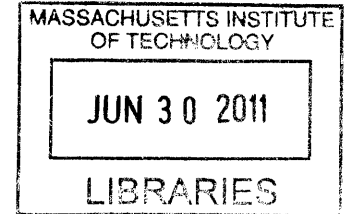


Spatial Empowerment:  
The Appropriation of Public Spaces by Filipina Domestic Workers  
in Hong Kong

By

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Master in City Planning


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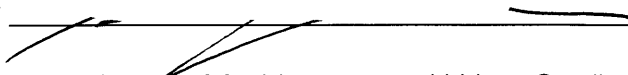
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**Abstract**

On a typical Sunday afternoon, hundreds of Filipina domestic workers (FDW) gather on the floor of public spaces in prime real estate areas of downtown Hong Kong. Over the last few decades, Hong Kong experienced rapid economic growth and industrialization, which led to an increase of middle class women leaving their traditional domestic roles to pursue mainstream workforce careers. Consequently, over 270,000 young laborers, many from the Philippines, have migrated to the city to work as domestic workers. Because they are required by law to live in the homes of their employers, they lack privacy and personal space. A resulting phenomenon is the large congregation of Filipina domestic workers in the downtown Central district on Sundays, their usual day-off. These workers occupy public spaces and return each week to the same spots, essentially creating a temporary "city within a city." Many local citizens view Filipinas and their "colonization" on Sundays as a major problem, causing conflict between local citizens, the government, and foreign workers. While various actors shape the space and its existence, in this thesis, I seek to expose this phenomenon from the point of view of the Filipina domestic workers themselves. I analyze the physical and programmatic use of space as well as the deeper meaning the space holds for the community. I also include an exploratory analysis of the impact of modern network communications on the spaces. Through ethnographic research, I learned the importance of the spaces and the real need for space among foreign migrant populations. By analyzing both FDWs' perspective on the space and how the Hong Kong city government has dealt with this phenomenon, I hope this thesis can inform municipal policy-makers and contribute to policies relating to this specific migrant community as well as other migrant communities and their spatial needs.

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Tunney Lee

Title: Professor of Architecture and Urban Studies and Planning, Emeritus

Thesis Reader: Professor Jean Jackson

Title: Professor of Anthropology

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## A Personal Narrative

My childhood consisted of moving every few years between different cities in the US and Asia. Constantly thrown into new environments, I soon developed an interest in learning about the varied cultures and many different people I often met. The two separate occasions I lived in Singapore, my family employed a Filipina domestic worker who resided with us. Because she became part of our daily life, I quickly grew curious about her story and how she came to live and work so far from her home.

The years I lived in Singapore, I was able to visit Hong Kong fairly often to see my many relatives scattered around the islands. Most of them also employed live-in domestic workers. As the only native English speaker in their immediate environment, I became close with many of them, and in many cases became their confidant.

Though uncommon to be such companions with to domestic workers since they were generally seen to be of a different social class, my friendships were strong. As a child, I remember being fascinated with their stories: I was curious about how they felt being so far from their families, how they perceived their overall situation, how they experienced their current city (Singapore or Hong Kong), and whether their notion of "home" had changed over the years. I always listened patiently and remember taking informal notes, not wanting to forget some of their captivating narratives.

Years later, I moved out of my parents home and began my life as a college student studying international relations and anthropology. Once I began college it was difficult to keep in touch with the domestic workers I had become close with; I eventually lost touch and did not think too often about their plight. About a couple of years ago, however, I visited Hong Kong for the first time in a few years. I remembered being startled stumbling upon hundreds of Filipina domestic workers congregating on the grounds of public areas in the heart of downtown. I wondered what hundreds of them were doing collectively so openly in the public spaces. I soon found out that this phenomenon occurs every Sunday, and immediately a series of questions came to mind regarding the relationship between the workers and the public space: What were they doing there? Were they even allowed to be there? What was their interpretation of the space and how they used it? How does the public view it and what does the government think? About a year later I was in planning school when it hit me: My interest in Filipina domestic workers was not just a personal interest but one that could also be an academic endeavor. Thus, a thesis topic was born.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

On a typical Sunday afternoon, a sea of Filipina domestic workers floods public spaces in prime real estate areas of downtown Hong Kong. The Central district's landscape of power and cosmopolitanism is juxtaposed with boisterous crowds and aromas of home-cooked food. From dawn until late in the evening, these women temporarily transform the space into a festive enclave

These workers occupy public spaces, such as parks, pedestrian overpasses, and sidewalks, transforming them into semi-private spaces. They privatize the space using cardboard boxes to create semi-permanent walls and lay mats of various materials on the ground to personalize and separate themselves within the space. During their time in Central they carry out various recreational and money-making activities. Each week, the workers will return to the same spots, essentially creating a temporary "city within a city."

As one of the four Asian Tigers<sup>1</sup>, Hong Kong experienced rapid economic growth and

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<sup>1</sup>The four Asian Tigers or Asian Dragons refer to Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. They



industrialization over the last few decades, which led to an increase of middle class women leaving their traditional domestic roles to pursue mainstream workforce careers. Consequently, over 270,000 young laborers, many from the Philippines, have migrated to the city to work as live-in domestic workers (Cheung 2010). A resulting phenomenon is the large congregation of Filipina domestic workers in the downtown district of Central on Sundays, their usual day-off. This practice has become so established over the years that government-issued signs exist in the park areas reminding people to clean up their litter in three languages – Chinese, English, and Tagalog, the Philippine national language.

While some local citizens perceive the spaces to be important for the domestic workers as a social outlet, the majority feel otherwise. Since the turn of the century, Hong Kong has engaged in debates over the city's public spaces, with local citizens asserting that public spaces in the city are disappearing (Law 2002, 1625). Due to this debate and the fact that these occupied spaces are in the heart of downtown in an exceptionally dense city, many local citizens have mixed feelings and view Filipinas and their "colonization" on Sundays as a major problem. Over the years, the government has dealt with various criticisms and complaints, and has been pressured by local citizens and the domestic workers themselves. While various actors shape the space and its existence, in this thesis, I seek to expose this phenomenon from the point of view of the Filipina domestic workers themselves. I hope this research can serve as a case study for planners and municipal policy makers. By analyzing both FDWs' perspective on the space and how the Hong Kong city government has

---

are known as the four Asian Tigers or Asian Dragons because of their highly developed economies. Originally newly industrialized regions, they were recognized for rapid industrialization and sustaining high levels of growth and quickly matured into highly developed economics between 1960s and the 1990s (Kim 1999).

dealt with this phenomenon, my findings can contribute to policies relating to this specific migrant community. This ethnography-based thesis can inform policies relating to spatial considerations and for the community as a whole. It also may inform how other city governments should deal with similar migrant community communities and their spaces.

## **1.1 Terminology**

There are an abundance of names to describe migrant laborers. The overarching terms used by the Philippine government for Filipinos who work overseas are “overseas Filipino worker” (OFW) and “overseas contract worker” (OCW). The names describing domestic laborers also vary; “household service worker” (HSW) to “domestic worker” and “domestic helper.” In Hong Kong, the more informal but widely used terms for domestic workers are “maid,” and in Cantonese “bun mui” or “fei yun,” with the latter two specifically referring to Filipinos.

While the Hong Kong government officially uses “domestic helper” to describe domestic laborers, “FDW,” or Filipina domestic worker, is used throughout this thesis. It is important to specify that while male Filipino domestic workers do exist, they makeup a very small minority. As such, while I recognize their existence, I use “Filipina domestic workers” to refer to the majority. Finally, “domestic worker” alone refers to the general domestic labor population, regardless of nationality.



Figure 1-1: FDWs in HSBC Plaza, June 2010

## 1.2 Research Methodology

This research primarily employs ethnographic research methodologies. Over June, July, and part of August of 2010, and most of January of 2011, I spent Sundays in Central from morning until evening conducting over forty in-depth, open-ended interviews with Filipina domestic workers in Central. I conducted participant observations, and helped the women to actually setup their sitting space as well participate in the various activities. On other days of the week, I interviewed a smaller number of Filipina domestic workers, Filipinos working

in Hong Kong in other professions, members of the Philippine Consulate of Hong Kong, local citizens, and members of the planning community in Hong Kong. I also relied on various literature on the subject: journal and newspaper articles, books, blogs, and other websites.

It is important to note how the community perceived me as a researcher. My East Asian physical characteristics meant that I did not stand out as a Western tourist. However, upon first approach, many FDWs believed that I was a local reporter. This initially repelled the community as reporters in the past have sought to reveal scandals and paint FDWs in a negative light. While I recognize that my status might have precluded me from certain information, in the end, I believe my status as a non-local Asian student increased the community willingness to share specific insights, more so than would be the case had I been a local citizen or a non-student.

### **1.3 Literature Review**

Many scholars and researchers have written about domestic workers in Hong Kong, including the Filipino community. In regards to spatial transformations, Maria Teresa Peralta concludes that the Statue Square area is a liminal sphere that transforms into a temporary refuge that alleviates feelings of displacement, disempowerment, and discrimination. Peralta as well as Lisa Law, describes the space and explains its importance. The article “Home Cooking: Filipino Women and Geographies of the Senses in Hong Kong” analyzes the metaphors as not only physical but a transformation through the senses – sight, smell, sound, and taste. While the two scholars essentially assert that the spaces are a “home

away from home,” neither provides analysis of the physical configurations of the space or the spatial organization of the community.

Cha-Ly Koh provides a cross-country analysis of public space among domestic workers, comparing Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers and the spaces they create in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur. Koh maps out some specifics of the space; however, she does not comprehensively analyze how the Filipinas are grouped, how the spaces are claimed, and how various activities play out.

Finally, Brenda Yeoh and Shirlena Huang analyze domestic workers in Singapore in their article “Negotiating Public Space: Strategies and Styles of Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore,” concluding that domestic workers are not entirely passive recipients of dominant practices, “but are capable of different styles and strategies” to cope with their hardships, rather than “deliberate strategies of resistance.” In this thesis, I will uncover the “styles” or the FDWs’ various ways of coping via the Sunday spaces. While the idea that the Sunday space is a “home away from home” is not new, I analyze the space through an ethnography.

## **1.4 Thesis Goals and Organization**

The goal of this thesis is to provide an in-depth analysis of the spaces occupied by Filipina domestic workers in the Central district on Sundays. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, I analyze the way FDWs use the space and the meaning it holds for their community. Superficially, many local citizens may perceive the temporary gatherings negatively, and as one local citizen believes, FDWs on Sundays are “unproductive members of society.” Other out-

siders may understand that the weekly act of gathering on the space is important to FDWs' well-being. Although this latter group may recognize that the space is significant to the community, both groups tend to observe the spaces on the surface and make stereotypes based on superficial assumptions. A deeper look and analysis of the space is imperative to obtain a more accurate view of these unique spaces.

I comprehensively analyze the space itself, examining the physical configuration of the spaces and spatial organization of the community. I uncover how the spaces are claimed, how FDWs organize within the space, what activities are carried out, and why they feel the space is suitable and valuable. I also review the historical evolution of the space.

The thesis begins by contextualizing FDWs within the larger framework of overseas Filipino workers. A brief history of the Philippine labor law that began the movement of Filipino workers abroad comes after, which is followed by a short historical background and analysis of FDWs in Hong Kong. Chapter 3 describes the municipal laws governing the residences and working conditions of FDWs, and Chapter 4 thoroughly describes and analyzes the Sunday spaces. Given the prevalence of cellular and internet technologies in recent years, Chapter 5 provides an exploratory analysis of the effects of these new technologies, highlighting recent trends and speculating on how these modern network communications may change the activities, Sunday spaces, and FDW community as a whole. The thesis ends with a conclusion reviewing major themes.



Figure 1-2: Mosaic of FDW Sunday Spaces, June 2010 and January 2011

# Chapter 2

## Overseas Filipino Workers

### 2.1 Overseas Filipino Workers in the World

Filipinos have a large presence around the world, living as immigrants and migrants. Immigrants leave their home country for permanent residence overseas with the potential goal of assuming new citizenship. This act can be “considered a permanent loss to the labor force of his country of origin” from a government’s standpoint (Andres 1984, 80). On the other hand, migrants leave their home country and enter into a contractual employment and plan to eventually return to their home country (Andres 1984, 80). Currently, about 10 to 11 million Filipinos are working overseas as migrants, or about 10% of the total Philippine population (Anon. 2008) (Lema 2009). They work in over 190 countries in various jobs (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration 2009, 3). The top three places where Filipinos travel to work abroad are Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Hong Kong. While many work within the fields of nursing, dental health, education, music entertainment, construction,



and sea-based occupations, among others, a significant portion of the overseas population work as domestic workers (POEA 2009, 8).

