

Practising hope in an urban landscape: the poetics and politics of  
Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong

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For the Degree of PhD

I, Hsiang Ying Wu, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.



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## **Abstract**

The thesis is about the Filipino migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and how they carve an alternative space in Central on their days off. This alternative space speaks of not merely a social space but a material built environment around which the migrants build their new subjectivities and constitute a transnational movement construed through the assertion of their rights as workers, women and human beings under the rubric of universal human rights.

I first discuss the spatial practices of the community to adapt to changes in the physical landscape and reveal the nuanced social relationships and contestation of spaces amongst the members of the community. The linear and cyclical repetitions of their Sunday life act to punctuate the everyday repetitive life they have as domestic workers and create and inscribe patterns of usage of space that disrupt the dominant corporate space of Central that has come to represent faceless capital and consumers of spectacles.

Through encounters with the representatives of the authorities in protest marches and everyday interactions, I examine the tensions between the dominant abstract space and the marginalised lived space and argue that the negotiations and creative alternative ways of appropriating spaces by the Filipinos illustrate that the domination of abstract space is not absolute. Alternative social relations emerge in the cracks of the abstract space and these alternatives are the beginning of something hopeful –the transnational migrant domestic workers’ movement.

Lastly, I argue that the transnational migrant movement in Hong Kong is underpinned by ‘practising hope’ – of one’s encounter with injustice; of the political awakening that the personal is political; of the identification of oneself as part of a collective and a community. The basis of it all is underpinned by the Sunday gatherings they have in Central that substantiate their claim to the ‘right to the city’.

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## **Chapter 1 Why are they here every Sunday?**

### **1.1 Introduction:**

I met Dorothy (pseudonym) on a cold evening in December 2012 in Central, the Central Business District of Hong Kong. She was packing equipment that she had used earlier for screening a documentary about violations of human rights in the Philippines. Her silhouette emerged as she turned herself against the glistening lights emanating from the window displays and Christmas decorations behind her.

The exact location where I met her was at a corner of Chater Road, a road that is closed from vehicular traffic every Sunday and on public holidays. Some of the global brands that can be found along this road include Chanel, Prada and Bvlgari, just to name a few. On any weekday, it is a business district with up-market retail shops with scenes of business executives in suits rushing by and tourists lugging their shopping trollies. On Sundays, it is transformed into ‘Little Manila’ in which many Filipinas gather and roam.

The sun had set and the crowds gathered here earlier started to dissipate. A few hours earlier, many women from the Philippines were sitting in front of a booth set up to screen the documentary telling stories of land grabbing and extra-judicial killings in the Philippines. Like many of her compatriots, Dorothy came to Hong Kong to work as a domestic worker (in Hong Kong, the term ‘domestic helper’ is used in government narratives and official documents – a term that has helped to evade many of their rights as workers) as she could not find work in her own country after graduating with a bachelor of commerce degree in the Philippines.

She joins other millions of Filipinos who find employment outside of their own country as “Overseas Filipino Workers” (OFW) to take advantage of the foreign exchange to provide better lives for their families back home (Gutierrez Iii, 2013). The economic reason behind her decision to find jobs outside of her country, even though it is considered ‘under-employment’ in



her case, becomes less important as she continues her tenure as an Overseas Filipino Worker in Hong Kong. Outside of her work, she spends her Sundays in Central, around Chater Road, attending anniversary celebrations of migrant organisations, giving speeches at rallies, negotiating with the Hong Kong police about the routes taken for protests or, as on the night I met her, organising events.

Meeting her that evening at Chater Road opened a door through which I got to know what she and her compatriots do on Sundays in Central, the reasons behind the myriad of activities taking place in the same area, who they are and what they fight for. It also gave me a glimpse into the development of the transnational migrant domestic workers' movement in the era of globalisation in the city that has the reputation of being the 'freest economy' in the world.

This thesis aims to discuss the encounter between Dorothy and I in the larger context of globalisation, the bringing together of circuits of people through migration as a result of unequal geographical development. It is also a story about how these encounters in the global city of Hong Kong brought about the emergence of a transnational migrant domestic workers' movement that echoes Sassen's articulation of the emergence of transnational politics (Sassen, 2001b). It is also about the migrants' 'dwelling' in Hong Kong (Knowles & Harper, 2009), a city where many lives intersect outside of their employers' households.

The focus of the discussion is about space and place, the role of public spaces in Central in many of the Filipino migrants' lives. Quoting Lily, one of my informants who has been in Hong Kong for 11 years and has done two stints with the same employer of 8 years and then 3 years and counting:

*"I don't feel complete if I am not going to Central; Central is the most important to us because Overseas Filipino Workers stay there".*

The Sunday gatherings of Filipino migrant workers in the public spaces of Central, especially along Chater Road, provide the lens through which we come to understand better the lives of migrant workers outside of their employment and also the importance of the marginalised sectors of the society having access to public spaces. It also provides us with the opportunity to stipulate the process and relationship between having access to public spaces, the social construction of their collective subjectivities and the emergence of transnational migrant domestic workers' networks and the movement that constitutes it. Through their encounters with the dominant architecture of global capital and authorities with an abstract concept of space, manifested in the form of the police and security guards governing urban landscapes, the prevailing power structure embedded in enforcing 'norms' starts to surface. Through their encounters with these enforcers of an 'abstract concept of space', we unravel the multiple claims made by different social actors about the urban landscape and the tools and discourses behind these claims. These claims extend beyond the spaces of the urban into the cyber and discursive spaces and are interwoven into a transnational social network that moves across them. However, as I will argue and show in the thesis, in the case of migrant domestic workers, who are often isolated in employers' households on weekdays, it is the encounters on the streets of Central on Sundays, of sharing one's problems with others in a physical space and being in the same spaces as others knowing one is not alone that are of the greatest comfort to migrant workers. It is the old-fashioned sharing of lives through everyday practices such as sharing food, organising parties and seminars, walking in protest marches, and being there together that underpins the basis of something bigger - the transnational workers' movement of migrant domestic workers who are disadvantaged along multiple axes of gender, race, nationality and their labour as domestic workers.

The questions this thesis aims to answer are: in what ways are the public spaces of Central significant for the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, especially the Filipino migrant domestic workers who identify

themselves as belonging to ‘progressive grassroots organisations’? What do their practices of using and occupying the public spaces of Central tell us about spaces and places and about the spatiality of public spaces in relation to social relations? How do their spatial practices and their ways of appropriating spaces tell us about alternative possibilities of conceptualising public space and inform us of the specific ways in which the right to the city could be claimed through claiming public spaces? What is the significance of the role of public spaces in Central in the formation of the transnational migrant workers’ movement in Hong Kong?

In this introductory chapter, I will first briefly introduce the literature on migration and situate this thesis in the more specific fields of migrant domestic workers. The discussion will also provide a brief context of female temporary labour migration from the Philippines to Hong Kong. The second part of the discussion is about spaces and places and the importance of having access to public spaces in Central, to the Filipino community. I then explore the conceptual framework through which the phenomenon of gatherings on Sunday will be examined. The structure of the thesis and methodology will be presented at the end of the chapter.

## **1.2 Migration**

Migration concerns the movement of people. The earlier approach of locality-based community studies undertaken by anthropologists in the 1950s to 1960s fell short in answering questions that involve boundary crossing. Realising such a shortcoming, efforts to analyse complex societies and link the micro to the macro can be observed in the development of urban anthropology and also migration and development studies (Kearney, 1986).

The linking of the micro (or ethnographic studies of the local phenomena) to the macro (the larger global context) has not, however, been the dominant way in which migration and development studies have been conducted. Persistently visible in the mainstream media is the economic

approach to understanding migration and development. This can be seen in the debates in the UK about the opening up of labour market to Bulgaria and Romania in 2014 and the fear generated regarding the impact that this opening up could have on local employment (Syal & Agencies, 2014) and the heated debates about immigration in the May 2015 general election. The differential in employment opportunities across two geographical areas underpins the studies of migration in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which focus on an individual migrant's decision-making. Originally developed to explain the rural-urban migration that took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe and the USA, embedded within the approach are the Victorian values and conception of progress – to examine how individual migrants “adapt”, “assimilate” and “adjust” within the modernisation project, which operates with the dualism of urban and rural, modern and traditional, civilisation and barbarism (Kearney, 1986). Kearney (1986) argues that this simplistic approach to examining the ‘flows of migrants’ failed to account for the social network often required in the process of searching for jobs across boundaries and the resources put together by extended families in searching for jobs. Not only does the unit of analysis become a problematic research issue, the economic approach of understanding migration as merely an issue relating to the labour market underestimates the complexities of migration, especially international migration. As with Dorothy and many of her friends’ cases, they had to pay a huge sum in placement fees before their employment in Hong Kong could be arranged through employment agencies. This sum of money, if not financed through extended families’ resource pooling, became a debt that many of them paid with their salaries for up to half a year while they were in Hong Kong. When asked why they were in Hong Kong as domestic workers, in particular as many of them were overqualified for the job, almost all of them answered, ‘to support my family.’ The utmost consideration in many of these migrant women’s minds is their family back home – their children, their parents and their siblings. Focusing on the individual decision-making process and disregarding the resources and influence of the social network within which an individual is entangled thus

fails to recognise the most important factors that make people cross borders for employment opportunities.

Failing to recognise the part that the wider social network plays in the decision to migrate is not the only limitation of the economic approach to understanding migration flows. The framework of individual decision-making regarding migration often employs the rational-choice model to explain the choice that migrants make in terms of migration. The fundamental flaw in the assumption that people who move have a choice between staying put and migrating is that it often fails to consider that some people who migrate to work are not simply choosing between two alternatives of better or worse economic opportunities, but between suffering and survival. The assumption that people have a choice not to migrate for employment opportunities to places other than their place of origin is blind to the macroeconomic structures and historic processes that force many migrants to move in the first place. They either have to put up with the circumstances of their lives, which tend to perpetuate a lack of hope for the future, or migrate, which might allow them to provide a better future for them or their family, at least financially.

For Dorothy, she could not find a job after she graduated from college with a bachelor degree within her hometown, nor could she find work in the metropolitan areas in the Philippines, which presumably offer more job opportunities. The only choice she had was to jump on the bandwagon of many of her countrymen before her, to work, although over-qualified, as a domestic helper in Hong Kong.

The economic approach with models based on individual decision-making not only fails to take into account the influence of the wider social network and contains a flawed assumption that people are given choices in terms of migrating for employment opportunities, it is also often embedded with the dichotomies between rural and urban, and traditional and modern, which are

inadequate to understand the wide spectrum of phenomena observed in migrant communities (Uzzell 1979; Lomnitz 1976 in Kearney, 1986).

Rather than distinct categories, urban and rural, and traditional and modern are two ends of a continuum that flow in both directions. Dependency theory, and later on world system theory articulated the linkage between rural and urban and provided a framework to embed both into a global capitalistic system. Dependency theory argues that labour migration is the result of uneven geographical development between the developed and peripheral economies that caused a permanent demand for migrant labour in the developed economies. Migrant labourers from the less developed economies are attracted by the higher wages they receive in comparison with what they would get in their own countries. World system theory, on the other hand, argues that labour migration is a result of the 'natural outgrowth' of dislocations and disruptions caused by the expansion of capitalist economic relations into areas such as control over land, resources and labour in the peripheral economies, creating a mass mobile population (Mahmud & Author, 2009).

This approach to the studies of migration also brings historic processes and macroeconomic structures transcending nations into the framework, uniting the individuals and the structure, the cores and the peripheries into a global capitalistic system. Migration studies that adopt dependency theory or world system theory as a framework have focused mostly on the transfer and appropriation of surplus values to the core area, and migrants as labour, together with capital and commodities form the circuit of a global capitalist system.

Notwithstanding its more holistic approach to the problems of migration, the framework of dependency theory and world system theory undermines the focus on local-level problems and the subtler influences outside of political economic processes. It has shifted away from the individual as a unit of analysis but does not address the issue identified earlier, i.e. that the

decision to migrate goes beyond individual motivation. Furthermore, the dichotomies between rural and urban, and traditional and modern can hardly be applied in the international context, and even less so when the migrant sending countries and receiving destinations do not fall neatly into the category of ‘non-western’, ‘western’, ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ as in the case of the Philippines and Hong Kong.

Many of Dorothy’s compatriots came from rural families. The move from their rural homelands to Hong Kong was not simply a move from the village to the city, but a transnational move from a village in the peripheral countries to one of the semi-core centres in the global capitalist system through a myriad system of recruitment agencies in the town centres in the provinces in the Philippines, the ‘maids’ agencies’ in Hong Kong and governmental departments in both countries. This process is further complicated by the policies of each respective government in controlling these migrant workers’ ‘legitimacy’ and ‘status of health’ through compulsory training seminars and examination in the Philippines, the issuance of restricted working visas and the clearance of health checks as required by Hong Kong regulation. Systemic exploitation of these migrant workers by the placement agencies through charging exorbitant placement fees (which is outlawed in the Philippines) is not unfounded (Amnesty, 2013). Comparing this process of scrupulous extortion from the migrant domestic workers by the placement agencies to professional headhunting industries that operate beyond borders with a similar remit of matching potential employees to employers in which the employers foot the bill, the differential experience of migrants in search of overseas employment opportunities for domestic works to that of the professionals, speaks of the need to look beyond individual decision making and the macroeconomic structures and look into factors such as gender and class.

Another trend that has emerged as a counter to dependency theory and world system theory is termed ‘articulation theory’ by Kearney (1986.) Rather than focusing on the transfer of surplus values from the peripheral to

the centre and based on the model of a single capitalist system, articulation theory argues that the analysis should start with the production of 'surplus' value itself. What is manifest in the case of migration is the production of economic goods that support the reproduction of labour outside of the capitalist system and the process of reproduction of labour itself (Kearney, 1986.) Thus, articulation theory moves away from having one united capitalist system as framed in the dependency and world system theories, and instead takes an interest in the unique characteristics of the modes of production and reproduction at the 'peripherals'. By shifting the focus away from the centre, the articulation perspective is able to look at migration in a more nuanced fashion: it looks at how factors such as citizenship (Mines & Anzaldúa, 1982 in Kearney, 1986), legal status (eg. Sim & Wee, 2010), nationality (de Regt, 2010) and gender (eg. Mahler & Pessar, 2006) influence the lives of migrants, as these factors are manifest in the labour markets as constraints or enablers for migrants from different backgrounds. The articulation perspective also moves between individuals as a unit of analysis in the microeconomic models and the macroeconomic structures and historic processes in dependency and world system theory to provide an entry point for anthropologists to focus on the communities.

One of the developments of the articulation perspective in migration studies is the role that women play in the process of migration. One strand of analysis has focused on the non-salaried labour that these women have contributed towards the capitalist circuit of circulation either from the petty commodities they sell or in the form of informal services rendered (Babb, 1986 in Kearney, 1986). Another strand is the direct participation of women in the migration process as migrant labours. It is within the articulation literature that this thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of migration and development, in particular with regard to women's empowerment through social movements in the context of Filipino domestic helpers' Sunday activities in Central in Hong Kong.



### **1.2.1 International Migration Trend**

According to the United Nations International Migration Report (UN, 2013), the number of international migrants worldwide increased by 50% between 1990 and 2013, an increase of 77 million over a 24-year period. Of the 77 million, 53 million were added to the developed nations, with North America and Europe experiencing the largest increase in numbers. There has however been a shift in the patterns of migration with intra-regional migration gaining more importance in recent years. In 2013, intra-Asia migration became the largest migration corridor with some 54 million born in one of the countries within the region residing in another country within the same region.

Different patterns of migration and settlement seem to have implications for the composition in terms of women and men migrants. Countries with a more well-established immigration history and long term settlement reflect this in the higher number of female migrants, who arrived decades earlier and outlive their male counterparts, whilst in countries with short term migration mainly driven by short term labour demand, like oil-producing Western Asia after 2000, the male migrants outnumber the female migrants (UN, 2013).

With the different trends of migration observed in North America and Europe and other parts of the world, it is not surprising to find that migration studies in different parts of the world have different priorities. Migration studies in Europe and North America tend to focus on the consequences of migration from the perspective of the migrant receiving countries (Piper, 2006a). Citizenship, border control and party politics are some of the main themes that dominate the discussion at the centre of the macro-level analysis (Hollifield, 2000). Hollifield (2000, in Piper 2006) pointed out that this political scientific scholarship lacks the perspective from migrant sending countries and entails the misplaced assumption of permanent migration, which is often not the case in many parts of the world, especially for countries with ‘guest worker’ programmes that develop

migration policies mostly from the perspective of economic demand and supply of labour.

The highly discriminatory immigration policy of many Asian countries has made it hard for many migrant workers to obtain citizenship and permanent migration is often out of the question. In Hong Kong, one of the jurisdictions in the region that respects rule of law, the Court of Final Appeal, in March 2013, ruled that foreign domestic helpers had no right to claim permanent residency in the city (South China Morning Post, 2013); therefore the discussion of citizenship and party politics that has featured so prominently in migration studies in Europe and North American is rendered irrelevant in this particular context.

### **1.2.2 Immigration Trend in Hong Kong**

The international trend of migration pointed out in the earlier section is not consistently observed in the case of Hong Kong, nor in the context of Filipino migrant workers bound for Hong Kong. Rather than experiencing an increase in the number of migrants, the number of migrants decreased from 2.21 million in 1990 to 1.66 million in 2013, including migrants from mainland China, which made up 1.66 million or 75% of the total migrants in 1990 and 1.27 million or 77% of the total migrants in 2013. Excluding migrants from China, which is the main source of migrants to Hong Kong, migrants from the Philippines made up the second largest group based on country of origin, with 79,000 Filipinos in 1990 and 114,000 in 2013<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, Hong Kong is consistently one of the top five destination countries for Filipino migrants.<sup>2</sup> This observation is consistent with the international migration trend of intra-Asia migration increasing in recent years as mentioned in the UN report earlier.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2013). Trends in International Migrant Stock: Migrants by Destination and Origin (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2013).

<sup>2</sup> Source: 2008-2012 Overseas Employment Statistics, Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, [http://www.poea.gov.ph/stats/2012\\_stats.pdf](http://www.poea.gov.ph/stats/2012_stats.pdf)

The number of “new hires” (a term used by the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration Report) bound for Hong Kong from the Philippines rose from 19,000 in 2008 to 34,000 in 2013. In 2010 (the latest year in which the breakdown of these new hires by sex and occupations is available), of the 28,000 new hires bound for Hong Kong, 98% were women. This overwhelmingly female migration from the Philippines to Hong Kong is a direct result of the type of employment offers made to the Filipino women in Hong Kong. 99.7% of these women are working in the domestic service industry. Like Dorothy and her compatriots, they are in Hong Kong as domestic workers. They represent the supply side of what Anderson (2000) terms the ‘global chain of care work’ from Hong Kong’s perspective although they themselves hire or rely on others (often females) to care for the families they have left behind.

The highly gendered migration pattern from the Philippines to Hong Kong contradicts the trend pointed out in the UN International Report on Migration, in which women made up slightly more than 50% of the migrants worldwide. The UN International Migration Report does not cover the specificities of each geopolitical entity nor does it address issues that are more prevalent outside the traditional migrant receiving countries.

For one, it does not distinguish permanent migration from temporary migration. The ambiguous term ‘temporary’ renders a discussion of temporary migration difficult. It is not merely a reflection of the duration of migrants’ stay – temporary could range from short business trips to seasonal repeated migration as in the many migration studies of Mexican migrant workers in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Massey, 1986; Massey, 1987; Guendelman et al. 1987) or guest workers’ programmes in Canada more recently (Basok, 2003). Temporary also speaks of the ‘legal status’ of migrants in host societies. The inherent conflicts between the nature of temporary migration and the bounded nature of nation-state based citizenship (even when a nation-state aspires to a cosmopolitan perspective on immigration) leave most temporary migrants’ plights invisible; they are

often in a marginalised and vulnerable conditions (Ottonelli & Torresi, 2012) as seen in the case of the domestic workers in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, however, there is an ambivalent ‘permanent temporariness’ on various scales being practised by the lifestyle migrants, including the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong (Knowles & Harper, 2009).

Temporary migration is mostly employment related and migrants are expected to return to their country of origin at the end the employment contract. In the case of domestic workers in Hong Kong, employment contracts are signed for a period of two years and a visa is issued with the same validity period. The contract is renewed every two years, even if a domestic worker continues to work for the same employer. Each time their contract is renewed, the domestic workers are expected to leave Hong Kong for a minimum of two weeks. If the contract is terminated prematurely the domestic worker is only given two weeks to stay in Hong Kong. These ‘special conditions of stay’ became the basis of the Final Court of Appeal’s decision to deny many of those who have been in Hong Kong for more than a decade the status of permanent residency.

The highly gendered phenomenon of migration from the Philippines to Hong Kong speaks of two countries (or geopolitical entities) with very different patterns of economic development and as a result creates the social impact of what Parreñas (2001) terms inequalities among women. We will next discuss the conditions that create such a global chain of care in the context of Hong Kong and the Philippines by focusing on the political and economic context within which Dorothy and her compatriots ended up in Hong Kong as domestic helpers.

### **1.2.3 Hong Kong and its demand for domestic services**

Hong Kong claims that it is ‘Asia’s World City’ – a brand that reflects its uncertain and ambiguous rhetoric in relation to the world and to the sovereign power that holds sway in this Special Administration of the People’s Republic of China. Almost two decades after the handover from

Britain to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, under the supposedly 'one country, two systems' framework of governance, Hong Kong maintains its border in the north, separating it from China, but in many other ways it is being integrated ever closer to the mainland. Tensions arise as Hong Kong struggles to come to terms with the incongruities that stem from the legacies of British colonial rule, which have constructed different ways of living from those in the rest of China under the Chinese Communist Party. Rights to assembly and demonstration are still enshrined in the laws of Hong Kong and its independent judicial system still manages to check on the powers of the executive branch of the government. This legacy of British colonial rule is an important basis that affords what this thesis discusses in terms of what is taking place in this uniquely positioned global city.

Accounts of Hong Kong's history prior to 1841 – the year British started its occupation - have been portrayed in different lights, depending on how Hong Kong's story is situated in relation to the narratives of the British or the Chinese empire. On the one hand, Hong Kong was described as a 'barren island, which will never be a mart of trade' by Lord Palmerston, the British Foreign secretary in 1842 (Welsh 1994 in Mathews, Ma, & Lui, 2008), while on the other hand, it was described as thriving (Liu, 1997) and as part of the larger commercial region of the Canton Delta with long traditions of international trade (Carroll, 2005). Whilst these historical accounts of Hong Kong prior to the arrival of the British appear to be contradictory, they might help to clarify the territorial claim of the British to Hong Kong, as what we come to know today at that time were a succession of acquisitions. Hong Kong Island was ceded to Britain through the Treaty of Nanking in 1841 and the Kowloon Peninsula was ceded to Britain under the Peking Convention 1861 after the first and second Opium Wars. The New Territories came under British control in 1898, with a leasehold arrangement of 99 years, through the Second Convention of Peking. It is thus worth bearing in mind that this timeline speaks of different junctures in

the historical development of Hong Kong and that each territorial acquisition added layers of complexity to its story.

Hong Kong Island's barrenness might have been overstated by Lord Palmerston, but in contrast to Kowloon Peninsula which was frequently mentioned in the Chinese historical records before the Qing Dynasty as the place where the emperor of the Southern Song Dynasty sought refuge in the 11<sup>th</sup> century from the Mongols or as a place for settlers from Guangdong and Fujian, or the New Territories with their established clans, the island remained mostly unpopulated with only a few villages scattered along its southern coast and it only managed to get its name in the late 1830s. At the time when the island found itself entangled in the intersection of two empires - the ascending British Empire and the declining Chinese Empire - it was a remote outpost of the Chinese Empire (Carroll, 2005). It was at the juncture when the island became British that Hong Kong underwent 'a new historical line of development' (Carroll, 2005). It was also due to the development of the island in the first few decades and its success that the successive acquisitions of other territories by the British were made feasible and possible. It is thus not an exaggeration to argue that what we know of Hong Kong today is largely a history of colonialism (Abbas, 1997b) with the help of events in China and across the globe (Carroll, 2005).

What has brought this city to what it is today is its location, which renders it strategic. It is situated at the mouth of the Pearl River, in between Guangzhou (Canton) and Macau; both were ports serving international trade with China under the Qing Dynasty under the restrictive 'Canton Trade System' where foreign traders were required to work through Chinese Hongs (middleman) with strict regulations (Wong, 2012) although in practice the Chinese generally turned a blind eye to breaches of these rules, including the selling of narcotics (Morris, 1997). Wong (2012) attributed the root cause of the First Opium war to the imbalance of trade whereby British demands for Chinese tea and silk resulted in a huge deficit that the British attempted to balance through selling opium, albeit illegally. The

war was waged to ‘protect British trading interest’, or for the ‘furtherance of British trade wherever the British wanted it’, which was ‘to be sustained by the threat of military violence’; at the time this was the political purpose of the Whig Government in London. The acquisition of Hong Kong Island also fulfilled the purpose of Captain Elliot, who started the war by firing at Chinese junks. His intent was to acquire a piece of China under British sovereignty where British traders were free from the dictates of the Chinese authorities under the Canton Trade System (Morris, 1997).

British sovereignty and its claimed impartial justice did not guarantee a prosperous port and colony. Carroll (2005) emphasises the importance of Chinese collaboration in the building of Hong Kong as a colony, especially for those who had incentives to venture outside the existing hierarchical frame in Chinese society, like the Tankas – a minority ethnic group who lived on boats and were despised by the local Cantonese and the overseas Chinese, who were looked down on as either victims or traitors. For many who moved to Hong Kong, colonial Hong Kong provided an alternative source of wealth and power. By rewarding these collaborators with special privileges through land grants or monopolies on certain trades, a Chinese business elite class was created that not only represented economic collaboration but also helped to pave the way for collaboration between the Chinese of Hong Kong and the colonial government. With the wealth they created, they also became the social leaders of the community by representing Chinese interests to the colonial government and they managed the affairs of the Chinese community by building hospitals and temples and organising their own District Watch. This class of Chinese business elites in Hong Kong made use of Hong Kong’s strategic position at the intersection of the two empires to distinguish themselves from their counterparts from China – on the one hand, they contributed to the nation-building of China, while on the other they were active members of the global British Empire by contributing to imperial war funds and organising and attending ceremonies for British royals. Colonialism in Hong Kong was not simply a story of domination and repression of the local population,

as there was little indigenous population to begin with; rather it involved a much more nuanced relationship between the colonial government, its Chinese collaborators and the many merchants, labourers and contractors, as well as pirates and vagabonds who were attracted to and self-selected to be in Hong Kong, as without them there would have been no colony.

The movement of people to Hong Kong has been entangled with the political situation in China as well as events beyond its shores. The treaties concluded at the end of the First Opium War forced open treaty ports beyond Canton that disrupted the local economies. With competition between British cotton and the Chinese products in the market place and many more treaty ports now open to foreign trade, Canton lost its hold on tea and silk, which resulted in unemployment (Carroll, 2005). The treaties also removed barriers to emigration and allowed foreign traders to tap directly into the Chinese labour market (Wolf, 1997); this was timely from the perspective of trades and industries that required labour, as England, France and parts of the United States had abandoned slavery and there was great demand for cheap labour. Many Chinese were driven to accept this work due to the economic crisis and the Taiping rebellion. Many of these labourers emigrated through Hong Kong in the 1850s to California, Peru, Australia, Cuba and Malaya while some stayed. Carroll (2005) argues that Chinese emigration through Hong Kong was the greatest contributor to Hong Kong's commercial prosperity as it subsequently attracted more wealthy Chinese. He even goes as far as to argue that the Taiping rebellion and the growth of Chinese communities overseas transformed Hong Kong from an outpost to the centre of a transnational trade network. In a way, the Treaty of Nanking not only gave Hong Kong a new line of historical development, it also firmly embedded Hong Kong in the nodes of Western imperialism and global capitalism. But it took the events in China to propel it onto its historical trajectory.

In its existence as a colony, not as official part of China, Hong Kong played the role of refuge or escape route for many who wanted to leave the



economic depravity and political turmoil of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century China (Carroll, 2005). It experienced a massive influx of refugees following periods of chaos and uncertainty on the mainland. Influxes of refugees were observed again in 1937 when the Sino-Japanese war started, between 1945-1947, the period of Civil War between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party, and between 1949-1952 after the Communist Revolution in China in 1949 (Cheung, 2003). At the end of 1954, the population had reached 2.3 million. This was a stark contrast to the barren island that Captain Charles Eilliot described in 1841. The population continues to grow to this day with the latest population figures being around seven million.

With little indigenous population to begin with, Hong Kong never consisted solely of just the Chinese and the Britons. In its earlier days, like many of the cities in the British Empire, the city was multi-ethnic (Carroll, 2005). Eurasians (who decreased in number but increased in prominence), Indians who served in the police force, the once powerful and philanthropic Parsee traders, Portuguese families from Macao, Jewish Sasson and Kadoorie families and other Europeans, Armenians and Americans were said to be interacting with each other (Carroll, 2005) and streets of Hong Kong in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were described as ‘filled with Britishners, Germans, Anglo-Indians, Chinese from Anton, Armenians from Calcutta, Parsees from Bombay and Jews from Baghdad’ (Mathews, 2011). Filipinos were among the first to arrive in Hong Kong. People from the Indian subcontinents – Sikhs, Bengalis and Pakistanis who worked as police, soldiers or ship guards and other Europeans like the Russians and French were also active in Hong Kong (Morris, 1997).

Hong Kong is where many pathways cross and a significant node of global flows of people and things (Knowles & Harper, 2009) and it has been so since its early days. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Hong Kong is where circuits of movements of people of at least two very different sorts converge. On the one hand there is the global circuit of highly educated professionals who

traverse borders as if they do not exist, for example the professionals, elites of developed countries (Knowles & Harper, 2009) and traders from the Indian subcontinent and Africa (Mathews, 2011); while on the other hand the ‘survival circuit’ (Sassen, 2002) of migrant workers who hold jobs that service the lifestyles of the elites of globalisation and fill the domestic roles left behind by local women who take up professional or service jobs (a viable option in Hong Kong as the minimum wage for local workers is much higher than the minimum allowable wages for domestic workers) brings to Hong Kong women from peripheral countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and to a lesser extent Sri Lanka and Nepal, who find themselves facing similar working conditions and global inequalities. It is in this space of convergence, of intersections of pathways, that Sassen (2001) suggests there emerges ‘a possibility of transnational politics’ for the disadvantaged and the marginal, as the alliances they form in the formation of the AMCB in Hong Kong (see chapter six for more details) and many protests they have organised have proved. It is this possibility of transnational politics, of the spaces that Hong Kong affords for such an emergence, that this thesis focuses on.

#### ***1.2.3.1 Domestic Services in Hong Kong***

Demand for domestic services in the territory has been present since its early days, although these days these privileges are only for those ones who can afford such services. There are records of domestic service jobs as early as in the 1870s in Hong Kong and the demand was met mostly by Chinese males as Hong Kong was considered a ‘frontier’, an area regarded as ‘unsuitable for women and children’ (Sankar, 1978, cited in Constable, 2007). Practices of slavery and bonded labour in some of the powerful lineages in the New Territories, an area that the British leased from China for 99 years after China lost the Second Opium War, were also other ways through which the demand for domestic services was met (Rubie S. Watson, 1991, Constable, 2007).

As the economic climate in Hong Kong continued to improve and the surge in population brought more women and children to the territory, the demand for domestic services in the territory continued to grow. The demand was increasingly met by Chinese women, who, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, were filling positions left by men who sought better paid employment (Sankar, 1978, cited in Constable 2007). Chinese women (who were referred to as *amah*) were the most popular domestic workers until the 1970s (Constable, 2007.)

This changed following the change in Hong Kong's economic structure. Facing the massive influx of refugees after the Chinese Civil War, the then colonial government of Hong Kong was forced into the provision of a public housing programme in 1954 and other elementary social provisions, which Cuthbert (1995) argued was a means through which the government got involved in the reproduction of labour power and which Cheung (2003) also argued provided the basis upon which light industries began to take off in the 1960s and fuelled the subsequent economic growth of an average of 10 per cent per annum between 1960 and 1980. By the 1990s finance and related services had overtaken manufacturing to be the main contributors to the local economy, as Hong Kong shifted from 'industrialism' to 'post-industrialism' (Cuthbert, 1995).

During this period, as well as its economic structure undergoing a transformation, Hong Kong's social demography also went through an equally striking transformation –women's participation in the workforce increased, family sizes shrank and the preference of local females to opt for jobs outside private households led to an increased demand for domestic help by the growing number of working and middle class families in the territory (Constable, 2007). The demand for domestic help was filled by the supply of women labourers from both Indonesia and the Philippines as evidenced by the population census and the statistics mentioned in the

earlier section. The Hong Kong government approved the policy<sup>3</sup> that kick-started the formal recruitment of domestic workers, mainly Filipinas, in 1973 (Ozyegin & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2008) and the number of Filipino domestic helpers has increased over the years (with the latest number being 114,000 in 2013.) While Hong Kong receives an increasing number of Filipinas in the territory as domestic workers, the Philippines has been sending people to work as migrant workers over the same period of time. Why are the Filipinos leaving in droves to find work in another country, leaving behind their families, often for a prolonged period of time?

#### **1.2.4 In the Philippines**

The Philippines is an archipelago of 7,000 islands and islets, situated between the South China Sea and the Philippines Sea (Tyner, 2009). The capital city of Manila is situated in Luzon, the largest and most populous island, which is a short flight away from Hong Kong. With its geographical terrain of islands and mountain barriers, which ‘foster regional consciousness and linguistic differences’ (Phelan 1959: 17-18, in Espiritu, 2005), there are more than 200 dialects that go back to eight major ethno-linguistic groups (Pido 1986: 17, in Espiritu, 2005) in the Philippines.

The islands and islets of the Philippines are grouped into three major regions. To the north is Luzon where the capital Manila is located. The Visayan Islands constitute the Central Philippines, including larger islands like Cebu and Leyte. To the south are many small islands, the Sulu archipelago that stretches towards Malaysia and the island of Mindanao. The diversity of the Philippines is manifested in the way in which groups come together on Sundays in Central, such that ‘it’s like a mini Philippines

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<sup>3</sup> Under the Hong Kong Immigration Guidelines for Entry into Hong Kong under the category of ‘Employment as Foreign Domestic Helpers’, it is explicitly stated that ‘This entry arrangement does not apply to:

- a. Chinese residents of the Mainland, the Macao SAR and Taiwan; and
- b. nationals of Afghanistan, Cambodia, Cuba, Laos, Korea (Democratic People's Republic of), Nepal and Vietnam.”

map' (quoting one of my informants, M), which echoes the observations made earlier by Filipino historians that 'the Filipinos do not think in terms of national boundaries but in regional oneness ... and in urban centres, Filipinos often segregate themselves by language group or regional origin' (Agoncillo and Guerrero 1970: 12; Pido 1986: 17, in Espiritu, 2005).

The strong regional emphasis has historical roots. The islands and islets that constitute the present Philippines were dispersed and largely autonomous settlements prior to the arrival of Spanish colonisers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Tyner, 2009). The 'divide and conquer' policy of the Spanish colonisers enacted through mobilising the manpower from one region against the revolts in another (Agoncillo and Guerrero 1970: 13 in Espiritu, 2005) by appealing to their 'regional pride' did not help in forming a 'Filipino national identity'. The Filipino national identity was only forged during their struggles for independence from Spanish colonial rule (Steinberg 1990: 36 in Espiritu, 2005) but the 'national consciousness' was subsequently weakened by the U.S rule after the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the Philippines-American War from 1899-1902, as the U.S. colonisers transformed the Philippines into a quasi-U.S society with its institutions, values and outlook (Constantino 1975: 308, in Espiritu, 2005). The continuous opposition by the English-language advocates and non-Tagalog-speaking communities to the governmental efforts to adopt Pilipino (a Tagalog-based language) as the national language (Sibayan 1991, in Espiritu, 2005) is perhaps also a manifestation of the 'regional mentality' and the influence of U.S. colonisation.

The U.S. colonialism also resulted in the overdependence of the Philippines' economy on a few cash crops that favoured the American businesses and landowners but reduced the amount of land peasants who could cultivate for their own subsistence. Peasants were forced to work on farms of cash crops as labourers, and were often landless and in debt (Tyner, 2009). Poverty in the Philippines is still a major issue with more

than a quarter of its population living below the official poverty line,<sup>4</sup> which is one of the major reasons why Filipinos migrate to work.

The institutional linkage developed between the Philippines and the United States, in the form of a labour system, also underpins the large-scale migratory system that continues to this day. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a colony of the United States, Filipinos who were considered as ‘nationals’ and were recruited to fill the shoes of Chinese and Japanese labours who had been sources of cheap labour before the Filipinos, but whose numbers were cut short after the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907 (Rodriguez, 2010). Filipinos were recruited, for example, to work in Hawaiian sugar plantations and their labour, Espiritu argues, was vital to the continuous success of the sugar industry (Espiritu, 2005). Filipino workers were found in many other sectors as their status as U.S nationals made them the favoured source of labour: some of them worked in urban centres as service workers and some even worked in the U.S Navy as stewards (Rodriguez, 2010)

Education was another route for emigration. Children of prominent Filipino families were also sent to the U.S for education after the passing of the Pensionado Act in 1903 with many of them returning to the Philippines to occupy key political positions that further enhanced the idea of the ‘American Dream’ (Rodriguez, 2010). Many also made their own way to the U.S for further education, which was encouraged by the U.S colonial governments through the U.S-style education system introduced in the Philippines (Tyner, 2009). The setting up of a public health system in the Philippines also encouraged many to train as nurses in the U.S (Rodriguez, 2010).

Emigration by the Filipinos was, in the earlier period, largely influenced by U.S policies and practices (Tyner, 2009) and these earlier influences and the

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<sup>4</sup> Source: The World Bank ; <http://data.worldbank.org/country/philippines>

institutional setup were instrumental in producing what Rodriguez (2010) argues is a ‘culture of migration’ among the Filipinos, which persists today. No longer a U.S colony, Filipinos continue to seek work abroad, and with the restructuring of the global economy, which we will discuss in more detail in chapter two, Filipinos are now found in all corners of the world; many of them end up in Hong Kong.

Lora arrived in Hong Kong in 1999. She left behind her two children: her 5-year-old daughter and her 4-year old son. When asked why she made the decision to come to Hong Kong to work, she said ‘life in the Philippines was hard’. She said she needed to earn money to pay for her children’s education.

Edward arrived in Hong Kong in 1991 when he was nineteen and he had been in Hong Kong for twenty-one years at the time of the interview. He joked: ‘I have spent more time in Hong Kong than in the Philippines’. He is one of the few thousand male domestic workers in Hong Kong. When asked why he came to Hong Kong, he said:

*‘I came from (what) I would say is a poor family in the Philippines and I came here (because) I have to support my two sisters who were at the time studying and also my mother who was also a migrant worker in the Middle East in Saudi Arabia but was forced to go back home because of the Kuwait and Iraq War. I have to assume the responsibility of providing for my family sending my sisters to universities, to support my family.’*

Dorothy became a domestic worker in Hong Kong in 1995 after searching for jobs at home for a year and being unable to find one. Pressured to support her family and her nieces, she took up the job of being a domestic worker for a Chinese family.

Dorothy, Edward and Lora came to Hong Kong in the 1990s, about two decades after the Hong Kong government approved the policy to formally recruit foreign domestic workers, and also about two decades after the ‘labour export’ policy of the Marcos government started in the Philippines

in 1974. It was believed that the ‘labour export’ policy would alleviate the balance of payment requirement through remittance sent by migrant workers and ease the rising underemployment and unemployment problems at home. The policy, which was intended to be a temporary solution, has now become a permanent policy of the Philippines government (Rodriguez, 2011). This is not only evident in the cases of Dorothy, Edward and Lora leaving their hometown two decades after the introduction of the ‘temporary labour export policy’; but also, the number of Filipino migrant workers has increased from 36,000 in 1975, when the programme started, to more than 4 million in 2009 (Gutierrez Iii, 2013). The once temporary measure has become “a vital lifeline of the nation” and migrant workers are hailed as the “new economic heroes” of the Philippines (AMC 1992 in Constable 2007: 33).

Women started to join the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) in the 1980s when the demand for care-workers in Canada and Great Britain grew due to an ageing population and the demand for domestic workers grew with more women participating in the local economies in Europe, Hong Kong and Singapore. The percentage of women migrant workers grew from 47.2 per cent in 1987 to 69 per cent in 2002 (Gutierrez Iii, 2013). Of those who arrived in Hong Kong in 2010, 98 per cent were women. This feminisation of migration has attracted attention in academia with research focused on women migrants (Kofman, 2004; Mahler & Pessar, 2001; Piper, 2006; Gaetano & Yeoh, 2010; Donato et al, 2006), and of particular relevance to this discussion on migrant domestic workers (Constable, 2007; Pande, 2013; Ueno, 2009; 藍, 2008 ; Ogaya, 2004.)

### **1.2.5 Migrant Domestic Workers**

Much of this research discusses the plight that these predominantly women domestic workers face under restrictive governmental policies in receiving countries such as the Kafala system in the Middle East (Pande, 2013), the issue of inequality in the policy and administrative frameworks towards the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong (Mok, 2008), the Foucauldian



disciplines exerted on them and their bodies by employers in different countries (Constable, 2007; 藍, 2008) and the active agency on the part of the migrant domestic workers to resist and better manage the situations they find themselves facing (Yeoh & Huang, 1998; Constable, 2007; Ueno, 2009). Whilst Yeoh & Huang (1998). Constable's earlier work in 2007 and Ueno's discussion (2009) focus more on the tactics deployed by the individual migrant domestic workers to counteract the restrictions placed on them by their employers. Lately the emergence of organised resistance in the forms of unions, protests and rallies in Hong Kong has caught the attention of many researchers. Sim (2009) discusses the relationship between the Indonesian state and the Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong as the Indonesian state has found itself facing more demands from its citizens, in particular more protection and a say in the policies affecting their lives. Constable (2009), in her observation of the migrant domestic workers' participation in the protest against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Hong Kong in 2005 (a WTO conference was taking place in Hong Kong), discusses the curious case of migrant domestic workers becoming organised and active in this 'post-colonial global city' and the 'neoliberal space of exception' that takes place in Hong Kong but not anywhere else in the region, for example Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia or the Middle East and Gulf States, despite the equally sizable number of migrant domestic workers in these countries.

The frame through which these migrant domestic workers link the plight they face with global neoliberalism and fight for their rights in the language of universal human rights has also been discussed in the scholarship (Elias, 2010; Mahler & Pessar, 2001). There is however a distinct difference between movements that are led by migrants themselves and those led by locals that advocate on behalf of the migrants – either middle class NGOs in the case of Malaysia and Singapore (Piper, 2006b; Elias, 2010) or church groups as in the case of South Korea (Kim, 2011). Hsia (2009) traces the development of the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body (AMCB) in Hong Kong, a transnational coalition of many grassroots migrant organisations.

These grassroots organisations are formed by the migrants themselves, rather than having the middle-class NGOs run/managed by locals to advocate for them. The migrants, through these organisations, advocate policies for their own community.

Although there has been research on the protests of some of the more political grassroots organisations (Constable, 2009) and the development of the alliance of transnational migrant organisations in Hong Kong (Hsia, 2009; Rodriguez, 2013), there has been little research on how these organisations work on a day-to-day basis (except Kennelly, 2008), how they negotiate as users of public spaces in Central and the everyday lives ('every Sunday lives' – as everyday is not an appropriate term in this case as they only gather in Central on a weekly basis) of those people who are involved in these movements. These organisations are visible through the banners they hang along railings on Sundays, in Central in Hong Kong and through the activities they organise. Who are these people and what are they doing exactly in these spaces every Sunday? These might be benign questions that have increasing global importance, as Constable (2009) neatly summarises in her article about these politically active migrant domestic workers that it "adds a new twist to the by now classic feminist critique of domestic/public, private/political dichotomies (in which women were once assumed to occupy a feminized private and domestic sphere), demonstrating that the domestic transcends and transforms the public, political, transnational, and global".

### **1.3 The Production of Space**

#### **1.3.1 Sundays in Central**

At the same time, the phenomenon of these Sunday gatherings is also important in terms of a discussion of 'space' and 'place'. The activities and gatherings of the Filipinos in Central, Hong Kong on Sundays have been interpreted from different angles and evolved over time. Abbas (1997) earlier questioned whether Sunday Central is considered a diversion from a

‘space of power’ to a ‘space of pleasure’ and dismissed the creation of ‘Little Manila’ by the Filipinos on Sundays merely as audiences to the spectacles of power. He dismissed it based on the grounds that the spaces ‘returned to normal’ on Mondays and hence no contestation has taken place – it might be true that the physical traces of the gatherings and activities of the Filipino community disappear once all of the migrant domestic workers return to their respective employers’ houses but their regular appearance on Sundays on fixed spots in that space has created a mental map among the Filipino community, as Edward excitedly stated when asked to describe Central on Sundays:

*“Central is like a micro Philippines on Sundays. The community is also divided based on where they come from in the Philippines. We know where to find people from the northern or southern Philippines, the Luzon etc.”.*

This ‘micro-Philippines’ does not disappear come Monday; it is continuously re-created on Sundays and public holidays and shared among the members in the community as a living space. They do not simply admire the symbols of power as Abba (1997) suggests; they create their own spaces through their own actions.

Law (2001) discusses the active creation of spaces by the Filipino women through mass-leisure activities and home cooking. She examines this conscious invention and construction of ‘homes’ in Central on Sundays by linking the bodily experiences of these migrant workers to urban culture and power relations in the city. Rather than using the language of the Foucauldian resistance, she provides an alternative mapping of material cultures and sensory experiences in interpreting the gatherings and activities observed in Central every Sunday. Contrary to Abbas’s dismissal of the activities of the Filipinos in Central on Sundays as ‘no contest’, Law (2001) argues that the olfactory aesthetics of ‘Little Manila’ on Sundays disrupt the dominant visual meaning of Hong Kong’s spaces of architecture. Law (2001) elaborates that the simple act of ‘eating’ Filipino food in Central becomes a productive and self-conscious pursuit as it is entangled in webs

of culture, economics and politics when it is viewed from the perspective of how it is contested in Hong Kong homes. The claims of an odour of Filipino food and the prohibition of Filipino food in employers' houses become issues of power within the household and make the presence of Filipino food in a public space on Sundays even more conspicuous. Law argues (2001) that through the conscious effort of the Filipinos on Sundays to invent their homes, and through the material cultures such as food, letters and photographs that are brought into Central on Sundays, they articulate and negotiate relations between the home and away, the dominant and subordinate, and the power and resistance.

While Law's observation focuses on the everyday practices of the Filipino community on Sundays in Central, Lai, (2010) focuses on the cultural performances, which she argues are central to migrant domestic workers' activism. Lai (2010) argues that these cultural performances, which take place in between protest speeches and rallies, present a common stage for public protests that weave together a community-in-the-making. They also help in the formation of a collective identity from one of maids who are subjected to particular treatment and discrimination in their host societies to one of people fighting for their right to the collective good. They also serve the purpose of recruiting members who might not be supportive of the more 'radical' actions of rallies and demonstrations but are drawn to the entertainment and perhaps find resonance with the messages conveyed in these performances. These cultural performances are also important to the organisations themselves as they present opportunities for members to be trained and acquire talents such as dancing and singing and leaders to practise skills such as choreography and management. They are also tools for building alliances. Groups are invited to participate in each other's events and celebrations and the demand for cultural performances is so high that one of my informants, Dolly, a leader of a Filipino Cultural Organisation 'Organic Clan', told me: 'I could not keep up with all the appointments; when they kept on pushing I have to say I'm sorry.' At the same time, these performances render conditions and

suffering that are a problem, mostly confined to individual households. Lai argues that very much like the mothers in Argentina whose silent weekly walking around the national capital's central square to protest about their children's disappearance, these public performances by the migrant domestic workers, whose problem of public invisibility is acute, breaks the boundaries between private and public. These performances also break down the divide between activist participation and passive onlookers and thus contribute to the creation of a collective identity and the community-in-the-making. No doubt these cultural performances are important to migrant activism, as Lai argues. There are, however, nuances in terms of how these cultural performances are received by the different groups occupying different spots in Central. One of my informants, Yan, related her story: "when we practised in "Bus Thirteen" (a place near City Hall in Central with a bus stop for bus number thirteen and therefore named by the Filipino community as "Bus Thirteen"), there were groups who were close to the consulate (it means they are supportive of the government in general); they would turn their loud speakers so loud that we could not hear our music when we practised". "What do you do then?" "Oh, we memorise the melodies by heart."

The materiality and the close proximity among the different groups in Central are also crucial factors in making performing for different alliances and groups possible. As Dolly told me: "Organic Clan is always in a rush. Maybe one hour of practice and then perform and then transfer to another performance, another venue and another event". The discussions about the phenomenon of the Sunday gatherings by the Filipinos did not focus very much on the materiality of the space of Central itself. The questions about why Central, and how the spaces in Central, are occupied by different groups of the Filipino community have been little researched. Memories of lost spaces in Central, such as the Blake Pier (which I had never heard of before an informant told me about it) and the Star Ferry Terminal talk of a place that has been actively engaged by the Filipino community throughout the years. Their practice of using these spaces changes as the landscape of

Central is transformed over time. The material culture that Lai (2010) mentioned of letters and photograph reflects the changes in communication technology as Facebook becomes the dominant means of communication among the migrant domestic workers and with their families back home. The almost ubiquitous free WIFI connections in public spaces in Central help with this. At one of the anniversary celebrations for the Mission for Migrant Workers (one of the NGOs that have been supporting the migrant workers' community in Hong Kong since 1982), in which many booths providing different services to the migrant workers were set up in Central in 2014, the computer terminals that were set up for migrants to communicate with their families back home were hardly ever occupied. The migrant workers instead queued up for blood-pressure checks, Chinese medicine and free drinks. The changing landscape of Central and the changing ways in which the spaces are occupied and used by Filipino migrant workers is what I wish to explore and discuss further in my thesis. It not only brings forth the bigger issues of the globalisation of domestic work, the feminisation of migration and migrant activism, but it also contributes to the dynamic understanding of the concept of spaces – ironically by making the seemingly temporary yet permanent phenomenon of the Sunday gatherings by the Filipinos in Central, Hong Kong the focus of the discussion.

These gatherings, however, have attracted their fair share of negative reaction from the locals. Constable (2007) has given a detailed account of the 'Battle of Chater Road' through tracing the exchange of words in the local press on this issue. The battle was sparked off when Hongkong Land, a major land owner in Central Hong Kong, suggested that the government reopen Chater Road to traffic in 1992, citing reasons such as "environmental problems" posed by the influx of domestic workers to the area, "undesirable activities" such as gambling and hawking and "continual complaints" from their tenants, who made racist claims that the domestic workers' presence was impacting their business. This 'battle' brought forth some support for Hongkong Land's suggestion to tackle the issues. Many, mostly the local Chinese, felt that the foreign domestic workers

'commandeer' Central such that inner Central has become out of bounds on Sundays, whilst some others, mostly Western expatriates, argued that the square is open to everyone (Constable 2007: 3-6). Hongkong Land's suggestion to open up its car parks for the domestic workers to gather in was met with fierce criticism.

In the midst of this exchange of words, Filipinas continued to be present in these spaces just as they always had been. Now their presence has become an accepted part of the urban landscape in Hong Kong (although persistent discrimination is experienced by the migrant workers from some members of the public) with its own spatial organisation logic – groups are organised according to regional and dialect groups and the open area of HSBC is one of the areas occupied by the Filipinas every Sunday. They are in these spaces creating their own 'habitus' – being in Central every Sunday to be with their friends, and to play, laugh and eat en masse, creates a sense of who they are and through their actions, not words, they make it known to all, including the land owners, that this is their place on Sundays. Their actions echo Tilley's (2006) argument that 'an essential part of the process of making self and social identity is non-verbal' and 'these material discourses of identity may reflect, invert, mediate, or serve to create their own performative contexts for experience and understanding in which people reveal themselves to them and are frequently surprised at the result'.

What does the phenomenon of the Sunday gatherings by the Filipinos say about this area called 'Central'? How do we understand this place and this phenomenon as a place?

### **1.3.2 Trialectics of Space**

Harvey (2009:134) suggests a two-dimensional framework: the first dimension constitutes three distinct ways to understand space and time - absolute, relative and relational; the second dimension is derived from Lefebvre's, (1991) trialectics of space - spatial practices, conceived space and lived space. He argues that these different ways of understanding

space, when kept in tension with each other, are what constitutes space. This theoretical framework has seen little application in the discussion of any real spaces so far, not least in terms of the temporary yet permanent occupation of spaces by a migrant community whose continuous presence is precarious and uncertain. It nevertheless provides a framework for the discussion of the phenomenon of the Sunday gatherings by the Filipino migrant workers in relation to space and place and an exploration of Central as a space with all its complexities.

What follows describes how the discussion of the phenomenon of the Sunday gatherings by the Filipinos in Central Hong Kong would fit into this framework.

