Migrant Intimacies in the "Land of Opportunity"

Navigating Race, Class, and Status in Hong Kong's Entertainment District

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Abstract: Since the 1970s, Southeast Asia women have turned to outward labour migration to Hong Kong to enhance their economic livelihoods. However, while their overseas work afforded the possibility of improved material conditions back home, migrants face an array of ethnic, classed, and gendered subjugations during their temporary placements abroad. Hopeful for futures beyond domestic labour, some migrant workers engage in intimate exchanges with Euro-American expatriate men in Hong Kong's entertainment district in Wanchai. Indeed, these relations do not entirely offset their ethnic and classed minoritization. But, becoming short-term partners, long-term girlfriends, or eventual wives provide alternative pathways for navigating their disenfranchisement as racialized labourers relegated to the city's spatial and legal peripheries. Comparably, their expatriate male partners also conveyed their own subjective experiences of dislocation and suffering due to employment redundancy, aging, and past separations. Ethnographic research examining the intimacies forged between these two groups of foreigners in Hong Kong—Southeast Asian migrants seeking better futures, and Euro-American men healing from past employment and emotional traumas—reveal opportunities for expanded aspirational capacities, broadened orientations to the future, and alternative gendered subjectivities. This article explores how the intimacies fostered in Wanchai carve out opportunity to re-envision what might be affectively and materially possible in their futures beyond domestic labour, aging alone, and prolonged economic precarity.

Keywords: gendered labour migration; intimate labour; aspiration; Southeast Asia; sex work; Hong Kong; Indonesia; Philippines; futures

Résumé : Depuis les années 1970, les femmes d'Asie du Sud-Est se sont tournées vers l'immigration de la main-d'œuvre à Hong Kong pour améliorer leurs moyens de subsistance. Toutefois, si leur travail à l'étranger leur offre la possibilité d'améliorer leurs conditions matérielles dans leur pays d'origine, les migrantes sont confrontées à toute une série d'assujettissements ethniques, de classe et de genre au cours de leurs séjours temporaires à l'étranger. Dans l'espoir d'un avenir autre que le travail domestique, certaines travailleuses migrantes s'engagent dans des relations intimes avec des expatriés euro-américains dans le quartier animé de Wanchai, à Hong Kong. En effet, ces relations ne compensent pas entièrement ni leur minorisation ethnique et ni leur minorisation de classe. Mais le fait de devenir des partenaires à court terme, des petites amies à long terme, ou d'éventuelles épouses, leur offre d'autres alternatives pour surmonter leur exclusion en tant que travailleuses racialisées reléguées aux périphéries spatiales et juridiques de la ville. De même, leurs partenaires masculins expatriés ont également fait part de leurs propres expériences subjectives de déracinement et de souffrances causées par des licenciements, le vieillissement et des séparations antérieures. Cette recherche ethnographique qui examine les relations intimes forgées entre ces deux groupes d'étrangers à Hong Kong – les femmes migrantes d'Asie du Sud-Est à la recherche d'un avenir meilleur et les hommes euro-américains guérissant de traumatismes professionnels et émotionnels passés – révèle des possibilités d'accroître les capacités d'aspiration, d'élargir les orientations vers l'avenir et de créer des subjectivités différentes en fonction du genre. Cet article explore la manière dont les relations intimes entretenues à Wanchai permettent de repenser ce qui pourrait être affectivement et matériellement possible dans leur avenir, au-delà du travail domestique, du vieillissement en solitaire et de la précarité économique prolongée.

Mots clés : migration genrée de la main d'œuvre ; travail intime ; aspiration ; Asie du Sud-Est ; travailleuses du sexe ; Hong Kong ; Indonésie ; Philippines ; avenirs

Introduction

In recent decades, Southeast Asian migrant domestic workers (MDW) have entered Hong Kong seeking to improve their livelihoods back home. Upon their entry into Hong Kong, MDWs face intersecting forms of discrimination along axes of racial, gendered, national, classed, and sexual differences. In search of reprieve from unregulated hours of domestic and care labour, some MDWs choose to visit Hong Kong's entertainment district of Wanchai to dance, drink, and meet Western partners. Hong Kong's distinct global positioning between two empires offers valuable insight into processes of transnational labour

migration in the global political economy and the intersubjective relationships that arise therein. While Wanchai has had a reputation for its vice and licentiousness, the intimacy shared between Southeast Asian MDWs and white, Western expatriate men spans a spectrum of relationships going beyond a sole sexual economic exchange. MDWs may act as a short-term dance partner on a Sunday afternoon, become a part-time girlfriend for several months or years, or choose to eventually marry their male expatriate partners.

These relationships provide MDWs, as one of Hong Kong's most subjugated class of ethnic minorities, new ways to navigate their positioning within the city. I argue that intimacy serves as a pathway or inflection point to reconfigure but not entirely upend MDWs' social and class positioning relative to the rest of Hong Kong society. While they may occupy a servile underclass in the eyes of local Hong Kong citizens, within the entertainment district, MDWs are able to envision greater possibilities. Departing from what Sherry Ortner (2016) terms as "dark anthropology" and pausing at the anthropological impulse to romanticize resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990) against totalizing power and domination, this paper seeks to parse out opportunity and aspirational capacity (Appadurai 2013) amidst inevitable precarity and sustained marginality. Following Anna Tsing's (2015) generous reading of our current neoliberal moment and the non-teleological possibilities of precarity, I argue that we cannot reduce migrant women to mere static sociological categories. Rather, we must bear in mind the potential incommensurability of their structural positioning and subjective experiences.