	2009	2008	Growth Rate
All Destinations	1,092,162	974,399	12.1
Other Destinations	248,079	192,364	29
Saudia Arabia	291,419	275,933	5.6
United Arab Emirates	196,815	193,810	1.6
Hong Kong	100,142	78,345	27.8
Qatar	89,290	84,342	5.9
Singapore	54,421	41,678	30.6
Kuwait	45,900	38,903	18
Taiwan	33,751	38,546	-12.4
Italy	25,159	22,623	2.4
Canada	17,344	17,399	-0.3
Bahrain	15,001	13,079	14.7

Figure 2-1: Top 10 Destinations of Land-based Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) New Hires and Rehires, By Number of Deployed OFWs. Source: Philippines Overseas Employment Administration Annual Report 2009

Unlike domestic workers from neighboring Indonesia and Thailand, many Filipinos who choose to go abroad as domestic workers are skilled workers with post-secondary school educations; they are not generally from the most impoverished and least educated areas of Philippine society (Constable 2007 citing AMC 1991; French 1986a). FDWs hold degrees in fields such as education and nursing, with some who obtained masters' degrees (Orbeta and Abrigo 2010) (Consulate interview, June 2010) (Elzingre 2009, 1). Before becoming domestic workers, many of these workers held positions as teachers, nurses, and office managers in the Philippines. Some Filipino physicians found their degrees were not recognized abroad, and had to retrain themselves as nurses in their host country (Overseas Filipino 2011). This "brain drain" effect is most common among the health and education sectors

(Overseas Filipino 2011), where skilled teachers and health professionals opt to work as domestic workers for the higher salary they receive<sup>1</sup> (Asian Migrant Center 2005).

## 2.2 The Historical Push for Labor Export

The political and economic history of the Philippines accounts for the large number of Filipinos working abroad. Deep economic unrest in the Philippines began to unfold in the 1960s, and continued into the 1970s. At this time escalating unemployment rates reached 25% in 1974 (Andrez 1984). As social upheaval transpired in the form of strong pro-communist movements grew, President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972; the Labor Code of 1974 was subsequently enacted (Sibal 2004, 37). This labor code consolidated all the country's labor laws and initiated the beginning of the mass "exportation" of Filipino labor. During this time the government encouraged their citizens to work overseas, as it was a way to alleviate a stagnant economy and rising unemployment rates.

As such, thousands of Filipinos began to work abroad, and gradually the Filipino economy became increasingly dependent on export labor. A large number of recruiting agencies began to emerge in the country. These agencies act as intermediaries between the Filipinos who want to work abroad and employers in other countries. Such agencies organize and do

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<sup>1</sup>Many FDWs I spoke with felt that their occupation status in the Philippines was much higher than their current position as domestic workers. One FDW summed up her frustrations, "I have a masters degree! I am bright. There is no chance here [in Hong Kong] to grow professionally but the money is good." All the FDWs I spoke with who previously held managerial desk jobs or other white-collar jobs stated that their salary as a domestic worker in Hong Kong was higher than what they made in the Philippines. They were willing to "sacrifice status" for their family. Although many believe they will only work for a short period, in fact, many end up working as domestic workers for many years in exchange for the financial security.

the necessary paperwork and travel arrangements. A few years after the code was enacted in 1978, these agencies were privatized and exporting labor became an integral part of the Philippine national development strategy (Sim and Wee 2003, 14).

In addition to the recruitment agencies, a series of government agencies and departments were founded to support the process of sending Filipino workers for overseas jobs. The Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) monitors departing workers, while the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) supports workers' rights in receiving nations. Within OWWA itself, there are various welfare attaches that also seek to help workers' rights. Both are located within the Philippine Department of Labor and Employment. The Commission on Overseas Filipinos, within the Office of the President, aims to strengthen ties among overseas Filipinos and promotes their interests. The Department of Foreign Affairs houses the Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs (OUMWA), which coordinates with various sectors to provide assistance to Filipinos workers abroad. Labor attaches are assigned to major embassies within the Department of Labor and Employment, which are separate from the welfare attaches under OWWA (Evardone 2011). In short, the Philippine government has a sizable number of active agencies supporting Filipinos to work abroad.

As the number of Filipinos migrating to work abroad increased, strict laws regarding flows of remittances were created and enforced. For example, a certain percentage of workers' earnings must be remitted. Money was required to be remitted through specific government channels, which allowed the government to charge extra fees and impose various

levies. In the last several years, pre-departure training programs that would cost a significant portion of a worker's monthly salary were proposed, such as "competency training" and "assessment programs" by the Philippine Department of Labor and Employment (Agence France-Presse 2007).

Although the Philippine government heavily promotes migration as an act of heroism (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration 2009, 8), many FDWs maintain the opinion that they are often paying unnecessary fees. Dolores Ballard, the chairperson of United Filipinos of Hong Kong (UNIFIL-HK), feels that agencies that are supposedly there to support FDWs are doing the opposite by habitually imposing unnecessary fees, sometimes to the point where she feels FDWs are being unfairly deceived, or "cheated." As a result, FDWs are often weary of new government laws and programs related to their status as domestic workers. Dissatisfaction with unnecessary costs has led to various protests by FDWs throughout the years (Anon. 2011, 7) (Hong Kong Human Rights Monitor 2001, 15).

The Philippine economy is profoundly dependent on remittances from OFWs. Over the years remittances have exponentially increased, from \$7.6 billion in 2003 (Hong Kong Human Rights Monitor 2001, 15) to the current amount of over \$17 billion in November of 2010, according to Gov. Amando Tetangco Jr. of the Central Bank of the Philippines. OFW remittances represent over 10% of the country's GDP, making the Philippines the fourth largest recipient of remittances in the world, after China, India, and Mexico (Torres 2011). In terms of proportion of remittances to GDP, the Philippines ranks number one (Rajan 2010, 4). Clearly, overseas Filipino workers are an important part of the Philippine econ-

omy.

## 2.3 FDWs in Hong Kong

The push for exporting Filipino labor abroad corresponded with the Hong Kong's economic rise in the 1970s and 1980s. As one of the original East Asian Tigers (Kim 1999), the booming economy coincided with an increase in middle class women entering the workforce, moving away from traditional domestic roles in home management and child rearing, allowing for the influx of domestic workers (Koh 2009, 11). In 1975, the first government-approved domestic worker contracts were written, allowing for 1000 Filipino women to enter Hong Kong (Law 2001, 270). Since that time, FDWs in Hong Kong have steadily increased.

As shown in Figure 2, there are currently about 132,864 FDWs working in Hong Kong, out of a total of 276,737 domestic workers (Cheung 2010). FDWs consist of almost 50% of all domestic workers, making for a strong presence in Hong Kong. In 2009, Indonesian domestic workers surpassed the number of FDWs in Hong Kong, and are slowly becoming a major player in global domestic labor. Despite this fact and that FDWs only make up 2% of the total Hong Kong population, FDWs are very visible within Hong Kong society.

In Hong Kong, popular stereotypes exist about domestic workers of various nationalities. A representative from the consulate of the Philippines described FDWs as the “Mercedes-Benz” of domestic workers: they often have years of experience, they speak English fluently allowing for ease of communication with employers and therefore can teach English to the

Nationality	2006	2007	2008	2009	May-10
Filipino	120,788	123,545	125,943	129,875	132,846
Indonesian	104,129	114,411	123,341	130,448	136,460
Thai	4292	4072	3820	3858	3789
Indian	1381	1457	1582	1814	1919
1 Sri Lankan	877	900	878	883	878
Nepalese	1144	957	820	677	620
Others	170	189	213	223	225
Total	232781	245,531	256,597	267,778	276,737

Figure 2-2: Population of Foreign Domestic Workers in Hong Kong - Hong Kong Immigration Department 2010

employer's children, and in general they are educated. However, when compared to Indonesians, for example, FDWs are seen to be more "cunning" and "less honest." Such stereotypes derive from the fact that most FDWs are generally more educated and not from the most rural places in the Philippines like their Indonesian counterparts. The stereotype of Indonesian domestic workers is that they are "docile," and consequently more desirable than FDWs in some respects.

In addition to the relatively high wages as a major attraction, Hong Kong's cosmopolitan status as "Asia's world city" makes it an enticing place for FDWs to live. However, with a total population of over 7.1 million people living within 21% of build-able area of its total 1,098 sq kilometers (about 423 sq miles), Hong Kong is among the most dense, if not the most dense, city in the world. The average apartment size in Hong Kong is 400 to 600 sq ft (37 to 55 square meters) (Ratings and Valuation Department), often with three to four people living in the space. Thus, for many Filipinos, the density and crowds of Hong Kong require a major adjustment, given their far less dense home regions in the Philippines.

# Chapter 3

## Living Spaces of Domestic Workers

### 3.1 The Laws

Foreign domestic workers are required by law to live in the homes of their employer (HK-SAR Labour Department, 27). The Hong Kong Labour Department sets the rules and regulations regarding the hiring and working conditions for foreign domestic workers. The Immigration Department approves the specific entry visa for domestic workers once these conditions are met. According to Clause 3 of the “Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties” in Appendix 1 of the standard employment contract, employers are obliged to provide free accommodation. More specifically, they should “provide the Helper suitable accommodation and with reasonable privacy” (HK-SAR Labour Department, 29).

A sample of this portion of the standard employment contract can be found in Figure 3-1

3. Accommodation and facilities to be provided to the Helper A.  
Accommodation to the Helper

While the average flat size in Hong Kong is relatively small and the availability of separate servant room is not common, the Employer should provide the Helper suitable accommodation and with reasonable privacy.

Examples of unsuitable accommodation are: The Helper having to sleep on made-do beds in the corridor with little privacy and sharing a room with an adult/teenager of the opposite sex.

č Yes. Estimated size of the servant room \_\_\_\_\_ square metres\*

č No. Sleeping arrangement for the Helper:

č Share a room with \_\_\_\_\_ child/children aged \_\_\_\_\_

č Separate partitioned area of \_\_\_\_\_ square feet/square metres\*

č Others. Please describe \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 3-1: Excerpt from “Practical Guide For Employment of foreign domestic helpers. What foreign domestic helpers and their employers should know.

Hong Kong Labour Department As shown above, the contract acknowledges the small average apartment size in Hong Kong and requires the employer to indicate apartment details. The employer must specify whether the domestic worker will live in a separate “servant room,” share a room with the employer’s child(ren), or have a partitioned sleeping arrangement, and provide specific information about the room’s size, should the FDW have her own room.

In addition to accommodation, essential “facilities and supplies” must be provided free of charge (HK-SAR Labour Department, 29). These include “light and water supply, toilet and bathing facilities, bed, blankets or quilt, pillows, wardrobe, refrigerator, desk” among others (HK-SAR Labour Department, 29).

Only under special circumstances, through an exception granted by the Immigration Di-



rector, are domestic workers allowed to reside in places other than the employer's residence. Though extremely rare, these "live-out" arrangements are allowed in very specific situations.

## **3.2 Description of Home Spaces**

Domestic workers that do have private rooms live in small, windowless rooms that are usually located next to the kitchen or near the laundry areas, away from the other bedrooms of the apartment. They typically have no electrical outlets or light fixtures, and unlike the rest of the apartment, almost never have air conditioning units. Many domestic workers described their rooms as large closets.

When domestic workers have their own bathroom, they are usually very small and "no frills." Rather than a separate area for the shower and another space for the toilet and sink, the whole bathroom acts as a shower. The drain hole for water is in the middle of the bathroom floor, resulting in showers that inconveniently wet the whole room. They also usually include a squat toilet rather than a seated one. If the domestic workers do not have their own room, they usually do not have their own bathroom, and thus share the family bathroom. In this case, the domestic workers are instructed to be extra tidy and not have their toiletries visible.

