(RE-)IMAGINING HOME AND DOMESTICITY—CULTURAL BORDERS AS ARTICULATED IN 1990S HONG KONG DOMESTIC SERVICE HANDBOOKS

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Abstract. Although domestic work is not a novel phenomenon in Hong Kong, the introduction of transnational domestic service in the late 1970s has inexorably transformed the division of household labour. This paper examines the production and proliferation of handbooks aimed at Hong Kong Chinese employers of Filipino domestic workers (officially categorised by the Hong Kong government as “domestic helpers”). In particular, this paper demonstrates that these books were not simply designed to transmit practical advice, but as a pedagogical tool, they were also prescriptive, in that they promoted, affirmed, and justified the continuation of the system and the attitudes preserved therein. Finally, this paper argues that exclusionary borders constructed in the colonial period justified by discriminatory policies of the government are, in this example, reimagined in the post-colonial period in the “home” and advertised under the guise of employment handbooks.

Keywords: Domestic service, Hong Kong, Filipinos, guidebooks, employment agencies, immigration policies, labour, migration, 1990s.

According to the latest figures from the Labour Department of the HKSAR, there are roughly 900 employment agencies registered and operating under the Employment Agency Regulations (Cap 57A) of the Employment Ordinance.¹ The high number giving the impression that there is considerable choice for employers and domestic helpers (hereafter DHs) disguises the fact that only one out of every ten of these companies take up the responsibility of providing full assistance to the DHs before they start their employment in Hong Kong. The most established of these companies have been in operation since the 1980s, initially catering to Western expatriates who were unable to find locals willing to work in domestic service or DHs who were formally educated and spoke English fluently. Since the 1980s the number of employment agencies has ballooned to the extent that it is arguably now an industry in and of itself. Employment agencies form a crucial chain in the “trade” of foreign DHs into Hong Kong and assisting first the colonial, and now the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), government in the facilitation of the necessary immigration procedures by being

¹ Labour Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China, List of licensed employment agencies under the Employment Ordinance (Cap. 57, Hong Kong Laws) as at 30 September 2013 (Hong Kong: Labour Department, 2013). The number of agencies that exist in reality is suspected to be significantly higher if the number of illegal operations that are run from the homes of local housewives and the offices of logistics companies are taken into consideration as well.
the immediate channel through which relevant government bodies, employers and DHs communicate
with one another. The unprecedented development of employment agencies in Hong Kong that
reached new heights in the 1980s streamlined the process for local residents to hire DHs on the one
hand, while legitimised this problematic form of “trade” by actively suggesting that DHs are
indispensable for middle-class households on the other. With domestic service becoming a lucrative
industry, the problems that DHs faced were swept under the rug, or constantly redirected, by
employment agencies and the Labour and Immigration Departments alike.

The monitoring of foreign DHs and the existence of DH-specific immigration policies in
Hong Kong are part of a curious colonial hangover concerning migration from the People’s Republic
of China (PRC) and Vietnam. This is highlighted by the colonial administrative discourse of the
“problem of people”—a phrase coined in the 1940s and subsequently used by government authorities
to address different kinds of demographic problems and to call for methods of control, restriction and
planning particularly from the 1960s to the late 1980s.\(^2\) The prevailing immigration policy that the
postcolonial, HKSAR, government inherited from the British colonial administration has not changed
much in that it continues to be one-sided in its focus on controlling the entry of workers. Further, DHs
are perceived as temporary migrants in that they are not meant to integrate into the society given that
they are not only perceived as a socio-economic threat by potentially taking up the job opportunities’
of local residents, but they are also a threat to the existing socio-cultural order.\(^3\) This is reflected in the
official administrative rhetoric, as well as the positions of local employment agencies and employers’
associations who often see DHs as irreplaceable but also undesirable.\(^4\)

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2 The phrase reached the peak of its popularity in the 1960s when a government booklet was published under