In what follows, I will discuss my ethnographic research methods in Hong Kong's entertainment district of Wanchai before presenting a brief overview of the literature on intimate labour migration. I then offer vignettes describing three stages of the intimate dynamics shared between Southeast Asian MDWs and their Euro-American partners: 1) performances of sexual and racial scripts during short-term exchanges, 2) the negotiation of gendered power dynamics during coupledom, and 3) the cultivation of future-oriented aspirational capacity upon marriage. My goal is to examine how the *process* of forging intimacies amidst mutual feelings of dislocation—migrant workers seeking to escape poverty and expatriate men's healing from past emotional and employment traumas—makes possible new forms of self-, future-, and home-making. I aim to show how these relations of intimacy-exchange and shared intimacy provide opportunities to tacitly refuse structural and representational constraints across class and ethnicity—for Southeast Asian MDWs relegated to

Hong Kong's ethnically minoritized labour class and their western partners whose subjective experiences are misaligned with the privileges attributed to white, Western masculinity. Just as the experiences of Southeast Asian foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong cannot be collapsed into their gendered, classed, and structural positionings within simple narratives of migrant victimhood and ethnic subjugation, we also cannot assume static power and privilege for their Western male partners.

Methodology

This article draws on ethnographic research in Hong Kong between 2014 and 2022, where I conducted interviews and participant observation with Indonesian and Filipina MDWs as well as their intimate Western partners. From 2014 to 2018, I regularly visited British pubs, discos and "girlie bars" in Wanchai's drinking district to understand the dynamics within migrant-expatriate couples. I gained access to informants by snowballing—starting with bartenders who introduced me to bar regulars at two prominent British pubs. Bar regulars (usually older expatriates who have resided in Hong Kong for 10 to 20 years) were more than happy to introduce me to their friend groups and give me walking tours of the bar district. These regulars frequently distinguished themselves from newcomers, short-term tourists, and the US navy—whom they claim lack respect for the women. I also befriended Nepalese security guards, Chinese *mamasans*, and the girlfriends of the bar regulars. To observe the weekday nighttime economy, I remained in the bar district from late afternoon until the last train at 11:30 p.m. On weekends, when MDWs had their weekly holiday, I would arrive at the bars earlier to observe their dancing, singing karaoke, and flirting with the male bar patrons.

Bar regulars and bartenders emphasized how my presence disrupted the gendered and racial dynamics at the bars. As explained to me, the Euro-American men have become accustomed to interacting only with 1) MDWs, whose low wages earned their sympathy, or 2) "working girls," who are portrayed as deceitful—though not as cunning as to outsmart the bar regular whose experience in Hong Kong afforded him the know-how when interacting with women in Wanchai. As an Asian/American woman not looking for a partner or money and who, instead, would offer to purchase drinks for other patrons, my presence in the bars challenged the categories of women they were used to. Nightly visits to the British pubs allowed me to cultivate deep friendships with the bar regulars. A fake wedding ring, a university-printed business card, and

a trusted friendship with an experienced bartender helped deflect unwanted attention from the male patrons as I did not participate in the intimate exchanges during my research.

Unable to travel to Hong Kong from 2019 to 2020 due to COVID restrictions, I followed these relationships on social media. From 2021 to 2022, I returned to Hong Kong to research the labour conditions experienced by MDWs from the first phase of my research in Wanchai. I volunteered at Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW), gathered in parks with workers on their holidays, and accompanied them to magistrate courts for cases of employment harassment and underpayment.

Re-envisioning Futures

The literature on transnational intimate labour often focuses on the export of domestic or care labour from the "global south" to wealthier nations (Boris and Parrenas 2010; Constable 1997, 2009a; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002). Authors have described structural challenges encountered by the worker, such as the financial costs of employment abroad (Chang 2021), insufficient state protection (Dewanto 2020), and institutionalized exploitation within the migratory infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Migrants also face an array of affective challenges. For instance, migrant mothers from Indonesia must decide whether to continue labouring overseas or stay with their children in their sending villages (Allerton 2020). In planning for the future, Ghanaian (Coe 2016) and Egyptian (Chakkour and de Koning 2023) migrants attempt to synchronize their overseas temporality with their families' life courses back home. In Singapore, Amrith (2021) found older MDWs contending with their own aging bodies. For migrants who wish to remain productive while they "still can," overseas labour offers a sense of bodily endurance, continual purpose, and affective possibility.

The other strand of literature on intimate labour involves longstanding debates surrounding sexual economic exchange. While anti-pornography feminists frame transnational sex in anti-human trafficking terms of involuntary coercion (Doezema 1998; Pateman 1999), the proponents of sexual labour emphasize the empowering and lucrative potential of this type of work (Bernstein 2007; Chapkis 1997). Underscoring the affective components of sex work, scholars have also outlined the emotional labour (Frank 2002) and costs (Hoang 2015) expended within these industries.

