonesian worked there, I asked her if she had ever eaten there. She nodded then said, ‘an Indonesian works there’, adding, ‘she is very good at adding up the bill.’ I answered, ‘Yes, I have been there. She doesn’t seem very happy’ (her boss yelled at her constantly every time I had been there). ‘No’, agreed the bureaucrat, adding with a smile ‘It [that work] is not allowed you know.’ Then she drove on. Nothing would ever come of it.27

SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ABOUT INDONESIAN WOMEN WORKERS AND LABOUR MARKET DYNAMICS IN TAIWAN

There are two interesting phenomenon at work relating to foreign workers and in particular in terms of ‘caregivers’ in the labour market of contemporary Taiwan.

Firstly, the formulation and promotion by brokers of nationality-based stereotypes which tend to channel migrant workers of different nationalities into different segments of the labour market. In terms of gender, those segments into which women are predominantly channelled are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In the category of carers, we see a trend toward a further hierarchical structuring between Filipinas and Indonesians with Indonesian women doing the dirtier more demanding jobs of caring for the sick and elderly.

Secondly, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Indonesian women workers are contracted to work as carers, a significant number are not working

27 Another Indonesian woman whom I had interviewed worked at a restaurant everyday as well as cleaning the family home in the early mornings and evenings. She told me how the restaurant was so close to the local police station that many of the police would come to eat there at lunch times. They never said or did anything about her illegal work in the restaurant.
as carers but rather work in various capacities in the family business as well as working as maids in the family home. This easily observable reality in Fengyuan and elsewhere outside Taipei is not an accurate reflection of the available statistics on migrant workers in Taiwan. Nor indeed is it given sufficient significance in the available research on Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan which, for the most part, focuses on telling us about domestic workers working as domestic workers.\(^{28}\) The spillage of foreign carers into other work especially in the case of Indonesian women prompts the question — could it be that the very characteristics promoted as essentially Indonesian, that is, ‘stupid yet loyal’, pinpoint them rather than the more ‘troublesome’, assertive Filipinas as better prospects for ‘double-exploitation’?

All social actors (brokers, employers and workers) seem to accept as true a difference based on stereotypes and generalized statements — they don’t see this as problematic. To a degree this channels them into different experiences. Over time, I imagine that these stereotypes get challenged and altered in response to a range of factors, not the least being political in nature. The stereotypes about Filipina ‘arrogance’ is accurate to a degree though I would prefer the term forthright — they have the institutional support, they are more worldly, they defend themselves, they are more educated and articulate, and they do have more ease of access to information and support. These are not characteristics intrinsic to a specific national group. Having said this, Filipinas have no easy time of it. They are subjected to abuses and mistreatment as well as Indonesians. As we all well know it is the vulnerability associated with live-in domestic work that lies at the heart of the problem and this vulnerability is greatly magnified when one is a migrant worker with little or no rights.

The Taiwanese state controls over migrant labour may appear very tight however the reality on the ground as they say is a great deal messier. The current data points to segmentation along lines of nationality, partly in the minds of brokers, employers and workers, partly on the ground but at the same time there is a huge range of experiences lived by migrant workers in Taiwan. It would be far too deterministic to argue that all Indonesian women end up working two jobs if employed outside Taipei, while all Filipinas are located one step up the hierarchy working as carers for children, however these are the observable trends in Fengyuan.

The questions that I am left with are to what degree does the nationality based stereotyping which employers, brokers and even workers themselves uphold impede the large-scale use of Filipinas in the noodle shops or family businesses? Or, alternately one may ask to what degree is it a combination of factors — the higher positioning in the labour market, the stronger support systems through the church and other advocacy groups, the more informed each Filipina seems to be about her rights — that make her a lesser target for double exploitation. In contrast, the Indonesian woman who, by the dynamics of the brokerage system and the labour market and by virtue of her relative

\(^{28}\) There is a marked absence of research of any depth on Indonesian domestic workers in Taiwan, an inadequacy which I seek to redress by my research.
ignorance of labour rights and lack of support networks, becomes the prime
target for maximum exploitation.

