Meanings of Working Abroad:
A Study on Indonesian Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

CHOR Hiu Kwan

Abstract: This paper explores the life of Indonesian domestic workers (IDWs) in Hong Kong through their discourses in personal history, value orientations, comments about life and work, and participation in their activities, in order to understand the meanings and meaningfulness they found in their overseas work experience. It touches upon issues of marriage and family, freedom, satisfaction and regrets. Recognizing the rewards and sacrifice IDWs gained and made in their work abroad, this paper studies IDWs as neoliberal subjects, and contends that the state's promotion in migrant work attributed the burden of national economic development to these female individuals. This coupled with cultural reasons made the costs of working abroad unreasonably high for these IDWs on their way shriving for their better future.

Introduction

This paper attempts to investigate in the "meanings of working abroad" of Indonesian domestic workers (IDWs) in Hong Kong. The analysis would draw mainly on the informants' discourse, with reference to the cultural and socio-political context of Indonesia to enrich the study.

According to data in 2014, there were some 331,000 foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, in which around 150,000 were Indonesian women (Immigration Department 2015). These Indonesian domestic workers are not considered as "Hong Kong people" though many of them have stayed in Hong Kong for years. Only are we most aware of their presence when we encounter them in markets, school entrances when the kids are off, or on Sundays when they gather in groups and sit in the parks or along the side of flyovers. However, many of our knowledge about them come from mysty impression or occasional news report on abuse cases, rather than real life interactions.

There has been an increasing trend of Indonesian workers in Hong Kong. Comparing the figure of 2009 and 2014, number of Indonesian workers has increased by 24%. The Indonesian population in Hong Kong has a very different cultural background than their Filipino counterparts. Large population highlights the need for more academic study on the group. Moreover, although there have been academic works about foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, for instance, Nicole Constable's Maid to Order (1997) and Born Out of Place (2014), many of these works study both Filipino workers and the Indonesian ones. Therefore, this paper would like to focus on Indonesian domestic workers as the subject of investigation, in order to highlight the significance of Indonesian culture on their livelihood.

Table 1: Population Trends of Indonesian Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

Year	Number of Indonesian Domestic Workers (to the nearest thousands)
2009	120,000
2010	134,000
2011	147,000
2012	150,000
2013	148,000
2014	149,000

(Source: Hong Kong Immigration Departments Annual Reports)

"Meaning"

In the academic realm, researches involving meanings of work explore "meanings" from two main perspectives. Meanings can be constructed individually, pointing to the psychological study on individual's perception; and socially, from norms and social perception (Rosso 2010:94).

In typical studies on the meanings of work, "meaning" can be an ambiguous term signifying both "meaning" and "meaningfulness". By "meaning", some studies on the meanings of work focus on the role of one's work plays in one's life (e.g. work as a paycheck, a higher calling, etc.) and "how employees make or find positive meaning in their work, even...in work that is typically considered undesirable"(Rosso 2010:94). On the other hand, "meaning" implies "meaningfulness", which refers to the "amount of significance something holds for an individual" (Pratt & Ashforth 2003). In this paper, the whole overseas experience, both their workdays and their off days, would be considered in the field of investigation. It would be revealed in the following sections that some IDWs regard their off days more significant to them than the workdays.

This paper would integrate the above two angles in the study of meanings. The dimensions would become (1) evaluating the significance of their work to them; and (2) finding the source of meaningfulness during their stay in Hong Kong.

Apart from these, this paper seeks to explore how traditional Indonesian and Javanese values and the varying degree of influence from alien cultures they are exposed to, reproduce new "meanings" in the life of IDWs. One's value system may change over time, so may the meanings one derives from work. These changes, or the value orientation that persisted, are what this paper intend to capture and analyze. It is hoped that these meanings will not only come from direct verbal statement of the IDWs, but also interpreted in the narratives of the IDWs and participant observation.

Scope, Methodology and Field Site

During my fieldwork, I talked to 13 informants about their life stories and background. Stories of some of the informants would be retold in this paper. Participant observation in their holiday activities and personal interviews are the two main methods I adopted in this study.

Table 2: Informant's Fact Sheet

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Place of Origin	Years Working Abroad	Relationship Status	Number of Children
Rose	35	Central Java	10 years in HK altogether (2002-2006, 2010-now)	Married (going to divorce)	1 daughter (8 years old)
Winnie	35	East Java	4 years in Singapore, then 7-8 years in HK	Divorced	1 son (14 years old)
Kate	35	West Java	17-18 years in HK	Married	None
Angela	31	East Java	2 years in Singapore, then 3 years in Hong Kong	Divorced and in a relationship	1 daughter (6 years old)
Matilda	30	Central Java	2 years in Malaysia, then 5 years in HK	Single	N/A
Sally	30	Central Java	3 years in Singapore, then 5 years in HK	Single	N/A
Isabel	22	Central Java	2 years in Singapore, then 2.5 years in HK	Married	None
Agnes	38	Central Java	2 years in Taiwan, then 8 years in HK	Married	None

My informants are mostly interviewed in Victoria Park. Yet I also met some of them in places like Ammar Mosque and Osman Ramju Sadick Islamic Centre in Wan

Chai. I have chosen Victoria Park as my main field site since it has been a well-known hub for Indonesian workers to gather at weekends. It is comparatively more spacious for interview and observation compared to the Wan Chai Islamic centre, or Mongkok where IDWs like to hang out. A wide range of activities happened there, such as playing sports, food sharing and chatting in groups, gathering for religious purpose, doing make-up and dressing up in Indonesian costumes, and celebrating even traditional Indonesian festival (e.g. Jaranan). The large population and variety of activities give me higher chances to meet workers with different interests and backgrounds.

Indonesian Domestic Workers' Meanings in Work

This part is consisted of life stories of IDWs and its analysis. It is consisted of five sections. First, I would present the life stories of several IDWs concerning the motives they come to Hong Kong. It is followed by an examination of changes and continuities in the marital status and perception of IDWs during their stay in Hong Kong, as these changes constitute an important part of the IDWs' womanhood and selfhood. The third part would examine the degree of freedom they experienced during their work, since freedom gives room for the production of meanings. Fourth, I attempt to use the concept of neoliberal subjectivity in analyzing IDW's work abroad. Finally, the satisfaction and regrets for the IDWs' journey abroad would be discussed.

Motives of Coming: Compulsion or Choice?

In the conversation with my IDW informants, many women were compelled by the situation in Indonesia to work overseas. They will not be able to meet their ends if none of the family members work overseas. However, several informants expressed that they came to Hong Kong hoping for a better future, though their family were able to self-sustain by farming or working in Indonesia. Their decision to come was apparently fostered by a less pressing situation, which allowed them more autonomy to choose to work abroad or not.

Winnie

I met Winnie at Victoria Park in a Sunday afternoon. She was attentively watching an Indonesian ritual performance called Jaranan when I approached her.

Winnie's case falls into those who were compelled by financial situation to work abroad. She is 35 years old and has stayed in Hong Kong since 2009. Coming from East Java, she worked in a boutique for a year after her graduation in 1999. After that, she got married, quitted her job and gave birth to her son. But in 2005 she divorced her husband. Since then, not only did she need to provide for her son and her parents, her husband also left heavy debt for her to pay off. When they were still married, Winnie's father once agreed to let her husband borrow money under his name. After he divorced with Winnie, he refused to pay the debt and went away with another woman. Winnie was left to pay the money and provide for the family at the same time.

Now that she has paid off her ex-husband's debt, I asked how she would spend her wages earned in Hong Kong. She replied that much was spent on building a new house, raising her 14-year-old son, and buying him a motorcycle. Since her house did not even have a washing machine, she would probably buy one as well.