**Absolute Space:** Harvey (2009) categorises the immovable, fixed, pre-existing space of the Newtonian and Cartesian nature under it. This absolute space helps to identify physically the individuality and uniqueness of persons, things and processes in its unique locations and when extended socially, it helps to exert the rights of the exclusionary space of private property on land. For our discussion about Central, this will entail the descriptions of the area, the process of its making, and the private property rights that have been exercised by different parties in allowing/disallowing accessibility by the migrant workers. This discussion will also extend to the ways in which the property right is exercised through restrictions imposed on the users by the different parties who claim to have rights to control these spaces and the tension and resistance to the imposition restricting users' claims to the city.

**Relative:** instead of the uniqueness and exactness of the absolute space relative space is understood by multiple matrices depending on the phenomenon, the observer and the frame of reference through which this 'relativity' is viewed. Relative space deals with motions and processes and thus it is not just about space but also about time. Harvey (2009) has suggested the hyphenated term 'relative space-time' to capture the



inseparable nature of time and space in the discussion of relative space-time. The frame of reference is an important part of the discussion of relative space-time and in our discussion regarding the phenomenon in Central, it is proposed that the framework of the relative unequal development of the world economy, which drives the Filipinos to look for work in Hong Kong, and the economic development of Hong Kong, which generates the demand for domestic services, will be used to answer partially the question of 'why are they here in Hong Kong'.

Relational: Harvey (2009) argues that in relational space, spaces fuses with time to become 'spacetime', as 'spacetime' is embedded within processes and matters as the 'relational spacetime' crystalises into an event or a permanence, as Whitehead (1916 from Harvey, 2009: 137) calls it, out of the field of flows surrounding it, across time. This relational spacetime is open and fluid. It is the realm of hopes and dreams. The relational spacetime in our discussion of Central will entail the social networks of the migrant communities, the alliances of the grassroots organisations, as well as their dreams and hopes of a better future for themselves. It is also about the memories of their time in parts of Central that have disappeared as the landscape of Central changes.

The second dimension that Harvey (2009) proposes, which he largely bases on Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad, has been adopted as the framework to discuss the 'Pier Saga', which took place in Central, Hong Kong, when two of the piers, Star Ferry Terminal (which was frequently cited as a 'lost space' by my informants) and Queen's Pier were demolished in 2006 and 2007 (Ng et al, 2010). The demolition of these two piers for further reclamation was met by strong civic resistance as the tension between the spaces conceived by the government (further reclamation for more revenue) and the lived spaces of the community (the people who use them in their daily lives) erupted into protests and fights by various cultural and social groups for their conservation (Ng et al, 2010). Whilst the authors emphasise the emergence of a 'lived space' after World War II of the

Chinese community, whose rights and claims were denied in the ‘Edwardian City of Victoria’ (the current-day Central area) prior to the war, they have not captured the ‘lived space’ of the Filipino community who also had their ‘lived space’ around the Star Ferry Terminal and areas surrounding Queen’s Pier prior to their demolition. The selective emphasis on ‘lived space’ is of course inevitable in any writing as we can only ever have partial truth, as Clifford famously claims, but this omission of the ‘lived space’ of any community in any representation of space such as in writing often leads to the oblivion of their presence when processes of the production of space (such as in the process of public consultation for any changes in urban planning) are concerned. When asked about the massive changes that are being planned to the landscape of the public spaces in Central, Edward said:

*“I hope that the plan in the future to develop layers of landscape and parks and pavements from Hong Kong Bank (the name for the HSBC Headquarters Building in the Filipino community) to the pier will not (be) materialise... it will be a sad situation to see where we can no longer (be) in places we used to gather and we will suddenly be under the bridges or under these new structures, floating footbridges or parks, parks on the top of the building, parks on top of the malls or parks on top of car parks (and) things like this”.*

The intricate interlinks of Lefebvre’s spatial triad, as illustrated in the above discussion, show that rather than following Harvey’s two-dimensional framework strictly, which he himself claims has limited revelatory power if they are treated as fixed classifications, these different concepts of spaces are analytical tools with which I can approach the phenomenon of the Sunday gatherings in Central by the Filipinos to reflect its multidimensionality.

Spatial practice is lived directly and gives the structure of everyday activities within the wider socio-economic context (Ng et al, 2010). It is also the space perceived by us; spaces experienced through our senses (Harvey, 2009). In our discussion, it will entail the practices of the Filipino

community in occupying public spaces on Sundays, the ways in which different groups are scattered around Central, the tactics they use in dealing with elements, the different ways in which spaces are experienced and used and the different activities that take places within the area of Central. The tension between the space conceived by urban planners and various authorities having claims to various spaces, both public and private in Central, and the lived space of the Filipino community on Sundays, such as the ‘Battle of Chater Road’, will also be discussed in conjunction with the hopes, dreams and memories of the activist Filipino community.

#### **1.4 Structure of the Thesis**

As the discussion of the complex and intertwined process and relationships of globalisation and migration and the discussion of space and place unfold in the next few chapters, the following broad and basic questions serve as an organisational structure for the thesis and guideposts in the journey I undertook as an anthropologist into the world of Filipino migrant domestic workers and their activism:

- 1) Who are they? Why are they in Hong Kong?
- 2) Why are they in Central every Sunday? What exactly are they fighting for?
- 3) What is Central about?
- 4) What do they do in Central every Sunday? Why is it important to them?
- 5) Why has coming together in Central on Sundays made a difference?

Chapter two paves the way for further discussion in the subsequent chapters by answering the questions of ‘why are these Filipino women, many of them overqualified, working as domestic workers in Hong Kong’ in the globalisation context of the convergence of circuits of people movement in global cities. It also discusses the role that the Philippines state, recruitment agencies, and the women themselves play in developing and sustaining the circuit of women to Hong Kong and the common issues faced by these

women in the processes. It introduces the main plight that many of these Filipino migrant workers face and the journeys some of them have taken to realise that they had to make changes by fighting for their own rights. It is also about some of the activists' initiation into political activism.

Chapter three then situates the language of rights deployed by the network of transnational migrant workers' movements in Hong Kong in relation to the legal framework in Hong Kong and to the unenforceability of the human rights regime in practice. This chapter aims to examine how the language of rights is being used to bring the plight of the migrant workers to the attention of the public and how successful (or not) they are in constructing a public that is sympathetic to their cause. This chapter links universal human rights to the specific problems faced by the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. It also paves the way for the central argument of this thesis, which is that through the migrant workers' presence in the physical space of Central their problems are made visible and it is in the physical space of Central that their collective subjectivity, which underpins the transnational migrant workers' movement, is formed. And it is only through their fighting for their rights in the physical space of Central that the space is public.

Chapter four moves on to the discussion of Central as a place. It contrasts the dominant narrative of Central as the space of global capital and of consumerist spectacle with the many protests organised by the migrant domestic workers that also take place in Central. This chapter paints Central as a contested terrain – which opens up spaces for an alternative understanding to the dominant narrative of Central. By adopting the methodology of a phenomenological walk to describe the three different marches in which I participated, I examine the ambiguous power of the police in relation to the protesters, and how the seemingly open and liberal governance of the Hong Kong police changed its attitude when a more threatening crowd took to the streets on the 17th anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong back to Chinese sovereignty.

Chapter five examines the spatial practices of and tactics deployed by the Filipino progressive community to adapt to the changes in the landscapes of Central and reveals the nuanced social relationships and contestation of spaces amongst the members of the Filipino community. By looking at their ‘off-stage’ experiences in producing cultural performances, which are common features of Central on Sundays, and their encounters with the representatives of the authorities in this process, I adopt the analytical frame of rhythmanalysis to examine the tensions that arise between the dominant abstract space and the often marginalised lived space. I discuss the negotiations that took place between various social actors and the creative alternative ways of appropriating spaces that are used by the Filipino migrant workers to illustrate that the domination of abstract space is not absolute. Alternative social relations emerge in the cracks of the abstract space, overcoming the fragmentation, tendency to homogenise and emphasis on exchange values that are the characterisation of abstract space and these alternatives - the ‘extra-everyday’ that arises out of the linear and cyclical repetition of everyday life is the beginning of something hopeful – of alternative social relations that form the basis of a Filipino progressive community in Hong Kong, which I illustrated with the case of the organised relief efforts in response to the aftermath of typhoon Yolanda, which swept through the Philippines in November 2014. Landscape in this case, i.e. the Central on Sundays, is constantly being reenacted and renegotiated between the lived and the abstract and contested among the different members of the Filipino community.

In chapter six, by engaging in an ethnographic portrayal of the transnational migrants movement through describing the development of NGOs, the grassroots organisations and individuals (the majority of them are migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong) that come to be involved in the movement, I attempt to paint a picture of the complex and interwoven networks that are constitutive and constituted within the movement and demonstrate the networks’ multidirectional and multidimensional growth, which I call ‘rhizomisation’. This growth, however, is not unhindered as

migrants' support for mass actions differ between the issue-specific campaigns and that of the 'national ones' such as human rights violation in the homeland. I also illustrate with the example of mobilisation for mass action for Erwiana (an Indonesian woman who suffered abuse from her employer and subsequently won the case against her employer in Court with the support of the migrants network) that the network of transnational migrant movements is a hybrid space of the urban and the cyber – but this differs from Castells' idea in that the primacy of the urban is emphasised. Lastly, I argue that the transnational migrants' movement in Hong Kong is underpinned by what I call 'practising hope' – in one's direct or indirect encounter with injustice in the socio-political structure; in the political awakening that the personal is political; in the identification of oneself as part of a collective and a community - and the success of issue-specific campaigns and the utopian hope for a better future sustain the movement through it.

In the last chapter, I conclude with my major argument that access to public spaces is important for marginalised sections of the society, as in the context of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong for three major reasons: as sites of resistance, for the formation of new social relations and the beginning of a new form of politics. I also attempt to extrapolate my argument to discuss how these could be incorporated into the concept of the 'right to the city'. I also examine the limitations of my research and explore areas for future research in this concluding chapter.

## **1.5 Methodology**

Meeting Dorothy on the street corner of Chater Road was how I started my fieldwork in the Filipino migrant community. After two brief assignments as a photographer for events organised by the community, Dorothy referred me to the Mission for Migrant Workers (Mission for short) and I started to work as a volunteer at the Mission. It is through the network of the Mission that I met my informants. Some of them were volunteers themselves and some of them worked with the Mission or other non-governmental

organisations (NGO) that advocate rights for migrant workers. Many of the insights were gained through working as a volunteer in the Mission in various capacities.

It is also with the help of the Mission that I organised workshops and invited migrant domestic workers to share their stories in Central. The workshops were designed on the one hand for the participants to explore Central through a treasure hunt and on the other hand to tell their own stories in Central through drawings and story-telling. Twenty-five informants participated in the workshops and structural interviews were conducted to understand their routines in Central.

I also participated in many of the activities organised by the community – protest marches, the formation of organisations, anniversary celebrations etc. Many of the informants I met became my friends on Facebook and their continued presence (albeit in cyber space) throughout my writing-up period also helped me to keep up with their latest campaign activities. This proved important, as one of the major events of the migrant domestic workers movement in Hong Kong – the campaigning and mobilisation for Erwiana (more in chapter six) - took place well into my writing-up period. I was never completely cut off from my field. Some of the information I managed to gather was through email interviews after my return to London.

Materials I gathered during my fieldwork such as pamphlets, posters, primer, messages on social media that are shared publicly, newspaper reports, and documents from relevant government departments are also used in the discussion. A lot more of my discussion, however, is based on the interviews with my informants. On top of the twenty-five structured interviews, I also conducted ten long interviews with grassroots leaders and people who work in various NGOs; these interviews lasted for one to two hours. The conversations I had with different informants while hanging out with them on Sundays in Central were recorded in my field notes. For those informants that are on Facebook, we have up to about fifty mutual friends –

this perhaps indicates the size of my network of informants in the field. All of their names have been changed in the thesis except for ones that are already identified in the public domain (newspapers) or as a result of their roles in particular organisations.

Visual technology played an important part in the fieldwork. I was invited to be the photographer for two annual events: the Human Rights Day and International Migrants Day (please refer to chapter four). Through these I was introduced to the community and this paved my entry into the field and made my presence with cameras a non-issue throughout the fieldwork. By showing the photos taken for the events, I was able to gather the views of my informants about participating in protests in Hong Kong (see chapter four). Photography among the Filipino migrant workers is a common practice with the ubiquitous mobile phones that come with the function of a camera. I was often asked to be the photographer for their group photos or to take part in the group photo sessions for their various functions and activities. Photography in the field was an interactive and dynamic process.

I was also invited to take part in a video production project in which collaboration and negotiation with different social actors in the migrant community became incorporated in the process of knowledge production (please refer to chapter three) and reflects upon the diverse approaches by which migrant workers' situations could be presented and represented. Visual technologies therefore move beyond being tools and become a methodology through which collaboration, negotiation and interaction with the Filipino migrant community are incorporated in this research project.

Photographs taken during the fieldwork are also important records. They not only provide evidence of the phenomenon on which this thesis focuses, but also represent the spaces and places I attempt to describe in words; they convey what words cannot. Photographs are embedded in the text also with the intent to 'evoke worlds' and to situate the migrant workers' embodied experiences in a specific location. Thus the photographs presented in the



thesis range from the realist to the expressive (Edwards, 1997), depending on the context of the particular discussion. Whilst some photographs embedded in the text are there for an explicit purpose, some are there to ‘evoke worlds’, as an attempt at non-linear representation and to bring the readers closer to the space and place of the particular situation.

Photography is inevitably influenced by the photographer’s thoughts, feelings and preferences and as photographers always work from a specific and individual perspective, the ‘representation of the visual’ is thus argued to be subjective (James & Booth, 2000). Just as it is argued that ethnography and written text are ‘partial truth’ (Clifford, 1986), photography and ‘its fragmenting nature’ do not claim or desire wholeness but instead stress the minutiae. It is in the realisation and full acknowledgement that ‘what looks insignificant to one way of perceiving and thinking maybe singularly significant to another’ (da Silva & Pink, 2004) that this thesis is written.

I do not pretend to be an objective and neutral observer without prejudices and biases. Part of the thesis is about my encounters with the people, the spaces of their social construction and my presence in them. It is in short, a personal journey through a landscape socially constructed by the migrant workers’ movement network in Hong Kong, and hopefully through describing this journey and the encounters I had, I have done justice to the migrant workers, who despite all odds, continue to fight for rights for themselves and others like them.

## **Chapter 2 Filipinas for Export**

*'The "labour export programme" has been in place for 30 years - not a single family in the Philippines has not had migrant workers in the family or some kind of connections to them.'* (Yvonne, interview, 11 Jan 2013).

### **2.1 Introduction**

It was my third week volunteering at the Mission for Migrant Workers (Mission for short), an outreach programme of St. John's Cathedral with its office located on the only plot of freehold land in Hong Kong, now known as the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong (HKSAR, Hong Kong for short), in Central, the central business district. The Mission was founded in 1982 to serve then as well as now mainly Filipinos, although it has dropped 'Filipino' from its original name. My task for the day was to capture details of each client's case in a database, which could then be used to generate a statistical report on the nature of the help that the Mission provides to its clients.

I recall going to different PCs in the office to ascertain whether the programme for the database (a VBA programme embedded within Microsoft Excel, and tailor-made by another volunteer at the Mission) worked. Sometimes the programme could not be opened, sometimes the programme crashed the whole PC and sometimes there were many error messages popping up and we did not know what to do with them. After a few trials, I finally found myself working in a space next to the pantry, behind the cubicle for the office manager with just enough space for a stool to be squeezed into it. The monitor took up almost all of the space on the desk and there was barely any space left for anything else. The keyboard was placed on a tray beneath the desk surface and there was just enough space to put a mouse right next to the monitor. The clients' case files were put on my lap. I went through the files one by one.

The clients in the case files I went through and the clients I managed to meet while volunteering at the Mission were all working as domestic workers in Hong Kong. All of them were women. They came to the Mission, during my fieldwork, usually to file complaints to the Philippines Consulate in Hong Kong to ask for a refund of the placement fees that were illegally charged by their placement agencies. Many of these fees become loans that they have to repay through their monthly salaries in Hong Kong. Other cases were related to the termination of employment contracts. It is not unusual to find luggage or suitcases placed at the entrance to the Mission office, on the third floor of an extension building within the compound of St. John's Cathedral (which is situated on top of a small hill in Central). It takes determination to first go up the hill, then climb up the three flights of stairs and then another few steps up again to step into the Mission office, not to mention to do that with luggage or suitcases. Those who come with their luggage or suitcases need places to stay as their contracts with their employers who provide accommodation while they are in Hong Kong have been terminated and they have nowhere else to turn to before heading home or while their cases go through the legal process.

How did these women end up here? What made them leave their hometowns to find work as domestic helpers in Hong Kong when many of them are clearly over-qualified for their jobs? What does this say about the racialised and gendered nature of the transnational labour movement for domestic services in the context of globalization and global cities? What are the roles of the Philippines state, the placement agencies and the women themselves in developing and sustaining the circuit of women from the Philippines to Hong Kong? What are some of the common issues these women face collectively as domestic workers in Hong Kong? Is going to the Mission the only way for them to find some sort of justice for their situations? What are they doing collectively to make a difference? These are some of the questions I will attempt to answer in this chapter.

## 2.2 Globalisation and the convergence at the global cities

There are various ways of categorising the general approaches to studying migration. Depending on the perspective that the approach takes, there are macro, meso and micro levels of analyses. At the top is the macro level of analysis, which documents the macro-processes that control the flows of migration (Sassen, 1988), the best-known ones being the structural approach of dependency theory and the world-system model (Parreñas, 2001). Next is the meso-level analysis of institutions and social networks in the social processes of migration and settlement. The neoclassical economic model is the micro-level analysis, which focuses on individuals and is critiqued to have ignored the macro processes and social networks involved in the decision-making processes of the individual (more details on this in the previous chapter).

Whilst these approaches present different perspectives on the understanding of migration, they are mostly gender-neutral, and fail to bring forth the gendered aspects of migration processes (Anuja Agrawal, 2006). Men and women do not experience migration in the same way. Parreñas (2001) argues that although the macro and meso level analyses have provided complimentary perspectives on the processes of migration, another level of analysis that not only takes into account the macro structures at work, the social processes that each individual is subjected to, but also the agency conferred on them by the very situations and circumstances they find themselves in should also be undertaken. She argues that it is necessary to examine the migration processes from the experiences of the subject and the dislocation they face. Dislocation captures the structural location inhabited by them: “racialized women, low-wage workers, highly educated women from the Philippines, and members of the secondary tier of the transnational workforce in global restructuring” (Parreñas, 2001: 31). It also incorporates structural processes, the institutional transformation and shifts in social relations, and the experiences and resistance of the subjects in the process of migration. I will be following Parreñas’s subject-level analysis to answer the questions posed above.

There are two fundamental questions that we need to ask to contextualise Filipinas' presence in Hong Kong as domestic workers. The first is the direction of the migration: why are women leaving the Philippines to work in Hong Kong? And the second is related to the nature of the jobs they undertake: why do these women work as domestic workers in Hong Kong? In order to answer these two questions, the framework of globalisation is necessary in our discussion.

### **2.3 Philippine's economy**

The latest Economist report (Economist, 2014) on the state of the Philippines' economy seems to paint a rosy picture. Foreign direct investment (FDI) has tripled since 2010 when Benigno Aquino was elected as the president. The remittances sent back by the Filipino workers abroad steadily increased from 1998 to over USD 25 billion in 2013. The remittances accounted for 10% of the GDP while the 'surge' in FDI accounted for only about 1.4% of the national income. The country's reliance on remittance cannot be overstated. Not only does it constitute 10% of GDP, remittance also helps to fuel the growth in both investment and private consumption. Although GDP grew from an average of 4.7% between 2008 and 2012 to 7.3% in 2013, the number of Filipinos leaving behind their families to work abroad is still on the rise. In a seminar on the context of the Filipino migration, Alan, an NGO worker in Hong Kong advocating for migrant workers' rights, stated, "for the past few years, the number of Filipinos who are leaving the Philippines has increased. In 2010, everyday there is a record of 2500, everyday. By 2013, it has increased to 4,484. So in only 3 years, the number of people leaving the Philippines to work abroad, (almost) doubled" (Seminar, 16 August 2014).

Alan used another figure to illustrate how reliant the whole country is on the remittance from migrant workers. He stated that, "there are now 12 million Filipinos scattered all over the world... if you have 12 million Filipinos and just assume that each migrant worker has two dependents on her/him being a migrant worker, that is 36 million Filipinos... and the total population of

the Philippines is 100 million, so it's like a third of the whole population of the Philippines is either a migrant worker or dependent on migration" (Seminar, 16 August 2014). Although the number of Filipinos overseas does not directly translate into the number of remittance transactions, as it varies depending on the nature of the migration, the gender of the worker and their own individual economic circumstances, this still paints a general picture of the heavy reliance on remittances in the country. This dependence on remittances from overseas Filipino workers (OFW) has seen the Philippines state, the private recruitment agencies and to a certain extent the workers themselves create, manage and sustain a continuous circuit of Filipino workers who generate the flow of remittances from various parts of the world to the Philippines (Guevarra, 2010). How did the Philippines end up being a remittance-dependent economy? How do we understand the Philippines' labour-export policy in the context of globalisation?

The concept of globalisation has gained popularity in the past few decades although the phenomenon of globalisation, Steger (2003) argues, as a set of social processes that enhance worldwide interdependence and global connection, is not new but has a deep historical root that goes as far back as when small bands of hunters and gatherers moved and settled in different parts of the world and has continued throughout history with different intensities. The concept of globalisation that has been extensively discussed focuses on the contemporary period starting in the 1970s, when globalisation is constructed in neoliberal language and becomes the hegemonic concept for understanding the political economy of international capitalism. It becomes a powerful tool to legitimise deregulation, liberalise markets and, at the cost of disempowering trade unions (and thus workers), emphasize competitiveness and entrepreneurship – in short, to usher in what is now commonly known as globalising neoliberalism. Whilst the world catches onto the frenzy of 'globalisation', Sassen (2002) argues that discussions about globalisation are often about hypermobility, of the effects and impacts of information technology. The emphasis is on the instant communication, the electronic markets, the compression of space and time

(famously coined by Harvey) or what Chang and Ling (2011) refer to as the 'technomuscular capitalism (TMC) as if these constant flows of people, information, images, capital and ideas as described in Appadurai's (1996) five 'scapes': "ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes" (1996:33) make places irrelevant or do not matter anymore.

The dominant narrative of globalisation, as Sassen argues (2002), emphasises the upper circuit of globalisation - the highly educated professionals who traverse borders as if they do not exist - but is oblivious to the other circuit of globalisation –the movement of many migrant workers who hold jobs in services supporting the lifestyles of professionals and experts, the elites of globalisation in global cities. These are the places in which some of the global economy's key functions and resources are concentrated, and Hong Kong is one example. These mostly female migrant workers are part of what Chang and Ling (2011) refer to as a 'regime of labour intimacy' (RLI): they leave home, care for others, and live among strangers. These two circuits of movements – the professionals moving into global cities with expanded job markets, which also absorb many of their women into the labour force, and as a result of the first circuit the second circuit of migrant women, who move from peripheral countries to fill the service jobs or domestic roles that are being left behind by the women of global cities - converge in Hong Kong. The Filipino women migrant domestic workers are in Hong Kong to take up the roles of the domestics being left behind by women in Hong Kong who are either taking up professional vacancies available in Hong Kong as one of the global cities or services jobs that support the functioning of a global city. This is an economically viable option for many households in Hong Kong, as Filipino domestic workers earn a wage below the minimum wage level in Hong Kong, but ironically this is high enough for them to leave their families behind to provide the life-line the Philippines so badly needs.

The dominant narrative of globalisation and what Sassen (2002) terms the 'survival circuit' of women from peripheral countries of the global

economy speak of vastly contrasting experiences of globalisation. The tension between these different experiences of globalisation is manifested in the everyday lives of the Filipino migrant domestic workers. It is manifested in their daily work and their relationships with their employers, with the state apparatus of the receiving territory and with the host society at large. They may roam the streets and the gleaming malls but their presence is unwelcome. Their labour in doing household chores and caring for children and the elderly is needed but their claim to the same rights as the other residents is denied. Parreñas (2001) argues that on the one hand, the denationalisation of economies compels poor nations with export-based development to respond to the demand for low-wage labour and extend their range of exports to include their able-bodied workers; and on the other hand, these poor nations are unable to provide protection for their ‘exported’ nationals due to the renationalisation of politics. The Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong find themselves facing the consequences of these contradictions: the fruits of their labour are the life-line they provide to their nation, yet their nation can hardly protect them in their vulnerable situation as live-in domestic workers, with the power to regulate working hours and extend the benefits of a minimum wage to them resting in the hands of the state apparatus in Hong Kong. Their labour maintains the reproductive capacity of the host society, yet they are excluded from the rights that are accorded to others who are not domestic workers in Hong Kong. To these migrant domestic workers, globalisation is not just about the political economy. It is also personal. It is the tension between different experiences of globalisation that converge in the space of Hong Kong that I wish to focus on for this discussion.

This is not simply an attempt to map what Sassen (2002) calls the ‘counter-geographies of globalization’. It is an attempt to focus on the tension between the vastly different experiences of globalisation that collide and converge in the streets of Hong Kong, in the everyday lives (Sunday lives) of the Filipino migrant workers who leave the confines of their employers’ homes, when they come face-to-face with the materialisation of the two



experiences of globalisation in space, on the streets of Hong Kong. But before moving on to the ‘tension’ experienced by these women, the context behind their massive migration as domestic workers is provided in more detail to set the stage for our discussion (for the following chapters).

Globalisation is not experienced evenly around the globe. In the case of the Philippines, its economy was not always in the dire straits described above. In 1960, the Philippines had a GDP of USD300 per capita, second only to Japan in Asia. Unlike its Asian neighbours, such as Taiwan and Singapore, who adopted export-oriented policies, the Philippines maintained an ‘import-substitution’ policy for a longer period of time to the detriment of foreign direct investment, which created export-related jobs and subsequently fuelled the economic growth in some of the ‘miracle’ and ‘tiger’ economies in Asia (Martin & Abella, 2004). GDP growth averaged about one percent in the 1980s and real wages declined in the 1990s. It also has a large foreign debt. As of the end of 2013, this debt stood at USD 58.5 billion.<sup>5</sup> Almost a quarter of its earnings are used to service its foreign debt. It might help to bear in mind that although the Philippines became independent in name after 1946, postcolonial relations resulted in special privileges for U.S. citizens and corporations and long-term leases for the U.S. military continued until the early 1990s (Martin & Abella, 2004). These ‘parity rights’ gave U.S. companies opportunities to exploit the country’s natural and public resources, leaving Filipino companies unable to compete given their relative lack of expertise and technology (Guevarra, 2010). While failing to develop a local manufacturing sector, the agricultural sector was also in crisis. Cash crops were produced instead of food crops and land degradation took place. The Philippines is still very much an agricultural country. However, with a reduced amount of arable land, many farmers were left with no land to till (Guevarra, 2010).

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP), the central bank of the Republic of the Philippines  
[http://www.bsp.gov.ph/statistics/spei\\_new/tab18.htm](http://www.bsp.gov.ph/statistics/spei_new/tab18.htm)

Together with the dire state in which the Philippines finds its economy, the political landscape has been equally troubling. The huge size of its external debt can be traced back to Ferdinand Marcos, who was re-elected as the president at the end of 1969. He was supposed to end his second term at the end of 1973 but instead he declared martial law and remained in power until his expulsion in 1986. With the economic crisis that was emerging in the background, Marcos turned to the IMF and the World Bank for an economic relief package, which came with 'structural adjustment policies' that supported foreign investors, wealthy Filipino elites and Marco's cronies to the detriment of local industries (Guevarra, 2010). Without effective legislative power to check on the executive branch of government, Marcos managed to expand the scope of foreign borrowing law and remove procedures that were in place to ensure that loans were put to good use and payments were serviceable (Aguilar, 2012). By the end of his administration, the country's foreign debt stood at USD28 billion. The anticipated income to be generated through international trade fell short and it became quite apparent that the loans were no longer serviceable. Means to generate foreign currency were encouraged by the Philippines government in order to solve this fiscal crisis. Tourists were encouraged to visit the Philippines. One of the means was to provide for the needs of visitors from Japan, largely as entertainers. This subsequently became controversial and damaged the 'brand' of tourism in the Philippines. It resulted in an outflow of Filipino women to Japan as entertainers under tourist visa; these were the pioneers of women migrant workers. The Japanese embassy in the Philippines even created a visa category called an 'entertainers' visa' – a kind of formalisation of the Filipino migrant women who serve in the entertainment and sex industries in Japan (Gulati, 2006) . In 1974 Marcos' regime formalised the labour-export policy by issuing an executive order of Labour Code of 1974 to reorganise its labour policies in the face of the fiscal crisis and a serious unemployment problem. Through the establishment of governmental agencies such as the Overseas Employment Development Board (OEDB) (later renamed POEA (Philippines Overseas Employment Administration), and the National

Seamen Board (NSB) and Marco's canvassing for the export of Filipino workers to countries in the Middle East, Asia and the United States and Canada, the Philippines state started to established itself firmly in the process of sending its own people overseas to work.

### **2.3.1 The tropes and technology of governance in labour export policies**

The Philippines state migration apparatus not only established itself firmly in the process of sending its people overseas to work, together with the private agencies and the workers themselves, it created a social imaginary of 'Filipinos as the ideal global workers' and the 'Philippines as the home of the Great Filipino Worker' through the recruitment process, to sustain the outflow of migrant workers or from the perspective of employers, to provide a constant supply of highly mobile (and cheap) labour.

Guevarra (2010) argues that economic consideration is not the only driving force behind the migration of Filipino workers, nor is migration a linear, bureaucratic process; rather it is a process that is not only shaped by the Philippines state (Rodriguez, 2010; Acacio, 2008) but also sustained by creating an 'ethos of migration' through the ideological and cultural dynamics of the recruitment agencies and the workers themselves. The Philippine state represents the migrant workers as the 'new national heroes' whose duty is to support their loved ones and the nation through the remittances they send home (Rodriguez, 2010). The 'New national hero' (bagong bayani) is a representation that Guevarra (2010) suggests has its roots in the ideological framework of Catholicism – introduced to the Philippines with the Spanish colonisation from 1565 to 1898 – which still shapes the culture and the Filipinos' worldview. By linking the migrant workers with the image of 'new national hero' grounded in the Catholic ideological framework, the Philippine state on the one hand rewards and recognises, and on the other hand promotes, the 'self-sacrifices' that many Filipinos make to become migrant workers, supporting their loved ones from a distance, and becoming patriotic outside of their own country.

The recruitment agencies contribute to this ‘ethos of migration’ in a number of different ways. One of these was described by Guevarra (2010) in her interview with one of the agencies, which was depicting Filipinos as always suffering, as victims, evoking the same rhetoric of ‘sacrifices’ as the Philippine state: “we have lawyers in America working as waiters... we may have fully employed people here, like an emergency duty manager or a nurse but the type of equipment they are using becomes obsolete as time and technology catches up with them...”, or the promise of ‘identity transformation’ by emphasising the economic opportunities of these overseas jobs through the prominent display of a ‘promised salary’ on their adverts. Recruitment agencies are also engaged in making undesirable destinations, such as countries in the Middle East, which are perceived as having different cultural and religious practices and being politically unstable and not suitable for women, a viable option for job applicants, as clients from countries such as Saudi Arabia provide sizable job orders that agencies, for their own economic interest, need to fulfill. They also need to manage the high expectations of the applicants, most of whom want to go to the United States, perhaps by using a combination of the tactics mentioned above – by mentioning the plight that the Filipinos face and stating that a living wage anywhere is better than not being able to land a job anywhere else. They also offer ‘temporary solutions’ by proposing that applicants work at destination countries with less stringent immigration rules while waiting for their applications to the United States to be processed (which is more expensive and takes a longer time). While they work in a less desirable destination for a fixed period (according to the contract), they can accumulate the capital required for the application as well as gaining experience that might be of help in their application to the United States. Another way of persuading potential migrant workers to apply for jobs overseas is to market the destinations themselves as if migrant workers were going on a holiday, for example claiming that they support Filipino migrants’ so-called sense of ‘adventure’ and ‘desire to travel’, and that they are facilitating them to ‘live their dreams’ – a dream of materialism and conspicuous consumption, which constitutes a class transformation for them

(Guevarra, 2010). ‘Seeing the world’ was usually not the reason why my informants had come to become domestic workers in Hong Kong but one of them, Erica, who had been in Hong Kong for ten months when we talked, indeed told me:

*I came here to Hong Kong just to ride an airplane. Coming here just to see what is an airplane. And then I come here and then I don't have plans and I just want to come to see Hong Kong without thinking, what is my future here, what is our job here, what is waiting for us? I just wanted to come to ride (Interview by author, 25 August 2013.)*

It struck me as somewhat surprising that someone would leave their family behind, not thinking of what the journey entails, just to see what an aeroplane is. It might very well be that the recruitment agency she went to sold Hong Kong to her as a way to ride an aeroplane and see the world – a world that perhaps many of those who live in the rural parts of the Philippines will never get to see if they do not choose to go overseas to work. Or maybe in a different way, this trope of ‘seeing the world’ does enter the consciousness of these migrant domestic workers, as I often wondered why they were always busy and happily posing in front of decorations in shopping malls or logos of branded shops, which are in abundant supply in Central, the space in which they roam every Sunday. These are often the images that are being shared with families back home, as one of my informants, Rose, who had been a domestic worker in Hong Kong for twenty-two years, and became a volunteer at the Mission and also a leader of a migrant grassroots organisation after her contract was terminated by her employer, told me about her cousin, who had started working in Hong Kong as a domestic helper before she did:

*Every time I saw my cousin in the pictures they were all happy. Seemed (as if) they did not have problems... When I stayed in Bethune House (a shelter for women run by the Mission) I was totally shocked with what I saw. I could not imagine the problems these people were facing: I saw (victims of) rape ... I*

*saw different kind of migrants' problems. (Words in brackets added by author) (Interview by author, 29 August 2013).*

Whilst on the one hand the Philippines state's apparatus of migration and private recruitment agencies entices Filipinos to become migrant workers by highlighting the 'upside' of becoming migrant workers and representing migrant workers as 'new national heroes' but hides the 'inconvenient truth' about the probable risks involved, on the other hand, it has been busy 'marketing' Filipino workers as the ideal workers to prospective employers based on 'the gendered and racialised moral economy of the Filipino migrant', which links to the 'notion of family, religion and nationalism with neoliberal capitalist ideals of economic competitiveness' (Guevarra, 2010). Guevarra (2010) argues that by creating a social imaginary of 'the home of the Great Filipino Workers', the Philippines state, in partnership with the private recruitment agencies, through a 'joint and solidary liability clause', which is made responsible for claims that arise out of the contracts they facilitate, instill, regulate and normalise a racialised work ethic and ultimately create docile citizens for the benefit of both the state and the private recruitment agencies (Guevarra, 2010). This work ethic is further extended to women migrants to remind them to uphold a particular image of 'femininity' – or 'productive femininity', a trope that has been operated by global capital to naturalise women's labour from the Third World for certain jobs based on a gendered understanding and assumptions about personhood, for example, in the repetitive and tedious assembly line in Mexico (Salzinger, 2004). The particular image of 'femininity' that Filipino women are reminded to uphold, Guevarra argues (2010), is produced and represented by the Philippine state's apparatus of migration and private recruitment agencies as a special 'racialised form of docility', 'a unique Filipino quality' that is marketed as the 'added export value' and the competitive advantage of Filipino women.

One of the recruitment agencies that had recruited domestic workers to Hong Kong commented:

*“Filipinos are the Mercedes Benz – they are educated, literate, English-speaking, possess a good work ethic. They don’t complain, they are quiet, and they keep to themselves – and they are trainable” (Guevarra, 2010: 137-138).*

This trope has been so successful that foreign employers use the terms ‘domestic helper’, ‘nanny’ and ‘Filipina’ interchangeably (Constable, 1997; Pratt, 1998 from Guavarra, 2010) and their English-speaking ability is viewed by employers as ‘two-in-one’ value - as a domestic worker and a tutor at the same time - which also boosts employers’ status as having a highly educated helper.

Recruitment agencies not only market Filipino women as docile and overqualified, but also, to ensure that migrant women meet employers’ expectations based on the images produced by the Philippines state’s apparatus of migration and the agencies themselves, operating within the tropes of ‘productive femininity’, applicants for domestic services work are required to go through a vigorous household training programme, which is also part of the POEA’s policy, which requires every domestic worker to obtain a certificate of competency. The ‘discipline’ that has been put in place through various governmental policies, narratives, marketing tactics and training programmes by the recruitment agencies, when viewed in the Foucauldian frame of discipline, provides us with a lens to understand the political power involved in the labour-brokerage process carried out by the Philippine state’s apparatus of migration in partnership with private recruitment agencies. It creates a supply of docile citizens from the perspective of the Philippines state and docile workers from the perspective of the prospective employers for their own benefit: remittances in the case of the government and profits in the case of the recruitment agencies. Rose and Miller (1992, from Guaverra, 2010: 7) aptly state that ‘government is the domain of strategies, techniques and procedures through which ruling bodies can fulfill their goals and interests.’

The training programme that has been put in place by the recruitment agencies and enforced by the Philippine state is intended to ‘equip’ and

‘train’ the migrant domestic workers with skills, professionalism and mannerisms that are believed to protect them from abuse from their employers. The underlying assumption behind this approach of ‘protecting’ and ‘empowering’ the domestic workers is that abuse and/or complaints from employers arise due to incompetence on the part of the domestic workers or their attitude not being to the liking of their employers. This assumption is oblivious to the vulnerable conditions that many of the domestic workers find themselves in, the unequal power relations between employers and the domestic workers and, according to some research findings, the ugly side of human nature, when one human being domineers over another, exploiting their vulnerable position as live-in helpers with undocumented status (B. Anderson, 2000). The inequality between women from the first world (or the global cities) who hire domestic workers to take care of their families and those women who leave their families behind to work and care for others’ families is startling. The tensions between these two very different experiences of globalisation are manifested in the households in which these migrant women work and the contradictions that many of these domestic workers find themselves facing are the focus of many researchers: Anderson (2000) documented the experiences of domestic workers in Europe and found that the living and working conditions of these workers are jointly influenced by the relationships that workers have with the state (in terms of citizenship, immigration status) and the relationship they have with their employers (live-in or live-out). Parreñas (2001) compared the dislocations experienced by Filipino migrant domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles and their tactics and strategies to come to terms or/and overcome the contradictions generated as a result of the two different experiences of globalisation: a sense of non-belonging in the receiving communities, downward social mobility, and tensions arising out of transnational families and intergenerational and gender relations. Constable (2007) explored how Filipino migrant domestic workers contribute to their own subordination by complying with the image of ‘docile’ workers through actively resisting and willingly participating in the ‘Foucaultian discipline’ imposed by their employers and at the same time



subjecting themselves to 'self-discipline'. Constable's (2007) finding echoes Guaverra's (2010) proposition that migrant workers themselves participate in sustaining the particular brand of Filipino workers as 'docile', which the Philippine state's apparatus of migration and the private recruitment agencies actively create: that it is not only migrant nurses as in the case studies by Guaverra (2010) but also domestic workers who also rely on the same image of Filipino workers as 'docile' for their sustained livelihood.

## **2.4 Power and Resistance in Hong Kong**

In the following section, I would like to discuss how in Hong Kong, the tensions and contradictions faced by the women migrant domestic works echo or differ from what other migrant domestic workers face in their particular context and in different receiving countries that have been analysed by earlier researchers.

### **2.4.1 Relationships with the States' Apparatus of Migration**

Anderson (2000) found that migrant domestic workers in Europe are a varied group, Immigration status, which sometimes depends on their citizenship, largely influences the working and living conditions of migrant domestic workers in Europe, as those with legal status to stay in the receiving countries can change their employers comparatively more easily than those without. Undocumented workers are at the mercy of their employers, as they fear being deported once they come to the notice of the authorities, and at the same time some documented workers are dependent on their employers for their legal status and are thus bonded to them. Migrant domestic workers' relationship with the state (or more precisely, their immigration status and citizenship) is thus an important factor, as the more precarious their status is, the less willing they are to risk their employment even when faced with unsatisfactory working and living conditions. Anderson (2001) also pointed out that the living arrangements are also an important factor in migrant domestic workers' working and

living conditions – those with live-in arrangements often find themselves having to be available at both ends of the day, which not only speaks of long hours but also ‘permanent availability’ and having their lives constantly monitored by their employers – including things that are personal and basic such as sleeping arrangements, baths, letters from home and food.

Unlike in Europe immigration status and citizenship might give migrant domestic workers different bargaining power in their relations with their employers and their working arrangements; in Hong Kong a specific visa is issued for foreign domestic helpers under a ‘Standard Employment Contract’ prescribed by the government between employers and migrant domestic workers. In short, the contracts between employers and migrant domestic workers determine the immigration status that allows migrant women to stay in Hong Kong as domestic workers. The contract is for a period of two years and it is mandated in the standard contract that the employer ‘shall provide the Helper with suitable and furnished accommodation’ under clause 5(b). The schedule of accommodation with details such as the address of the employer’s residence, the size of the employer’s residence, and the accommodation and facilities to be provided to the helpers also form part of the contract. Migrant domestic workers are only to perform the domestic duties stipulated in the contract and live in the employer’s accommodation stated in the contract. It is argued by many of the activist groups in Hong Kong that this mandatory ‘live-in’ arrangement creates vulnerable conditions for migrant domestic workers, as with those found by Anderson in her cases in Europe too – long working hours, having to be ‘permanently available’ and their lives being constantly scrutinised and monitored by their employers. One of my informants, Kate, who used to work for a British employer in Hong Kong, jokingly told me one day about her boss, whom she nicknamed ‘Hitler’: “Hitler has installed many security cameras in the house as it is an independent house in the village of Ma-on-shan”. The first time she wanted to leave the house the alarm went off and within minutes the police and firemen arrived; she was terrified.

She was made to iron clothes from 12 mid-night until 2-3am in the morning. She said she was very thin then (Fieldwork Notes, 2 June 2013).

In the statistics report published by the Mission for Migrant Workers, based on clients they had in 2013, the average working hours for migrant domestic workers are 15.8 hours per day and 43.47% of them do not have a private room.<sup>6</sup>

Migrant domestic workers' visas shape the way they are treated from the point they enter Hong Kong at the immigration checkpoints to the ways in which they choose to leave or stay in the city. Pan (潘, 2013), one of the interns at the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM), an NGO advocating for migrant workers' rights, observes in her report: there are special counters designated for 'foreign domestic helpers' (holders of special visas issued by the Hong Kong Immigration Department for migrant domestic workers). Unlike 'ordinary Hong Kong residents' who can make use of the 'electronic channel' to clear immigration checkpoints with Hong Kong identify cards and thumb-prints, migrant domestic workers need to have their passports, Hong Kong identity cards and contracts with their employers ready for the Immigration staff at the counters designated for 'foreign domestic helpers' to check or 'interrogate' before they are allowed to enter Hong Kong. Their Hong Kong identification cards bear the letter 'W' – a symbol that is designated for foreign domestic helpers for much of the time. These identification cards are crucial in their everyday interactions with the host society – for example in applying for mobile phone contracts, opening bank accounts etc. The symbol 'W', a status the host society confers upon them, makes their 'otherness' highly visible and that becomes grounds for rejection. This highly visible 'otherness' is extended beyond the border of Hong Kong to Macao: similar to the 'interrogation' they are subjected to in Hong Kong when going through

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Mission for Migrant Workers: Statistics for MFMW On Counseling, Shelter And Other Emergency Services in 2013: <http://www.migrants.net/mfmw-2013-statistics-on-counseling-shelter-and-other-emergency-services-out-now/>

customs, they are asked the reason why they are in Macau, why there is a mismatch between the photos in their passports and on their Hong Kong identification cards, and their employers' names, when they decided to pay a visit to a city that is a one-hour boat ride away from Hong Kong. Their 'legal' status in Hong Kong does not free them from the fear of facing the authorities, as in the case of Anderson's informants in Rome. Rather than the fear of being exposed and deported, the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are being scrutinised in the face of the authorities, and instead of hiding in the dark, the visibility of 'otherness' that is conferred on them through the apparatus of the state has made them a target of 'governance', not only within the borders of Hong Kong, but also in neighbouring cities and in their everyday interactions with the host society.

Migrant domestic workers are mandated to leave Hong Kong at the end of their contract – as home/annual paid leave with transport costs borne by their employers or, if their contracts are terminated prematurely by either of the parties, they must leave Hong Kong within two weeks, again with the transport costs borne by the employer. For those whose home bound holidays are coming up, they can be seen busily packing gifts for their families on Sundays in the streets of Central and collecting gifts that are to be passed to other domestic workers' families who live in the same village. For those who have their contracts prematurely terminated, most of them will try to find alternative employers within the two-week period. Depending on the reason for the premature termination of the contract, finding an employer within the two-week period can prove challenging. Despite the standard employment contract prescribed by the government clearly stipulating the rights and obligations of the parties to the contract, claiming these rights is not always easy.

Marian, who had been in Hong Kong for eight years and had had three employers at the time of the interview, told me about her ordeal: her contract was terminated one month before the two-year term. She found herself escorted out of her employer's residence in the middle of the night

by a policeman as her employer claimed that she had stolen things from them. She was lucky to have a boarding house to go to in the middle of the night, but when she contacted her employer to ask for her wages the next day she was referred to the agency. The agency said that her employer would pay her wages up to the day she worked and buy her ticket home. She refused. Her employer refused to pay her payments in lieu of the one-month notice period, payments in lieu of annual leave that she was entitled to and the transportation allowance for her trip home - all of which are entitlements based on the 'Standard Employment Contract' and the Employment Ordinance.

After several attempts to negotiate with her employer through the recruitment agency, she filed a complaint to the Labour Department. Her employer failed to attend the first hearing. When her employer finally attended the second hearing, she still refused to pay Marian, as she insisted that Marian had done something wrong and thus did not deserve the payment in lieu of the one-month' notice and the rest of the payments she entitled to. Marian explained that the policeman who escorted her out of her employer's residence simply helped her with her stuff in four rubbish bags (as she had no luggage with her at that time and was escorted out in the middle of the night) and helped her to call a taxi to get to a boarding house. There was no police statement, no evidence of her wrongdoing and she had not done anything wrong, Marian explained. Yet her employer insisted that she would not pay all that Marian was entitled to. While all of the legal proceedings were taking place, Marian had to apply for an extension to her visa to stay in Hong Kong, in order to attend the hearings, not knowing how much she could eventually claim back from her employer. Every extra day she stayed in Hong Kong was an extra day of expenses – for food, for lodging, and for transportation to the agencies and to the Labour Department. And having an on-going case also hindered her chance of getting a new employer, as prospective employers were weary of her having an on-going case that required her attendance at hearings from time to time. At the third (private) hearing between Marian and her employer

(without the Labour Officer present), her employer finally agreed to pay all she was entitled to except that instead of the payment in lieu of the one-month notice period, she would only pay half. Marian said to me in an interview:

*(if) I don't agree with it, I don't know how many more days or if it would be another month to spend in HK without like, no income, the claims would be just nothing. I just said, it's really been a rough month for me... it's ok for me, you pay me then (Interview by author, 17 August, 2014).*

Although Marian managed to get back her full claim by talking to her employer's husband without her employer knowing, Marian's experience illustrates migrant domestic workers' difficulty in pursuing their rightful claims. Every single day without a result is a day of extra cost with no income and at the end of the day it is very likely that the claims they manage to get back will be used to pay for the expenses they incur while pursuing the cases. As Constable (2007) points out with the words of Melville Boase (1991: 90, from Constable 2007: 119): "No matter what fine words one may have written on paper, they only have significance or meaning if they can be enforced" and unlike Marian, who managed to pursue the case without the help of others, many migrant workers simply do not have the confidence, ability, financial resources or time to navigate the maze of Hong Kong's state apparatus governing "foreign domestic helpers". In a way, like the Philippines state and the private recruitment agencies which create and sustain the 'docility' of Filipino workers through a rhetoric of 'new national heroes', training programmes and mandated certification, Hong Kong's state apparatus makes it difficult for migrant workers who do not have the resources to pursue the 'legal route' for their rightful claims, which also sustains the 'docility' of foreign domestic helpers.

The reality of having an employment contract prematurely terminated and losing the accommodation, food and income that come along with that

employment is daunting. Yet some of those who manage to find help and navigate through the web of bureaucracy find the experience life-changing.

Rose, a volunteer at the Mission, who was also a leader of a grassroots organisation and was often seen speaking in public, had been in Hong Kong since 1991. She was underpaid (the Standard Employment Contract stipulates a minimum allowable wage that employers have to pay domestic workers and the latest is HKD \$ 4,110 per month, still way below the minimum wage per hour at HKD \$ 30 per hour, considering many of them work more than 10 hours per day) for her first job. When she complained to her employer, she was sacked. She told me:

*“So I went to Bethune House, I stayed there and there I saw different kinds of problems for migrants. Of course I could not believe my fellow Filipinos, fellow coworkers were facing such problems you know because every time I saw my cousin in the pictures they were all happy... it seemed (as if) they did not have problems. When I stayed in Bethune House I was totally shocked with what I saw. I could not imagine the problems these people were facing: I saw (victims of) rape and different nationalities. That was the start. I involved myself in the organisations. Because in Bethune House I learnt many things. Because then we finished the case in the Labour Tribunals for almost 10 months. It was very long so I had time to help others so I got to know the process to (file cases to) the Labour Department... It's an experience where I learnt many things. So I involved myself and I really spent time learning things (such as) the process (and) how to defend the situation of migrants there etc. I have involved myself until now (Interview by author, 29 August 2013, brackets added by author).*

Sara was in Hong Kong for 28 years and she returned to the Philippines for good in December 2013. She was recognised for her contribution to the migrant community in a ‘Thanksgiving’ event organised by the Mission for migrant workers. She continues her organisational work in the Philippines. She answered my interview questions via email after she left Hong Kong (I lost the opportunity to interview her because I didn’t know she was leaving for good):

*“I started my involvement in the organisation in 1987. I was terminated from my job at that time and I was at the Bethune House for temporary shelter; the Mission For Migrant Workers referred me there. On Sundays, there were members of the Association of Concerned Filipinos in Hong Kong (ACFIL-HK), members and officers who would go to Bethune House and they would talk to the residents of Bethune House. They happened to talk to me and they shared with us what their organisations were doing and they encouraged us to be a member. I did. And in 1988, I was elected as the new President, despite my little knowledge of doing organising. I was also invited to be a part of the UNIFIL Secretariat at that time and that’s how I started my organising work with the Filipino migrants” (E-mail, 16 March 2014).*

They are among the leaders of the grassroots movement of migrant workers in Hong Kong – a movement that now spans different nationalities in the city. Their actions could be seen in the massive mobilisation of migrant domestic workers to join protests asking for the scrapping of the two-week rule that mandated that migrant domestic workers leave Hong Kong within two weeks of the last day of their contract; protests against social exclusions and discrimination; rallies asking for the ratification of the ILO Convention 189 - Domestic Workers Convention, 2011; and one of the biggest mobilisations, asking for justice for Erwiana, an Indonesian domestic worker who was abused by her employer. Images of her bruised and seriously injured body depicted ‘modern slavery in Hong Kong’ and were circulated in media around the world (please refer to chapter six for more details).

Erwiana’s case (Red Door News Hong Kong, 2014) reveals the shocking extent to which migrant domestic workers can be tortured and abused within the confines of their employer’s residence without anyone noticing, even though in law, Erwiana was entitled to ‘equal statutory rights and benefits as local employees’, including ‘rest days, statutory holidays, annual leave, sickness allowance, work injury compensation, etc.’ and has ‘free access to the services provided by the Labour Department (LD) such as consultation and conciliation services’, as stated in a paper presented to the Legislative Council of HKSAR in February 2014, jointly prepared by the



Labour and Welfare Bureau, Labour Department and Immigration Department in response to concerns raised after Erwiana's case came to light. The paper continued, "Erwiana's case has aroused concerns in the community over how to protect the rights and benefits of FDHs, including their personal safety and the regulation of EAs (employment agencies) and "the Government considers that the most effective way to resolve the problem is to tackle it at its root. The Government will continue to request that the Indonesian authorities adopt proactive measures to alleviate Indonesian domestic helpers of the debt burden that results in the helpers having to pay a huge amount of intermediary and training fees before they come to Hong Kong" ("Briefs for Legislative Council on Policies Relating to Foreign Domestic Helpers and Regulation of Employment Agencies," 2014).

The fear of losing their jobs and the amount of debt incurred as part of their training and certification make many of the migrant domestic workers financially vulnerable (the extent of the agency fee overcharges differs in Indonesia and the Philippines – whilst in the Philippines the agency fee has been outlawed but many agencies still charge it, while in Indonesia it is sanctioned by the state and the 'standard' fee ranges from about HKD 15,000 to HKD 21,000) and renders assistance from and the rules of law available to them under the Hong Kong government, meaningless. In an indirect way the statement issued to the Legislative Council recognises that some of the changes required to make migrant domestic workers less vulnerable lie outside of its jurisdiction.

The cases discussed above illustrate the extent to which some of the migrant workers in Hong Kong experience harsh working conditions, unreasonable employer-relations and extreme brutality on a more structural level, which are enforceable by law. The subtler discipline imposed by employers at a household level, which provides the background to illuminate migrant workers' everyday lives as domestics, is described in the following section

for a further discussion of their public lives outside the household in the rest of the chapters.