This dynamic tends to lead to a different experience of migration for the
Indonesian woman ‘carer’ as opposed to the Filipina ‘carer’. Clearly, we cannot
collapse the category of ‘domestic worker’ or ‘carer’ in Taiwan nor, one may
wonder, elsewhere. Further to this, can we indeed presume a degree of
experiential homogeneity on the part of Indonesian women workers employed
as ‘carers’ even those who experience ‘double exploitation’ when employers
manipulate the system? The cases of Siti and Endah represent such different
experiences that they demonstrate not only the variety of ways in which
migration may be experienced by Indonesian ‘domestic workers’ but also the
ease of manipulation of what appears to be a highly controlled environment by
employers. The ‘mis-employment’ of migrant women ‘carers’ demonstrates
explicit collusion between employers and brokers and the frequency of such
occurrences constitutes an ‘open secret’ and by extension, an implicit official
acceptance of such behaviour (in terms of state inertia) in ‘milking these migrant
domestic workers for all they are worth’. We see the ‘creative use’ of Indonesian
domestic workers in jobs other than domestic work and caring, for employers
other than those with whom they are registered.

Brokers, bureaucrats, police and the public at large seem to be fully cognizant
of this double-utilization of migrant workers illegally in the family business and
then as maids at home. Partly this seems to be as a result of a socio-cultural
lack of distinction between duties within the home and those outside the home
but still within the family business. There is also a geographic dimension to it
however – I have been told that it is common knowledge that the police in
Taipei are far stricter in cracking down on migrants doing illegal work than their
counterparts outside Taipei. Whilst the double exploitation does occur, mainly to
Indonesians I was informed, it is far more hidden and surreptitiously pursued.
Hence, we must take a migrant domestic worker’s geographic location into
account when seeking to understand the breadth of difference in terms of
migration experience for women caregivers.  

A POST-SCRIPT AND CONCLUSION

This ‘double burden’ of working two jobs may well be a contributing factor to
Indonesians being the highest number of runaways. As at September 2002,
there were officially 724 runaway migrant workers, 357 of whom were
Indonesian (HMWC 2002). Indonesians flee their jobs for a range of reasons —
abuse, non-payment of wages and often to avoid repatriation if an employer no
longer wants or needs them or if they are nearing the end of their contract and
don’t wish to return to Indonesia with no likelihood of employment or the
prospect of another set of broker’s fees to work overseas again. The network of
brokers finding illegal work for runaways and the company of other Indonesian

29 I feel I cannot leave this paper without noting the there is by no means a presumption of
passivity and lack of social agency on the part of Indonesian women workers, merely a lack of
space on the part of this researcher, perhaps in another paper?
runaways is easily accessible — despite its vulnerabilities, it is a risky but rational response to a range of situations. Ostensibly, as a result of the number of Indonesian runaways, the Council of Labor Affairs banned any further processing of Indonesian migrant worker applications from 1 August 2002.

Thus, somewhat ironically the challenge to the stereotype of Indonesian loyalty and acceptance appeared at an official state discursive level in the form of the ban. On a popular level with brokers and employers, despite the fact that there is such a high incidence of Indonesians running away, the stereotype of loyalty does not seem to be challenged yet. The current ban on Indonesians stands and now Taiwanese brokers are starting to look to Vietnamese to fill the place of Indonesian carers – ‘they are close culturally to us’ — but Indonesians’ loyalty is not questioned rather it is just their lack of availability that is problematic.

To conclude, despite the superficial appearance of a rigid structure of employment for migrants, the government rhetoric of human and labour rights extended to migrant workers, and threats of massive fines for ‘misuse’ of migrant labour — the system is (purposefully?) open to manipulation. At the same time, we witness a process of ethnicisation of migrant workers that relies on the promotion and acceptance of stereotyping according to nationality. This in turn sees Indonesian women placed at the most exploited position in a segmented labour market – the initial channelling on the brokers level leads to a hierarchy in terms of a job’s desirability but it is in the carer category that we see spillage over into other work especially in the case of Indonesian women resulting in a situation of ‘double-exploitation’. It is therefore clear that we are unable to speak definitively about the experience of domestic workers in Taiwan without reference to the nationality of origin of such workers or mechanisms within local brokerage systems in the migration industry that facilitate their exploitation.

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30 Two other reasons were proffered: that brokers fees placed on Indonesian workers were too high and the Indonesian government had failed to address the problem and that brokerage agents continued to submit false documents. Although these are the reasons given for the ban, inter-country diplomacy and politicking would seem to play a significant part as it did when migrant Filipino workers were reduced in 1999 by the Taiwan government because of a dispute on bilateral air traffic (Migration News 2001).
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