Rose

On a Saturday afternoon when Victoria Park was apparently less filled with Indonesian workers, I found Rose sitting on a bench looking at her mobile phone.

Timid and unconfident at first, Rose unfolded the story of her expeditions bit by bit. It turned out at the age of 35, she has already come to Hong Kong twice. Her family in Banyumas, Central Java was not in dire financial need the first time she decided to come, probably because her mother worked in Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker since Rose was young. Thus, family finance was not the main reason the first time she came, but a failed relationship, since her ex-boyfriend in high school married another woman. Depressed by this, she came to Hong Kong right after her high school graduation, largely to escape from the trauma of the relationship. She chose Hong Kong as her destination following her mother's advice that it would be safer as her cousin was already working there. Hong Kong's glamour is another thing that attracted her. She recalled the day when she saw the city of Hong Kong on television, she said to herself, "*how come this place is so beautiful!*" This is how she decided to come to Hong Kong the first time for her first job.

She came the second time for financial need. By then she has already got married and gave birth to her daughter. Rose told me that it is a norm for married women to bear children. A married couple that failed to do so had to tolerate

criticisms from neighbors and the community. Her husband did not have a job when they got married. After her daughter was born, she was not satisfied with her husband's job because of the unsteady income. Since she could make more money through working overseas, she left for Hong Kong again. She became the financial pillar of her family, whereas her husband made little contribution.

However, last July when she went back to Indonesia for holiday, she confirmed that her husband had not been living with her family.

She had no idea what her husband was up to, adding that she chose not to inquire about his life. But the thing that drove her mad was the money. Before she learnt about the situation, she kept sending money back to him, assuming that he was taking care of her daughter. Out of the $3000-4000 (which was the wage range throughout the 2000s) wage she got, $3000 was sent to her husband. Yet when she went home, the entire surplus after paying for her daughter's expenses was gone, all perceivably squandered by her husband who no longer lived with her daughter. She was so disappointed that she now only sent $1000 to her father for her daughter and her sister's daughter, saving up the rest.

I noticed her puzzled and stone-faced expression while she was saying this, and asked her how long she expected to stay in Hong Kong. "*Three to four years more*," she said, as she wished to save enough money for her daughter's tuition that she could go back to Indonesia, and probably start a business of her own to sell some food, which is the best picture she could imagine now.

Sally and Matilda

Sally and Matilda met each other in the training centre in Indonesia. Both of them were 30 years old when I met them and came from Central Java, though different towns. After high school graduation, Matilda helped with farm work at home, while Sally worked in a garment factory in Jakarta. They both had worked in places apart from Hong Kong. Matilda worked in Malaysia for 2 years and Sally worked in Singapore for around 3 years, before they came to Hong Kong and worked for another 5 years.

Different from the reasons to earn money for family, they stated clearly that they came here for themselves, rather than their families. Matilda added that if she stayed in Indonesia, she would have to help with her brother's study, and probably to get married, which was what she did not have to do now in Hong Kong. She said it

was hard finding jobs in Indonesia. Thus she needed to save money for herself so that she can still sustain her living when she got old.

Kate

The first time I saw Kate, she was a guest speaker in a book sharing session about Indonesian workers. Her routine "job" on Sunday was a volleyball referee. She was 34 years old and came from East Java.

When she came to Hong Kong in 1998, she had not reached the legal working age of 20. "I had not even reached 17 years old". But the domestic workers training centre in Indonesia counterfeited an ID card for her. "I think they are still doing the same thing now," said Kate.

One reason that triggered Kate to come was her marriage arrangment by her grandma and grandpa. Her parents have divorced. When Kate turned 16, her grandparents arranged a marriage for her with a man whose family had connections with Kate's grandparents. Kate, not knowing the man and detested being arranged a marriage at her young age, decided to resolve this through working abroad.

Also, the decision to go overseas was an investment for her future. She described the life of her family in Indonesia as "poor", but able to self-sustain. When she was young, she dreamed of many possibilities for her future, and felt an urge to pursue self-realization. For the dream of a better future, Kate decided she would work abroad.

Thus, Kate's choice of working abroad was perceived as an opportunity to flee from the traditional marriage obligation, a chance to earn money and hence change her future, and a precious chance for a teenager to explore the world.

To summarize, it is found that family need and self-realizaiton are the motives of working aborad. Yet it is also obvious that those who described a more pressing situation are often married women who need to support their children. In some cases, escape from traditional obligations may also be a push factor for working abroad.

Kate, Sally, Matilda and the first setting out for Rose reflected the thoughts of single Indonesian women before they come to Hong Kong. Although all of them consider financial incentives important, their discourses entail personal reasons; they are attracted by the fantasy of working overseas. Whereas, Winnie and Rose (second embarkation) who needed to raise her child found herself in a more pressing financial situation.

IDWs that came because of the wish to explore the world outside Indonesia grounded more of their meanings of work in the new experiences they encountered abroad. Compared with those who feel more compelled to come, their work experience becomes more important to them. Although they contribute to their family with their wages, their role in their family becomes less significant than the individual fulfillment of wishes, or the more significant goal they can attain through the earning of money.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that the line between "compelled to come" and "active choice" is never clear-cut. A person is affected by the environment whenever they make a choice. The categorization above is based on the situation the IDWs illustrated in their discourses, in which IDWs tended to express their reasons for coming as an option they actively chose.

In the latter section of this paper, we would explore more on the choice they made and its meanings. Yet, here it is also worthy of notice that though some IDWs went abroad for personal pursuit, they were still stuck in the dichotomies of "work abroad or stay poor" or "work abroad or get married". It shows how socio-cultural factors such as marriage norms and traditional economic activities play a role in individuals' decision-making concerning their own and their family's future.

Since almost all my informants relate their coming to their family in Indonesia, the traditional roles in their family and marriage affect greatly how they evaluate their life in Hong Kong. Also, the following parts would seek to assess how these roles influence their selfhood, and how life in Hong Kong induces changes.

Changes and Continuities: Relationship and Perception

Family and marriage are regarded as important parts of women's self-identity, hence the meanings they found in life. Marriage is a key for Indonesian women, as marriage symbolized one's entry into adulthood (Geertz 1961:55). Women are typically responsible of managing the household in Indonesia. Their migrant work shifts the role of women.

Since many IDWs included working for family in their reasons for coming, through analyzing the changes in their family and marriage conditions during their overseas work, changes in the meanings in their work can be observed. This section would depict and analyze IDWs' experience on the changes in their marriage and

family situation during their stay, and how their relevant value orientations are challenged or maintained accordingly.

Divorce

Rose

Rose was married but was planning a divorce. She did not know her husband was not living with her daughter until she went back to Indonesia for holiday last July. She said, "My father told me about this but I didn't believe. I trusted my husband."

But this trust did not come from deep understanding and mutual affection. In fact, in Rose's description of her husband, she repeatedly used the phrase "*I don't know him*" to illustrate her understanding on him. Their marriage seemed to be an abrupt decision - they met for the first time when Rose went back to Indonesia. She accounted for their acquaintance this way:

> *"I met him at the airport of Indonesia. I came across him when I was trying to find the right bus. Since I have not been in Indonesia for so long I did not know the way. He taught me how to go home and accompanied me. On the way he asked me if I would marry him. I said yes. I didn't know why he wanted to marry me. I didn't know him after all! He brought me to his father's home and they all approved our marriage. Then we got married."*

I was so shocked by her account that I asked her a few times to confirm the details, afraid of misunderstanding the story. The underlying fact was far from simply a tale of love-at-first-sight:

> *"My younger sister was married and had a child. Because of this my father questioned why I was still not married. One day he fell ill and I asked how he got sick. He answered, 'Because I wanted you to get married.' I wanted my father to be happy so I decided to marry someone."*

Then I ask her if her father had not desperately asked her to get married, would she want to do so? Rose thought for a few seconds and said, "No! My boyfriend got married [with another woman] so I no longer wanted to get married. I don't trust men anymore."