In both Hong Kong and Taiwan, where women increasingly participate in the workforce, the hiring of migrant domestic workers has become a way to fulfill the multiple gendered duties of mother, wife and daughter-in-law (Lan, 2006) and managing the migrant domestic workers falls mostly on the woman employer as part of her duty in managing the household. Domestic workers are hired to provide help with in-home childcare and household chores and as the subcontractor a 'filial care duty' (Lan, 2006, brackets added by author). As part of their household management, employers often have household rules for the migrant domestic workers to follow – and many of these rules are based on customs in Hong Kong or Taiwan and can become source of conflict. Food (the quantity and the question of what constitutes a proper meal, the issue of pork for migrant workers from Muslim countries), hygiene (e.g. when to take bath, and how long they are allowed to use the bathroom for) and physical appearance (what to wear) are all areas of subtle or direct discipline. Some employers go to extreme lengths to control migrant domestic workers' time by expecting them to follow timetables and a work schedule – as argued by Michel Foucault, based on the principle of 'non-idleness' and to 'eliminate the danger of wasting time' (Constable, 2007.)

On top of controlling and budgeting migrant domestic workers' time, some employers also impose household rules regarding the use of space. Many do not have their own private space in the household – given how small many of the Hong Kong flats are, they either share rooms with family members in the household or sleep in the storeroom or servants' quarters, which are more like a closet (Constable, 2007). Some of them are not allowed to go out of the flats (like Erwiana, please see chapter six for more details). The confluence of work and household makes it hard for the migrant domestic workers to be off from work – they are on call 24 hours a

day. Spatially, without their own private space, they are constantly under the surveillance of their employers.

Employers of migrant domestic workers in Taiwan are the so-called new middle class, consisting of professionals and the owners of small and medium-sized businesses (Lan, 2006). In Hong Kong, the majority of the employers of migrant domestic workers are also new middle class – a status that seems precarious to the householders themselves, with the women employers' occupations being school teachers, clerks or office staff, not too different from what some Filipinas did before they worked in Hong Kong (Constable, 2007). In the latter case, the close class relations between that of the employer and the migrant domestic workers may seem uncomfortable and a possible source of conflict. Much of the discipline imposed by the women employers, argues Constable, is a tactic on the part of the employer to manage the situations that arise as a result of hiring a migrant worker to help her with childcare; the children will spend most of their waking hours with the migrant workers close to them. Women employers devise and maintain a hierarchical division of labour, distinguishing between the 'menial' and 'spiritual' aspects of mothering work. The emphasis on the 'spiritual' aspect of mothering is to affirm their primary status and enhance their bonding with their children (Lan, 2006) and in a way, it further reinforces the dislocation that many migrant domestic workers experience.

#### **2.4.2 Dislocations: non-belonging and downward social mobility**

“Dislocations are the challenges that Filipina domestic workers encounter as they navigate through social processes of migration” (Parreñas, 2001:31). Among the dislocations Parreñas identified, I would like to highlight that of non-belonging and contradictory class mobility arising from the fact that membership of the host society is not always obtainable and many of those who work as domestic workers in these places, although they manage to have a higher economic return, usually find themselves unable to move socially upwards. These dislocations, however, have nuanced expressions in different receiving settings. Whilst membership in the host society and

polity is possible in the United States, it is restricted in the case of Italy. Filipino migrant workers in Rome, argues Parreñas(2001), position themselves as outsiders and cope with non-belonging by venturing into businesses to hasten the pace with they accumulate capital in order to return to the Philippines whilst Filipino migrant domestic workers in the United States feel unease among middle class Filipinos, who to them are more successful in their career pursuits, and react with defensive behaviour and aspirations by claiming their ‘temporary membership’. In Rome, the businesses into which these migrant workers venture are businesses that make profits out of their own communities by charging fees for job referrals, lending money with exorbitant interest rates, or renting out properties to pay for their own rent, practices that Parreñas suggests (2001) “instill anomies and aggravate the dislocation of non-belonging”. In Los Angeles, the anomie and non-belonging of Filipino migrant domestic workers are found towards the middle class Filipinos, who become members of the host societies and are doing ‘more respectable’ jobs than they do that they turned to each other for solidarity.

In Hong Kong, membership of the host society is out of reach for migrant workers who enter Hong Kong on visas issued specifically for ‘foreign domestic helpers’ as in March 2013 the Court of Final Appeal ruled that foreign domestic helpers have no right to claim permanent residency, an issue that stirred up emotions in Hong Kong in the years leading up to the final verdict. Non-belonging to the host society is somehow eased by a strong sense of community in the streets of Central on Sundays. They get together in what they call ‘tambayan’ – meaning ‘homebase’ or ‘hangout place’ in Tagalog - on Sundays. Julia, who had been in Hong Kong for two years at the time of interview, explained: “*we call it ‘tambayan’, it’s a tagalog word where we stay and it seems like our house every Sunday in Central. We eat there (and) we stay there for a long time*”.

She continued:

*“Every Sunday I use my day off with the organisation... I use my whole day there... And (in) the organisation I find real friends... also in the organisation I found my family. Here in Hong Kong they are the family to me. We struggle; we fight for our rights...”*

*(Interview by author, 11 August 2013, brackets added by author).*

Lucy, who had been in Hong Kong for almost three years at the time of the interview told me about her experience:

*“when I was new here, I was not into organisation so I was just popping around and hanging around. I usually went to the IFC (International Financial Centre) and I found the IFC really so amazing, looking over the view of Tsim Sha Tsui (in Kowloon, opposite Central across the Victoria Harbour), during the sunset. I loved walking around because there were a lot of shops.... I have been active in the organisation FMA (Filipino Migrants' Association) for two years. So I decided to stay here, in Chater Road, which is where we always (hang out). This place, this is our dwelling. It's just like our house. We are just like a family. Although it's just on the street but it's really so amazing that you have a family just on the street, to eat together, to have fun, have meetings, you help other domestic helpers who have got problems ...” (Interview, 11 August 2013, brackets added by author.)*

When asked to represent what Central meant to them in drawings and words, Andrea, who had worked in Hong Kong for eight years and left a few weeks after the interview, said:

*“for almost eight years I worked here in Hong Kong. The first time I went to Central, here in Chater Road I met the organisation. I draw a house because this is my second family. I consider us as 'second family'. I meet many different people with different personalities. Some is sad, happy, confusing, afraid. So with these different people that I met I felt comfortable with them, especially we are in one organisation and I saw what are they doing with fellow migrants. And I am going to miss of course eight years... for four years I am a member of the organisation. I will be leaving this and I am going to miss these people” (Interview by author, 11 August 2013).*

For these migrant women that I came into contact with through the Mission, the organisations to which they belong are their families in Hong Kong and the members are their 'second families'. The support and solidarity they find in each other to fight loneliness and homesickness, while managing a transnational family, is evident in Angel's remarks:

*"I felt sad because this was my first time I went here in HK and too far from my family, my husband and my son... But that time I found my family here, we called that the POWER (Pangasinan Organizations for migrants' Welfare, Empowerment and Rights) family, they are the ones who comfort me during those times... my saddest day of my life here in Hong Kong. And when I am with them I feel so happy, eating, chatting with them, but still I miss my family, my son and my husband..." (Interview by author, 11 August 2013, brackets added by author).*

Facing similar situations, with membership of the host society out of reach, but unlike those migrant domestic workers in Rome who experience dislocation of non-belonging from both the host society and from their own fellow migrants, the Filipino migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong who are active in migrant organisations find solidarity in these organisations. Some even find that participating in these organisations becomes the solution to the dislocation of contradictory mobility experienced by Filipino migrant domestic workers. Valerie, who was a secondary school teacher and part-time university lecturer before she started working in Hong Kong as a domestic worker, told me about why she had stayed in Hong Kong for 21 years, which turned out to be contrary to her initial plan to work for just one contract.

She said:

*"the 2 years became 4 years as I renewed another contract with my employer and the Mission was a big factor in the change of my plan. Because I found that I could also do some work... that I could apply my skills as a teacher, like writing, you know because they needed someone to write, translate the statements into English. At the same time they taught me how to counsel for the cases, so ultimately I made an adjustment, I learnt to accept being a domestic worker and doing something I would*

*say even more noble than being a teacher, a traditional teacher, later on because for that one I was given training in organising, in teaching the rights... how to empower migrant workers, that's why I'm still here after so many years" (Interview by author, 23 Oct 2013).*

Valerie came to know the Mission because her sister-in-law's contract was terminated and was referred to the Mission for assistance.

At one stage while I was compiling the statistics for a press release to be issued by the Mission, I raised my concern with Lisa - an intern with whom I worked on the statistics - that many of the cases did not get closed and that we had no idea what happened to some of them. She said that many of the clients did not come back to the Mission with case results. Many of them simply wanted to obtain advice about what to do to claim agency fees they had been charged and they never came back. When another volunteer, Mary, a domestic worker who volunteered at the Mission while her employer was out of town, tried to reach them, many of the phone numbers had stopped working. For many of those who managed to climb the stairs up the hill to the Mission office, many of them did not turn out to be like Valerie or Rose. Not everyone could turn adversity into opportunity to see the world in a different light. Not everyone could afford the resources required to fight back against the very system that oppresses them and puts them in such a vulnerable position in the first place. Many of those who were abused, had their contracts terminated, were underpaid, or were unable to pay the loans demanded by the moneylenders simply went home. Many refused to participate in movements that are perceived to be 'aggressive' or 'anti-government'.

Yet I want to tell the stories of those who fight on – those who despite facing adversities managed to navigate and find ways that they believe might make a difference, not just to themselves, but for the wider community; although in their most vulnerable moments, they also show doubt about how much they can achieve through this. In their eyes I see despair and hope, on their faces both tears and smiles. It is a space of

extreme emotions and intense struggles but through them I see courage and hope. All of these struggles and emotions materialise in the weekly phenomenon of the gatherings in Central, Hong Kong, a space that is built based on the logic of first-world capital and consumption – of international financial corporations and fashion brands - but at the same time a space that allows the circuit of third-world migrants to congregate and gather, carving their very own stories in this landscape. This is a space where the two circuits of globalisation collide and converge and a place that tells stories of courage and hope, a space that transforms the number of cases the Mission handled on a periodic basis into streams of compassionate actions and solidarity on the streets.

## **2.5 Conclusion:**

In this chapter, I started by asking questions about why overqualified Filipino women work as domestic workers in Hong Kong and what their presence says about the racialised and gendered nature of the transnational labour movement for domestic services in the context of globalisation and global cities.

I then discussed the converging of two circuits of globalisation in Hong Kong: the upper circuit of key functions and services in the global cities that offer professional opportunities or service jobs that go along with it to local women on the one hand and the lower circuit of movements of third-world women into the domestic spheres of households left behind by the local women on the other.

The role that the Philippine state's apparatus of migration in partnership with the private recruitment agencies plays in creating and sustaining the tropes to entice Filipinos to work overseas, awarding them the title of 'new national heroes' and marketing them as 'docile workers' through a disciplinary mechanism, was also discussed to answer the question of why many overqualified women work as domestic workers in Hong Kong. The



socioeconomic background that works as the pretexts for these tropes and techniques to work was also discussed.

I then moved on to discuss the particular situations that Filipino migrant domestic workers face in Hong Kong and how Hong Kong state's apparatus of governing 'Foreign Domestic Helpers' also contributes to the making of 'docile' workers whose labour is needed but not respected. I also focused on the efforts of those Filipino domestic workers who manage to navigate through the webs of bureaucracy and fight for their rights and their conversion into activists in the grassroots organisations in which dislocation of non-belonging and contradictory social mobility are partially managed and mitigated.

This chapter provides the context for further discussion on the tensions between the two experiences of globalisation and how these two experiences collide and converge on the streets of Hong Kong with a focus on Filipino migrant domestic workers who are actively involved in the grassroots organisations.

## **Chapter 3 Making spaces of the publics: the cultivation of material and discursive publics in Hong Kong by the transnational domestic worker activists**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Constable, (2015) states that Hong Kong has a reputation as the exemplar of a place to work for migrant domestic workers compared to other migrant receiving countries in Asia and the Middle East due to its standard employment contract, which is signed by both employer and employee, and stipulates the conditions of work, salary, entitlement to rest days, annual leave, and benefits to be provided by the employer such as the paid return travel from the employee's place of origin to Hong Kong, free accommodation and free food. If there are any contractual claims to be made by the migrant workers, Labour Relations Services are available to them at the Labour Department through conciliation meetings mediated by Labour Officers. If an agreement cannot be reached at the conciliation meetings, cases can be escalated to the Minor Employment Claims Adjudication Board or the Labour Tribunal. In law, migrant domestic workers are protected under the Employment Ordinance and recruitment agencies are also regulated under the same ordinance, which prohibits them from charging more than 10 percent of the employee's salary as recruitment fees. Indeed, in policy and law, and with the presence of the employment contract, Hong Kong appears to be an exemplary place for migrant domestic workers. Like Constable (2015), I substantiated with examples and a discussion in the previous chapter, but I argue that, despite the standard contracts, law and policies, many migrant domestic workers are underpaid, work under harsh conditions, and in extreme cases are physically abused. Channels through which contractual disputes are to be resolved, such as the Labour Relations Services, result in migrant domestic workers giving in under the pressure of financial hardship during the period of the hearing. In the previous chapter (and there are more details in chapter six), I illustrated the massive network of support that was behind the trial of Erwiana against her employer to overcome the obstacles involved in filing

her case and getting ‘justice’ for her. The challenges faced by migrant domestic workers in claiming these rights prove that the protection of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong is far from the exemplary reputation it enjoys. How then do the social actors – the NGOs and social movement activists in this case - use the language of rights to bring the plight of the migrant domestic workers to the attention of the public? How do they successfully (or not) construct a public that is sympathetic to their cause? How do they more specifically translate the global language of rights into local issues and frame the local issues in global terms?

This fighting for rights rhetoric is stated repeatedly by the members of the progressive organisations. It is in speeches heard and banners seen at events organised by them such as the Asian Migrant Workers’ Summit (please refer to the conclusion), in protest rallies that take place on International Migrants’ Day (please refer to chapter four), in campaigns asking for justice for Erwiana (please refer to chapter six), etc. The consistency of the use of language and the logic behind the construction of the rhetoric is one that, when viewed in the universal human rights framework, is highly strategic. Embedded within the speeches at public events, the banners held at protests and the statements for press release is a highly orchestrated presentation of the situation of the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong in relation to the rights framework, both locally as workers (as their rights as workers are enshrined and protected in the Employment Ordinance) and internationally as domestic workers, women and simply human beings, in reference to the International Labour Organization (ILO) Domestic Workers’ Convention (C189), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, and the more general Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This ‘rights speech’, if not viewed in the light of the normativity of the human rights framework, would appear incoherent, just as it did to me when I first stepped into the field two years ago. The issues with which these migrant domestic worker activists concern themselves range from the

overcharging of agency fees and the labour-export policy of the sending countries, to protests against exclusion from the minimum wage legislation in Hong Kong, demands for the regulation of working hours, changes to the live-in and two-week rules, the very general protests against social exclusion and neoliberal globalisation. I will examine in this chapter the discourse of the migrant domestic workers' movement and their practices of employing the framework of human rights to negotiate their marginalised and temporary status as domestic workers in Hong Kong and as migrant workers who are forced to leave their countries to work in the global order under the sway of neoliberalism, and how the constant awareness of 'publics' or imagined publics in and beyond Hong Kong shape their rights discourse in return.

At the same time, the consistent messages of migrant domestic workers' organisations, the NGOs and their trade unions (I will refer them collectively as migrant domestic workers' movements thereafter unless specific reference is required in the context) that appear in the public arena, in the streets of Central, in and around the Hong Kong government headquarters, in front of courts or in the form of banners, pamphlets and posters, create audiences of such rights talk amongst themselves and the other non-progressive Filipino migrant workers who also gather in Central as well as the wider public in and beyond Hong Kong. Their taking over the space in Central through their different activities (please refer to chapters 4 & 5) and the prominent display of their 'rights' appeal' in these spaces, as I argue, in this chapter with more details discussed later, creates not only representational space (to be discussed in chapter 4) that counters the representation of space but also makes space FOR representation in the lens of Don Mitchell's (2003) 'rights to the city'. He contends that 'to fulfill a pressing need, some group or another takes space and through its action makes it public' and that 'the very act representing one's group (or to some extent one's self) to a larger public creates a space for representation (Mitchell, 2003: page 35). I will demonstrate in this chapter that through

both rights talk and making spaces for representation the migrant domestic workers' movement in Hong Kong construes 'publics' in the process.

### 3.2 The Rights Paradigm

'We are workers, we are not slaves' is one of the most commonly chanted slogans by the migrant domestic workers' movement in protest marches. These words are also often seen on banners and posters (please refer Figure 3-1) and sometimes press releases. At first I was taken aback by the assertive language, especially as the mention of slavery has been associated more with the transatlantic trade of Africans to the New World in an earlier era than with the global cosmopolitan city in which this slogan is heard and seen.



Figure 3-1: Poster in a protest march

The media, government departments and the public in Hong Kong in general refer to migrant domestic workers (as they call themselves in the

progressive Filipino community and the term I use throughout this thesis) as ‘foreign domestic helpers’. The term ‘foreign domestic helpers’ might appear innocuous enough to be passed as politically neutral: ‘foreign’ indicating their origin outside of the city and ‘domestic helpers’ indicating the nature of their work. The word ‘helper’ is generic (and convenient) enough to cover both the household chores and care work that are required in households in Hong Kong but in practice they might require different levels of skill and expertise, especially if the work involves care of the elderly with medical complications, which entails more than the requirements of a generic ‘helper’.

The seemingly innocuous term ‘foreign domestic helper’ is neither innocent nor neutral, and even more so when viewed in the light of the ‘rights’ framework. Their work, regardless of whether it is generic domestic work (which in fact might require certain skills such as culinary expertise, and even more so if the cuisine is not one’s own) or more specialised work in caring for the elderly and frail or the young and dependents in private households, is not recognised as work. The ‘familiarisation of paid domestic and care work – i.e. in the construction of this work as that of a family member - and her defamiliarisation’ - i.e. her systematic separation from her family’ (Kontos, 2013) underpins the logic of systematic exclusion of migrant domestic workers from certain civil and workers’ rights. This failure to recognise their work as work has political implications for how they are treated under the legal framework of Hong Kong. This is also the function of ‘exclusionary ideologies’ in which some people are denied human rights protection because of their identity, which Goodhart (2013) argues is most influential when people are institutionalised, as we see in the case of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Their ‘special status’ as ‘foreign domestic helpers’ – not workers - renders them excluded from the minimum wage legislation, and the compulsory live-in arrangement due to the nature of their ‘work’ becomes the basis on which a lower wage compared to the minimum wage is accorded to them.

Although their rights as workers are enshrined and protected in the Employment Ordinance, enforcing these laws in private households makes the Ordinance at best ambivalent in protecting their rights as workers. Their immigration status depends on a two-year employment contract under the category of ‘foreign domestic helper’- which is rendered by the Supreme Court to be ‘extraordinary’ in that it becomes the basis for excluding them from claiming the right to apply for permanent residency in the city. The ‘special category’ of ‘foreign domestic helper’ construed by the government systematically enforces their ‘otherness’. The media further reinforce their ‘otherness’, which affects how migrant domestic workers are perceived. Ladegaard (2013) argues that the exploitation and abuse of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong is legitimised through consistent negative them-presentation and positive us-presentation in the mass media.

Therefore, the claim to be recognised as ‘workers’ and the claims to other civil rights under the human rights discursive framework become the weapon through which migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong negotiate for their rights and counter the hegemonic narratives of the government and the mass media. In this chapter, I will examine the practice of the migrant domestic workers’ movement in Hong Kong in advocating their own rights through the deployment of the human rights discursive framework.

What kind of rights language has been used in the migrant domestic workers’ movement in Hong Kong? How can we understand this language in relation to the legal framework in Hong Kong and in relation to the unenforceability of the human rights regime in practice? How politically efficacious is the language of human rights in mobilising the movement? How then do we expand our understanding of human rights from the practice of the migrant domestic workers’ movement and the ways in which they use the language? These questions will be answered in the first part of this chapter.

The analysis will be based on the script of speeches that were distributed to all participants of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Asian Migrant Workers Summit – the forum in which representatives from various organisations constitutive of the transnational migrant workers’ movement in Hong Kong gathered and where statements and press releases were presented from organisations that constitute the migrant workers’ network. Interviews, pamphlets, posters and scripts for a training video will also be quoted as examples of the practice of the use of rights language.

Before we go on to the analysis per se, I would like to briefly introduce human rights as a concept and the somewhat awkward anthropological engagement with it. I will then move on to introduce human rights as a regime and the ways in which human rights as a concept and as a regime see the emergence of diverse groups deploying the language of human rights in advancing their specific social or political projects. I will then discuss specifically the rights language deployed by the migrant domestic workers’ movement in Hong Kong in relation to both human rights as a concept and as a regime and at the same time I will elaborate on the concept of ‘cultivating the public’ coined by Niezen (2010) in the discursive space of human rights.

### **3.2.1 Human Rights – the concept**

The concept of human rights is itself highly contentious. Its philosophical foundation is questionable, which has implications for its implementation and political efficacy, as we shall see later. The roots of the rights language can be traced to Western political history, which cumulated in the age of European Enlightenment in the development of the concept of ‘the rights of man’. The concept of ‘the rights of man’ was developed after the concept of ‘natural rights’ was derived from the idea of ‘natural law’ under Christianity where people owed duties to one another and to God, as laid out by John Locke (Goodhart, 2013). The conceptual linkage to a divine being from which rights derive threw into question its validity in an age when the reason of man was starting to replace the words of the divine. The



appeal to our common humanity made by Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes as the basis of ‘natural rights’ (Goodhart, 2013) and Kant’s metaphysical conception of rights of the person as a moral agent (Freeman, 2011) morphed into the basic inalienable rights as we have come to know them today.

The concept of natural rights was not without its critique in its early days and its philosophical foundation continues to generate debate in the world today. The attack on its universality was common among the earlier critique: Burke (1971, in Goodhart, 2013) argued - not unlike the statement issued by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in 1947 by H.G. Barnett on the basis that rights were not ‘natural’ but should be viewed in relation to the traditions and institutions of the society - that the rights of man should be ‘social’, not ‘natural’ (Freeman, 2011). Burke viewed the concept as ‘simplistic and dogmatic’ and believed that the ‘imposition of one list of abstract rights on all men would issue in the breakdown of social bonds, the eruption of chaos and eventually tyranny’ (Goodhart, 2013). The AAA statement in 1947 posed similar questions about the ‘universality’ of the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) when formal representations from academics and others were sought leading up to the ‘social construction of UDHR’: “how can the proposed Declaration be applicable to all human beings, and not be a statement of rights conceived only in terms of the values prevalent in the countries of Western Europe and America?” (Goodhart, 2013.) This ‘cultural relativism’ argument was taken up by leaders from Asia, although in a different turn; they argued that not only are human rights a western construct, but they have also been used (and are still used today, as in the case of the attack on Iraq by the U.S. justified by George Bush) to justify colonialism, imperialism and in general Western domination of non-European people. It formed the dominant cultural relativism strand of anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s and perhaps to a certain extent in the political context of Cold War, which thwarted the progression of the human rights regime, anthropological engagement with or studies of human rights were limited.

Jeremy Bentham was also critical of the concept of ‘natural rights’, which he dismissed as vague and irrational and as having no basis of justification after the removal of their link to the divine law (Freeman, 2011). He disputed the notion of ‘natural rights’ as he argued that there are ‘no such things as right anterior to the establishment of government’ (Bentham, 1842, in Goodhart, 2013); the only right he saw was the legal right. He was suspicious of the language of rights, which was elusive and hard-to-pin down, and he worried, not too differently from Burke, about the disruptive and subversive powers that the rights language could unleash, as seen in the aftermath of the French revolution in 1789, a period through which both of these men lived. His legal positivist approach is itself being critiqued today: Freeman (2011) critiqued that the studies of human rights have been dominated by lawyers who see human rights are what human-rights law say they are. He contends that although it might be desirable that human rights should be legally enforceable, it is precisely when legal recourse is not available that one appeals to human rights and ‘if legal positivism were true, an important basis for criticizing unjust legal systems would be eliminated’ (Freeman, 2011). Donnelly earlier (1989, in Goodhart 2013) argued along the same lines about what she termed the ‘possession paradox’; that ‘having a right is of most value when one does not have it.’

Marx also dismissed the concept of the ‘rights of man’ as the rights of ‘bourgeois man’. He argued that these rights of the bourgeois were ‘the natural necessity, need and private interest, the conservation of their property and egoistic person’, not ‘the rights of man conceiving of man as a species-being’ (Marx, 1987, in Goodhart, 2013). He viewed these rights as part of the general capitalist system; that they are still to some degree ‘determinant in social life’ – that they are protected within the existing institutional structure backed by state violence and that the interests of some are protected at the expenses of others because of human rights’ universality (Mitchell, 2003).

Feminist critiques also shared the same sentiment. The dominant idea or the normative theory of human rights, with a strong focus on individualism and the protection of civil and political rights, renders violations experienced by women politically invisible, as in the case of domestic violence where civil laws are incapable of reducing such violence against women and thus constitute an obstacle to women's enjoyment of their rights (Goodhart, 2013.) It is not only obstacles in the rights framework itself that prevent women from enjoying their rights; also, the social milieu in which human rights are supposed to be exercised creates unequal forces that require more than simply equal treatment to make advancements in the enjoyment of rights by women (Goodhart, 2013).

### **3.2.2 Human Rights – the practices and politics**

All of these critiques of the concept of rights or later on human rights, however, do not stop diverse groups of people from using the language of rights in their struggles. The cultural relativist critique of human rights assumes static social norms and is challenged on the ground by activists demanding the elimination of traditional practices or cultural or social norms that reproduce inequality. Changes from within do not stop a particular society or culture from fighting for the recognition of their group rights based on cultural difference. This is best illustrated with the example of the struggle by women in Zapatista for equality within the Zapatista community in the context of Zapatista's collective rights struggle against the Mexican state based on cultural differences. Speed (2009) argues that it is the multiple axes of oppression or the interlocking axes of structures of domination that shape the lives of these indigenous women and by looking at how these women in this particular social context understand their rights in different ways and fight for their rights in their own terms we can come to know better about human rights. In other words, we know human rights better when we look at how the concept of human rights is lived and practised by communities or groups using the rights language as their strategy. It is an understanding of human rights as a socially constructed

concept that substantiates the hollow philosophical foundation upon which the human rights concept was derived and developed.

The shift of focus to look at how people in a particular context practise human rights is what anthropologists have been doing since the 1990s, after the discipline's realignment in 1999. This realignment entailed a shift from an earlier relativist stance of rejecting the UDHR by Melville Herskovits's (AAA, 1947, in Goodhart, 2013) Statement on Human Rights, which later on was adopted by the American Anthropological Association (AAA). Herskovits argues that the universal human sameness, which forms the basis of the UDHR, is contrary to the anthropological understanding of differences in values between cultures. He also argues against the moral and normative implications of the UDHR, as a construct representing the cultural values of powerful Western nations (Goodale, 2009), which if used as a normative instrument, would deny the freedom of other peoples whose values differ from what is prescribed in the UDHR (Goodhart, 2013). The Statement quite effectively blocked anthropologists' engagement with human rights for a long time (Goodhart, 2013).

Changes during the 1980s and 1990s led to the AAA issuing a 'Declaration on Anthropology and Human Rights', wherein it states 'the AAA definition (of Human rights builds on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights...and other treaties which bring basic human rights within the parameters of international written and customary law and practice) thus reflects a commitment to human rights consistent with international principles but not limited by them'. Its stance on human rights is constantly evolving and UDHR is not merely a moral and normative instrument as it was taken to be in an earlier era. This speaks of a realignment and reengagement with human rights and the beginning of different approaches to the study of human rights by anthropologists.

Turner (1997, in Goodhart 2013) suggests an approach of 'emancipatory cultural politics' to human rights that treats human rights discourse as a

political strategy for marginalised groups and cultures. Speed (2006) also argues for ‘critically engaged activist research’ to embrace the issues raised by social actors, not just studies of human rights in a particular site but as advocacy for human rights there – an approach to human rights that Goodhart (2013) describes as normative. Wilson (1997, in Goodhart 2013), on the other hand, contends that the intellectual approach to human rights is to understand the ‘social life of rights’ by exploring their meaning and use according to the social actors who use the language of rights in the specific social context and in relation to the wider historical constraints of institutional power. This approach studies human rights by locating local struggles within their specific context with empirical data and examines how the universal concept of human rights is translated and used and how social actors become enmeshed in its logic (Cowan et al, 2001 in Goodhart 2013). ‘How human rights ideas and interventions circulate around the world and transform social life’ is also part of this intellectual enquiry (Merry, 2006 in Goodhart 2013).

Rather than suggesting to anthropologists to advocate the human rights of the groups they study, the latter approach of the ‘social life of rights’ is a study of the normativity of the human rights practice. The underlying philosophy of this approach is to view human rights as a social construction and the process of this social construction tells us what human rights are, what they mean to different people and how different people practise human rights. Through this approach to studying human rights, the plural and fragmentary nature of the international rights regime is revealed. Understandings of human rights and claims to rights are contested. Rights are not always enforceable; they are subject to politics as human rights law places limits on governments – in this particular aspect, it is also political. Articles within the UDHR might even be incompatible. Given the ambivalent and highly contested concept of human rights, perhaps it is useful to locate the discussion of this chapter in relation to the various approaches to studying human rights. But before doing so, it is necessary to

first provide a summary of various orientations to the problem of human rights as a normative category.

Goodale (2007) illustrates the diverse meanings of human rights along a spectrum of the degree of expansiveness. The more restricted view of 'human rights' at one end of the spectrum is of the various views of human rights as the body of international law – the UDHR and other conventions or instruments that follow. He then identifies Donnelley's (2003) work as an example of moving beyond the bodies of law to looking at human rights as a normative concept in itself. This orientation analyses conceptually and in theoretical abstraction how human rights normativity shapes the concepts of others, say for example the concept of the individual.

The most expansive orientation of human rights treats human rights as a discourse. By doing so, the international human rights regime (the bodies of human rights law and legal arenas like the international courts) becomes one of the many nodes in the power nexus from which human rights practices emerge. By treating human rights as a discourse, it ceases to be laws, codes or norms to be followed and its normativity becomes a question – how do people deploy the language of human rights, which might or might not be in accordance with the bodies with human rights law – given the at best ambivalent enforceability of even the bodies of human rights themselves. The ambivalence opens up alternative possibilities. Its political nature, given the bodies of international human rights law to which states are held to measure/or adhere, makes the human rights language a potent one. It is within the discursive space of human rights that the social lives of rights can be revealed and through practices of human rights that constitute an expansive notion of human rights that light can be shed on how the concepts and practices of human rights evolve and influence each other.

Within the framework of this expansive notion of human rights, of treating human rights as a discourse, the language of rights itself becomes the object

of analysis, as does the question of audience. Often the audience is clear and specific – as in many of the protests organised by the migrant domestic workers’ movement in Hong Kong in which protests often ended with the presentation of petitions to representatives of the state – either the officers from the Hong Kong government or the consulate representatives of the Filipino or Indonesian embassies. This gesture is significant on both sides. It is a recognition of the movement’s representation for migrant domestic workers by the state on the one hand and a recognition of the issues and problems faced by the migrant workers as being within the realm and power of the states concerned on the other. However, if petitions were all it took to make changes, we would see a lot less occupation of and protests in public spaces. If the handing-over of petitions were in itself an image powerful enough to galvanise any actions, the protests and occupations would have been superfluous. But we know that the protests and occupying of public spaces are significant in the process of constructing an alternative narrative for the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong as well as in framing their situation in the language of rights to demand changes that would make their working conditions better and reasonable. Claiming the right to the public space is significant in its own right, which I will discuss later in the chapter, but for now I argue that by protesting or occupying public spaces, disseminating the messages in the language of rights constructs ‘publics’ beyond the discursive spaces and moves into the physical realm of coming into contact with audiences that might not be the intended ones. Images of occupying and protesting in public spaces enter the discursive space through the mass media, press releases and social media. Public spaces, discursive and material, reinforce each other in the constructing of ‘publics’ – whose view, Niezen (2010) argues, have, in the expansive notion of human rights, ‘influence and possible effectiveness of international norms that are otherwise not judicially enforceable’. He argues that ‘publics’ have become an important part of the social imagination, whose opinions, compassion and activism influence the behavior of the powerful in the direction of laws outside the judicial processes’.

Niezen substantiates his argument by citing Kimlicka (2007, in Niezen 2010), who says that ‘states are increasingly being monitored and judged by how well they comply with these norms and failures to comply have resulted in criticism. In some cases non-compliance could have resulted in tangible consequences’ as some of the states depend on loans from the IMF and the World Bank, whose governance might render non-compliance with these norms too high a price to pay. Criticism, Kimlicka argues, is also a source of the influence of international norms. The presence of International Non-governmental Organisations (INGO) such as Amnesty International (AI) is a source of influence. Their sharing of information in their network with global media networks and their members with evidence of human rights violations act as an additional monitoring mechanism in world politics outside of the apparatus of UN bodies (Goodhart, 2013). Naming and shaming the public bodies (states for example) that engage in systematic non-compliance with human rights in print and digital media through skillful exposure is one of the techniques deployed by INGOs to influence state behavior. This process of and the relationship between the practice of human rights networks and the state practice is termed the ‘norm cascade’ (Goodhart, 2013). The norm cascade is also termed the ‘boomerang model’ (Freeman, 2011). It describes the dynamics between the international pressures and human rights compliances at the local level. There are five phases of change in this model: (1) repression - this not only consists of the violation of human rights but also the prevention of information from leaking out of the country; delegitimising external pressures, sometimes even mobilising nationalist sentiment to fend off external pressures (as is often the case in China); (2) mobilisation by external actors through a combination of material and normative pressures, including shaming publicity; (3) repressive states buying off ‘external pressures’ (as part of international politics and foreign policy, which goes beyond the scope of this thesis) or making tactical concessions; (4) for the latter, human rights norms being acknowledged through the institutionalisation of human rights domestically although implementation might be imperfect (as is the case even at the UN level); (5) compliance



with human rights norms becoming habitual (Risse and Sikkink 1999, in Freeman 2011).

Although this model does not explain why in certain areas external influences do not work, it provides an analytical framework to situate the discursive space of human rights activists in influencing (or hoping to influence) states' behaviour. This boomerang model (or norm cascade process) renders the translation (or more broadly communication) between the local and the global important as it provides the basis for influences to be exerted (E. L. Lutz & Sikkink, 2000) to effect changes in states' behaviour.

### **3.3 Translating between the global and the local**

The study of 'translation' that takes place between the global and the local – the dialectic/dialogic processes of translating global ideas into local practices and the feeding of local framing and practices back to global attention and the intermediaries such as NGOs, social movement activists and others who do the translating - is argued by Merry (2006) to be crucial in understanding the interwoven circulation of the ideas and practices that constitute the process of the norm cascade and which transform social life. I would like to draw on Niezen's concepts of 'publics' to argue further that the process of translation not only constructs multiple publics whose opinions might have influences on global norms and local political efficacy but also constitutes a strategy through which a new subjectivity of migrant domestic workers that underpins the social movements that we have witnessed in Hong Kong emerges. Niezen has focused his argument on how indigenous groups appeal to the publics who might not be immediately identifiable using the language of 'cultural differences'. I argue that his concept of 'cultivating publics' can be expanded to include identifiable groups of people with strategically different rights languages and is not limited to instances of indigenous people claiming collective rights. Like Niezen, who emphasises the plural publics, I attempt to demonstrate in the case of the transnational migrant domestic workers movement in Hong

Kong that the different frameworks underpinning the language of rights reflect on the part of the spokesperson or the producer of the rhetoric and the different imaginations of the public to whom the language is targeted.

One of the first ‘publics’ is the migrant domestic workers themselves. Hong Kong is seen by many as the exemplary destination for migrant workers, with its laws and policies that might appear to be protective of migrant workers, although in practice there are obstacles for migrant workers to claim these rights (Constable, 2015). The more fundamental problem is that many of the migrant workers are not aware of, or do not understand, the rights that have been accorded to them within Hong Kong’s legal framework. Although employment contracts are signed by both employers and employees, the legal terms used make it hard to understand them. Cynthia, the manager of the Mission said:

*‘Even though most of them (domestic workers) are professionals, they don’t read their contract... the contract has very legal terms ... this is my classical example ‘hitherto and for’, what does it mean? (The contract) cannot be easily understood until you are in trouble. They (would ask) in this contract, where is my right with regard to a particular incident for example, so they do not know (their rights)...’ (Interview by author, 22 August 2014, words in brackets added by author).*

Thus, before even translating the global language of human rights to local issues, around which migrant workers are mobilised and publics sympathetic towards them are aroused, education or information dissemination of the rights under the existing legal structure of Hong Kong is instrumental as a first step in constructing the subjectivity of rights of migrant domestic workers. The Mission, which publishes a booklet called ‘Know Your Rights’, started the 2010 edition with the following words: ‘the road to empowerment starts with our own desire and decisiveness to acquire knowledge’; it has been at the forefront in equipping migrant domestic workers with knowledge about their rights.

A new edition of 'Know Your Rights' called 'Know Your Rights Plus' was published and issued in January 2013, just before I started volunteering at the Mission. Versions in different languages were issued. At the first meeting with ATIS (please refer to chapter 5), these booklets were distributed to leaders of grassroots organisations and there was talk of organising seminars to discuss the content of the booklet in relation to the standard employment contract that is the envy of many in other parts of the world. The booklet later became part of the 'toolkit kit' provided to welfare officers of various grassroots organisations to build the capacities (by setting up their own welfare committee & programme) of the grassroots organisations to help their own members who might have their contractual rights violated.

The language in this 'Know Your Rights Plus' (MFMW, 2013) booklet is plain and simple. It is framed largely within the legal structure of Hong Kong with extensive reference to the Employment Ordinance of Hong Kong Cap 57 and Employees Compensation Ordinance Chapter 282. It explains the legal rights that these workers are accorded in the contract and the Employment Ordinance. It also details the ways in which legal rights are to be secured in cases of breach of contract by the parties to the contract. Outside the realm of employment, in relation to circumstances where some migrant domestic workers might find themselves facing the authorities as a result of being accused of theft, child abuse or overstay, or in the event of them being victims of assault, the booklet details the rights that they are accorded within the existing legal structure of Hong Kong such as the right to remain silent, and the importance of providing evidence in the event that they face physical assault. Reference to human rights is scant in the booklet. The language of rights here is largely within the confines of the existing legal structure and institution – securing one's right is a matter of knowing it and knowing how to get it. It is perhaps easiest to relate to given its pragmatism and the concrete steps laid out in claiming rights as workers recognised by the Employment Ordinance, if only partially. The language of rights here is legal in nature, taking rights as what the laws says they are.

The audience of this language of rights is every migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong; the political message, if there is one, is ‘empowerment through knowledge’.

Migrant domestic workers’ special immigration status as ‘foreign domestic helpers’ excludes them from certain rights that other workers enjoy. For instance, they are excluded from the Minimum Wage Ordinance, social security and maternity leave protection. The claims and fight to be recognised as ‘workers’ by the migrant domestic workers’ movement in Hong Kong can thus be seen as their struggle to have full and non-discriminatory access to what other workers enjoy in the city. The mention of slavery in their slogan, ‘We Are Workers, We Are Not Slaves’, highlights that the specific rules governing migrant domestic workers render them vulnerable to forced labour or physical assault, conditions they term ‘modern day slavery’.

‘Modern day slavery’ is a term frequently used in speeches and protest posters by the migrant domestic workers’ movement in Hong Kong. Their vulnerable situation is revealed through the extreme brutality that some of them face (please refer to chapters 2 and 6). In a speech given by Sringatin, from the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Asian Migrant Workers’ Summit, she said:

*‘there is a deeper problem that puts migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong in the condition of modern-day slavery and exclusion. At the core of what we all experience are the policies of the Hong Kong government that purposely make our job insecure, our labour cheap, our working conditions inhuman and our rights restricted’.*

Her speech then launched into critiquing specific policies of the Hong Kong government that sustain the ‘conditions of modern-day slavery’, many of which are mentioned in the periodic report by the United Nations Economic and Social Council on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN, 2014), including the two-week rule, the compulsory live-in arrangement and the exclusion of migrant domestic workers from the Minimum Wage Ordinance,

social security and maternity leave protection on the grounds of non-discrimination. Whilst the UN report categorically situates the plight faced by migrant domestic workers as a form of ‘discrimination’ that excludes them from enjoying their rights as workers, the speech given by Springatin, emphasises the effects of the two-week rule and compulsory live-in arrangement on the migrant domestic workers:

*“...like a chain that keeps us bound and forced to accept whatever comes our way...the live-in arrangement has forced migrant domestic workers to accept any living and working conditions that our employers give us, it is not true that we have a choice”.*

She continued:

*“they can order us to sleep on the floor, in the kitchen, in a cupboard or in a bed constructed just above the toilet seat, and we do not have a choice but to endure it”.*

She also criticised the rampant practice of illegal charging of agency fees, which leads many migrant domestic workers to end up in debt (please refer to chapters five and six for more discussion), a practice pointed out by Human Rights Watch. This frequently leads domestic workers into forced labour and servitude (Mullally & Murphy, 2015).

The use of the term ‘modern slavery’ implies forced labour and servitude as a result of the specific conditions created by governmental policies. This takes the migrant domestic workers movement beyond the existing Hong Kong legal framework and codified laws to that of the universal human rights enshrined in several international instruments including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1979 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, on the basis of the obligation of effective deterrence of forced labour, slavery and human trafficking (Mullally & Murphy, 2015). Framed in such a way, the migrant domestic workers’ movement critiqued the Hong Kong government’s policies as violations of human rights and

held the Hong Kong government (the state) to be the ‘immoral actor’ within the context of the legitimacy and influence of the international law of human rights in which states have to bear all the ideals and responsibilities and improvements in terms of behaviour that underpins the essence of human rights standard setting (Niezen, 2010).

The change in the language of rights from that of the codified rights enshrined in contracts and the Employment Ordinance to the language of rights with reference to the codification that makes up the soft laws of the human rights regime is what Niezen (2010) describes as the ‘cultivation of popular indignation’. He argues that this is done through ‘personification of the state’ by communities that are marginalised by the state to represent themselves to others as a collective entity that is subject to the abuse of a state, and to articulate claims of collective rights, virtue and victimhood in order to reach out to alien publics for recognition and sympathy (Niezen, 2010). I argue that the implication of a shift in the language to that of the violation of human rights on the part of the Hong Kong government is twofold: firstly, by holding the state to be the source of the injustice and suffering they face pressure from international bodies outside of the local judicial system; and secondly, at the same time it perhaps provides legitimacy and support for the other branches of government (judicial and legislative) to exert their influence over executive decisions. In terms of the alien publics to which the migrant workers’ movement might hope to reach out, their issues were indeed raised in the United Nations’ report. Amnesty International has also published a report on the slavery-like conditions that many of the migrant domestic workers face in Hong Kong. Within the local state itself, opinions and voices different from that of the executive branch (the policy-making bodies) also started to emerge (please refer to Erwiana’s case in chapter six). Niezen’s (2010) argument regarding the ‘cultivation of popular indignation through personification of state’ is a good ground from which to understand the language of rights undertaken by marginalised communities to claim their rights but he has not captured the nuanced and complex power relations within the state itself.

At the same time, the personification of the state is expanded to include more than just one state. In the case of activists in the migrant domestic workers' movement in Hong Kong, they do not stop at claiming to be workers and criticising Hong Kong governmental policies that make their livelihood precarious. They also frame their situation in relation to global neoliberalism, which links the states of migrant sending countries, whose inability to generate jobs at home make them victims of 'forced migration' – a term that has a more specific reference to refugees and perhaps to some extent asylum seekers in the human rights regime but nevertheless is taken up by the migrant domestic workers' movement to construe their collective victimhood as being a result of the immoral action of states, which range from migrant sending countries to the allegedly 'imperial' countries of the global order of neoliberalism such as the United States.

Moving from the specifics to the general - from codified contractual rights under the existing legal framework and governmental policies with reference to specific human rights covenants to the more generic concept of global neoliberalism and ambiguous terms of claims to human rights - proves tricky. It requires a leap of faith not simply on the part of the ones who construe the rhetoric of the language of rights, but also on the part of the audience, who might not see the legitimacy in the language used. I illustrate this point with my personal reflection on the specific concept of 'forced migration'.

I found myself involved in the production of a welfare training video that, together with 'Know Your Right Plus', became part of the toolkit for setting up welfare programs for grassroots organisations. It was a joint effort between the Mission and another NGO, whose role is to advocate rights for migrant workers across the region. The team members, including me, were not migrant domestic workers. In the process, I found myself involved in translating (or critiquing) the global terms used by the advocacy networks to address or situate local specific issues faced by migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. The terms used and the tones in which the video were set

changed after my input during the internal discussion but the discussion itself was a manifestation of how the language of rights was a process of deliberate negotiation and strategy.

The very first draft script proposed to start the narration with the following words: Poverty

Unemployment

Displacement

Inaccessible social services

Debt

Lack of on-site services

Forced migration

Unfamiliar with the language of rights at the time of the production, I was struck by how provocative some of these words were. It was unclear to me then how these terms were going to be comprehended by the migrant domestic workers themselves. Did they see themselves through the light of these words? Or was there an intention to make them see themselves in such a light? Was this an attempt to connect the dots for them to confront and situate the problems they face on a more daily basis as related to some abstract ideas about ‘displacement’ or ‘forced migration’, or influence them in how they communicate with others, including me, about what they believe and what they do?

I was not ready to move from the role of providing support to the frontline services, of looking through the files of each individual story and occasionally hearing directly from the clients themselves in the Mission office, to the role of being involved in producing portrayals of migrant domestic workers’ lives in images and words with a coherent story and rhetoric with potential political implications (or just falling short of telling them what to think about the situations they faced).



I then commented:

*“the connotation associated with these words might not immediately strike the audience as being relevant. For example, displacement in today’s context, people might associate it more readily with Syria’s refugees than Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong”.*

At the same time, I was struck by the authoritative character of the script. A statement shouted, ‘migrant workers are in crisis’, and was followed by a long narrative that I later came to know was the argument made by the advocacy network as their concept of ‘forced migration’: migrant workers are forced to be separated from their loved ones by the need to survive. They are mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters and sons who have made the sacrifice of living and working in a foreign land and facing hardships to provide for the most basic needs of their families. The long narrative then described the loneliness and homesickness felt by the migrant workers, the vulnerable situations in which they work, soaring prices, insufficient provision of social services and political instability, which are attributable to the ‘crisis’ that migrant workers face and stop them from going home to reunite with their families.

The attempt to link the problems they face to the purpose of the programme came in broad sweeping statements: ‘when they encounter problems abroad, the system in place to provide them assistance is very insufficient, if not absent. Important information is withheld from them, they are not given sound and reasonable advice, they are treated rudely by government officials, legal and medical assistance when needed are not made available, and financial assistance is nowhere to be found’.

Uncomfortable with the authoritative approach and broad-sweeping statement of the narrative (which was quite contrary to the Know Your Rights Plus booklet, which reflects the established rule of law in Hong

Kong), I argue that the migrants should do the talking and those who have specific issues should share them so that the audience can draw their own conclusions and link the dots themselves. Those who have been through it are in a much better position to relate to the migrant domestic workers and share their experiences in providing welfare support than us telling them what to think and do. I recommended interviews rather than a long narrative.

The recommendations and comments were taken graciously and were put into context in relation to the target audience by other team members. One of them recommended not starting with a serious tone, which might bore the migrant workers and another argued that the idea of forced migration did not need to be expounded as the audience of this welfare training video would have familiarised themselves with the concept earlier in other seminars organised by grassroots organizations. The provocative terms were removed and the authoritarian narrative was replaced with interviews, although the reasoning behind these changes was less an agreement on the philosophy and more about the effect that it would have on the audience. The public at which this video was aimed was very different from the public of the 'Know Your Right Plus' booklet – active members of a grassroots organisation in the case of the former and every migrant worker in Hong Kong in the case of the latter.

Forced migration is a concept that the advocacy network that is constitutive of the transnational migrant domestic workers' movement in Hong Kong (please refer to chapter six) consistently used in their portrayal of the situations of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. I argue that the act of using this provocative term to describe the causes of their leaving behind their families for survival is a political act that breaks away from the convention of how this term is commonly used and understood even within the language of rights. It might have strengthened the efficacy of constructing a transnational public among the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong by targeting their own states and in general global

neoliberalism with regard to their plight. It might also, in my opinion, undermine the legitimacy of their claims - perhaps less so in the part of the world in which the rhetoric is preached, where 'forced migration' in the conventional sense is less rampant. It would, however, sound a lot more provocative and indigenous in the face of refugees fleeing their homelands due to the adversity of war. It might be argued that the civil war that is still ongoing in the southern Philippines is the cause of the migration there; the migration as a result of that war is 'forced migration'. As demonstrated in the stories of many in the previous chapters, the reasons for them leaving behind their families varied and the reasons for their continued absence changed over time. It could very much be the case that in order to embrace the complex and diverse political and economic situations in different countries of origin that might have contributed to their absence from their families and homeland, a term that is provocative enough yet at the same time expandable to include a broad range of interpretations should be strategically chosen. I argue that the use of the term 'forced migration' is crafted not only with the general alien publics in mind, by claiming victimhood and the suffering of injustices perpetuated by states, as Niezen (2010) argues, but it also strategically aligns them with the anti-globalisation movement, which has its roots in the wide ranging and disparate struggles against neoliberal capitalism, which have become a recognised entity with a heightened capacity to shift public debate (Daro, 2013). Thus, even though the term 'forced migration' seems at best ambiguous and at worst controversial. The constant appearances of this term in speeches in the transnational migrant domestic workers' movement and in conversations I had with my informants has taken on its own meaning, outside of the conventional language of rights, in this specific context.

From the ways in which the language of rights is used that encompass the local to the global, we can see the multi-scalar nature of the transnational migrant movement in Hong Kong. At the local level, it claims the right to be recognised as workers. Through publications like 'Know Your Rights

Plus', it empowers the migrant domestic workers through educating them about their accorded rights within the local legal framework. It then claims the right to be recognised as victims of injustice, perpetuated by state policies, through claiming that the vulnerabilities of migrant domestic workers are akin to 'modern slavery', which evokes a state's obligation to interfere with specific reference to covenants of human rights. This explicit appeal to the human rights regime generates influences from external (the UN) and internal (judicial and legislative) parties on Hong Kong government policies although we have yet to see a concrete change in behaviour from the executive branch of the government. Lastly, the construction of victimhood based on the ambiguous term 'forced migration', aligned with the global anti-globalisation movement as resistance to neoliberal capitalism, under which migrant sending countries and the alleged 'imperialist U.S' are blamed for their plight makes them both 'victims' and at the same time 'activists fighting for their rights'. This perhaps illustrates quite well the paradox of human rights—it is precisely when you have no rights that having rights becomes valuable (Donnelly, 1989 in Goodhart 2013), and in order to claim or fight for your rights, you need to portray yourself as victims of injustice, lacking the agency to change your own fate.

The multi-scalar use of the language of rights comes with a different imagination of the intended public – from all migrant workers in Hong Kong (the audience of the Know Your Rights Plus Booklet), to the fellow migrant worker activists (the welfare training video), to the global movement activists with a language of resistance to neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, however, they are used simultaneously – a manifestation of the multi-scalar struggles that constitute the movement. The language of rights used in the movement constructs a collective subjectivity of the migrant workers, but also has an intended audience of publics who might be influenced by either the specific reference to human rights or the more generic struggle against neoliberal capitalism or a mixture of both. It will be clearer to use extracts Eni's speech at the Third Asia Migrant Workers'

Summit to illustrate my points above. She spoke in the capacity of the Chairperson of the International Migrant's Alliance (IMA). (Please refer to chapter six for more discussion about Eni and the organisation.)

*'We are gathered ... because we are seeking an explanation to study our own situation. We want to understand because as grassroots migrant workers who have no choice but to live in the reality of forced migration and modern slavery, we must discuss and unite on what can be done to address all these problems. We are here to reaffirm our commitment to fight back ... because we are workers and we are not slaves' (script of a speech, Eni, 31 August 2014).*

*'Our problem is not just bad employers and bad recruitment agencies but the more systematic ones – the bad policies by both our own governments and the receiving government in Hong Kong. Government policies and treatments that actually are the ones that made us modern slaves. Through the labour export programme, our government earns income and remittances from migrant workers and cuts down the high rate of unemployment in our country. Likewise, receiving governments like Hong Kong enjoy the cheap labour of migrant workers for their neoliberal development. Despite our economic and other social contributions, our rights as workers, women and human beings continue to be ignored and omitted' (script of a speech, Eni, 31 August, 2014).*

*'Furthermore, we also learned that our miseries as migrant domestic workers are part of a neoliberal globalisation scheme promoted by monopoly capitalism at the expense of the majority of people in the world. Not only do we in Hong Kong face the problems, all migrant workers in different parts of the world face them' (script of a speech, Eni, 31 August, 2014).*

Her speech was interwoven with different claims to rights as workers, women and human beings. She moved from the personal to the political by critiquing the government policies of both sending and receiving countries, to which migrant workers suffering is attributable, and her language was dotted with terms that have taken on their own lives in this particular context but which would otherwise sound out of place, such as modern day slavery and forced migration as discussed in length above.

