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Working and dwelling in a global city: going-out, public worlds, and the intimate lives of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the public routines through which migrant domestic workers inhabit a global city such as Hong Kong. Using ‘public outings’ as a conceptual entry point to understanding migrants’ mobile geographies of dwelling, it seeks to present such migrants as ordinary urban actors who inhabit, share and shape the city landscape every day just like many others. Whilst disciplined by their employers in all sorts of ways, domestic workers nonetheless use the public and quasi-public spaces within their neighbourhoods – spaces integral to their work routines – as sites for forging a precarious autonomy. Drawing on a short ethnography – using participant diaries, interviews, and participant observation – of live-in migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, the paper describes how migrants use a range of neighbourhood spaces to create an improvised infrastructure of care that helps create a sense of domesticity and home.

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1. Introduction

Jeanelyn is a Filipino live-in domestic worker who has worked in Hong Kong for near on 20 years. She cares for an adult couple and their dog, Molly. Every workday morning at 7 AM, Jeanelyn takes Molly for a 30–60-minute walk around the neighbourhood. Reaching a shaded bench atop a small hill, Jeanelyn spends a couple of minutes video-calling her daughter in the Philippines. On the way back, Jeanelyn greets other migrant domestic workers – some also walking dogs, others taking children to school. Jeanelyn leaves her employers’ apartment again at 11 AM to shop at the nearby market for the family’s evening meal. Once or twice a week, Jeanelyn detours to the Filipino grocery stores to buy Filipino snacks, phone cards or use the door-to-door delivery service. Generally, for lunch, Jeanelyn has leftovers from the previous day’s dinner; sometimes, however, she goes to Jollibee, a franchised Filipino fast-food store – the spaghetti reminds her of home – to meet up with some of her Filipino domestic worker friends living and working nearby. At 8 PM, she usually takes Molly out again for her second walk; Janet, a friend who is also a Filipino live-in domestic worker, joins with her dog, Mini.

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Joyce, also a live-in Filipino domestic worker, likewise has a busy working schedule. Aside from domestic duties like cleaning, cooking and provisioning, she cares for the 12-year-old child of her employers. For domestic workers in Hong Kong, taking care of children goes beyond simply providing care in the domestic space. During weekdays it also means accompanying the children when they are out. Most of Joyce's outings outside her employers' apartment revolve around the everyday mobility of the child. She drops off and picks him up from school. She accompanies him to various extra-curricular activities – Monday and Wednesday swimming class at 4 PM, Tuesday and Thursday English and Maths private tutorial classes at 5 PM. With a tight working schedule plus the burden of facilitating the child's mobility, Joyce rarely manages to squeeze personal errands into her work day.

Jeanelyn and Joyce's stories exemplify how transnational labour migration enfolds distant spatiality into local-global assemblages. Coming from the Philippines to work in Hong Kong, they have travelled to a foreign country to work for a living. But their stories equally show that their movement is not simply defined by ideas of 'flow' or 'circulation' (Blunt and Sheringham 2018; Smith 2001). Rather, their use of their neighbourhoods whilst fulfilling tasks for their employers shows something of how urban landscapes are inhabited tactically by many migrants. Like many ordinary locals, public 'outings' in the city are part of the everyday lives of these migrant domestic workers. Sometimes, they go out into the city to simply execute employers' orders. Sometimes they improvise and calibrate their urban mobility alongside their urban duties to make migrant living in the city easier. To them, migration is a quotidian 'footwork of dwelling' (Ingold 2004) rather than an abstract flow of faceless bodies. A corporeal experience that varies across different migration stages – moving, waiting, working, settling – as a relation-building project with places, material objects and people across multiple temporalities and spatialities (Knowles and Harper 2009; Boccagni 2017; Yeoh and Huang 2015). The dynamic and structure of this experience vary enormously depending on how migrants are positioned within migration regimes. The structuring of migration regimes and the lived experience of migration is closely related to the kind of city migrants are inhabiting and servicing. Global cities are supported by both skilled professionals and low-skilled precarious labour (Sassen 1991), with transnational subjects being crucial sources to both labour groups. Whilst within global cities, highly skilled migrants are often aggressively competed for by both governments and business organisations, often with promises of permanent residence (Yeoh and Chang 2001), less skilled labour migrants are actively constructed as non-citizens with state-regulated precarity (Yeoh 2004; Parreñas 2001; Parreñas et al. 2018; Tai 2012). Migration regimes are often carefully constructed to exclude low-skilled migrants from labour protections so they 'remain a transient workforce subject to repatriation during periods of economic downturn' (Yeoh 2006, 29).

In much of East Asia, transience has been a defining feature of migration (Hugo 2009). Marked by 'temporality and circularity' (International Organization for Migration 2015), hundreds of thousands of migrants from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand work in domestic and household service in cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Shanghai. These migrants do not simply keep such global cities working; their invisible reproductive work also releases local labour for a range of more highly paid labour markets. Temporariness may sometimes be a desirable option for migrant workers (Parreñas 2010;

Knowles and Harper 2009). Nonetheless, it is, in most cases, institutionalized and enforced by migration regimes that exercise ‘disciplining power over bodies, families, and social fields’ (Bailey et al. 2002, 139; Collins 2012), constructing infrastructural barriers to prevent migrants from establishing social roots in the host society. Migrants are forced into a situation of ‘permanent temporariness’ (Bailey et al. 2002, see also Yeoh 2006; Xiang and Lindquist 2014; Lin et al. 2017). How to live with the ‘permanent temporariness’ thus becomes a pressing concern to many labour migrants in East Asia.