Recent ethnographic accounts have highlighted the affective *gains* derived from sexual exchange across borders. For instance, Cheng's (2010) ethnographic study invites us to understand the romantic love, hopeful longings and self-making projects that emerged within and alongside relations between Filipina entertainers and US military in South Korea. Likewise, in the Dominican Republic, Padilla elucidates how participation in gay tourist industries may allow local male sex workers to negotiate respectability and reputation alongside new forms of masculinity in response to past family traumas. Comparatively, Hoang's (2015) sociological study of Ho Chi Minh City's sex industry with four groups of male clients revealed the emergence of new subjectivities that 1) challenged ideas of hegemonic masculinity, and 2) allowed for the cultivation of new tastes, consumption patterns and dreams of pan-Asian modernity among rural sex workers. Lyttleton's (2014) study in the Greater Mekong Region showed a variety of actors—older women, factory workers, and kathoey sex workers—entering different intimate exchanges to achieve shared comfort and human connection amidst changing economic development.

I add to these conversations by examining future-making possibilities forged out of intimacies shared between two distinct migrant groups in Hong Kong. While MDWs face intersectional subjugations across racial, class, and citizenship differences, their partners may experience their own perceptions of powerlessness due to increasing age, unemployment, and past separations. This article explores how the intimacies fostered in Wanchai carve out the opportunity for these "foreigners in a foreign land" to re-envision what might be affectively and materially possible in their futures beyond domestic labour, aging alone, and imminent precarity.

Hong Kong as Asia's World City

Upon losing the first Opium War, China ceded Hong Kong to Britain under the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. Hong Kong was a strategic gain for British trade as it operated as an entrepot between the East and the West. In the twentieth century, Hong Kong saw steady economic growth as it transitioned from a manufacturing zone into a "newly industrializing economy." As intended by colonial Britain, Hong Kong's gradual ascent to global cosmopolitanism as a port for trade and commerce allowed for the integration of regional and international economies, ultimately bringing together differently skilled labourers. Like many post-industrial locales, deindustrialization within Hong Kong resulted in a bifurcated economy of the low-skill and low-waged service

sector and a high-paid professional sector (Sanchez 2003; Sassen 2001). Diminishing borders in favour of neoliberal economic policies have enabled people across the world with "differentiated mobility" (Massey 1993) to converge in Hong Kong with aspirations for economic gain and social mobility. Unfortunately, the capacity and opportunity to actualize these aspirations are unequally conferred for the global city's newcomers and tend to be partitioned along racial and ethnic lines. Euro-American expatriates in Hong Kong, considered "skilled" labour migrants, enjoy significantly greater privileges than their non-Western migrant counterparts from South and Southeast Asia. Despite these racialized and classed distinctions, interviews from my research revealed a more complex portrait.

Wanchai as the "Land of Opportunity"

Originally a seaport for trade and commerce in the 1800s and 1900s, Wanchai soon operated as an entertainment district for colonial servicemen, a site of rest and recreation for American GIs during the Vietnam War, and an enduring destination to fulfil orientalist imaginations. The infamous district that had inspired *The World of Suzie Wong* has historically celebrated white, western militarized masculinity. Some interviewees have expressed to me that in Wanchai, "If you're White, you're right!" and it was the "land of opportunity" for Euro-American expatriates because their foreign citizenship and presumed economic power rendered them the objects of desire for many local Chinese women and Southeast Asian migrants.

However, other Western interlocutors from the bars have jokingly likened themselves to *FILTHs*—Failed in London, Try in Hong Kong. Conversations with this latter group of male patrons suggested to me a range of affective experiences that challenged these broader narratives of impermeable racial privilege across time and space. Particularly for long-term bar regulars, sentiments of vulnerability and precarity were pronounced due to volatility in their employment[1] and intimate relationships.

Nevertheless, the championing of white masculinity was lucrative for Wanchai's drink economy and was most apparent in the differentially raced and gendered access to public bar spaces and discos in the "ethnosexual frontier" (Nagel 2003). Bar patrons explained that for many of the underground or above-ground discos, bouncers would refuse service to African, South Asian, local Hong Kong or other East Asian men as they were not seen as lucrative for the business. This logic relied on the tacit presumption of female desire within

these venues. The women—mostly Indonesian or Filipina migrant overstayers or entertainers, or domestic workers freelancing on their Sundays off—were assumed to only be attracted to Euro-American men and thus would not be as inclined to engage with others. When these "working girls"[2] receive drink purchases from male patrons, they earn a commission (30 percent of the original drink price) from the bar. Accordingly, if the women were uninterested in the male patrons, they would be less likely to seek or accept drink purchases from them, thereby limiting the revenue earned from commission drinks.