3 Agnes Ku, “Immigration Policies, Discourses and the Politics of Local Belonging in Hong Kong (1950-

4 See Another Employer, letter to the editor, *The South China Morning Post* (hereafter *SCMP*), 23 October
establish a family tradition,” *SCMP*, 20 June 2005. *See also* Hong Kong Employers of Overseas Domestic
Helpers Association, “Submission from the Haong Kong Employers of Overseas Domestic Helpers Association:
Submission on wage cut and the levy on employers of Foreign Domestic Workers (FDW),” *Minutes of Special
Meeting on the Panel on Manpower. 2003. 03.12*, LC Paper Number CB(2)1492/02-03(01).
The expansion of employment agencies in Southeast and East Asia in recent years has attracted a heightened degree of interdisciplinary inquiry, particularly regarding the role that they play in the global phenomenon of the commodification of domestic service and its intersections with cultural and economic activities. To this end, this paper demonstrates how employment handbooks designed for potential employers of Filipino DHs—and later the DHs themselves—primarily in the 1990s can be utilised to add to current understandings of the transformation domestic service in Hong Kong.

**Employment Handbooks at a Glance**

In 2005, one of the last of these handbooks, generously entitled *Quanfangwei zhangkong waiyong* (literally, Comprehensive Management of Foreign DHs, hereafter *QZW*), was published by a certain Irene Ho Ah Wing.\(^5\) The preface of *QZW* begins with a short paragraph reminding local Chinese employers of their indebtedness to foreign DHs. And like other handbooks, a pithy attack on its counterparts did not go amiss: “This book breaks out of the traditional mould by providing perspectives of both employers and DHs to understand potential misunderstandings and come up with solutions for a harmonious existence.”\(^6\)

*QZW* is fairly representative of a type of publication that was, and continues, to be popular. However, these handbooks have all but mysteriously disappeared from the market after the 2000s, and can no longer be found in bookshops in Hong Kong, the PRC or Taiwan. Notwithstanding the fact that many regard these handbooks as being mass-produced and formulaic, this paper maintains that these books offer a testimony of the mentalities of local employers, or at least popular perceptions of them, since they were often marketed to employers, and sometimes they were even written by one. Further, almost any Hong Kong Chinese local who has been an employer has used, or at least has heard of, employment handbooks. By considering these books as literary artefacts, one is able to discern a certain mentality towards domestic service in the 1980s-'90s, and possibly even earlier since the tropes borrowed date back to the colonial period. Indeed, the ambivalences and contradictions are

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5 Ho Ah Wing [何安盈], *Quanfangwei zhangkong waiyong* [Comprehensive Management of Foreign Domestic Helpers] (Hong Kong: Singtao, 2005).

6 Ibid., 6.
evident in these handbooks. Attention to rhetorical detail reveals that the seemingly sympathetic stance towards DHs that these books conveyed was often belied by the inclusion of large amounts of opaque, contradictory, and sometimes discriminatory, material. This is most evident in their frequent presentation of documents in the appendices intended to facilitate the termination of an employment contract and the inclusion of sensationalist case studies from local news outlets, for example.

Content and Distribution: Of Text and Mentality
At least 20 employment handbooks were published in Hong Kong between 1980 and 2005. They are closely related to do-it-yourself manuals written for housewives looking for objective practical advice on household management. A supply-side phenomenon, the employment handbook emerged in response to new forms of consumer demand. Between the 1980s and 1990s, Hong Kong saw an unprecedented increase in the number of wealthy local Chinese residents becoming first-time employers of DHs. These individuals, later becoming the main audience of these handbooks, had some vague notion of what to expect of hired help, but most have not had prior experience of dealing with live-in DHs. Appropriately, employment agencies and even employers of DHs, designed guides by eliminating unnecessary detail, streamlining information and focusing on practical advice that needs to be known, rather than what may be known. For example, after outlining four reasons for the maintenance of good management practices in the household in the first chapter of QZW the author refers to a few cases reported in the news to emphasise that:

“Even though these [cases reported] are isolated incidents, they demonstrate that disputes between employers and DHs can have horrific consequences—the DH can be pushed over the edge and end up taking out her anger on the children, or even perform black magic against her employer—and it is even possible that the employer can get in trouble with the authorities due to unfamiliarity with policies and regulations.”