To give a sense of the size of a domestic workers' room, we can look at a sample residential apartment building. The Masterpiece, a luxury apartment put on the market in 2009 and one of Hong Kong's "most exclusive residential towers," has an average apartment size

of 1452 sq feet (sq meters) (Kiu Lok International Realty 2011) and ceiling heights of 11 feet and 2 inches (China Lux Culture Biz 2009). These apartments are extraordinarily large and spacious by Hong Kong standards. One-bedroom apartments in this building have been sold at record high prices (Yiu 2009). All of the units, including the one-bedrooms, have a room for a domestic worker. However, even in this “prestigious residence” with “exceptionally spacious apartments,” a domestic worker room size can be as small as 5.5 square meters or about 59 square feet.

If the domestic workers do not have their own room, they often share a bedroom with the employer’s children, sleeping on a pullout mattress or mat on the ground next to their beds. According to anthropologist Nicole Constable, sometimes the employers deliberately require the domestic workers to sleep in the baby’s room so that they can care for the baby throughout the night when he/she cries and needs attention. Although the domestic workers have to share, many said that they regarded this sleeping arrangement as fortunate because these rooms are often more comfortable, have better lighting, and are not isolated from the family (Constable 1997, 110).

The standard employment contract does not define what is considered a suitable accommodation, but does give examples of unsuitable accommodations, such as “made-do beds in the corridor with little privacy and sharing a room with an adult/teenager of the opposite sex” (HK-SAR Labour Department, 29). Despite this requirement, many domestic workers live in what would be deemed unsuitable accommodations, such as on a sleeping mat on the kitchen floor, in the corridors of the apartment, or behind the couch in the living room. A

few of the domestic workers I interviewed mentioned “horror stories” for example, of domestic workers who slept on top of cabinets and have hurt themselves falling from them while asleep. Although some employers may have space for the domestic workers to sleep in the children’s room, they often still sleep in these more “unsuitable” areas because the employers do not want the domestic worker’s bed located in such close quarters to the children (or other family members).

### 3.3 Limited Personal Space

Though not immediately apparent, domestic workers lead acutely different lifestyles compared to other migrant workers in the city, because domestic workers live in their places of employment. While other laborers such as factory workers typically spend the day in a factory and return home to rest once their work is done, domestic workers do not get to return to a different location. Thus, domestic workers lack a separation between work and home spaces, which is understood to be important for overall well-being and quality of life<sup>1</sup>.

The lack of spatial separation between work from non-work spaces makes it difficult for domestic workers to distinguish between work time and off-time. Factory workers clock their hours and have clear start and end times, whereas the lack of set hours for a domestic worker essentially requires them to act “professionally” at all times<sup>2</sup>. The absence of spec-

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<sup>1</sup>It is widely accepted that the separation of work and home life positively affects overall well-being and quality of life. In many analyses involving the evaluation of working at home, including the study entitled “Work-at-Home and the Quality of Working Life” by Boas Shamir and Ilan Salomon, conclude that working at home is likely to adversely affect one’s quality of life.

<sup>2</sup>Taking a rest break can be seen as a sign of laziness and not doing their job well.

ified work hours can lead employers to order their domestic workers to “find more work to do” if they are seen standing around after they have completed their daily chores (Constable 1997, 96). The indistinguishable spatial difference between work and non-work spaces results in very limited personal space for FDWs.

Among the FDWs I interviewed the most common complaint was unreasonably long working hours and the absence of an area that is clearly their “own... to sleep and breathe.” This is also consistent with Nicole Constable’s findings (127). Although personal space is typically defined as the area immediately surrounding oneself, or “a mobile form of territory surrounding oneself,” as anthropologist Edward T. Hall first coined and described (Hall 1990), I am defining personal space as an area that belongs to an individual where they feel it is truly theirs. It is a space where an individual can feel comfortable knowing they will not be observed or disturbed.

Many of those FDWs who have their own room said they felt they had some personal space, as they were able to physically enter into a separate space when they went to sleep. Though they felt cramped, they stated that they felt fortunate to have a separate area, as many FDWs did not. Some commented that although they have their own rooms, “we are so tired by the end of the day that we cannot spend time to sit inside and breathe.” One Filipina domestic worker commented, “Having your own room means almost nothing. The space is so small that I am there to be in one position [to sleep] and that’s it! It is not a room, it is a box!” Another explains, “It doesn’t matter if we have our [own] room or not, we are on-call 24 hours a day.”

FDWs who sleep in children's rooms, the living room, or other "unsuitable accommodations," complain about not having any personal space. For example, if a FDW's bed is in the living room, she must wait until her employer and family go to sleep. On weekends, the family may utilize the living room and stay up until very late, but the FDW must still wake up at her normal early hour to start the daily chores. Although some FDWs might prefer to sleep in a shared room because of the better amenities, as mentioned earlier, they still commented that not having their own area was a major negative.

Furthermore, elderly family members live in many households and they tend to closely monitor the habits of the FDWs. These elderly members are usually the employer's parent or parents. Typically the mother of an employer is more inclined to observe and scrutinize FDWs, and are characterized by many domestic workers to be "strict," "picky," and sometimes "gossipy." Like children, these members have to be given special care and require extra work. Many FDWs expressed their discontent at the elderly parent constantly "watching [their] every move" while their employer is at work, making sure the FDW is doing her chores thoroughly and working at all times, which further ensures very limited personal space.

After interviewing many FDWs who did not have their own room, I concluded that the kitchen was the room that felt most like their domain, coming closest to having a personal space. Since they spend so much of the day there, washing, chopping, cooking, and eating meals, I speculated that it would feel familiar and comfortable. To my surprise, FDWs stated the kitchen was definitely not a space in which they felt comfortable, since their employers

and family were able to come in freely even if there was a swinging door that closed off the kitchen to the rest of the apartment. In fact, all of these interviewees stated that the bathroom (or “toilet,” as they are called in Hong Kong) was the only place where they felt they had any personal space. A handful of interviewees said they felt that even if they did not need to use the bathroom, they would enter the bathroom and sit on the toilet, “just to get some peace and quiet.” Some said that closing the bathroom door was an extremely satisfying feeling; as one respondent stated, “As soon as I shut the door, I can breathe for a few minutes.”

### **3.4 Isolation**

Ironically, despite having very limited personal space and essentially never being alone, the FDWs are socially and emotionally isolated. As foreigners living and working individually in a private home, FDWs are constantly surrounded by their boss(es) and usually do not get to see their peers or friends (the exception being running into their peers at the grocery store), until their day off. As Constable notes, separation from their peers prevents them from generally being open with their feelings and emotions, which would signal unprofessionalism (Constable 1997, 93). This environment constrains FDWs into isolation<sup>3</sup>.

Furthermore, relative social class status creates another type of isolation; whether or not FDWs are conscious of class hierarchies, many of them seem to experience a clear dis-

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<sup>3</sup>The article “Planning for Telework and Home-based Employment: Reconsidering the Home/Work Separation” by urban planner Penny Gurstein, concludes that home-based workers are more prone to feeling isolated.

inction between the Hong Kong public and themselves. Many FDWs do feel themselves to be of a lower class. The specific visa status they hold as domestic workers not only legally restricts them from social mobility and integrating into society as permanent residents, but also limits their psychological assimilation.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Hong Kong's law that requires domestic workers to live in the employer's residence makes the city unique with respect to how the local government manages domestic workers. As a result of the scarcity of space in the city and the aforementioned law, FDWs have very limited personal space and are generally emotionally isolated. Such limited space leads to a strong desire for their own, personal spaces. Emotional isolation causes a need for interaction with peers. This need for personally programmed spaces for interaction is illustrated into the spaces that are created by FDWs on their off-days, Sundays, or FDW Sunday spaces, in various areas around the city.

# Chapter 4

## Sunday Spaces

### 4.1 Appropriation of Public Spaces

"If you would like to enter, you must come with a smile and earplugs!"

-FDW in the HSBC space

Hong Kong's Central district possesses a symbolic air of power and modernity. On a typical weekday in the heart of downtown, a mix of local and expatriate businessmen in suits, government workers, and youthful high-end shoppers walk the streets amidst soaring skyscrapers and grand shopping towers. On a typical Sunday, a complete metamorphosis occurs: A cacophony of noises, a mix of food aromas, and the striking sight of hundreds of women transform the space into a festive enclave.



Domestic workers of various nationalities congregate in different locations throughout the city on their off-day. The Sunday appropriation of public spaces of FDWs in Central has been informally described as “Little Manila” or “Filipino Town” (Law 2001, 265) (Pinoy OFW Admin 2009b). FDWs are most prominent in the Central district, although in recent years, several mini “Filipino Towns” have sprung up around Kowloon and New Territories. FDWs are located in several major areas within Central. They are seated in public parks and squares, such as Chater Garden and Statue Square, and on the ground floor plaza of the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC). They also occupy sidewalks of various streets, including Chater Road, and on elevated walkways. A smaller gathering can be found in Admiralty district. I focus here on FDW gathering spaces in Central.

By law, employers of domestic workers should “provide [the] helper at least one rest day in every period of seven days. A rest day is a continuous period of not less than 24 hours” (HK-SAR Labour Department, 11). Although in reality many FDWs may not receive a weekly day off<sup>1</sup>, the majority are given Sundays. These Sunday spaces have come about in response to the limited personal space and social isolation FDWs face on the other days of the week. The tradition of FDWs gathering together by the hundreds has become so established that Sundays in Central have become synonymous with the Hong Kong Filipina domestic worker community.

While this temporary occupation of urban public spaces by migrant workers is not a new trend, this particular case is unique because FDWs are not gathering on the city’s peripheral areas, away from the general public’s eye. Instead, they are located in one of the city’s most

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<sup>1</sup>Some FDWs get every other week off instead of every week.

exclusive areas, next to the high-end luxury stores and the foreign banks. As such, it is a very controversial practice.



Figure 4-1: Before and after pictures of the HSBC Plaza space: Typical weekday versus Sundays, June and July 2010, January 2011

## 4.2 History

FDWs have been congregating in areas within Central since the 1980s (Constable 1997, 4). As Hong Kong's economy continued to prosper throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s,

an increasing number of FDWs were hired, and consequently, more FDWs frequented Central on Sundays. As the area became more popular, however, the public spaces began to get more crowded, resulting in FDW gatherings spilling over onto elevated footpaths (also called overpasses), underground footpaths (or underpasses), and sidewalks.

The most popular street is Chater Road. Over a decade ago, it was closed to cars on Sundays. Within a few years, a slow but steady spatial conflict unfolded between FDWs and the tenants of the stores located along the road. As previously mentioned, Central is prime real-estate area, chosen by luxury-brand stores, like Prada, Burberry, and Bvulgari. As the FDW population grew, an increasing number of FDWs sat on Chater Road, seeking refuge from the rain, inside the corridors of the commercial buildings and beneath storefronts along the road.

For many years, the Hong Kong public has both directly and indirectly criticized these Sunday gatherings for aesthetic and hygienic reasons. Many local citizens argued that these gatherings are unattractive, if not unsightly, and interfere with the image of Hong Kong as a modern global city. FDWs have been described as a “nuisance,” “of no value “unproductive members of society,” “illegally squatting and hawking.” Some citizens feel satisfied with the idea that FDWs gather, but prefer them not to do so in the “most up-scale part of town.” These citizens suggest that FDWs choose their sites to make themselves feel “high-class.” Such complaints over the years have actually persuaded the government to erect temporary barriers and station greater numbers of security guards in the area (Law 2001, 271). However, it was not until organized complaints from the many surrounding tenants that

the situation really escalated. These tenants, including retail and hotels (like The Mandarin Oriental), complained about the large, noisy groups of people loitering near their shops, deterring business. They also complained about the many women asking to use the rest room. Their criticisms directly targeted FDW gatherings (Wallis October 9, 1992a). The pressure mounted in 1992, when Hong Kong Land, one of the major developers in the city<sup>2</sup>, presented a petition to the Transport Department and Urban Council of Central and Western Hong Kong. The petition called for reopening the road for traffic on Sundays (Koh 2009, 27). This conflict became known as the “Battle of Chater Road.”

The proposed opening of Chater Road to traffic was accompanied by a suggestion to relocate FDWs from public spaces in Central to nearby vacant carparks (Wallis September 17, 1992b). These proposals instantly generated a huge wave of attention from the Hong Kong public, local media, and local non-governmental organizations. The government and local media focused on the issue from various angles, including the amount of trash generated by FDWs, which damaged the aesthetic appearance of the city’s public spaces (Koh 2009, 27). Non-governmental organizations and other groups criticized the developer for implicit and explicit discrimination and racism (Constable 1997, 5). Members of the community also argued that relocating the FDWs to carparks was “inhumane” and “impractical” (Koh 2009, 27). Eman Villanueva, the secretary general of United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL-HK), commented on the absurdity of the proposal, stating that “Carparks are not designed for people, but parks are!” (Eman Villanueva 2010).