Most relationships begin as a transactional exchange—with the commercial aspect obscured by euphemisms of exchange, such as "supplemental income," "taxi fare," or additional "shopping expenses." The bar regulars have described these relationships not as explicitly commercial in nature, but simply made sense as they were both "foreigners in a foreign land." They explained that their shared intimacy in Wanchai can help assuage mutual feelings of dislocation felt both by MDW seeking to alleviate family poverty from abroad as well as their Western partners whose employment redundancy and aging bodies refract their senses of power, privilege, and belonging in Hong Kong.

Pushing past the "bounded intimacy" (Bernstein 2007) of short-term sex-for-money exchange, a portion of these relationships progresses into more intimate connections outside of Wanchai, leading to long-term coupledom or eventual marriage. With time, the affective risk and costs also accumulate. For the older men who were divorced and seeking stable partners as they approached retirement, it became difficult to discern whether their younger counterparts "truly loved them or [they] were being emotionally cheated for their money." Similarly, as the migrant women expressed, they "could never fully trust their boyfriends because [of] other women." Further, with increasing numbers of Euro-American expatriates undergoing employment redundancy, Southeast Asian partners have communicated anxieties about having to secure income through other means. Accordingly, just as the women's structural vulnerability rendered the men's pursuit of intimate companionship tenuous, the migrant men's own structural vulnerability (employment redundancy) rendered a woman's financial safety net precarious.

Hong Kong's Foreign Domestic Workers

Hong Kong's status as one of the freest economies on the global stage would not have been possible without the import of cheap, expendable, and unregulated domestic labour from South and Southeast Asia. Overseas labour

migration from the Philippines began as early as the twentieth century after the Spanish-American War when the Philippines became a US colony and Filipinos emigrated to the US to work in agricultural, maritime, and other low-wage industries. Waves of labour migration to Asia from the Philippines intensified in the 1970s after the oil crisis. Amidst political instability, underemployment, population growth, and insufficient economic development, citizens of the Philippines—many of whom already had tertiary education—turned to the Middle East and East Asia for work. Like the latter phases of Filipino migration, Indonesian outward labour migration was the result of insufficient state assistance, systemic corruption, land dispossession, and limited employment opportunities back home. After the Philippines, Indonesia is the second largest exporter of MDWs in the East Asia and Pacific region. Currently, there are approximately 385,000 MDWs labouring in Hong Kong.

Due to Hong Kong's high cost of living, the need for dual-income families led to a greater demand for imported care and domestic labour. According to Enrich (2019), MDW labour in Hong Kong contributed approximately USD $12.6 billion to Hong Kong, as 3.6 percent of the global city's GDP. In terms of their real value, the employment of MDWs in Hong Kong enables an increased female labour force participation by allowing mothers who would otherwise provide childcare at home to enter the workforce.[3]

Despite their significant contribution to Hong Kong's economy, MDWs from Southeast and South Asia occupy not only the social and economic margins of the city but are also relegated to the spatial peripheries. Their minimum allowable wage per month has not improved significantly in the past two decades despite frequent activist demonstrations. In March 2023, their monthly salary had increased by just HKD$100 and remains a mere HKD$4,730 (USD$608). The Hong Kong government justifies their low wage by mandating employers provide accommodation and food to their workers. However, there is a lack of safety enforcement and quality control for these accommodations, nor is the nutritional value of the workers' meals regulated.

Hong Kong's notoriously small living quarters have rendered the migrants' living conditions as normal and spatially necessary. MDWs have been required to sleep "between a toilet bowl and a wall" (MFMW 2021), underneath sinks or cupboards, or in a shared bed with another family member. Recently, Hong Kong's Omicron crisis revealed further the precarity of these live-in arrangements. When MDWs tested COVID-positive in March 2021, they were

terminated and forbidden to return to their employers' homes for fear that they would infect the household. This led to cases where MDWs were left stranded at the airport without shelter.

Further, as migrants are required to live in, there is a lack of transparency into the number of labour hours demanded of the workers. While volunteering at MFMW, I encountered cases of migrants working for 15 hours continuously without rest and only afforded a few hours to sleep every day. As the torture cases of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih (HKFP 2021) and Kartika Puspitasari (Straits 2022) show, state migration agencies continually fail to protect their overseas citizens and remain reluctant to seek redress against mistreatment from placement countries (Piper 2003). These extreme cases of migrant abuse were a direct result of the stringent live-in regulations that limited the migrants' mobility, awareness of their rights, and interactions with compatriots who could help them.

Semi-Scripted Rituals

One night at around eleven p.m. at a minimarket in Wanchai, I was held up in line behind two older British men who were about to purchase a variety of snacks and several bottles of wine. One man already had his wallet open in his hand and was trying to pay the cashier, who looked increasingly impatient. From behind I heard a high-pitched female voice. "Thank you so much, Daddy! Anything else you want, Daddy?" I turned and saw a younger Southeast Asian woman in a white cocktail dress holding a packet of gummy bears. The other man standing in line eyed me apologetically. Another girl in a black miniskirt appeared with a carton of ice cream, "Here, Daddy, this too! Thank you, Daddy!" When they finally paid, the three girls hooked their arms around the two men and led them out of the store and into a taxi.