Using Hong Kong, an East Asian global city, as a case study, this paper draws on public ‘outings’ as a social theoretical concept to help researchers attend to how live-in migrant domestic workers may use their workday journeys outside their employers’ home as opportunities to gain a sense of agency, claim moments of personal intimacy, and elaborate informal social infrastructures of care. The concept of ‘outings’, developed from DeLand and Trouille (2018; see also Trouille 2021), foregrounds the fact that migrant domestic workers have lives in and across the cities where they work. How they experience their everyday urban excursions, and the relation of these to wider urban ecologies, has much to tell migration researchers about the experience of being a migrant domestic worker. Outings as a conceptual heuristic, works as a tool to orient our attention to the different possibilities migrant groups have for inhabiting urban environments. It sensitises us to the multiplicity of experiences and trajectories across urban actors even when they are sharing the same public and quasi-public places and facilities with others (DeLand and Trouille 2018). The paper is organised as follows. It begins by examining existing work on migrant domestic workers, domesticity, and urban domestication, followed by an overview of Hong Kong’s ‘use and discard’ migration regime, and a description of methodology used to gather material for this study. The discussion then moves onto a detailed empirical description of how a group of live-in migrant domestic workers have become embedded within the fabric of the neighbourhoods in which they live.

2. Migrant domestic workers, domesticity and urban domestication

In East Asia, transnational domestic workers are one of the most studied populations in urban and migration studies. There are three key insights from this research. First, the massive movement of temporary domestic workers from less developed countries like the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand to global cities like Hong Kong, Singapore and Taipei, has defined the migratory landscape of the region for decades (Castles 2003; Hugo 2009). Second, the temporary and circular migratory status of the group points to how various migration infrastructures are enrolled in managing the intricate balance of ‘permanent temporariness’ and ‘permanent presence’ to keep global cities working (Yeoh 2004, 2006; Collins 2012). Third, the distinctive spatio-temporal domesticity experienced by domestic workers shapes how they go about constructing intimate connections in their host societies (Constable 2007; Lan 2006). Here we follow the third line of inquiry. We want to explore how neighbourhood spaces are used as sites of dwelling by domestic migrants; and how domestic workers, for all their precarity, also function as ordinary city-makers.

Home is a complicated term invested with contradicting meanings and emotions (Blunt and Dowling 2006). In the popular imagination, home and domesticity are a

‘safe haven’. In reality, home is a more ambivalent space. For many transnational domestic workers in East Asia, their transient statuses in the host countries are experienced at the most intimate level of domestic space. Relocation to another ‘home’ is common as a result of managed employment precarity. Settlement and home-making is difficult as their experience of domesticity are often at odds with the domestic space (Pratt 2004; Silvey 2004; Boccagni 2018), especially when most of them – unlike European and North American live-out ‘nannies’ – are live-in workers co-residing with employers. Living inside others’ lives to produce others’ domesticity at an intimate yet subordinated position is not easy. At the everyday level, the need to survive in others’ intimate landscape often involves a tightly regulated presentation of self and spatial deference in the domestic space¹ (Rollins 1985; Yeoh and Huang 2010; Boersma 2016, 2019; Johnson et al. 2020; Abdullah 2005). This is a story told differently by some of their employers, who tend to mask the unequal power relations through claiming the workers as ‘one of the family’ (Huang and Yeoh 2007). The ‘home’ therefore tends to be a paradoxical space, where the vulnerable ‘others’ are at once ‘workers’ and ‘one of the family’. Indeed, the work of live-in migrants is never purely task based. It is emotionally entangled (Steinberg and Figart 1999), involving the careful everyday management of the fragile equilibrium of ‘other’ as an employee and a family member (Huang and Yeoh 2007; Jacobs 2003).

New surveillance technologies are further reaching into the working autonomy of many migrant domestic workers. If old-fashioned employee surveillance is conducted through the presence and monitoring of family members, workers’ current everyday experience is increasingly characterised by being watched at a distance (Johnson et al. 2020; Lee, Johnson, and McCahill 2018). Nanny cameras and similar devices allow employers to easily observe, regulate, interrupt and interfere with the work of domestic workers remotely, with the watched migrants uncertain to the location, frequency and content to be recorded by the cameras. The inspecting eye is an always present companion. A disciplinary gaze that is designed to remind the workers to be conscientious and work focussed even in the absence of the physical presence of any household members; challenging and transforming the relations of trust between employers and employees, and undermining workers’ work autonomy.

Regulated powerlessness at ‘home’ does not, however, preclude tactics to resist such surveillance regimes and the recovery of domesticity at the work/dwelling site (Constable 2007; Lan 2006; Boersma 2016; Johnson et al. 2020). But such powerlessness does highlight the importance of examining other spaces and routines through which domestic workers might fashion spaces of autonomy within the neighbourhoods and cities of their host societies (Blunt and Sheringham 2018). There are a number of studies that highlight how live-in workers (re)construct – temporarily bounded – domesticity through the use of public spaces during their holidays (Law 2001, 2002; Lan 2006; Constable 2007). These studies suggest that the public and quasi-public urban landscape has the potential to afford migrant workers more room for ‘privacy’ than the domestic workspace. Other scholars similarly highlight migrant populations finding a sense of homeliness in urban community gardens (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017), ‘generic places’ like chain-cafés or airports (Ley-Cervantes and Duyvendak 2017) or streets (Smets and Sneep 2017). This points to the multi-scalar practices of domestication that sustain many migrants. It also affirms migrant domestic workers as everyday urban actors rather than simply

employees confined to the domestic space. Domestic workers might be expected to work long hours by their employers, but they are simultaneously ordinary and visible urban actors, who consume, navigate, dwell in, animate, share and remake the city day after day (Conradson and Latham 2005). They have lives beyond their work and the private confines of their employers' home. Lives that are not decontextualised from but are continuously interwoven with complex webs of local urban processes (Collins 2012; Constable 2007; Law 2002; Conradson and McKay 2007). To explore migrant dwelling in the city, the following sections discuss the empirical scenes of the study, and introduces public outing as a conceptual entry point for the study.