The most important turn in her speech was the switch from the claiming of rights to calling for action. Here, more specifically, she knew exactly the ‘public’ she was appealing to and the ‘public’ she needed to cultivate. To fellow migrant activists she said:

*‘...we continue to organise and empower our fellow migrant workers. Every Sunday, we use our day-off to inform our compatriots about their rights as domestic workers and educate them to be brave to fight for their dignity’.*

The public to be ‘cultivated’ (in the sense of cultivating the public, as argued by Niezen (2010)), in this instance is the other migrant workers who are still unaware of their rights as domestic workers.

She continued:

*‘We should prepare ourselves for greater challengers by educating ourselves, deepening our knowledge ... we must engage directly in the movement by joining a progressive organisation and alliance’.*

Here the public to be ‘cultivated’ was the migrant workers who might have come to appreciate their rights as workers, but perhaps not yet as activists. She also talked of reaching out to ‘many people in Hong Kong whose hearts are in the right place for justice and human rights’ and ‘organisations of grassroots migrants and advocates outside of Hong Kong’ – the intangible public to whom she wants to reach out. She continued, ‘for our advocate friends, thank you for always putting our voice, rights and wellbeing at the forefront of your work’ – this was the tangible public that were physically present in the same auditorium as she was. The recognition of multiple and overlapping publics to whom the language of rights crafted by the movement were delivered demonstrates the ‘strategic cultivation of public compassion and indignation’ through the language of rights. It also demonstrates how the ‘cultivation of publics’ can be used for strategic ends in terms of mass mobilisation and political awakening, as Niezen (2010) suggests. The publics are not just distant and intangible and unknown

consumers of information as Niezen articulates, but identifiable and specific publics in the case of migrant domestic workers and migrant domestic worker activists, as stipulated in Eni's speech. The difference, I argue, lies in the fact that these 'publics' that Eni refers to have physical and material presence in Hong Kong's public spaces on Sundays.

### **3.4 Rights to the Space for Representation**

Eni's call to migrant domestic workers to show, visibly, in public spaces, the strength of the movement, was poignant:

*'We need to mobilise thousands of migrants to advance our position. Attending these consultations is not enough if the Hong Kong authorities do not see a sea of migrants marching on the streets for our rights. We have learned from our experience that our rights and wellbeing will not be offered to us on a silver platter. We have to struggle for only by struggling can we hope to win...concretely, let us prepare for a mass action on International Migrant Day (this is an annual march, please refer to chapter four for more details), where we shall bring up all the major issues that we want the Hong Kong government and our respective governments to address' (script of speech, Eni, 31 August 3014).*

By taking to the streets, the publics have been made concrete. They represent themselves in public spaces to a larger population – the Hong Kong government, the publics and the world; and through representing themselves in the public spaces their cries and demands are seen and heard. The making of the publics, by taking over public spaces to represent themselves, creates a space for representation (Mitchell, 2003). Don Mitchell (2003) argues that this space for representation is a public space that arises out of the dialectic between the representations of space and representational space (please refer to chapter four for a more detailed discussion of these terms in Lefebvre's sense), between those who seek order and control and those who seek places for oppositional political activity and unmediated interaction. This space FOR representation is the space in which political movements are seen and heard by staking out their territory. The materiality of the space for representation is what makes it

important for the struggles of rights. Don Mitchell (2003) contends that in the case of the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization, it was the visibility of the protesters, their bodies and their costumes on the city streets that made the difference – that nearly shut down the meeting. He argues that all of the web communication in the world would not have the same effect. It is in the material space, the space for representation, that publics are made – they become visible in the space for representation and physically disrupt the control and order that are typical of the representation of space (Lefebvre, 1991b). Public spaces are at the same time created only when oppositional struggle against the abstract, the ordered and the controlled materialises in spaces for representation (Don Mitchell, 2003). Public spaces are thus in a sense constantly emerging, and constantly in the struggle against being closed off and at the same time being claimed and taken back by the people who struggle for their rights.

### **3.5 Merging of Discursive and Material Publics**

Publics that have been cultivated using the language of rights are made concrete through their visibility in the material space for representation by claiming their rights to the city. At the same time their struggle for rights in the material space animates the space for representation public. It is the coming together of the discursive and material publics that underpins the migrants' movements in Hong Kong. The claim to the city, or the right to the city, or more specifically, the right to space for representation is thus important for 'publics', for those who want to be seen and heard and to have the opportunity to become part of the plural publics in their own right. Don Mitchell (2003) contends that it is the good that comes from the version of public space as a relatively unmediated interaction, the space's 'publicness' as a good in and of itself and as a collective right to the city that are crucial, especially in the face of threats that come from the exclusion of certain segments of the population (please refer to chapter five for discussions about the interactions between the migrants and the authorities) and the promotion of private, controlled spaces, which are increasingly seen as the solution to perceived social problems.



The publicness of public spaces allows problems that might otherwise be masked to become visible. For instance, the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, who are mandated by government policy to live-in with their employers and who find it unaffordable to spend the whole day in cafes and restaurants on their days off would have nowhere else to go to, or simply be (as akin to homeless people in Don Mitchell's discussion) if they were not on the streets and in the open spaces of Central. Their problems with their employers, if there were any, would be hidden in the private households, for they would not have access to the wider publics in their own community in places like Central on Sundays, where a simple question like asking where to find help can quite readily be answered and they can be directed to service providers like the Mission or grassroots organisations, which hang banners at prominent sites to help migrant domestic workers who might be in trouble. The presence of a physical site like Central offers not only a space for representation, but also a space to be for migrant domestic workers and it is also here that publics cultivated through the language of rights cease to be faceless consumers of information, and become rights-conscious subjectivities.

A place to go and just be, in Don Mitchell's discussion about homeless people in Berkeley, is essential to the formation of rights-conscious subjectivities. Being heard and seen by the public at large is quite different from acquiring or familiarising oneself with the language of rights. Raising awareness about rights is not one-way street. It is not like in the auditorium of a university setting, where few but the most experienced in the setting speak up; it is a two-way dialogue that is only possible in a conducive environment. The open spaces of Central allow groups of various sizes to gather and talk. Grassroots organisations organise seminars that allow members to participate and ask questions. N, who has been in Hong Kong for fifteen years and recently found a new grassroots organisation, told me:

*'at the seminars they would ask us what are the problems, any suggestions, any ideas, so I always raise my hand to speak, to*

*‘speak what’s on my mind, that built up my confidence’  
(interview by author, 1 June 2014).*

The place to go and be, in a way, is more than taking to the streets – the Sunday gatherings, the lived experiences, and the everyday practices are all constitutive of being who they are and fundamental to becoming ‘publics’. It is in the public spaces that they can simply be and become what they aspire to be. Through participating in events like One Billion Rising (Figure 3-2), a worldwide campaign against violence against women, N and others in the movement become part of a global community raising issues about violence against women. The campaign did this by organising women to dance en-mass – in an interview with the Guardian,<sup>7</sup> Ensler says it is claiming back the public spaces for women – as creative resistance. Images of the campaign appear in media around the globe, including those of the migrant workers in Hong Kong. Through it, they become a global public reaching out to a global public.

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<sup>7</sup> Source: One Billion Rising: how can public dancing end violence against women? By Homa Khaleeli, 13 Feb 2015, the Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2015/feb/13/one-billion-rising-public-dancing-violence-women-eve-ensler>



Figure 3-2: One Billion Rising dance at Chater Road on 15 Feb 2015; Source of Photo: Courtesy of Cocoy A. Sabareza from Filguys Organizations - Gabriela Hong Kong

It is not possible to discern how and where the ‘publics’ start – did they start in the realm of the discursive spaces cultivated in the language of rights, as Niezen (2010) articulates, or the claim to the rights of the city, as Don Mitchell argues, the physical space of Central in which the Filipino migrants gather? I argue that it is less a concern about where the ‘publics’ start and more about recognition that the ‘publics’ emerge as a result of bringing together the struggle for rights as migrant domestic workers and the struggle for a space for representation as a claim to the right to the city. In other words, publics cultivated in the discursive space with the language of rights remain intangible and unidentifiable consumers of information. The publics who gather in an uncontested and sanitised public space of consumerism remain random masses of passive consumers (as in the case of Tiffany Wonderland, discussed in chapter four). Or in the case of traditional groups who gather in Central on Sundays, described by K, who ‘don’t know what to do besides being together’ as collection of private individuals. Being together in a public space does not amount to creating space for representation. It is in the togetherness with a message to deliver, i.e. the conveying of the publics construed in the discursive space with the

language of rights, that puts words to bodies occupying spaces and bodies occupying spaces to words. It is the bringing together of the discursive publics cultivated through the language of rights and the publics in the material space that are constitutive of the transnational migrant workers' movement in Hong Kong. It is the constructing of publics in the discursive space using the language of rights and by claiming a right to the city and the space for representation that publics come into being.

Don Mitchell (2003) argues that the struggle for rights produces space. Indeed it does, as in the case of Central for the migrant domestic workers' movement. Their struggles as migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong makes Central more than a space of global capital; it is also a site of resistance and struggles, although it might be added that the presence of a material space in which Filipino migrant domestic workers gather on Sundays helps to materialise the struggles in the space. Thus, publics cannot be public without having the right to the space for representation (public spaces) and public spaces that are not spaces for representation are not public. They are the two sides of the same coin – one cannot go without the other.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

My notion of the nuanced, multiple and overlapping 'publics' contrasts with Habermas's public sphere, which is more concerned with the bourgeois that assumes 'universality' with its representation and perhaps as a result excludes acknowledging the 'counter-publics' (Fraser, 1990) who compete to be in the public spheres and bringing issues that might not be deemed as 'public' into the public sphere. Using the language of rights deployed in the transnational migrant domestic workers' movement in Hong Kong, I have demonstrated that even within the seemingly uniform public within a movement, there are multiple publics along the spectrum depending on their acquisition and/or familiarity with the language of rights as well as their inclination and subscription to the multi-scalar of the same discursive representation. I have also demonstrated that instead of the publics that are

knowable only through extrapolation, which are distinctly non-manifest as Niezen (2010) argues in the process of claiming collective human rights, or cultural rights, the publics in the transnational migrant domestic workers' movements are identifiable and visible, as the nuanced, multiple and overlapping publics occupy the streets of Central on Sundays and public holidays. It is the materiality of their presence in public spaces that make their 'publics' concrete. Discursive publics need to be materialised in space to make themselves felt.

From the perspective of rights to the city, which Don Mitchell discusses at length with regard to the rights of homeless people, for marginal people to be seen and heard and alternative movements contesting issues of citizenship and democracy to be made visible the publicness of public spaces is crucial. I wish to emphasise that whilst I do not dispute the rights to the city and the good of the publicness in and of itself, lacking the discursive power regarding what exactly these publics in the spaces are about, the gathering of people in public spaces becomes what K says, and which I repeatedly quote because of how succinctly it captures and perhaps reflects the nature of movements we have seen in the world lately, for example the Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and the Umbrella Movement –‘they do not know what to do besides being together’. Mobilising masses to take to the streets with spur of the moment emotions of outrage and hope (Castells, 2012) is one thing, but cultivating publics and at the same time taking into account the nuanced, multiple and overlapping publics and strategising multiple claims in the language of rights is quite another. Whilst the former might have generated excitement and spectacle, it is in the latter, with its influence on expanding the notion of human rights, that our struggles for our rights might be advanced. It is ultimately due to our aspirations for the kind of the world we want to create that human rights as a regime came into being after World War Two. And it is in the belief that everyone is equally deserving in terms of being protected and accorded human rights that people struggle for their rights, or else, quoting Harvey (2000), ‘what on earth are workers of the world

supposed to unite about unless it is some sense of their fundamental rights as human beings'? Starting with the belief that we are all human beings seems like a small yet big step forward.

In the next two chapters to follow, I will discuss how the transnational migrant workers' movement in Hong Kong animates the spaces and streets of Central 'public': as resistance to the domination of global capital through their protest marches - in chapter four - and with regard to how they negotiate with the representatives and enforcers of abstract spaces with their lived practices in the same area.

## **Chapter 4 The Global Third Space**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Co-ordinates such as this: "22°16'51.75 N, 114° 9'35.48 E" do not mean anything to most people, as Cresswell (2004) suggests. They simply point to a location in Hong Kong, the Statue Square.

Statue Square is a rectangular open space in the centre of Central, the central business district. It is a civic centre with clusters of government buildings and skyscrapers that house some of the biggest multinational corporations in Hong Kong. Along its southern edge is the HSBC Headquarters Building. Neighbouring its northern end is an eight-lane expressway. To the north of the square is Connaught Road Central and to the south is Des Voeux Road. Chater Road runs through it in the middle and splits the square into two along its east-west axis. The northern half of Statue Square is sandwiched between the Mandarin Oriental Hotel to the west and the Cenotaph to the east. The southern half of Statue Square is bordered in the east by the Old Supreme Court, one of the few classical buildings remaining from the colonial times, and in the west by the Prince Building (please refer to Figure 4-1).

## Statue Square

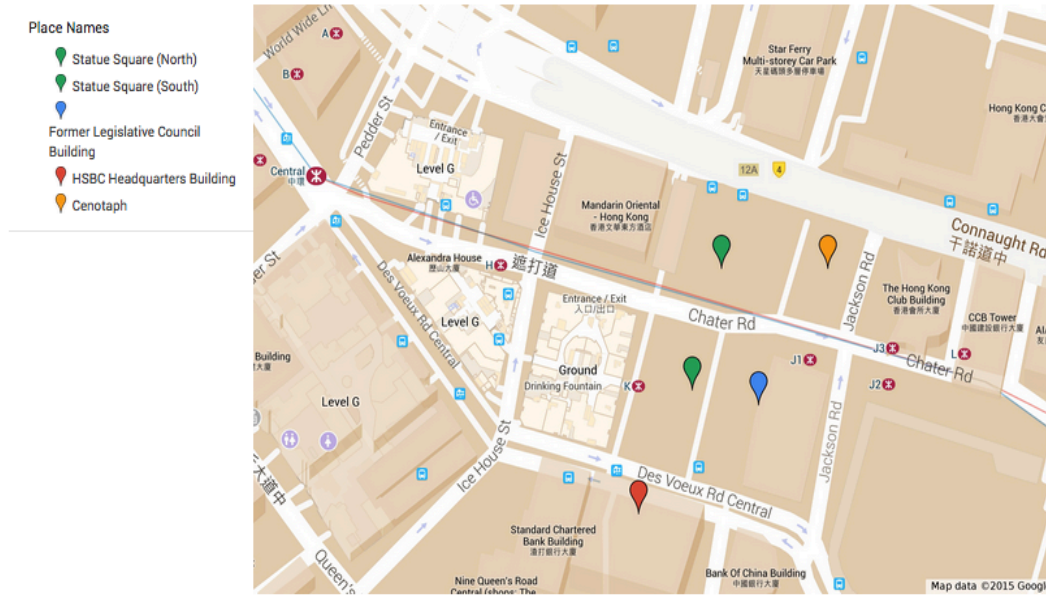


Figure 4-1: Map for area around Statue Square

Within the tiny square, there are a number of water features: there is one water fountain in the northern half, which occupies almost half of the square right in the centre and a smaller rectangular one on the right of it, although there is no symmetrical relationship between the two to speak of. There are two smaller water features in the southern part of the square closer to the Old Supreme Court in the east, which leaves the western half of the southern square adorned with the statue of Sir Thomas Jackson, General Manager of HSBC from 1876-1902, facing the Old Supreme Court. The structure that is the entrance to the Central Mass Transit Rail (MTR) Station and yet another water feature of an irregular shape take up most of the rest of the area. Concrete benches are mounted to the floor within a couple of pavilions. There is little room left for pedestrians.

The Square is ornamented with street furniture and artwork with an unknown connection to Hong Kong: one row of sheltered benches is located next to the big water fountain in the northern half of the square, right in the middle of the path leading from the bus stops just outside the entrance to the square into Chater Road. To separate the bus stop along Connaught Road



and the Statue Square, walls that also act as a planter have been erected with azaleas greeting the visitors every spring. Crossing Chater Road into the southern half of Statue Square would lead us directly to the structure that is the entrance to the Central MTR Station. In order to get into the square proper, one has to walk past this station entrance and go up a few steps towards the Old Supreme Court.

Going into the southern part of the Square proper, there is a path leading towards the Old Supreme Court with two water fountains on each side of it. Both water fountains are decorated with wall sculptures: on the left is one that resembles a totem of oceanic origin and on the right the wall is decorated with tiles of different shapes and colours. Both of them seem unconnected with Hong Kong in any meaningful way, or at least their connections are not apparent or made known. Except for the Statue of Sir Thomas Jackson, there are no physical objects that speak of Hong Kong within the Square itself yet the Square was not meant to house Sir Thomas Jackson's statue in the first place. Although the Chinese name of this square remains 'Queen's Square', Queen Victoria's statue, which once occupied the Square, is no longer here. The statue has been moved and placed in Victoria Park, in between basketball courts and football fields.

One has to take in more than the objects within the Square to recognise it as Hong Kong. Just like the co-ordinates mentioned in the opening paragraph, the objects within Statue Square are not meaningful to most people except perhaps those who bother to stop by Sir Thomas Jackson's Statue and are also aware of the history of HSBC and its connection with the development of Hong Kong. The location itself does not have embedded meanings, as is the case for most of the objects within Statue Square, described above; they seem to be standing alone on their own, without connection and meaning embedded within them. They do not in any way make the Square Hong Kong. If Trafalgar Square is the living room and theatre of London, Statue Square is far from it – it does not even tell the story of the place. Statue Square might appear to be a public space but it is in fact a corporate space

(Knowles & Harper, 2009) and its less-than-obvious connection to Hong Kong is probably intentional.

The reality of Hong Kong starts when the surroundings are taken together as a whole. Starting with the physical surroundings, the sounds, noises, lights, decorations, advertisements, newspaper headlines, people in dresses with strange colour combinations, to the newspaper vendors right next to the line of people who are eager to give you newspapers for free. These newspapers include English Standards, metropolitan Metro, newspapers set up by the CEO of the biggest real estate agency in Hong Kong and newspapers that exposes the wrongdoings of Chinese communist government by the Falungong branches in Hong Kong. There are window displays of Channel, Max Mara and Tiffany. People dressed in suits walk right next to people who deliver fresh vegetables and poultry on the same pedestrian path. Conversations are heard in Cantonese, Mandarin, English or a mixture of all of these languages.

Standing in the Square, one marvels at the postmodern architecture that adorns Hong Kong's incredible skyline. Most notably, the HSBC Headquarters Building neighbouring the Square at its southern edge, designed by Sir Norman Foresters, with its steel-and-glass frame and every mechanical detail visible, is located at a site that is said to have the best fengshui in town. Two escalators linking the open space basement to the banking floors above at an odd angle are said to symbolise the whiskers of a dragon sucking wealth into its belly (Wainwright, 2015). The Old Supreme Court is at the eastern edge of the Square. It is a neo-classical building with ionic columns and a dome and it is surmounted by the Statue of Justice, represented by Themis, the Greek Goddess of Justice and Law, as this building was the Supreme Court from 1912-1978. Another famous building on the skyline is IM Pei's iconic Bank of China Tower, which is visible from the Square – this also has its own fengshui fable, as the building, with its sharp edges and crosses on all of its facades is said to be bad “fengshui” for the people and buildings surrounding it (Wainwright, 2015). When you

hear stories of people taking “fengshui” seriously, you know you are definitely in Hong Kong.

What I have described above, which is captured within the small area of Central, is a manifestation of the global connections with deep historical roots that underpin this landscape. The concept of globalisation, although it has only gained popularity in the commercial and academic literature in the last few decades, the phenomenon of globalization, has a much longer history. Steger (2003), despite the continuous debate around it, broadly defines it as “a set of social processes that are thought to transform our present social condition into one of ‘globality’”- one that with global economic, political, cultural and environmental interconnections and flows that make existing borders irrelevant. Steger (2003) argues that the phenomenon of globalisation goes back as far as we are willing to extend the chain of causation – in the case of Central, we could go back as far as the Greek Goddess of Justice and Law on top of the Old Supreme Court and the spread of western civilisation, or the British Empire, which brought the British to Hong Kong in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (please refer to chapter one for more details), or the postmodern architecture that has adorned its skyline in the last few decades. While each approach would be a topic of research on its own, it is suffice to note that the flows of people, goods and culture and the global economic and political connections are not new – technological advancements often act as catalysts that increase the intensity of such flows and interconnections.

Of particular importance for the case of Victoria City, or Central as we know it today, is the expansionist desire of the Europeans after the ‘Enlightenment Project’ aided by innovations like revised maritime technologies, mechanised printing, the extensive postal system and navigation techniques as objective science was brought back into focus. This not only enabled the European ships to search for profitable trade routes but also aided the spread of the new values of individualism and the unlimited material accumulation of European entrepreneurs that laid the

foundation of what scholars call the ‘capitalist world system’. These early entrepreneurs were given substantial support by their respective governments. The British East India Company was founded in 1600 with the purpose of setting up a profitable trade post. The company, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, came to rule a large part of today’s India, where opium, which was sold to China at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century - which later triggered the Opium War - was grown. Indians of different ethnicities were also active members of the Hong Kong society (please refer to chapter one) when Hong Kong became part of the global British Empire.

Hong Kong’s new historical development coincided with ‘an earlier golden age of globalization’ (Stille, 2001), which reached its peak before World War I, in which global trade volumes increased drastically with the introduction of a gold standard and invention of steamships, which brought down the cost of transportation of goods and facilitated the movement of people. Massive migration with little restriction (waves of Chinese emigration went through Hong Kong, please see chapter one) intensified cultural exchanges and transformed the existing social patterns (Steger, 2003). Massive migration, urbanization, colonial competition and the excessive liberalisation of world trade (more in chapter one) abounded in this earlier golden age of globalisation with intensified interstate rivalries and heightened nationalism that was brought to an end with the two World Wars (Steger, 2003).

Hong Kong was at the receiving end of the mass wave of migration as the result of the interstate rivalries and competition between different versions of nationalism in China. The founding of Communist China and its subsequent turbulent years brought to Hong Kong many of those who fled the communist rule (Mathews et al., 2008). The particular historical circumstances of Hong Kong have created not only the urban landscape, which is global in its history and outlook, but also the mentality of the people. Hong Kong is a society of migrants and to these migrants, Hong Kong is a place where the nation is suspended and bracketed (Mathews et

al., 2008). For the early Chinese collaborators it gave them an alternative source of wealth and power and for those who arrived later it gave them the freedom to pursue their own interests. Being Chinese in a British colony in which the colonial government downplayed Hong Kong's linkage to both China and Great Britain (or their families) and was an active agent in leaving China behind, many of them 'share a way of life, core values and an outlook that resembles that of the average New Yorker or Londoner than that of their counterparts in China' (Tsang, 2004 in (Mathews et al., 2008)). Hong Kong identity, Mathews et al (2008) argue, is one that has no particular place to which it must remain loyal, 'but rather a belonging to the global market, to which no particular loyalty is required'. This has become a source of contention with China .

If Statue Square and what surrounds it are a "Placeless landscape" (Abbas, 1997a) and symbols of corporate power, then Chater Road, a two-lane road that cuts through Statue Square and is closed to vehicular traffic on Sundays and public holidays can be likened to a break from the dominant landscape of Central. If Statue Square and Central represent the global influences that converge in Hong Kong, it is at the same time uniquely Hong Kong in that these spaces also accommodate an expression of resistance to both global capitalism in the eyes of the transnational migrant workers and the encroachments of the Chinese state in the eyes of the Hong Kong residents who march on the anniversary of the handover.

In this chapter, I will discuss Central as a space of global capital and consumer spectacle and as a space of resistance through three different marches. I will examine the embedded social relations (audience versus performers and an audience who are also performers) and the ways in which the prevailing power structures governing urban spaces are revealed in these two different spaces that are Central. In the end, I argue Central is a global third space –in the sense that it is a space that is beyond the public and the private as we understand it conventionally in terms of work and family. It is

a third space that is open with linkages that are local and beyond, a space that is constantly in flux and emerging.

#### **4.2 Christmas Theme Park – the consumerist wonderland of Hong Kong**

A giant Christmas tree was erected in the northern section of Statue Square and decorated with gift boxes wrapped in Tiffany Blues (which is a colour trademark that I have to describe as such in capital letters). The water fountain situated right in the middle of the Square was converted into a raised platform upon which not only a giant Christmas tree was erected but also huts for Santa Claus and Tiffany Funland (a small hut in which craft workshops for creating Christmas decorations operated). In the southern section of Statue Square, the bridge that crosses a fountain was named the ‘Bridge of True Love’ and a small stall was set up in front of the bridge selling ‘cards’ for customers to write their wishes and tie to the railings of the bridge. Another raised platform encompassing two fountains and the pathway in between had a candy shop and a carousel on it. Smaller Christmas trees were also erected next to the ‘Bridge of True Love’ and around the raised platforms.

Speakers at various corners of the Square streamed Christmas carols. Lighting mimicking old gas lamps was found at different corners of the Square. The “black man”, as my informants called it, stood right next to a giant Tiffany gift box that was big enough to wrap up as a present. The description board placed at the foot of the statue that might have told us the story of this ‘black man’ was blocked by iron-railings that would have been used as barricades for other occasions but were covered with Tiffany Blue plastic sheets (for decorative purpose or perhaps to mask the true identity of the Square.) Tourists who tried to peep through the space between the Statue and the railings did so to no avail. The ‘black man’ – the Statue of Sir Thomas Jackson, a manager of HSBC (formerly known as the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, who agreed with the then colonial government in Hong Kong to keep this open

space in perpetuity – was dwarfed in the shadows of 21<sup>st</sup> century consumerism and his relevance to this square had disappeared into obscurity.

It was December 2012 and as part of the ‘Hong Kong WinterFest’, which the Hong Kong Tourism Board stated was ‘to showcase Hong Kong as the ideal winter destination in Asia’ and ‘to encourage visitors from the Mainland and other short-haul markets to celebrate Christmas and the New Year in Hong Kong’, Statue Square in Central was converted into a temporary Tiffany Christmas theme park with a mouthful of a name: “A Brilliant Tiffany Holiday – Unveiling the Exquisite Beauty of the Season”<sup>8</sup> (I will refer to it as the Tiffany Christmas theme park in this chapter).

The parts of the Square with Tiffany ‘fixtures’ were open from three o’clock in the afternoon to nine or ten in the evening. Outside of these operating hours, iron-railings wrapped in Tiffany Blue were used to prevent the public from entering these spaces that not too long ago had been open to the public. One of the signs that these ‘Tiffany Spaces’ were ready for operation was the appearance of men dressed in black suits. Unlike the security guards at the Square, who are dressed more like the police when on duty, these men guarding the Tiffany fixtures and premises dressed in another category of dress – that of the corporate and business world. Their presence was prominent by their sheer numbers given the relatively small area of the Square. One wonders why a premise of entertainment warranted such heavy security. Another group of men and women dressed in Tiffany jackets or polo-shirts also started to appear next to stalls set up for the public to consume ‘the Tiffany Christmas experience’: riding on a carousel, drawing/making Christmas crafts or simply enjoying licking lollipops sold in the Tiffany Candy Shops. Part of the proceeds from these activities would be donated to a charity named ‘Helping Hand’ according to the price

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<sup>8</sup> Source: 2012 Hong Kong WinterFest 23 November 2012 to 1 January 2013 Fact Sheet; retrieved on 17 November 2014, from: <http://partnernet.hktb.com/filemanager/pressrelease/2012%20WinterFest%20Factsheet%20Eng.pdf>

list board. One had no idea whether ‘Helping Hand’ was on the premises, nor did one know how much of the proceeds would eventually go to the charity.

The Tiffany Christmas theme park was set against the backdrop of postmodern architecture that adorns Hong Kong’s incredible skyline (see Figure 4-2). The Old Supreme Court Building is at the eastern edge of the Square – it is one of the rare pieces of architecture in Hong Kong that tells the story of her colonial past. Another famous building on the skyline is IM Pei’s iconic Bank of China Tower with its reflective glasses that mirror the city, the mountains and the ever-changing skies (Pryor & Lampugnani, 1993), about which Jameson (1991) commented that it is similar to the reflective glass of Bonaventure in Los Angeles, as a glass which ‘repels the city outside’ (quite literally so in the case of the Bank of China Tower, which is separated from the rest of Central and from expressways and is surrounded by artificial landscaped ponds). To the south is the HSBC Headquarters Building. Its white and red lighting accentuated its steel-and-glass frames prominent in the sea of Tiffany Blues (see Figure 4-3).



**Figure 4-2: Tiffany Christmas Trees with the Bank of China Tower and Old Supreme Court Building as the backdrop**





**Figure 4-3: Carousel and the HSBC Building**

Each of these buildings and the Tiffany Christmas theme park, if viewed (both visually and conceptually) on their own, would probably give us different readings of their existence. The international-style HSBC Building represents ‘the reification of the finance capital in the physical form of the city’ and ‘the sale of “symbolic capital” to the private sector by the architectural profession’, as Cuthbert (1995) puts it; The Bank of China Tower built form can be understood as a metaphor with its ‘incremental form of the Tower likened to bamboo which symbolises ‘a sturdy yet flexible tube’ (Pryor & Lampugnani, 1993). The Tiffany Christmas theme park speaks as another example of the ‘placelessness’ created as a result of the fascination with the “machinery and paraphernalia of travel itself” (Relph, 1976 in (Cresswell, 2004)) - another type of ‘Disneyland’, constructed purely for outsiders that could be easily replicated across the globe (Cresswell, 2004). At the same time the Tiffany Christmas theme park

was a simulacra (Baudrillard, 2001), a nostalgia of an imagined past without any referent, packaged with the objective of targeting certain ‘tourists markets’ with ‘charity’ thrown in as a sideline in the global competition for capital (Harvey, 1996).

Different interpretations of architecture and the built environment are exactly what Jencks (1977) suggests regarding postmodern architecture: architecture that speaks and is also metaphorical, which creates ‘the vernacular, the new, and the ambiguous kind of space’. But it is more than the space per se that is of concern here. It is more about the image of the city as a tourist destination, for outsiders. The postmodern buildings, or rather their representation in photographs is what the world has come to know about Hong Kong - its spectacular skyline set against Victoria Peak and the shimmering harbour with reflections of glittery buildings. The representation of Hong Kong with its spectacular skyline has dominated the mass media and the world at large, as Jameson’s (1991:125) addition to Debord’s famous theoretical move describes: ‘the material image, the photographic reproduction’ ‘is the final form of commodity reification.’ Not only are these postmodern buildings a reification of their capital in the built form, they also becomes a commodity of consumption – consumption of its images as representations of contemporary Hong Kong with little connection to her other stories or her past.

Curious about Tiffany’s seemingly coincidental presence in prominent public squares in both Hong Kong and London during the Christmas season, I ventured to approach one of the staff dressed in a Tiffany jacket to ask about Tiffany’s ‘global’ marketing strategy. Apparently shocked by my enquiry, the staff member directed me to another more senior member of staff, who was referred to as the Site Manager of the event. He was frank with me, stating that he was not from Tiffany, when I started asking about the coincidence of having giant Christmas trees in both London and Hong Kong. No-one dressed in a Tiffany jacket was from Tiffany, nor were those dressed in black suits guarding the fixtures and premises for the company.

This event was organised by the Hong Kong Tourism Board and Tiffany was the sponsor. The company paid for everything we saw on the premises – the cleaning, the security, the setting up of the sound system, the trees, and the fixtures and platforms. Tiffany hired sub-contractors for the setting-up and it hired an event company, which this manager was part of, to run the event. What is more shocking to me is the fact that even the event company itself was a temporary one, set up specifically just for this event. The site manager was a freelance employee of this temporary company. I could not stop laughing when I learnt about this.

This is consumerism wrapped up in the name of charity. It is elusive consumerism in which the corporation that provided the experience and the consumers who consumed that experience interacted through numerous transactions in between – between the organiser and the sponsor, the sponsor and its subcontractors and the subcontractors and their temporary employees. It was a picture of consuming a fake Christmas experience, knowingly on the part of tourists and passers-by, and assisted by temporary employees who had no direct connection whatsoever with the company whose logos appeared on their polo-shirts and jackets. Corporations appear only in the imagery – in the logos, in the brands and in the capital - to make these events possible. They do not in any real sense have a human face. The way in which the premises were guarded and separated from the public during non-operating hours spoke quite clearly of the relationship between the event organiser and the public. This relationship was only operational during certain hours of the day – when the contractual relationship between the sponsors and its subcontractors and between the subcontractors and their temporary employees was effective. Outside of this contractual relationship the space was closed off from the public; it became dead space.

If we take the Tiffany Christmas theme park together with the backdrop of postmodern buildings, the other ubiquitous shopping malls surrounding it and the ways in which it operated, what the Hong Kong Tourism Board did was to create a ‘spectacle’, a form of capital that concealed class relations

(we cannot even clearly say whether there was a class distinction at all - it was the faceless capital versus the people), which could only be consumed passively in a space that was heavily regulated with informal security, consumption activities and pedestrian circulation (Harvey, 2006). It was a place in which the only desirable activity was the consumption of both the images created by the Hong Kong Tourism Board and the sale of the 'Christmas experience' at the site.

Indeed this is the Hong Kong that most of us are familiar with (although perhaps a different image of Hong Kong emerged very recently after the 'Umbrella Movement'): a landscape of consumption (Spurr & Kwok, 2013), a global city with flows of information, capital, people, images and ideas, as described in Appadurai's (1996) five 'scapes'; "ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes" (1996:33). It is essentially the materialisation of the upper circuit of globalization in spaces, especially in the central business district, Central.

Central has seen continuing interest from Hongkong Land (Cuthbert, 1995a), a subsidiary of Jardine Matheson Holdings, a company that set up its headquarters in the territory after the island was ceded to the British in 1842. Initially it traded opium, cotton and tea but later it ventured into property development. It now owns and manages more than five million square feet of commercial space within the small area of Central. Running through the two parts of Statue Square is Chater Road, named after the founder of Hongkong Land, Sir Catchick Paul Chater, an Armenian broker in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who proposed and oversaw the reclamation of Victoria Harbour to form much of what is Statue Square and its surroundings today (including of course the road named after him.)

From its early days (of becoming a trading port), Central (then known as the city of Victoria) has been a centre for commerce, a hub of trading and capital, which works with transnational networks spanning across China and the United Kingdom, among the trading ports in Asia and across the

Pacific Ocean, making it almost impossible to distinguish the local from the global and vice versa.

The first land sale that took place soon after 1841 was to the trading houses: the 'Hong's', who needed to build wharves and warehouses along the harbour for their businesses. When more flat land was needed for development, reclamation was the answer. For Central or what became Central, the local is global and the global is local. The dichotomy of global and local, the conflict and tension between that of the authentic dwelling place versus the abstract and universal concept of space has simply become irrelevant – no-one can truly claim to be indigenous to a landmass that did not exist before the reclamation.

Global capital and its various manifestations in space have been the consistent landscape in Central as Hong Kong has been the intersection of different worlds since its inception as a trading port (Sassen, 2001a). These intersections, as we shall see in the discussion that follows, render an ontological framing of space as non-territorial but as nodes in relational settings and a site of situated practices (Amin, 2002), as an 'embodiment of virtual and immanent forces and as the temporary spatiotemporalisation of associational networks of different length and duration (Olds & Yeung, 1999). On the one hand, Central is what I have described in the coming together of the Tiffany Christmas theme park with its postmodern buildings as the backdrop. It is a consumerist wonderland, a spectacle for image consumption, and a heavily regulated public space, with which we are all familiar. On the other hand, I wish to bring forth temporary spatiotemporalisation of an association network manifested in Central through three different protests, as a place of subversion, of resistance that is at once local, transnational and global. It exists temporarily but consistently on Sundays, public holidays and days when events, such as the rallies on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, and the anniversaries of the handover of Hong Kong from the UK to China, take place.

### 4.3 Walking as resistance

Protests are not new in Hong Kong. Hong Kong claims that it is ‘Asia’s World City’ and the rights to assembly and freedom of procession and demonstration are enshrined in the Hong Kong Bill of Rights and the Basic Law, the mini constitutions of the Special Administration of Hong Kong although the extent to which the rights and freedom can be exercised is still very much an on-going battle between the protestors and the administration and, as we will find out in our journey through three protests in our discussion later, other stakeholders who might in their own different ways restrict freedom of procession and demonstration. It is only through the exercise of such practice, i.e. the protest marches, that we come to know how much of the freedom guaranteed in the constitution is really exercisable and only when protest marches encounter police, private security guards, enclosed spaces and barricades that the nature of the public spaces and the power relations governing them is revealed (Köksal, 2012).

The simple act of walking thus becomes subversive: in the simple act of walking we find historical episodes of punctuating political statements: from Ghandi’s Salt March, to the freedom walks of the American civil rights movements, the colossal Gay Pride parades, and the walks around Plaza de Mayo by mothers whose children ‘disappeared’ in Argentina (Bonilla, 2011; Solnit, 2001). Walking, in its long history as a constituent part of political collective action, is itself an expression – a form of speech almost.

Solnit (2001) describes walking together on the streets and spaces that on ordinary days are only for transit and used as a thoroughfare, but on days of protest marches are transformed through the stamping of our feet into meanings of the day or history; the bodily movements turn into speech or performance that demonstrate the political and cultural conviction and the ‘distinction between words and deeds and representation and action begins to blur’. Walking together itself becomes subversion to the existing norms and order and an act of spatial transformation (Bonilla, 2011).

Walking is also a way of knowing. Tilley (2012) argues that the encountering of landscape through our bodies in the very act of walking is lived experience. Through the gathering of events, things and social encounters in the process of walking along the journey, and in putting together the narratives of the landscapes inscribed by the past – either of others or of one’s own - an embodied knowledge of the landscape is generated, which is different from knowledge generated based on abstraction or representation of the landscapes in which the human experience of the landscape is bracketed. As walking in contemporary life becomes more of a necessity than a pursuit in itself for most people, Solnit (2001: 9) argues that ‘instead of moving and shuffling between interiors’, through walking ‘one lives in the whole world rather than in interiors built up against it’.

Walking is not only a way of making and being in the world, Solnit argues, it is also the beginning of citizenship, of linking one’s personal microcosm with the public macrocosm. Solnit brings in Rudofsky's (1969) Italian-style streets, especially the arcades, which were celebrated as ancient forums in Greek cities to emphasize her argument. Solnit (2001) explains: ‘arcaded streets blur the boundaries between inside and out and pay architectural tribute to the pedestrian life that takes place beneath them’. These streets became a social space, where people met, debated and courted and where things were bought and sold. The arcaded streets were also the subject of enquiry by Benjamin in his work – the *Arcades Project* and the figure of flâneur became prominent in the discussion of city spaces. The flâneur was, according to Benjamin, born out of a specific time in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris when it became so large and complex that the inhabitants were strangers in their own city. As a result, walking through the streets, including the arcaded streets, became a means through which a flâneur came to know his city and modernity. Tilley (2012) describes the walks by flâneur as ‘a consumptive act, sucking in disparate and transitory experiences’ and flâneure as an everyday act in Certeau’s (1984) term: a process of

‘inhabiting, appropriating urban spaces’ and ‘an act of learning through participation in the streets of the city.’

Walking, as an important constituent of both political protests and collective action (Bonilla, 2011) and a way of knowing the landscapes, urban spaces and our cities, has remained little researched and examined. To my knowledge, only Solnit (2001), with her diverse experience of taking part in many protests, discusses the act of walking together with others for expressive and political purposes in the contemporary world and of many prior episodes of walking en masse that made history. Her discussion, however, is too diverse to unravel what hides behind the seemingly innocuous public spaces in a specific city with different contexts and agents, as her discussion understandably is more about the walking than the city space.

Walking as a way of linking to the past through the historical landscape (Bonilla, 2011) does not capture the power relations imbued in the governing of urban spaces; walking as an individual tactic against the strategy of the powers does not reflect the collective efforts of masses to counter the powers. Instead of devising tactics to escape governmentality on an individual basis, protest marches demand to be seen to change the structure of governmentality (Certeau, 1984; Pinder, 2011); and walking as a therapeutic construction of counter-memories to overcome trauma has exerted relatively little social and political influence (Pendleton, 2011).

If walking as a constituent of political protests and collective action and as a way of knowing is to us ‘making and being in the world’, as argued by Solnit (2001), then a phenomenological walk, as proposed by Tilley (2012), where walking is to understand the place through one’s perceptual senses and experiences, to ‘bracket off mediated representations of places’ and to write as one walks as narratives unfold, seems to be an appropriate methodological approach to examining the act of walking. In this way, he argues, the agencies of the places can be felt by our walking into and



through them, as well as perhaps the imbued power relations governing urban space. The phenomenological walk, Tilley (2012) argues, is also an analytical act – walking through places to learn their similarities and differences and their past and present, as well as their states in different times and seasons. Knowledge of places is thus gained through phenomenological walks at different times and in different seasons, and through different angles and routes, which Tilley describes as ‘a composite walk’, and through this phenomenological walk experiences that we have in common with others can be identified.

In what follows are descriptions of three different protests in which I took part during my fieldwork, including the very first protest I ever took part in and the last protest I joined before I came back to London. The protests were for different purposes, with different groups of people, and in different seasons and the processions took different routes. The overlapping urban space of all of these protests was Central, the site of global capital and the consumerist wonderland described at the beginning of the chapter. It is through both walking together with others in these marches, wearing different hats at each of them and the juxtaposition of different protest marches with that of the manifestation of global capital and consumerism that I attempt to reveal the prevailing norms and power relations in public spaces. The different ways in which the boundaries between public and private, between what is permitted and what is not, are pushed and broken to form new political possibilities. Lastly, this attempts to break away from the territorial dichotomy between the global and the local in understanding place, which warrants a shift ontologically in how place is approached and understood as a concept – as a nexus of relations – or as ‘politics in place: plural, open and contested’ (Amin, 2002) that is Central. It is through the descriptions of these three different protest marches that narratives of a different Central emerge.

#### **4.4 Central and its many protests**

It was my first assignment after I met Dorothy on the corner of Chater Road. (She was introduced in the opening chapter: a leader of a Filipino grassroots organisation through whom I came to know the informants for my research). When I asked if I could be of any assistance to her, she invited me to be the photographer for two events that were to take place in December 2012: a rally from Chater Road to the Philippines Consulate that ended with an interfaith prayer service at Chater Road for the International Human Rights Day (9 December 2012) and a rally from Chater Road to the Hong Kong Government Headquarters (while the Indonesians marched from Victoria Park, which is in Causeway Bay, the place in which the Indonesian domestic workers congregate on Sunday - the two groups met in Admiralty, where the Philippines Consulate is located) that ended with a Christmas party at Chater Road for Migrant Workers Day (16 December 2012).

For the uninitiated, walking through Central on Sundays can be daunting. Among the 150,000 Filipino domestic workers who are in Hong Kong, many of them who have their off-days on Sundays congregate in Central. On the bridges linking Admiralty to Central, in the squares and gardens, on the pedestrian walkways outside the International Financial Centre, along the piers, outside the General Post Office, around City Hall and in the underpasses, the Filipino domestic workers gather every Sunday (see more in chapter five).

The ground floor of the HSBC Headquarters Building with its vast open and sheltered space is also one of the many spots where the Filipino domestic workers choose to gather. It is one space that has been photographed by many journalists and academics alike; the sight of Filipino women having fun in a cold postmodern architectural space seems both incongruent and intriguing. For most of my informants though, that was not the space for them – it was too noisy and also too comfortable, so their favourite spot in Central was Chater Road, which runs through two parts of Statue Square and is closed from vehicular traffic on Sundays and public holidays. Unlike

Statue Square, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, armed with the Ordinance that stipulates acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, the management of Chater Road falls under the remit of the Lands Department. When events are to be held on major sections of Chater Road approval from the Lands Department must be sought, otherwise Chater Road is less policed and regulated. Police are seldom seen in this area unless it involves a rally in which stopping traffic is required (that is how I came to view the police in these rallies organised by the Filipino community, a perception that drastically changed in another rally that took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2014, which I will discuss in more detail later).

#### **4.4.1 International Human Rights Day**

That was my first rally ever. (I grew up in Singapore – I suppose that says a lot.) I joined the Filipino migrant workers in the rally as a photographer, an ambivalent role that made me part of them yet not exactly part of them, a perfect opportunity for practising participative observation.

I went to Chater Road at 10am. It was a bright and warm day despite it being almost Christmas. Chater Road was already filled with activity. Closest to the Old Supreme Court Building (which is at one end of Chater Road), a group of Filipinas were dancing - I later asked one of the members of UNIFL (United Filipinos in Hong Kong, an alliance of Filipino grassroots organisations in Hong Kong) what they were doing. She said they were just doing exercise and if I wanted to join them, I could. I found Dorothy busy setting up a booth in front of Chanel for a movie screening later in the afternoon (the first time I met her at the other end of Chater Road she was packing up equipment for a movie screening earlier). She told me I was free to hang around the area, watching them.

While Dorothy and the others were setting up booths, laying banners on the roads, setting up the sound system and testing the microphone and loudspeakers, I strolled further along Chater Road and found the

Democratic Party of Hong Kong having their own activity at the other end. A truck with a huge banner featuring the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Leung Chun-yin, with huge words 'Step Down' written across it was parked in front of one of the exits of Central MTR (the equivalent of the tube in London) station. Someone who appeared to be joining the activity organised by the Democratic Party of Hong Kong walked past the booth set up by Dorothy and her friends with a piece of paper stating, 'Leung is a liar' and told them the same in English.

Three policemen in uniform and one plain-clothes policewoman later arrived at the scene and discussed the route for the protest march with Dorothy. They appeared friendly and knew exactly whom they needed to approach for the discussion. They left the other members to do whatever they needed to do before the rally and were taking notes, chatting among themselves and sometimes working on their smartphones. They looked relaxed and the Filipinos who were getting ready for the protest march seemed not to mind them at all.

The members of UNIFIL continued with their setting-up and the groups who were dancing in front of the Old Supreme Court Building continued to do so. The Democratic Party at the other end of the Road also carried on their activities as usual. Shouting about 'stepping down' from one end of the road collided with music from the other end of the road while Dorothy and her friends also tried to speak to the protestors to get themselves assembled and ready for the protest march. It was a space of contrast and interesting juxtapositions: Filipino migrant workers having fun versus Filipino migrant workers getting ready for protests on the one hand, and Filipino migrant workers protesting versus local political protesting on the other, all within the space of Central's luxury shopping with retail outlets of Chanel, Max Mara, Cartier and other international brands, and of course the Tiffany Trees.

The protest march started from the booth in front of Chanel. The protesters marched via the Old Supreme Court Building towards Chater Garden. Before the protest march started, policemen signalled to the leader of the dance group in front of the Old Supreme Court Building that the march was about to start. The leader of the dance group stopped the music and the group stepped inside Statue Square to leave sufficient space on Chater Road to allow the march to go through. At the time the march started, a booth was also being set up by the Hong Kong Women's Association for a charity sale of second hand clothes and toys. Chater Road was apparently big enough to accommodate the various activities and the Filipinas mingled between the spaces of the booth for second hand goods and the Christmas Trees set up by Tiffany, taking pictures of others dancing in the road. They also danced in the roads themselves and cheered members of UNIFIL on as they marched by.

The procession stopped for a while right in the middle of Chater Garden to ensure that everyone followed. Then it stopped again before the traffic lights between the Bank of China Tower and Chater Garden. Not everyone in the procession managed to cross the road within the time duration of one green light; one of the policemen stopped the traffic from going through in the middle of the road and another one ensured that everyone in the procession crossed the junction before the last policeman waved the cars to go behind him. The police seemed to be the facilitators of this small (in terms of the number of protesters) protest march and their concern seemed to be primarily to ensure that the protestors were not run over by traffic. Stopping the traffic before the protesters crossed any major junctions was their most important job (at least it seemed so to me).

The same thing happened again at the junction leading towards Pacific Plaza. Before the procession crossed the small junction, one policeman stopped in the middle of the road to stop the cars going by - interestingly, he managed to stop a Rolls Royce from going through. The picture of a junior police officer stopping perhaps somebody important (apparently the Rolls

Royce was driven by a chauffeur - an elderly man was sitting in the back and his face looked vaguely familiar) to allow a long stream of Filipino domestic workers, who on weekdays disperse into the households of Hong Kong families and on this particular Sunday, the day before International Human Rights Day, were raising the issue of the violation of human rights back in their homeland to the wider public – to their own community right here in Hong Kong, the passers-by, the Chinese tourists and the locals – in the hope that they will become aware of the dire situation from which some of them have managed to escape, was beyond my expectations. I did not react quickly enough to capture the scene but the image was impressed upon me.

Along the way, someone with loud speakers shouted slogans such as 'stop the killings in the Philippines' and 'end of impunity', and the members followed.

The group was then led onto the escalators provided by Pacific Plaza (a shopping mall cum office development) to cross the big junction between Pacific Plaza and the Lippo Centre on the opposite side of the street. There is no pedestrian crossing for the ground floor of this big junction. The space is taken up by taxi stands, a bus terminus and MTR exits. Pedestrians can only move about in these areas through the elevated walkway. So the march entered the private space of the shopping mall through two panels of transparent glass doors. One of the policemen held the door open for the group and signalled for the shouting and chanting to be stopped. The protesters obeyed and quickly followed through the glass panels. It was apparent now that we had entered a different realm of governance in which shouting and chanting and any acts of protest were not allowed.

As the march went through the spaces from the streets to Pacific Plaza and up the escalator, the group was "greeted" by a security guard in the mall. He stood at the top of the escalator through which the march had to pass and watched the march continue northwards to leave his territory. In

between Pacific Plaza and Queensway Plaza (another shopping mall!) is an elevated walkway that connects to the tram stations on ground level. The group was then led by the police down to the ground floor using the staircases provided by the MTR, and one security guard was seen standing right at the entrance of the Queensway Plaza. His symbolic act of standing in between the public space (the elevated walkways) and the private space (the shopping mall) spoke of the expected behaviour of anyone entering 'his space': everyone shall enter as quiet and passive consumers, not active citizens. Once the group had reached the ground floor, the shouting and chanting began again.

The Philippines Consulate in Hong Kong is located in one of the commercial buildings in Admiralty. There is no public square for demonstrations but a tiny strip of pedestrian passageway that allows pedestrians to enter the bus terminus right behind the commercial building. The protest group was stopped outside the building, forming lines right at the entrance of the commercial building. Again, a security guard was observed standing at the entrance. As the tiny space of the pedestrian walkways was not sufficient to accommodate everyone in the group, some had to cross the road to occupy the public garden on the other side. Policemen used bright orange tape to form a soft line to which the group had to adhere to allow a single file space for pedestrians heading to the bus terminus or the MTR station. There was also tape set up right in front of the building, signifying the border beyond which the group could not enter. Some of the group leaders, however, stood on the stairs leading up to the entrance, but outside the panel of glass doors, to speak to the crowd.

The engines of the passing buses muffled the shouting and speaking. I wondered whether anyone was in the Philippines Consulate. There was no press following them. No-one from the host society seemed to be interested in the issues of these domestic workers. They live intimately with the Hong Kong households, yet the host families know next to nothing of the

background stories, which force so many women to leave their families behind to tend to others. I did not either, before the protest march.

It was a small group of people consisting only of Filipinos. They posed no threat, either in terms of the size of the group or the issues they were protesting about. Extrajudicial killing or human rights violations in the Philippines seemed remote and abstract in the space of Central with policeman facilitating the protesters to cross big and small junctions and everyone (the police, protesters, and security guards in various capacities) knowing their place and acting accordingly.

#### 4.4.2 International Migrants Day

One week later at the junction of Chater Road and Ice House Street, a traffic island and its extended areas were converted into a theatre-in-the-round or arena-theatre. It was a bright and warm day. A much smaller Christmas tree - compared to the one less than 100-metres down the road by Tiffany - was placed in the middle of the traffic island. This was a tree made up of a thin stick erected as the main stem with strings of plastic acting as the body. Instead of Tiffany Blue gift boxes, pieces of paper with slogans were pasted around the plastic strings (see Figure 4-4.)



Figure 4-4: A protest Christmas tree



On the pinnacle of the tree was a piece of paper with ‘Pamaskong Handog Ni Pnoy – AO -31! Administrative Order 31<sup>9</sup>’ (Aquino's Christmas gift – AO 31!) written on it. There were gift boxes and inflated red trash plastic bags with pieces of paper stating ‘No. 1 Human Rights Violation’, ‘Mandatory Insurance’, ‘Hunger’, ‘Unemployment’, ‘Illegal Practices of Illegal Recruitment Agencies’ pasted on their surfaces. All of these messages were printed with ‘Merry Christmas’ at the bottom of the page – I suppose that was an intended irony. A small booth was set up about ten metres from the intersection between Ice House Street and Chater Road, soliciting donations for victims of typhoon Bopha, which had swept through the Southern Philippines in early December leaving more than 1000 dead and displacing 1.2 million families<sup>10</sup>.