Performances of deference, sexual or romantic interest, and exaggerated power differentials enacted by Southeast Asian women, such as those portrayed in this incident, are a common scene in Wanchai between the migrants and potential male partners. These performances tend to play to enduring Orientalist "semi-scripted rituals" (Maher and Lafferty 2014) of Asian female sexual availability and Western male desirability. The legacy of British colonialism, Western militarization, and commodified Asian female sexuality in Wanchai has constructed a nightlife district for resident expats and migrants, and a sex tourism district for itinerant travellers playing to these sexual scripts. Adequate performance of these "semi-scripted rituals" is necessary to sustain

"the ethical dimensions of a shared reality" (Keane 2015,102) between the Euro-American expatriates and their Southeast Asian partners. Playing to different axes of power—in terms of age, class, gender, and citizenship—whereby, at face value, the men occupy higher positionings than their female counterparts in such an exchange, these women performed the semi-scripted ritual expected within this bar space in their efforts to attain a Western partner. Their performance, in line with the expectation of Wanchai being a site that celebrated white, Euro-American masculinity, reaffirmed dominant tropes of saviour narratives and hegemonic masculinity against hypersexualized Asian feminine deference (Shimizu 2007).

While some may render this type of dynamic as inherently exploitative given the respective structural relations of power, we cannot assume that the migrant women did not enjoy performing third-world vulnerability alongside agentive hypersexuality. These encounters allow Western bar patrons to enjoy new forms of desirable masculinity, especially for those who are aging, made redundant, and have undergone multiple divorces. At the same time, their migrant counterparts found comparable senses of fulfilment and pleasure from these interactions. As they explained, it is much more rewarding to go out dancing and meet potential partners earning between HKD$500-$3,000 in a single day than to work unregulated hours and be scolded daily to scrub toilets for a mere HKD$4,700 per month.

As they imagine new futures for themselves and their families, MDWs can resignify their ethnically minoritized status while playing on longstanding gendered and racialized tropes. Rooted in colonial-era sensibilities, the process of racialization within Hong Kong has tacit class markers, whereby the aspirations for upward mobility for ethnic minorities remain largely circumscribed within the socioeconomic hierarchy of Hong Kong. As the migrants perform enduring scripts of their precarious class positioning, they are repurposing their racialized identity in their interactions within Wanchai that is both simultaneously intelligible within gendered and racialized colonial scripts, but also yielding alternative postcolonial ends that push back against static conceptions of migrant marginality.

Alternative Futures

I met Rachel in 2015. She was a 31-year-old Filipina migrant who used to work in South Korea as a singer before arriving in Hong Kong to be a domestic worker. In 2017, she ended her employment contract with a local Chinese

employer for denigrating remarks. "She would tell me I'm dirty and wouldn't let me share food with her! She says it's because I'm Filipino and I'm lazy, my food smells, and I'm beneath her!" Fortunately for Rachel, at the time of her abrupt contract termination, she was already dating Eric, a 52-year-old British software engineer whom she met in Wanchai. "I'm so lucky Eric signed my contract! I couldn't work there anymore!"

At the time of their first meeting, Rachel and Eric were both still married to their former spouses. Rachel remained on neutral terms with her Filipino ex-partner who relied solely on her earnings for childcare, while Eric had a less amicable relationship with his Japanese ex-wife. "I was the stay-at-home dad for 15 years while she was the breadwinner. Then she stabbed me." In 2014 Eric had just re-entered the workforce after several years of unemployment and binge drinking that followed the divorce. Eric's story of emotional volatility following divorce was not uncommon. Despite this, through the eyes of Southeast Asian migrant women, these older Western men were desirable—they were more mature and financially dependable—the opposite of their ex-partners back home.

Rachel recounted her performance of deference as a particular "semi-scripted ritual," during their first meeting: "I was sitting at the bar finishing my beer when Eric offered to buy me a drink. Because he bought me a drink, I told him I would give my seat to him. But then he refused my offer. He said, 'I can't just take a lady's seat.'" Rachel offering her seat to Eric was meant to establish reciprocity to avoid incurring debt after receiving a drink from him. For Rachel, Eric declining her offer was an explicit rejection of the gendered moral economy of the bar district.

> Afterwards, we went to a restaurant to eat. In the Philippines, women are sweet, we can feed [our men] in the restaurant. So, I feed Anthony, Eric's coworker, first. But Eric refused me again. He said, "I can feed myself." I turned to Anthony and said, "He's rude." But now that we're together, I have an easy life.

Later I asked him why he became so upset when Rachel tried to feed him. "She was doing this in a public restaurant! In Wanchai! What about my male pride?" He explained that while it was okay for her to feed him in their home, a private space, for her to do so in public was unacceptable.

Despite these public displays of contested gendered power during their first meeting, in the private space of their apartment, Eric acknowledges that he

maintains economic power. As he explained, even though Rachel is prideful about her financial independence from working part-time jobs, he upholds the contractual employment agreement of paying her at least $4,210 a month, the minimum allowable wage for domestic helpers at the time of my fieldwork in 2015. "She refuses to accept my money, but every month I leave money in the drawer and tell her to take it if she needs it." This strategy of salary disbursement blurs the line between employer and boyfriend—as a more intimate form of the "girlfriend experience" (Bernstein 2007) while at the same time shielding Eric from future legal repercussions if they were to separate and Rachel accused him of withholding her salary. This was an important move for Eric as he was still in an ongoing legal battle with his ex-wife over assets and parental rights.