Rose added that in Javanese tradition, the elder child should marry before the younger. Rose said she was mad at her younger sister for some time when her younger sister got married before her, despite their good relationship. Rose was considered marrying "late" compared to her younger sister and this worried her father. It was by and large out of family pressure and obligation that Rose married her husband. After she found out her husband's infidelity, she declared to her husband she wanted a divorce, but her husband has been reluctant.

The third time when I met Rose I asked about her divorce again, her expressions became less bewildered than the first time. Her husband was still unwilling to divorce, but they slept in separated rooms last time she went back to Indonesia. She was not sure why he was reluctant though. Every time when Rose brought up the subject, her husband would talk with rage, "I don't want that!" and avoid the discussion, saying "I am sleepy, I want to go take a nap!" However, Rose added that couples who had marriage problems did not just lay the total blame on one side. The reluctance to resolve the marriage problems is sometimes the reason leading to divorce.

Angela

In Indonesia, Angela had a six-year-old daughter, who was now living with her ex-husband's mother. She and her husband divorced while Angela was working in Hong Kong.

Angela grew up in a Protestant family while her ex-husband was Muslim. They knew each other as neighbors and fell in love. Angela's family opposed to their decision of getting married, but had no means to deter it (during our conversation, Angela showed she could be resolute at times). After they adopted the Muslim marriage ceremony, Angela ritually converted into a Muslim.

However, their relationship grew tense. Because her husband and his family were very concerned with money, she found a wide value gap between them. Conflict sparked off one day when she and her husband talked on phone, when Angela was already working abroad:

> *"That was because of money. He wanted me to mail him 20,000 Indonesian dollars because he wanted to work abroad in Taiwan and needed money to pay the agency fee […] but at the time I was*

saving money to build our new house, so I told him I do not have money for him. If he needed the money he should borrow from his friend, and he repay the money after he got to Taiwan. He said to me: 'Now you don't care a straw for me! And you don't care a straw for your daughter! We should divorce! ' I asked him what if I helped him paid the agency fee after he arrived in Taiwan. He said he did not need that. He only talked about divorce."

After their divorce, Angela retained her Christian identity. She heard that her ex-husband had already remarried, and was working in Korea. I asked her if she would agree that her husband was upset about her working abroad and not taking care of the daughter and sensed the divorce was coming from time to time. She answered,

" I don't think so… because last time when I came back to Hong Kong from Indonesia, he said 'now that our daughter had go to school. I could stay at home and cooked for the family.' Since our marriage, his mum did not really like me. They are not very rich, but they want to get rich and own the things rich people had. They aim very, very high on gaining money."

From Angela's perspective, not fulfilling her role as the caretaker in the family was not the main reason for her divorce. To Angela, value gap was the determinant, and her work abroad indirectly contributed to her divorce when the tolerance between her and her husband topped the flashpoint during her time overseas.

The changing economic status and widened value difference between couples during the woman's work abroad might contribute to their divorce. Angela's reply to her ex-husband's demand on money revealed this difference in resources, status in family and marriage view. The husband asking his wife for money has already subverted the traditional Javanese view on family expecting the man to be the breadwinner (Wichelan 2010). The way Angela rejected her husband's request further subverted the gender hierarchy in the family, potentially hurting her husband's self-esteem. Although to Angela, her husband had already adapted to the untypical gender division of labor in their family, reflected by the fact that her husband was

willing to do the cooking at home while Angela worked overseas, he was apparently tempted by and envied such resourcefulness Angela attained from her overseas work, driving his desire to work abroad as well.

As Rose said, divorce cannot be attributed merely to one person. Unresolvable problems build up from lighter tension and smaller cracks in a relationship. The prolonged period of separation during overseas work, often unpredictable in length, makes it hard for couples to settle their smaller conflicts. Limited time for communication makes the emotional bonding fickle.

The new role as the economic pillar of the family is meaningful to the IDWs. It gives them a new and significant status in the family. However, the wife's increased money-generating ability in an Indonesian family may make the man feel threatened about his status and power. The role of woman in a family concerned more on the management of money rather than generating it. Hilliard Geertz's *Javanese Family* depicts that men commonly perceived themselves as incapable of carefully managing finances, whereas women are naturally thrift and foresight that most husbands gave the greatest part of their earnings to their wives to manage. However, IDWs' increased money-earning power infringes the status and role of the husband to be the breadwinner. As in Rose's case, she mentioned his husband initially did not want her to work abroad and thought he should be the one to work abroad instead. He was afraid of losing the economic power in the family. But Rose thought her husband would not be able to find a good-paying job with his wounded arm, she demanded to be the migrant worker instead. Both Rose's husband insistence and Angela's husband dismay upon her money-using decision showed the men's discomfort towards the new reverted economic power between husband and wife, posing threat to the fragile long-distance marriages.

Among my informants, only Angela made a boyfriend in Hong Kong after her divorce. Her relationship would be discussed later in this section. Meanwhile, Kate seemed to proceed to a new stage of her life in another direction, which is getting married.

Marriage

One informant, Sally, once told me a principle on handling romantic relationship for female migrant workers, asserting with certainty, "a woman should

not work overseas once she is married, or else her husband will find another woman". While this is indeed the case for many IDWs, some others married their dating partners, whom they have met locally, like examples in Nicole Constables's *Born Out of Place* (2014), or through online platforms that link them to other migrant workers worldwide. Kate, who got married last year, is one example:

> *"I have known my husband for 13 years. He has been working in Korea and was the friend of a friend. We talked through MSN (in the past). He always phones me, I like using the phone but I don't like using webcam. Throughout these 13 years I have met him face-to-face for 4 times. I believe Yuen Fen (缘分) is the reason we can still be together. But the years have not been without troubles and conflicts. We have had misunderstandings, but we chose to say sorry and forgive each other after that."*

Dating between these migrant workers is quite unimaginable for many people. The bonding between lovers is intriguingly maintained by technologies and involves little face-to-face communication. Yet for Kate, she enjoyed the freedom in choosing her own partner than the arranged marriage she would possibly face before she went working abroad.

Their long-distance love did not wear out after 13 years of dating, though Kate implied there had been great troubles in their relationship. When asked about affairs outside the relationship, Kate said,

> *"We have friends of the opposite sex, but we don't have affairs outside our relationship. Now we are the only lover for each other. We only want to focus on the present, and choose to forget the things of the past. We are living our life at present, not our life in the past. We could have picked on our past lives, but we didn't want to make things complicated."*

Kate said she rarely thought about relationship and marriage before and during the start of her working abroad, and described herself as sensitive and emotional. Kate

has grown to be tougher throughout her years in Hong Kong. In fact, Kate's work in Hong Kong from 17 to 35-year-old has been a testimony of her life growing from teen age into adulthood. Her long-distance love experience is rarely shared by Indonesian housewives back in her country. Her comment on maintaining a relationship sounded very mature.

Besides committing to a marriage, some IDWs choose to engage in relationships during their stay in Hong Kong.

Romantic Relationship

Angela

Angela and I had conversation some time around the Chinese New Year. At times, Angela checked her mobile phone and used the voice message function in Wechat to talk to her lover in Cantonese. But her boyfriend was too busy with family reunions that they could not have dinner together that Sunday night.

Back then, they connected via the "people around" function on Wechat which the user can connect with any other users nearby. Angela felt safe to respond because "*we only chatted with each other*" and nothing more. They started hanging out after several months of chatting online.