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<sup>2</sup>Developers in Hong Kong hold a powerful position with respect to the urban landscape. There are 12 major developers in Hong Kong who control much of the land (Yuming Fu and Ching 2001, 1).

After months without a final decision, the Central and Western District Board Council set up an interdepartmental study to help find a solution (Koh 2009, 27). Ultimately, in late 1993, the government set up a plan to relocate FDWs to a former school-house, which is known today as the Bayanihan Kennedy Town Centre, or simply the “Bayanihan Centre.” This center holds Sunday church services, as well as classes for hair-cutting, cooking, singing, drama, and English. According to one researcher, the center attracts 5000 to 10,000 every weekend (seefortyone 2008).

Despite the Center, Central has remained as the main FDW gathering location. In the weeks following the opening of the center, the FDWs continued presence acted as a political statement (Eman Villanueva 2010). One FDW stated to me that “They [The Hong Kong government] do not recognize the fact that Central on Sunday is a community of people, and forcing people to leave is uprooting people who are already uprooted from country, families, home...” Of the FDWs I interviewed, most had heard of the Bayanihan Centre but few had ever visited. When asked why, most of them answered that they “already have a place.”

Due to failure to relocate FDWs away from Central, the government (and business owners) have ceased to try to move the community, and have focused their efforts on increasing security and number of sanitation workers to “avoid conflict between different parties at the site (Koh 2009, 28).

Although the conflict ended, a subtle tension seems to remain among the various players. The government, however, seems to have assumed a fairly neutral position; they nei-

ther encourage thinking of Central as a gathering area, nor adamantly dismiss the idea. Evidence of this tacit acceptance and institutionalization of the colonization is found in government-issued signs in Statue Square and Chater Garden. These signs remind users to clean up their litter in three languages, Chinese, English, and Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines.



Figure 4-2: Public signs in three languages around Central, June and July 2010

According to researcher Cha-Ly Koh, the Hong Kong government has gone through a process utilizing three different strategies in dealing with the FDW occupation of Sunday spaces. Koh stated that the city government at first ignored the phenomenon, then acted upon the demands of the different actors and showed resistance towards FDW requests, and finally arrived at accommodation (Koh 2009, 151, 152).



Figure 4-3: FDWs on Sundays around a public sign in Chater Garden, January 2011

### 4.3 Description of the Sunday Spaces

On any given Sunday, hundreds of FDWs rush to Central. The HCBC ground floor plaza where they gather is a privately-owned public space. The HSBC headquarters building designed by Norman Foster and Partners is considered to be one of Hong Kong's landmarks and even an "icon of global capital" (Hou 2010, 7). Two iconic guardian lion statues sit on either side of the Plaza; they are so well known that they have come to symbolize the city's banking culture<sup>3</sup>. FDWs refer to this area as "Hong Kong Bank." FDWs identify the lions as "smiling lion" and "frowning lion," and frequently use them as markers for meeting one another.

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<sup>3</sup>These lions are printed on the \$100 Hong Kong Dollar notes as they are issued by HSBC.

Statue Square abuts HSBC Plaza. It is a landscaped pedestrian square containing a black bronze statue of the first chief manager of HSBC, Sir Thomas Jackson. The statue, referred to as the “black man” among FDWs, is also a popular meeting location. The Legislative Council building is sandwiched between Statue Square and Chater Garden. Chater Garden is very similar though slightly bigger in area. Both political rallies and demonstrations often take place on these sites. They are managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

The map in Figure 4-4 indicates where FDWs gather in the districts of Central and parts of Admiralty.

### **4.3.1 Spatial Configurations**

Upon first encounter, Central on Sundays seems chaotic and disorderly, sporting large, boisterous crowds. However, many FDWs group themselves in a clear, organized fashion. FDWs not only consistently return to the same space each week, but also to the same specific areas.

My research design required me to verify if a common perception among FDWs and certain members in Hong Kong’s urban planning community: that the FDWs group themselves so as to naturally create a “virtual map of the Philippines.” The popular hypothesis holds that if one overlays a map of the Philippines onto Central, the southern Filipinos would be located in the southern area of Central while the northern Filipinos would be gathered in the northern areas, etc, etc. To my surprise, the majority of FDWs were actually simply



grouped by friendships and family members (i.e., they would sit in the same group as a sister or cousin who also worked as a domestic worker). Nonetheless, I found some clear patterns. Although not a true “virtual map of the Philippines,” I discovered that many FDWs are also grouped by home region (rather than by same language group), and by affiliation to a cultural or civic organization.

The Philippines consists of 80 provinces and 17 administrative regions (National Statistical Coordination Board 2010, 1). There are about 15 regions represented in the map in Figure 4-5.

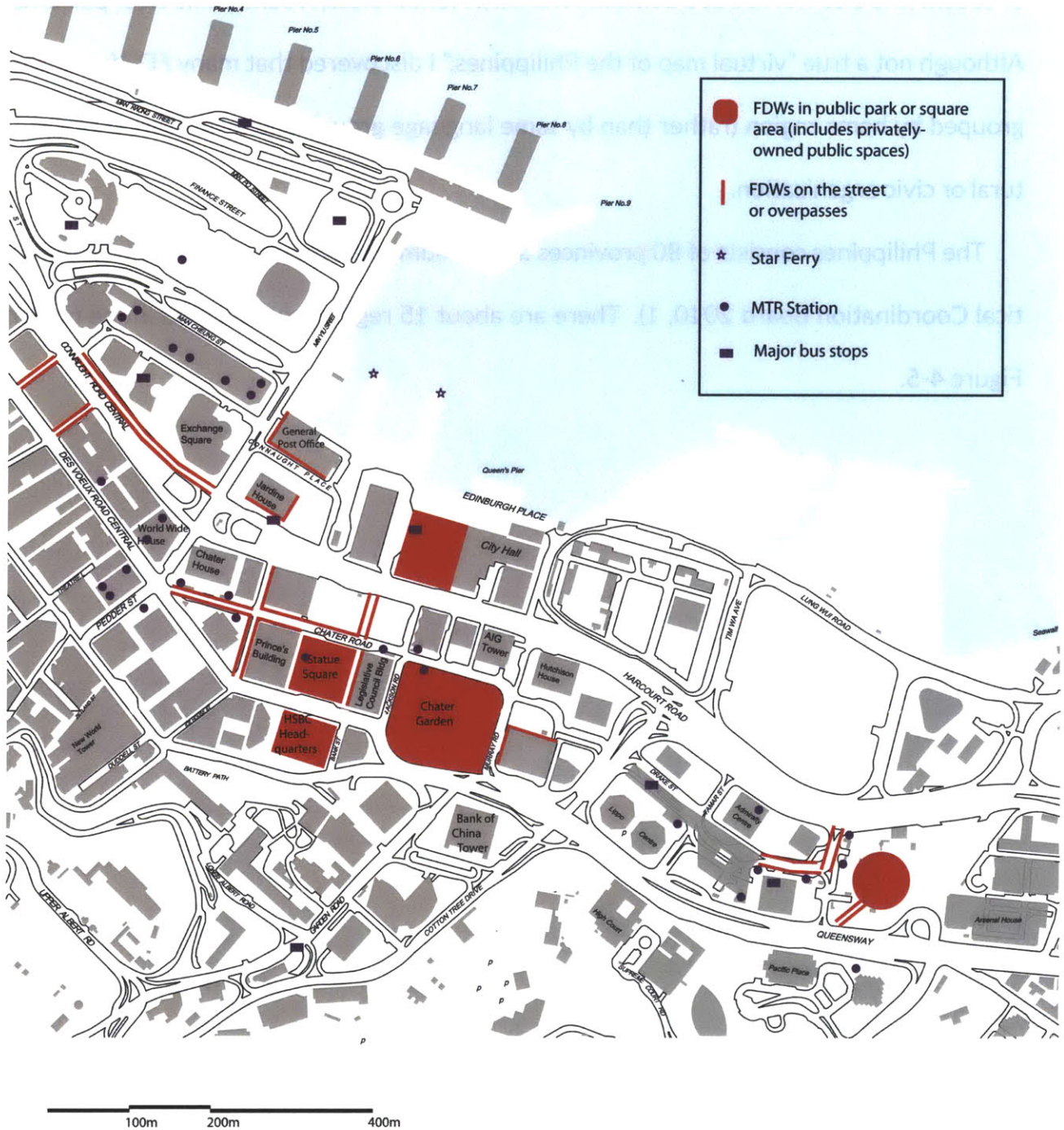


Figure 4-4: FDWs on Sundays in Central and Admiralty

- 1 - Bicol
- 2 - Southern Tagalog
- 3 - Oriental Mindoro
- 4 - Cordillera
- 5 - Laguna + Batangas

- 6 - Pagasinan
- 7 - Pampanga
- 8 - Abra
- 9 - Iloco
- 10 - Panay

- 11 - Cebuano
- 12 - Visayas
- 13 - Ilocos Norte/Sur
- 14 - Isabella
- 15 - Occidental Mindoro

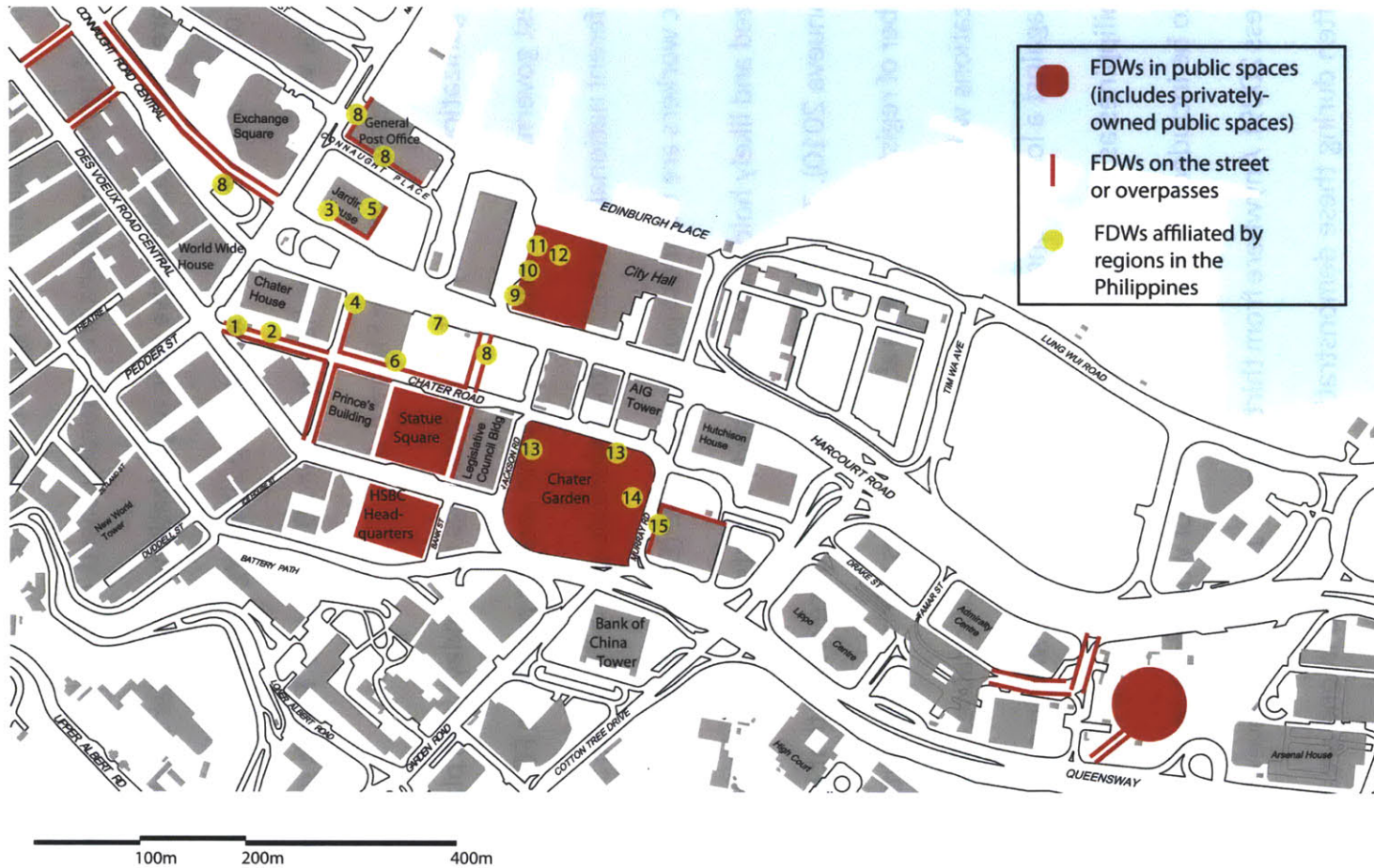


Figure 4-5: FDWs on Sundays grouped by regional-affiliation

FDWs belong to various FDW-led organizations. The Hong Kong Consulate of the Philippines lists over 120 official registered cultural and civic organizations are officially registered. A significant number of additional organizations are not registered, for unknown reasons. The majority of the organizations are culturally based, or based on region or language group. Many are also politically active civic organizations. A smaller number are religiously based. The organizations vary in membership size; large organizations may have thousands of members, with smaller ones having under 30 members. FDWs grouped by organizational-affiliation are represented in Figure 4-6.