3. Hong Kong: The precarious lives of domestic workers in a global city

Like many other global cities, Hong Kong is dependent on hundreds of thousands of migrant domestic workers (Chiu and Lui 2004; Tai 2012). In many middle and upper-class families, the mundane and invisible household reproduction work has been progressively directed to transnational non-kinship family members. Given the declining fertility rate, an ageing society, and the prevalence of dual-income nuclear families, the heavy reliance on transnational migrants is an economically efficient way of addressing the 'time and care deficit' of many households (Boersma 2019; Bryson 2007; Cheng et al. 2013). This has effectively transformed the population migrant domestic workers – currently amounting to around 380,000 people, 10% of the overall local workforce (HKCSD 2015, 2018) – into an integral part of Hong Kong's urban fabric.

Despite playing a critical role, the domestic workers are deliberately turned into a transient 'use and discard' labour force (Yeoh 2006) to be easily repatriated or replaced when necessary. Through labour policies, immigration acts, contracts, training schedules, working timetables or house rules, structural non-incorporation is enacted through various un-caring migrant infrastructures involving parties ranging from the state, street-level civil servants, recruitment and placement agencies, media, employers, legal professionals or even the migrants themselves (Ladegaard 2013; Wong et al. 2016; Johnson et al. 2020; Groves and Chang 1999; Law 2002; Constable 2014; Tyner 1999).

At an institutional level, the migrant domestic worker population is continuously fashioned as 'temporary' workers subject to easy exploitation and disposal. Domestic migrants enjoy no family reunion rights, no right to permanent residency, and few labour rights protections. They must renew their contracts every two years. If they lose their job, migrants have just two weeks to find a new employer. If they do not, they risk being deported. Their right to reside and work in Hong Kong depends on their continuous work as 'temporary' contract workers. Most migrant domestic workers earn the legal minimum wage set particularly for them – a monthly wage of around USD600 per month that amounts to only half of the monthly income of the lowest percentile of the local working population, with no limits of working hours. Since the group is legally bound to live with their owners throughout their contracts, this means they are institutionally positioned to be available for work around the clock.

The purpose of these legal infrastructures is to institutionally subject migrant domestic workers to be easily disposable so they 'gain no permanent foothold' (Yeoh 2006, 32) in the city; keeping the Hong Kong 'globally competitive at both ends of the labour and wages spectrum' (Chua 2003, 70). Working as the running philosophy of migration

infrastructure in the city, ‘use and discard’ illustrates how the ‘commodification of intimacy’ effectively turn transnational carers into disposable service providers. It describes the everyday felt experience that ‘you do not belong to the place’. The ‘use and discard’ experience in Hong Kong is particularly illustrated in the migrants’ everyday living/working arrangement. Living in the home of others as foreign ‘others’ has tremendous impacts to their migrant experience. At the everyday level, the disadvantaged employment position, institutionalised bodily control, and imposed permanent temporariness put many domestic workers into situations of exploitation, forcing them to work excessive working hours under comprehensive surveillance (Constable 2007, 51).

For these migrants, ‘home’ is a paradoxical space in need of careful negotiation. It is also pivotal for understanding the experience of how migrants dwell in a novel landscape. Not much attention has been paid to exploring how the ‘everyday city’ is entangled in this experience. Here we argue that moving beyond the ‘domestic home’ into the quotidian spaces of the urban environment offers a distinctive perspective on how migrant domestic workers negotiate the experience of precarity. Migrant live-in domestic workers are never fully confined to the ‘private’ domain, even during their workday. Hong Kong is in all sorts of ways a migrant city, a global city that runs on precarious migrant labour. In what follows, we seek to understand some of the ways such migrants forge a sense of connection within and to neighbourhoods despite precariousness.

4. Methodology: researching migrant dwelling through the everyday outing

The following empirical discussion is built around the narratives of eight migrant domestic workers. As researchers, we wanted to understand what migrant workers did during their routine workday ‘outings’. As has already been highlighted, here we are conceptualising outings as more than simply the act of ‘home-leaving’ and ‘home-returning’. Rather, taking inspiration from DeLand and Trouille (2018), the concept works to foreground the everyday mundane, routine, journeys out into the cities they inhabit, and the significant rhythm-making or relation-making processes that entangle ordinary urban actors within wider urban ecologies. The concept of the ‘outing’ therefore helps to sensitise social scientists to how journeys outside the home are organised; providing an analytical focus for how urban lives are lived differently across social groups and how public life is patterned collectively in everyday encounters.

For our study, we asked eight migrant domestic workers to write a one-week time-space diary of their workday outings (cf. Latham 2003, 2004). Most were recruited through a Filipino Christian church. Others were recruited through hanging around in neighbourhoods and referrals from workers’ friends or employers. All respondents were females. The length of time they had spent in Hong Kong ranged from one to more than 30 years (see Table 1). Seven were from the Philippines and one from Indonesia. Diary writers were asked to record the preparation, planning, and outing details – for what purpose, where, when, with who, with what items. – along with post hoc feelings of each workday outing: they were provided with written guidance to aid the completion of the diary. On completion of their diaries, respondents were

Table 1. Profiles of migrant domestic workers taking part in the diary-interview methods.