Whilst the participants of the activities organised by member organisations of the Asian Migrant Coordinating Body celebrating International Migrants Day started to gather and get ready for the programmes of the day, there was also another function of a very different nature taking place. Another stage (a proper one this time) was set up along Chater Road outside the Old Supreme Court Building. A bright pink board printed with the logos of two telecoms companies, who had apparently sponsored the event, acted as the stage backdrop. A light blue tent was set up right in the centre of the stage from which the preachers spoke. Two rows of booths were lined up along the sides of Chater Road, leaving the central spaces of the road open for pedestrians. There were Christmas decorations aplenty – shiny ribbons pulled across Chater Road, and giant stars on top of the booths. A Christmas tree at the junction between Prince Building and the Mandarin Hotel drew crowds to hang wishing cards on it (in direct competition with

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<sup>9</sup> Administrative Order 31 was signed by President Aquino of the Philippines on the 1 Oct 2012, authorized all ‘heads of departments, bureaus, commissions, agencies, offices and instrumentalities of the national government, including government-owned and/or – controlled corporations, to rationalize the rates of their fees and charges, increase their existing rates and impose new fees and charges’.

<sup>10</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/12/16/world/asia/philippines-typhoon/index.html>, retrieved on 23 Dec 2012

the cards on sale at the Tiffany booth just metres away – but then again, this may not be the case as the target market for each event was very different).

At around eleven in the morning, a religious service took place. Prayers were spoken to the crowds from the stage and lines of people stood in front of the stage singing hymns. At the same time, queues formed in front of the booths giving away free food and drinks for the first hundred or so registered customers for the day. The booths along both sides of Chater Road were mostly telecoms companies competing for Filipina customers or companies that sell products or services to the Filipino communities in Hong Kong: a cable TV company showing a Filipino channel, budget airlines and associations serving the Filipina community. Later in the afternoon an entertainment show was put on stage. The audience either stood in the central spaces of Chater Road in between the two rows of booths or watched the performances from the pavement of Statue Square. Tourists and passers-by could easily enter and leave the space enclosed by the stage and the two rows of booths. People paused to watch and struck up conversations with fellow audience members commenting on and asking questions about the performances on stage. It was an open and interactive space and full of life but a space that was not too different from the Tiffany Christmas theme park just right next to it. It was another kind of Christmas experience consumption, perhaps with Filipino flavours thrown into it.

Participants in the celebration of International Migrants Day gathered in lines around the traffic island in three directions, except the direction towards the Old Supreme Court Building, which was scattered with passers-by, policemen and local student organisations. Loud speakers were placed on the road surface facing three different directions – all of the directions surrounding the traffic island with the exception of the section of Ice House Street that leads to Connaught Road (which is a little quieter and opens up to a major road running through the island). Following the education awareness programme conducted by members of UNIFIL on migrants' rights vis-à-vis the policies of the Philippines Government that affect them

and the policies of the Hong Kong government while they are in Hong Kong, there were cultural performances by the member organisations of AMBC (the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body): the Thai Regional Alliance (TRA); the Overseas Nepali Workers Union (ONWU); and Asosiasi Tenaga Kerja Indonesia- HK (ATIS).

In between the performances solidarity speeches were given by these groups and unlike the event that took place a week earlier, which focused on issues in the Philippines, the event for that day was for all of the migrant workers in Hong Kong. Copies of list of demands to be made to the Hong Kong government after the protest march were available for distribution near the traffic island. Copies of the Global Migration Report for 2012 were also available at one corner near the traffic island.

There was no clear demarcation for the stage and no space for the sound system equipment either. The intersection with the traffic island in the middle therefore became the stage, as the backstage and as the backdrop simultaneously. Sound effects were produced through laptops and drums at one corner of the intersection for one performance and through a group of narrators squatted at the same corner speaking through loud speakers for another. The audience stood around this group of ‘sound engineers’ and photographers (such as me), and criss-crossed spaces up and down the stage and between the performers and the audience. The boundary between the ‘stage’ and the ‘audience’ was a blurred and porous one. Photographers, tourists and other participants were at times part of the audience and at times part of the performance in someone else’s camera. Lines of participants with their banners at the three directions of the intersection became part of the backdrop against which the performances and speeches took place. The iron-railings, which are barriers preventing pedestrians from crossing the roads from any other section of the road other than designated spaces on other days, acted as supports for the protest banners on that day.

‘We are workers, not commodities’ stated one banner; ‘regulate working hours’ stated another.

When the space for putting up these banners ran out, they were placed on the road surface of the section of Chater Road in which the policemen and tourists lingered. Everyone moved in and out of the spaces fluidly. Tourists and passers-by paused to watch. When I asked one of the enthusiastic tourists from China, who paused to watch, the question ‘do you see protests in China?’ I was given a defensive answer. ‘No, protests are not allowed for the sake of the harmonious society and national security’ he said. I smiled and walked away. I wondered if he was treating this rally by a group of minorities in Hong Kong as yet another spectacle similar to the one he had walked past by earlier – the one with a giant Christmas tree with gift boxes in Tiffany Blue and the entertainment put up on the stage by commercial companies targeting Filipinos as their customers. I hope that the ways in which the spaces around these events had been arranged and the banners around the stage could have impressed upon him otherwise.

The protest march started at 2pm. After my experience of the protest march a week before and following a discussion with Dorothy with regard to the kind of photographs she wanted for the newsletters and press releases, instead of taking photos while walking along with the protestors, I had to anticipate where they would be heading and run ahead to capture more of the ‘panoramic view of the protest march’ rather than close-up faces of protestors, about which Dorothy commented, ‘everyone looked happy and dressed up for the protest march in Hong Kong, it is not the case in the Philippines’.

The imagery of how these protest marches would best appear on press releases framed the way in which I participated in the protest march and the ways in which I decided to frame my photos – always looking out for moments of dramatic action. To effectively capture images of the masses, I

had to be further away from the participants of the march and I became a mere observer rather than a participant in it.

Instead of going through the shopping malls as the protest the week before had done, this time the police opened up one lane of the main road for the protest march given the much bigger size of the protest group. Traffic from the mid-level through flyovers and Central was stopped to allow the protestors to march from Central to Admiralty where the Philippines Consulate is located (see Figure 4-5). It did not take much for the police to stop the traffic. It was done quite simply by a single policeman standing right in front of a two-lane flyover. The protesters were led by police officers in front and walked within the lane marked by a bright orange line (see Figure 4-6). The line was not enforced rigorously – I could leave and enter at any time. My role as a camerawoman seemed to afford me the freedom to move freely within the protest group as part of them and also as merely an observer, when required.



**Figure 4-5: A policeman stopped the traffic from the mid-level while the protestors marched on with the backdrop of the skyscrapers in Central**





**Figure 4-6: Protestors marched from Central to Admiralty**

Behind the leading police officers were protesters who had performed at an earlier dance, dressed up as the ‘baddies’, the USA, the GFMD (the Global Forum on Migration and Development), the Presidents of the Philippines Aquino and VFA (the Visiting Force Agreement). They were followed by rows of flags of various organisations, banners stating: ‘We are workers, not commodities’, ‘Regulate working hours for both local and migrant workers’, and then protesters wearing masks of Aquino. Many of them were dressed in red. When the protesters arrived at the building in which the Philippines Consulate is located, there was a Christmas party going on in the park opposite the building.

The Indonesians arrived from another direction singing ‘Solidarity Forever’. They had marched from Victoria Park, which is their usual gathering place on Sundays, to their own embassy, and they joined the Filipinos and others at Admiralty. The Indonesians also had a sea of flags for their own organisation, and many of them wore hijabs. By the look of it, most of them were much younger than the Filipinos. Local supporters who had come by coach also arrived at the bus terminus around the same time – some of them were representatives of local workers unions and the League of Social Democrats. These groups converged and marched towards the Hong Kong Government Headquarters, which is to the south of the commercial building in which the Philippines Consulate is located and separated by a bus terminus, another building and an eight-lane highway that can only be crossed via an overhead bridge (this is the section of the city that was occupied by some students and Hong Kong residents in the Umbrella Movement for months in 2014). The expressways act as a barricade of sorts and leave the Hong Kong Government Headquarters as an island on its own.

As the only way to reach the Hong Kong Government Headquarters from Admiralty is to cross an overhead bridge with an escalator, which acts as the interface between the street and the overhead bridge, the throngs of protesters that converged in Admiralty were slowed down considerably because everyone needed to queue to ride on the escalator. Once they were at the other side of the road, the crowds became more dispersed. They entered the ‘civic plaza’ – a space surrounded on three sides by what seem like impregnable walls (this space was occupied by students and parents, who were concerned about the introduction of ‘national education’ into local schools in September 2012 – the people of Hong Kong are generally sensitive to any acts of indoctrination on the part of the government that will subject their children to the kind of ‘patriotic education’ that they are extremely wary of). A small platform in the middle of the civic plaza onto which the Hong Kong flag was raised is surrounded and protected by iron-railings (the same kind of iron-railings as in the Tiffany Christmas theme

park, only in Central they were wrapped in Tiffany Blue plastic sheets). The crowds were thus dispersed into various corners of the plaza.

With the platform right in the middle, the visibility of the speakers and protesters holding flags was reduced considerably, which made it hard to frame an impressive imagery of the migrant workers protesting in front of the Hong Kong Government Headquarters. All of the imageries became fragmented –the speakers, the protestors, and the sign that signifies the Hong Kong Government. In order to have a panoramic view, the focus became the flag poles – which became the object of distraction rather than providing powerful imagery capturing the moment. I wondered whether that was calculated on the part of the police or the government or even the architect who managed and designed this ‘civic plaza’ to be a governable space – a space that can be easily guarded and in which any protesters can be easily surrounded and cut-off from any supporters outside of the plaza.

This design has proved to be effective when the number of protesters is small – but once the number of protesters exceeds that of the police, the police find themselves surrounded by protesters and also fall into the trap of the design. The latter scenario took place in both September 2012 and also during the Umbrella Movement at the end of 2014.

Representatives of each organisation took turns to give solidarity messages and most notably, a member of the Legislative Council who is known to have been supportive of workers in general, ended his speech with ‘all workers of the world unite!’ Dorothy, who was also the spokesperson of AMCB, spelt out the twelve demands for migrants’ and workers’ rights: to regulate working hours, to abolish the two-week rule, to make the live-in arrangement optional, to increase the minimum allowable wage, the ratification of the ILO (the International Labour Organization) Domestic Workers Convention (C189), to lift the ban on hiring Nepali Workers and to end social discrimination against migrants.

The rally ended when she, together with representatives from all AMCB



members, presented the demand to the representative of the Hong Kong government who was there to accept their demands – a perfect photo opportunity of symbolic significance, as mutual recognition of the representatives of the grassroots organisations by the state on the one hand and the recognition of the issues and problems faced by the migrant workers as within the realm and power of the state on the other (see chapter three).

Comparing this protest march to the one that took place a week earlier, the protest march on International Migrants' Day was more significant in two ways: it was an alliance of migrant workers transcending nationalities and ethnicities and an alliance between the migrant workers and the local supporters. Secondly, the more imminent threat perceived by the police due to the size of the protest groups rendered it necessary to close the traffic lane and railings were made a physical defense guarding the flagpole - a manifestation of the constant battle between the protesters and the police in negotiating the extent to which freedom of assembly and demonstration is exercisable.

#### **4.5 Hong Kong as spaces of exceptions**

Protests are a common sight in Hong Kong. What is unusual about some of the protests in Hong Kong is that they are organised by migrant domestic workers, a sight that is not only rare, but impossible in many of other migrant worker receiving countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, the Gulf States and the Middle East.

Constable (2009), in her discussion of the 'Consulate Hopping Protest', which was organised by the migrant domestic workers in 2005 as part of the larger protest sponsored by HKPA (Hong Kong People's Alliance) during the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference meeting that took place in Hong Kong at that time, attributed three main reasons for the vibrant protest scene organised by migrant domestic workers that has managed to flourish in Hong Kong: Hong Kong is a global city and a neoliberal space of exception, and the peaceful and subtle form of modern

governance by the Hong Kong Police, as seen, is linked to the image of Hong Kong as 'Asia's World City'. Let me elaborate.

Hong Kong as a Special Administration Region of the People's Republic of China is a state of political exception in that it possesses its own mini-constitution, independent political institution and judiciaries, which come together with the civil rights enshrined in the mini-constitutions; an exception that 'allows different degrees of civil rights in a vibrant capitalist setting' and 'pockets of agitation for civil rights are accommodated that do not threaten economic, national and collective security' (Ong, 2006) against the backdrop of authoritarian China. Migrant domestic workers, fall into what Ong (2006) argues is the 'space of neoliberal exception' in which the benefits of citizenship and human rights are denied. They enter the city on special two-year visas, which are renewable depending on their employment contracts, and are what Constable (2009) terms 'flexible noncitizens' who 'transform and transcend the borders of nation-states and work in a space of exception that simultaneously permits their protest (within limits) and denies them the rights of citizens and citizenship'. Their ambiguous status allows them to exercise the rights enshrined in the mini-constitution with regard to demonstration and assembly as residents of Hong Kong and at the same time their 'noncitizen' status poses little threat to Hong Kong's security, and partially explains why the police have been tolerant of their protests, as long as their actions are peaceful (Hsia, 2009).

These observations have been made by the director of the Mission for Migrant Workers, which has been actively advocating rights for migrant workers since the 1980s (more in Chapter Six). Hsia (2009) attributed the liberal governance adopted by the British colonial government after the 1967 riot as it underwent a series of reforms and established the strategy of 'administrative absorption of politics' called 'consultative democracy' and 'government by consent'. Following that the forms, claims and demands of the Hong Kong people were reframed as rights and entitlements. This was also the basis of the formation of the people's attitude towards the

government: as not a matter of political loyalty but of administrative efficiency alone. The people were happy to be left alone to pursue their own interests (Mathews et al., 2008). This liberal governance approach, and leaving the people to pursue their own interests as long as they do not threaten the public order is evidenced in the way in which the police prioritised their work in dealing with the different offences in the Chungking Mansions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Mathews, 2011), and the narrative of indirect rule in the earlier colonial period, in which Hong Kong was a politically neutral state and a market place for all sorts of people to pursue their own interests, where money-making was the common denominator (Wong, 2012). Mathews (2011) even argues that the police's principle of laissez-faire neoliberalism – that as long as the Hong Kong public is not harmed (and there is no disruption to public order), let the business go unimpeded - is what made the Chungking Mansions possible.

Constable (2009) also states that the 'peaceful and subtle forms of modern governance' of the Hong Kong police are one of the reasons why protests by migrant domestic workers take place in the city and not in other migrant receiving countries. From the ethnographic descriptions of the two protests above, the police were seen more as the facilitators and traffic controllers for the protests than as an antagonistic force that one has to reckon with. Dorothy's testimony that 'everyone looks happy and dresses up for protest marches in Hong Kong' has to be taken in the context of the brutal governmental forces in the Philippines, which confront protestors.

One of the participants at the protest march on Human Rights Day related how activists in the Philippines can become the target of 'extrajudicial killing' as the armed forces do not differentiate rebels from activists. The brutality associated with the Philippines armed forces is absent in the police forces in Hong Kong, at least in the community of migrant domestic workers/activists, who pose little threat to anyone in the city. When protestors do appear to threaten the law and order, as in the case of the anti-WTO Korean protestors – who had a reputation for vandalism and clashes

with the Korean police - the Hong Kong police are put on their guard. The Hong Kong police were under pressure to manage the protests effectively, to prevent any scenarios providing the People's Liberation Army's with a reason to intervene if it turned violent and to demonstrate their ability in upholding Hong Kong's status as a neoliberal city, by minimising the use of force, which might otherwise undermine the legitimacy of the Hong Kong SAR government and its 'high degree of autonomy'. The use of teargas and pepper sprays in dealing with the anti-WTO protestors and the firmer approach to managing the protests - discussed in a later section of this chapter - demonstrate the argument that the Hong Kong police's tactics in dealing with protesters are largely related to how disruptive and violent those protesters are perceived to be by the police.

Indeed, on the part of the migrant worker activists, they committed themselves to peaceful protests to avoid the risk of being arrested, and jeopardising their jobs, visas and livelihoods. Thus, the 'peaceful and subtle forms of modern governance' suggested by Constable (2009) are not only desirable for the police – although they know that the migrant activists pose little threat - but are also an outcome of the commitment on the part of the migrant activists to peaceful protests and operating within what is permitted by the law in consideration of the risks involved in not doing so.

The overlapping of spaces of exception – of the political exception of Hong Kong from the rest of China, of spaces of neoliberal exception of non-citizenship and of a negotiated outcome between that of the police and the migrant activists - are the spaces within which the protest marches organised by the migrant domestic workers took place.

#### **4.5.1 1 July 2014 – 17 years after the Hand-over**

About 18 months after my first ever protest march in Dec 2012 (I took part in many more during my fieldwork after that), I took part in a protest that was personal. No longer was I just practising participative observation, or being an observing photographer; I was a participant taking part in what to

many in Hong Kong was an important demonstration to demand the government's attention.

The Chief executives in the territory are elected by a 1200-member election committee in which most members are chosen for their sectorial interests or functional constituencies. They are largely made up of professionals, businessmen and corporations. At the same time, about half of the Legislative Council members are chosen by these functional constituencies. It is little wonder that Hong Kong ranks number one in the index of crony capitalism computed by the Economist<sup>11</sup> and if this ranking is too remote or abstract for many to appreciate, the image of a non-directly-elected member of the Legislative Council forced through a budget for a huge development plan in the North East part of Hong Kong, which until now has managed to preserve many of its farms and natural landscapes, was too close to home for comfort.

We all knew it was going to be big. It was hard to miss the pent-up anger towards the government. Hundreds of lawyers marched from the High Court, in Admiralty to the Court of Final Appeal, in Central, protesting against a white paper issued by China's cabinet, the State Council, in which it declared that "loving the country" was a basic political requirement for all Hong Kong administrators, including judges and judicial personnel, a move perceived by many as an infringement of the judicial independence guaranteed by the mini-constitution<sup>12</sup>.

Hours before the scheduled march began, people started to strategise on how to take part in this protest. Information on where the counting stations would be located was circulated on the social media. Many insisted on marching from the starting point, Victoria Park in Causeway Bay, so that

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<sup>11</sup> Source: Planet Plutocrat, the Economist, March 15<sup>th</sup> 2014  
<http://www.economist.com/news/international/21599041-countries-where-politically-connected-businessmen-are-most-likely-prosper-planet>

<sup>12</sup> Source: Hong Kong Lawyers March for Judicial Independence, Wall Street Journal, 27 June 2014 <http://online.wsj.com/articles/hong-kong-lawyers-march-for-judicial-independence-1403873329>

they could ensure that their participation would be counted. I was less concerned about the counting and more concerned about participating so I met my friend two stations ahead of the starting point. The plan was for us to join the protest march when it came to this part of the town and we could relax and hang around while we waited.

When we arrived in Wan-chai, mid-way between Victoria Park, the starting point, and Central, the final destination, the street was already filled with participants. There were platforms for speakers to encourage the participants to share who they were and why they were there. Recycling stations had also been set up. (It was a summer's day - hot and humid - and the anticipated amount of rubbish from bottled drinks could be seen in the separation of plastic bottles, caps and other things. They even had a bag for paper; it was interesting in a way that I picked up a poster from someone promoting equality among sexes and found many copies of the same poster in the recycling bin for paper). Months later, in what has come to be known as the 'Umbrella Movement', in which the streets of Admiralty surrounding the Hong Kong Government Headquarters were occupied by protesters, similar phenomena were observed. Protesters cleared their own rubbish and made sure that the rubbish was sorted for recycling. A mini-city sprang up during the occupation with tents, libraries, study desks and mini gardens on the expressway, which at other times serves to facilitate flows of traffic and acts as a barricade to separate the Hong Kong Government Headquarters from the rest of the city. Similar to the claiming of city space by the migrant domestic workers on Chater Road on Sundays and Public Holidays, the Hong Kong residents had created a different narrative for a space that is otherwise nothing more than expressways.

An ex-colleague who insisted on starting the march from Victoria Park posted on Facebook that she could not even make it to the starting point from the nearest MTR station; there were simply too many people. Another friend with whom we had lunch and then parted from to start our march at different starting points also faced the same situation. We were told that the

march could not get started because many people had skipped the starting point to join mid-way and had ended up jamming up the roads (!).

It did not make sense to go anywhere or to go backwards, so we waited and meanwhile we were entertained by many people who spoke about why they had finally decided to turn up for the protest today. When the leader of the march (a humble little truck) finally arrived at our area, the crowds decided to just march ahead instead of waiting for the truck to overtake us – as there were many other people jamming up the roads in front of us anyway. Unlike the earlier protest march that had a clear beginning and an end, I found myself in the crowds, not knowing exactly what was happening. There were no leaders with banners or loudspeakers to lead us. We were not part of any organisation with which we could identify ourselves and we did not have any clear idea of the run-down of the day (unlike the earlier ones at which there were speeches and a handing over of documents to a government representative). We were just individuals somehow connected through this march and we walked on.

It started to drizzle – a man walked away with a young girl (perhaps his daughter) to the nearby building for shelter; then it poured. Umbrellas sprang up. Everyone adjusted their positions in the crowd in relation to the spaces taken up by umbrellas. Some shared umbrellas; some stood in-between them. As it poured, the march stopped. No leaders, no sounds, we had no idea what was happening and why we had stopped. Everyone stood in the rain and waited. I did not have a panoramic view as I had done previously; I was but one of the crowd. We were like frogs looking up at the grey sky in a well. This is a city that is known for its density and in the rain we felt as though we were hemmed in (see Figure 4-7).



**Figure 4-7: Protesters in the rain**

People were stopped from leaving Victoria Park and messages from social media came through. The police refused to open more lanes for people to take part in the protest. Another message came through. People had broken through the police barricades, the news reported. We were not sure if any of these messages were true but it was very clear that we were stuck in the rain with a lot of others. Everyone just waited.

When we finally started walking again, we walked through traffic lights that had stopped functioning as regulators of movement. We walked on tramways and tried to avoid bodies of water on the uneven road surface. We unintentionally walked towards the edge of the crowd only to realise later



that we were separated from some other protesters by barriers in the middle of the road, which on normal days were used to stop pedestrians from jaywalking. We came across one of the counting stations and saw protest banners hanging down from the pedestrian bridges. We were far ahead of the rest of the protesters. We arrived in Central relatively quickly and it was quiet and eerily empty.

The Filipinos who used to gather in various parts of Central were there but only at the side, perhaps due to the weather. The junction between Chater Road and Pedder Street – a corner for Filipinos to gather and chat on Sundays - was barricaded, so much so that it looked like a fortress. Standing behind lines of iron-railings were policemen who I used to think only cleared the roads for the protesters. They certainly were in a different mood today, just as I was (see Figure 4-8, Figure 4-9).



Figure 4-8: Barricade on Chater Road



**Figure 4-9: Police & the billboard advert**

A helicopter hovered above us. With the march stretching all the way from Victoria Park to Central, clearly we had arrived too early for any scheduled programme to be running on the stage set up on Chater Road, along the side of the Old Supreme Court Building. Compared to the migrant organisations, many of the participants in the protest march today were amateurs, even those who spoke to us on the stage. There was no run-down and people were bad with words. They could not put together a coherent argument about why they were there (compared to the use of the language of rights by the transnational migrant workers' movement – see chapter three). We were all angry but we could not put together a proper argument about it so in the end we were asked to sing a Cantonese pop song that has become 'the song' for any protests in Hong Kong.

This arrival at the rally point, of turning participants into audiences of selected speakers (Solnit, 2001), was a change of momentum, a change of modes of participation, which I only noticed as a mere participant in this particular protest march. At the two previous protest marches, I had had the role of camerawoman, a privileged position that brought me closer to the core of the events. I had been able to be upfront and personal with the

protest leaders, go in and out of the marches at will and I had had a much better vantage point of the whole event unfolding in front of my eyes. It was only through the experience of the third march that I appreciated the privileged position I had enjoyed - of walking and following the routes unchallenged and unhindered at the first two protest marches. Although I still possessed the same body, my ability to walk freely unchallenged and unhindered changed as I played different roles in different events and to a certain degree perhaps also because of the nature of the events themselves. It is thus not just that different people might have different experiences, as suggested by Tuan (2008)'s concept of 'asymmetries' - in which he states that 'people may live in the same city, even work in the same building, and yet experience different worlds because their unequal status propels them into separate circulatory routes and work areas', as the urban spaces are not democratically available to all - but that access to the urban spaces also differs when one, although still in the same body, wears a different hat, as evidenced by my experiences of the three different protest marches, and contingent on the circumstances.

Thus, bodily experiences of urban spaces are not only particular to the body that experiences the urban spaces; they also vary as one changes one's role in relation to the governing powers of a space in a given situation. It is a situated lived experience that is mediated through the social relations embedded in the existing power and governance structures. For the masses who walk in a march, the situated lived experiences might be shared, as the majority of the participants in protest marches are simply participants. In that situated event, they possess the same social relations as the power and governance structure and are therefore likely to face similar restrictions and access to urban spaces and be guided by similar principles of operating within the remit of what is permitted and what is not.

The shared experience of walking with others in a protest march emphasises togetherness and the interrogation of urban spaces (Köksal, 2012) 'signifies the possibility of a common ground between people who have not ceased to

be different’, and ‘who have at last become the public’ (Solnit, 2001). This inter-subjective situated lived experience of becoming the public through walking with others in protests in the urban spaces of Hong Kong, I argue, is the basis for the formation of a global third space and what Central has come to be.

#### **4.5.2 Global Third Space**

Global, in Massey's (1994) sense of an ontological frame of looking at local and place as layer upon layer of different sets of linkages that links the local to the world beyond; it is also the sense of a global city that Sassen (2001b) articulates as an emergence of transnational politics, as we have seen in the celebration of International Migrants Day by Filipinos, Indonesians and others. In this light, I argue that Central is global. We can see it from its early inception as a trading hub connecting transnational networks and in the contemporary manifestation of global capitals as made evident by the Tiffany Christmas theme park and postmodern architecture. Central would cease to be Central if we stripped away its many global linkages – it itself is global.

The notion of a ‘third space’ was advanced by Oldenburg (1989, in (Carmona, 2010)), who was referring to settings in which people can participate in ‘informal public life’ outside of their family lives and work. These ‘third spaces’, including cafes, bookshops and salons, Carmona (2010) argues, become important mediation between individuals and societies and are highly inclusive and neutral grounds for conversations or potential political debates. The setting of these ‘third spaces’, although it mediates social interactions and could be seen as a way for individuals to participate in informal public life, is much of the time built on the basis of consumption. If one cannot afford to consume in these ‘third spaces’ then these ‘third spaces’ become exclusive and highly inaccessible, denying individuals who cannot afford this consumptions a way to participate in informal public life.

I argue to make this notion of 'third space' as a setting in which people participate in public life outside of their family life and work, notwithstanding that some of these settings may be off-limits to people who could not afford it as a starting point and expand it to include streets and urban spaces in which participation in public life can take place, such as what we have seen on Chater Road and many pockets of space in Central on Sundays and when the streets are cordoned off from traffic during protest marches. Third space is the setting in which people can take part in public life outside the confines of their family lives and work and at the same time become part of a 'public'.

Third space is also, at the same time, in Soja's (1996) words, where "everything comes together... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the trans-disciplinary, everyday life and unending history".

Soja's 'ontological trialectics' draw from Lefebvre's (1991) argument regarding the trialectics of space: spatial practice, representation of space and representational space, or the perceived, conceived and lived spaces that Soja modifies and calls Firstspace, Secondspace and Thirdspace. Lefebvre's concept of spatial practice and what Soja calls the Firstspace is the traditional focus in all spatial disciplines: the materialised, empirical measurable configuration of physical spaces. It also refers to 'a multitude of materialized phenomena across spaces and places' (Soja, 1996). The Secondspace or what Lefebvre suggests is the 'Representation of Space' or 'conceived space' is the dominant space and a space for utopian thought and vision. Lefebvre states that this is the 'space of the scientists, planners, urbanists etc. – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived' (Lefebvre, 1991). The representational space or lived space is 'space directly lived through its associated images and symbols', 'the space for inhabitants and users, also a space for artists,

writers and philosophers’, ‘the dominated, experienced, subjected space, space which imagination seeks to change and appropriate’, and ‘space of resistance, of imagined and real’ (Lefebvre, 1991).

Soja emphasises that the concept of Thirdspace is open and flexible, encompassing all potentialities and possibilities within which resistance and alternative interpretations and differential experiences of spaces are found. This ‘Thirdspace’, he argues, ‘arises from the sympathetic deconstruction and heuristic reconstitution of the Firstspace-Secondspace duality’ (Soja, 1996), as ‘thirthing-as-Otherings’. The “third-space’ is continuously open to additional otherness and open to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge” (Soja 1996). Third space as both a setting in which people participate in public life or become public in the Oldenburg sense and at the same time which is continuously open to new additions of ‘otherness’, as Soja advocates, is what I mean by the ‘third space’ that is Central.

On my way out of Central after the last protest march, before I came back to London, I came to the spot from which my very first protest march had started about 18 months previously. I saw a man standing in the middle of road with posters hanging both in front and behind him, asking for the people of Hong Kong to help. He started the poster by addressing ‘mistress and misses of Hong Kong who are fighting for justice’. It was a story of disputes over land claims that had resulted in a loss of life in a mainland Chinese city. He clearly could not do this in mainland China and I was not sure how much longer he could do it in Hong Kong.

As I was leaving Central, there were still many people waiting to start their march in Victoria Park. The march went on until midnight. When I left the protest, I did not know that many of the protesters had decided to stay overnight and risked being arrested for carrying out acts of ‘civil disobedience’. Instead of leaving the rally point, they occupied Chater Road with sit-ins and locked themselves in each other’s arms. Occupying Central – by blocking the movement of traffic in the Central Business

District - was initially a political imagery, only to be carried out if the government refused to negotiate political reforms regarding a genuine choice in the election of the city's next leader. The imagery became a reality that night. In the comfort of my own home, I watched the protest leaders who arrived later teaching the protesters ways to hold together, ways to protect themselves in the case of police violence, the numbers to dial for legal help and the rights accorded to them when they were arrested. I woke up the next morning seeing images of people being arrested, one of them was an 87-year-old man who had insisted on being with the students. He said, "I came because I find Hong Kong increasingly 'mainlandised' since Leung Chun-ying took office". "The white paper further sidelined 'one country, two systems' and I feel Hongkongers' freedom is under threat."<sup>13</sup>

Stories of each arrest was posted on an on-line platform and weeks later it was shut down without warning<sup>14</sup>. Three months later, at the end of September, a student boycott of classes started that turned into the Umbrella Movement<sup>15</sup> the world has come to know about. It was symbolised by the yellow umbrellas used to block tear gas and pepper spray from the police. Images of my friends, migrants and locals alike, in the areas of the blockaded Admiralty and Central, kept on appearing on my social media feed and they kept on coming for the three months the streets surrounding the Hong Kong Government Headquarters in Admiralty were occupied by students and protesters. The world has come to know a different Hong Kong: these images were different from that of the consumerist wonderland and tell one of the many stories that are only beginning to unfold.

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<sup>13</sup> Source: Police say all the arrested sit-in protesters were released last night, South China Morning Post, 2 July 2014; <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1544658/mass-arrests-hong-kong-protesters-demand-meet-chief-executive?page=all>

<sup>14</sup> Source: Pro-democracy website House News closes, citing political pressure, low revenue, South China Morning Post, 27 July 2014; <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1560104/pro-democracy-website-house-news-closes-citing-political-pressure-low?page=all>

<sup>15</sup> Source: Hong Kong umbrella protests - what's going on? Del Crookes, BBC; 29 September 2014; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/29407079>

#### **4.6 Conclusion:**

I opened this chapter with a description of the Tiffany Christmas theme park set against the backdrop of postmodern architecture – a picture that dominates the narratives of global cities and late capitalism, of consumerism and passive consumption, of the spectacle that is Central. By locating the social relations between the spectators and sponsors, I revealed the layers of transactions that took place between faceless capital and the consumers of spectacle. I also argued that this dominant narrative of Central speaks of its global origins from its early inception days as a hub for transnational trade and global capital and continues to dominate the landscape in Central today. It thus becomes essential to view Central ontologically, as a nexus of different networks, as open, porous and emergent.

In the second part of the chapter, I narrated three different protests in which I participated during my fieldwork: a march with the Filipino migrant domestic workers for International Human Rights Day, a march with the members of a transnational migrants' movement on International Migrants Day and the protest march that took place on the 1st of July 2014, 17 years after the handover of Hong Kong to China. Adopting the phenomenological walk as a methodological approach, these walks in protest marches revealed the prevailing norms and power relations governing urban spaces, and the different ways in which the boundaries between public and private, between what is permitted and what is not, are pushed, negotiated and broken. It was also through the 'composite walk' in the three different protests that I argued for a shared situated lived experience mediated by social relations in the existing power and governance structure as the basis for forming the 'global third space' – which Central has become.

Central as a global third space, I argue, is the global city that measures up to Sassen's articulation of the possibility of new transnational politics, a place that is global with its linkages beyond local and a third place that is the



setting in which people are able to participate in a public that is open to additional others, constantly under negotiation and always emerging.

## Chapter 5 Central on Sundays – Rhythmanalysis

*“Central is like a micro Philippines on Sundays. The community is also divided, based on the place where they come from in the Philippines. We know where to find the people say from the Northern or the Southern Philippines, the Luzon et al, so it’s like a Philippines map. We know where to find people who speak Ilocano, we know where to find the people who speak Ilonggo and the people who speak Tagalog and it is the same with food. If you like to taste Lucano food you know where to go, if you like to taste Visayan food you know where to go. It is a miniature of Philippines on Sundays which does not exist on ordinary days” (Henry, interview by author, 3 September 2013).*

### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, through a description of the journeys I took to navigate through Central, which has been socially constructed by the progressive Filipino organisations on Sundays, I discuss the spatial practices of and tactics used by the Filipino progressive community to adapt to the changes in the seasons and in the landscapes of Central. The nuanced social relationships and contestation of spaces with others and amongst the members of the community are also revealed in their ‘every-Sunday’ and ‘extra-Sunday’ activities. By looking at their ‘off-stage’ experiences in producing cultural performances, which are common features of Central on Sundays, and their encounters with the representatives of the authorities in this process, I examine the tensions that arise between the dominant abstract space and the often marginalised lived space and illustrate the negotiations and the creative ways of appropriating spaces by the Filipino community to argue that the domination of abstract space is not absolute.

This is also an attempt at a rhythmanalysis of Central and the Filipino progressive community on Sundays – a methodological approach to bring together the diverse practices and rhythms of the city space that are both constitutive and constituted by the linear and circular repetitions of everyday life, which in Lefebvre’s own words is “a discourse that ordains these horizons as existence, as being” (Lefebvre, 2013). I discuss the ways

in which the linear and circular repetitions of their Sunday lives creates their own social world and constructs or re-enacts the Filipino sociality, which has its own rhythms: it acts to punctuate the everyday repetitive life they have as domestic workers and create and inscribe patterns of usage of space that disrupt the dominant corporate space of Central, which has come to represent faceless capital and consumers of spectacle (see previous chapter).

Alternative social relations emerge in the cracks of the abstract space, in the encounters on the streets of Central. In the ‘every-Sunday’ and ‘extra-Sunday’ activities that have arisen out of the linear and circular repetition of every-Sunday life is the beginning of something hopeful – which I have illustrated with the case of the organised relief efforts in response to the aftermath of typhoon Yolanda, which swept through the Philippines in November 2014. Central on Sundays is constantly being re-enacted and renegotiated between the lived and the abstract and contested among the different members of Filipino communities.

## **5.2 Central On Sundays**

After being introduced to the community by Dorothy and having participated in two protests as a photographer, I ventured further and started hanging out with the community on Sundays. The task of hanging out did not appear daunting, but there was an immediate practical question of ‘where to start.’

The congregation does not have a distinct beginning or a clearly demarcated end. If one exits from the Central MTR (the Mass Transit Railway, equivalent to the London Underground) station on Sundays, one finds oneself emerging from the ground into a completely different space than the one that exists on other days of the week. There may be performances, on and off stage, tribal in nature or contemporary (see Figure 5-1, Figure 5-2); or booths set up to provide services to migrant domestic workers (see Figure 5-3, Figure 5-4) or to raise awareness of their common plight and

campaign against such abuses (see Figure 5-5, Figure 5-6). There may be protests (as described in the previous chapter), campaigning for the election in the Philippines, or on a less serious note, games and parties (see Figure 5-7, Figure 5-8). Of course, there are also the more mundane activities of commercial transactions around World Wide Plaza. People can be seen giving out pamphlets for telecoms companies and queuing up to send remittances. Carton boxes are packed and loaded onto trucks along the pedestrian walkways surrounding World Wide Plaza (see Figure 5-9, Figure 5-10; for discussion see (Camposano, 2012)). Sheltered walkways are occupied or ‘domesticated’ by migrant domestic workers, who try to make themselves as comfortable as they can with their little ‘huts’ built out of cardboard, and their umbrellas and mobile stools (see Figure 5-11, Figure 5-12, Figure 5-13).



Figure 5-1: Performance at Chater Road, January 2014



Figure 5-2: Performance on stage at Chater Road, July 2014



Figure 5-3: Glucose Check Station as part of Give Our Care to Carer programme at Chater Road, July 2014





Figure 5-4: Mobile Counselling Station at Chater Road, July 2014



Figure 5-5: Booth for TIGIL NA movement, a movement against illegal recruitment and trafficking, July 2014



Figure 5-6: Booth for the campaigning for legislation of working hours and ratification of ILO C189, July 2014



Figure 5-7: Election Campaign at Chater Road, April 2013





Figure 5-8: A party game at Chater Road, Feb 2014



Figure 5-9: Boxes being packed and loaded outside World Wide Plaza, March 2013





Figure 5-10: World Wide Plaza on a Sunday, March 2013



Figure 5-11: Resting on mobile stools



Figure 5-12: Getting shade with umbrellas



Figure 5-13: Cardboard partitions along the walkways outside the International Financial Centre



It is impossible to account for every group that occupies this space on Sundays or to disentangle the social relationships among these different groups and the activities organised by them. What I have done instead is to follow the routes I started when I met Dorothy at Chater Road on one particular Sunday night in November 2012. Through my journey to navigate the physical terrain of Central and of the Central that is socially constructed (S. M. Low, 2000) by the groups I encountered along the way, I attempt to provide a narrative of the Central of the Filipino community in Hong Kong, highlighting the ‘trialectics’ of spatial practice (perceived space: *le perçu*), the representations of space (conceived space: *le conçu*) and representational space (lived space: *le vécu*) (Lefebvre 1991, cited in (Ng et al., 2010)). Given that Dorothy is one of the leaders of the alliance of ‘progressive Filipino grassroots organisations’, the groups that I came into contact with through her were mostly members of progressive organisations who spent their Sundays trying to make a difference to their community both in Hong Kong and back in the Philippines. Central, socially constructed by these groups, is a reflection of who they are and who they aspire to become. Whilst these people do not represent the whole of the Filipino community in Hong Kong, I will refer to them as so in the discussion unless explicit differentiation is required in the context.

Many migrant domestic workers from the Philippines gather in Central on Sundays and on days that are mandated as statutory holidays for all workers in Hong Kong under the Labour Ordinance. This means that the coming-into-being of the Filipino migrant community depends on the calendar that is followed by everyone who lives in the city while at the same time there is another calendar that is followed by the progressive Filipino community in Hong Kong: anniversaries of organisation founding days are celebrated with vigour as are days of importance to the progressive migrant community – such as International Migrants’ Day, International Human Rights Day (see previous chapter), and the state of the union address by the President of the Philippines. These are all followed strictly with activities that correspond with the theme of the days. There are also the more universal days of

celebration –Mothers’ Day, Women’s Day, Christmas and New Year. Some of these days overlap with the uniquely Hong Kong calendar. These important events and dates that come once a year are in a way the circular repetition of their ‘every-Sunday lives in conjunction and contrast with the linear repetition of Sundays that come every seven days. These calendars interweave and underpin the rhythm of Filipino Central.

In parallel to the different activities that take place on Sundays there are extensive social networks being formed, which are in a constant state of emerging.

*“Central has always been the historical place of congregation of the foreign domestic workers, by the Filipinos originally, because they were the biggest migrant community for foreign domestic workers (in Hong Kong)” (Jo, interview by author, 14 October 2013).*

He continued:

*“Central is the place where they can search for their extended families, they can connect with their compatriots from their own villages” (Jo, interview by author, 14 October 2013).*

Through describing the activities that I encountered and in which I participated on my journey navigating the social spaces of Filipino grassroots organisations in Central, I aim to unravel the spatial practices of the Filipino grassroots organisations in these spaces: how do they make do with and make use of the physical spaces in Central for their various purposes, what are their tactics to ‘use, manipulate and divert’ (Certeau, 1984) the public spaces in Central, to overcome the obstacles and difficulties they encounter in appropriating these spaces, and how do they interact with the abstract rules and regulations that govern urban spaces and direct where they are permitted to undertake certain activities and not others. I also wish to discuss the ways in which their Sunday lives create alternative identities and social relations - they cease to be domestic workers and become leaders and members of grassroots organisations and,

with the linear and repetitive mundane activities within their Sunday lives and the events they run on a circular basis, they create and inscribe their own social world in this space. They construct their ‘tambayan’ and a space that is totally different from the weekdays when they are not around, a place that they call their own - albeit temporarily - which is important for them as a community and as members of that community. Lastly, I wish to argue that by appropriating spaces in Central in such a manner, the Filipino community has ‘unleashed’ a struggle in which the citizens resist the state and its domination and management of space. Central on Sundays becomes what Lefebvre & Regulier (2004) describe as “a place for walks and encounters, intrigues, diplomacy, deals and negotiations”. It becomes a theatre. Thus the rhythms of the people who occupy this space are linked back to the space, in this case Central.

## Central



Figure 5-14: Map of Central with key locations from the discussion; Source: Google Maps

## Chater Road and its surrounding area

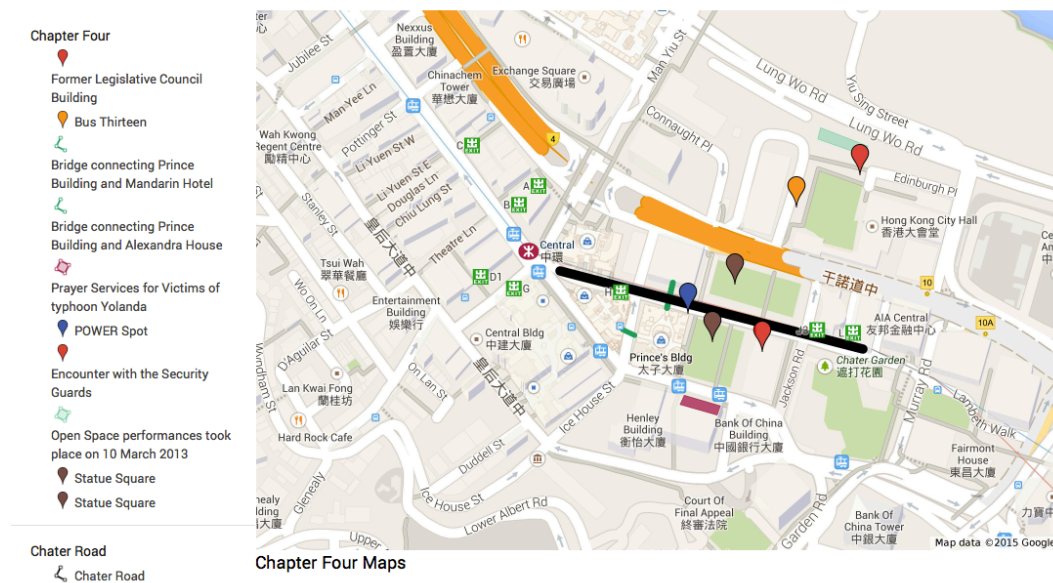


Figure 5-15: Map of Chater Road with key locations in the discussion; Source: Google Maps

### 5.3 Connecting the Past with the Future: First Meeting with ATIS

Sitting on the pavements was not my cup of tea. I found anyone stopping in the middle of the street a nuisance. People stopping meant that flows were obstructed - especially in the narrow pedestrian walkways in which I usually found myself in Hong Kong - or the speed at which I travelled was slowed, which is a sin in a city where efficiency is accorded as one of the highest rated traits. One had to fight for territorial space with everyone: pedestrians, motor vehicles, and men and women pulling or pushing trolleys and sometimes one had to avoid or circumvent material objects – signs, advertising boards and traffic poles. One of the tourist attractions in this city is the world’s longest outdoor escalator – a solution to facilitate smooth flows of pedestrians up and down its hilly terrain. In Hong Kong, flow and smooth movement are everything – the discourse of the market space, the abstract dominate the way in which spaces are used and planned; spaces are not for stopping, least occupying a space in the public walkway. That was, until I started hanging out with the Filipinos on Sundays in Central.

My adventure in ‘hanging out’ started with a meeting organised by ATIS (Abra Tinguian Ilocano Society) on 13 January 2013, at the invitation of Yvonne, an intern with one of the NGOs in Hong Kong advocating for migrants’ rights.

The space was on the ground floor of Pier Three, one of the piers along the shorefront of Victoria Harbour facing Kowloon, which provides ferry services connecting Hong Kong Island and Discovery Bay, a residential development on one of the many offshore islands. There is an overhead bridge that connects Pier Three to the International Finance Centre (IFC) Mall across a huge tunnel and multi-lane road. The space in which the migrants gathered was right next to the escalators that connect to the overhead bridge and hence there were many passers-by (see Figure 5-16). The little square next to the escalators provided sufficient space for all of the members to sit on the ground and the two leaders to speak to the members using a portable microphone and speaker, as in a traditional classroom setting - this arises out of habit for the leaders, Valerie and Sandy, who were teachers back in the Philippines. Valerie and Sandy sat on stools (see Figure 5-17). According to Yvonne, migrants make use of any public space that is available to them and sometimes when the street furniture does not provide comfortable seating, raised pavements become benches – as they provide some level of elevation for them to sit on. For the more experienced, bringing along a foldable stool is always advisable. As public spaces in Hong Kong are mostly for the facilitation of flows and smooth movement, they are not adorned with proper seating facilities for ‘people to rest their legs for a moment or just to watch the world go by’ and even ‘if public seating exists it is often narrow, uncomfortable and difficult to sit on’ (Sharp, 2015). Having mobile furniture such as stools overcomes the limitations imposed by urban space designs.





Figure 5-16: Pier three next to the elevator, 13 Jan 2013



Figure 5-17: Having a meeting in the public space at pier three, 13 Jan 2013

This was one of the regular meetings held by this alliance – an alliance of grassroots organisations that consisted in 2013 of fifteen municipal and three concern groups – the Abra Migrant Workers Welfare Association (AMWWA), the BAGGAC ti ATIS Cultural Group and the Divine Word



Migrants Apostolate from Abra, a province in northwestern Luzon.<sup>16</sup> Unlike those grassroots organisations that have fixed spots in Central for their weekly gatherings, ATIS, being an alliance, holds its meetings only on every second Sunday of the month. One of the officers, Isabel, who joined this meeting, told me: ‘when there are meetings for ATIS, they know instantly that they should go to Pier Three. For dance practice, they go to Ice House Street and if there are no meetings or practices, they occupy the walkway outside the IFC Mall (see Figure 5-13.)

This practice of having a specific space for a specific function has not always been the norm. Valerie, a member of the executive committee of ATIS, told me later in an interview how the group has adapted to changes over the years – both its growing membership and the changing landscape of Central.

*“We used to have our meetings, as an alliance, in the General Post Office area... because the group was still manageable. If you noticed in the General Post Office area there was a long stretch in front of the post office so at first it was okay. We met our members there, because many of those who stayed there during the holidays were from our province in Abra. So it was easy to call them to say we have the meeting now at the time. But after some years, in 1992-1994, when we organized AMWWA, the members of ATIS increased and we found the post office area was no longer conducive for the meeting; we had to find a larger space. At first we stayed on the pier, the pier side... there was no Central Pier at the time, there was no Piers Seven, Eight, or Nine, only up to Pier Six ... and Piers Four, Three, Two towards the western area, so we used to have it in Pier Six. At first it was also nice. It was a bigger space but then we had to find an area where we could form them in a way that the members would pay attention because in the areas, they were more scattered, so it was not organised. It was important to arrange people in such a way... it’s like school you know, it’s like a classroom, they listen to the teacher... both of us, the president of ATIS and I are both teachers actually so we tend to carry with us the style, the classroom type, the traditional type of speaking to the students, speaking to the members like in a classroom. So we found the area on Pier Three and so far it is*

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<sup>16</sup> Source: Abra Tinguian Ilocano Society celebrates 21st anniversary; HK Pinoy TV; <http://www.hkpinoytv.com/abra-tinguian-ilocano-society-celebrates-21st-anniversary/>

*the best because even if it rains... that's another factor, the rain you know... when we were on Pier Six, there was no shade, so we had to disperse and find our own place but there on Pier Three there is shade from the building so we decided to stay there for now" (Valerie, interviewed and edited by author, 23 October 2013).*

ATIS celebrated its 20th anniversary in December 2012, an event that was on the meeting agenda for discussion. In its 20-year history, it has witnessed changes to the landscape in Central. Valerie continued:

*"Actually I forgot to mention in 1992, when I arrived here, the people from Abra used to stay on the Blake Pier, I'm not sure if you are aware of that...that is the area of the IFC now, the International Financial Centre. That was still sea... part of the sea before. In that area, there were like small huts you know, anyway, that's the space where the Abra people used to stay when I arrived".*

I enquired whether there was any photographic evidence to show that; it was peculiar for a migrant community to have memories of past Hong Kong, which seems to no longer linger in many of the locals' mind. She said, "no, it was not the era of the selfie and mobile cameras. Even if there were, they would be in the boxes sent back to the Philippines". Despite the lack of physical evidence, her memories of Blake pier were vivid:

*"It was frustrating to lose your... because we considered it our territory - those from the northern part of the Philippines, most of them stayed there. There was a big space and they were dancing and singing. It was different, so much different from now, because they were just having fun. When I saw them before, I really admired how they came together on their days off and did the things that they loved to do like dancing, eating and having picnics and singing. There were no rallies then. I didn't see any rallies before; I didn't see any of what we are doing now like signature campaigns... no such things before. Maybe because I was not yet or I had not met UNIFIL (United Filipinos in Hong Kong – an alliance of grassroots Filipino organisations) because UNIFIL already existed at that time... since 1985 right? But for ATIS, that group, they were in their own world, on Blake Pier. So when they built that IFC that was the time they moved to the General Post Office, because that was near to that area at that time. So I started doing, organising, holding meetings in the post office area".*

The transformation of the group, from being in their own world and just having fun to being a group that is an active participant in many of the events that are more political in nature, is best summarised in the opening paragraph of a booklet published to celebrate and document ATIS's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2012:

*“Twenty years of building a family of Ilocanos and Tinguians, providing welfare services, actively defending the rights of migrants, establishing alliances and doing solidarity work, transforming a traditional cultural group into a progressive organization and working for a better Abra and a better Philippines sums up the history of the Abra Tinguian Ilocano Society in Hong Kong”.*<sup>17</sup>

The transformation is not only reflected in the spatial practices of the group – in the kind of spaces required for their specific activities, the growing number of members and the changing landscape of Central to which the group has had to adapt – it was also reflected in the very meeting I attended and the nature of the activities that were being planned for the group: a one billion and rising programme (a global campaign against violence against women, see chapter three); protest marches on international women's day and international labour day; and for the following two months, electoral campaigning for Migrante Partylist (a party that says it represents Overseas Filipinos Workers and their families) for the 2013 Philippine House of Representatives election. For the last task, ATIS set itself the task of forming teams to recruit members both inside and outside ATIS to join MIGRANTE International, an alliance of grassroots migrant worker groups headquartered in the Philippines but which has affiliates or chapters throughout the world (Rodriguez, 2011), including Hong Kong.

The Overseas Absentee Voting Act, passed in February 2003, provides a system for many of the Filipinos who work or reside outside the Philippines to vote in an election. The act, which is officially known as the Republic Act 10590, stipulates that “all citizens of the Philippines abroad, who are

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<sup>17</sup> Source: ATIS Yearbook 2012, editorial, ATIS Narrative History

not otherwise disqualified by law, at least eighteen (18) years of age on the day of the elections, and who are registered overseas voters, may vote for President, Vice-President, Senators and Party-List Representatives”.<sup>18</sup> Migrante Partylist’s third nominee for the election in 2013 was an active member of the Filipino community in Hong Kong and his involvement seemed to have an impact on the enthusiasm of many of the so-called ‘progressive organisations’ for the electoral campaign.

During the meeting, while explaining to me what was going on, one of the members, Lina, told me: “we want to have our voices heard in the congress”.

The possibility of having a representative in the congress, as Lina stated, may also explain the transition of the group to focusing on events that are more political in nature.

Besides setting up booths to recruit members, another way through which ATIS strived to reach out to the ‘more traditional groups’ was through cultural performance, which is argued by Lai (2010) to be central to activists’ practices among migrant domestic workers, especially in terms of mobilising activities such as rallies and demonstration, and is aligned with ATIS’s intention to recruit members who might not be supportive of the more ‘radical’ actions of rallies and demonstrations as yet but are drawn to the entertainment and perhaps find resonance with the messages conveyed in these performances.