Many of these organizations regularly schedule meetings on Sundays, and plan a range of activities to protest government actions, or to discuss specific problems FDWs in their daily lives. Of the different nationalities, such as the Indonesians, the Thais, the Sri Lankans, the Filipino domestic workers are the most politically active (Eman Villanueva 2010). “We are the most organized and likely hold more rallies and protests against issues [than other groups]” (Eman Villanueva 2010). The 2010 Philippine elections revealed that Hong Kong had the highest number of registered overseas absentee voters (Pinoy OFW Admin 2009a). Often, many organizations will come together to fight for a specific cause. Recent rallies have demonstrated against a local Hong Kong magazine columnist, who in a satirical article described the Philippines as a “nation of servants” (Global Nation Rep 2010). Another involved a demand to be included on the list for the types of workers to receive minimum wage (Associated Press 2009). Anywhere from thirty to over 1000 FDWs have participated in such protests. Often during these demonstrations, FDWs stand in one area or march

around Central and neighboring districts.

Cultural groups constitute the other major type of organization. These groups mainly seek to maintain and celebrate their cultural identity, as well as foster community through various festive activities. They host events such as local food potlucks, dance competitions, fashion shows, and beauty pageants. Beauty pageants are popular events in the Philippines, and this culture of pageants has been brought to Hong Kong by FDWs through these cultural organizations. Well-attended and decorated functions, they award titles such as Miss Cover Girl and Miss Migrant Worker. At times, these organizations may request and rent use of public spaces from the Leisure and Culture Services Department for such events.

- 1 - Cuyapo Association
- 2 - Filipino Migrant Workers Union
- 3 - FILGUYS
- 4 - Cordillera Alliance
- 5 - MIGRANTE
- 6 - United Pagasinan
- 7 - GABRIELA National Alliance of Women – Hong Kong

- 8 - Filipino Migrants Association (FMA)
- 9 - Association of Concerned Filipinos (ACFIL)
- 10 + 11 - Confederation of Ilocos Norte and Bileg Ti Ilocano
- 12 - Filipino Women Migrant Workers Association in Hong Kong (FILWOM-HK)
- 13 + 14 - Friends of the Bethune House and Filipino Friends
- 15 - Jesus is Lord

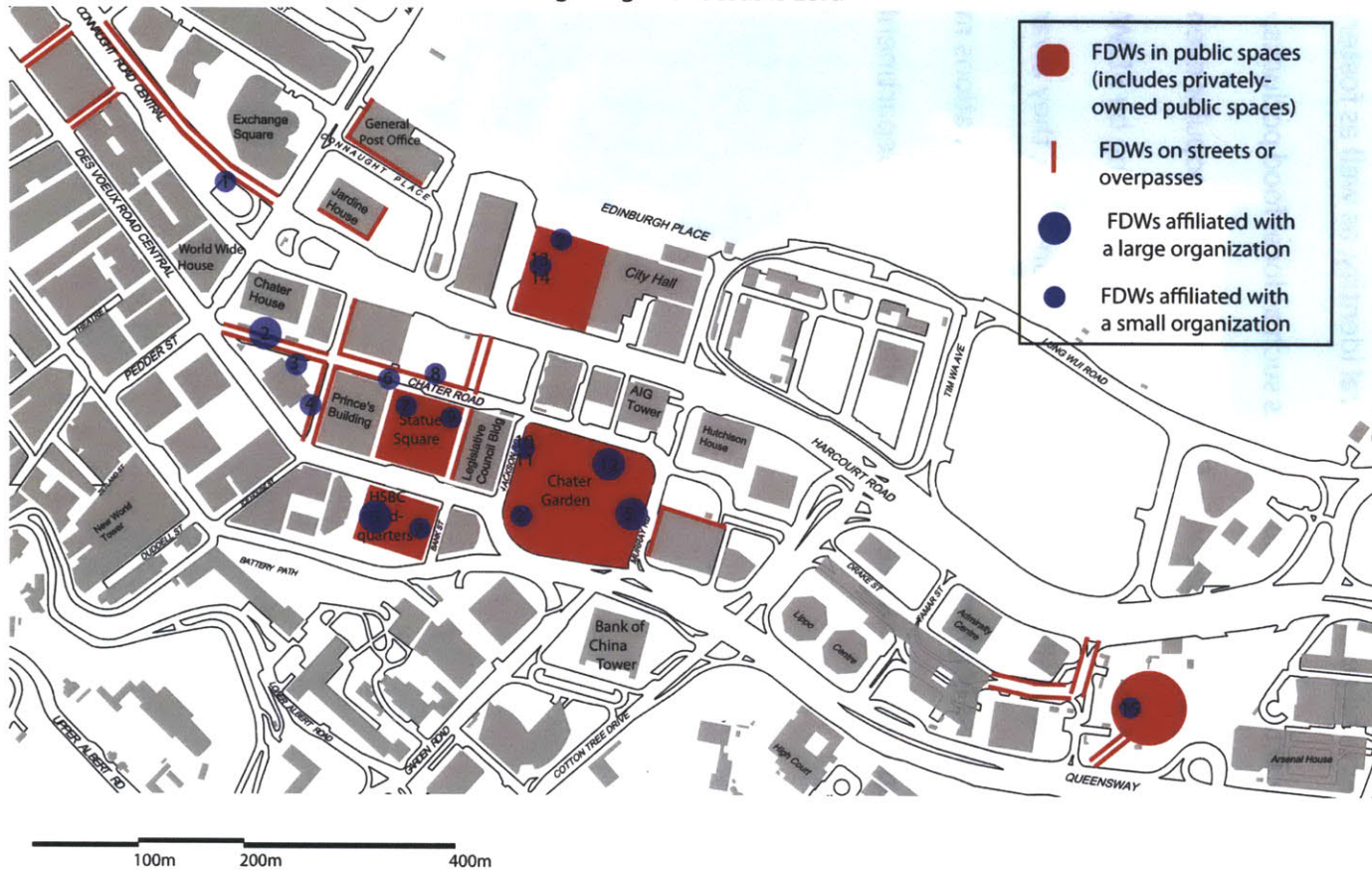


Figure 4-6: FDWs on Sundays grouped by organizational-affiliation

### 4.3.2 Claiming the Space

The FDWs are seated on a colorful succession of mats made from different materials. The mats also help claim and demarcate the group's territory. Most FDWs are clustered in groups of four to six though some groups are larger.

Interviewees stated that most FDWs come between 6:00AM and 8:00AM, and stake their claim to their accustomed spot by putting various types of mat-like materials on the ground. Although it would seem that claiming the space would not be necessary given that each cluster of FDWs return to the same spaces week after week, many like to come early, setup their space, and then leave to do Sunday activities in the area. Activities include attending church, or remitting money home at nearby World Wide House. After a couple of hours, they return and sit in their space for the rest of the day. Most FDWs begin to pack up and leave between 7:00PM and 9:00PM.

Two main spatial typologies characterize FDW claims to an area: (1) flat clustering, and (2) cubic clustering.



Figure 4-7: Typology 1- Flat Clustering



Figure 4-8: Typology 2- Cubic Clustering



The most common mat-like materials used in flat clustering are Chinese bamboo mats called “jek,” which also come in a modern plastic material. These women also use plastic disposable table cloths, cotton table cloths, shower curtains, cardboard boxes, packaging foam, blankets, towels, textiles or “batiks,” disposable plastic meal cloths, newspapers and foam shipping wrap, and cut-up garbage bags. Often, they layer a combination of materials. For example, many cardboard pieces might be placed on top of foam shipping wrap. Or newspapers are placed underneath disposable plastic tables cloths. The cubic clustering is created with cut-up cardboard boxes to form a cube with four walls.



Figure 4-9: Mosaic of space claiming materials, June, July, August 2010, January 2011

While the materials used to set up flat clustering are typically brought from home, pieces of cardboard are obtained from local sanitation workers who collect them in the early morning on Sunday and sell them to the FDWs. A routinized and almost ritualized transaction

takes place. Sanitation workers who work in the vicinity early on collect cardboard and paper scraps from various nearby stores. Often women, the sanitation worker walks around with her cart holding pieces of cardboard, offering them for sale. Sometimes she will “sew” or tape together several pieces to create a bigger one, and will charge accordingly. Several FDWs told me that a 3x3 feet piece of cardboard costs about HKD\$6 or just under USD\$1. At the end of the day, most FDWs will put the cardboard pieces in the trash. Sometimes, however, the sanitation worker will return to collect the pieces, and save them for the next Sunday.



Figure 4-10: Sanitation worker cart full of cardboard located on elevated footpath (pedestrian overpass) in Central, July 2010

### 4.3.3 Activities

Despite an initial impression of disordered loitering, many specific, diverse activities occur within the FDW Sunday space. I have loosely classified the activities as follows: individual, social, income-generating (services and goods), and organization-based.

Individual Activities refers to behaviors that are performed alone. Napping, applying make-up or styling one's hair, or making crafts are examples. Many of these behaviors are normally done in private, but in this case are performed in the public sphere.

Social Activities are carried out with one or more women. Examples include chatting informally among a group, sharing food, playing cards, and talking on the phone.

Income-generating Activities – Services and Goods can be classified into two categories. Examples of the first category include manicures or pedicures, checking blood pressure, and applying make-up. Renting out books and romance novels through a mobile library system, selling phone cards, and selling skincare and clothing items through catalogs are examples of the second category, in which goods instead of services are exchanged.

Organization-based Activities are those undertaken within a larger group or organization or is associated with an activity that is connected to an organization. These groups may be culturally, religiously, or politically based. Examples of the activity include FDWs leading their weekly political organizational, recruiting contestants for talent or beauty shows as part of a cultural organization, preaching or reading aloud religious texts from a specific religious group, soliciting donations for church or organizations, and rehearsing dance routines for later performances as part of a community organization.