Name	Ethnicity	Working year in HK	Major duties in the current household	Major urban tasks in the current household	Approximate daily outing time in the current household
Joyce	Filipino	>20 years	Housekeeping, Care-giving to 1 boy (12-year-old)	Marketing, Taking and accompanying the kid to after-school-activity centres	2–4 h
Cathy	Filipino	21 years	Housekeeping, Care-giving to 2 boys (10-month- and 3-year-old)	Taking the older boy to school bus station, Taking the younger boy to estate-club-house (occasionally)	30 min–2 h
Valarie	Filipino	>30 years (on & off)	Housekeeping, Care-giving to an elderly couple (both 70+ years old)	Marketing, Taking and accompanying the 2 elderly to an elderly centre	2–3 h
Jeanelyn	Filipino	16 years	Housekeeping, Care-giving to a dog	Marketing, Dog-walking (twice a day)	2–4 h
Cherry	Filipino	>1 year	Housekeeping, Care-giving to 2 boys (11- and 14-year-old)	Marketing, Taking kids to/ from the school	1–2 h
Delia	Filipino	2 years	Housekeeping, Care-giving to 1 boy (10-year-old) and 1 girl (8-year-old)	Picking up delivery in estate lobby (occasionally), Taking kids to/ from the school bus station (occasionally)	10–30 min
Jenny	Filipino	>1 year	Housekeeping, Care-giving to 2 boys (5- and 8-year-old)	Marketing, Taking kids to/ from the school, Taking the kids to playground, Taking 1 kid to his divorced mother's residence	2–4 h
Dolores	Indonesian	>20 years	Housekeeping, Care-giving to 2 adult children (>20-year-old)	Marketing	30 min–1 h

Note: All respondent's names are in pseudonym.

interviewed. This allowed respondents to expand on and clarify the accounts presented in their time–space diaries. Diary interviews lasted around one hour. In addition, and to inform work with the diary writers a number of more informal face-to-face interviews with domestic workers ($n = 15$) were carried out, and a loosely structured process of participant observation was undertaken; this included joining in a number of workday outings. The research was conducted from June to July 2019 in Hong Kong. Clearly, this small sample of participants does not capture the full variety of everyday migrant outings in Hong Kong. And we would remind readers that there are many other migrant stories that are quite different (see Knowles and Harper 2009). Nonetheless, the eight key diary informants, through the extended research encounter afforded by the diary interview approach, provide a set of nuanced insights into an often marginalised group's everyday use of Hong Kong's public and quasi-public spaces. There is a great deal that can be learnt from the eight key informants in this study.

5. Domestic migrant's everyday work-bound outing

The first reaction from Joyce when asking her to describe her outing activity was puzzlement that someone might be interested in her work routines. This was followed by a long list of work tasks she needs to do when out. Shopping for family meals and housekeeping

items alone, and occasionally with madam, picking up and sometimes dropping off the kids at school and extra-curricular activity centres. Joyce's reactions were not uncommon to the other women met in the study. Their outing duties are similar too: taking the kids to school, community parks, after-class activity, or the elderly to senior centres or a regular check-up, walking pets or running other errands for employers. These worklists suggest two points about their mundane mobility patterns. First, work defines their everyday urban navigation. Second, their daily outing patterns display distinctive temporality and spatiality highly dependent on the household structure and the mobility pattern of other family members. That is to say, the questions of what, why, where and when they perform their daily outings usually end up as stories about the everyday life of different household members.

Amongst the diarists, whether their work included taking care of employers' children as was the case with Joyce, Jenny, Cathy, Cherry, Dolores and Delia, or employer's parents as with Valarie, or as with Jeanelyn an employers' pet, no one describes their daily outings as practices they could freely do at any time. Going out is always about work. Almost all of their outings happen in the morning or the afternoon in their immediate neighbourhoods. As Joyce and Jenny explain, they must be at home to serve dinner when employers return home. Ranging from a 30-minute trip to a two-hour journey, outing tasks typically include going to the market for daily shopping (*almost all workers*), dropping off the school-age kids at school (*Joyce, Jenny, Cathy, Cherry and Delia*), taking them back from extra-curricular classes (*Joyce and Jenny*) and going to the playground with them (*Jenny*), accompanying the elderly to community park or elderly centre (*Valarie*) and walking dogs around the neighbourhood (*Jeanelyn*). While provisioning is normally done by the worker alone, other outings are conducted with and correspond to the outing patterns of different household members, the children, the elderly and the dogs, whose everyday mobility differs in temporality and spatiality. Everyday trips with the children tend to be restricted to school-related space and community space after school, while outings with the elderly are around community spaces in the late afternoon to avoid the unbearable heat summer heat, but also because kids are done with their homework at that time. Similarly, dog walking tends to take place in the early morning or late afternoon because of the heat. The exact outing time and destination differ according to the actual work schedules, the household composition and the itinerary of family members, but they tend to show similar patterns among the workers with similar working conditions (see [Figure 1](#)).

A number of the workers described their outings as the 'same' every day. Yet, their outing temporality and spatiality involved subtle variation. Dropping off the children to school might be done at a similar time every morning, but taking them to various after-school activities that take place at different time and space in a week tells a different story, as suggested in the brief vignette of Joyce at the beginning of the paper. On these occasions, the workers continuously recalibrate their everyday mobility to synchronise with others' changing temporal orders. Going out, therefore, in many cases implies an ongoing calibration of working schedules, both indoor and outdoor, to the mobility patterns of others. Collectively, the snapshots of workers outings underlines that their everyday outings are highly work-bound and localised in immediate neighbourhoods.