With her boyfriend on Sunday, Angela would spend time hanging out on the street. Since her boyfriend often had to work on weekends, she did not have a fixed schedule on Sunday, but would usually attend church service in the morning. Sometimes when her boyfriend did not have to work on weekdays, they would have breakfast together in the restaurants near where she lived during the time Angela is expected to shop for food.

Angela's relationship with her boyfriend was significant in showing the changes in her attitude towards marriage. The following sub-section would investigate these perception changes of Angela and other IDWs during their work in Hong Kong.

Perceptions on Relationship and Marriage

Changes in perception create new meanings in the migrant work journey of IDWs, and make their work journey more meaningful to their life. The marriage perceptions of IDWs are affected by their marriage and cross-cultural working experiences, as well as socialization they experienced in Indonesia before they come.

I witness both changes and continuities in their marriage perception. Since marital status constitutes Indonesian's adulthood (O'Shaughnessy 2006:218), and hence personhood, I contend that changes and continuities in marriage perception alter IDWs' view of their selfhood, hence their evaluation of their work abroad.

Below I would use Angela and Winnie as illustrations of how perceptions on marriage and relationships may change during IDWs' stay in Hong Kong.

Angela

Angela's overseas work experience provides a chance for her to reframe her conceptualization towards romantic relationship and marriage. This was shown on how she treated the relationship with her boyfriend. She asserted, "I never consider marrying him. My mum would not allow me. She said I can date him, but don't marry him."

Angela's discourse reveals that her attitude on romantic relationship and marriage has become different from the mainstream attitude in Javanese society. The Javanese view on courtship and marriage has been affected by at least three factors: the social-educational changes, state policies, and prevailing religious teachings. Smith-Hefner's study concludes that modern courtship and romance among the younger Javanese generation is characterized by the celebration of individual choice and freedom embedded in Western modernity, while such freedom is constrained by "rival and more encompassing visions of self and sexuality" (2005:459). These less individualistic visions are shaped and reinforced by the cultural and religious values in the Javanese surroundings. Both Muslim and Christian value sexual pleasure and sexuality as God-given and intrinsically good, but sexuality has to be confined to marriage in order to realize such goodness (2005:454). Therefore, a romantic relationship should ideally proceed to marriage, as extra-marital affairs may happen easily in a prolonged relationship, which would be a disgrace. Getting married is a moral ideal for lovers. Predominantly Muslims consider marriage as the goal of courtship. Christians also share similar views.

In this sense, the attitude of Angela challenged this typical standard. On one hand, staying in Hong Kong makes her free of the potential criticism she might face at home. On the other hand, it was only under specific temporal and spatial condition of her overseas work that would enable her to plunge into this relationship. It was

cross-cultural and destined to be short-lived – as Angela explicitly said she did not wish to stay in Hong Kong for long. Moreover, the fact she was once married with a daughter already brought her social status as an adult, meaning she does not suffer from the pressure to seek marriage for fulfilling this social rite signifying maturity.

Angela's relationship manifests her own realization of marriage's meaning to her. For ordinary young women in Java, marriage may seem necessary culturally as it constitute social membership. Financial and emotional input and reward are also evident in marriage. However for Angela, her overseas experience enables her to self-sustain financially. And without the social pressure of marriage, she sought for a relationship that gives her emotional support and happiness, which does not necessarily come with a marriage.

She expressed the following view on relationship, "When two people are together and happy, that's it." In such relationship, to marry or not is unimportant. Her attitude on love, courtship and marriage obviously broke the traditional code of a "good" relationship, yet it means to her emotional support and company, which is more substantial to her than the possible criticism from her homeland.

Winnie

The case of another IDW, Winnie, revealed the fluidity and complexity in analyzing the changes and continuities in marriage perception. She also offered many interesting comments on Javanese marriage and gender relations.

Winnie, who was now single, divorced her husband in 2005 before she worked abroad due to her husband's infidelity. She provided some remarkable comments on the gender situation in Indonesia. Contrary with the norm of arranged marriage, Winnie and her husband were high school schoolmates:

> *"We were boyfriend and girlfriend for 4 years. But I don't know why. Maybe people change. Our life is boring. I am not good looking, [and] another girl is better- looking. Love can change very fast."*

Then I asked Winnie about how common men have girlfriends outside their marriage, Winnie answered,

> *" Yes it is common. When my husband went outside, he could talk to another girl because she was better-looking than his wife. It was different from [how] the Chinese men [behave]. But because Indonesians are Muslims, men can have more than one wife. They can have two to three wives. If my husband had enough money and I allowed him to do so, he could marry another wife…If the first wife allows, the man can marry more wives, as many as ten is also fine."*

I asked for clarifications as I remembered Muslim law only allowed man to marry four wives at maximum. Winnie replied by commenting that those men who have married ten wives "*are really bad men*". Most Indonesian men who practice polygamy would not marry more than four. The man has to ensure all the wives are in good terms with each other and treat everyone equally. If the wife is not happy with the husband's decision to have another wife, she can divorce him:

> *"Some women like this Muslim law but some don't. It is different for everyone. For example, I personally don't like my husband to have two wives. But now things have changed. Indonesia doesn't have enough men. People like one man to look after five women. Some other women do not want this - Why do I have to share my man with other women? Other women are okay with their man having 2-3 wives as long as the man pays for their living. But I don't want that. I would rather live alone."*

In Winnie's response, she tended to separate her own situation with the general or conditions about an issue. She talked about for her as a Muslim, marriage is necessary for woman. But when asked about how she see marriage after her divorce, she replied,

> *" At first it (marriage) was really necessary for me. But after my husband turned bad (find another woman), I decided to move away. I have no intention of starting another family."*

However, 3 months after my first conversations with Winnie, I saw her posting a video featuring a man and herself on her Facebook wall. There were captions like “miss you” and “waiting for you”, and a lot of heart icons in the video. Curiously, I asked Winnie whether she was in a new relationship. It turned out that the man in the video was her ex-husband. He has returned to their relationship, but was now working abroad in Africa. Winnie apparently felt excited and considered reconciling with him.

Winnie’s responses highlighted the fluidity of one’s marriage perception. Indeed, the working abroad experience contributed to perception change. During her time in Hong Kong she grew more confident about her ability to support herself and her family. However, though regarding marriage less important, it still seemed easier to start it all over with her ex-husband, whom she had genuinely loved in the first place.

In fact, Winnie described her husband as a “naughty boy” (in English) when she referred to the fact that he had two wives. Yet, her latter reconciliation with him reflects Winnie’s tolerance. Her description on her husband coincided with Geertz’s report in *Javanese Family* on people using the word *nakal* to describe man’s sexual promiscuity. Sixty years after the book’s time, the impression of man being naturally susceptible to sexual seduction was still prominent among Indonesian women.

I also asked Winnie about her view and feeling towards lesbian relationship among IDWs she knew:

> *“I feel guilty and embarrassing when I look at them. But they have reasons why they are doing that way.If my husband hurt me [more], I may also do that. They may have broken up with their husbands too. They need people to look after each other. [They are) away from their parents, their bosses are not good to them. But another friend is helping. They feel lonely, but they find another friend in the similar situation. Then their love grows. I feel guilty [for them] when I look at them but I also know how women feel. I can’t treat them unfairly. I can’t think they are bad doing that way. I can’t do this. Because we are all women, I know how they feel.”*

The experience of Winnie above revealed two things. First, a great discrepancy is observed between Winnie's personal feeling and the religious teachings she received. The discrepancy has perceivably widened during her time working in Hong Kong but she also developed the skill to make the two compatible. In the first conversation about her marriage, although she lost faith on her husband from her heart-breaking marriage experience, her religious mentality reiterated the importance of marriage to her. That was a deep consciousness in the prominence of marriage, which Winnie managed to compromise with the current decision for her to remain single while she worked abroad.

