

# South China Morning Post 南華早報

## Book review: Born Out of Place, by Nicole Constable

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Lifestyle › Books MIGRANT WORKERS

Meredith McBride

### Born Out Of Place: Migrant Mothers and the Politics of International Labour

by Nicole Constable

HKU Press

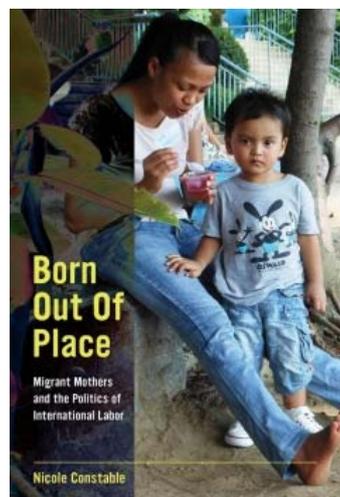
4 stars

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Ara (a pseudonym, as with other interviewees in this book for privacy protection), a domestic migrant worker from Indonesia, recalls a night she went out drinking with a fellow domestic worker in Hong Kong. After a few drinks, she was introduced to an African man. The next thing Ara recalls was waking up alone in her friend's home.

Several months later, Ara discovered she was pregnant, and later gave birth to daughter Angela. She believes she was sold to the man, who drugged and raped her. When her work contract ended, she searched for a new employer, but could not find one who would house a mother and baby. She had not told her conservative Muslim family about the pregnancy, so she overstayed her visa and filed a torture claim to legally remain in Hong Kong.

Dr Nicole Constable, director of Asian Studies at the University of Pittsburgh and an expert in Asian migration, conducted an intimate study of Hong Kong domestic workers - such as Ara - who become pregnant.



[1] Ara was expected to send remittances home to Indonesia and also faced the costs of raising her baby. Rather than pay fees to an agency, she found illegal work in a restaurant that earned her HK\$8,000 a month - more than twice what she had made as a domestic worker.

Constable's research is both relevant and timely. She found that domestic workers were often excluded from social protections that other migrants, including mainland Chinese, enjoy. Stories such as Ara's, Constable says, illustrate "how policies and employment practices at home and abroad unintentionally promote overstaying and illegal work".

Constable weaves the delicate tales of domestic workers and their children with explanations of the policies and social issues that affect them. Because the fathers of these children frequently come from South Asia or Africa, many cannot offer any sort of permanence to their new families.

The children of domestic workers thus find themselves born into a legal purgatory.

To stay in Hong Kong may mean these children forgo formal education while their mothers risk jail time for working illegally. To leave means to break up their family and face bleaker economic opportunities and sometimes worse consequences in home countries. In Indonesia, for example, single mothers are shunned and considered immoral; fatherless children are often denied official paperwork and struggle

to obtain jobs in later life.

Where Constable succeeds is in her goal of humanising these women. Although she is critical of many legal policies, she objectively reports the bad along with the good, and occasionally a surprisingly funny mixture of both: Endri, an Indonesian domestic worker and mother of two children in Hong Kong, became pregnant despite purchasing a costly "Plan B" pill. She insisted the pill was faulty: she had taken it the day before she had sex after reading instructions that said "take within 48 hours of intercourse".

While the stories are telling and detailed, the book asks more questions than it offers answers. It is clear that within a system unable to cope with pregnant migrant workers, they - and their children - fall through the cracks.

"Ideal workers are devoted to their employer's households. They are always available, obedient, and nonassertive; their sexuality is, ideally, nonexistent," Constable writes. The reality she illustrates is that no policy can truly eliminate the desire for sex, relationships, or family.

Book launch, Thu, 6pm-7pm, Kelly & Walsh, Shop 204, Pacific Place, Admiralty. Inquiries: 3917 7801 or e-mail [upweb@hku.hk](mailto:upweb@hku.hk) [2]

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