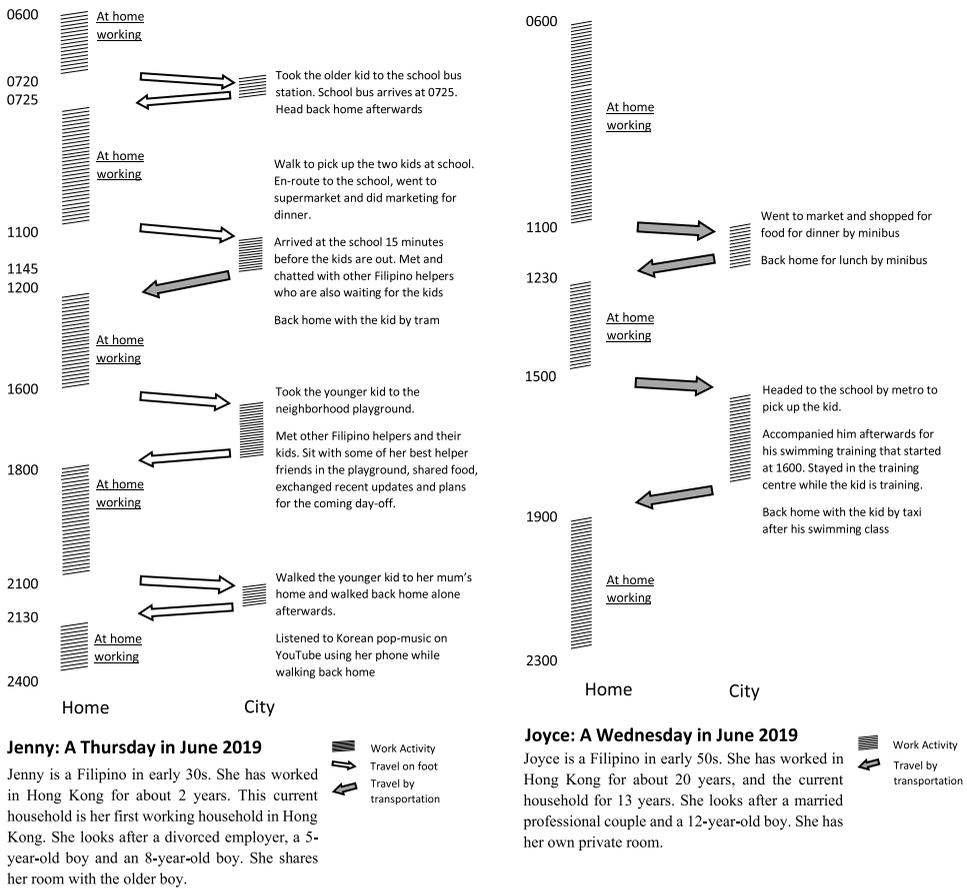


Figure 1. The ordinary mobility patterns of two migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong during workdays.

6. The neighbourhood: from an extended worksite to finding moments of autonomy

Going out to complete work tasks constitutes an essential part of the everyday work life of live-in migrant workers. The actual outing themselves affords non-work activities that escape the control of their employers. Dolores would run detours to grocery stores for data sim cards while shopping for family meals. Valarie would exchange employment opportunities with other workers when accompanying the elderly members in senior centres. Cherry would make good use of the limited work trip to walk more to stay fit and healthy. Jenny would play K-pop from YouTube on her phone when going to pick up the kids at school. The city is undeniably an extended worksite, but it is also a place of escape where the totalising disciplinary regime at the domestic space loses its grip, where its reach is incomplete, tentative or uncertain. To go out on a domestic errand is to work, but going out equally represents a chance to for a break, to rest and to forge moments of freedom.

The temporal constraints underlie respondents' organisation of everyday domestic outings. The workers usually have very limited time to complete a long list of tasks, going here and there then rushing back to home for another long list of domestic

duties. Diarists created free time during outings, plugging non-work agendas into their everyday work routines. 'Sometimes after the marketing ...' Cathy explained, 'I would just sit nearby my place before I go up [to the apartment], because I still have time. I will sit down somewhere. Make a call or sometimes I can buy some Filipino snacks before I go up.' Likewise, Delia talked of how tiring her job is and how she is constantly under camera surveillance by her employer.

Because [there is] no camera [at the corridor between the lift and the unit]. I can raise my body, just like that, I will try to do exercise. I will do stretching because when I am at home, I keep on working under the camera, just focus, nothing to do. So, when I go out, I close the door, and (she exhales strongly). OK!

Along with breaking away from constant impression management to relax a bit, diarists also are involved in a kind of self-care by running regular detours to nearby Filipino or Indonesia grocery stores, fast-food restaurants or low-budget second-hand clothing shops, buying various personal items, toiletries or homesick-easing national cuisine in local stores scattered around their neighbourhoods when they are doing marketing, returning to home after dropping off kids at school or walking dogs. Sometimes they do so by squeezing 'free' outing time through the perfect execution of a work outing. For example, Jeanelyn checks the bus schedule online before going out so not to miss the bus and waste her 'free' time unnecessarily. Others like Valarie and Jenny would pretend they were caught in a traffic jam, claim they have forgotten to buy some essential household item, as excused for a late return. Diarists also plugged into non-work components into work trips through the active use of mobile phones. Phones are used to listen to music and watch YouTube. They are also used to talk with others, text, Facebook friends or family members. Phones are part of the subtle everyday resistance whereby workers perform work and non-work tasks. The use of mobile phone is often banned at the domestic space, where the migrants are expected to comply with the 'principle of non-idleness' and should be actively looking for work to do (Lan 2006). Indeed, using cell phones at home would convey an impression of slacking off to employers and undermine employment relations, as stressed by Delia whose mobile phone is confiscated by her employers during workdays to make sure she does not get distracted from work. It is worth highlighting that many of these acts of 'self-care' are entangled with obligations towards and care for others.

Among these outing narratives, the domestic workspace is often described by the workers as a place where they cannot 'breathe', feel 'suffocated' and must 'look for work for yourself', or as a place of intense surveillance where they must always work 'near the (nanny) camera' or 'stay alive' because 'the madam is present every day'. It is lived as a site of performance in need of constant impression, stress and emotional management unlikely to confer a sense of domesticity. Going out, in this respect, constitutes a brief possibility of freedom analogous to workers' 'toilet breaks' at home (Boersma 2016), only that the latter usually last only for a few minutes. It represents moves from the domestic performative frontstage to the urban backstage where the migrants regain space for self-expression, privacy and autonomy. It implies a chance to create free time 'for themselves' to seek brief refuge and to stay 'OK', even if they could only get a 'little bit' free time. Here, the 'OK' implies more than some sorts of self-encouragement or qualities of resilience, but an afforded capacity of endurance to keep their migrant living going (see [Figure 2](#)).