Lai (2010) argues that cultural performance also helps the formation of a collective identity, from one of ‘maids’ who are subjected to particular treatment and discrimination in the host societies to those who fight for rights for the collective good. These performances also break down the divide between activist participation and passive onlookers and thus

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<sup>18</sup> Source: Department of Foreign Affairs, Overseas Voting Secretariat: Republic Act No. 10590; <http://www.dfa-oavs.gov.ph/index.php/2012-06-18-03-48-48/2012-06-18-03-50-53/republic-act-no-10590>

contribute to the creation of a collective identity and the community-in-the-making. As much as Lai's analysis and observation of "on-stage" cultural performances and their crucial role in the practice of the activist community of migrant domestic workers is illuminating, I argue that cultural performances need to be viewed in the context of the specific events of which they are a part, and in relation to other events that were taking place at the same time. I also argue that the formation of a collective identity through cultural performance is more nuanced than just a transition from 'maids' to 'those who fight for collective good'. It is a multi-layered contestation between different provinces, affiliations and the issues at hand. In some instances, as I will demonstrate with ethnographic accounts in the following sections, when cultural performances are viewed within the specific contexts of the event of which they are a part and in relation to other events that might be on-going at the same time, the effect of cultural performance on collective identity formation, argued by Lai (2010), might be limited.

What follows are two ethnographic accounts of my journey through Central in March 2013, to illustrate the arguments made above.

#### **5.4 Contested Terrain: Electoral Campaign 10 March 2013**

It was a bright day, peculiarly hot for this time of the year. There was a Central and Western (district) Road Safety Carnival taking place in Chater Road with the area cordoned off by the police (see Figure 5-18). Migrant domestic workers could be seen either at the side of the pavements near the MTR exit outside Chater House or scattered along the underpass leading to Edinburg Place, and there were a few migrants around Chater Road. I walked through the underpass that connects Chater Road to City Hall, an area in which many migrant domestic workers congregate, to try my luck. The still-under-construction space stretching between the General Post Office and City Hall after the relocation of the Star Ferry Terminal and Queen's Pier was full of activity – as if the community of Chater Road had been relocated across the expressway. Signs of construction were still

visible with bricks and tiles piled up at the side bordering the vehicular road to the north. People dressed with tribal motifs were getting ready for some kind of festivity in this open space.



Figure 5-18: Police Cordon around seating areas in front of the stage, Chater Road, 10 March 2013

Soon, against a backdrop of skyscrapers and on tiled flooring, a few men in long strips of hand-woven loincloth and women in wrap-around skirts with tribal motifs danced to the beat of gongs (see Figure 5-19). The performers carried a miniature hut made of straw, baskets of fruit and tropical plants and they danced and walked barefoot on the sterile paved pedestrian walkways (see Figure 5-20, Figure 5-21). The incongruence between the costumes, the props, and the cultural performances of agriculture in nature against the landscape upon which they performed was striking.





Figure 5-19: Men and women danced to the beat of gongs, 10 March 2013



Figure 5-20: Miniature hut made of straw and tropical plants wrapped in tribal motif cloth



**Figure 5-21: Performers carried baskets of fruit**

At the other corner, supporters of Migrante Partylist in green t-shirts gathered around the entrance to City Hall facing the multi-level car park to the west, an area that is known as ‘Bus Thirteen’ in the community, as there is a bus stop for bus number thirteen. I met Dorothy at the northwestern corner of Edinburg Place, between the open space in which the cultural performance was taking place and the Bus Thirteen area. As the cultural performance drew crowds surrounding the open space, the number of supporters for Migrante Partylist getting ready for a protest march was comparatively much smaller in size.

I enquired about the cultural performance that was taking place. Dorothy explained that these groups were from the mountain region in the northern province of the Philippines and mentioned they were ‘friends’. She then went on to explain that there are many different levels of members of UNIFIL and that if she asked them to sign a petition, they would usually do that, but some would prefer not to join protest marches. She said that there exist different levels of involvement. Clearly, with cultural performances and protest matches to choose from, different affiliations and different priorities were apparent. The costumes and props were telling.



The protest march was part of the electoral campaign for Migrante Partylist and partly for International Women's Day. A woman in a green Migrante t-shirt popped a balloon underneath her t-shirt to dress up as a pregnant woman and held a protest banner stating, 'NO TO HOME BIRTHING POLICY' (see Figure 5-22). She explained 'home birth': she said that the Filipino government had passed a rule to force all women to give birth in hospitals rather than at home, which was still the practice for many of the women who lived in rural areas in the Philippines. She asked, "what is going to happen to those midwives? And what if the families of the pregnant women cannot afford to go to hospitals?" There were also banners protesting about issues directly impacting migrant workers' lives – such as advocating direct hiring instead of subjecting migrant workers to the whims of hiring agencies and protesting against the 150% increase in the insurance premium under PhilHealth, a government scheme for national health coverage in the Philippines. There was also a more universal appeal to 'stop violence against women'.



**Figure 5-22: Protest against home birthing policy on t-shirt supporting Migrante Partylist and Teddy Casino, party's candidate running for Senate**

The protest march started with Dorothy giving a speech to the crowds of Filipinas who were camped beneath the sheltered walkway of City Hall but were not part of the supporters of Migrante Partylist or participants of the cultural performances that were taking place in the open space a stone's throw away. Later I found out from Marian (she was introduced in chapter two) that most of the groups who stay in this area are supporters of the Consulate (this implies supporters of the government) and they would turn up the volume of their music if they found Marian and her friends to be practising for dances.

The protest march stopped at several places along the way - at Statue Square (see Figure 5-23) right outside the MTR exit and at the rear of the HSBC Building (see Figure 5-24) - and then it headed back to the area of

Statue Square that is in front of the old Supreme Court Building. All of these areas, I came to know later, were occupied by mixed and random groups who were not known to belong to any particular organisation. The protest march was also an electoral campaign, and as such it made ‘tours’ to reach out to members of the community who were known to be non-supporters to garner support. It was common knowledge among the migrant workers it seemed. Just as the protest march was about to leave the grounds of the HSBC Building, another group carrying the national flag of the Philippines and flags bearing the name of another partylist stopped at the front end of the HSBC Building, doing their part in the electoral campaigning (see Figure 5-25). While the leaders were giving speeches to the crowds, some of the members went into the crowds to distribute pamphlets for the up-coming election. The crowds might have been listening but it dawned on me that they continued with what they were doing – playing cards, chatting and browsing on their mobile phones. The protesters were out-numbered by the people, who continued with their activities in the sheltered spaces of HSBC and Statue Square. A journalist who followed the protest march remarked: “the protest march is related to women’s issues, but many of them do not appear interested”.



Figure 5-23: The protest group stopped at Statue Square in front of a giant advertising board



Figure 5-24: The protest march stopped at the rear of the HSBC Building





**Figure 5-25: Another group campaigning for another partylist at the front of the HSBC Building**

There were clear differences between the kind of activities that take place in and ambience emanating from the sheltered spaces such as the ground floor of the HSBC Building and that of the open-aired Chater Road; Henry explained:

*“The shelter (these spaces) provided attracts a lot of people. ... it is a big open space and you (can) just come and put your cloth where you would stay. And that is it; you have your space! So it attracts people from different areas, different origins. Somehow it develops into a place in which they can stay for the whole day. So there is also a saying there that because they can stay there the whole time they do not have to be afraid of the sun or the rain. They are sheltered basically and so it also somehow dampens. The activities (in these sheltered spaces) are not as active and as vibrant compared to (activities in other) areas. You do not see people dancing or singing there. You only see people chatting; playing cards; eating ... it is a very passive space, not as vibrant as the other areas. So those people who want to just sit down, relax and chat somehow they want that space” (Henry, interviewed and edited by author in brackets, September 2013).*

The different ways in which the spaces in Central are contested by different groups of Filipinos during their Sunday gatherings and the patterns of use and significance of these spaces speak of spaces that are socially constructed with distinct experiences of “being-in-Central” (Richardson, 1982). Some spaces are thought of as suitable and are used for ‘passive activities’ whilst the spaces that afford more flexibility in terms of use are open for contestation: depending on the cause and the organisations that can mobilise sufficient members to appropriate and occupy these spaces. This also reveals that beneath the working of the general Hong Kong calendar that determines when Filipinos come together to Central on certain days, within those who gather there is a multiplicity of rhythms (Lefebvre, 2013) – that rhythm of ATIS, of active Migrant supporters, and of members of organisations from the northern provinces.

The short journey from City Hall to the HSBC Building and Statue Square, my encounters (and non-encounters) along the way and the ways in which various pockets of spaces were appropriated differently within a small area of Central also revealed the heterogeneous nature of the Filipino community in Central. There was competition for members’ time and commitment between different organisations with different affiliations. These organisations might contest over the use of spaces and rival groups campaigned for electoral votes. Some simply preferred to relax and chat with friends, while others, like the activists I came to know, made sure that they spent their off-days in useful ways. This revelation makes Lai’s (2010) argument of the cultural performances’ role in the formation of collective identity from one of ‘maids who are subjected to particular treatment and discrimination in the host societies to those who fight for rights for the collective good’ an underestimation of the complexities of the Filipino communities in Hong Kong.

The cultural performances carried out by groups from the mountain region, who wore costumes and danced with props, distinguished them from Filipinos who were not from the same region. Tribal motifs are powerful

symbols to enact identities but they also serve to exclude others who do not share the same sentiments towards them. Lai's other argument, about these performances breaking down the divide between activist participation and passive onlookers, seems to assume that these cultural performers are of a uniform nature and the division is only between those who participate in the performance and the audience. On the contrary, as we have seen in the case of the dances by tribal groups and the performances carried out by another group who were campaigning for a political party, these performances act to reinforce the diversity within the Filipino community in Hong Kong. It is thus important to view these cultural performances in the context of the event of which they are a part, and also take into account the nuanced relationships among the different groups within the Filipino community. We need to differentiate between performances that aim to unite the Filipino community with common issues faced by the migrant community in the host country from cultural performances that enhance the differences that already exist within the Filipino community in Hong Kong.

At the same time, these cultural performances should not be viewed in isolation from their production and in this particular discussion I would like to emphasise the importance of having access to public spaces for the production of cultural performances. I argue that the discussion of the 'off-stage' practices of the migrant organisations in adapting, making do with and making use of the public spaces that might or might not be accessible or available to them for practising and rehearsing cultural performances reveals the interaction between the spatial practices of the migrants and the spatial practices of the dominant way of how spaces are conceived, governed and used. This dominance is a result of the materialisation of conceived spaces of various governmental departments in terms of governance in urban spaces, or what Butler, (2012) articulates as the impact of law - of how 'law is inscribed within social relations and is materialised in the practice of living bodies' as the 'concrete abstract'. At the same time, I argue that off-stage" efforts and the overcoming of obstacles by these performers also reveal the treatment and discrimination faced by the

migrant domestic workers in the host society in general. The obstacles to, and effort involved in, putting on performances are not only linked to producing the performances themselves per se; they also face obstacles before the performance can even be rehearsed and materialised on stage.

For this discussion, I will turn to the ethnographic accounts of my encounter with LIKHA in the spring of 2013.

### **5.5 Negotiation of using public spaces**

For about two to three weeks leading up to the event for the electoral campaign for Migrante Partylist at Chater Road, I was attached to LIKHA, a cultural organisation that is reputed to be THE cultural organisation of the progressive Filipino community. I became acquainted with them on one of the Sundays outside Edinburg Place at a location they call 'Bus Thirteen'.

It was a day in early spring with intermittent rain. The section of Chater Road stretching from the old Supreme Court to the junction between the Prince Building and the Mandarin Hotel was the venue for AIDS day. The event was organised by St. John's cathedral. I was there at around 12.30pm and rows of seats set up in front of the stage were unoccupied. At the time, when I walked past the stage, two local young men were demonstrating how to handle a condom and its subsequent disposal process. Not many people were paying attention to the demonstration on the stage. Two rows of booths were set up along Chater Road. Filipinos migrant workers sat and gathered at the usual spots - at sheltered bus stops and on the walkway along the colonnade of the old Supreme Court. The section of Chater Road west of the junction between the Mandarin Hotel and the Prince Building was relatively empty. It looked exposed, both to the gazes of passers-by as well as the elements. A few migrants were gathered underneath the overhead bridge between the Prince Building and the Mandarin Hotel (see Figure 5-26) and between Alexandra House and Chater House.





**Figure 5-26: Chater Road between the Mandarin Hotel and the Prince Building, 31 March 2013**

I then proceeded to City Hall to see if I could see any familiar faces. At Bus Thirteen, I met Crystal (a volunteer at the Mission from Migrant Workers), Jay and Frank, whom I had come to know through Yvonne as they also worked at an NGO advocating rights for migrants. A small group of about ten was practising dances following Jay's instruction. This is a



cultural group called LIKHA and they had gathered together to rehearse for a skit that would take place a week later (see Figure 5-27, Figure 5-28) as part of the electoral campaign for Migrante Partylist.



Figure 5-27: Bus thirteen area for LIKHA



**Figure 5-28: Practising for performances in the Bus Thirteen area (without shelter)**

Jasmine, who had joined LIKHA in January, told me that she would act as the father of a family of three – all active in politics - and a candidate for congress election. She and two others – who acted as her son and her wife in the satire - were to represent the “political dynasties in the Philippines who have held sway for generations” (Economist, 2013); there was also a role of Ms Popular whose rise to politics was more a result of her fame than her policies; and lastly roles for the kind of politicians who appear only during election campaigns. The satire was to mock the personality-driven and inconstant politics of the Philippines in which corrupt officials sentenced to prison for life were returned to Congress by voters (Economist, 2013). It was decided during the discussion among the production crew (the performers and Jay, who had co-written the script with Frank) that exaggerated accessories and comical make-up would be used to make it obvious to the audience that they were being mocked rather than celebrated.

When it started to drizzle, the group moved to the corner of the City Hall entrance, adjacent to the City Gallery, right next to a spiral staircases leading up to the courtyard above. We realised when facing the entrance to City Hall from the square outside (Edinburgh Square), to the right side of the entrance, that the spaces under the colonnade were occupied by different migrant groups but to the left side of the entrance it was left empty. While we were still standing around the area, undecided about whether we should choose the spot, a security guard approached a few Filipinas who were sitting on the parapet wall next to the entrance and asked them to leave. The group suspected the security guard of being racist in the apparent act of dispersing the Filipinas. It was only when people who resembled Chinese sat on the parapet wall and the security guard disallowed their action that they ruled out racism. There must be certain rules regarding the occupation of spaces that were broken by the public seeking rest by sitting on the parapet wall.

While we were still uncertain about our next, another migrant group started to move platforms of food (food put on top of wooden structures) to an area next to us, closer to the entrance. The security guard stepped in and asked them to clear the area. The Filipina clarified with the security guard the areas in which they could place their food (two large cakes!) and looked fully cooperative, although they proposed for the food and platform to be moved slowly.

I approached the security guard and asked her why they could not stay in that area as apparently to the right of the entrance there were groups gathering. She replied that there was a picket line telling the public which area not to block - which was at least three to five metres away from the areas in which the group next to us had gathered. I enquired about the decision maker. She said she did not know how the precedent had been set except that it was the standard operational procedure. When I pressed her further about with whom I could check regarding the rules she referred me to the press office inside the building. The press office inside the building turned out to be a reception desk and when I asked the receptionist if he could enlighten me about the reason why a certain area was out of bounds, he responded that he was not aware of any areas that were out of bounds. We went out to clarify this with the security guard and the security guard simply stated that it was common knowledge that the area adjacent to the City Gallery was not to be occupied by anyone. The inconsistency in the execution of the rules between the receptionist and the security guard needed further enquiry. The security guard urged the receptionist to check with the estate manager but the estate manager referred him to the Duty Manager.

Consequently, the Duty Manager from the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) came to the scene and I clarified with her that I just wanted to understand what the rules and regulations regarding space usage were, and why a certain area was out of bounds whilst the others were accessible. She explained to me that there was an emergency exit behind

the areas that the group next to us had blocked with their platforms (of food). I confirmed with her that as long as the emergency exit was not blocked the areas were open to the public. I explained to her that I wanted to know and explain the reasons to the migrants as I did not want them to misunderstand and perceive that the authorities were being racist. She said, defensively of course, that the authorities were not being racist as the other spaces were open for use by the migrants (she specifically pointed out the facilities such as the washrooms – a point I will return to later).

During the next one hour or so, different security guards came around to our areas a couple of times but left us alone. The production crew practised the political satire in a narrow strip of space between the spiral staircases and the fire exit, while being careful not to sit around the fire exit to avoid getting the group into trouble. It continued to rain and the satire was rehearsed repeatedly. Seeing that we could make use of this stretch of space without being chased away, other migrant groups also started to occupy the remaining space. Then towards five in the evening, the same security guard with whom I had talked earlier came over to us and asked the group to stop dancing. I told her that I had clarified with the manager in charge that this space was open to the public but she said that another woman in authority had told her to inform the group that they could not dance in that space. I asked her who that woman was and she had no idea. Another round of internal enquiry took place – this female security guard asked her boss, and then her boss asked the estate manager.

The estate manager turned out to be the woman that the female security guard was referring to, who had instructed her to stop the group dancing in the area. This estate manager wanted to dismiss my enquiry about why the rules had changed quite quickly, until I told her I had talked to the Duty Manager. She said she would check with her again. After a while, a group of them ( security guards, the estate manager and the Duty Manager) appeared simultaneously near the entrance and looked in the direction in which the group was rehearsing. I asked directly: “what were the rules

now?” The estate manager said that this was the entrance to City Hall and as there were events taking place in the evening, they (she referred to the migrants) could not block the passageway. I said that I did not see anyone being blocked by the groups. The Duty Manager replied that they required preemptive measures in order to prevent the pavements from overcrowding. The estate manager quickly jumped onto the bandwagon and commented that they could not let their patrons be affected (I had no understanding of the logic of the Filipinas resting outside affecting the patrons inside City Hall). She emphasised that this was the entrance and she needed to ‘maintain’ the entrance. I told them that I agreed on the grounds of safety that the emergency exit should not be blocked; but disallowing the migrants to sit around in the area that was not blocking the emergency exit or anyone else was not reasonable. The estate officer then said, “the public would complain about having them around and we are in a difficult situation too. We need to balance letting the migrants have access to the spaces and at the same time ‘maintaining the entrance’”. (I supposed she meant maintaining the ‘image’ of the entrance.) I asked her then where this demarcation line was. What she had said about ‘maintaining’ the entrance was arbitrary – there are no ordinances or laws stipulating specific areas that are out of bounds. Although I could see that the government officer nodded in silence in response to my comments about this arbitrary judgment, the estate manager insisted that she needed to maintain the ‘entrance image’ for City Hall. The two security guards who had been quiet for much of the conversation seemed keen to move the migrants to the open space (and perhaps spaces not falling under their responsibility). One of them suggested: “it’s not raining anymore, why don’t they just move out?”

After rounds of negotiation, the government officer (who seemed to be in a position to decide what was acceptable behaviour in the public space and what was not in this particular instance) confirmed that if the people could quickly move away, she would be fine with it (i.e. sitting down and occupying spaces was not allowed but dancing and rehearsing was acceptable according to this arbitrary negotiated agreement). This newly



minted agreement came into effect immediately. The groups that had moved into the area next to us were told to move to the other side of the entrance. Security guards then came to set up picket lines to prevent anyone else from settling in the same area. Jay came over and whispered to me that that the new picket lines would probably be set up on the very spot on which we were standing. We both laughed. He turned out to be right; the next time the group came together for another rehearsal, the space in which the practice had taken place on that very day had become out of bounds (see Figure 5-29).



Figure 5-29: Picket line set up around City Hall

Jo, who works for an NGO advocating migrant workers' rights, compared the restrictions and regulations in the parks and squares governed by LCSD to Chater Road and also how the migrants are affected by events that are organised on Chater Road (such as AIDS Day, Safety Road Carnival and later on 'Cheers for Play Day'):

*"I've seen more and more activities in the Chater Road area, unlike before... it's not so usual to see lots of event happening there but now not only migrant groups but also local people are*

*using that space... that's more positive than negative. The positive side is it makes the space more vibrant and more diverse: you can see a lot of things happening and you can witness or even participate in some of these events. Local people using Chater Road also provide an opportunity to interact which is quite important... that the local and migrant people are coming together at least in a specific space. But there are also negative aspects there. One very popular criticism or complaint has been the displacement again. Every time Chater Road is reserved to be used for big events it will displace groups, they will be driven further towards the western part of Chater road or they will go to the two parks, Statue Square or the one near the fountain, near the cenotaph and it will cause inconvenience for the community because unfortunately in the past year or so we have witnessed a lot of restrictions being imposed on migrants as they stay in these public areas. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) is in charge of these areas, Statue Square the other side, and you can see that most of their administration of these public spaces, they really go around telling migrants not to do this, not to sit down, not to lay down their food... they can't even play dance music or even if they sit down and use mobile sound systems, they are being restricted from doing that. Unlike if they use the road. This is unfortunate - public space in which migrants can come together to talk and discuss and share problems or just enjoy their food or their company is being restricted because of regulations that we don't necessarily see on weekdays when migrants aren't there. So sometimes you have to ask, do they really have these regulations or are these regulations there because of their treatment/attitude towards the migrants in how they view them? ... It's an open secret that there are sections of the HK society unfortunately that still think of the phenomenon in Central on Sunday as an eyesore. Thousands of Filipino migrants congregate in Central... surely they need places where they can sit; surely they will access to rest rooms. But now you can see here even though Sundays the main consumers of their products and their foods are migrants you can still sense in some of the coffee shops or restaurants they have been restricting use of their facilities” (Jo, interviewed by author, 4 October 2013).*

Having access to a restroom has been an issue among the migrants, and the discrimination they face was described by Rose (introduced in chapter 2). She said:

*“We experience discrimination especially in the toilet... (there was one instance in which) I'm pushing the door to open it while*



*I am talking to a friend and I'm surprised that the door is not opening. I push the door but it's not opening and the cleaner is actually holding the door, so that it does not open. She told me that this is only for the customers. So I shouted and told her that I'm the customer because I came from inside Starbucks. So I showed her my receipt. But I'm so angry... why are they treating us like that?" (Rose, interviewed by author, 29 August 2013).*

The accounts of the episode at City Hall with the security guards, the estate manager and the government officer; the description given by Jo of the rules and regulations imposed on the migrants in using parks and squares that fall under the administration of LCSD compared to the relative freedom enjoyed by the migrants while using the road; the basis of the usage refusal; and the discrimination faced by Rose in the toilet all illustrate the emphasis on abstract space over lived space. Based on Lefebvre's writings, Butler (2012) articulates that abstract space is 'the fragmentary, pulverized space created by the imperatives of a capitalist economy and the state's involvement in the management and domination of space'.

Lefebvre (1991) critiques the dominant trend of dividing up spaces in accordance with the division of labour whereby each specialisation acts upon truncated spaces, sets up barriers and frontiers, and occupies the carved up spaces 'in itself', oblivious to the latent social relations embedded within it and the production of it. 'Just as fetishism of commodities arises out of treating things in isolation' (Butler, 2012), space is also fetishized when considered in isolation, 'in itself'. Another aspect of the critique of abstract space by Lefebvre (1991) is the dominance of the visual in social practices whereby impressions derived from all other senses fade away and with the eyes being accorded priority, there is a tendency to relegate the objects to passive that they merely become images. When this is applied to space, 'space has no social existence independently of an intense, aggressive and repressive visualization (...) space becomes purely visual space' (Lefebvre, 1991: 286).

The dominant abstract space and its characterisation of fragmentation and visualisation was clearly demonstrated in the encounter with the authorities in City Hall when rules and regulations were applied to specific areas that were demarcated in abstract terms, in the conceived space, not the physical space that was perceived by the users. It was also evident in the ways in which the security guards reacted to behaviours that they deemed ‘unacceptable’ by suggesting that the groups move out into the open space to which the rules and regulations and perhaps his ‘authority’ did not extend. The emphasis of the ‘image’ of the place, of the importance of the visual to the gaze of others by the estate manager also plays a part in justifying her demand that the migrants behave in ways that she deemed would not compromise the ‘image’ of the place. Mental barriers and frontiers set up in accordance with the abstract space are reinforced through the ordering and regulations of everyday experiences in urban spaces by the state (and its representatives) that lead to the homogenization of spaces (Butler, 2012).

Lefebvre (1991) argues that ‘abstract space is not homogeneous; it simply has homogeneity as its goal, its ‘lens’’. Martins, (1982, in Butler, 2012) argues that the fragmentation of spaces ‘facilitates the imposition of a logic of exchange’ which flattens the diversity of spaces and brings spaces towards the goal of homogeneity (Butler, 2012). The emphasis on exchange value over use value is deeply embedded in how spaces are deemed to be accessible to others, or not, as illustrated in Rose’s encounter with the cleaner, who only allowed ‘customers’ to use the toilet and refused Rose entry. It is also reflected in Jo’s articulation of how the migrants, despite being the main customers of the services on Sundays, are denied access to facilities. The emphasis on exchange value over use value seems to have been subscribed to by all spectrums of the society, it becomes the basis of social relations and for justifying having access to certain urban spaces.

It is evident from our discussion above that both the state, through fragmenting spaces and regulating behaviours within them, and the market, by emphasizing exchange value are dominant in the control and governance of urban spaces. In broader terms in realms such as planning, administration and regulation of urban spaces by the state and in the case of private security guards as discussed above to perform functions previously monopolized by the police, which is enabled by legal arrangements (Valverde, 2009), are in themselves manifestations of the dominance of abstract space in fragmenting and facilitating the exchange not of space per se but services and social relations that are results of what characterizes abstract space – fragmentation, tendency towards homogeneity and facilitation of exchange. The same effects of fragmentation also apply to the ways in which the state governs the urban space – as is evident in our discussion above regarding the regulations that are prevalent in the parks and squares, which are not applicable to vehicular roads - which are closed from vehicular traffic on certain days - as well as in the episode of negotiating for used spaces with the City Hall Duty Manager. The dominance of abstract space is thus not total and interstitial spaces between ‘fragmentations’ thus open up for appropriations by users. It is to the discussion of the creative appropriation of spaces by the migrant community that we will now turn.

## **5.6 Everyday Moments – eating and chatting**

Sundays for migrant domestic workers who are active members of migrant grassroots organisations are usually action-packed: protest marches, rehearsals, celebrations of anniversaries of organisations, birthday parties and seminars make Sundays without any planned events few and far between. It is thus hard to describe what a ‘typical’ Sunday is like for the progressive migrant community. There were, however, times when the migrants were not as busy with their organisational activities and they took time off to enjoy each other’s company. The mundane activities of sharing food, chatting with each other and sharing problems and issues form the basis of the sociality that appears in their narratives of the importance of

organisation to them again and again. 'Eating, chatting, and the discussion of issues, and sharing of problems' become an important ritual in being a member of an organisation. As those Sundays without any activities planned are few, what I describe in the following accounts were interstitial times between events that were of sufficient duration to allow for a more detailed description of the spatial practices of the more mundane activities of sharing food, chatting and simply hanging out in Central.

One of those Sundays was when I met members of UPHK (United Penangsinan in Hong Kong) for the first time at Chater Road. It was early June, and a typical summer's day in Hong Kong: hot and humid. By the time I arrived at Chater Road late in the morning, Dorothy was holding a meeting outside the Prince Building. The meeting was about the upcoming anniversary celebration for UNIFIL that would take place on 7th July 2013, about a month after that particular Sunday. While the meeting was ongoing, those who were not required to attend the meeting spread out under a humble footbridge connecting the Prince Building and the Mandarin Hotel to take advantage of the shade it provided (see Figure 5-30). Katie, a little girl who could barely speak yet, sat beside me and at times pointed to the clouds above (see Figure 5-31). She seemed happy to see the clouds. I did not know exactly what she meant but if it had not been for the humble footbridge above us we would have been exposed to the scorching hot sun above and baked by the dark asphalt under our feet, for it absorbs heat, and then radiates heat into the atmosphere, slowly raising the temperature of its surface. For a moment, I wished that there were more clouds and agreed happily with Katie that the clouds were welcoming. It was underneath the bridge, in the shade it provided, that we started lunch.



Figure 5-30: Relaxing in the shade provided by the footbridge between the Prince Building and the Mandarin Hotel at Chater Road

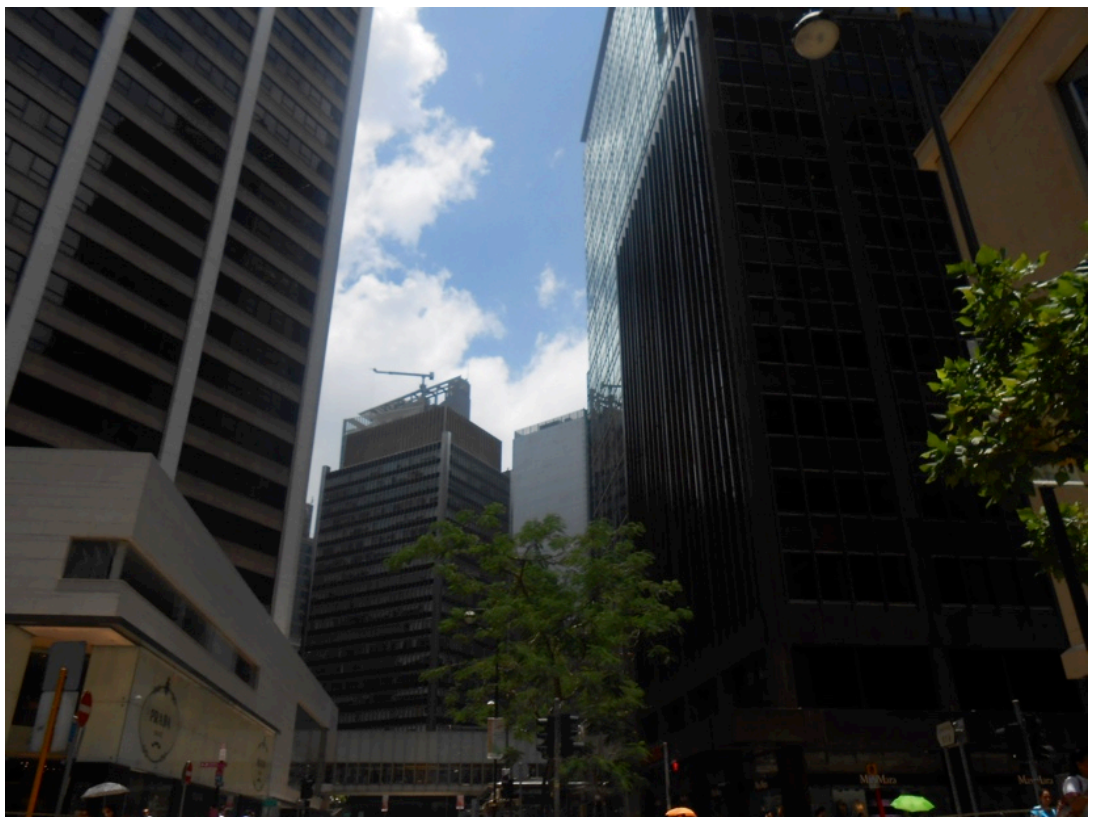


Figure 5-31: Clouds and buildings, looking up from Chater Road



Sharing food was a common practice among the Filipino migrants. Dishes were prepared at home and brought to Central to be shared among members of organisations and the costs split among the members, as eating out in Central is forbiddingly expensive. A piece of white plastic sheeting was placed on the asphalt pavement as the ‘tablecloth’ and dishes of food in polystyrene foam containers and steamed rice in a plastic bag were put on top of it. Plates were wrapped in plastic bags so that the plastic bags (like the plastic sheet that acted as both the tablecloth and rubbish container) could be easily thrown away and the plates re-used immediately. Spoons and forks that could be found free-of-charge from the big chain restaurants were used. Utensils and the ways in which sharing a meal were organised were highly adapted to mobility – the food needed to be brought some distance, and reusable plates that could cater for a group of people (without a corresponding number of plates) made it easier to carry them around. Everything else such as containers, tablecloths and disposable utensils could easily be thrown away.



Figure 5-32: Lunch at Chater Road

For lunch that day, there were tomatoes, spaghetti, steamed rice, stir-fried leaves of sweet potatoes with chilli, eggs and fried rice noodles. We helped ourselves to the food; everyone took their own portion (see Figure 5-32) and moved away to let others to get access to the food. Foldable stools again proved handy as they alleviated the heat radiating from the asphalt pavement. Sharing food is a significant part of social life for the Filipino migrants who gather in Central and as a member of an organisation sharing food is arranged around the organisation – with those who are allowed to cook at employers' houses taking on the task of preparing it. Khalaf (2010) argues that in the case of migrant workers in Dubai sharing a meal 'creates common sentiment that sustains social capital as a currency for supporting each other in unpredictable circumstances' and this argument extends to the Filipino migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong too. The bonding and social network they create, which is re-enforced through sharing food, builds social capital that can be tapped in times of need.

Law (2001) also argues that the olfactory aesthetics of 'Little Manila' on Sundays disrupt the dominant visual meaning of Hong Kong's spaces of architecture. Law (2001) elaborates that the simple act of 'eating' Filipino food in Central becomes a productive and self-conscious pursuit, as it is entangled in webs of culture, economics and politics when it is viewed from the perspective of how it is contested in Hong Kong homes. The claims of the odour of Filipino food and the debate about whether Filipino food is allowed in homes become issues of power within the household and make the presence of Filipino food in Central, a public space on Sundays, all the more conspicuous. Law argues (2001) that through the conscious effort of the Filipinos on Sundays to invent their homes, and through the material culture such as the food, letters and photographs that are brought into Central on Sundays, they articulate and negotiate relations between the homes and away, the dominant and subordinate, and the power and resistance. Their coming together in public spaces in the host societies is also about 'place-making' and 'home-building' (Lindio-McGovern, 2004) –

a home away from their work and a way in which to maintain their Filipino identity in the host society.

Sharing a meal with fellow migrants is one of the most important activities for migrant domestic workers who are active in grassroots organisations. This is the time when they can chat and relax; the break time they have amidst their busy Sunday schedules of organising various activities; and the time in which stories are shared and they re-enforce the differences between who they are – members of progressive organisations – and the more traditional organisations that they often associate with beauty pageants, and the ‘flash mob’ dances they sneer at.

While we were having lunch, a group of migrants was practising a dance at the other end of Chater Road, towards Pedder Street. We watched them practising their dance, supposedly for Independence Day, in the shade, while the performers had towels or t-shirts wrapped around their faces to prevent sunburn. Edward commented that he did not see any connection between the song, the dance and the Independence Day of the Philippines and the performance was just like a flash mob that had been popular recently. The group Edward was referring to, according to him, was pro-government, something he seemed to identify rather quickly.

We chatted and ate food. People came and went as they ran between different groups and went off to carry out errands: shopping, doing remittance, selling tickets or soliciting funds. Dorothy was there too - collecting membership funds after lunch and distributing tickets for the upcoming events on the 7th of July for their anniversary celebration. Kate, a member of UPHK, who was put in charge of taking care of ‘visitors’ like me (and had an employer who she nicknamed ‘Hitler’ - see chapter two), said that a proper stage for any event would cost about HKD twenty-five thousand a day and hence they were soliciting funds for the event. The tickets were being sold at five dollars each and for each ticket that member organisations of UNIFIL sold, the member organisation retained half of the



money and the other half would go towards organising the event and UNIFIL. Instead of renting out booths to telecoms, banks or other sponsors, the source of their funding was members, other organisations and their respective communities. They do not rely upon the big corporations like some other organisations do. As we chatted, we needed to shift our mobile stools every fifteen minutes to half an hour in order to follow the shadows of the overhead bridge cast by the revolving sun.

Evenings are much more pleasant in this sub-tropical island of Hong Kong. Breezes from the harbour and the receding sun make it a more conducive environment to be out and about. It was also a quieter Central. Activities that might have taken place at Chater Road had ended by the evening and migrant domestic workers who are active in organisations had finished their tasks for the day – be it organising protest marches or seminars or simply providing counselling to fellow members. Members of organisations return to their ‘tambayan’ and relax – often sharing another meal together. In the words of Emily, who had been in Hong Kong for 22 years and had been active in the organisation since 2004:

*‘...only in the evening when you see the glittering light and some friends... you don't see it in the morning... you can only see them at night because (that's the time) when all the tasks are already finished. Only in the evening can you gather and see them. And then we have nothing to do and that's the only time you can buddy-buddy to them’ (Emily, interview by author, 18 August 2013).*

On an evening after the prayer service for the victims of Typhoon Yolanda and hours of packing and sorting donated goods at the roadside of Chater Road, members of POWER (the Pangasinan Organization for migrants’ Welfare, Empowerment and Rights), one by one, returned to their ‘tambayan’, a spot in front of Chanel at Chater road and started to lay out their food. The activity that had taken place at Chater Road had ended and the organiser was packing up the cardboard that was scattered on the road. It was an evening in November – summer had long passed and the evenings could be chilly. Members of POWER approached the organiser to enquire

whether they could pick up some of the cardboard and the organiser agreed. They used the cardboard to set up an area for them to rest – shoes were removed before entering (see Figure 5-33). Like the heat radiating into the air under the scorching sun, the asphalt pavement does not provide good thermal comfort (in all fairness, it was not meant for sitting). The cold seeping through the asphalt pavement as it draws heat from the body can be chilly. The cardboard provided insulation and made sitting on the road slightly more comfortable. From that spot, the glistening light that adorned the Bank of China tower could be seen in the background (see Figure 5-34). People gathered in a circle to talk about typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan). It was the strongest storm to make landfall in recorded history. It ravaged through the Philippines killing more than 6,300 people<sup>19</sup> and displacing more than four million others.<sup>20</sup> There was a discussion about the 'storm surge'. Kate said many misunderstood the term 'storm surge' or had total ignorance of the term and that this was a cause of the devastating damage. As a result the people had not run to the high land. They thought that it was just like any other typhoon - but they were wrong. Could it have turned out differently if they had understood the term? There was no answer.

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<sup>19</sup> Source: Tacloban: a year after typhoon Haiyan, the Guardian, 31 Oct 2014; <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/31/tacloban-a-year-after-typhoon-haiyan>

<sup>20</sup> Source: Philippines marks one year since Typhoon Haiyan, BBC, 8 Nov 2014; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news>



Figure 5-33: Tambayan set up with carton boards after a day filled with activities at Chater Road, the POWER spot



**Figure 5-34: Resting at 'tambayan' against the glistening light in the background**

A lady who joined us later sat at the side of the tambayan and while she started laying out the food she had brought for us she told us that she could not find her mother and her siblings' families in Tacloban, the capital of Eastern Visayas, one of the hardest hit regions in the Philippines. As the words were spoken, we nodded in silence – there were no words that could console or comfort her. Against the background of the glistening building and an evening that was only just getting started on this subtropical island, the images of the tsunami, surge storms and waves among the migrant workers seemed distant and surreal; but on that evening, the typhoon connected this tiny space, a tambayan set up in front of Chanel at Chater

road, to the devastated land of the Philippines, for which a prayer service had been held earlier in the afternoon on the ground floor of HSBC.

### **5.7 Alternative social relations**

I was told that the plan had been for the service for the victims of typhoon Yolanda to be held at Chater Road but because of another huge local event (an annual children's play day) that was taking place concurrently, the service had instead taken place in quite an unusual spot for the migrant organisations – on the ground floor of the HSBC building, the pedestrian walkway facing Des Voeux Road or what the migrants refer to as the 'Hong Kong Bank'. An altar covered with white cloth was set up towards the edge of the pedestrian walkway. On top of the altar were a wooden cross, a white candle and an open bible. The altar marked a boundary from which the pastor and speakers stood and spoke to the audiences who were standing in front of the altar. Spaces were left empty towards the northern edge of the pedestrian walkways to allow people to pass through (see Figure 5-35). Flowers were given out to the people surrounding the small altar for them to place next to the cardboard symbolising victims of the typhoon. Prayers were said and hymns were sung.

Many wept. Andrew, who works at an NGO advocating rights for migrant workers, stood beside me during the service, and told me that many of those crying were from Visaya, the region that was hardest hit by typhoon Yolanda. He asked me if I was religious. I said I was not but I supposed it provided people with hope when they were in dire straits, like today. He asked if that was spiritual? I was not sure what he was referring to so I did not reply. It was a bizarre conversation to be having during a prayer service but a conversation that lingers on for a long time to come.

The service was indeed asking for hope in a moment of despondence and aimed to provide consolation in a time of despair. Much later I realised that it was also a moment of awakening for some of them perhaps, when the political reality of the Philippines was revealed in this disaster and its



aftermath; that the ineffective and uncoordinated efforts of the Filipino government meant that many of the victims still had no access to relief goods and efforts at the time when the prayer service was taking place and this revelation came about.

Henry then took to the stage to tell the crowds that more needed to be done in the secular realm, in terms of demanding changes in the way in which politics was done in the country and perhaps, in being a part of the change personally.



**Figure 5-35: Prayer Service for the Victims of Typhoon Yolanda in the HSBC Building, ground floor**

The bulk of the action was not in the prayer service, however, but in sorting out the donated goods to be shipped to the Philippines. At the Chater Road POWER spot, pictures of areas affected by typhoon Yolanda were put up behind a table at the junction between the Prince Building and the Mandarin Hotel, appealing for donations (see Figure 5-36, Figure 5-37).



Figure 5-36: Photographs of areas in the Philippines affected by typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) put up at Chater Road



Figure 5-37: Banner to appeal for donations organised by Migrant

At the same time, members of POWER and some other organisations started sorting out bags and boxes of clothes and goods that had been deposited on the street. It turned out that people had been dropping off donations since 10am that morning and despite the appeal made to the public that used clothes would not be accepted, there were a lot more used clothes than anything else. As we sorted through the donations, separating goods (which would be sent by courier companies to the affected areas free



of charge) and putting them into boxes, many items of a ridiculous nature started to emerge. Many of the clothes were worn and torn; some still bore the smells of their previous owners. Quite a lot of winter clothes also emerged - members of POWER with whom I sorted the clothes laughed and said that it was very hot in the Philippines and that there was no need for winter clothes in any case. This might also indicate that although Hong Kong and the Philippines are not far away from each other geographically, the people of Hong Kong know little of their poorer neighbour and the country of origin of the migrant domestic workers who travel to work and care for them in their everyday lives. Many of the clothes were in good shape and appeared to be brand new.

The unexpected items found among the donated goods threw at whoever was helping out a common problem that needed to be solved on the spot: we needed to find a way to deal with the clothes that had been donated in the name of the relief effort (but also as a dumping ground for some it seemed) as the courier company that sponsored the shipping costs had indicated that no clothes were to be included in the shipment. At the same time, while we were separating the goods (mostly canned food) from clothes (see Figure 5-38), many passers-by started to pick up the clothes from the bags and boxes, thinking that they could get a good bargain.



Figure 5-38: Packing relief goods at Chater Road pavement



There was no-one taking charge as we were all members from different organisations. We had seen each other around at various events but not everyone knew each other on a personal level. Of course that included me – a somewhat ambiguous member of the community. However, faced with the problems of finding a way to handle the donated clothes, preventing any ‘looting’ from the bargain-hunters, negotiating the spaces with others (passers-by, onlookers, participants in other activities) on a narrow pavement, a specific form of temporary social relations, a kind of ‘collectivity’ was formed (Simpson, 2011). Discussions took place and tasks were allocated spontaneously. Although the situation was very different from street performances and their audiences, as described by Simpson, the temporary social relations - the collectivity formed as a result of a change in the use of space – represented a break from the norm, and ‘stood out from the everyday activities (Simpson, 2011).

The act of working on a relief effort also distinguished the members of progressive organisations from others who were simply participating as passers-by or bargain-hunters; it acted as a constant reconfirmation of their membership and also the exclusion of others. After our spontaneous discussion and running around the different locations in which the organisations were working on sorting donations, it was decided to sell the clothes at two dollars each and place the cash in the relief fund. All of the clothes to be sold were to be gathered at Ice House Street in order to centralise the cash collection. We sorted out the clothes, and then dragged boxes of sorted clothes from one spot in Central to another amidst the chaos and noise of the other activities that were also taking place at the same time.

Many parents with children were queuing up for their 'playground games' as it was the ‘Cheers for Play’ day at Chater Road. They stood in the queue and watched these Filipino migrant domestic workers busying themselves with the relief effort for their homeland. The table set up earlier at the junction was a donation post – a message was broadcast through a speaker

in both Tagalog and English to appeal for donations to the victims. Not many locals came forward. Rose (introduced in chapter two) came along with receipt books to collect donations solicited at the different locations (of different migrant organisations) later in the afternoon. She brought along her foldable stool and started working immediately next to the boxes. Two Indonesian women dressed in jilbabs (hijabs) came looking for her. They brought with them a cheque for five thousand dollars – a donation from the Indonesian migrant workers community – a sign of transnational solidarity among migrant workers emerging in Hong Kong. Transnational ties might not have been visible in the physical space – although they were at the protest rallies and organised events - but in this case this social network materialised into two Indonesian women showing up in jilbabs and handing a cheque to one of the leaders of the Filipino grassroots organisations, thereby expressing their solidarity with the Filipinos. It was a small gesture vested with significance – their co-presence in many of protest rallies, organised events that cater for the migrant communities, has helped to generate mutual recognition of the similar situations they face as migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and the different political and social regimes from which they come.

Jasmine, who joined LIKHA in January 2013, said in an interview later:

*“Actually I have so many Indonesian friends now, so many and I can relate to how they feel about their situation. Not just about the Filipinos’ situation, about migration, but now I have learnt more about them... there is also a kind of feeling that we are human, we can feel what you feel... there is a feeling towards them and towards the Filipinos” (Jasmine, interview by author, 18 May 2014).*

Catherine, in a different context, explained how she came to know about the progressive organisations that she became a part of:

*“You always hear them and see them having demonstrations on Sundays and I was like ‘what is that? Why are they always talking through microphones really loudly?’ Then I came to know them and I came to feel that I should be part of that*

*organisation - you think that those people are a family... that you don't want them to experience this kind of problem”.*

The congregation of Filipinos in Central has created a stage for progressive organisations and an opportunity to turn the masses into a public. In relation to services provided by NGOs to the migrant workers, Jo said:

*“Here there is a concentration of migrant workers that makes our jobs easier in reaching out ... Central on Sundays has provided us with good space and a good opportunity for that outreach and for that connection to happen” (Jo, interviewed by author, 13 August 2013).*

Central on Sundays has become what Lefebvre & Regulier (2004) call ‘the site of a vast staging where all these relations with their rhythms show and unfurl themselves’: such as in the case of the electoral campaign that acted as the ‘extra – Sunday activities’ that punctuate the every-Sunday life of the migrant communities in Central. The prayer service that marked the tragedy of typhoon Yolanda, the codes of behaviour between members of the organisations in the sharing of meals, the ‘buddy-buddy’ in their ‘tambayan’, the social relations manifested through the regular meetings were all manifestations of activities that overlapped in time and space, and which revealed the polyrhythmic nature of the users of Central on Sundays. Each organisation or each member has its/her unique rhythm and is in a constant interaction with others. And the appearance of two Indonesian women in Central indicated the transnational nature of such social relations. All of these are acted out in the space of Central on Sundays.

These gatherings of migrant domestic workers on Sundays in Central, I argue, when viewed against the dominant linear, quantified time of the productive and the rational that takes in the forms of the days these migrant domestic workers live and work with their employers, Sundays become the circular rhythm that comes every seven days, which provides punctuation to the linear repetition of the everyday. This is not too differently from work versus rest around which the contemporary societies arrange our lives. However, when we examine the urban space more closely, navigating

through the multitude of activities and revealing its polyrhythmic nature, these Sundays that come every seven days are in themselves an intersection of the circular and linear repetition: these Sundays are linear repetitions that progress week after week and month after month, which are punctuated with a circular repetition of events, which could be argued to be 'rites': as Lefebvre & Regulier (2004) articulate as the 'extra-everyday' (extra-Sunday) that is constitutive of and constituted as rhythms of Sundays in Central. These 'extra-everyday' (extra-Sunday) in the rhythm of Sundays in Central thus become 'ruptures' against the dominant and linear repetition of the everyday of the rational and productive in two layers: one of the everyday in the households of the employers and one in the every Sunday 'eating and chatting' that underpins the sociality of the migrant community and at the same time acts as linear repetition against which these 'extra-everyday' (extra-Sunday) arises. These 'extra-everyday' (extra-Sunday), I argue, through the appropriation of urban spaces, by negotiating through the cracks of the fragmentation of abstract space and making-do with their tactics to overcome the discomfort in the physical spaces of Central, are the 'festivities and play' (Butler, 2012) that have the potential to create alternatives in both the social relations of the everyday and how urban spaces can be appropriated.

Although the discussion of 'festivities and play' by Lefebvre (1991) was initially about peasant festivities in France, its application to the migrant community on Sundays in Central is still valid. He argues that these festivities are grounded in the everyday existence, acknowledging the power of nature and the fragility of human lives, and thus these festivals are embedded and grounded in the somewhat tragic nature of everyday human existence. In his view, festivals are moments that connect the community members and the human bodies to the rhythm of nature' (Butler, 2012). These transitory moments are ruptures from the everyday – a way to overcome alienation, and the starting of alternatives.

The bodily inhabitation of these urban spaces by the migrant communities on Sundays in Central presents us with a new form of spatialisation – an inhabitation that emphasises bodily occupation (rather than paths of flows). This new form of spatialisation exhibits use patterns that do not accord with the official plan (or the way space is conceived) by conducting performances on roads that are usually reserved for traffic and converting pedestrian walkways into ‘homes’; and through the deployment of tactics that temporarily disrupt the physical constraints inherent in the urban spaces with foldable chairs, umbrellas and cardboard.

It is also through the body that space and time are united. We occupy space through our bodies at a point in time. This changes the meaning of inhabitation altogether –when spaces are examined together with time, or rhythms, or approach, a space with an analytical frame of rhythm analysis, the potentialities within urban spaces are revealed and the ways in which urban spaces are governed, conceived and exchanged are challenged. If each of us can only be at one point in space at any one time (except of course in sci-fi worlds for now), and space is exclusively assigned a certain use, what does a space become when it is unused and uninhabited?

This also leads us to question of who has the right to claim urban spaces? When considering the impacts of urban changes, are the holders of instruments of abstract space more important than the bodies that use, inhabit and live in the physical spaces? The dominance of abstract space over lived space has never ceased to create such tensions but the domination of abstract space over lived space is not absolute as we have seen in the discussion throughout this chapter and the intersection of the linear and circular repetition of rhythms and the ‘extra-everyday’ arises out of it and opens up possibilities of alternative social relations and ways of appropriating spaces.

What these alternative social relations and ways of appropriating mean in the case of Central on Sundays is what Catherine says: ‘it’s where you find

happiness, sadness and hope, and being able to be hopeful that we can make a change” – a hopeful place for changes. Many of the members of these organisations were like Catherine. They were curious about why these organisations were always protesting and speaking through microphones about the various issues that migrant workers face both in Hong Kong and at home, and they did not mind just listening to find out a bit more before they decided whether they should perhaps be part of it.

Phoebe was approached by one of the organisations during its member-recruitment drive. She was with her friends hanging out in Central, and although she was hesitant at the start, she attended seminars and joined protest rallies and found herself starting to get active on Sundays. One month before I came back to London, she was chairing a seminar at the entrance of the underpass connecting Chater Road to City Hall, for an organisation that had been newly formed by another informant who had decided to set up her own organisation. Her town mates, after watching what she had done in the organisation, decided to join her.

At the other side of Chater Road hung the banner of POWER, whose strategic location had acted as the bridge between many Filipinas who had problems and issues and the community of organisations that provide counseling or refer women in need to the relevant NGOs. Many of those who have been through abuse and decided to fight the very system that put them in a vulnerable position in the first place have become activists in these organisations. But there are also those who cannot stay for another anniversary celebration because of the sudden termination of their contract by their employer or their families changing their plans and wanting them to go home. In the urban space of Central on Sundays, new social relations are constantly emerging.

## **5.8 Conclusion:**

In this chapter, through a description of the journeys I took to navigate through Central, which has been socially constructed by the progressive

Filipino organisations, I discussed the spatial practices of and tactics used by the Filipino progressive community to adapt to the changes in the landscapes of Central. By looking at their ‘off-stage’ experiences in producing cultural performances, which are common features of Central on Sundays, and also by adding the analytical frame of rhythmanalysis, I examined the tension that arises between the dominant abstract space and the often marginalised lived space and the discussions of negotiations that take place and the creative alternative ways of appropriating of spaces to illustrate that the domination of abstract space is not absolute. Alternative social relations emerge in the cracks of the abstract space, overcoming the fragmentation, tendency towards homogenisation and emphasis on exchange values that are the characterisation of abstract space and these alternatives. The ‘extra-everyday’ (extra-Sunday) that arises out of the linear and circular repetition of everyday life is the beginning of something hopeful – something that will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6 Practising hope – the network of transnational migrant domestic workers' movements in Hong Kong

*The miserable have no other medicine  
But only hope.  
~William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure*

*It is the around-the-corner brand of hope that prompts people to action, while the distant hope acts as an opiate. ~Eric Hoffer*

*Hope is like a road in the country; there was never a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence.  
~Lin Yutang*

### 6.1 Introduction

She was an unlikely heroine. Compared to others like Pope Francis, Angela Merkel and Narendra Modi, whose names together with hers appear on the list of the one hundred most influential people in 2014 compiled by Time Magazine, her name is less familiar and the reason behind her name appearing on the list at all is a lot more personal and painful. Her story and the extent of her suffering emerged as images of her injuries. Her battered face, legs and hands and her frail condition (weighing only 25kg, after losing about half of her weight) shocked Hong Kong into facing its shame: that many of the foreign domestic workers in the city are faced with horrific working conditions, living a slave-like existence and suffering in isolation without help in a city that is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Her plight only came to light when one of her fellow migrant domestic workers, Riyanti Binti Noto Parni, who first sensed and questioned her condition while waiting for a flight bound for Indonesia, accompanied her home and took photos of her injuries, which later went viral among the Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong and caught the media's attention. Riyanti later told the court that the young woman's face was so bruised that she looked like "someone from Nigeria" (Siu, 2015).

