



TRANSLATION OF MINGPAO NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

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Sunday Workshop: Return it, the dignity of a human being.

Her telephone rings on the way from Tai Kok Tsui to Nam Cheong. Taking out her navy blue, old fashioned mobile phone, a familiar voice from the past rings out. “Where do I get off? Hung Shui Kiu? All right.” Of the lines of the Light Rail, West Rail, Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories, in areas where even locals may never have stepped foot in, she knows them like the back of her hand. From the hustle bustle of old Kowloon to quiet rural Yuen Long, the districts are all the same to her mind, covered in tightly knit and criss-crossing paths, each tracing to the stories of the pregnant migrant mothers of Hong Kong. Of that MTR map of a Hong Kong simplified into a network of dots and lines, in her map, behind each and every station, each and every dot, hides a forgotten face. While enjoying the mellow years of her life, the story between an anthropologist and Hong Kong also unfolds. “I’m very grateful, that your society has allowed me to come to where I am,” smiles Nicole Constable, anthropologist at America’s Pittsburg University, with that sense of respect that a researcher holds for the place that has been the subject of one’s research.

Migration is not an unfamiliar story to HongKongers. After all, we are not strangers to immigration. Yet, the stories of migration that happen within this very city, how many inhabitants know of them? Since the 1990s, Constable, who has been interested in the situation of and relations between gender, migration, and human rights for several years, has started research projects on Hong Kong foreign domestic workers. Using real life individuals as her point of departure, she draws out the pains and pleasures of life as a migrant in Hong Kong. Her latest book, *Born out of Place: Migrant Mothers and the Politics of International Labour*, continues her narrative of the stories of FDWs, and their born out of place children. From the 1980s, Hong Kong began to import a large number of workers from South Asian countries, reaching approximately 300,000 FDWs in 2012, 150,000 of which comprise the majority who are from Indonesia, followed by the Philippines, Thailand, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. According to the NGO PathFinders, among these workers the number of pregnant migrant workers and the children is up to 6000. Under the current law, FDWs have the right to have a child in Hong Kong and to protection under labour laws, but the babies born in Hong Kong do not have the right of abode. Contrary to the image of “Foreign children fighting for the resources of Hong Kong”, Constable illustrates in her book that these children are often vulnerable in multiple dimensions, in their struggle against all sorts of pressure, slander, and uncertainty.

What to do when you have a baby out-of-wedlock?

These FDW mothers mainly come from Indonesia, have had relatively little education, and bring with them to Hong Kong an array of religious beliefs and traditional attitudes regarding marriage. Faced with young migrant men of similar backgrounds, they fall in love. "When they are going out, they feel as if they are already married to the man. In all sincerity and seriousness, they begin a relationship, but as the man is often a political asylum seeker, or there is another girlfriend, this relationship is brought to an end." A relationship that cannot be stable, brings not only mental and physical fatigue, but also a child of accident. For an unmarried pregnant woman, there are manifold questions which face her: Should she abort the child? Should she put it up for adoption, or take it to her home country? How will she raise the child? For them, given the current government policy regime, and economic and social requirements, the knowledge and the power to solve these problems are insufficient.

It is like a life trapped between a gap. Albeit that it would be illegal, a fair number of employers upon knowing that their FDW is pregnant or has a boyfriend, will fire them. A fair number of these mothers who were let off are forced to remain in Hong Kong, overstaying their visa, along with their child, with nowhere to turn to. For FDW mothers, returning to their home country is not an ideal solution, but a nightmare that is fed by their fear and imagination. Constable points out that, in their home countries, gender, family, and attitudes towards sex are extremely conservative. Women who give birth outside of wedlock are no different, in the eyes of society, from prostitutes. Constable once went to Indonesia to visit some FDWs who had returned to their country, and discovered that they had suffered the criticism and reprimand of the entire family and the entire social community. A person's self-confidence and hope have been destroyed by these experiences: "A woman's younger sister was about to go abroad to work, and I asked her for her opinion of her younger sister. She looked at me, as if I were crazy, and said, 'I can't give any opinion on her, because I made this mistake, so I am undeserving of having an opinion of her.' Once you've made a mistake, your opinion will lose its value." Not only mothers, but the children also are affected. For example, they might have stones thrown at them, or be called names. Some will be left to stay at a distant relative's, unable to become a part of the family.