The mixing of non-work components into everyday urban work trips is, however, not without challenge. Cathy explained how she lost her routine outing opportunities when her previous female employer was laid off and thus took over her outing tasks. She was



Figure 2. Migrant domestic workers out in public in Hong Kong. (From top left to bottom right) **Figure 2.1:** Helpers meeting and having lunch in McDonald. One of them brings with her a baby of the employer. Source: Author; **Figure 2.2:** Helpers shopping for cheap clothing in a second-hand shop during their marketing trip. Source: Author; **Figure 2.3:** A helper resting and playing with her cell phone at a small public area next to her residence after the market trip. Source: Author; **Figure 2.4:** A helper is chatting on phone in Tagalog (the language used in the Philippines) on the metro during the market trip. Source: Author; **Figure 2.5:** A group of helpers gather inside a facility in a community park with the children of their employers. They are at the same time video-calling on their phone in Tagalog. Source: Author; **Figure 2.6:** A local grocery store inside a local wet market. It sells Filipino and Indonesian food, and provides door-to-door delivery service to different areas in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand (top right is the price list of the delivery service). Source: Author; **Figure 2.7:** Elderly along with the helpers accompanying them (siting at the back) are drawn together in an elderly day-care centre every day. Source: Supplied by Participants; **Figure 2.8:** Elderly along with their migrant caretakers are drawn together into the neighborhood public space. Source: Author; **Figure 2.9:** Children of different ages, along with their migrant caretakers are drawn together into the playground. Source: Author.

‘trapped’ at home six days a week until her female employer got a new job a few months later. Delia, on the other hand, shared that in her first year working, her employer did not allow her to leave the block where their apartment was. It was only recently that she is occasionally permitted to pick up delivery at the estate lobby or drop off and pick up the employers’ children at a nearby school bus station. She, however, has to notify her employers when she leaves or comes back home. Similarly, quotidian urban spaces do not always offer the workers moments of autonomy but sometimes function to reproduce their otherness as racialized and disadvantaged workers. Jeanelyn explained that she is used to Chinese people calling her ‘bun mui’ – a derogatory and racist slang in Hong Kong that stigmatises Filipino domestic worker. Other younger workers shared how they are sexually harassed or hit on by older locals while commuting on public transport, having lunch in McDonalds or hanging out in parks during their workday outings. Instead of speaking up immediately or to their employers, they would rather keep silence to avoid getting entangled in ‘troubles’ that might put their work at risk. The everyday city similarly function as a site of everyday racism or everyday harassment that reproduces the otherness of the migrant domestic workers, alongside offering them possibilities for temporary refuge.

Despite these challenges, the public and quasi-public spaces of the urban environment remain central in making the workers’ endurance in Hong Kong possible. The public urban landscape challenges the totalising surveillance regimes constructed by employers. It affords possibilities to bend work tasks, quietly contesting unequal labour relations and encroach the disciplinary forces through borrowing worktime for non-work agendas. In many respects, urban neighbourhoods play the role of an extended care space. They afford the possibility for diarists to plug-in a dimension of self-care into the work of caring for others; affording spaces where parts of everyday outings can be transformed into moments of self-care that allow diarists to regain a sense of privacy and autonomy. A resource that helps them to endure living as a live-in migrant domestic worker.

7. Neighbourhoods as infrastructures of intimacy and care

Each of the diarists has travelled a long way from their home countries – the Philippines and Indonesia – to earn a living without knowing exactly when they might return to their ‘home’. But as daughters, wives, sisters or mothers of someone back ‘home’, they are marked by multiple social identities that are not suddenly made void by their move to Hong Kong. Rather, they make significant efforts to maintain these now transnational social ties. The built fabric of Hong Kong is critical in making such ongoing reworking of transnational ties possible. As a kind of ‘provisioning machine’ (Amin 2008), the city affords the migrants opportunities to elaborate translational identities by plugging into its extensive arrays of place resources to perform transnational communication, remittances and gift giving.

