Global cinderellas: migrant domestics and newly rich employers in Taiwan

Pei-Chia Lan, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2006, 304p,
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Global cinderellas: migrant domestics and newly rich employers in Taiwan is the latest and most detailed ethnographic work on migrant domestic labour in Taiwan today. It is set in the context of the growth of migrant domestic labour in newly industrialized countries in East Asia. Increasing numbers of women of middle-class backgrounds (many of whom are what the author Pei-Chia Lan terms 'first-generation career women') are in need of domestic help, to cope with the stress of daytime work and household duties. As the demand for domestic labour has expanded in the South, the integration of the global economy has found the solution by complicating the racial and class divisions of domestic labour on a global scale.

Now the destinations of migration are no longer exclusively toward countries in the North. Now Madams are not white. The author argues that this development challenges the universal claim of 'woman': the emergence of Asian 'madams' versus Asian maids deconstructs the notion of 'Third World Woman', a category assumed to be homogenous in earlier Western feminism. These multi-tiered flows of global migration have displayed inequalities among women in the South.

In the context of the growing privatization of reproductive labour as a global trend, Taiwanese middle-class women outsource their patriarchal duties to the market (many Taiwanese daughters-in-law are using domestic employment to resist the tradition of three-generation cohabitation), whereas migrant women from the Philippines and Indonesia become the major breadwinners of their families. In the power relations between them, women employers in Taiwan and migrant domestic workers are both bargaining with patriarchies in their own ways.

The author demonstrates that the growth of global migration has not weakened the sovereignty of nation-states. Migrant workers are marginalized in the process by a series of legal and political regulations based on the idea of citizenship. In the case of Taiwan, the government has maintained a closed-door policy towards workers from China, but recruits from southeast Asia while imposing harsh restrictions (that prevent southeast Asian workers from seeking permanent residence and changing employers). Thus, the visibility of ethnic boundaries is ensured, and Taiwan's diplomatic leverage with southeast Asian countries is enhanced.

Apart from examining the policy context and institutional mechanisms that set up the migration channels (between Taiwan, the Philippines and Indonesia), the author interestingly researched the perspectives of both employers and migrant

domestic employees. This offers insight into the industrial relations between the two, and shows how these employers and workers develop a range of approaches and strategies in negotiating social distance from each other and reconstructing boundaries between public and private spheres.

The boundary work in these domestic employment relations, the author argues, is situated in the domestic politics of food management (a crucial mechanism by which employers define the marginal status of domestic workers in the family), privacy and home space (deployed as a field of exclusion and incorporation in everyday domestic lives). The author gives a vivid and detailed account of how employers shape their boundaries by highlighting or downplaying hierarchical differences, and how migrant domestic workers respond to these with their various strategies (such as the demand to have their own space and time, as expressed in these words – 'No extracurricular work!' (see p. 226)).

For the author, boundary work is a microcosm of identity politics and class struggle embedded in the global context. That is, she argues, how the personal becomes political and the domestic becomes global. The author herself saw the endless negotiating of the boundaries working when her rented apartment in Chicago was visited by a Polish cleaner one day.

The author depicts how identities and power dynamics work in the daily lives of migrant domestic workers in Taiwan. The class identity of both migrant domestic workers and employers are shaped by the circumstances of transnational class stratification. Although the purchase and consumption of migrant domestic labour is the way the new Taiwanese middle class confirms its upward mobility, the author observes that class identity can be contested and class boundaries made ambiguous, for instance, when the well-educated Filipino maids began to challenge their employers in English (also an indicator of class mobility).

The author conducted part of her research during her fieldwork in a Filipino migrant community as a volunteer teaching Chinese and assisting in case counselling on labour disputes. Her research with Indonesian workers was mainly conducted in her visits to Taipei Railway Station, where the migrants hang out on Sundays. While researching the identities of her interviewees, the author's own interaction with them is itself a refreshing experience to read and an extremely interesting indicator of the power relations experienced by the migrant domestic workers and the complex working of their identity formation. A fascinating read for all those interested in labour migration.

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