# Activities in FDW Sunday Spaces

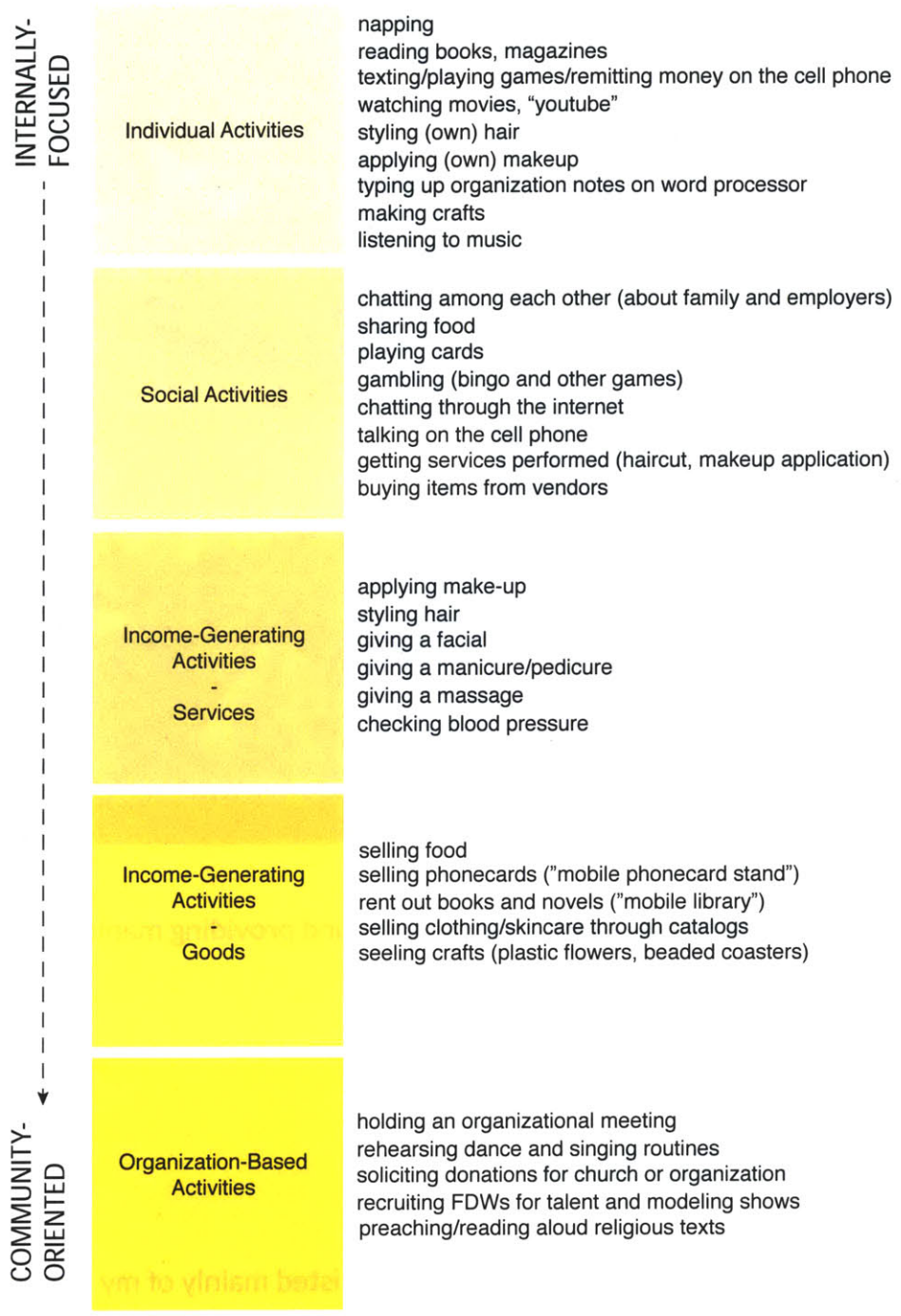


Figure 4-11: Figure 5



Figure 4-12: FDWs renting out books, playing cards, and providing manicure services, January 2011

#### 4.4 Concept of the Space

The descriptions provided earlier in this chapter consisted mainly of my participant observations during the Sunday Central gatherings. In understanding how FDWs conceive of the space, I engaged in open-ended dialogues to draw out more in-depth descriptions that permit further analysis.

The most important characteristic of a suitable and effective FDW gathering space, FDWs said, was convenience: The “place that Filipinas from all over Hong Kong can travel to.” The substantial mobility permitted by efficient transportation networks was a major advantage Hong Kong had over the Philippines, and Central district was the “best location.” The major terminals for buses, mini-buses, trams, and ferry lines are located here, making it extremely physically and monetarily accessible.

Convenience also included proximity to services. FDWs cited that it is important in having a space that is close to remittance centers and post offices, both places routinely visited by FDWs for remitting money and mailing parcels to their families. Having access to desired products was also said to be important. The nearby World Wide House, a commercial shopping mall located in Central, sells food and other products catering towards Filipinos. FDWs stated they liked the open space in the parks and the covered area in the HSBC plaza because “it’s good for rain or shine.” They would rather not, in fact, be in such close proximity to the aforementioned posh retail stores, nor did they like stares and comments received that were part and parcel of an accessible “prestigious neighborhood.”

Such comments allow us to develop deeper insights about how FDWs felt about Sunday Central spaces. Aware of the controversies, many FDWs believed that they were doing nothing wrong “because these are public spaces!” Many also believed that they had a right to the space and “deserve some sort of space because without domestic helpers, Hong Kong would not be Hong Kong!” Many similar comments were expressed. For example, “we deserve somewhere to rest because we work so hard,” “The Chinese and the expats need

helpers so they can work to help Hong Kong grow," "We contribute to the economy but we have no say politically!"

Many others took a different stance: on the contrary, they felt fortunate to be able to use the spaces. "Having the space is a privilege," "We feel very lucky to have this space and are grateful to HSBC, " because the "Hong Kong [government] and HSBC can forbid us to sit here..." "...but [the] Hong Kong [government] understands that this is our time, so we can help their country after our recharge." Almost all FDWs interviewees had heard or knew first hand that in other cities in the region FDWs were not as fortunate, unable to gather as freely in public spaces. Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Dubai were mentioned. In this way, "for all the bad things about Hong Kong, it is still a very desirable place for Filipinas to work."

## **4.5 Sense of Ownership**

The strong sense of ownership of the area is a major reason for the continued existence of these Sunday spaces of ephemeral "homes." Although difficult to accurately measure, FDWs have exhibited this concept towards the space. FDWs show this sense of ownership in four ways: through their descriptions, the fact that they return weekly to the exact same spaces, their behavior towards the space as a "homebase", and the fact that the space is what I am calling a "matured space."



### 4.5.1 Descriptions

The majority of FDWs described the space they occupied as their personal “lot” or “tambayan.” As one FDW yelled with laughter, representing her whole group, “We own this lot! Everyone knows this.” “Tambayan” is Tagalog for “regular hang-out spot.” Another said, “This is my space. They are my neighbors” pointing to the groups next to her. The flat clustering was most commonly described as “lot” or “space,” whereas many FDWs called the cubic clusters “apartments.”

The word “lot” refers to a specific plot of land as used in real estate or planning, and implies a specified area. The use of the word “neighbors” illustrates spatial differentiation. “Apartments” as a metaphor for the cubic clusters connotes home. The word “neighbor” illustrates spatial differentiation and refers to an area in relation to one’s home, reinforcing the idea that their space is seen as a type of home.

Traditional neighborhood dynamics are also at play. One FDW explained to me that a few years ago her regular, long-term “neighbors” stopped coming to their space and were replaced by a new group. Even though she did not know her neighbors well, she knew something was wrong and was concerned. She later found out that one of her original neighbors had fallen sick, and she wanted to help in some way. This type of concern shows a certain camaraderie between people who have shared experiences within a neighborhood-like context.

FDWs consistently referred to the Philippines when talking of home, and several mentioned that their Sunday “lot” was their “second home.” One FDW claimed, “this is our space

to recharge, to reset ourselves like people do in their homes. We have no space to do [so] at home so we do it here!" Other women in the group strongly agreed. The idea of home resonates with Lisa Law's argument that the FDW Sunday spaces transform into the Philippines through different senses – sight, smell, and tastes – creating a "home away from home" (Law 2005).

Finally, in almost every description of the FDW Sunday spaces, the workers used possessive adjectives like "our [space]," "my [area]," and "their [lot]," further illustrating a sense of ownership.

#### **4.5.2 Collective Space Memory**

As mentioned above, FDWs return to the same specific spot within the larger area each week, which, I have argued, demonstrates a sense of ownership and belonging. As Cha-Ly Koh asserts, this type of collective memory of space resembles to flea markets around the world where people return to the same spot to more easily locate friends and family (Koh 2009, 45). A group of FDWs stated that although they did not necessarily personally know the individuals in the groups next to them, it was understood that that spot belonged to the "neighbors," just as their spot belonged to them.

#### **4.5.3 A "Homebase"**

Besides words indicating ownership, how the women interact in their specific "lots" suggests that they consider them a "homebase." As mentioned earlier in the chapter, many

FDWs arrive early in the morning and claim their space by laying down the different materials. One member in their group will often stay to keep watch, or certain items are left in the middle of the mat, either covered with a cloth, or visible for their “neighbors” to watch over. The women then leave and perform what they call “chores,” or their outside errands. Examples of these activities include attending church, remitting money, going to the Filipino Consulate (which is purposely open on Sundays to accommodate the community), and using the internet at internet cafes. After these activities, they “return home” later in the day.

Additionally, before FDWs enter their flat or cubed areas, they remove their shoes and place them on the periphery of the space, mimicking the custom of removing shoes before entering a home in many parts of Asia, including Hong Kong. One FDW expressed how privacy was created, stating “This has become my private place. When my friends are here, I feel safe,” implying a sort of metaphor where the friends, in a sense, act as walls.

#### **4.5.4 A “Matured Space”**

The fact that the Sunday spaces are what I call “matured spaces” also shows a sense of ownership. A “matured space” is a space that goes through a progression of uses and activities. For example, these Sunday spaces might have begun as an area solely for socializing. After a certain period of time, however, FDWs most likely felt that the space has been adequately established, and saw the opportunity to make some extra income, and a variety of activities involving exchanging services and goods to make money emerged. The appearance of activities serving greater community needs shows yet another stage of evolution. For ex-

ample, the fact that a “mobile library<sup>4</sup>” and specific areas to purchase food were established illustrates the space as a self-sufficient community, with semi-formal institutions within an informal setting. The variety of activities and the loosely designated areas for specific activities suggests that the space is a kind of ephemeral city (Koh 2009, 11). A “matured space” means that the space feels established to its inhabitants who have achieved within it a certain level of comfort. We can conclude that there is a sense of possession of the space, or ownership.

Other peripheral activities carried out by outsiders alongside those of the FDWs reinforce the degree to which the space has “matured.” Immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Mongolia take trains weekly from southern Chinese cities like Shenzhen and Guangzhou specifically on Sundays to sell goods to FDWs. They will purchase goods at wholesale markets in these cities and once in Hong Kong, carry them in bags from FDW cluster to cluster, attracting buyers by yelling, with gusto, the product names and prices. Because these vendors are illegal, they try to be discreet and keep their distance, especially from the security guards. These vendors sell items such as clothing, pillows, bags, and knick-knacks. Even local Hong Kong vendors take advantage of the FDW Sunday space and sell a special type of local drink called “bubble tea.” They will take orders in large batches and return with boxes of the drinks. Also, there is a specific corner where Filipino male photographers come to the FDW Sunday space in Statue Square. For a fee, they take photos of an FDW with a background of the Square or skyscrapers. These photos are often sent home to family in Philippines as a way to show that the FDW is thriving and living a “glamorous life” in a “cos-

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<sup>4</sup> “Mobile library” was described in Chapter 4.3.3.

mopolitan city."

While the FDW Sunday spaces initially look like a chaotic cluster of people, in fact, organized spatial configurations are the norm, as is an established system of activities and networks. As noted, FDWs feel a strong sense of ownership of the individual "lots," and collectively of the entire area.