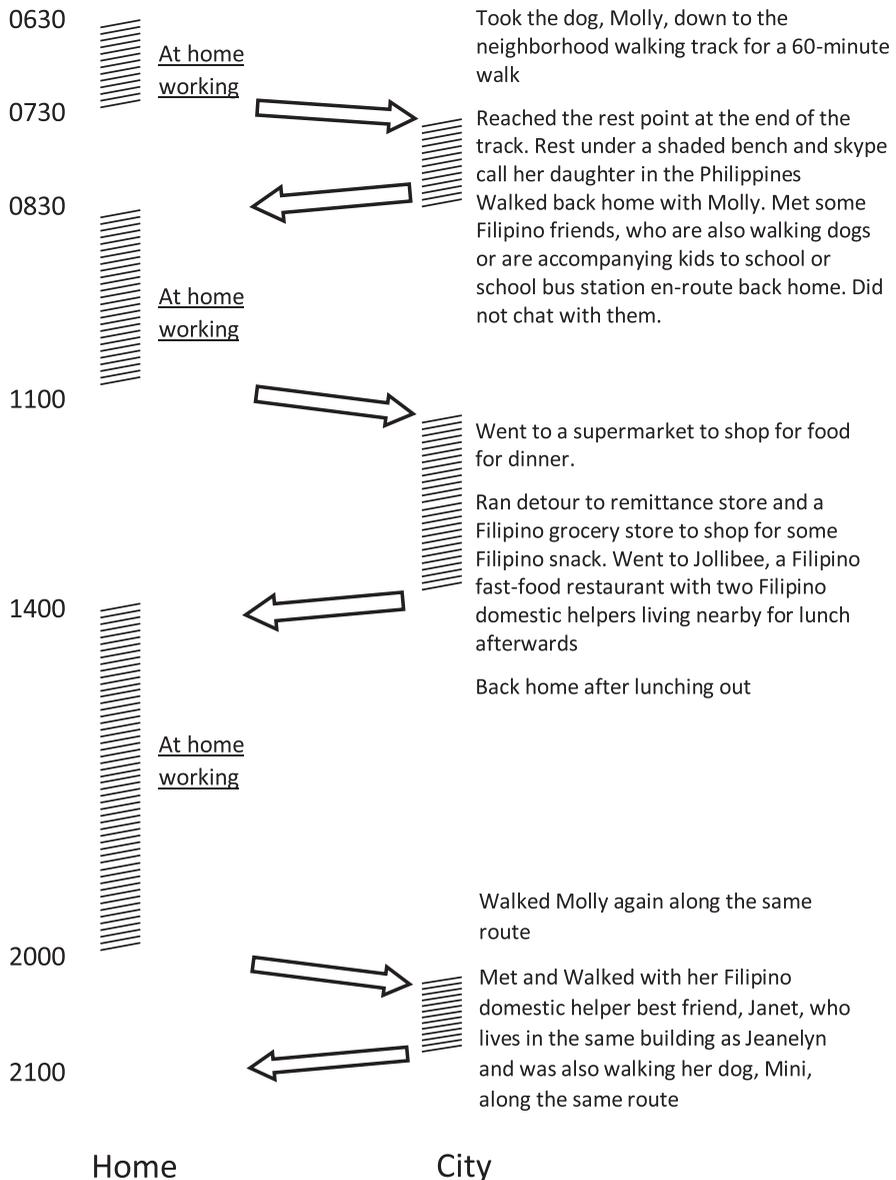
Domestic workers’ outing practices – as exemplified through the accounts of diarists – are entangled with maintaining a connection with distant friends and families. Being in public offers domestic workers opportunities to connect with distant loved ones. These mundane acts of care are, of course, afforded by smart phones. But it is equally afforded by Hong Kong’s extensive network of telecommunications infrastructures. A

major reason that some migrant domestic workers go to McDonald or KFC during their lunch hour is to tap the free and fast Wi-Fi there to keep in touch with their families. For these migrants, the public and quasi-public spaces of Hong Kong are part of an intimate, private, infrastructure of care. Similarly, the provisioning opportunities of Hong Kong form part of wider transnational networks of care. The clothing, handbags, electronics and other goods bought in local stores for those 'home' are a vital way diarists confirmed and sustained relations as a 'responsible' daughter, wife or mother. 'I'm the youngest among the family', Valerie explains, 'I usually send some Ensure [the brand name of elderly milk powder] to my sister [in the Philippines] because it is cheaper here.' Similarly, Jenny, in diary entry, writes how: 'While walking [to the market], I stop at the jewellery shop. I am thinking and looking for something to buy for my mother and sisters as a gift when I go home next year.'

But the city does not simply afford the elaboration of spatially stretched intimate relations. Given the similar family structure and mobility patterns of corresponding household members, migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong tend to go to similar places at similar times during their workdays. Their everyday outings, therefore, involve routine meetings with other migrant workers. Here, the city functions as an encountering platform, 'a gathering point of plural geographies of association' where the migrants meet and re-meet (Amin 2015, 243). Markets, parks, schools or elderly day-care centres, are places live-in domestic workers must visit regularly for their work. These neighbourhood sites are not just places of work but also simultaneously legitimate sites of encounter where migrant domestic workers are repeatedly drawn together. They are sites when sociality among the migrants gradually emerges through routinised recognition, meeting and interaction.

The routine interaction of domestic workers takes in numerous forms: a simple hug in the supermarket, a brief chat at the school entrance or a one-hour food sharing 'party' in the park. Sometimes, meetings are prosaic and unexpected. Sometimes, they are planned and scheduled. Such day-to-day meetings and interactions elaborate a provisional, informal and localised social infrastructure of care in the neighbourhood that connects migrant domestic workers (Simone 2018; Tonkiss 2015; Latham and Layton 2019). Jenny's daily joyful meeting with her fellows' domestic workers illustrates the point. Taking care of two kids in the household, Jenny brings the kids to the playground every day at 4 PM. Every time she takes the kids to the playground, she sits with other workers who are also accompanying children to the playground. Here they talk – sharing gossip about their employers and stories about family back home. The playground draws children as well as the accompanied workers together. The two-hour playground time, therefore, is for Jenny intensely enjoyable. Cathy, Cherry and Joyce similarly congregate with other migrants at the school entrance or gather at various after-school activity centres when waiting to pick up their employers' children; often 10–15 min earlier than needed to allow time to talk (Figure 3).

In many cases care, involves more than emotional support. Care was also manifested in the sharing of information, exchanging job opportunities, selling phone-cards or second-hand cell phone below market price, or offering to pay visits to the friends' family during a return trip to home countries. These acts of care are not simply a product of altruism but also an investment based on the associated norms of reciprocity



Jeanelyn: A Monday in June 2019

Jeanelyn is a Filipino in early 50s. She has worked in Hong Kong for 18 years and the current household for a few years. She looks after a cohabitating couple and a dog. She has her own room.