The only way to get rid of the stigma is to work as a FDW again so that they can support the family. You send money home, you are a good mother and a good daughter. If you become a single mother, this is your way to restore the reputation. Another way to "atone for their shame" is to get married with a man, but still, they will need to work overseas.

Migrant workers are humans, not labour

Despite that these mothers experience a lot of pressure, they demonstrate good qualities of human nature in human interaction, which is moving. "Some mothers really care about their children, and hope that they can have a better life. They would study together with the children, play together, and work very hard so that their children can have the best possible life in HK." Yet, in this transient period of their lives, no matter how much they treasure their children, that sense of unease and suspicion towards their future never goes away. Yet, in the most painful times, humans can still demonstrate the most beautiful image. Constable says: "the beauty of migration is that, on the one hand it brings different challenges and problems, on the other hand it develops different opportunities and solutions. If you are a FDW in Hong Kong, you can learn a new way to teach your child, your perception of what constitutes

hygiene can change, how to wear clothes, how to wash clothes, which poster is suitable for your children. You learn new ways of teaching your child.”

Equal treatment, is the responsibility of society and employers.

Some people think that, as long as FDWs “stay in their place”, they wouldn’t need to face these hardships. Thus, for several HKers, the helper has an important place in shouldering the household duties. Taking care of the children and elderly, cleaning and cooking as the standard image of a FDW is sufficient to represent her entire person. But FDWs are not just domestic helpers. They too have desires and emotions, they have their own adventures, and they build intimate relationships. Constable thinks that, for unmarried women in their 20s, dating is the most natural thing. “People should respect their needs as a human being, whether they are the needs for friends, sexual, personal or individual. You wouldn’t take home a person in their 20s and expect them to devote their entire life to work!” Labour workers have always been human beings and not machines. “In the process, treating them equally is the responsibility of society and of employers. She should not be treated as a child, trapped in the household, forbidden from dating, she is not a child, she is an adult. She needs to take responsibility for her own wrongs, but she should be given the power she deserves as an adult, that is, time, freedom, a fair wage, outside accommodation, if both parties agree.” Many problems relating to the employment of FDWs actually originate from people’s dehumanizing perception of FDWs, wiping out what makes them special as human beings. “A more perfect human rights development is beneficial for the development of the economy. The two should not be separate. If human rights, labour and the mother’s rights are respected, Hong Kong’s economy would also benefit.”

Competition among grassroots originates in societal unfairness.

In recent years, owing to the tensions between the mainland and HK, barriers and enmity between different nationalities have become more prominent. Last year, in the debate over right of abode for FDWs, “competition over resources” was a debate topic that incited a fair degree of fear and anger among HK people. Constable thinks that, in reality, even more than the desire to relocate their family to HK, FDWs desire a fair wage, and that the current differential treatment is naturally unfair and exploitative of FDWs, but it is also unfair to local workers. “FDWs come from poor countries, and so even though their wage is very low, they are still happy to work”. “The problem is that the employers come to the opinion that their low wages justify and rationalize their behavior. But this is unfair, especially for local workers. If we gave an equal wage to FDWs, then more people would employ local workers.” In her opinion, equal treatment of FDWs can also help local workers. “If FDWs were to decrease, maybe more local workers would be willing to do domestic work at a fair wage. If Hong Kong can reduce its dependence on FDWs, then on the whole HK society would benefit.”

“Injection of labour arises from the fundamental financial inequality. In HK, Taiwan and Singapore, the rich benefit off the hard work of the poor.” The reality is that employing FDWs is no longer a privilege for the middle class. To pay for the rising costs of maintaining the family, most grassroots class families have both parents working, and so they employ a FDW in order to reduce the household burden. Yet, because the employer has financial difficulties, for FDWs in grassroots class families, part of their salary

is lower than the statutory wage. Cross-border class exploitation, pressure on grassroots, enmity and attacks among the weak, where is the origin?