In another conversation about lesbian women, Winnie separated her own feeling with the Muslim point of view of treating homosexual relationship as sinful. Her discourse expressing that despite the embarrassment she had, she empathized on the situation of the lesbian women she knew. Her experience in Hong Kong had in fact made her more tolerant towards behavior, which she might disdain initially (e.g. homosexual relationship). Overseas working experience has opened Winnie's mind on other forms of committed relationship, though which she had not totally accept still.

Complexity and Fluidity in Marriage Perception

Winnie's perception on marriage reflected greater room of negotiation for obliging religious principle with exercising of agency, in the scenario of a cross-cultural overseas work site. On the other hand, her consideration of reconciliation with her husband reflects the fluidity of one's perception change in response to the situation. It is inferable that such fluidity persisted during Winnie's working abroad journey and that of other IDWs.

In fact, all of the IDWs who experienced divorce, marriage and new relationships in Hong Kong manifested certain changes in how they look at marriage, while some deep-rooted perceptions still persisted. For instance, Kate, who took escape from an arranged marriage, still regarded marriage as essential to woman.

She introduced to me that in traditional Javanese belief, if the younger daughters in the family got married before the eldest one, the eldest one would have to wait for a much longer time to come across her Mr. Right. That happened with

Kate's younger sister. Now that Kate has got married, she expressed that her marriage now with her long-dated boyfriend was a result of good *Yuen Fen*.

Apparently, Kate has inscribed the meaning of *Yuen Fen*, which is a concept in Chinese culture, in her own worldview system. The word *Yuen Fen* was made compatible with Muslim religion. Kate's Chinese was mostly learned from watching television programs at home. Her use of such word reflects her assimilation to Chinese culture. Although the meaning of such word may be partly compatible with guidance of the Islamic god, the original meaning of *Yuen Fen* itself has affected her perception on marriage.

Another interesting point shared by Kate, Winnie, Rose and many IDWs is the signifincance of marriage to a person. Despite setbacks in relationships, marriage's importance still seems to be invincible to many IDWs.

The cultural foundation behind such inviolable perception is in fact complex. Deeply rooted in the Javanese culture, the primary social structure was the nuclear family made up of a husband, a wife and offspring (Geertz 1961:78). Therefore, not entering marriage means social exclusion from the community, and lowered social status from the structural emphasis of the society. At least in the 1950s, most adults in Java are married (Geertz 1961:77). This has not changed in the New Order period of Suharto's rule, which uses marriage as a tool to control loyal citizens (O'Shaughnessy 2006:42). Marriage was portrayed as "a spiritual and physical union between a man and a woman as husband and wife for the purpose of creating a happy and eternal family based on the One and Only God." (2006:44). IDWs (e.g. Winnie) also used the Muslim discourse to justify the importance of marriage. With the multiple influences from religion, state policies and cultural roots, IDWs reflects continuities and persistence on their marriage perception, despite conspicuous changes observed.

Escape

Escape from failed or undesirable relationships and the community criticism that follows is another reason of working abroad that creates meanings for IDW's journey. Kate came to work in Hong Kong to avoid getting married as she thought she was too young for it. As for Rose, the distressing fact that her boyfriend got married with another girl contributed as one of the important reasons for Rose's departure to Hong Kong. She told me another story about her mother, who has worked overseas as

a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia since Rose and her siblings were kids. Her sister that was much younger than her mistook Rose as her mother since she played the role of a caretaker to them. When I asked Rose why her mother has been out working abroad for so long, Rose suggested her mother did so in order to avoid hearing the community's criticisms. The neighbors' opinion has been accusing her of not taking care of her children and the household, hence not fulfilling a mother's responsibility. Likewise, Rose also showed a mixed feeling between longing and reluctance to returning home too. On the one hand she missed her family members; on the other, she was worried about community criticize her for her divorce and irresponsibility as a caretaker.

Even though the divorce rate has already reached 50% in 1950s Java (O'Shaughnessy 2006:40), in such society where marriage was held to high regard, divorce has continuously attracted social criticisms. In the Suharto period, the state has tried to manipulate marriage activities. One endeavor was the enactment of The Marriage Law (UU1/1974).

The law has stated the aim of marriage as "to create a happy, eternal and prosperous family", this law works to restrict the occurrences of divorce, rather than enabling it (ibid:43). Legal procedures disapprove acts of divorce from its structural premises. Society's opinion laid pressure on couples that are thinking of divorce and those who have already divorced.

Last time when Rose went back to Indonesia, she already heard people gossiping about her relationship with her husband. She could only repeatedly assert herself not to put their words in mind. Indeed, working abroad in Hong Kong gives IDWs personal space freed from cultural stigmatizations they would face in Indonesia. However, once they got back to Indonesia, they were still confronted with the same criticism and prejudice on stigmatization around divorce, and moral expectations for a wife and mother. The fear for going back kept them distant from their loved ones. Since almost all the domestic workers are to return to Indonesia one day, their hope is save up the abundant financial resources, hoping it would help them gain social status upon their return, through means like building more glamorous houses or doing local business.

In a nutshell, this section focuses on the changes and continuities in the IDWs' marriage or family status and the related value orientations during their stay in Hong

Kong. Their long stay means that this foreign land has become the stage for many important life incidents and critical moments in the life of IDWs.

The perception changes, brought about by changes in life course, or affected by the cultures in their working country, are meaningful to the life of the IDW as a whole, exerting influence even after her journey ends. From the analyses above, overseas experience seemed to have challenged their perception on gender and marriage.

Nonetheless, some deep-rooted perceptions, such as the importance of marriage to woman, are firmly held by the IDWs and less inclined to change. Also, other perception changes may gradually become less conspicuous, subject to the cultural and environmental impact of their hometown. To avoid conflict between these changes in life and values, and the social expectations in her home country/hometown, some IDWs would consider her persistent stay in Hong Kong as an escape from the social constraints she would live within upon her return to Indonesia.

Some IDWs showed their embrace of neoliberal values such as autonomy of self and independence. Yet in the course of this paper, I find freedom a term with contested meanings among my informants. In the following section, meanings concerning freedom would be investigated with discourses from IDWs.

Pursuit of Freedom

Freedom provides space for the exploration and creation of meanings. The term “working abroad” itself gives a lot of room for fantasy related to freedom and new experience. For some IDWs, working abroad means freeing from the cultural bondage they were subject to in Indonesia. The diverse culture of Hong Kong appeals to some IDWs who have assimilated herself into the global entertainment culture. However, this section also attempts to show that IDWs’ long working hours and exploitation of labor rights perpetuated by unjust policies have curbed their freedom. In addition, working abroad brings IDWs into an environment surrounded by new sets of cultural assumptions that can make them vulnerable.

Sally

Clear enough, Sally stated she came to Hong Kong and earned money for her own sake. Once a factory worker in Jakarta, she thought Hong Kong had a better working environment. She did not have holidays when she was working in Indonesia because holidays were "only for [high-ranked] government officials". Most workmen had to ask the employer specifically for a holiday. Also, she did not feel very homesick working overseas, because even when she was working in Jakarta, she could only go home once a month. Comparatively, work in Hong Kong was lighter than in Jakarta. She considers her life better than friends at home and perecieved that she has more freedom.