Eight months into their relationship, I learned that Rachel had begun earning $500/night for commission drinks at one of the discos. Surprised, I asked Eric, "Are you worried about her with another guy? Don't you get jealous? You don't care that other guys are buying her drinks?" I was even more shocked at his reply as I assumed her participation in the drink economy would impinge on their relationship:

> You know, you're the first person to ask me that. I think it's so normalized in Wanchai that most of my mates didn't even mention it. I have my ear to the ground, I know how much she'd be making through commission drinks and how much she'd be making doing other stuff. If she shows up with large sums of money, I'll start to worry.

Weeks after this conversation, I found Rachel and Eric fighting over the tacit conditions of this agreement. Rachel accused Eric of cheating while she was away: "You have a young girlfriend and go buy a girl a drink when I was in the Philippines? I resign! I'm going home with someone else!" When Rachel stormed off, Eric turned to me, "I was out with the rugby team and yes, girls asked me to buy them drinks. But I didn't. She's just drunk right now, she'll be back… ." Even though Eric was sure she would be back, he chased after her moments later.

The issues that arose—mistrust about potential infidelity and conflicting cultural norms about gendered propriety (as we see from their first meeting)—conveyed competing moral and ethical codes in Wanchai. In coupled relationships, migrant women receiving commission drinks was deemed permissible because the drinks are framed as a decommercialized transaction for additional income, whereas the Western men's purchase of commission

drinks for other women entered the realm of betrayal. These drinks from men were considered more as a gift with implicit expectations of reciprocity in the form of sexual economic exchange. The migrant woman's structural positioning justified her earning commission, but Western men purchasing a drink for another woman signaled potential interest.

Rachel's abrupt departure, threatening Eric with her resignation and intended infidelity, suggested that Eric could be "just another white guy" whom Rachel could easily replace. Even though Eric had signed her domestic worker contract that allowed her to earn additional income in the first place, Rachel felt empowered to declare sufficient financial capability and independence from him. This confidence was not through a significant spike in earnings from commission drinks, however; rather, her relationship with Eric illuminated for her the viability of alternative options forward, as she boasted to me her other opportunities if they separated.

During our interview, Eric revealed his own ambivalence towards their relationship amidst Rachel's newfound independence:

> I have a young lady who is in the Philippines, who I would love to get back here. She's under a lot of pressure. She's got her two children. She could end up going back to Korea. I think she will come back to Hong Kong. But, it's a case if she comes back to work for me or if she comes back to work for someone else. She gets angry over things which I have no control over. One of the things is [that] I'll be out maybe 10 days a month [for work].

Eric's perception of their differentiated mobility juxtaposes Rachel's capacity to choose to move to South Korea against his own compulsory travel for work. In this framing, he attributed greater agency and mobility to Rachel, a Filipina national who requires a visa for travel and re-entry into Hong Kong, while downplaying his own British citizenship and freedom of movement. Eric did not believe that signing her contract for her to be his live-in girlfriend with an "easy life" would incentivize her to return to him. Rather, he assumed she could easily attain employment elsewhere.

Interestingly, Eric's comment here signals a tacit refusal of the presumed mobility of Euro-American expatriates in Hong Kong. Despite his British citizenship and upgraded employment from stay-at-home dad while in Japan, Eric's relationship with Rachel in Wanchai allowed him greater opportunity to express an alternative masculine subjectivity wherein perceived vulnerability

and powerlessness are permissible. While he is the main breadwinner for now, upon reflecting on their divergent structural positionings, he continues to insist on Rachel's greater decision-making power. For Rachel, entering a relationship with Eric, having him sign her employment contract just to be a live-in girlfriend, and then participating in Wanchai's commission drink economy enhanced her capacity to realize other opportunities for upward mobility beyond domestic work in Hong Kong and a relationship with Eric. Even without Eric, she feels capable and confident in pursuing other future life-making strategies.

In 2018, Rachel married Eric, and they had two children together. Photos from a new Facebook account no longer show images from her previous life as a domestic worker, nor of her drinking in Wanchai and dancing with Eric in a cocktail dress. Instead, Rachel shows herself planting trees in her backyard, posing with the young boys holding gold trophies from their recent win in Davao City, and enjoying the beach with Eric alongside her family. Eric's Facebook is inundated with posts that boast of his new life in the Philippines and his wife's newfound hobby of basketball coaching the Typhoons—the local Filipino basketball team named after his own Rugby group in Hong Kong. The life that Rachel and Eric cultivated now is markedly different from nearly a decade ago in 2014 when we first met, when Rachel was a domestic worker being reprimanded by her employer, and Eric was healing from his divorce.

