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Book Review: *Maids to Order in Hong Kong. Stories of Migrant Workers*

by Nicole Constable, Cornell University Press, 2007, 242 pp.

The book *Maids to Order in Hong Kong. Stories of Migrant Workers* is a result of field research the Author, Nicole Constable, has conducted since mid-1990s. This anthropological and historical study of the lives of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong is based on many sources of data. Constable visited organizations that advocate foreign workers (mutual-aid societies, religious missions, trade unions), met with staff of some employment agencies, talked to government officials and above all, she led many interviews and conversations with maids. As a support to the oral histories and observations she gathered a lot of archival documents: scientific and popular literature, newspapers, articles, editorials, newsletters and papers.

As Constable announces “the first three chapters of this book provide theoretical and historical background and place Filipino domestic workers within the context of wider political economy”. This part of the book presents the reader with an excellent use of the archival data. In the sub-chapter “The Battle of Chatter Road” (p. 3-8), which itself is a good example of discourse analysis, the Author shows how xenophobia, racial and cultural prejudices are supported by media and local establishment because of demographic and economic changes. Next pages inform the reader about the main reason of Filipino migrations to the Hong Kong and “how particular local, cultural and historical factors have influenced attitudes toward Filipino domestic workers and their treatment in Hong Kong today”. What is interesting, is that present attitude toward maids has its roots in the tradition. A lot of Hong Kong's employers still keep in their minds an image of the “ideal” contemporary Chinese servant (amah) who, in the past, was rather a member of a family than a salary worker. No doubt that this symbol serves to control present maids, as it locates this occupation in a specific, cultural context. Thus, one of the main advantages of this part of the book is a strong historical background and multicultural archival data.

The next three chapters describe how employment agencies, government and law regulations control and disciplin foreign domestic workers, how maids become docile; powerless and passive. Investigation of the methods used to discipline their bodies seems to be the most important issue. The Author shows how the process of recruitment and selection is oriented to mold women into docile domestic workers, becoming unconscious victims. “Applicants are fitted into uniforms, examined, photographed, x-rayed, measured and evaluated” (p. 74), thus making the role of a maid fully standarized. Maids have to accept very detailed regulations such as: an obligation to be patient, polite and respectful to all people in a family of the employer, never complain about a salary, never go out without permission or not to attend any

religious rituals other than simple prayer at night (p. 84-85). All these practices turn home workers into “standardized products” for trade. Certainly, the book profits from a very detailed analysis of agencies, employers and government control over domestic workers. Unfortunately, Constable does not describe sufficiently the process of becoming a maid from the point of view of a potential maid. For a one, becoming docile and disciplined has got a processual character, but we do not learn much about this process from the book.

The last three chapters examine everyday forms of maids` docility and resistance. Constable stresses that domestic workers are not simply the subject of institutionalized forms of power. The Author writes: “to regard these woman simply or solely as pressed by those “with power” is to ignore the subtler and more complex forms of power, discipline, and resistance in their everyday lives” (p. 202). Maids are disciplined not only by their employers, agencies or governments but also by themselves. Constable, for example, investigated *Tining Filipino* – popular magazine, written mostly by domestic workers. Many articles suggest workers “should find satisfaction “from within”, rather than address the conditions of their oppression” (p. 187), often invoking personal and national pride, obligations toward (their) family support and of course, debts to pay. Just as docility, resistance may take many forms, from demonstrations and public actions to less overt acts like jokes, pranks or assertive behaviours. The use of humour as a form of therapy symbolically reverses the roles of employers and maids. Being assertive and, for example, taking an advantage of the English language fluency domestic workers can control their employers. The last chapters provide the reader with examples of excellent ethnographical work as the Author concentrates on everyday life and everyday language and investigates different levels and meanings of ordinary behaviours and attitudes. It could be interesting, how problems of domination, docility and resistance are perceived by other side of the “drama” - employers. Yet the Author fails to address this point sufficiently.

Summarizing, in spite of some critics the *Maid to Order in Hong Kong* is an interesting and in many parts an excellent example of ethnographic account of domestic workers everyday lives. I do agree with the opinion placed on the back cover: “This ethnography is an indisputable contribution to both Asian studies and anthropology and a pioneering work in the field of transnational migration studies”. The book is worth recommendation.

Citation

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