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Maid to order in Hong Kong: stories of migrant workers (second edition)

Nicole Constable, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2007, 242pp.,
ISBN 978-0-8014-7323-4 (Pbk)

Maid to Order in Hong Kong looks at domestic work historically, locally and contextually, within a capitalist world system. It does so movingly, with tales of individual women who have migrated to improve life for themselves and their families.

In the 1970s, Hong Kong experienced remarkable economic growth. The service sector and the construction industry boomed, and with it came a growing local labour shortage and an increasing number of women joining the workforce. During the 1980s, the wealth of the upper- and middle-class Chinese in Hong Kong increased, while the labour shortage in hospitality and domestic work continued to grow. This situation pushed the government to open doors to women workers from other parts of Asia. At this time, as the economy of the Philippines deteriorated, women aged between 20 and 40 (a third of them having college degrees) began to migrate to work in Hong Kong and other countries.

Nicole Constable tells their story by updating *Maid to Order in Hong Kong* with a focus on the major changes that have taken place since Hong Kong's reunification with China in 1997, the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, and the outbreak of SARS in 2002–2003. She shows how power is expressed in the day-to-day lives of migrant domestic workers.

Since the early 1990s, Hong Kong has experienced economic downturns. The rate of unemployment went up to as high as 6 per cent in 1999 during the Asian financial crisis and 8.7 per cent at the peak of the SARS outbreak. These downturns have had enormous impact on the wage level and working conditions of the working-class as a whole. This changed the needs and patterns of domestic work in Hong Kong, and thus the working conditions of migrant domestic workers there. The wages of migrant maids were reduced during these downturns, when the government was urged to 'protect local jobs' by tightening visa restrictions and making domestic work placements live-in jobs, and further tying these workers' immigration status to their jobs. Meanwhile, the inflow of domestic workers from Mainland China since Hong Kong's handover back to China in 1997 has been much restricted, as it was seen as a way for Chinese workers to seek permanent residency in Hong Kong.

Domestic workers from Indonesia, instead, were seen as a much better option as they were considered docile and as having no intention of settling

permanently in Hong Kong. Therefore, women mainly from the rural part of Indonesia, motivated by a worsening of their economy in the 1990s, began to enter Hong Kong in larger numbers. Today, over 1,20,000 women from the Philippines, over 90,000 women from Indonesia, and thousands more from other parts of South and Southeast Asia are working as maids on two-year contracts in Hong Kong. They are sending much-needed remittances to their families abroad.

Racialization intensified during these economic downturns, particularly when the labour of 'foreign' domestic workers was cheaper and more favoured than the Chinese domestic workers from Mainland China. Increasingly, 'foreign' workers were seen as naturally suited for domestic work. They were dehumanized – treated as no more than foreign commodities, 'furnished' by agencies in their home countries in the first stage of the labour-packaging process, and then 'filtered' and selected by agencies in Hong Kong, who would present past records of these 'products' and ensure that they were 'good value for money' before they were 'hand-picked' by fussy employers. Thus, racist abuse is no doubt a large part of the migrants' working lives in Hong Kong.

Adding to the new edition is research that suggests diverse forms of resistance to the exploitation to which migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are subjected. 'They are not simply subject to institutionalized power', Nicole Constable says, 'Rather, they are implicated in a field of discursive power in which they both contest and contribute to alternative versions of reality' (p. 203). They have ways of circumventing the rules and they practice subtle forms of 'sabotage'. However, these individual ways of presenting their critique of the power structure under which they are exploited have not been able to challenge that structure.

This book is a useful resource for those studying labour migration.

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Sex, culture, and justice: the limits of choice

Clare Chambers; Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA, 2008, 294p, ISBN 978-0-271-03301-3 (Hbk), £37.50

Clare Chambers' aim in this book is to find a way to mesh feminist and postmodernist insights about social constructionism with universalist, liberal principles of freedom and equality to deal with enduring forms of gender inequality and injustice. According to Chambers, previous theoretical attempts by liberals and feminists (she would not regard those categories as mutually