Completely in a league of their own, these handbooks range from compendia of employment tips to guides for household management techniques. They were designed to be accessible: the idea was not to confuse the reader or to introduce the potential for a multiplicity of interpretations while trying to

7 The Standard Employment Contract (ID407) was officially revised in April 2003 to incorporate a mandatory live-in requirement for all foreign DHs. See Hong Kong (China) Legislative Council Panel on Security, “Panel on Security: Background brief prepared by Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 5 July 2005. Policy governing the employment of foreign domestic helpers,” Minutes of Meeting of the Panel on Security 2005.07.05, LC Paper Number CB(2)2116/04-05(07).

8 Ho, QZW, 12.
handle problematic DHs. The uncertainties of household management and the possibility of employing a “problematic” employee were to be addressed by the manual’s clarity and basis in experience.\(^9\) The books are clearly structured, with sections in the table of contents written in catchy titles drawing attention to the “dangers” of DHs and a variety of “tactics” available to “control” them, for example.\(^10\)

*Shou Ce* (“Handbook”) is a term that is often used to refer to handbooks for quick and reliable advice. The appearance of this term, and other synonymous variations, namely, *tianshu*, *shouze*, *daquan*, *quanshu* in the different titles collected for the research upon which this paper is based, suggests that the authors and/or the organisations to which they are affiliated were promoting themselves as having created the ultimate “decoder” to the “problem” of DH management. The cover of *QZW* is particularly telling (Fig. 1): It features a Rubik’s Cube with the face of a caramel-skinned woman, presumably a DH, which decorates each face of the individual miniature “cubelets.” The Rubik’s Cube is held by a disembodied feminine hand, the pigmentation of which is significantly lighter than that of the DH who is not only separated from the disembodied hand, but is also depicted vacuuming in a stereotypical “maid” uniform.\(^11\) The message conveyed by the illustration is clear: We will help you control your DH like one can with a Rubik’s Cube—it is in your hands.

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9 Wang De [□□], *Lunjin waiyong* [All About Foreign DHs] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Home Economic Association, 2011), 18.

10 The only instance in which *zhangkong* —literally meaning “control”—appears is on the cover. For evidence of other terms, see Ho, *QZW*, p. 8, 20; and pp. 55-9.

11 Ibid.
Unfortunately because most of these books are out of print, no record of QZW’s readership is available to confirm the basis of its target audience. While deducing readership solely on the basis of text is problematic, because this paper focuses on mentalities of employers as reflected in the handbooks—as opposed to embodied, confirmed or exclusively voiced therein—even if the reflections are distorted and the projections miss their mark, the number of these books available today at public libraries around Hong Kong and their generic similarity indicate some correlation between text and mentality.

Unlike English employment handbooks, these were written in standard Chinese, sprinkled throughout with local Cantonese colloquialisms and were exclusively marketed to Chinese employers. This meant that non-Chinese employers and DHs, in general, were effectively excluded from their readership. This exclusion plays a crucial role for understanding the ways in which these guides fostered and justified local Hong Kong middle-class mentality. While no one is saying that the aforementioned groups were intentionally excluded from the readership of Chinese handbooks, even if isolated members of the expat or DH communities can speak Cantonese, whether they are able to read standard written Chinese is an entirely different matter. Indeed, local Chinese housewives from the burgeoning middle class—the target audience of these handbooks—were more comfortable reading Chinese than English. This group hungered for knowledge that provided some semblance of
security and reassurance at a time when domestic service began to be considered as a necessity and part and parcel of what it takes to maintain a comfortable lifestyle in Hong Kong.