Marriage and Homemaking

David arrived in Hong Kong in 2010 after having been "made redundant" as a business manager in Australia. When we met, David was in his early fifties and once divorced with two teenage children. He had just separated from his girlfriend of four years due to "trust issues" and her "emotional manipulation." As David explained, she repeatedly reminded him of their age difference and the unlikelihood of him finding another partner aside from her. Even during his unemployment, she continued to ask him for money. "But what about my feelings!?" he exclaimed to me as he recounted his past relationship. During our conversations in 2014 and 2015, he frequently communicated his fear about an imminently uncertain future. He wanted to find another partner who could care for him as he approached retirement age.

In 2017, David met Sandra in Wanchai. While David was facing anxieties of an uncertain future ahead, Sandra, an Indonesian migrant, was still coping with traumas from her youth. One night at the pub, David disclosed that it was her background and resilience that had attracted him to Sandra. At a young age,

she was sent to live with a relative as her family lacked sufficient economic means. By the age of 14, she was forced to marry and bear a child. The next year, she left school and divorced her husband to return to her home village. Upon her arrival, she faced ridicule from former childhood peers for being a single parent at 15 without an education. She married again at 19 and had another child, but eventually divorced due to her husband's infidelity. Finally, she decided Hong Kong would offer better opportunities.

Sandra frequented Wanchai bars on Sundays to dance with other migrants and expatriates. Fluent in English, Sandra was considered quite attractive by many of the bar patrons. But as David admitted, it was her personal biography that captured his attention. He felt compelled to "help her with a better life." For David, this relationship was more than just "philanthropy-oriented intimacy" (Hoang 2015). Rather, there is a sense of reciprocated care for each other, irrespective of their prior difficulties in life. "She takes care of me, makes sure I don't get home from the bars too late. I really think she's the one."

After dating for three years, they married in 2019. While I was unable to attend their wedding in Bali or honeymoon in Hong Kong, I continued to follow their relationship development on their social media. Sandra's marriage to David drastically elevated her social standing. Like other MDWs who project their cosmopolitan lifestyle on Facebook for compatriots and family, she took to social media to capture each sentimental moment shared with her new partner. Sandra began uploading pristinely edited Instagram videos of her new home life in their apartment, which included matching His and Hers bedding and bathroom sets, rose gold dinnerware and extravagant decor.

In 2019, Sandra and David invested in property in Indonesia and Hong Kong. Turning their Bali property into an Airbnb, Sandra created separate social media pages advertising her new business. The aesthetics of the video appear professionally produced, featuring soothing background music, stone and beige colour tones and neat cursive font detailing the Airbnb's features. Most recently, Sandra and David launched a small goat farm in the yard of their Airbnb to complement other outdoor amenities. While other MDWs from Southeast Asia might purchase livestock as investments in case of family emergencies, the goats on Sandra's farm, charmingly named Mr. Brussels and Mr. Maroon, are captured on video being coddled and bottle-fed by Sandra's daughter.

On social media, Sandra highlights a status elevation beyond that of the coveted expatriate husband and newly acquired Hong Kong citizenship. Her

tagline on Instagram, "Media Exec on the Weekdays, BnB Co-host on the Weekends" with links to her Indonesian and Hong Kong properties, presents her as part of the expatriate professional class without any trace of her former employment as a domestic worker. Her vlogging communicates a newfound entrepreneurship and global citizenship—as property owner, businesswoman, and social media lifestyle guru. For Southeast Asian MDWs, the moment of departure from their village home in search of work and opportunity abroad is often already the apex of success. But Sandra pushes this further—success is garnered not merely by her outward sojourn. Rather, success is materializing a new home for herself and her daughters in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

Due to the spatial and population density in Hong Kong, an average flat spans a mere 172 square feet, with monthly rent ranging from HKD $15,000 to $25,000 (USD $2,000 to $3,000). While lower-middle-class Hong Kong locals might share single-bedroom flats consisting of multigenerational families (that is, grandparents sharing a bed with grandchildren), the poorest are relegated to "caged homes" before finally moving to the streets (Time 2022). As such, domestic workers' living-in arrangements with their employers in such close quarters means they are relegated to the margins or crevices of the flat. Without their own private spaces to call or make "home," many migrants create temporary dwelling spaces with makeshift cardboard boxes, two-person tents or plastic bags in the negative spaces of the city—underneath bridges, along sidewalks, next to trashcans, and within alleyways.

Accordingly, these efforts of '"home-making'"—by vlogging about her expensive flat shared with David, Instagramming their staycations during Hong Kong's three-year COVID-19 lockdown, and now curating elite Airbnb bed and breakfast experiences for travellers to Bali, Sandra demonstrates to Hong Kong locals, western expatriates, and her compatriots alike her belonging to a new socioeconomic class. Such a leap across several class strata is far beyond the imagination and reach of most middle-class Hong Kong citizens, let alone other MDWs from Southeast Asia.