Badly injured, fragile and unable to get out of the car: that was the state she was found in on the doorstep of her home in Eastern Java by her father who had not heard from her for months before her sudden return in January



2014. A press statement issued later by one of the committees formed to fight for justice for her described her injuries, as they were discovered by the hospital in East Java, as follows: “she had suffered severe “cellulitis” on her feet and hands, a blunt object had hit her body, part of her brain was swollen, her eyesight did not function well and her teeth were a bit broken”. The report reveals the injuries sustained by the young woman beyond what could be easily seen. She later returned to Hong Kong to face her abuser in court and it was her decision to speak up that drew attention to the plight of the vulnerable and the invisible population and made her one of the one hundred most influential people in 2014 as listed by Time Magazine (Somaly Mam, 2014).

Her name is Erwiana Sulistyaningsih. She is a twenty-three year old Indonesian woman who was working as a domestic worker in Hong Kong. Like many other migrant workers who move to another country hoping to better the economic conditions of her family, Erwiana instead found herself abused and tortured at the hands of her employer, Law Wan-tung, for eight months. While testifying against Law, she told Hong Kong’s District Court that she was assaulted frequently with rulers, clothes hangers and metal tubes from a vacuum cleaner. She was given inadequate food and water and on several occasions was forced to urinate in plastic bags due to a toilet ban that Law imposed on her, the court heard (Siu, 2015).<sup>21</sup> The detailed account of what she experienced was beyond belief. Later in an interview with the South China Morning Post, the main English newspaper in Hong Kong, she revealed that she even considered ‘sneaking to freedom through one of the flat windows’ but did not have the courage to do so as the flat was on the 38<sup>th</sup> floor. She was locked up and any attempts to open the door would trigger an alarm that would invite another round of beating by her employer,. Coming face to face with Law, who had abused her, in the courtroom was not easy. She said, ‘I felt like I had been hit’.

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21 Source: South China Morning Post; <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1709133/i-forgive-my-employer-says-abused-hong-kong-maid-erwiana>; ‘I forgive my employer’, says battered and imprisoned Hong Kong maid Erwiana; by Chris Lau, 10 Feb 2015

Almost a year later, on 10 February 2015, after her sudden return to Java, the verdict of her case against her employer, Law Wan-tung, a 44-year-old woman, found Law guilty of 18 of the 20 charges laid against her, including grievous bodily harm, common assault, and failing to pay Erwiana's wages or give her statutory rest days. Law was sentenced to a six-year prison term on 27 Feb 2015. In delivering her verdict, Judge Amanda Woodcock described the 23-year-old victim as "a simple young lady who tried to financially better her life and that of her family". She also said, "that Erwiana had no reason to fabricate the evidence, and that the abuse had been so frequent and over such a long period of time, it was reasonable that the young maid might not be able to recall specific dates". Woodcock said that Erwiana thought she was under surveillance at all times, and believed Law's threats that her family would be killed if she told anyone about the abuse (Whiteman & Kam, 2015).'

From a video clip embedded in the news coverage of this verdict by the Guardian, Erwiana was shown wearing a black t-shirt emblazoned with her face and the word 'Justice' on it. She was surrounded by journalists and spoke softly to the press in simple English: "Thank you, I am very happy. Thank you, I am very happy. I won't forget". When asked why she was happy, she said: "because I can get justice in Hong Kong". She hastily passed the microphone to someone else. The image then shifted quickly to the police superintendent named David Cameron, who emphasised "the message should be brought home that if you live in a society where you're fortunate enough to employ a domestic helper, they're still protected by the law".

What might have easily escaped the notice of ordinary viewers of the group of people surrounding Erwiana was that, when she spoke to the press after the verdict and in many of the images that appeared on major news media covering this story, many faces of people I came to know in my fieldwork were among that group. They stood behind Erwiana when she faced the press. They took turns helping her clear the path to the District Court when

journalists seemed to be approaching her aggressively. They went on protests, asking for justice for Erwiana. They pressured the police to investigate the case, which when first reported was filed under the ‘miscellaneous’ category; and questioned policies that made foreign domestic workers vulnerable. They held press conferences for and with her. They provided the shelter and support needed for her stay in Hong Kong when she returned to Hong Kong in April 2014 as a witness as well as during the trial in January 2015. If David Cameron (the police superintendent, not the then British Prime Minister) had made it sound as if the law was readily available to the poor and the most vulnerable, it was the work of the faces that I came to know that formed the foundation and network that enabled justice for Erwiana to be upheld in Hong Kong.

With regard to the black t-shirt that Erwiana was wearing, most of the news media picked up the word ‘Justice’ and her face emblazoned on it, but they seemed to miss the important letters that also appeared on the same t-shirt: AMCB and IMA, which stand for ‘Asian Migrants’ Coordinating Body’ and ‘International Migrants Alliance’ respectively. These are the organisations that were behind her on her extraordinary journey from a victim of abuse to an icon of a campaign that demanded justice for her and at the same time fought for rights for foreign domestic workers in the city. The extreme brutality she experienced caused an international outcry and caught the global media’s attention but sadly she is not the only foreign domestic worker in Hong Kong who has been through abuse.

In his analysis of the narratives of foreign domestic workers in a church shelter in Hong Kong, Ladegaard (2012) found that many of the stories told by foreign domestic workers are trauma narratives about physical assault, starvation, underpayment and exploitation. He also found that the social-cultural context in which stories of undesirable traits of certain minority groups prevail, although unproved, works effectively in inferring that something is essentially wrong with a certain group (Hanson- Easey and Augoustinos 2012, in Ladegaard 2012). Filipina domestic workers are

positioned as ‘cunning, cocky and inconsiderate thieves’ and the ruling of the Court of Final Appeal in Hong Kong on their residency rights also classified foreign domestic workers as not ‘ordinary residents’. Chiu and Lau (2012, in Ladegaard 2012) argue that it positioned them as ‘not different from refugees and asylum-seekers’. When a minority group is constructed as ‘out-of-place and abject’, Tileaga (2007, in Ladegaard, 2012) argues, this acts as ‘symbolic resources for reproducing their delegitimization and their depersonalization (and ultimately their dehumanization)’. These unproven, stereotypical and largely prejudicial stories are used to legitimise and naturalise the repression of foreign domestic workers and they make it hard for individual women to have their voices heard (Ladegaard, 2012).

It is thus even more extraordinary that some abuse victims like Erwiana decide to fight back and construct alternative narratives for themselves. The transformation from a victim to someone who has a dream, as illustrated in the narratives of Erwiana’s interview, serve as the overture for what is coming up in this chapter. This transformation, however, is not a miracle in itself, nor simply a manifestation of justice upheld. It is an embedded outcome and the result of decades of work by various social actors in the transnational migrant domestic workers’ movement in Hong Kong.

"In the beginning, I didn’t want this case to be this big because it’s too much of a burden for me emotionally and psychologically" she said in an interview with the South China Morning Post. She continued, “I was glad that my case could reveal other cases that the government hadn’t paid attention to”.

“I am happy that I won my case and justice for me and other victims has finally been upheld. The only reason we Indonesian domestic workers come to Hong Kong is to help our families. I spoke up so that no-one will have to go through the same suffering”, she said in an interview with Amnesty

International. In an interview with CNN, she said: “I have a dream of creating a foundation that will help other migrant workers”.

In this chapter, I will start by discussing the context in which the transnational migrant domestic workers’ movement developed in Hong Kong and I will also introduce the main social actors in this movement. In the process, through Erwiana’s case as well as some other cases that I came to know about during my fieldwork, I will illustrate the organisation, mobilisation and provision of support and services to the migrant community in Hong Kong in fighting for justice (and rights) by various organisations and social actors - NGOs, grassroots organisations and various other supporters. I am also interested in the personal transformation that has been experienced by domestic workers who participate in this movement – how they have come to see the movement and themselves in it. Lastly, I argue that the transnational migrants’ movement in Hong Kong is underpinned by what I call ‘practising hope’ – of one’s encounter with injustice; of recognising that the personal is political (Hanisch, 2006), of political awakening; of the acknowledgement that ‘you are not alone in this’; of the successes of issue-specific campaigns that mobilise and activate the masses, and of the more universal issues such as human rights that act as a utopian vision to keep people hoping (or not) as the means through which to construct alternative narratives for themselves and at the same time make changes to their own and others’ lives.

## **6.2 Transnational Activism Discussion**

Transnational activism is not a new phenomenon. Tarrow (2005) categorises two ‘mechanisms’ through which social movements spread across borders. The first is diffusion; he provides the examples of the Reformation across Europe, and the antislavery movement, which spread from England to other countries in Europe and the Americas, and the spread of nationalism through print, colonialism and the railways (Anderson, 1991, in Tarrow, 2005). The second is international mobilisation, for example the campaign that made the First of May an international workers’ day and the

formation of the Red Cross, which formed chapters all across the world. Coming closer to our time, the global justice movement sparked by the Zapatista uprising in 1994 and the wave of Occupy Movement, which spread around the globe in 2011-2012, are examples of transnational activism that as subjects of analysis and research have had much ink spilled on them.

The first research on transnational activism took the position of situating it as a rise of 'global civil society' (Wapner 1996, in Juris & Khasnabish, 2013) by focusing on non-state actors in international politics (Risse-Kappen 1995, in Piper & Uhlin, 2004). A new framework was later formed by Keck and Sikkink (1998; in Juris & Khasnabish, 2013) by combining international relations and a network perspective in which they emphasise the importance of information politics for NGOs engaged in human rights, environmental or women's issues to apply pressure on foreign governments by circulating information within the transnational advocacy network (TAN). Employing the resource mobilisation framework, they argue that the transnational social movement is characterised by the extent to which these social actors 'communicate, consult, and coordinate' (Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco 1997, 60; in Juris & Khasnabish, 2013) across borders.

Others also approach transnational activism through social movement theory with analytical tools such as political opportunities, diffusion (Tarrow, 2005) or issue framing or resistance to global neo-liberal globalisation as in the field of International Political Economy (Mittelman 1999; Gills 2000 in Tarrow, 2005). Studies have also been conducted by sociologists, political scientists and researchers from the fields of politics and development, political theory and even international law.<sup>22</sup>

Ethnography as a tool of writing and analysis for transnational activism has also started to emerge. Contrary to scholarship produced within the social

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<sup>22</sup> Please refer to Piper and Uhlin (2004) for a brief summary of various approaches to transnational activism.

logic of the system that the struggles within transnational activism try to challenge and subvert, Juris & Khasnabish (2013) argue that ethnography as an approach pays attention to the 'everyday practice, cultural imaginaries and emerging subjectivities and allows us to grasp the complexity, contingency and transformational potential of the contemporary transnational movement'. Ethnography is also an attitude that recognises social movement as a source of knowledge. The recognition of social movement as a source of knowledge shifts the ways in which researchers relate to their informants: the informants are not the subject of the research but collaborators on common problems. We move from doing ethnographies of a people to doing ethnographies of a problem (Casas-Cortes, Osterwell, & Powell, 2013). Rather than speaking for the community in which we are doing research, the ethnographer's role is more like a translator, a relayer (Latour 1993 in Juris & Khasnabish, 2013), someone who engages with the knowledge advanced from particular and transnational locations and puts distinct spheres of knowledge into conversations through the practice of sharing, spreading and building connections among engaged knowledge producers. It is in this spirit that this chapter is written with extensive narratives from various social actors in the movement.

Cunningham's research on (post)sanctuary activists in Tuscon, Arizona, is one of the first ethnographic accounts of transnational organising. His work uncovered trends that have become increasingly important in transnational activism such as the widespread use of the Internet and an expanded sense of global imagination and possibility. As activists incorporate the discourse of transnational social movements and global civil society by referencing many of the terms that had been developed by social scientist in the academia (Juris & Khasnabish, 2013b), the boundaries between social movements and knowledge production, between activists and academics are no longer clear. An expanded sense of global imagination and possibility, however, is not shared equally among the actors in transnational activism. Alvarez's (1999, in Juris & Khasnabish, 2013) studies on the transnational

feminist network reveal the gap between what she terms the ‘ethical-cultural’ and ‘structural-institutional’ dimensions and also the imbalances of power and unequal access to different resources among the participants at a UN-sponsored forum in Latin America. Thayer (2001; 2010 in Juris & Khasnabish, 2013) also highlights the complex and contradictory ways in which women’s organisations are articulated at the local, regional and transnational levels and reveals the contestation, negotiation and appropriation in the process.

The practice of transnational activism is also an area of contestation: the ways in which organisations are structured, the kinds of technologies employed and the tactics and strategies to be used etc. Most of the recent ethnographic analysis on the practices of transnational activism, has, however, focused on the transnational Zapatismo and global justice movement. Juris (2008), in his study on the distributed network structure and technology within contemporary movements, argues that the confluence of network technologies, network-based organisation forms and network-based political norms has become a cultural idea - an emerging form of racial and demographic practice. Similar to contestations of the different ways in which transnational activism could be organised as discussed above, Khasnabish’s (2008) analysis focuses on how diverse communities of activists in Canada and the United States, rather than imitating Zapatismo wholesale (they cannot I suppose, unless they want to form their own armed forces), underwent a process of ‘transmission’ and ‘translation’ to ground their ideas in the living fabric of their struggle. Global justice networks are also found to have similar problems to the feminist ‘webs’ in Latin America, with an imbalance of power, tensions, and competing organisational logic given the diverse cultural and political backgrounds from which these activists come, which Juris (2008a) terms ‘the cultural politics of networking’.

Given that transnational activism relies on networks that span across borders and network-based technologies, organisation forms and political



norms become the key questions on how transnational activism is to be practised. The study of interactions and networks has also become the focus of ethnographic analysis of transnational activism. In an ethnographic analysis employing complexity theory as the analytical framework, Escobar (2008) studied the networks of the *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* (Process of Black Communities) on Colombia's Pacific coast and suggests that despite the network having a hybrid formation that involves both hierarchical and horizontal networks, it exhibits features associated with the latter, for example decentralised decision making, self-organisation and heterogeneous – a reflection that social movements possess complex and adaptive features. In another study by Routledge (2008), he draws on Actor Network Theory to study the patterns of networks among the actors within the People's Global Action Network in Bangladesh. His conclusion is similar to what has been highlighted by others: the importance of practice, culture and power within networked spaces of transnational encounters.

### **6.3 Network of Transnational Migrant Workers Movement in Hong Kong**

The general transnational activism literature is largely focused on the spread of the ideas, practices and cultures of movements across borders, and the tensions that exist within the movements in terms of an imbalance of power, unequal access to resources and the ways in which the differences are negotiated and appropriated. There has been relatively little discussion of transnational movements within a bounded territory as this seems to contradict to a large extent the term 'transnational'. However in the case of the transnational migrant domestic workers' movement in Hong Kong, the term transnational takes on a dual meaning; it not only entails border-crossing, but also relates to people from different nationalities within the territory of Hong Kong, which says something quite extraordinary about the city, for it affords opportunities for the flourishing of an active community of foreigners who forge alliances politically. This is the more remarkable that this movement is comprised of members from the marginalized sectors of the society – a stark contrast to literature on social movements which

have largely focused on global justice movements of the global North, and lately in the context of Occupy movements that are conceived to be of ‘white middle-class’ character (Juris & Khasnabish, 2013a).

Discussions of transnational social movements also tend to be framed within the paradigm of opposition to neoliberal globalisation with less attention paid to labour movement whilst research on labour movement focuses its discussions on trade unions and the cooperation of such across borders with little focus on migrant workers, who tend to be excluded from trade unions given their status as non-citizens (Piper, 2010). This is more so for the case of migrant domestic workers whose temporary status, and gendered and informal job sector have been largely ignored by trade unions (Piper, 2008 in Piper 2010). Given their marginality, which as multiple dimensions: non-citizens, gendered, racialised and isolated in individual households most of the time, it is all the more remarkable that the migrant domestic workers’ organisations and collective action in Hong Kong have attracted attention from researchers.

Constable (2009) attributed the active participation of migrant domestic workers in protests in Hong Kong, including the anti-World Trade Organisation protest that took place in Hong Kong to the following factors: the uniqueness of postcolonial Hong Kong with its claim as a global city (Sassen, 2001b); Hong Kong as a space of neoliberal exception (Ong, 2006); and the status of migrant domestic workers as flexible ‘non-citizens’.

Hsia (2009) counters that Hong Kong’s more liberal governance is not a unique postcolonial feature, but a legacy from the colonial era that aimed to project a picture of Hong Kong as a ‘modern city’ with political and social stability, especially after the riot of 1967. However, whilst this liberal governance permits the presence of protests, such as the one described by Constable, the simple permission of protests in itself does not automatically conjure up scenes of migrant women protesting in front of the embassies of the sending countries or the Police Headquarters or the Hong Kong

government headquarters. Behind such scenes of protests are mobilisation and organisational efforts that take years to materialise.

Hsia (2009) argues that the ways in which migrant domestic workers are governed in Hong Kong in comparison to other receiving countries can be attributed to the vibrant transnational grassroots activism in Hong Kong. Many of the migrant domestic workers have stayed in Hong Kong for decades on a series of two-year contracts and visas, unlike migrant workers in Taiwan for example, where a maximum length of stay is imposed. Having people who stay in Hong Kong for a long period ensures continuity of leadership and also membership of grassroots organisations. At the same time, migrant workers in Hong Kong are entitled to the rights stipulated in the Employment Ordinance under which workers are allowed to join unions and associations, an important avenue through which migrant workers form alliances with local workers; although this only came to pass in 1995. Under the Employment Ordinance, migrant workers are entitled to days off on a weekly basis, and statutory holidays just like local workers. Having a day-off allows migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong to meet with their counterparts in public spaces, constructing their social lives outside of their employers' households, as discussed in the previous chapter. Also, as Hsia (2009) articulates, they are able to 'avail themselves of opportunities to become conscientized and organized'.

This is also the reason why some of the migrant activists, despite an improved situation back in the Philippines, have decided to stay in Hong Kong. When asked about his future plans, one of the prominent grassroots leaders, M, who had been in Hong Kong since he was 18, said:

*'Of course I can go home and continue my activism there but here I have found my place and work in the migrant workers' community and so I think with my experience both as a migrant worker and also as an activist, as a migrant activist, I can be more useful and productive here than in the Philippines. I can share my experience and at the same time I know the whole issue of forced labour migration and somehow I think I can contribute more here and so I think it's also something I would*

*be willing to exchange...I mean we need more activists here, more home grown activists, activists who are developed here in Hong Kong. Because we know the terrain, we know the community, the community knows us, the people know us, that's one reason, and as long as the political environment in Hong Kong permits us to do our work... the relative freedom (we enjoy) compared with our counterparts in the Middle East or other countries in which they are more restricted you know then I think we should make use of that opportunity and that space to advance the migrant workers' movement' (M, interview by author, September 2013).*

Hsia's discussion of the reasons behind Hong Kong's vibrant transnational migrants' movement did not examine in detail how these factors have been interwoven to contribute to the formation of the movement, especially the role of Central in bringing together people, ideas and every-Sunday and extra-Sunday practices (see chapter five). Migrant workers do not automatically get involved in social movements because they have a day off. They might very well spend their off-days resting and relaxing (as they do in the grounds of the HSBC Building or in churches). Having leaders who are continually present in Hong Kong does not translate directly into social movement. Sometimes these leaders do not have spaces in which their presence can be felt or their influence can be materialised (as in the discussion of the speech delivered by Henry after the service for typhoon Yolanda (see chapter five)). I argue, as I will illustrate later in the chapter, that the space of Central has materialised the social relations that are required for the formation of the transnational migrants' movement. It is through the encounters on the street, of hearing and seeing what these migrant domestic workers' organisations do in practice in helping the community and advocating their rights that the factors discussed by Hsia interweave into the transnational movement we see in Hong Kong.

#### **6.4 Organisational Actors: Service providers and advocates**

One of the earliest pieces of research specifically analysing the phenomena of transnational activism by migrant domestic workers is by Law (2002). It examines the roles that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play in providing welfare to the migrant workers. She started by analysing the

tropes deployed by the welfare-providing NGOs on equality. Within this trope the Philippines suffers as an unequal player in the global economy and the overseas Filipino domestic workers (who are mostly female) suffer a triple bind, 'first as a foreigner, second as a woman in patriarchal societies and thirdly as a woman working in professions regarded as menial and even socially undesirable' (Tolentino, 1996). She first discusses the formation of UNIFIL, an instrumental organisation in the formation of the Asia Migrants Coordinating Body (AMCB) and the formation of the Migrante Party in the Philippines. Given its importance, it is worth mentioning how it came into being.

In 1982, a strict policy of forced remittance known as 'Executive Order 857' was introduced by the Philippines government, which forced Filipino domestic workers to remit 50 per cent of their earnings and other Filipino workers to remit up to 70 per cent of their earnings through its banks. Workers who did not follow this rule were threatened with punishments such as non-renewal of their passports and no longer being eligible to work overseas. By 1984, an alliance of 10 domestic workers' organisations called 'United Filipinos Against Forced Remittance' was formed in Hong Kong (Constable, 2007) and was instrumental in having the Executive Order revoked. The coalition was renamed United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL) after its successful campaign against the Executive Order (Law, 2002a). It remains an umbrella organisation for Filipino organisations in Hong Kong, an alliance of organisations from across the political spectrum (anything goes as one of my informant, K, stated).

Law (2002) also highlights how in 1999 the proposal for a 5% cut in wages for migrant domestic workers by the Hong Kong government helped not only the formation of the Asia Migrants Coordinating Body (AMCB), which consists of alliances of organisations formed by migrant workers from different countries in Hong Kong, but also linked migrant organisations with the Hong Kong Council of Trade Unions (HKCTU), which also took part in the February 1999 protest in the wage cut campaign.

Prior to this, these migrant organisations had worked independently. By forming a transnational organisation like AMCB the tropes of the Filipino NGOs shifted from that of a national-centric debate to one that focuses on the constitution of a new domestic worker subject that is not national-centric. This shift, Law argues, is the result of an expanding political sphere with the formation of alliances with other domestic workers from other countries whose working conditions and exploitations fared worse than the Filipinos in general and creates a new political space that reflects the complex circumstances of transnational migration and a new form of post-national solidarity with other Asian countries.

Hsia (2009) emphasises the importance of the Asia Migrants Coordinating Body (AMCB) and highlights the distinction between NGOs and grassroots organisations: the former speak on behalf of the migrant workers whilst the latter speak for themselves as migrant workers. AMCB is important due to it being the first coalition of grassroots organisations of different nationalities and the fact that its formation was not simply motivated by the Asian Financial Crisis and the proposed wage cut, as discussed by Law above. Hsia argues that prior to the crisis, efforts were made to form a coalition among migrants from different nationalities, including efforts to overcome the antagonism among migrants of different nationalities, by forging an understanding within AMCB that all migrant workers, despite their diverse origins, are victims of poverty back home.

Through tracing the efforts made by AMCB, in working with other NGOs in “educating” migrant workers about the negative impacts that the WTO had on them one year prior to the mobilising of its 5000 members in the 2005 anti-WTO protests, which took place in Hong Kong, Hsia (2009) argues that mobilisation demands continuous mass education work, not sudden, spontaneous ruptures, as has been assumed in anti-globalisation studies. Organising educational seminars such as those leading up to the protests against the WTO Sixth’s Ministerial Meeting in Hong Kong in 2005, and cultural exchanges on key celebration days such as International

Labour Day, Women's Day and International Human Rights Day (as discussed in the previous chapters) is a way in which collective solidarity can be worked on. By focusing on the 'methods of activism' and on how AMCB and its grassroots organizations leaders continuously engage its members through groundwork such as 'conscientization, empowerment and mobilization' as their members often lack confidence, access to information, and resources, Hsia (2009) argues that the formation of a subject (as discussed by Law above), or the transformation from personal subject to a 'communal subject' is a long process that requires painstaking efforts and does not arise out of spontaneity.

Hsia's argument that organising migrant domestic workers across nationalities is a long and painstaking process is substantiated by his historical account of the development of the various actors that were instrumental in the coming-into-being of AMCB in Hong Kong. However, relatively little has been said about the efforts and work that were put into forming and running the first non-governmental organisation for the migrants in Hong Kong, the Mission for Migrant Workers, or its role in providing services and support to the migrant workers' community and their movements, and, as we will see in the discussion that follows, that was not in its initial plan.

The Mission for Migrant Filipinos was the first non-governmental organisation formed for the benefit of migrants in 1981. Initially it was mainly for the Filipino migrant workers, as they constituted the majority of migrant workers in Hong Kong then. Later on it was renamed the Mission for Migrant Workers (Mission) to reflect its services to all migrant workers regardless of their nationalities. At an interview with the founder of the Mission, Ms. Cynthia Abdon-Tellez (Cynthia) said that everything started with a three-month fact-finding request from the National Council of Protestant Churches in the Philippines to understand the kind of services required by the Filipinos in Hong Kong. She worked with priests and sisters in different churches to propose the setting up of the Mission for

Migrants Workers. The aims were to have someone to attend to individual cases, organise seminars to educate migrants on the legal terms pertaining to migrant workers' contracts and document the learning experiences along the way. No-one took up the role of setting up the Mission for Filipino Migrants in Hong Kong after Cynthia returned to the Philippines with her proposal, as no funding was available and, due to the non-US location (this reason was stated matter-of-factly, which shows the long-lasting and deep influence of the United States on the Filipinos' psyche), Cynthia was approached by the Bishop again to materialise the proposal she had put together. She accepted the role with the condition that she wanted to move to Hong Kong with her family.

She said in the interview:

*'I don't want to be dealing with migrants and crying with them because I miss my kids too'.*

She started without funding (although the National Council of Churches in the Philippines was willing to provide a loan) and no permanent office for her work. On Sundays she church-hopped to tell others what they did and on other days she visited parks and public spaces to connect with the domestic workers.

The Mission found its home in St. John's Cathedral in Central later:

*"We happened to visit the Cathedral and the dean of the Cathedral was telling me oh, it's the kind of out-reach programme we wanted to do... since you are doing it, why don't we adopt you as our out-reach programme and we can provide you with the space".*

In a newsletter by the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants in October 2014, authored by Libby Hurley, looking back at its 30-year history, the good location of St. John's cathedral was described as being 'half the battle in providing an effective service' and its prime location, being close to areas where the Filipino migrants gather and the Philippines Consulate, certainly



helped in reaching out to the migrant communities. Both Cynthia's initial out-reach strategies in public spaces and Libby's account of the central location of the Mission in Central indicate the importance of the encounters brought about by the bringing together of people in a particular space and the centrality of that space in doing so.

One of the greatest achievements of the Mission is the setting up of the Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge (BHMWR), a temporary shelter that provides accommodation, counselling, and legal and medication services to distressed foreign women workers. It took years of fund-raising and planning before this was finally set up in 1986. Meanwhile the much-needed shelter for migrant women in need was achieved by simply having friends and persons on a list who were willing to share a space with migrants who were in need, sometimes for a day, sometimes for a week and sometimes for the whole duration of their cases.

The need for a lawyer to handle more serious cases also arose. Cynthia recalled how Melville Boase, a solicitor who has represented domestic workers for three decades in Hong Kong, including Erwiana, came to be in the picture:

*“He had a client and he wanted some statements from several people from the community the client is from. So that person whom he passed the work to was a Methodist pastor who passed it to the NCPC (National Council of Protestant Churches) and knowing it was a migrant issue, the Bishop called me and asked me if I could do this. I was just lucky that it was not in down south which was (like) four hours by plane but it was just one hour away from Manila so it was easy to find. Knowing that I kept that name and contact number in my diary so when we arrived (in Hong Kong) we contacted him and told him what we are doing and what we would like to do and asked if he was willing to help us and he said yes. So from then on till now, he has been our legal counsel”.*

After meeting Mr. Boase (that is how Cynthia addressed him), Cynthia and her team started developing the educational programme to inform migrants of their rights – starting with their employment contract. Today, a booklet

called ‘Know Your Rights’ is revised and published by the Mission regularly in various languages. The first time I met ATIS (see chapter five), the latest copy of ‘Know Your Rights’ was being distributed to leaders of grassroots organisations. It is not uncommon for leaders to be going through the booklet with their members.

Erwiana stayed at the Bethune House throughout her trial and had Mr. Boase representing her at her trial. It would have been much more difficult for her or anyone willing to pursue their cases to do so without the shelter and/or the help of a lawyer. The practicality of filing a case, funding the trip to be back to Hong Kong, paying for the costs associated with accommodation, living expenses while not being able to work to earn an income would have put off many migrant workers who are less determined. Domestic workers who have an on-going case would not be allowed to work, which an officer from Immigration Department of Hong Kong interviewed by Wall Street Journal stated that ‘exceptions might be granted on a case-to-case basis’ but according to Mr. Boase such exceptions are extremely rare (Price, Yung, & Schonhardt, 2014). These are considerations domestic workers would have had before even finding a lawyer, being tried in court, facing the press, the public, and the employers who are most of the cases, source of their agony and pain.

Support is also needed outside of the practicality of having a roof over one’s head throughout the duration of one’s case and having someone to represent you in court. Feeling a part of a bigger community, that one is not alone in the fight, is important, as Erwiana pointed out in her interview with Amnesty International: ‘in my darkest moments, it was the messages of support sent by other domestic workers that gave me great comfort’.”

Bethune House is not simply a temporary shelter. Hsia (2009) observes that many of the clients of the Mission simply left after their cases were settled; however the residents of Bethune House usually stayed at the shelter for a longer period of time, which provided the timespan for more to be done.

Residents of Bethune House were provided with training on topics including leadership, organisation, writing, advocacy and alliance work (Hsia, 2009) by the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM), which was set up by the Mission in 1984, as similar needs of migrant workers were seen in countries all over the Asia Pacific and Middle East and APMM was designed to advocate for rights for migrants workers in the region (Hurley, 2014). Bethune House has thus become a place of transformation for many of its clients and even the birthplace of grassroots organisations.

### **6.5 Linking the Personal to the Political**

Eni Lestari (Eni) was the chairperson of the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong (ATKI) and a representative of AMCB. The story of her political awakening during her stay in Bethune House has been re-told many times as it was a crucial moment in the history of the transnational migrant movements in Hong Kong. When she first arrived in Hong Kong she was underpaid for six months and was referred to Bethune House. In Bethune House, she was taught how to handle her case. Quoting her from Hsia (2009):

*“The way they handle cases in Bethune House was very empowering. Bethune House helped me through education and exposure to ways of handling different cases. The Mission provided education and helped me see the importance of organising migrant workers. APMM also helped with various training. Bethune House is the second home for many Indonesians. It’s also for empowerment. I was sheltered at Bethune House for four to five months. From the shelter, I learnt from the Philippines movement. I attended their forums and activities, and I was so impressed by the Filipino migrant organisations. They are also migrant workers, but it did not prevent them from fighting and organising themselves. I saw how the victims become heroes for themselves! So we Indonesians also felt the need to form an organisation for fellow Indonesians”.*

ATKI was formed with the help of the Mission, APMM, UNIFIL and Bethune House in 2000 and is now a member of AMCB. AMCB, together with Migrante International (a transnational alliance of grassroots

Philippine migrant workers' organisations based in Manila (Rodriguez, 2011)), were instrumental in the formation of the International Migrants Alliance (IMA), whose short-form name together with AMCB's appeared on Erwiana's black t-shirt. IMA was founded by 108 self-claimed 'grassroots migrant organisations' in 2008 and engaged in what Rodriguez (2013) termed 'migrant labour transnationalism'. Eni, by the time IMA was formed, was the spokesperson for AMCB, and she said in her speech that has appeared again and again in many publications by migrant organisations and in many research papers that emphasise the difference between NGOs and migrant grassroots organisations: 'For a long time, others have spoken for us, but the time has come when we should be the ones to speak for ourselves'.

The assertion of migrants to speak for themselves was recognised and acknowledged by H., a programme officer at the Mission for Migrant Workers, who said:

*“Through their own efforts, the migrant grassroots groups have been asserting their presence, asserting their identity here in Hong Kong society and they have been quite successful I would say... as I was mentioning to you how the Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body (AMCB) has evolved from a cultural migrant association and is now doing more than that... it is involved in a different sphere, in policies, and they are being recognised, being acknowledged. The institutions, the Missions and other NGOs were at the forefront more than the migrants' groups but now the migrants through their own empowerment are able to assert their independence and their own strength and NGOs have been put into their proper place, in service provision and support and that's a very positive development. That's actually what the Mission wanted, to see an empowered migrant community. They shouldn't be dependent on the experts... actually the grassroots organisations are the actual experts because they know they are the ones experiencing the exploitation, they are experiencing the problems here, they are the best people to actually articulate... our main role is to facilitate that empowerment because we believe that to intervene in a crisis situation doesn't depend on the NGO or the service provider alone. A lot of that (intervention) depends on the migrant workers and their organisations. And the fact now that they have been*

*strengthening... and the expansion of the migrant movement here in Hong Kong... we are quite happy, very happy... that means our work in helping and the empowerment process is paying off. They have decided that this is important and we were there throughout the whole historical process. We were part of that, whether Filipinos or the Indonesians now. I still remember the time that the Indonesians were being targeted for exploitation ... and they were not yet able to speak out but now they are quite active, they are quite visible. They are now speaking for themselves. I think that was what our mission wanted, to create that opportunity so I believe that it's a very positive development”.*

Empowering the migrants themselves and providing them with the training and support needed to set up their own organisations is part of what Hsia calls the long-process of labouring that is required before a movement comes-into-being. But she fell short of giving concrete examples of how this is done. K, an ex-student activist who had been in Hong Kong for 23 years, since she was eighteen, had been volunteering at the Mission and providing assistance whenever migrants decided to form their own organisations. When I asked her the reasons for, and importance of, forming these organisations, she said:

*“Most of the people they want to have their own organisations. They want to be leaders. That is why they form their own group. And I think they have this potential to be leaders also. Others... they want to show something of themselves, yes I can do that also”.*

I asked specifically about how she had helped these migrants in forming their organisations:

*“That depends on their needs. Say if they want to have more cultural (content in their activities), we can have discussion regarding cultural... For example: a cultural orientation in the perspective of a progressive group, not just a group... some of the groups are traditional groups. We call them traditional groups because they just gather because they want to... aside from that, they don't know what to do besides being together. That's why we give them guides... if you want to become a cultural group, we give them a cultural orientation ... it's not about forming a group because you want to dance... but you have to become more realistic not just by dancing but you*

*can also form/perform in terms of what is going on in relation to the situation of the migrant workers... it's more sensible rather than just dancing" (words in brackets added by author).*

She continued:

*"Sometimes we provide seminars to discuss the roots of migration - why we have to migrate - what's the cause of migration? They have to know or else they would just go round in circles, repeat and repeat without the people knowing what the cause is, why migrant workers have to be separated from their families".*

The interactions between migrant grassroots organisations and the Mission or NGOs who provide support and services are reciprocal rather than one-directional. Grassroots organisations also inform the Mission and other NGOs of the latest issues faced by migrant workers. Cynthia from the Mission revealed to me how this works in her interview:

*"In the past five years, we have realised that while we are overstretched (in terms of resources), the organising of migrant workers is also happening at a faster pace. And that needs some kind of direction from us. Also we have realised that when people say they are on the front-line we realise that we are just the second-line... the front-line would be the leaders of the organisations ... Older people know us and can pass the word around. But for people to really think of coming up (to the Mission Office at St. John's Cathedral, up on a hill in Central), this heavy road, the flight of stairs, and then coming up another three sets of stairs to get to the mission office, people have already thought many times... to speak to strangers as they do not know us, talk about their problems... they must really have thought about it many times...I always say, you sit on a pavement in Central, sit beside somebody you do not know, and sigh... 'Life is very difficult, no?' ... that other person would definitely respond to you, oh yes, this morning what happened to me.... they share their bad experiences, and later on they exchange happy moments and that is the best way to know the situation. That's why we say that we have to consult with you (the organisations) because you know what's going on".*

## **6.6 TIGIL NA! (Stop Now!) Movement of Victims against Illegal Recruitment & Trafficking**

One of the problems identified during the consultations with the migration organisations as well as through the experience of handling an increasing number of cases was the illegal charging of agency fees, which led to the formation of a movement called ‘TIGIL NA! Movement of Victims Against Illegal Recruitment & Trafficking’. I remember vividly the seemingly never-ending piles of files to input into the system and the rush to compile statistics for press releases for this particular campaign. An almost 100% increase in the number of cases filed at the Mission regarding the illegal charging of agency fees in the second quarter of 2013 prompted the Mission to call all of those who had filed complaints to gather together in one venue to inform them of the situations and procedures in terms of how these cases were to be handled instead of handling them one-by-one, as there were simply not enough resources at the Mission to cope with that. At the same time, welfare officers from migrant organisations were also invited to training sessions on how they could manage and help members who might have the same issue i.e. the illegal charging of agency fees.

It turned out that Cynthia was right: that being in Central on Sundays on a pavement is a way to sense the problems facing migrant workers and provide ‘front-line’ help. On a summer’s day in June 2013, standing at the usual busy junction between the Prince Building and the Mandarin Hotel, the usual spot for ‘POWER’ on Chater Road, I was having a conversation with RR, who had been in Hong Kong for eight years and was an active member of POWER, when the leader of POWER brought four anxious looking women over to us. She said that they needed help as their passports had been confiscated by their recruitment agencies and they had received notices demanding payments. We asked if they had been to the Mission. They said that they had but they were not sure of the next steps. They had also gone to the Philippines Consulate. One of them demonstrated this by saying that the staff at the Consulate only wanted

to look at the papers and file them. She imitated the officer at the Philippines Consulate by gesturing with her hands in the air as if she would get hold of the document and then waving her hands to signal 'leave now'. We all laughed. The Case officer at the Mission told them that it would take about a month for their loans to be cancelled. They said that they were worried for the time being as the demand notice had also caused anxiety for one of their employers. She showed us the demand letters (for payments) and there was no company name or address. It was just a letter addressed to her, with someone's family name and a contact number on it.

The Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), an arm of the Department of Labour and Employment of the Philippines, which is mandated to promote and develop an overseas employment programme and also to protect migrant workers, has expressly prohibited charging fees to Filipino household service workers under its Governing Board Resolution No. 6, Series of 200623. The practice of charging exorbitant placement fees by the agencies, however, is still rampant. Those who had filed complaints against the illegal charging of agency fees had been charged an average of HK\$17,500, under various modus operandi like 'training fees' and 'medical examination fees' (although in law the latter is to be borne by employers and employers also find such items under their payments to the recruitment agencies). Many migrant workers were also forced to take on loans in the form of promissory notes to pay these fees, often just before departing to begin their jobs.

One of the four women brought to us by the leader of POWER said that she had signed a promissory note in the Philippines with the agency through which her job in Hong Kong was arranged and was told to contact the agency in Hong Kong after she arrived. When she went to the agency in Hong Kong, she was told that the promissory note she had signed in the Philippines was useless and hence she needed to sign another one. She did

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<sup>23</sup> Source: POEA, [http://www.poea.gov.ph/news/2012/PR\\_July2012\\_PF.pdf](http://www.poea.gov.ph/news/2012/PR_July2012_PF.pdf) retrieved 20 February 2015



and it demanded HKD2800 in monthly payments from her. (Under the Hong Kong Employment Ordinance, the maximum commission which may be received by an employment agency from each job-seeker is an amount not exceeding 10% of his/her first month's wages after he/she has been successfully placed and therefore in both jurisdictions the charge by the agency of such an exorbitant amount in comparison to their monthly salary of HKD4010 is illegal.)

When she failed to pay, a demand letter was pasted on the front door of her employer's house. She explained to her employer that she should pay her the money and not pay the agency directly (apparently her employer paid the agency for the first month and hence she only received the remaining salary of about HKD1000). Later on her employer told her that she would pay her full salary and it was up to her to decide whether she wanted to repay the loan.

She said that she had contacted the person whose name appeared on the demand letter and asked for the loan details but the person at the other end of the phone had said that he did not know anything about the loan and that he was only told to get payments from her. The parties to whom these debt arrangements are attributed are very careful about leaving any traces that will lead the migrant domestic workers involved or the authorities to them. They are concealed behind collectors to whom the collecting jobs have been outsourced, who do not know anything about the loans. These collectors had harassed her with demand letters and SMS messages and had also sent SMS messages to her employers.

RR, who had attended the training seminar organised by the Mission and UNIFIL earlier that morning on the illegal charging of placement fees faced by many migrant workers, came into the conversation halfway through and started telling her not to worry and to be firm. She said that these collectors could not (legally) cause harm to them and if they did she should go to the police. She told them to tell their employers what had happened and to get

their understanding as agencies that do not receive payments from migrant workers sometimes ask the employers to terminate their contracts with domestic workers. RR also told them to tell their guarantors in the Philippines not to worry about this, as the party behind the loan would also have demanded payments from their families back home after they failed to pay their 'placement fee disguised as other miscellaneous charges and loans'. Their documents were also confiscated by the agencies – such practices are also rampant but illegal. RR told them to report this to the police and demand that the documents be returned. The four of them later left us, scared and worried.

I met one of them, JJ, at the Mission a few days later. She had been sacked as the debt collector's messages to her employer had caused a great level of anxiety in the household. JJ was at the Mission to seek advice about what to do after the cheque issued by her employer as her wages and wages in lieu of notice had bounced. She had reported it to the Philippines Consulate and the agency seemed keen to settle her case after hearing this. She was eager to go home to her 2-year old son who had fallen sick. Even if she wanted to, she could not stay in Hong Kong to attend the conciliation meeting to be arranged by the Philippines Overseas Labour Office (POLO) between her and the agency with which she had signed the promissory notes, as she had to leave Hong Kong within two weeks after her contractual relationship with her employer ceased. At these conciliation meetings arranged by POLO, she would be able to negotiate for a refund of the payments she had paid to the agency and have her loans cancelled (as they were illegal in the first place). Instead, she had lost her job and she was uncertain about whether she would be able to recoup the money she had spent on getting this job. With the victim gone, the agency had now created another demand for the employer who had been threatened and at the same time urgently needed to find another worker to fill JJ's shoes.

Despite the illegality of charging placement fees to household workers in the Philippines and a cap of 10% of their monthly salary as chargeable

commission by recruitment agencies to employees in Hong Kong, many of the Filipino migrant workers do not seem to challenge the rampant practice of paying a handsome fee to recruitment agencies for job placements. Most of them are unaware of the rules and regulations governing recruitment agencies in both jurisdictions. Even if they have come to know about its illegality, it is not easy for them to act on this, especially those that have signed promissory notes, for fear of losing their jobs (as any failures to make payments entail harassment not just to themselves but also their employers, who might under duress sack them) as JJ's case has illustrated. As a result, those who fear losing their jobs over failing to make repayments for forced loans are mostly migrants who have no ability to pay such fees in cash and their conditions are thus aggravated by being made to pay fees that have been illegally charged to them and also having to repay loans with interest. RR's advice to JJ and her friends to get their employers to understand their situation was well intended but not at all easy to act on. Some of the migrant workers have little knowledge of the basis of their claims. I also found out later that RR's advice for migrant workers, to report to the police about collectors' harassment and the confiscation of their documents by agencies, can seem daunting to migrant workers who have just recently arrived in Hong Kong and who distrust and fear the authorities in general. It takes encouragement and consistent persuasion on the part of the Mission case officer, or leaders of organisations if victims belong to or decide to join grassroots organisations, for these migrants to act on their own cases. Many visit the Mission for advice but not all of them will right wrongs that have been done to them. For those who decide otherwise, they soon recognise that they are not alone and find themselves in a collective movement with others.

GA described how she came to be part of the Tigil Ng movement:

*'We filed a complaint against the agency... the members of the Consulate told us that you just come back and follow it up after one month. Actually before I went there I had already received a demand letter from the lending (company) so we decided to go to the Consulate to follow it up and we showed the demand*

*letter to them. But the staff at the Consulate just said, 'we didn't tell you to not to pay'. We were just shocked at what they told us. Actually I had the money to pay the lending (company) but my employer told me that I would be wise, before I paid, to ask the Consulate first. So I went to the Consulate... but I didn't get good answers from the Consulate office. I was so upset that time. I went out of the Consulate with my friend ... we went to Central and sat there, talking about what we should do. I said I had the money and I could pay now but some of my friends said that we had already filed our cases so we needed to pursue them. Some also said that we needed to wait for another demand letter. Another friend told me that we should pursue this until we win, because some of our co-domestic helpers... they were refunded their placement fees. That time I prayed that somebody would come to us to help. Luckily my phone rang and someone said that there was a briefing here for all domestic helpers who have a problem with lending. So we ran over there and we saw the leader of the organisation and she asked us to join the migrant group. After that she asked us to join the briefing. Then after the briefing we went to the Mission. And then we filed a case at the Mission. Since that day we are in Central every Sunday for the activities'.*

From GA's narrative, describing the dilemma she faced while being pressured by the demand letters for payments, and the ambivalent stance of the Consulate on the one hand and the advice from her friends about needing to 'pursue until we win' on the other, the decision to be made by GA and many of those who are in the same situation is not an easy one. It involves risking their jobs (as the case of JJ indicates) and the uncertainty of not having their fees refunded or loans cancelled. It is thus a personal undertaking, a kind of courage that is needed, to face the risks and uncertainties involved and a recognition that things might not always turn out the ways one hopes. It might involve political awakening, such as in the case of Eni, who later on started her own organisation. With regard to GA, she continues to actively participate in grassroots organisations and the TIGIL NA movement. Before I came back to London, she happily told me that her agency fee had been refunded and the loans cancelled.

At the same time, in both instances (GA & JJ and her other friends), the public spaces in Central are where they find potential solutions to the problems they face and the social network they need to make the difficult

decisions about what to do in situations of distress. The social relations of grassroots organisations are materialised not just in the every-Sunday and the extra-every-Sunday activities, as discussed in the previous chapter, but also in the very pragmatic matters of dealing with situations when one is sacked by one's employer, or when one finds out that one is being forced to pay a loan that is illegal in nature in the first place. In times of crisis or distress, physical presence counts - it is the old-fashioned warmth of the body and face-to-face interactions that make the difference. I argue that it is the materialisation of social relations in the public spaces of Hong Kong that underpins the transnational migrant workers' movement. It is the gathering of people in a physical space that brings about encounters on the street and the formation of new social relations; it is through the pragmatic approach in providing support and knowledge in times of need that the ideas of rights as workers, women and human beings are made relevant. It is through the reaching out to the migrant workers by the NGOs in the form of public seminars and counselling and other services that networks consist of migrants, grassroots organizations and NGOs are made.

Furthermore, I wish to emphasise the long and laborious process behind what we know as the 'migrant movement' in Hong Kong, the complex networks that constitute and are constituted in the movement and the importance of actors from service providers such as the Mission, the grassroots organisations it supports and the individuals who make up these different organisations. These different actors at the same time actively weave through the complex network that is the movement. The TIGIL NG movement illustrates the dialectical relationship between the Mission as a service provider and the community it serves – the grassroots organisations and the members who make up these organisations. The Mission recognises the problem of the illegal charging of placement fees both from the cases that come to it and its consultations with the leaders of grassroots organisations. Through organising seminars to assemble the victims of these illegal placement fees to disseminate information regarding the illegality of such a practice, the procedure of filing cases for refunds and the

cancellation of loans through the POLO conciliation meeting, and most importantly in showing them that they are not alone in this, these victims of illegal placement fee charging, like GA, become potential members of grassroots organisations.

Providing training to the welfare officers of grassroots organisations to equip them with knowledge and skills to handle cases of illegal charging of placement fees relieves the Mission from handling the massive volume of cases with its own resources and allows these welfare officers to act as the ‘front-line’, as suggested by Cynthia – to address their members’ worries and issues more spontaneously. JJ’s case illustrates that it takes more than just welfare officer’s efforts to attend to cases to avert the wrong done to them. It also depends on the understanding of the employers and the willingness of the victims themselves to undertake the pursue of justice. There are others like GA, who manages to right the wrongs and becomes an active member of the grassroots organization that strengthens the movement and at the same time is empowered and transformed through the process that enables the Mission to act as the ‘second-line’, to be put into its rightful place, as H suggests.

The clear division between NGOs and grassroots organisations looking through the lens of their memberships is not always clear. Mission volunteers can also be members or leaders of organisations and vice versa. The network at the organisation level is equally intertwined: the Mission and other NGOs work in partnership with other organisations, both locally and transnationally, whilst the grassroots organisations, including unions of migrant workers, also form their own alliances with local unions, and other migrant grassroots organisations locally or transnationally. NGO networks and grassroots networks also come together for specific campaigns such as the formation of ‘the Justice for Erwiana and Migrant Domestic Workers’ (J4EMDW) committee, a broad coalition of groups and individuals in Hong Kong that campaigned for justice for Erwiana and continue to do so for other abused migrant domestic workers. The complex, intertwined, non-

hierarchical and constantly emerging networked nature of this migrant movement is best described using the metaphor of a ‘rhizome’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987); like a bulb or tuber with its roots and shoots, its shape is unpredictable and capable of growth across multiple dimensions and its becoming is influenced by the ability of its heterogeneous shoots and roots to grow and their respective engagements with the surroundings (Juris & Khasnabish, 2013b). The process of the growth of shoots and roots in multiple dimensions across the network, or what I would call ‘rhizomisation’, is itself heterogeneous and multi-dimensional. Having discussed many cases of the personal transformation from victims to activists, I would like to turn now to a discussion of rhizomisation –the growth of the networks at the edge – in terms of how the migrant movements expand and negotiate their boundaries to grow in various directions.

## **6.7 Rhizomisation**

Most of the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are not politically active. For those who are, some of them are student activists back in the Philippines or have experienced political awakening through their personal experiences as victims of abuse or illegal practices, as we saw in the case of Eni, who was a client of Bethune House and later became one of the most prominent grassroots leaders in the migrant community in Hong Kong. They become champions of change not just for themselves; their experiences also influence the people around them. DD, whom I met while rehearsing the skit for the electoral campaign in the Bus Thirteen Area in early 2013 (see chapter five) and who later founded her own organisation, told me:

*‘Because suddenly one of our friends became a client of Bethune House. She came up with the idea... why doesn't our group join this kind of group because we can help, we can develop our talent, develop ourselves, and at the same time, help the whole. So she talked me into it... that's a nice way, we have to open ourselves up, open up to the reality of us as domestic workers...we are educated, we studied back home,*

*why stop our learning here? Just be domestic workers doing housework? Why (not) let us develop and make use of our learning or talent? So in this aspect, this made me join. At the same time we fight for rights as migrants ...we are also the ones that benefit from it ... because if we fight for our salary increment all will benefit from it'.*

DD had worked in the United Arab Emirates as an X-ray technician for seven years during her first stint of migration. She went back to the Philippines for four years during which she gave birth to her son. She then left for Hong Kong when he was four-years old to support him and her parents. The call to 'make use of one's talent and develop one's potential' was what appealed to DD in terms of joining the movement but not all of her friends were convinced at first. She said:

*'slowly, slowly, we kept on talking to them, by talking and by showing them, because we are a migrant cultural organisation, we asked: why not make use of your talent at dancing and at singing rather than just sitting there (in Central on Sundays)? So little by little they became open the idea'.*

She added:

*'And then the old members heard that our organisation was performing so they were happy because they had this feeling of attachment and friendship to the organisation so I kept on talking to them about the benefits. At first I introduced them to the ideas but maybe there is a negative connotation about the rallies and protests, although I told them this is not against the government but their reaction was, "I don't want to get involved in this kind of thing"... so bypassing that... '...we did it through progressive dances - we are not shouting but through dancing we protest to the government for something - we are asking our request through dancing". And actually our organisation is about nature too so we care about nature ... about how to save nature. At the same time we are also performing for a number of organisations as solidarity for them'.*

Showing solidarity to other organisations is an important step in becoming part of the bigger picture, DD said:

*'our organisation is just a small group, part of UNIFIL. If we remain just as a small organisation, then how can we join the*



*bigger (events)? UNIFIL is like a stepping stone. UNIFIL gives us information, opens our ears and eyes as to what's happening through seminars, Facebook, RADIO MIGRANTE... Without this, we'll be back to parties, birthday parties etc. So this is very important'.*

She added:

*'maybe someday we can join another alliance, maybe Cordillera (an alliance of organisations from the northern, mountainous part of Luzon, the main island in the Philippines). We are not the same, but we have similarities in fighting for the land... our adviser is also from Cordillera so there is a big chance. In the afternoon, Cordillera have mining seminars about nature and we would join them for that... what I heard from Cordillera is that mining affects their livelihood. It affects their source of food, their source of income. If they continue mining, what happens to the plantations? The rice and food will be destroyed by the mining so this affects our livelihood; it affects our people in the Philippines'.*

DD's experience shows a different way through which Filipino migrant domestic workers become part of the migrant movement. Through her participation in the movement, she demonstrates her leadership ability in convincing and talking others into joining the organisation, that she is able to manage her members, her commitment to different groups and alliances, and that she is no longer just a domestic worker doing household chores but someone who makes use of her education and talent as a leader of a grassroots organisation. I would also argue that by joining the migrant movement, she is able to reconcile her dislocation (Parreñas, 2001) of downward social mobility and her desire to be part of the bigger picture (by joining alliances such as UNIFIL). This fulfils her wish to be part of that movement and also strengthens the growth of the movement itself. Her future plan to join another alliance that appeals to her organisation's objective (of caring for nature) manifests the multi-directional growth of a shoot/root in a rhizome and reflects yet another dimension of the rhizomisation of the migrant movement.