The injection of foreign labour lets the government off the hook

Constable stresses that the pressure that different classes and nationalities face are all tied to a larger systemic problem: "Hong Kong working hours are too long. For an adult, when working long hours, they have no time to cook, shop, take care of children and elders." Several workers in order to support their family place all their labour into the market, sacrificing the basic family communication, and they have no energy or time to care for their family members. "Compared with injecting foreign labour, the provision of free education and elderly services is much more costly. This is originally the responsibility of the government, but injecting foreign labour allows the government off the hook. The government makes the family responsible for several of the problems, but does not see it as its own responsibility, it is more akin to a sort of neo-liberalist solution."

Seeing the lower classes attack each other because of a lack of resources, instead of resisting the powerful, privileged, rich, and the unfair system, "it is indeed sad," says Constable. "HK's lower class and third world countries' impoverished people have several points in common and common interests, and if both parties see the other side as competitors, it is not beneficial for either side. If they can recognize that they are facing the same problems, it would bring more hope for the improvement of the current situation. Disputes among those situated at the lower end of the economy are definitely not the way to solve inequality."

Local value: respect diversity, treat others kindly.

As an anthropologist, Constable is keenly aware of the wrongs that society's cultural identity, and how this identity affects its research and viewpoints, can result in. As a member of the "special class of white people" she is also always self-critical: have her own thoughts been limited by white western perspectives, missing out on the perspectives of other local and different perspectives? She stresses: "I am not judging, but understanding, a problem that is not limited to HK." The problem of foreign migrant workers, is not only a Hong Kong phenomenon; it is also common among the countries of the world, including several developed countries like England, America etc. Different places' experiences are worth referring to so as to create a system more respectful of life values. "I think that Hong Kong, as an international Asian city, is in a good position to serve as an example for other countries. In Hong Kong, several laws and regulations are very perfect, but the problem is how to ensure their implementation and improvement. Hong Kong should continue to lead. Diversity, is what Hong Kong as an international Asian city truly needs. She must be more inclusive of differences, and show care and support for the weak."

Love at first sight, her home of thirty years

For more than thirty years, her research has not left Hong Kong. "When I first came here, I fell in love." That was in 1979, when Constable studied Chinese History as an undergraduate. At university she crossed the ocean to come to Chinese University of Hong Kong's Chung Chi College to research for 1

year. In speaking of the past, her eyes smile into a line, "Hong Kong from then has become my second home." Her doctorate thesis researched the identity and culture of the Hakka people in Hong Kong's New Territories. Since the 1990s she came again to Hong Kong to do research on FDWs, concerning people who had a similar status as her in Hong Kong, that of a "foreigner". "Hong Kong is an unbelievably special place. She is not only an ex-colony of England, and not only a part of China, she has the rare opportunity, to pick the best parts from her history and create her own unique culture." Of Hong Kong's past changes, Constable has kept a close watch, "the largest change and challenge for Hong Kong come from the relations between Hong Kong and the mainland. In the future, just how exactly can Hong Kong be autonomous? Hong Kong's choices, are they dangerously based on narrow and simple economic development motivations, or will Hong Kong be able to consider broader societal welfare and justice principles to make decisions?"

Constable says, the stories that she presents, comes from her own very personal relationship and experience with these FDW mothers. "People can disagree on more general analytical models, but they see that what I'm talking about is the truth. Are we to see them, or to pretend not to see them? To see them as part of a larger problem, or to see it as their problem?" These are not the choices that she makes as a researcher, but the choices as a Hong Konger. "Everyone has a different perspective, but I think that people should agree on this: treat other people kindly, is the most basic and most important. This belief is profoundly embedded in the Chinese Confucian thought and Western humanist thought. To merge these thoughts into one, is to bring happiness to man, and this is my hope."