# Concept Diagram: Evolution from a social space to a mature space or ephemeral city

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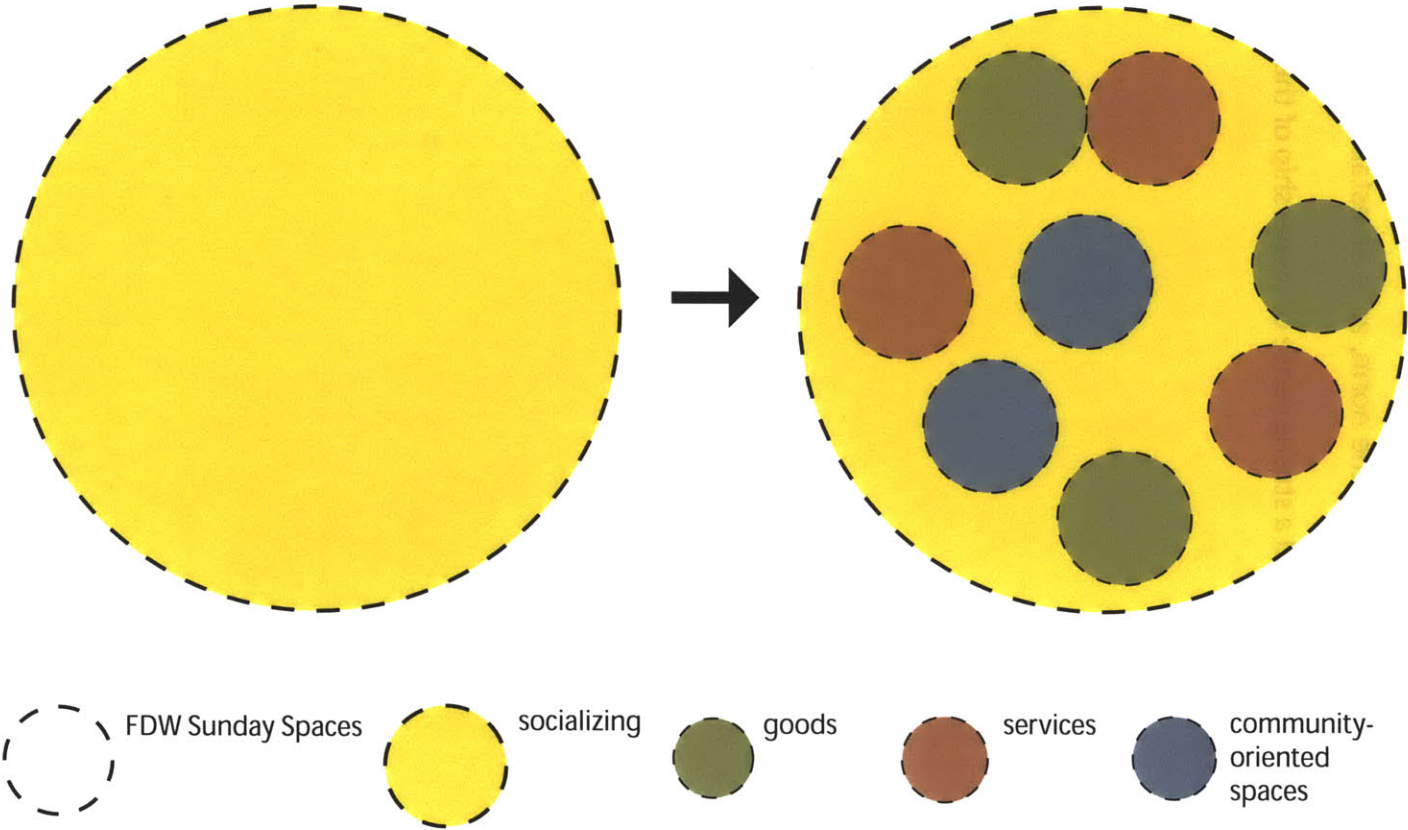


Figure 4-13: Concept Diagram

# Chapter 5

## Impacts of Modern Network Communications

### 5.1 Physical to Virtual Interactions?

The previous chapters illustrate how the Sunday spaces created by FDWs developed out a need of personally programmed spaces for interaction. In these spaces, interaction between FDWs acts as a means to decompress from the long work week, helping their emotional well-being. In recent years, the prominence of cellular and Internet technology use among FDWs has led to the rise and popularity of virtual interactions. The shifting habits and activities in the Sunday spaces related to these modern network communications raise important and thought-provoking questions of how virtual interactions will affect physical interactions between FDWs, the Sunday spaces, and the FDW community as a whole.

In this exploratory chapter, I hope to reveal certain patterns of use and highlight specific trends with respect to the influence of modern network communications.

The large majority of FDWs have at least one cellular (cell) phone, with many owning more than one, and an increasing number not only using the internet, but owning a laptop or netbook (Yummul 2011). Initially rare, FDWs on cell phones and using netbooks have become commonplace in the Sunday spaces. Acting out hand and thumb gestures mimicking typing and texting, several FDWs who have been working in Hong Kong for over 15 years commented, "Before there were less people with their heads [facing] down. Now you see the Filipinas so busy looking down at their cell phone or computer," "sending load<sup>1</sup>..." "chatting with their family..." and "playing games." Despite the extra costs associated with cell phones, laptops and netbooks, the prevalence of modern network communications among the FDW community in Hong Kong comes as no surprise given the pervasiveness of these technologies in the Philippines, a country that has earned the title of "texting capital of the world" (Dimacali 2010), where cell phone has become "a major icon of Philippine life" (Pertierra 2002, 149).

## 5.2 Modern Network Communications in the Philippines

The cell phone rapidly penetrated into the Philippines and has significantly impacted all social classes. In 2005, two major cell phone companies, Globe Telecom and Smart Commu-

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<sup>1</sup>Load is another term for cellular phone credit. Many FDWs "send load" or purchase phone credit for their families back home for communication, and do so because it is easier than transferring money to have them add credit themselves. "Sending load" has become a popular service from many phone network providers.



nications, served a total of 32.8 million cellphone subscribers in 2005, or 36% of the Philippine population. This is significant number as 40% of the country lives below the poverty line, on less than \$1 a day (Uy-Tioco 2007). As a result, the dominance of the cell phone as a result affected the way FDWs abroad communicate with their family members<sup>2</sup>.

The desire to be “constantly connected has become a national obsession” (Pertierra 2002, 88), though instead of talking on the phone, the Filipinos primarily use their cell phones for sending text messages, or Short Message Service (SMS). “Texting” is an abbreviated form of writing for brief messages used on cell phones. Cell phones have an alphanumeric keyboard where the twenty-six letters are created from ten buttons.<sup>3</sup>

In 2009, the average Filipino mobile subscriber sent an average of 600 text messages per month, or 43 percent more than their US counterparts (Dimacali 2010). While the per capita number of cell phones in the Philippines is not significantly large by international standards, the number of text messages sent by subscribers is double the world average (Pertierra 2002, 88), ahead of any of its Southeast Asian neighbors and many cities in Europe or North America (Roman, 1). Texting has become so second-nature that researcher Pertierra states that its function is “primarily symbolic and ritualistic rather than instrumental and cognitive.” It has fostered a culture of “quick greetings and forwarded jokes” (Teves 2007).

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<sup>2</sup>Like in many other developing countries, the Philippines’ weak landline networks and the affordability of cell phones were major reasons for its success.

<sup>3</sup>At one point, texting was a free service, with a certain number of messages per month per subscription, but currently, texts in general cost about 1 peso per minute (about USD\$0.02). Texting became more widely available with the introduction of pre-paid calling cards by major telecommunications companies in 1999. This allowed Filipinos to acquire a cell phone without major paperwork including filing a billing address, because anyone who could afford a phone could then buy a phonecard (Pertierra 2002, 87). This allowed for more privacy and mobility (Pertierra 2002, 87).

Although internet penetration in the Philippines is relatively low compared to its Asian neighbors, the percentage of the population using the internet has grown from 2.6% in 2000 to 29.7% in 2010 (Anon. 2010). The internet has a high potential for growth in the coming years due to a deregulated market, strong government endorsement for IT development, and an increasingly internet-savvy population (Anon. 2010). Internet connection in homes is currently limited to wealthier citizens and companies, though the popularity of internet cafes has allowed many other citizens access. Consequently, the online gaming industry in the Philippines is strong (Anon. 2010). In sum, cellular and internet technologies have had a significant impact on Philippine society.

## **5.3 Modern Network Communications among FDWs in Hong Kong**

### **5.3.1 Cellular Phones**

The pervasiveness of cell phones in Hong Kong allowed for prices to drop, which enabled many FDWs to be able to afford their first hand-set in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Today, FDWs in Hong Kong have a complex network of cell phones with the purpose to save money, although many stated that they end up spending more in the long-run. Most FDWs have at least one cell phone, but many have two, with some that have up to four or five cell phones at the same time.

The most basic cell phone an FDW would have is intended for use among friends in Hong

Kong. These phones function through a pre-paid SIM card or a monthly service plan from a local network provider. If FDWs have a second phone it is most often one that uses a Filipino SIM card, which allows for roaming<sup>4</sup>. This type of phone is used solely for receiving texts from family because it is free on these SIM cards to receive texts and cost only 1 Philippine peso per text for families to send them. If FDWs have a third phone, it may be provided by the employer who employer will call the FDW during the day to check-in, especially if they are caring from children, or remind them to purchase something at the market, etc. Most FDWs either not carry or will turn off this phone during their off-day, however some are required to leave them on in case their employers need to reach them.

A fourth or fifth phone might be used for a variety of reasons. An extra handset can serve as a “business phone” for a side business, for example, of selling phonecards or clothing, skincare, or other items from catalogs. Often some FDWs use an extra phone for finding a significant other, communicating with a lover or finding a “textmate,” the modern-day equivalent of romantic penpals. Sometimes FDWs have an extra phone as a result of a promotion from a certain network provider. For example, some providers supply SIM cards that allow free texting between people using the same provider. Many times if a close friend of a FDW is on a certain network, a FDW will purchase the SIM card and use that phone solely to communicate with that one friend. Obtaining extra phones is possible because of the general availability and low costs of handsets, especially older phone models.

While most FDWs purchase pre-paid calling cards, some of them do subscribe to service

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<sup>4</sup> Roaming is defined as the ability for a cellular customer to automatically make and receive voice calls, send and receive data, or access other services, including home data services, when travelling outside the geographical coverage area of the home network, by means of using a visited network.

providers and pay for monthly service. Increasingly popular, many FDWs opt to pay for service to be able to check email, or for full internet service or their phones.

In recent years, dual or triple SIM cards have entered the market, allowing for less of a need for multiple handsets. For example, dual “SIM 1528” allows users to have two numbers. One number is a Philippine-based one, so that family can still text to a FDW at 1 Philippine peso per text, and the other number is a Hong Kong number, so it can be used with friends locally.

### **5.3.2 The Internet and Netbooks**

Authors reporting on communication and FDWs have commented that financial limitations often mean that FDWs are restricted to using cell phones (Pertierra 2002, 83). However, the increasingly low price of laptops, especially netbooks, make them more affordable and therefore accessible within a FDW’s wages. Of the over forty interviews conducted, all but a few FDWs use the internet on a regular basis: about seven to eight of them own personal laptops or netbooks. At the time of writing, a netbook in Hong Kong costs about HKD\$2000, or about USD\$257. Those who do not own their own machine frequent internet cafes located throughout the city<sup>5</sup>.

As an alternative to getting a laptop or netbook, many FDWs get full or limited access to the internet through their cell phones network providers. For example, as an extra service to their regular phone line, FDWs can pay to access all of the web or only access to email or

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<sup>5</sup>Some, but very few FDWs, are allowed by their employers to use the family desktop once they are done with their chores.

sites such as Facebook for a smaller fee. Several companies provide special plans targeted to FDWs (Teves 2007). Also, many FDWs with internet through their phone engage in a process called tethering, whereby they hook up a netbook to the internet via the cell phone internet service. In this way, FDWs are able to use the internet on their netbooks in the Sunday spaces, which would otherwise not have wifi.

The internet was originally a means for chatting – real-time instant messaging and video chat – with family, as many FDWs said that they were willing to pay this extra expense because “family is everything.” In recent years, however, social networking among friends has become just as popular among FDW internet users. The most popular software programs for video chatting with family seem to be Skype, followed by Yahoo Messenger, while social networking sites Facebook, MySpace, are used for socializing and chatting, in order of popularity.

Social networking through Facebook has become so popular that for “many Filipinos who never even thought of going on the [inter]net before, Facebook has become nearly a must” (Teves 2007). Some internet cafe shop owners say that many of their Filipino customers on the weekends come in and ask for help opening a Facebook account. Many do not even have email accounts and obtain them for the sole purpose of opening a Facebook account. As one internet cafe shop owner in Hong Kong revealed, “They ask me to log in for them, but after a few weeks, they would have already learned [how] to do it by heart. I just notice that [they] never open their emails, only Facebook.”

Since 2006, the Hong Kong Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) office

began to offer free computer literacy courses for FDWs at Community Technology Learning Centers (CTLCs), in a joint project called “Tulay” (or “Bridge”) with Microsoft Philippines. The program seeks to address the “social displacement encountered by OFWs and their families.” Director Rafael Rollan of Microsoft Philippines hopes that “by receiving technology participants are able to do more than communicate through email or chat. They become armed with skills that boost their confidence and equip them in exploring alternative employment prospects” (Ortiz 2008).

While participants learn the basics of computing such as how to navigate a mouse, use Microsoft Word, Excel, and internet browsing, they also teach participants how to use internet chat and social networking sites like Facebook (Cataran 2011). The fact that the Philippine government is endorsing and facilitating these types of activities indicates that FDW usage of computers will only increase.