When I mentioned her vividly dyed hair, she laughed soundly and apparently felt happy that I noticed it. She was particularly enthusiastic when comparing fashion in Indonesia and Hong Kong:

> *"In Indonesia you have to wear shorts that cover your knees at least. Because exposing your thigh was too sexy. Indonesia men tend to have filthy eyes on women. A woman's mother would not be pleased if she dresses too sexily."*

But in Hong Kong, Sally was not in these restrictions and wearing shorts is no longer a problem. She thought it was good to gain new experiences in Hong Kong and to know how people in other countries live. She asserted that she would still choose to come to Hong Kong if got to choose again.

Kate

Every Sunday, Kate could not be contented without volleyball. Taking up roles such as volleyball referee, match organizer and player, she was in charge of the Indonesian team in an organization called Komunitas Volleyball BMI HK. The organization held matches occasionally between Filipino and Indonesian domestic helpers, and would make bookings on volleyball courts to let friends enjoy the game every week.

The first time I interviewed Kate was one of her rare match-off days, when she could sit relaxingly with her friends, chat and have snack at Victoria Park. Kate and her friends were passionate in telling me what IDWs could do on Sunday. They introduced me various activities organized by the Indonesian Consulate, including

cosmetic classes, English classes and dancing classes. The community of IDWs in Hong Kong organized many activities for themselves as well, such as aerobics class, Taekwondo mass practices, art class and beauty pagans.

In another conversation, Kate talked about her different foci in life in a week's time:

> *"Monday to Saturday is my working life. That is why I am here (Hong Kong). While Sunday, is my day of freedom[…] Every day - Monday to Saturday - is exactly the same... Not only me, my friends said the same too: the happiest thing is to wait for Sunday. After Wednesday and Friday pass, we feel time suddenly goes fast."*

Freedom: Contested Meanings

Freedom is what brings meanings in their work for both Kate and Sally. However, their discourses on freedom focus on different aspects.

Sally's freedom refers more to the liberation from Indonesian cultural constraints. Working abroad gives her the chance to live an alternative lifestyle and break some cultural taboos, such as the modest dress code. This is not limited to appearance. They also enjoy the liberation from gendered moral code exerted on women. This is a change resulted from cultural changes in an overseas work environment.

Considering cultural bondage, Kate likewise avoided the marriage obligation on her young age through coming to Hong Kong. However, Kate felt her freedom more on Sundays after doing her mundane weekdays' work. Her free day provides her meanings outside her motive to come. In her discourse, her chief motive for coming is to work – as what she is doing over the week. She earns monetary reward but the process of working is often not enjoyable. Sunday was the only time when she can engage in events that she was genuinely interested in, which gives her satisfaction not evaluated in monetary terms. But that further reflects her life during the week was not free comparatively, though the working days make up the bulk of the time she stayed.

It depicts a vivid dilemma for IDWs in Hong Kong: though many different lifestyles are exposed to them in a neoliberal society, their time and freedom to pick such choices are actually very limited, due to their long working hours and few

holidays. Laws and policies structurally contributed to limit the freedom of IDWs. The live-in requirement mandates foreign domestic workers to live with their employers and sets this as one of the requirements for visa application (Amnesty HK 2013:6). Living under the same roof, IDWs have no official work and rest hours in their working days and are basically on call 24 hours a day, having little privacy and space for own life after work. In a survey done by Amnesty Hong Kong, 56 out of 94 IDW informants replied they did not have their own room in their working household (ibid: 6). This is a serious breach of privacy and freedom in their daily life, apart from the rare day-offs they get by the end of the week.

Different laws and policies not only curb the freedom of IDWs, but also reflect the mindset of treating them as second-class residents in Hong Kong. Examples of such policies include the live-in requirement, unfair minimum wage, and the "two-week" rule upon the termination of contract[1]. Among them, the "two-week rule" in particular increases the job-seeking urgency and IDWs' dependence on the agency to find jobs, posing a higher threat of exploitation through expensive agency fee and acceptance of jobs that do not suit the IDWs' expectations (Amnesty HK 2013:7). It also makes the IDWs less inclined to speak up and thus more vulnerable upon abuse and exploitation from their employers, for the fear of losing their job and not finding a new one immediately.

To sum up, freedom has been a contested concept in the life of IDWs. While some of the IDWs considered a break with the Indonesian cultural constraints they disapproved of, the lengthy working hours and other exploitative policies obstruct their exercise of freedom on the other hand.

Satisfaction and Regrets

There are two kinds of opinion I heard from my informants. Some considered coming to Hong Kong a wise choice she had made. One informant, Sally, who loved shopping and admired Korean stars, expressed the most distinct attitude regarding her life in Hong Kong better than that of her friends in Indonesia; in fact, "more than better".

[1] Foreign domestic workers must seek a new job and apply for a new working VISA within 2 weeks, or she would have to leave the Hong Kong territory (Amnesty HK 2013:6).

With technological advancement facilitating overseas communications, working abroad does not always mean a halt of social ties in Indonesia. For instance, the relationship between Winnie and her ex-husband still progressed despite the distance, so did that of Kate and her husband. Many other IDWs informants actually expressed frequent communications between them and their family members in Indonesia, ranging from everyday to once a few weeks. The high accessibility of communication technologies free-of-charge has made long-distant communications easier.

Still, a number of my IDWs informants expressed regrets over working abroad. Relationship constituted a large part of their regrets. Isabel, who got married three years ago when she was 22, said she managed to maintain good relationship between her and her husband whom she always contacted. But if she could choose again, she would not choose to be a domestic worker overseas, because she wanted to stay with her parents and family. She was going back to Indonesia within one month on our day of interview, and thought she would not come work again.

Rose, who had a mother who also work overseas and was now a mother herself, found a circular repetition on relationships:

> *[Eyes going red] "I was never close with my mum. She has been working in Saudi since I was very young. It seems I don't know my mum,like my daughter and I. Since my daughter was 2 years old I began working here, thus I did not seem to know her even when I saw her face to face. My mum and I was the same with my daughter and me. If I were able to choose again, I won't come. People say, in bringing up their children, the early years are most important. People say it is inappropriate for a mother not to take care of her infants by herself but work outside instead. If a child stayed with her/his mother when s/he was little (explained: before turning ten), the child would listen to her mother, and would not turn bad when s/he grows up."*

Rose's story showed repeated history between two generations. Her mother sustained the living of Rose's family at the expense of her relationship with them. Rose followed the same path of working overseas after her marriage, due to the low-

waged occupation opportunities resulted from undercurrents in Indonesian economy. The misery of family separation recurred across generations.

I asked Rose to rank the two most important things in life, among options such as career, family, friends, money, religion, dream, happiness, etc. or whatever she could think of. At last she picked family and health as the two things she treasured most. Then I asked, "Is there one specific family member that you think is most important to you?" She picked her father, explaining, "if I lost my dad I can't have another one. But if I don't have my daughter, I can give birth to another."

Rose did not mean to downplay her daughter's importance to her, but to stress her father's irreplaceable significance to her life. Still, from this we may imagine the loose bonding between Rose's daughter and her, and her father's importance likewise. Since her mother left Rose when she was little, her father has been the one responsible for taking care of Rose. This further explained why her father's wish for her to get married is so influential to Rose's decision on marriage.

However, Rose knew her daughter wanted her to go back, and she in fact cared about her daughter very much. She told me every time when her daughter talked on the phone with her, her daughter just held the phone and remained silent, not saying a word. Yet, when her daughter's birthday approached, she asked her daughter, "What do you want me to buy you?" Her daughter replied, "I don't want anything. I just want you to come back."

Several times she changed her Whatsapp icon into a photo of her daughter, with heart decorations around. The lost time between her and her daughter is a pity unredeemable. She wanted to love her daughter more and watch her grow. Yet, endorsing the extension of contract one after another, it seemed it is more sensible for her to work abroad than staying home, taking care of her own family and not earning a penny. Deeply missing her daughter, still, Rose expected to work for a few years more, not knowing when exactly she would go back.