As studies of refugees have found, home-making can be an attempt "to restore an ordinary life" amidst displacement and "in seemingly unfavourable and transient environment[s]" (Van Raemdonck 2021, 117). Indeed, for MDWs like Sandra, the transient nature of domestic labour in Hong Kong reinforces underlying sentiments of displacement upon their departure from their villages

as they are required to continually move after each new employment contract. Migrants denied the right to stay home with their families may rely on social media and regular remittances to retain their connection to home. But for Sandra, home is newly built and spans national borders; it has become a node in her pathway to refuse marginality and forge greater aspirational capacity (Appadurai 2013). As Appadurai explains, housing insecurity among the most disenfranchised in urban cities can negatively shape one's kinship ties and networks and affect their political and social citizenship given their delimited capacity for domestic hospitality (2013, 122). Within the first five years of their marriage, Sandra's multiple home-making projects between Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Australia, where David originates, have expanded her and her daughter's capacity for broadened kinship ties and citizenship through her capacity for hospitality for years to come.

As flexible non-citizens in Hong Kong (Constable 2009b) and bare citizens (Appadurai 2013) in their home countries, excluded from the rights and privileges otherwise afforded to non-migrants, MDWs must imagine alternative pathways forward. As Stuart Hall asserts, identity cannot be affixed to "some sacred homeland to which [one] must at all costs return" (1991, 235). Following this, I argue that as Sandra cultivates a newfound personhood through home-making, the process is less of a backwards yearning for Indonesia, but rather an "intimate connection to dwelling" (Appadurai 2013, 117) towards the future. Sandra does not passively hope and "wait for" her fate to change, but rather proactively "waits to" fulfil her aspirations through the investment in and construction of home (Appadurai 2013, 127).

"Who wants to leave?"

Itinerant workers in Hong Kong are often victims of decades-long neoliberal projects in their home countries, whereby state-backed corporate land dispossession inevitably led to the outward migration of the peasant class in search of new livelihood strategies. While seeking opportunity abroad, they experience debt bondage and cyclical migration patterns of re-migrating after having already returned. When the remittances from long-term migrants are insufficient to sustain their families, the next generation of migrant children then migrate abroad and work alongside their mothers as domestic helpers. Every new generation of migrants comes at a cost—in the form of exorbitant loans owed to middlemen and employment agencies, ruptures within the family, and the sacrifice of one's most productive years (Allerton 2020).

Migrant workers might present romanticized portrayals of modern cosmopolitan lifestyles on social media to project images of success to their families back home, as Sandra has done. Erased within such portrayals of success is the stark reality of what is implicitly denied: *the choice to stay*. During the second phase of my research with MDWs outside of Wanchai, I encountered more bitter attitudes towards their outward sojourn: "Many of us don't want to leave if we had the opportunity to stay. We are being forced to migrate. Who wants to leave behind their families and their home?" The failure of this migratory infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2018) to lift families out of poverty unfortunately circumscribes the migrants' capacity to envision or hope for alternative futures. Other migrants have echoed to me, "We don't have plans for the future. We don't know when we'll go home. We don't make enough to save and pay for our families, the children's education, and emergencies. We're just working as long as we can. Just focus on being happy now."

Contrasting these present-focused comments against the hypercapitalist orientations to the future in Hong Kong's rapacious finance and property economy, it becomes apparent that MDWs stuck within this cyclical migration regime can at best only envision their lives in the "near future," but most are resolved to surrender to what may come in the more elusive "distant future" (Guyer 2004). This migratory "chronic present" (Ley 2021), where migrant efforts and earnings are quickly depleted to maintain daily survival in the immediate present, remains undergirded by systemic poverty and limited state support constraining one's ability to plan, save, or invest. Due to legacies of colonial and sociopolitical exclusions and inefficient socioeconomic infrastructures, planning for the distant future remains improbable for those trying to manage one immediate crisis at a time while "sustaining life at a bare minimum" (2021, 12). However, by forging relationships with western partners in the entertainment district, some migrants can orient their futures through aspiration, enabling them to stretch their imaginations into more distant horizons—as exemplified by Sandra's investments in property and Rachel's participation in the commission drink economy.

Conclusion

In Hong Kong, MDWs are expected to nurture the children or elderly family members of their employers—as part of the global care chain (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). Seeking to transcend poverty and underemployment in their respective home countries only to be treated as under-classed ethnic minorities

in Hong Kong, MDWs possess limited opportunities to imagine and realize alternative futures for themselves. Wanchai's entertainment district offers new forms of future-making possibilities for these migrants. These relationships provided migrants with enhanced capacities to envision, cultivate, and materialize alternative pathways towards improved future livelihoods that may not have otherwise been possible through years of domestic labour alone. Likewise, forged out of these relationships are new gendered subjectivities for the Euro-American expatriate class in Wanchai, where they may explore counter-hegemonic masculinities where expressions of vulnerability, immobility, and powerlessness become possible.

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Notes

1 The bar patrons –mostly from Australia, Canada, Europe, and the US—were employed in a range of professions, including media advertising, banking/finance, construction, English teaching, and pilots.

2 The term "working girl" was used loosely by the Western bar patrons, but the bar regulars would sometimes qualify this term by identifying the women who were domestic workers working part time at the bars for commission (Sunday Girls), or those who were on tourist visas to Hong Kong for the purposes of participating in the commercial sex industry.

3 In Hong Kong, the percentage of mothers at a prime working age (from 25 to 49 years) who can join the labour force is 49 percent. The employment of MDW could increase this percentage to 78 percent if more mothers joined the work force (Enrich 2019).

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