-  Work Activity
-  Travel on foot
-  Travel by transportation

Figure 3. The ordinary mobility patterns of a migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong during workdays.

that is once ethical and economic. Repeated care exchanges accumulate a culture of reciprocity and afford sustainable interaction among workers when they are doing their work trips. Built from repeated collaboration, the routinised reciprocal exchanges further elaborate a tentative supportive social infrastructure of care where migrant bodies working as ‘the conduits of exchange and connection’, and their ‘face-to-face or hand-to-hand interactions’ in the brief outing journey ‘provides the basic network of communication and distribution’ of care (Tonkiss 2015, 389). As one of the causally interviewed worker said, ‘I sometimes feel less lonely when out ... as it allows me to “see” other helpers’. Through their use – and subtle appropriation – of a range of neighbourhood spaces migrant domestic workers are embedded into locally situated networks of care. In a context where formal infrastructural capacity of care to the group is lacking, the informal care infrastructure crafted by migrant bodies operates as a tentative yet dependable platform where the migrants continuously rely on to make their everyday migrant lives in the global city more bearable. Collectively, the outing stories establish that the various sites of work in the neighbourhood where workers are repeatedly thrown together are simultaneously where repeated care exchange is most intensely performed and where the ‘peopled’ infrastructure is most visibly articulated (Simone 2004). It also represents an ongoing ‘infrastructural crafting’ practice (Amin 2014) that continuously inter-locks givers and recipients ‘in a social framework imbued with a range of obligations and meanings’ (Cliggett 2003, 543) so the migrants can remain dependent on others to exchange support.

Composed of myriad bodies, ideas, senses or affects, the city affords a range of possibilities for migrant bodies to become entangled in all kinds of networks and systems of circulation during their everyday urban routines. Undeniably, the ‘use and discard’ migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong is a highly constrained group whose ‘everyday’ is structured around their working status as a live-in labour migrant. The everyday city illustrated by the outing stories of the diarist migrant domestic workers presented here equally tells much about the possibilities for a quotidian domestication that allows such precious migrants to exceed their working identity and live as an ordinary wife, daughter, mother, friend or just simply an urban actor.

8. Conclusion

Domestic workers play a key role in global cities like Hong Kong. But they do so from a position of precarity. This precarity is a product both of the immigration regime which regulates their movement and level of integration into the host society, and of the domestic situations within which their work takes place. In the context of working lives that are controlled and monitored to an extraordinary degree by their employers, time spent outside of the employers’ homes becomes an important resource for maintaining a connection with others – both back ‘home’ and in Hong Kong. Streets, Parks, shopping centres, supermarkets, even elderly day-care centres, offer opportunities for social interaction that is autonomous from the surveillance of employers. Many of these ordinary public and quasi-public spaces are marginal to previous studies of migrant domestic workers, more interested as they are in the political economy and flow of transnational care provision and in employer-employee care relations at the (trans-)national, and

household scale, respectively. A focus on the spaces outside of the domestic work place brings into focus the situational configurations and the social infrastructural affordances of these spaces that migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong routinely visit and appropriate as part of their work commitments.

The use of mundane urban spaces is, of course, constrained by the fact that such outings are part of the domestic workers' work duties. Still the accounts offered by the respondents in our study, whether lunching in Jollibees, walking dogs with other workers, having a food-sharing party in a community playground while attending to school-age kids, shows how such routine daily outings can be more than a mere work-trip. These accounts highlight the ways the otherwise anonymous, impersonal, public and quasi-public spaces become sites of intimacy for many migrant domestic workers. Routine outings and interactions with other workers become part of migrant domestic workers' everyday dwelling in the global city. They are repeatedly drawn together in these public spaces, creating an intricate – if still precarious – social infrastructure of care. These outing experiences are conceptually and empirically significant. They foreground that migrant domestic workers not only have lives in the cities they work in, but also how through their creative use of routine work-bound outings – however brief they are – they claim a degree of autonomy; maintaining and building both local and transnational relationships in order to endure dwelling within a state of everyday precariousness. These everyday stories highlight that the 'everyday city' does not always have to be conceptually taken as a site of resistance or an extended worksite; it can equally be seen as a site of ordinary inhabitation where varying resources from multiple urban assemblages are drawn to makes the difficult lives of the migrant population – as ordinary urban dwellers – less difficult.

To highlight the importance of a range of public and quasi-public spaces to the lives of the domestic workers in this study is also to make the case for 'outings' as a social theoretical concept. Focusing on outings draws attention to how excursions outside the home are performed, managed and organised, individually or collectively, by different social actors. In our study, the overall outing experiences and feelings vary across the eight participants. We would, however, expect the ordinary outing experiences to be different in other major hosting countries for migrant domestic workers. For example, migrant domestic workers working in places such as Kuwait, Lebanon and Jordan are generally forbidden from leaving their employer's homes unaccompanied (International Organization for Migration 2017). Similar restrictions on autonomous movement are also witnessed by workers in Indonesia and Malaysia (Human Rights Watch 2004). 'Outings', therefore, is a tool for thinking about the different ways – and different potentialities – urban inhabitants – migrants and non-migrants alike – have for inhabiting and making a home for themselves within an urban environment. Outings can be conceptualised as a rhythm and relation-making process within the wider social-ecology of neighbourhoods and cities. The public worlds – and the meaning of those worlds – occupied by Hong Kong citizens or professional expatriates from North America, Europe or other Asian countries are not the same as those occupied by migrant domestic workers, even if they do in fact share many of the same spaces, nor do migrant domestic workers across migration regimes share similar outing trajectories or experiences. In this sense, outings as a concept works as a sensitising heuristic to sharpen our understanding of the multiplicity of urban lives in global cities.

Note

1. That includes the use of time-table or work manual, general access denial to the frontstages of home (e.g. master room, living room), control over food consumption and physical appearance, surveillance through the use of nanny cameras presence of family members or unexpected spot checks, the use of kinship metaphors for intense bodily.

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