Self-Enterprising Projects

In this section, I examine how IDWs become neoliberal subjects that are presumed to be self-determined and autonomous in choosing to work abroad, analyzing the benefits and bearing risks. Yet, their life planning is deployed by the state as means of boosting the national economy without their conscious knowing.

IDWs making money, to pave her way for a better future either for herself or for her family, consider working abroad as a rational choice. However, the outcome of and the life during their work abroad are usually different from what they expected.

Responsibilization

In the neoliberal age, governance relies on predisposing individuals to undertake responsibility for their actions, instead of authoritative means. Previous central governments exercised top-down command and make social actors obedient to the rules set by the government. Contrarily, neoliberal responsibilization assumes an individual has "a moral agency which is congruent with the attributed tendencies of economic-rational actors: autonomous, self-determined and self-sustaining subjects" (Shamir 2010:7). These subjects are able to "rationally assess the costs and benefits of a certain act as opposed to other alternative acts", and proving their moral quality from doing so (Lemke 2001: 201). Their expression of free will and self-determination make them solely responsible for the consequences of their actions, and the costs of their decisions.

The below analysis would examine how the IDW's decision of working abroad becomes an action of neoliberal responsibilization, creating neoliberal subjects under state influence. As investigated in section 5.1, almost all the IDWs work for their family to different extent, either for their nuclear (if married) or natal family. Single women have a higher tendency to work for their own future. Working abroad is a self-enterprising activity, in which individuals are cultivated with the moral agency to self-develop and be responsible for one's own future well-being, within the limits of conduct set by the state.

Kate and Sally are examples of IDWs treating their migrant work as self-enterprising projects. When asked why she come to work abroad at such a young age of 16, she recounted it this way:

> *"I was poor in Indonesia. By "poor", I don't mean I had nothing to eat, nothing to drink, nowhere to live or to sleep… but as I grew I realized I needed more stuff. I was still young that there was a long, long future ahead of me. So when there was a chance I could work abroad, why should I not grasp it?!"*

Escaping poverty and working for a better future seems to be the drive of Kate's overseas work. Not only herself, but also her family, are stuck in the "poverty" she described. Working abroad is a long and uneasy path she chose for seeking upward mobility.

Another IDW, Sally, considered the greatest reason to work is to work for herself, rather than her family. Her family has asked her to return to Indonesia and get married but she refused. For her, marriage means less freedom and she did not want to get married. Concerning money, Sally remarked that in Indonesia she could only earn less than $1000 a month, yet in Hong Kong, the salary exceeded $4000, which was more than four times of that in Indonesia. She was also satisfied with the freedom she enjoyed in Hong Kong because she could dress freely, ignoring the moral dress code in Indonesia.

It is worthy of notice that the "poverty" Kate described does not mean a deprivation of basic material needs. Rather, it is more of a comparisons with the wealthier classes in society and her family. Sally and several other IDWs I interviewed also talked about building new houses with the money they earned from working abroad. Some mentioned that when they see others building new houses that were so beautiful, they aspired in building the same decent houses too. The trend of Indonesian women and men working overseas have apparently aggravated the wealth disparity between the goers and non-goers, making Indonesians consider it as a normal way to attain a more affluent lifestyle. Working overseas is a rational choice and a due chance to be grasped.

Similarly, those who primarily work for their family took family welfare in consideration when assessing whether to come work or not. They often have a rational evaluation on the worthiness of overseas work. An informant, Agnes, insisted her working abroad was a decision of her own, rather than prompted by external forces. She worked abroad to pay her younger brother and sister's tuition fee. Proudly, she told me her siblings have all graduated from university, and her sister was a secondary school teacher now. She admitted that she sometimes envied her sister for having the opportunity to study in university whereas she worked abroad. Nonetheless, she comforted herself that it is her high wage had enabled her siblings to achieve. She was pleased that she was the main financial support to her siblings' high tuition fee,

and the money she saved up would allow her to make a business when she went back to Indonesia.

Risk-bearing Subjects

I contend that Indonesian women become neoliberal subjects that alone bear the risks of their decision to come and during their stay in Hong Kong. In neoliberal age, self-enterprising individuals sometimes "embrace risk as a marker of their 'freedom' within a cultural ethos that we identify as neoliberal." (Anagnost 2013:12) The struggle Kate had when she was about to embark on the overseas work journey corresponds with the image of a risk-bearing subject:

> *" Still, before I came I was scared of leaving my family for a long time. I doubted whether I could overcome the separation. I made the decision alone, and I sought my family's permission afterwards. My parents warned me that the job would be arduous, and there were news reports about foreign domestic workers being ill-treated and abused."*

Despite her worries and parents' warnings, Kate decided to take on the risks after some considerations. The desire for escaping poverty and a better future outweighed the risks and gave her sufficient motivations, among push factors such as the marriage obligation she wanted to evade. Without pressing economic conditions, the chance to work abroad was perceivably a free choice that Kate grasped, for which she accepted the risks that came along. Embracing risks in their work was one of the ways IDWs exercise their subjectivity in the course of self-determined decision making.

Neoliberal Subjectivity and the State

The state plays a crucial role in fostering, backing up while restricting the actions of neoliberal subjects. Foucault's concept, governmentality, depicts power not as a denial of the vitality or ability of individuals, but as "the creation, shaping, and utilization of human beings as subjects" (Rose 1996:151). The promotion of contemporary values we consider vital – such as autonomy, fulfillment, responsibility,

choice…. which we pursue and exercise with initiative, are media used by the state and diverse authorities to permeate its invisible control on individual's life and conduct, in order to "avert evils and achieve such desirable states as health, happiness, wealth, and tranquility" (ibid.:152). This political dimension of authority's control through the exercise of individual subjectivity is called governmentality.

Scholars have employed the concept of governmentality both to illustrate the execution of top-down political power through state policies, and also the "mundane, everyday practices involved in producing subjects" acting in accordance with the will of the authority (Rudnyckyj 2004:412).

Although no rules are set to mandate Indonesians to work overseas, state policies of Indonesia have encouraged migrant work. In 1983, Indonesia's Centre for Overseas Employment was established to serve the following goals: "(1) to expand employment opportunities of Indonesian workers; (2) to increase the income of Indonesian workers; (3) [to] increase national income through foreign exchange revenue, and; (4) to foster closer relationships among Indonesia and other countries" (Adi 1995:131, as cited in Silvey 2004:251). Consequently, the Department set up a target of sending 1,250,000 workers overseas between 1994 and 1999 (Silvey 2004:251). Migrant workers have brought immense revenue to the government thorough overseas remittances. In 2009, financial remittances from migrant workers exceeded foreign aid and accounted for one-third of total foreign direct investment (Chan 2014:6955). They have become heroes/heroines of state economy.

The government does not manage the outflow of migrant workers through direct supervision, but private, government-approved agencies, which send brokers into the rural areas to find potential recruits. The Article 10 of Indonesian *Law No. 39/2004 Concerning the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Overseas Workers* required Indonesian to apply through private, government-approved recruitment agencies for working as domestic workers abroad (Hong Kong Helpers Campaign 2014). As analyzed in Rudnyckyj's study, the brokers' recruitment relies much on the patron-client networks, in which "clients willingly consent to exploitation by higher-status patrons with the expectation that the patron will ensure the livelihood of the client in the event of hardship" (Rudnyckyj 2004:414). Thus, without strong intervention of the state but indirect regulations, the local "moral economy" made Indonesian women willing to bear the hardships and risks of family separation and the tough training

provided by the training centres, with the belief that these brokers would lead her to a job that guarantees better economic prospect for herself and her family.