Aside from acquiring factual knowledge, whether the readers were hopeful employers or long-standing members of an employers’ association, they all shared a desire to adopt and reaffirm the group’s rhetoric and styling. This is particularly evident in the inclusion of a smattering of local slang, which on the one hand reflects the desire of employment agencies to seem relatable to local Hong Kong employers, and related to a shared mentality of employers on the other. These terms are popular Hong Kong colloquialisms, but they take on different meanings in the context of domestic service and household labour. And given that employing a stranger to work and live in one’s home can be fraught with complications, the amount of power that these terms carry must not be downplayed either.

For those who are already part of this shared mentality—in this case experienced employers of foreign DHs—the affirmation and resonance in the rhetoric and the contents of their proprietary knowledge is essential. It does not matter if the information, like specificities regarding employment contracts, is out-dated if one is reading to confirm what one already knows rather than to discover what one does not know. It gives one access to certain archetypes of DHs, thereby facilitating a shared mentality among the readers. Given that a stock of motifs is adhered to and novelty is introduced within a standardised framework, a large part of the reader’s satisfaction stems from having access to this mentality. This explains the standardisation, not only of general topics, but also of their format and style. Indeed, an employer’s main sources of information would always be the employment agency, or conversations around his/her apartment complex, or letters-to-the-editor to local English-language newspapers, whereas knowledge of management techniques are not accessible until the DH actually starts work in the household when hands-on training for both the employer and DH begins.

12 Examples include: xingmu 《《(smart), guanli 《《(management), keku neilao 《《(hard-working), zhidongbo 《《(auto-pilot), guhua 《《(sneaky), bochao 《《(acting against the wishes of the employer to get fired). For instances of: xingmu refer to You Jin [ ], Pingqing waiyong bidu tianshu [Essential Reader for the Employment of Foreign Domestic Helpers, hereafter PWBT] (Hong Kong: Eugene Group, 2004), 6; Ho, QZW, 2; guanli refer to Ho, QZW, 10; keku neilao refer to Anon., Jia you waiyong shouce [Foreign DH in the Home: A Guide, hereafter JYWS] (Hong Kong: Xianggang yi chuban youxiangongsi, 2008), 90; zhidongbo refer to Yu, PWBT 95, guhua refer to Anon., JYWS, 122; You, PWBT 7; bochao refer to Anon, JYWS, 126; Yu, PWBT, 7.
Thus, it is arguable that the willingness of employers to buy these books that had little practical value was driven by other desires and needs of their lifestyle.

**Conclusion**

To the extent that these handbooks are a reaffirmation of a certain mentality, they were most explicit in fostering appropriate qualities in their readers. This paper has illustrated that the central purpose of the QZW and its counterparts was instruction in maintaining appropriate relationships with DHs and achieving success by grasping specific management tactics. The employer to whom the QZW was marketed had more practical, experience-based, advice than those who relied solely on employment agencies to provide satisfactory after-care services. The reader was by necessity a consumer whose outlook fitted a (upper) middle-class Chinese Hong Kong desire for maximum help around the household in the most cost-efficient and utilitarian way possible. This approach constitutes the general critique of transnational domestic service and the economic conditions that facilitated its emergence. While the QZW chastises its counterparts for failing to approach issues from the perspectives of both the employer and the DH, its emphasis on efficient uses of management techniques worked to affirm a middle-class Hong Kong Chinese identity.¹³ These handbooks affirmed processes of commodification and homogenization and also reintroduced notions of irreducibility and differentiation. A blend of reverence for history and the nostalgic embrace of industrial progress are mixed with an equal measure of a specific sense of racial/national difference on the part of the employers themselves. These notions, along with the proliferation of stereotypes of different nationalities and their relative suitability as DHs, are also used to justify or glorify the continuation of domestic service.

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