Not all growths of shoots and roots are of equal strength though and, as DD revealed, migrant workers seem to respond to certain issues with scepticism, which reflects the unpredictable and contingent nature of rhizomes. Certain parts grow and others shrink depending on the environment surrounding them, and for the migrant movements in Hong Kong, it depends on the issues concerned. K, a mission volunteer who helps groups to form progressive organisations, recognised the issue-specific and contingent nature of the migrant movement and targets different audiences for different issues accordingly:

*'...if it's national issue, human rights, extra judicial killings, killing of activists or abduction of activists - they don't want to be involved. Maybe they are just very scared or they don't understand what it is and why they have to be involved in that. For the basic needs, you can still encourage them to join, but for human rights, especially the issue of land grabbing, if they are not affected, they will not join'.*

Therefore she said:

*'we usually use issues (specific to domestic workers) to form our biggest mobilisation... that's particular to the domestic workers. If you want to reach out to them you have to know what the interests of the migrant workers are, i.e. wage, live-out arrangement and anti-migrant policies. It is very Hong Kong specific. That's why as much as possible for those groups we already reach out... we raise the political consciousness so that those groups can also influence other groups, it's wave upon wave. That way we can gather more migrant workers to mobilise more migrant workers. That's why the movement is expanding'.*

Hong Kong specific issues also form the basis upon which transnational networks of migrant movements in the city come together for campaigns as in the case of campaigning for Erwiana. A committee consisting of a broad coalition of groups and individuals in Hong Kong called 'Justice for Erwiana and Migrant Domestic Workers (J4EMDW)' was formed, which campaigned for justice for Erwiana and continues to do so for other abused migrant domestic workers. The Mission, APMM and as we have discussed earlier, AMCB and IMB are all part of this broad coalition. Given the

extent of the brutality that Erwiana experienced and the media coverage of her case support was generated from other organisations such as ‘Christian churches, human rights organisations and individuals from all walks of life in Hong Kong’ (email correspondence with APMM Programme Coordinator, 25 Feb 2015). The committee of J4EMDW is an open network-committee that involves both organisations that have been advocating for migrant domestic workers’ rights and individuals who are concerned about their issues.

Within the committee, member organisations that had a long track record in advocating for migrant workers’ rights in Hong Kong drew on their specialised experience, which they had gained over the years, to provide support and assistance to Erwiana. The Mission provided Erwiana with pro bono consultancy under the law firm Boase, Cohen and Collins (whose partner has been the legal counsel for the Mission for three decades), which coordinates its intervention through the Mission and with the Department of Justice’s prosecution and investigative teams. It also took care of Erwiana’s billeting arrangements to ensure that she had an escort whenever she was out on the streets during the trial period. APMM, on the other hand, provided regular updates on the case to ensure its international exposure through the networks of IMA (global migrant alliances) and United for Foreign Domestic Rights (UFDWR),<sup>24</sup> NGO networks that focus on migration issues. AMCB takes care of the Hong Kong migrant communities - from the Indonesians, to the Filipinos, Thais and others. Through the coalition committee of J4EMDW, which also consists of local groups and individuals, they help in organising rallies and press conferences, and in lobbying and even fundraising in support of FDW victims of abuse (email correspondence with APMM Programme Coordinator, 25 Feb 2015).

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<sup>24</sup> UFDWR is a coalition of five regional/international organizations formed in May 2007 in Indonesia. Its core committee member organizations are: Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), Mekong Migration Network (MMN), Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility and the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM).

Images of Erwiana's injuries and her frail condition were circulated through social media among the Indonesians in Hong Kong and they subsequently caught the media's attention. Social media continued to play an important role as the case unfolded. They provided platforms for informing the public on the progress of the case and winning the public's sympathy, through Facebook and organisational websites such as those of APMM and blog news sites like 'HK Helpers Campaign'.<sup>25</sup> On top of the social media platforms, mobile applications that provide push-mail services like WhatsApp, Telegram and Viber were used extensively to mobilise allies into mass action for the campaign, according to the APMM Programme Coordinator whom I interviewed via email.

The essential role of the Internet and the mobile communication network in mass actions such as this is recognised by Castells (2012). He argues that the 'hybrid of cyber space and urban space constitutes a third space', which is the 'space of the movement' or 'space of autonomy' that is the 'new spatial form of networked social movement'. I do not dispute his argument about the merger between cyber and urban spaces in social movements but he has underestimated the role of urban spaces in bringing people together prior to the start of any of such social movements. He attributes such cohesion to the Internet as the starting point of social movements that later materialise in urban space. I argue that the Internet is not the birthplace or the starting point of a movement, but an extension of existing networks that are formed, in the case of the migrant movement in Hong Kong, through the painstaking process of 'conscientisation, empowerment and mobilisation' in which networks are formed through encounters on the streets of Central, with actors from NGOs and grassroots organisations and are reinforced through a collective construction of their lived place (see chapter five). Castells' argument regarding a 'space of autonomy' assumes equal access to information and a political awareness of the power relations embedded in

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<sup>25</sup> It is a campaign run by a small, independent, diverse group of volunteer activists working closely with helpers and Hong Kong NGOs to promote the rights of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong.

'blatant injustice', which might have facilitated the identification of an agent responsible for such an action (Castells, 2012) that brings people onto the streets. These assumptions do not apply to the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and the agents responsible for the blatant injustice they face are also not always evident. Bringing them onto the streets is thus not as simple as Castells has assumed.

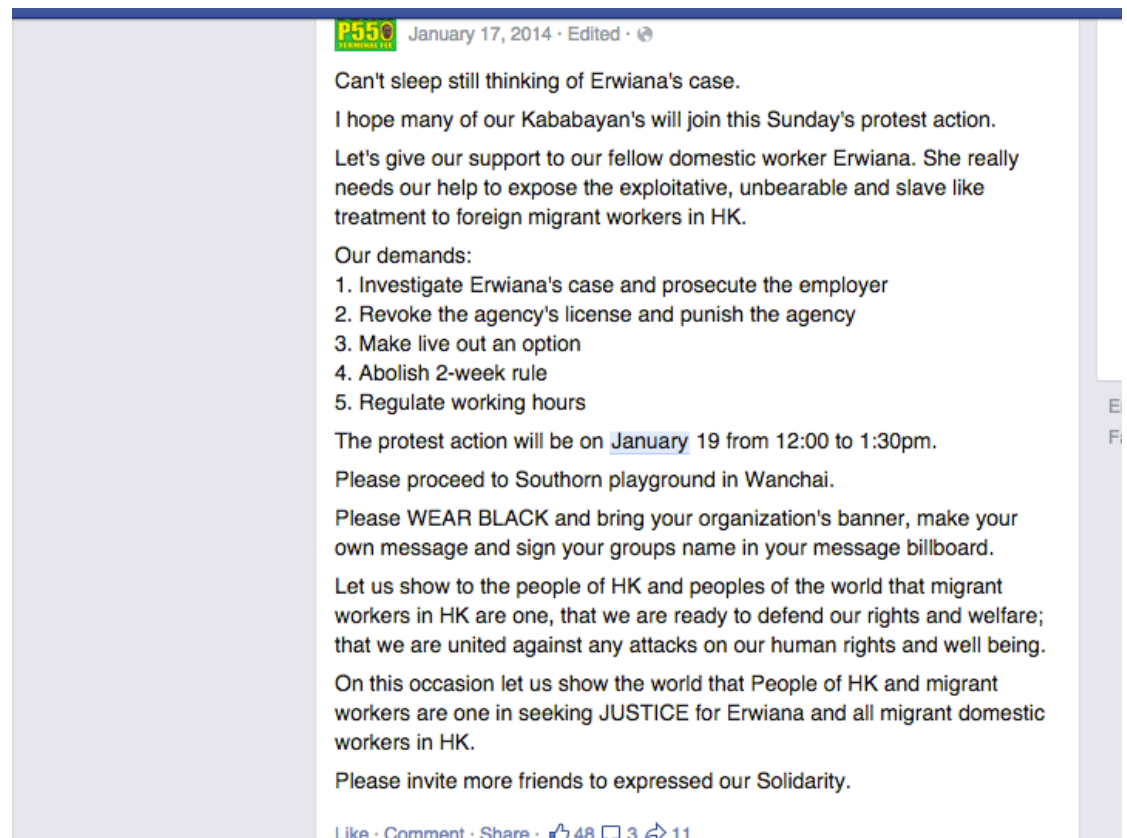


Figure 6-1: Facebook Post to call for participants to protest for Erwiana

One of the earliest organised mass actions took place in early 2014 when Erwiana's case first came to light. Instead of the usual gathering places - in Central for the Filipinos and Victoria Park for the Indonesians - migrant domestic workers gathered in the Southorn Playground in Wanchai as the demonstration was organised to first march to the police headquarters nearby - protesting about the way in which the police had handled the case - and then to the Hong Kong Government Headquarters, where they were met with a closed door.

Local trade unions and many individuals who did not seem to be part of any organisation also turned up for the rally. Throughout the trial, whenever there was a hearing, migrant domestic workers and supporters of Erwiana showed up in front of the court carrying banners and shouting, 'Justice for Erwiana.' Portraits of Erwiana's face and banners demanding a review of the existing policies such as the mandatory live-in arrangement and the two-week rule were seen at these mass actions. Campaign strategy taps on the work advanced by many of the organizations that have a long track record in advocating rights for migrant domestic workers. The campaign strategy includes an analysis of the situations faced by the migrant workers in Hong Kong and aligns Erwiana's case within the broader narratives of demanding policy changes that would perhaps lessen the opportunities for such brutality to arise again. The linking of the personal to the political (Hanisch, 2006) becomes a strategy through which real changes might be possible.

Handing down her sentence to Erwiana's ex-employer, District Court Judge Amanda Woodcock said that in her opinion, abusive conduct such as that exhibited by Erwiana's ex-employer towards her could be prevented if domestic workers were not forced to live with their employers, echoing what migrant domestic workers' organisations have been advocating. The case at this point ceased to be just about Erwiana. Through the extreme brutality she experienced and the intensive media attention that it drew, the precarious and vulnerable situations that many of these migrant domestic workers face were revealed in Court and indirectly through the media to the public. This case became not just a personal transformation of a victim to an activist-in-the-making, but also a manifestation of the years of work behind the networks of NGOs, migrant grassroots organisations, and alliances within and beyond Hong Kong with other unions, individuals and organisations in obtaining a greater access to justice and redress for abused victims.

Through the broad coalition of J4EMDW, which incorporates both the usual organisations that advocate for migrant workers' rights and also Christian churches, human rights organisations and individual supporters from all walks of life in Hong Kong, the transnational migrant movement in Hong Kong manages to enhance its reach and expand its boundaries. Subsequent to the closure of the case, various migrant organisation leaders initiated a dialogue with legislators from the pan-democratic parties in Hong Kong to discuss the situation of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and, at the press conference after the dialogue, many of these legislators aired their support for reviewing the existing policies with regard to the live-in arrangement and two-week rules. This is a curious case of non-citizens gaining access to legislators. The power of the legislative branch of the government is questionable in Hong Kong's context in at least two aspects: (1) only half of the legislators in Hong Kong are elected directly by the people whilst the remaining half are chosen by representatives of different 'functional constituencies' that represent the interests of different industries. The names of these functional constituencies are telling: the 'transport functional constituency', the 'insurance functional constituency', the 'import and export functional constituency' and the 'information technology functional constituency' for example. (2) The head of the executive branch of the government is not directly elected by the people of Hong Kong and bears no direct relation to the result of the legislative council election. Thus, whether such a dialogue between the legislators and the leaders of migrant organisations will bear any fruit, only time will tell. But for such a dialogue to have taken place at all is testimony to the rhizomisation of the the transnational migrant movement in Hong Kong, to its multidirectional and multidimensional growth, and to how much it has grown from a marginalised sector of society.

The relative success of the campaign 'Justice for Erwiana' also helped the transnational migrant networks to provide hope, which is essential in holding the movement together. RR, an active member of POWER, with whom I encountered victims of the illegal charging of placement fees on

Chater Road, told me why she had joined the movement. She told me that she had no issues with her employer – that her employer was the same one who had hired her mother before she passed away and her decision to join the organisation was so that she could contribute to the community, ensuring that her Sundays were spent in meaningful ways. She knows that any actual changes are hard to come by. When mentioning her dad, she said that she kept telling him to take care of his health as they were too poor to afford any medical fees should they fall ill,. She recognised the sheer amount of work involved to effect changes in the health care policies back in the Philippines and she said that perhaps all that she had done would not have an impact but she still needed to be doing something. Beneath her assertive voice regarding her Sunday activities in Central, I also sensed traces of desperation and yet at the same time hope for a better future.

The process of recognition of her own situation, the awakening of the personal as the political, linking the personal to the collective, the urge to be doing something in the hope of bringing about changes, yet knowing how hard it is, is what I would argue to be practising hope. Practising hope is what drives the transnational migrant movement in Hong Kong. Like the three quotes at the beginning of the chapter, hope manifests itself in different forms at each stage of one's encounter with the injustice in the structure: in political awakening, in the acknowledgement of 'you are not alone in this', in the successes of issue-specific campaigns that mobilise and activate the masses, and in the more universal issues such as human rights that act as a utopian vision to keep people hoping (or not) that when enough people come together, changes happen.

We have developed an extensive insight into the personal aspects as well as the political perspectives of the situation, and into the importance of the urge to be doing something that will transform personal lives as well as the transnational migrant movement in Hong Kong. The recognition of how collective power as the manifestation of hope in its most potent could perhaps be best illustrated by Henry's words:



*'...we cannot expect change to happen just by waiting for it to happen. If we want to see change, we must work for it. We will only work more effectively if we are organised. If we do it on our own individually, it might result in something but it might not be as significant compared with what we can achieve together in a more organised manner so the challenge is not to wait for problems to knock on our door but to be more proactive and to work hard to help fellow migrants. I think we can start with that... assisting fellow migrants... from there we know a lot of us... we can do a lot together, we can affect change together.'*

Contributions to the community featured repeatedly in many of my informants' narratives. They want to help their fellow migrants. They talked about their collective identity as migrant workers construed through political awakening and recognising that the personal is also political, that their experiences in the process of migration as victims - of say the illegal charging of placement fees - are shared with others. If they are not personally affected by the injustice imbued in the structure, it could be someone they know, be it a friend or family member, or people whom they meet on the streets in Central who have had such experiences, which influence their outlook on their own status as migrant workers and make them identify themselves as members of this community. I argue that self-identification as part of the community, part of the collective, underpins 'practising hope' - of seeing oneself contributing and making changes for the benefits of the collective. This collective identity as a migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong transcends the ethnic and national divisions among the Filipinos, Indonesians and others. When it comes to responding to calls for mass action, identification as a migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong comes more immediately than being a Filipino responding to calls to human rights violations or extrajudicial killings in the homeland. The embodied identity of the 'migrant domestic worker' outweighs the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006) in this particular context - they co-exist but one is called to action more easily than the other.

Practising hope does not come automatically; instead it is embedded in the continuous efforts of various social actors starting with the NGOs and then

the grassroots organisations, which directly or indirectly encourage practising hope as a way to manage or deal with one's situations as migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. Hope here is thus not simply an emotion, together with anger, which arises from the blatant injustice that triggers social movements, as argued by Castells (2012). It is a way of life for the migrant domestic workers who decide to spend their off-days busying themselves with organisational activities that they hope will bring about changes that will benefit the collective, which provides the feedback mechanism to continue practising hope. This practice is anchored in the encounters on the street of Central, reinforced through their routine everyday construction of their lived space in Sunday Central and extended beyond it through the Internet and mobile communications networks. It is different from what Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin (2013) call the 'methodology of the oppressed', which Chun, Lipsitz and Shin (2013) used to describe the work done by Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) in the United States to respond to language discrimination and the daily humiliation experienced by immigrants with little English skills. They describe 'methodology of the oppressed' as 'establishing a set of processes, procedures and technologies for decolonizing the imagination' that enable 'individuals and groups seeking to transform dominant and oppressive powers to constitute themselves as resistant and oppositional citizen-subjects.' Whilst the empowerment of individuals and resistance to oppressive powers are common in AIWA and the transnational migrant movement in Hong Kong, there is a more prominent feature of the collective that emerges in the latter. The most potent element of practising hope is the collective, 'to be organised', and the emphasis on 'contributing to the community', rather than discrimination. This appears repeatedly in my conversations with my informants and it is the source of hope, in a way, that sustains 'practising hope.

## **6.8 Conclusion**

In this Chapter, I started with Erwiana's story to trace her extraordinary journey from a victim of abuse to an icon for campaigning for the rights for

migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and through her story I emphasised the support provided by the various social actors that constitute the networks of migrant movements in Hong Kong before, during and after the trial.

The emergence of the impressive orchestration of support behind Erwiana by the transnational migrants' networks in Hong Kong also speaks of the relative freedom that migrants enjoy in comparison to other migrant receiving countries and the years of work on 'conscientisation, empowerment and mobilisation' by the networks behind the scene. I argue that the public space of Central gathers the people in a physical space where encounters on the streets and the formation of new social relations take place and that it is the materialisation of social relations in the public space that underpins the transnational migrant workers' movement in Hong Kong.

By engaging in an ethnographic portrayal of the transnational migrants' movement through describing the development of NGOs and the grassroots organisations and how individuals come to be involved in the movement, I attempted to paint a picture of the complex and interwoven networks that constitute and are constituted within the movement and demonstrate its multidirectional and multidimensional growth, which I call 'rhizomisation' and the differential power of calling migrants into mass actions between the issue-specific campaigns and the 'national ones'. I also illustrate with the example of mobilisation for mass action for Erwiana that the network of transnational migrants' movements is a hybrid space of the urban and the cyber, which differs from Castells' idea in that the primacy of the urban is emphasised.

Lastly, I argued that the transnational migrants' movement in Hong Kong is underpinned by what I call 'practising hope' – in one's direct or indirect encounter with injustice; in one's political awakening that the personal is political (Hanisch, 2006), and in the identification of oneself as part of a collective, of a community and that the success of issue-specific campaigns

and the utopian hope for a better future sustain the movement through practising hope.

## **Chapter 7 Conclusion: Rights to the city as the beginning of alternatives**

### **7.1 Introduction**

My fieldwork ended in the summer of 2014. It ended with the third Asian Migrant Workers' Summit on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2014, which took place in an auditorium in the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong.

Speeches and progressive performances (please refer to chapter five on the discussion of progressive performances), the familiar features of events organised by the migrant domestic workers' organisations took place as usual. The venue changed and so did the ambience that went with it.

In a lecture theatre that is generally used for one-way communication from those on stage to those seated in the comfortably lit and air-conditioned room, there was relatively little rousing and movement compared to similar events that take place in open public spaces such as Chater Garden or Chater Road in Central. On the contrary, in Central, whenever there is a speech, the first line of the audience will usually stand in silence holding up the banners as if they are posing for some unseen yet present photographers - for a perfect picture for the media - whilst the rest of the audience will be whispering subtly in private, jostling and moving among themselves, saying hellos with hugs to people who have just arrived at the scene or preparing for the events that are lined up in the programme. The distinction between on-stage and off-stage is often porous (see chapter four) with audiences quite readily integrated into the stage from all sides.

In the lecture theatre, it was quiet during the speeches – private exchanges might have been blocked by the rows of chairs mounted to the floors and the audiences forced to sit neatly in them, evenly spaced out. Banners were hung on the wall so as to be seen by the audience – no active participation was required. When the floor was open to the audience for questions, given the power of the centrality of the stage, few but the very experienced

leaders of NGOs and the invited guests who were used to the setting spoke up. It was a comfortable setting, but not like the lively one that I had frequently seen in the open public spaces in Central. The passivity that was in-built into the space of this event differed starkly from the enthused ambience of Central that I usually observed.

In the comfort of the air-conditioned room these migrant domestic workers could easily pass as university students attending lectures. The rows of chairs created a distance between the audience and the speakers. Sitting among the rows of chairs, the audience's attention was drawn towards the rostrum in the centre and it mattered little who was sitting next to you. With everyone facing the front, one could hardly identify anyone in particular. Face recognition became difficult – even if you did recognize someone, the chairs prevented you from moving easily to say a proper hello. The audience became a mere mass. The programme on stage ran as planned but few other spontaneities took place.

The stage in this lecture theatre was designed for a solo speaker to deliver to a mass crowd. It was not a proper stage but a space with a rostrum placed right in the middle of an expanded pedestrian walkway. The performers had to choose either to perform to the right of the rostrum or to the left. The rostrum placed in the middle truncated the space into two and it could hardly be called a stage. It was not a big enough space for a performance. The performers made do with the little space they had. The audience watched whatever little they could see from where they were sitting.

It was only during the performances towards the end of the event that some of the participants started to pour to the front in order to get pictures taken and this brought back vibes of the migrant domestic workers' communities - vibrant, noisy, unruly and full of energy. It was like an eruption of a pent up bottle – of breaking the implicit rules placed on them by the layout and architecture of the room. As people started to gather at the front, those seated had to stand up in order to catch a glimpse of the performance.

Some of them moved in between the rows of chairs and on the way to securing a spot to watch the performance, familiar faces stopped them halfway and they started to chat. Noises and chatter returned together with the music. Simultaneously the lecture theatre was transformed into a living room, a stage and perhaps, Central on Sundays.

The reminder that it was not Central on Sundays came soon enough. Once the performance was over, the participants returned to their own seats (with the exception of a few, like me, who were taking photographs). The organizers announced that the lecture theatre needed to be cleared. The banners were soon taken down from the walls. People started to stream out of the lecture theatre. The noises and chatter softened and groups of migrant domestic workers dispersed into their respective employers' households as night fell.

## **7.2 Claiming Public Spaces**

The contrast of the ambience and activities that took place in the lecture theatre and in that in the open public spaces of Central thus brings us back to the objectives of this research: to explore and understand the importance of public open spaces in their own right and the role of public space in relation to strategies of resistance, social relations, the formation of collective subjectivity and social movement networks.

More fundamentally, as Harvey (2013) suggests, there is always an on-going struggle over the regulation of, and access to, public spaces and the questions of by whom and in whose interest become sources of tension. The tension also gives rise to further questions as to why access to public spaces is important – both from the perspectives of the public spaces that are being claimed or fought over and from the perspectives of the people who make the claim.

Firstly, what is particularly important about certain public spaces that people make claims over them for their purposes? This question in itself

refutes the idea that city (space) is merely a passive site where deeper currents of political struggles are inscribed in the landscape. One of the environmental characteristics that Harvey (2013) suggests is more conducive to protests is centrality. Centrality also proves to be important in the context of the Filipino migrant workers' community in Central. Being the central business district in Hong Kong, Central is well connected to most parts of Hong Kong by public transport – this allows easy and quick access for Filipino migrant workers who might otherwise have difficulty travelling or little incentive to do so. The presence of comprehensive services that are available to the Filipino migrant workers – the Consulate of the Philippines, World Wide Plaza in which many of the shops target Filipino migrant workers as their customers and churches of different dominations within the proximity of Central - draws the Filipino migrant workers to the area. Of course the community itself is important in drawing migrant workers to Central as we have seen in our discussions (see chapters five and six).

Within Central itself, Chater Road - which is closed to vehicular traffic on Sundays and public holidays - is centrally located to serve as the 'centre' of Central. POWER (the Pangasinan Organization for migrants' Welfare, Empowerment and Rights) hangs its banner at the main junction along Chater Road leading to Central MTR station. That particular spot is strategically central and visible and allows it to be available to migrant domestic workers who might have issues and need a helping hand (see chapter six).

It is the centrality of spaces that bring crowds together – togetherness in the sense of being in the same physical space. What transforms merely being in the same physical spaces into encounters and new social relations and 'how such disparate groups may become self-organized' (Harvey, 2013) are some of the questions that this thesis has attempted to answer. Harvey (2013) suggests that to even begin answering the last question of 'how disparate groups may become self-organized', we have to start by understanding the



origin and nature of their cries and demands – from the street. He also argues that to explain the idea of the right to the city, however important Lefebvre’s intellectual legacy might be, it is the happenings in the streets and the social movements that arise out of the streets, that we need to look to for answers. This is what this thesis has attempted to do – to turn to the streets to look at the social movements that take place there in order to shed light on what the right to the city, especially the right to public space, entails and why claiming the right to the public space is important in its own right.

In the context of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, the right to have access to public spaces is crucially important – it is through their making visible of their presence and through their protests to make their plights public that their cries and demands to be recognised as workers, women and human beings start to get traction. It is as a space of representation for marginalised sectors of the society in public spaces that saw the beginning of the alternative possibilities that Harvey (2013) suggests. It is at the same time as a space to be for the migrant domestic workers that marks Central unique. More than simply a place of resistance, it is also a space of sociality that has the depth of history. Different from the spontaneous outpouring of people onto the central squares that we have witnessed in the world lately – in Cairo, Madrid, Athens and Tel Aviv - this thesis has painted a picture of the migrant workers’ movement, the roots of which go back at least thirty years. Unlike the movements we have seen lately in which cyberspace is argued to play an important role in triggering emotions that can be mobilized into mass action (Castells, 2012), this thesis has emphasised the centrality of urban space as the core of the migrant domestic workers’ movement (see chapter five and six). It is the encounters on the streets, the formation of collective subjectivities through the practice of everyday life that underpins and becomes the network of migrant domestic workers’ movements to which we will turn shortly.

Harvey (2013) recognises the fleeting nature of the spontaneous gatherings of crowds in central squares and doubts their far-reaching political implications. He questions the staying power of many of the movements that seem to ‘swim within an ocean of more diffuse oppositional movements that lack overall political coherence’ (Harvey, 2013: 119). What he seems to see in these movements are perhaps ‘failed attempts’ at revolutions that he hopes will overthrow and replace the capitalist system with its associated class structure and state power. His call to the ‘right to the city’ is more of a rhetorical call that serves as a ‘way-station’ rather than one that aims to interact with and influence the existing international human rights regime and what it represents - the established order with states as an essential player in contemporary capitalism. This is where I part with him. Although he recognises the disparate groups of people who are affected by the various ways in which the existing global capitalist system creates inequalities and the precarious living and working conditions for many whom he terms the ‘precariat’, his call for mass action by the 99% to challenge the 1% whom he perceives as the source of inequality overgeneralises the nuanced complexities within the 99% as well as the 1% at the top. If we were to challenge the existing source of power, I argue, it is only by recognising its influence and through analysing the ways in which it can be contained and checked in its own right that systems that can outlast the imaginations of our current generation can be determined.

Looking at how the transnational domestic workers’ movement in Hong Kong frames its struggles within the rubric of universal human rights by claiming the workers’ rights from the states, I echo Mitchell's (2003) argument that although the state is seen by many as the impediment to freedom and a just social life, the state has, through the institutionalisation of rights, come to be the key protector of the weak. The human rights regime and its ideas have evolved since the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 with some of the changes effected through people who use the language of rights in their struggles. As we have discussed throughout the thesis, ‘fighting for one’s rights’ is a belief and a practice that migrant

workers in Hong Kong tirelessly construe and work on to claim rights to which they are entitled in both law and policies and sometimes to negotiate for rights that are aspirational at best but ambivalent at worst (see chapter three). Nevertheless, it is through the social practice of fighting for rights that the boundaries of what human rights encompass in our world today are redrawn and in the case of the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong that some of the battles for the recognition of and claiming their rights are won.

We will never know what is best for the future but we shall endeavour to leave a system that is open enough to adapt through time and it is in this spirit that I argue for the rights to public spaces as spaces for representation and spaces to be jealously guarded and struggled for. This is nothing new perhaps but in the context of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, the right to public spaces has proved to be a weapon of the weak – as strategies of resistance, and as a site in which new social relations and collective subjectivities are formed. Most importantly, this perhaps answers the question of ‘how disparate groups of people may become self-organized’ indirectly – both through their acts in the public spaces of Central, and their appeals to the regime and the ideas of universal human rights as a coherent political framework.

### **7.3 As Strategies of Resistance**

It is in the public space of Central as a space for representation and a space to be that some of the rights that migrant domestic workers fight for are won. It started small. It started when Filipino migrant domestic workers gathered in the public spaces in Central on Sundays and public holidays as a way to be themselves: to speak in one’s own language and to enjoy the Filipino food (Lisa Law, 2001). These social gatherings provide companionship and social bonding that overcomes the loneliness and isolation they experience during the rest of the working week. It also provides a space for them to just be (Mitchell, 2003; see also chapter five).

By occupying the public spaces in Central on Sundays and through the linear and cyclical repetitions of their Sunday lives, these migrant domestic workers create their own social world. They construct and re-enact the Filipino sociality in Central, which has its own rhythms that act to punctuate the everyday repetitive life they have as domestic workers for their employers (see chapter five).

Their being in Central on Sundays can be viewed as a strategy of resistance on different levels. As a way of overcoming their ‘dislocation’ (Guevarra, 2010; also see chapter two), on Sundays, they cease to be domestic workers and become leaders and members of grassroots organisations. They are no longer simply workers in the eyes of their employers, or mothers, sisters or daughters to their families back in the Philippines to whom they need to provide economic support; they are members of the progressive movement and have public roles that many of them never considered before their experiences in Hong Kong.

Ironically, being away from their families frees up their time outside of their employment: they find themselves having the time to participate in activities that are outside their work and families, in what we usually consider ‘public life’ in the ‘third space’ (see chapter four) provided by Central. The third space that is Central in this case is both the setting in which people participate in public life or become public (see chapters four and six) in Oldenburg’s (1989, in Carmona, 2010)) sense and at the same time is constantly open to new possibilities as Soja (1996) advocates in his concept of ‘ThirdSpace’. They ascribe to themselves new public roles – as one of the strategies of resistance to their situation of being third world women who are disadvantaged along multiple axes of gender, ethnicity and nationality.

At the same time, through their Sunday lives of sharing food, practising dance, and having parties, meetings and seminars and occasional protest marches in the public spaces of Central, they create and inscribe their own

social world into this space with its spatial logic (see chapter five). Their temporary yet permanent recurring ‘tambayan’ (home base or hangout place) creates a landscape that is totally different from the space of Central on weekdays when they are not around. They not only carve a place that they call their own, a place that is important for them as a community and as a member of that community, through their every Sunday life, but they also disrupt the dominant narrative of Central as a space of global capital and consumerist spectacle (see chapters four and five).

They also deploy tactics such as bringing along foldable stools and making use of cardboard to overcome the physical discomfort of sitting on roads paved with asphalt. Arranging meals with disposable utensils and unfurling umbrellas as mobile shade are ‘spatial practices’ in which these migrant domestic workers engage to create and change the ways in which public open spaces are designed or imagined by the planners and architects. In the comfort of a well-lit and air-conditioned lecture theatre, no such spatial practices were deployed. In a similar but less luxurious setting of the sheltered ground floor of the HSBC building, in which migrant domestic workers gathered, they carried out passive activities. This seems to indicate that comfort dampens the urge for resistance and breeds passivity. If all migrant workers in Hong Kong were housed in comfortable settings, perhaps they would have less urge and reason to self-organise themselves into fighting for their rights.

Their inhabitation of Central on Sundays is also a resistance to the domination of abstract space as demonstrated in their negotiating and appropriating spaces in Central of various publicness (by this I mean a sliding scale of restriction imposed upon the behaviour of users in a particular space – exclusive rights to property at one end of the scale to the less restricted vehicular roads at the other). The publicness of spaces is influenced by a matrix of property ownership, regimes of space governance and the ambiguous negotiation between users and managers of that particular space. For example City Hall vicinity in Central is managed by

the Leisure and Cultural Services Department with its own sets of rules, whilst Chater Road falls under the jurisdiction of the Lands Department and a different set of rules apply to the use of the space (more details see chapter four and five). Through cracks in the fragmentation of abstract space, the progressive Filipino community has, through their ‘extra-every-Sunday’ activities’ that are akin to festivities and play, unleashed a struggle in which the citizens resist the state and its involvement in the management and domination of space. Central on Sundays has thus become what Lefebvre & Regulier (2004) describe as “a place for walks and encounters, intrigues, diplomacy, deals and negotiations” - it has become a theatre in the process. This illustrates that the domination of abstract space is not absolute – that through the creative appropriation of space through use and inhabitation that are different to the logic of the dominant abstract space, and in the cracks of the fragmentation of abstract space emerge new social relations. In these new social relations, collective subjectivities are formed – again, in the every-Sunday and ‘extra-every-Sunday’ activities in Central.

#### **7.4 As sites of new possibilities – new social relations and subjectivities**

The gathering of Filipino domestic workers in Central on Sundays makes it a good place for them to search for their extended families and connect with people from their villages. Not only does Central on Sundays provide a good place to reconnect existing social relations, but many of the migrant domestic workers who participate in grassroots organisations described their organisations as their ‘family in Hong Kong’ (see chapter five).

These new social relations are formed through the every-Sunday and ‘extra-every-Sunday’ activities that interweave through the rhythms of their lives in Central on Sundays. Progressive groups organise protest marches and cultural performances in Central on Sundays, which attract the attention of those who are not part of them – the audiences might become curious about what these people are doing and some of them, when approached, join these progressive organisations (see chapter five). It is in the publicness of the

spaces in Central that the formation of new social relations is possible. A lecture theatre that shuts itself off from the outside world is hardly a conducive environment for the formation of new social relations.

New social relations are also formed among the members of the organisations when ‘extra-Sunday’ activities require forging a specific kind of temporary social relation among them for the tasks at hand – as in the relief efforts for Typhoon Yolanda in which members of different organisations came together for a collective effort to sort out goods donated while fending off bargain-hunters and other passers-by who seemed less concerned about the typhoon relief effort than about extracting benefit from the donations. A collective subjectivity was forged among those who participated in the process of collective decision-making regarding what to do with the donated goods that were unexpected. It was also a reconfirmation of their membership of the progressive community and differentiated them from others who were not members.

The collective subjectivity is also formed and reinforced through the ‘every-Sunday’ activities in Central. ‘Eating and chatting with them’ (them being other members of the organisation) was cited as providing some of the happiest moments that these migrant domestic workers have in Hong Kong. They are friends and families. They share the ups and downs of their lives in Hong Kong and face the problems of being migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong together: including the sudden termination of their employment contracts, financial demands from their families at home, and the loneliness and isolation they experience being away from their families.

New social relations are also formed when one finds a helping hand with whom one can share these problems, as in the case of the victims of the illegal charging of placement fees (see chapter six). Being in Central makes it easy for those who are willing to help and those who need help to find each other. The strategic location inhabited by some of the grassroots organisations on Sundays in Central proves effective in reaching out to

those who need help by either providing advice on the spot (see chapter six) or referring them to NGOs (such as the Mission for Migrant Workers) . Many of those to whom help was rendered turned out to be some of the most devoted grassroots leaders in the migrant workers' movements (see chapter two.)

The recognition that the 'personal is political' is one of the bases upon which a collective subjectivity is forged within the Filipino progressive community. In Central, they realise that they are not the only ones facing problems. The constant protests against the illegal charging of placement fees, scrupulous recruitment agencies that turn illegal fees into loans, the two-week rule that makes migrant domestic workers reluctant to report any abuse - make them aware that many of the problems they face personally are more than personal. Policies created by the governments of both the sending and the host countries impact them directly. Political awakening often follows painful personal experiences – but it is an awakening nevertheless.

An awakening powered by knowledge gives the migrant domestic workers the tools through which they can examine and reinforce their collective subjectivity. During my fieldwork leaders of grassroots organisations held seminars at which the content of 'Know Your Rights' (see chapters three and six) was discussed and information about how to navigate the bureaucracy of the Hong Kong government to claim what they are entitled to in the Employment Ordinance was shared. The laws and policies of the Hong Kong government frame the migrant domestic workers into a specific category through which the host society interacts with and sees them. It is an imposed identity – and a collective one when they come to see it that way.

It is in the publicness of the open spaces in Central that encounters lead to the formation of new social relations. These encounters can come in different forms – as an audience member of a protest or cultural



performance, as someone who needs help and finds it, or an old-fashioned encounter of bumping into someone one knows. It is also in the publicness of the open spaces in Central that collective subjectivities are formed. Collective subjectivities are forged and reinforced through the everyday and ‘extra-everyday’ activities in Central on Sundays built on the shared social and spatial practices and the notion that the personal is political. These collective subjectivities exist not only in material spaces. Nuanced, multiple and overlapping publics cultivated with the language of rights in the discursive space (see chapter three) merge with the publics in the material space of Central into a new kind of politics that transcends the boundaries of ethnicity and nationality, the kind of politics suggested by Sassen (2001) as the ‘disadvantaged and the marginal acquire presence in a broader political process that escapes the boundaries of the formal polity’, ‘a transnational politics centred in concrete localities’. It is to the new forms of transnational politics that we shall now turn.

### **7.5 As a new form of politics**

The impressive orchestration of support for Erwiana during her extraordinary journey from a victim of abuse to an icon for a campaign that demanded justice for her and fights for the justice of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong (see chapter six) is but one of the many manifestations of the new form of politics that fits Sassen’s (2001) description of a ‘transnational politics centred in concrete localities’. It illustrates the depth and width of the network that is the transnational migrant workers’ movement in Hong Kong. It is also a movement from the ground – literally and metaphorically, a new kind of politics in which ‘the disadvantaged and marginalised acquire their presence in the broader political process’ (Sassen, 2001).

The interwoven and multidimensional networks that supported Erwiana resulted from a painstaking process, which lasted many years, of ‘conscientization, empowerment and mobilization’ by the different social actors: NGOs, grassroots organisations and the members of these

organisations themselves (see chapter six). These networks build on the encounters on the streets of Central (see chapters five and six) and are reinforced and extended through collective construction of their places in their every-Sunday social and spatial practices in Central, in the ‘extra-every-Sunday’ activities such as the protest marches organised annually on International Migrants’ Day (see chapter four) and One Billion Rising Campaign (see chapter three). Manifestations of the transnational collective are shown in instances such as the gesture of two Indonesian women showing up in Central bringing a cheque for the relief efforts for typhoon Yolanda or the mobilisation of migrant workers who took to the streets for Erwiana’s case.

New social relations are formed through encounters on the street and the solidarity and networks of these new social relations are manifested in the streets and well beyond the material space. Many of those who were part of the ‘Justice for Erwiana and Migrant Domestic Workers’ (J4EMDW) committee, which orchestrated support for Erwiana, initiated a dialogue with the legislators in Hong Kong and managed to get support from them for reviewing the existing policy of the two-week rule. We do not yet know if any changes will come out of this but it is in itself a demonstration of the rhizomisation of the transnational migrants’ movement in Hong Kong, which has grown in dimensions and direction.

These networks of transnational migrant workers are made up of the nuanced, multiple and overlapping publics cultivated through the language of rights (see chapter three). The language of rights serves not only to educate but also to empower and mobilise the migrant workers in Hong Kong. Through the legitimacy and the influence of international laws of human rights, the Hong Kong government’s policies are critiqued within its framework. It also provides the basis for other branches of the government – the judiciary and the legislative, and the International Non-governmental organisations (INGO) such as Amnesty International and the United Nations - to hopefully exert influence. Through the language of rights

deployed in the transnational migrant workers' movement, by claiming rights as workers in Hong Kong as enshrined in the Employment Ordinance, as women under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1979, and as simply human under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which the Hong Kong is a signatory, a new kind of politics is created that is framed in the coherent language of rights within the legitimacy of states and international laws. It unites the people and brings the negotiators to the table. It is through the social practice of human rights such as the case of the transnational migrant workers' movement in Hong Kong that the boundaries of what human rights are can be pushed and negotiated. It also forces the states, which have come to bear all of the ideals and responsibilities and improvements in behaviour that underpin the essence of human rights standard setting (Niezen, 2010), to materialise the policies and laws of 'protection' and 'justice' in practice, not just in law and theory.

On top of the rights that these activists are already fighting for, the transnational migrant workers' movement in Hong Kong provides the basis for arguing for the right to public space as a space of representation as a crucial right to be protected, if not advanced. It is only through public spaces as spaces of representation and to be that marginalised and disadvantaged sectors of the society make their problems visible and the encounters on the streets form the basis of a new kind of social relations and politics. It is through a different kind of image and imagining of the city (different from the dominant space of abstraction, see chapters four and five) and through the claiming of public space (by use and inhabitation, see chapter five) that alternative narratives begin – of who one claims to be, of the ways in which spaces can be used and inhabited and of a new kind of politics that centres on the social practice of human rights (see chapter six).

## **7.6 Claiming the right to public space as the first step towards claiming the right to the city**

I have so far in my thesis established the reasons why claiming public space is important in its own right and the possibilities and potentialities of having access to public spaces in the formation of new social relations and a new form of politics, which is crucially important for the marginalised and disadvantaged sections of society. In the following section, I attempt to extrapolate my argument regarding both how this thesis informs the concept of the right to the city and suggestions for possible future research.

Sundays in Central have shown us what ‘alternatives’ can look like – that there is no need for the spaces of global capital to be destroyed or the architecture of consumer spectacles to be razed to the ground as long as these spaces are also open for others to enjoy. The exclusive right to property can be counter-balanced with rights of inhabitation, rights to be, and rights to have access to public spaces as spaces of representation and to be – effectively freedom of assembly and demonstration, which is enshrined in the mini constitution of Hong Kong. It is the alternative ways of appropriating and inhabiting public spaces by the Filipino migrant domestic workers in Central on Sundays and the images and imaginings of the possibilities and potentialities of public spaces generated as a result of their activities that I argue will further the conceptualisation of a right to the city in more specific terms.

Lefebvre’s concept of a right to the city builds on his assertion of the importance of space (particularly the city centre, which enjoys advantages such as centrality and access to resources), which renders the continuous struggle over urbanised space between those who seek to control urban spaces with homogenisation, fragmentation and the emphasis on exchange value (characteristic of the dominant abstract space) by the state, the market and the bureaucracy on the one hand and those who are disadvantaged and fighting to resist and take greater control over how space is socially produced on the other (Soja, 2010).

For Lefebvre, the struggle over the right to the city is the struggle for a fairer and more equitable distribution of urban resources to compensate for the injustices and inequalities brought about by uneven geographical development, for control over the processes of how urban spaces are produced and for the ideas, images and imaginations of the kind of cities we want to have. The Filipino migrant domestic workers, in their ways of appropriating and inhabiting the public spaces of Central on Sundays, create a lived space that is different from the dominant abstract space and presents a specific example of what alternative possibilities are like. Based on the ideas, images and imagining they help create through their spatial practices, potentialities for a different kind of understanding of what public space could and should be are coming into more specific forms.

Firstly, let us consider the potentiality of the expanding notion of space by situating space in time. Rhythms of the city create different needs in spaces at different times of the day and on different days of the week. Corporate spaces that are occupied during the working days of the week become vacant and deserted on non-working days. Public open spaces or major vehicular roads may become less crucial for the flows of people and goods at specific times of the day and on certain days of the week, when they could be turned into spaces for alternative uses. The closure that is the characteristic of the exclusive right to property could be opened up if spaces were also timed. The concept of time-shares for holiday resorts and high-end residential apartments in certain areas of London could be extended to urban open spaces for the public. Making spaces available to the public through the idea of timed-space is one of the potential contributions to the idea of the right to the city.

Secondly, we need to recognise the importance of lived space for users and inhabitants. The recognition of the rights of users and inhabitants of a particular space opens up the possibilities and potentialities of their involvement and participation in the process of space production. This involvement might not lead to fairer and more equitable distribution of

urban resources, as advocated by Lefebvre, but it could be the beginning of ending the exclusive rights over property that are the basis of domination as we know it today. This also means that the rights to assembly and demonstration as enshrined by law should be protected in practice such that the governance of urban spaces should not compromise the right of people to assemble meaningfully. In other words, the public should have the right to public space as a space of representation and a space to be, and should not be excluded on the basis of exclusive rights over property. Architects and planners need to consider the impacts of the design and management of public spaces on the practice of the right to public space: how can they design and manage public spaces that are always open to new possibilities and new ways of using and inhabiting them?

Thirdly, by recognising the rights of users and inhabitants based on their actual use and inhabitation would open up the possibility and potentiality of the reconceptualisation of citizenship - that the place of residence defines individual rights and responsibilities rather than rights and obligations determined by the nation-state (Soja, 2010). This reconceptualisation of citizenship asks us to consider how we relate to the world we live in today – especially in the context of people who cross borders to work and live - and the question of who should have claims to the right to the city – those who claim citizenship of a particular nation-state as a birth right or those who move to work and live in a particular place. And why? While the original idea of citizenship arose in the city-state of Athens for (a limited number of) citizens to decide how best to maintain equitable access to urban resources, what constitutes citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the context of globalisation? If one's life is impacted by how urban resources are distributed and the production of spaces in the cities, then why should one not have a say in the ways in which these decisions are made? Are we able to disentangle citizenship from the nation-state and re-embed citizenship in cities?

Hong Kong provides us with a unique context. Its self-proclaimed brand as 'Asia's World City' and as a space of exception (a space of neoliberal exception and a state of political exception (Ong, 2006), see chapter four) makes it possible for the migrant domestic workers to take to the streets to voice their concerns as they enjoy freedom of assembly and demonstration as residents of the city; yet at the same time they are denied the benefits and rights of citizenship. The ambiguities in the categorisation of citizenship and residency are sources of contestation and claims made by different social actors. If we follow Ong's (2006) argument, Hong Kong's status as a space of exception provides a framework that allows experimentation with different degrees of civil rights that do not threaten the economic, national and collective security and in the face of Hong Kong's struggle to define its independence and distinction from China (Constable, 2015), the re-examination of what constitutes 'citizenship' in a city that aspires to be a world city is a task worth undertaking. It is also a beginning of reflecting on what kind of city and society Hong Kong aspires to be. How can Hong Kong continue to be a world city while the Chinese government encroaches on Hong Kong's autonomy? All these questions have no easy answers and are projects that would continue for decades to come. I argue, echoing Constable (2015), firstly to reflect on the underlying problems of an ethics of privileges prevailing in Hong Kong that have failed to reform on policies and laws governing the migrant domestic workers despite the constant protests, critiques in and outside of the administration. An ethics of equality will be necessary to bring about the necessary reforms would benefit Hong Kong in multiple ways.

I also argue for Hong Kong to remain radically open like what it has been in the past to peoples who might need refuge in different ways and recognize the benefits diversity of cultures brings to its shore. Hong Kong needs to guard the commitment to the upholding of individual rights, including but not limited to the rights to assemble and be in public spaces, enshrined in its constitution despite the encroaching Chinese authoritarian regime. Hong Kong has become what it is today because of its role as a refuge and escape

route for many who have fled the political turmoil of nineteenth and twentieth century China. Its open door has brought to its shore a diverse population throughout its modern history (please refer to chapter one). Its liberal governance, which is underpinned by the principle of ‘laissez-faire neoliberalism’ (please refer to chapter four) and its rule of law, allows a degree of civil rights and freedom against the backdrop of an authoritarian China – although a source of tension with the mainland is what distinguishes Hong Kong from China and the bedrock of what it has become. Its experimentation in balancing being the poster child of the free market and its tolerance of civil rights agitation also generate new possibilities and potentialities of new politics that are the hopes of marginalised and disadvantaged people. It needs to recognise that by claiming that it is the ‘world city’, it needs to subscribe to universal human rights not only in law but also in practice – and not only in the state but in the society as well. If not being officially part of China throughout much of its modern history - since 1841 - is what has made the world city what it is today, then it needs to remain radically open and liberal so that it will continue to thrive as a world city.

## **7.7 Challenges and Limitations**

This thesis has attempted to capture the lives of migrant domestic workers on their days off in the public spaces of Central and this in itself has proved challenging given the constraints of time and resources for this research.

Firstly, as briefly mentioned in chapter five, there are about three hundred thousand migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and about half of them are from the Philippines. Whilst many of them congregate in Central on Sundays, they also gather in other public spaces and private spaces to which they have access– churches, public parks, shopping malls, and private boarding houses, if their employers provide one for them. I recognise that there are different ways in which migrant domestic workers spend their time outside of their employment and the way they do so will inevitably bring about different social relations. I chose Central, where a great number of



them congregate and gather on Sundays, which serves as a public space for them for different purposes given its centrality and its symbolic importance, but that does not imply that gatherings and congregations in other spaces (private or public) are less important in the lives of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Even within Central itself, there are groups of Filipino migrant domestic workers with very different ideas about the situations they face and the politics to which they subscribe. I recognised the micro-politics among different groups briefly in chapter five but was unable to explore this further given that I only had Sundays to investigate the phenomenon in Central. Forming a different social network outside of the progressive migrant community would lessen my understanding of the progressive migrant community itself which in itself has a multitude of differences along the axes of regions, provinces, issues of concern which I have but only mentioned briefly.

The phenomena of Central on Sundays is fluid in itself and thus it has proven difficult for me to clearly demarcate the different organisations within the progressive migrant community itself – as people flow in and out of different events on different Sundays and individuals can bear memberships of multiple organisations. I thus see them as a collective whose boundaries shift as the issues of concern change from week to week (see chapter three) and thus different numbers of organisations and sizes of crowds are drawn on a weekly basis.

There were also more fundamental challenges; when the weather was hostile to outdoor activities, I did not manage to find out where they hang out at that time. I drifted in and out of different organisations depending on the kind of activities they had planned and also on the invitations I received. People also come and go – some of them had to leave when family circumstances changed or when their employers' circumstances changed.

Given the fluidity of the phenomena of Central on Sundays, I managed to capture the networks that form and converge in the space and how the networks expand into cyberspace and fuse with the discursive space of human rights that sustains the practice of hope by the progressive migrant workers' community. The networks also brought together grassroots organisations of different nationalities into the lecture theatre in which the Third Asian Migrants' Summit was held (see beginning of this chapter), which expanded beyond the Filipinos to Indonesians, Thais and Sri Lankans. It would be worth exploring in more detail how the collaborations among migrant domestic workers transcend ethnicities and nationalities and how these networks (might) impact social relations back in their own countries. This might also provide the basis to ask the question of why migrant workers' movements are not seen in certain contexts as in the UK and what might be hindering this.

## **7.8 Conclusion**

The on-going struggles and questions about how productions of and access to public spaces are perhaps best answered by considering what the public spaces are capable of, for whom they are important and how the materiality of public spaces enables or constrains social relations.

This thesis has discussed this in the context of Filipino migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and how they carve an alternative space in Central on their days off. This alternative space speaks of not merely a social space but also a material built environment around which the migrants build their new subjectivities and constitute a transnational movement construed through the assertion of their rights as workers, women and human beings under the rubric of universal human rights.

I first discussed the spatial practices of the community to adapt to changes in the physical landscape and revealed the nuanced social relationships and contestation of spaces amongst members of the community. The linear and cyclical repetitions of their Sunday life activities punctuate the everyday

repetitive life they have as domestic workers and create and inscribe patterns of usage of space that disrupt the dominant corporate space of Central, which has come to represent faceless capitalism and consumers of spectacles.

Through encounters with the representatives of the authorities in protest marches and everyday interactions, I examined the tensions between the dominant abstract space and the marginalised lived space and argued that the negotiations and creative alternative ways of appropriating spaces by the Filipinos illustrate that the domination of abstract space is not absolute. Alternative social relations emerge in the cracks of the abstract space and these alternatives are the beginning of something hopeful –the transnational migrant domestic workers’ movement.

Lastly, I argued that the transnational migrants’ movement in Hong Kong is underpinned by ‘practising hope’ – in one’s encounter with injustice; in one’s political awakening that the personal is political, and in the identification of oneself as part of a collective and a community. The basis of this is all underpinned by the Sunday gatherings they have in Central, which substantiate the claim of the ‘right to the city’.

With the evidence established in the thesis, I extrapolated how ‘claiming public spaces’ can conceptualise the ‘right to the city’ in specific terms: by rethinking space as time-spaced, by recognising the rights of users and inhabitants as contrary to the exclusive right to property and by reconceptualising the concept of citizenship, especially in the context of globalisation where many people move to work and live. This also paves the ways to reconsider what Hong Kong aspires to be - of how it could continue to thrive as a world city and that alternative ways of appropriating public spaces are celebrated in its spectacular urban landscape. It is in the different images and imagining of the public spaces of Central that I encountered Dorothy at the street corner of Chater Road, which made this thesis possible. The encounter would not have happened if the migrant

workers had all been confined behind the doors of a comfortable lecture theatre. Perhaps this is what it is all about – bringing different people together in a space so that we become comfortable in each other's company.

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