Government's regulation is present again in the training program each applicant has to go through. Every applicant has to attend a short state run training program that lasts a few days to ensure the applicant possesses the basic skills for domestic work overseas. The responsible institution is the Bureau of Labor Training. Subsequently, in the process of attaining passport and visa, human resource companies are said to give bribes to the offices of the Indonesian government for the convenience of committing illicit deeds, such as faking the age of applicants on their ID cards such that under-aged girls can also pass the screening. The government was said to have an informal relationship with these state-approved human resource companies and together facilitated the outflow of domestic workers.

While waiting the immigration papers to process, future domestic workers underwent rigid training in the human resource companies. Rudnyckyj maintained that state-approved training centres used technologies of servitude aiming at turning rural women into self-disciplined docile servants. These "rationalities that are intended to endow these women with the capacities necessary to conduct domestic labor" (Rudnyckyj 2004:419) such as tight training schedules, score sheets and harsh standard and instill trainees with the codes of conduct, attitude and behavior as a domestic worker abroad. The state-ordered mandatory participation in these training centres is a means to cultivate self-discipline and docility. The technologies in the recruitment process and the pre-departure training shaped Indonesian women to be governable subjects suitable for domestic labor transnationally.

Last but not the least, the gendered hierarchy in the mass media and government's discourse exerted self-surveying obligations to IDWs overseas. Revealed in Carol Chan's research (Chan 2014), the discourses of the Indonesian state and mass media often evaluate Indonesian migrant women with "gendered moral hierarchies", while presenting them as heroines of state development (ibid:6959). They do this by broadcasting cases of abuse and maltreatment overseas. A gendered moral expectation was laid on the IDWs through distinguishing those "moral" workers worthy of public attention and assistance, from those who are immoral and hence deserve the offense. These hierarchies of Indonesia's gendered morality that links migration "with the fulfillment of religious and familial duties" (ibid:6957),

compelling the IDWs to self-discipline and act on par with the standard behavior of good mothers, daughters and wives.

These gendered moral expectations, present both in the state discourse and the Indonesian social arena, are useful for the analysis of the meanings of work IDW has in their work abroad. While the motivation of being a good woman to support the living of the family drive them to be migrant workers, another more vital element of being the caretaker of the family is often compromised. The overseas distance make IDWs unable to fulfill the emotional work in the household. As shown in the previous sections, though many IDWs have endeavored to compensate for their long leave using communications technology, shouldering the major sum of family expenses and sending money or gifts back home, some still feel indebted to their family members, be it daughters, sons or parents, to be away from home and not taking care of them, for instance, the cases of Rose and Winnie. The IDWs' subjectivity in choosing to come was followed by invisible regulations from gendered expectations.

The decision to work overseas, based on one's subjective free will, is not solely driven by self-initiated ends, but entrenched in the background of state promotion of migrant work for the hope of reviving national economy, and the transnational global migrant workers market. As a technique of governance, the construction of moral agency is the condition for making a self-enterprise subject (Shamir 2008:7). Individuals on the one hand are motivated by the moral obligation to work for one's future or support the family. On the other hand, state policies create lots of opportunities and incentives for Indonesians to work abroad, making migrant work ordinary choice for many. Overseas work appears to be a moral and responsible decision to earn money and support themselves and others. Migrant work becomes a rational solution for personal and familial problems, yet the government's responsibilities on local economic condition and the effort it needs to make are cloaked and neglected.

State's subtle use and control of individual's subjectivity neglect the risks and sacrifice borne and made by the IDWs. Facilitation from the state and agencies, as well as the social atmosphere of Indonesia, often leads the IDWs to miscalculate the cost they have to pay for their overseas expedition.

Conclusion

> *"These logics (globalization, economic restructuring) open new spaces and create new kinds of actors who are often multiply located in competing regimes of value and whose daily practices are caught up in negotiating the ruptures between them."* (Anagnost 2013:9)

This essay has sought to investigate the meanings in life of IDWs in two dimensions: first, the meanings they find in life when they are working abroad; second, what their long working expedition means to their life path as a whole.

Their motivations to work abroad were neither purely a self-initiated one, nor entirely compelled by situation. Economic conditions in Indonesia, gendered obligations in the family, and their responsibility to self-enterprise are major reasons they work abroad. The meaningfulness of the work journey depends on how these goals are fulfilled. The freedom to make choices highlights the feature of a neoliberal society where individuals are solely responsible for one's decision of life planning. Yet, marriage obligations, poor family conditions, and national economic downturn, are structures impeding Indonesian woman's agency in making their decision to work abroad.

The job as a domestic worker was made meaningful through achieving certain goals they expected from their work, like supporting their children to school, saving money for own sake, and building a new house. However, during the course of their overseas journey, things that happened out of their expectations, for instance, divorce, marriage, and weakened ties with family members altered the meaningfulness of their work here. The shifting meanings of marriage to them during their work abroad alter the way women evaluate themselves and how they think of their womanhood. These changes in perception would last even after the women leave their jobs, affecting their relationship with their family. Also, their enhanced economic power after they work overseas brings them higher social status in their community. Nonetheless, part of these impacts may be short-lived, as returned IDWs are re-exposed to the value judgments from their neighbors and gendered expectations from her family. Still, the changes induced carry long-term significance.

The freedom from value judgments in Indonesia society is one thing that brings meaningfulness to the IDWs, yet the work environment and regulations in

Hong Kong restrict the freedom they can exercise, without adequate safeguard of their rights at the same time. It seems rare that IDWs find the most meaningful part of their working abroad journey from the work itself, though many still deem taking care of elderly and children meaningful. Some IDWs saying their cared-for remind them of their loved ones (e.g. own children) marks the high regard of family values for the speakers. The motivations behind their work, no matter for family or themselves, still constitute the most meaningful elements of their journey.

Government control does not only exist in the solid form of policies, but also as the "invisible hand" encouraging IDWs to work abroad. The perceived freedom in the age of neoliberalism requires individuals to be solely responsible for the consequences. The outsiders such as neighbors in community, and even the IDW herself are often unaware of the involuntary part in their choice making. With the promoted gender ideals and moral expectations, overseas workers bear some unnecessarily high costs of working abroad alone, such as the self-blame for being unable to take care of children, and the working woman's responsibility for marriage failure. The counterfeit autonomy embedded in state manipulation for macro economic development and the global network of transnational labor attributed disproportionate high costs for an Indonesian woman to work as domestic workers abroad, while the knot of the economic problem and the state's responsibility and incompetence in tackling it are understated.

Fairly speaking, IDWs have both satisfactions and difficulties during their stay in Hong Kong. The money they earned that make them capable in supporting their children/siblings to school, building a new house, buying new electronic devices, and saving money for business or own sake, are concrete, tangible rewards they get from working abroad. At the same time, the difficulties such as prolonged separation with their loved ones and the loneliness that follows are just as hard for many IDWs. The above sections emphasize how Indonesian womanhood concept influences their emotions such as sense of guilt, and meaningfulness they find in their work.

As Anagnost pointed out, "the utopian visions of this era, often invested with ideas of freedom and the promise of self-fulfillment, are also laden with the costs of greater vulnerability and uncertainty" (ibid 2013:4-5). This paper seeks to focus on the life of Indonesian working female community in Hong Kong, through examination of the meanings and meaningfulness IDWs derive from their work expedition, as an illustration on neoliberal subjects negotiating with opportunities and

potential risks on their way to a more promising future. As a large community, variation in background and personal value orientations induce IDWs' different views on their meanings of work. Yet, it needs to be aware that state influence and environmental variables often makes individuals in society face with needless loss and uncertainties, cloaking the root of the socio-economic problem.

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