## **5.4 Changing Habits due to Modern Network Communications**

### **5.4.1 Connecting with Family**

Modern network communications has changed the way FDWs communicate with their families, which has in turn changed FDW Sunday habits. Keeping in contact with family members was stated as the most important pastime, since their stay in Hong Kong is a “sacrifice for [their] family.” Before modern network communications, “first generation” FDWs

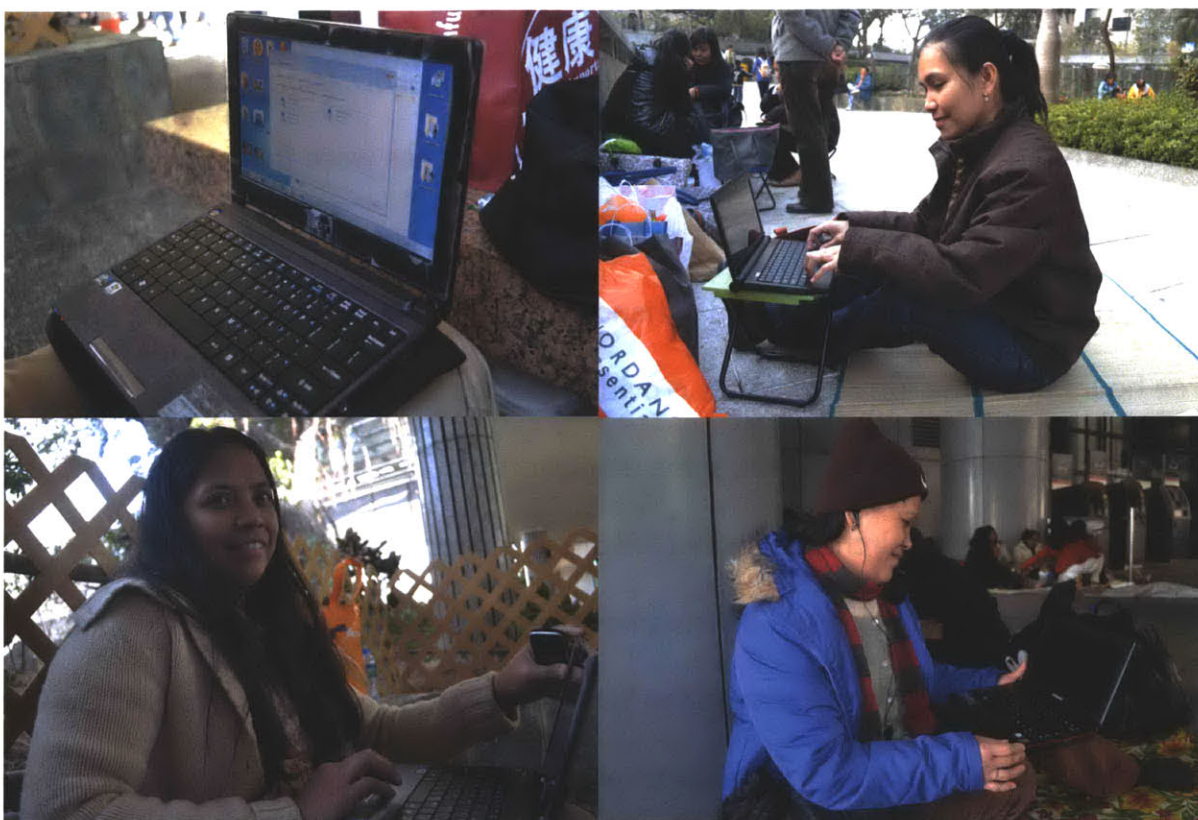


Figure 5-1: FDWs renting out books, playing cards, and providing manicure services, January 2011

used letter-writing as their primary form of communicating with their family, children and spouses. Letter-writing was described as an almost ritualistic endeavor, with trips to the post-office or mailbox a weekly custom. Even though their families would not receive the letters until “one month, sometimes more!” a feeling of satisfaction emerged as soon as “the envelope was sealed.” Over time, recording one’s voice on a voice recorder, or producing a “voice tape,” became popular. Voice recorders were relatively expensive but still accessible for those who really desired one. Instead of composing words on a page, voice recordings

allowed for a “more real expression,” with one’s “real voice<sup>6</sup>.”

Talking to families through the telephone was a special occasion that did not happen often. Before the ease of the cell phone, public pay phones were the primary means for speaking with loved ones. Because only a few public pay phones existed around Central, hearing the voices of family required patience. It was common to “wait in line for two to three hours at a time” on Sundays, as crowds of FDWs would eagerly await during their only time off. Though not common, some employers would allow their FDW to call home every so often, using a purchased phonecard or subsequently paying the charges.

Today, the cell phone and the internet have become instrumental tools in maintaining and developing relationships between the FDW and her children and spouse. As Uy-Tioco points out, it is ironic that care (of children and the home) is the largest export product of the Philippines, sacrificing caring for one’s own family (Uy-Tioco 2007, 4). FDWs always speak of “sacrifice” when asked the reason why they are in Hong Kong. The cell phone and the internet have allowed FDWs to bridge physical distance between their families at home by maintaining relationships with their children and maintain their roles in the family. As Uy-Tioco says, “The capacity of text messaging for real-time communication has allowed both profound and mundane “conversations’ to take place despite the distance of time and space” (Uy-Tioco 2007, 21). Video chat has allowed for real-time communication accompanied by picture. FDWs comment, “You miss the milestones, her first period, first boyfriend, first talent show, but at least now I can see them grow up through the internet. It’s amazing”

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<sup>6</sup>Many FDWs commented how mailing the tape would cost more than just a letter, but that the extra cost “for my children to hear their mother and smile was worth it.”



“I’m much closer to family now. You can share with them if you are sick. And they make you feel better.” “You can easily become a stranger to your children... that’s the saddest thing. But now it’s better with technology.” Thus, modern network communications allows FDWs to have a greater presence as mothers and spouses than they have in the past.

Internet technology is also attractive because it saves money. A self-proclaimed “Facebook fanatic” FDW comments, “I like Facebook better because I get to save. I do not call as much as I used to, and I can even see what my children are up to because they are also active users” (Admin 2010).

Finally, many have found the internet to help with their romantic relationships with husbands and boyfriends back in the Philippines. Video chat was mentioned to by many to have improved their relationship, as they can now “see and feel the love more than before.”

The use of modern network communications as a means to communicate with family replaced the need to stand in line at payphones. In the past, FDWs had to wait once a week or more to speak with family; they now can do it much more easily and frequently, almost at any time, on Sundays while they sit in the space.

#### **5.4.2 Support from Friends**

Modern network communications has allowed FDWs to get emotional support on any day of the week. Before these technologies, receiving emotional support from friends was possible only on Sundays. Talking in person to friends about family-matters, employers and their work, and about other FDWs lives acted as an emotional outlet which allowed FDWs

to “feel human.” Many FDWs text short messages to each other during the week<sup>7</sup>, checking-in, in order to feel “are connected.” As one FDW explains, “Even if we are just texting jokes, I feel better already to know someone is laughing with me.” The cell phone allows for real-time communication.

Using Facebook also provides a means of directly getting support from friends. As one FDW describes, “Facebook has helped me a lot. For example, now that I am undergoing some personal problems, I am able to recover more quickly because of the words of encouragement from my FB friends. Another thing, it has helped me find my old friends, so Facebook is really good” (Admin 2010). Furthermore, FDWs report that the internet has helped build their confidence. Facebook has acted as a support and coping mechanism. One FDW expressed, “I am a shy person, but because of my frequent postings, I developed self-confidence. I realized I am able to do this and that. And because of Facebook, I am able to show the whole world that I can send my kids to school even if it’s hard. My children also seem to appreciate my sacrifices more because they get to read my status updates” (Admin 2010). Despite the positives, one FDW comments on the negative change she has seen, “My group [on the Sunday space] is much smaller now than it was 10 years ago. Everybody wants to chat, they go to the internet cafe, or some stay at home. I still need them because I don’t care for these new technologies. I still come because this is my place.

Thus, in previous years, much of the support FDWs received was from chatting informally among friends on Sundays, or in discussion support sessions through their organizations. Today, some of this support has transferred to text messages and online support with

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<sup>7</sup> Many FDWs commented that they more often send texts than make phonecalls.

some FDW members shifting from being in the Sunday spaces to anywhere they can access the internet.

### **5.4.3 Remitting money**

Although no concrete statistics exist, the popularity of remitting money through the cell phone suggests that one day this technology may replace traditional ways of remitting money by going to a remittance center. Remitting money ranks as one of the most important errands for an FDW as the sole purpose of their Hong Kong sojourn work is to remit money back to their families. This critical task, which involves FDWs unfailingly going to a remittance center and standing in line, may happen anywhere from once a week to once a month. Many regard these remittance centers as expensive and slow (Ganchero 2009).

Slowly gaining popularity, more FDWs are beginning to remit money through mobile banking services. The Filipino network provider Smart provides specific programs to serve overseas Filipinos: “low-cost communication and remittance services enable them to maximize the impact of their hard-earned income” (Ganchero 2009). With a required small fee, in just seconds, a transaction is made and approved. A bank account is not necessary to retrieve the money, and enables people without them to transfer money easily, quickly, and safely. One Hong Kong FDW comments, “The good thing here is, wherever my children are, they can text me and I can send money immediately” (Teves 2007). As of 2007, more than 5.5 Filipinos used their cell phones as “virtual wallets” (Teves 2007). The ease of remitting money through cell phones replaces physical trips to remittance centers and frees up time.



Figure 5-2: Confirmation of a money transfer. Source: Bullit Maquez / AP

#### 5.4.4 Games and Recreation

Modern network communications has opened up a whole new set of entertainment and recreational activities, which conceivably will replace the more traditional forms of Sunday entertainment. Gambling and various card games are a highlight on Sundays. Today, cell phones and the internet also act as an entertainment outlet. Besides Facebook as a means to connect and get support from friends, it is also used for entertainment through games, horoscopes, and personality tests. Many FDWs play Farmville, a popular Facebook game. Some describe it as “dangerously addicting.” Before the internet and Facebook, cell phones also served as an outlet for simple games. Real-time chatting online in chatrooms has also become popular, especially among FDWs seeking a romantic companion. Thus, some FDWs who partook in gambling or playing cards in the Sunday spaces may now choose to get their entertainment through the cell phone or Facebook.



Figure 5-3: Will card games be replaced by Farmville?

#### 5.4.5 Tool for Organizations

Modern network communications has changed the way organization leaders advertise their activities and events. Organization leaders have found new technologies to be an extremely useful tool for promoting their activities and events. UNIFIL-HK Secretary General Eman Villanueva says he appreciates technology because he is able to instantly notify hundreds of members at once about upcoming rallies and other activities, through what he calls “text blasts.” Before, if members had not attended Sunday meetings, word of mouth was the primary way of relaying news. “Today, we have a quicker and greater reach,” says Villanueva. Facebook event invites are also commonly used: hosts can invite all their contacts “with one click.” In the past, leaders had to rely on an organization’s members to show up to hear about major activities and events.

One major disadvantage Villanueva and others have noted is that some members do not show up to meetings on Sundays as often as they used to. Leaders hypothesize that these members feel they can “catch up on missed news” through the internet or mass texts. The new communication technologies allow members to miss announcements, and may point to a continued lower attendance rate at meetings on Sundays spaces in the future.

## 5.5 Consequences

Modern network communications has changed the way the world communicates, including the lives of FDWs within their Sunday spaces and other times during the week. But what does the future hold for the Hong Kong FDW community? Will virtual interaction replace physical interaction? Will the Sunday spaces eventually become obsolete? Although no concrete conclusions can be made, such questions should be raised so we can consider how the space may change and the overall impacts on the future of this community.

Some members of the community are concerned that FDWs will interact physically much less frequently than in the past, ultimately spending significantly less time in the spaces. Many FDWs said that it is happening already; FDWs take their laptops and netbooks to the space, with the result that they are “there but not there.” Eman Villanueva states that FDWs should not use modern network communications “as an alternative to interact and communicate with people.” He adds, “Before people were really excited to go out on Sundays to meet people other than their employers. But now, some would rather stay at home, or go out and stay online – they have a false idea that they have hundreds of friends [from Face-

book].” It is possible that eventually fewer FDWs will frequent the space, resulting in an overall weaker community.

On the other hand, some FDWs believe that these technologies will have the opposite effect. “Text blasts” and Facebook event messages allow for more organization and therefore higher attendance to rallies and other events. In 2001, it is popularly known that text messaging played a key role in mobilizing crowds that fueled the revolt in overthrowing of President Joseph Estrada in the Philippines (Admin 2010). As a result, Hong Kong may experience more organized FDW crowds, in the form of rallies or organizational meetings around the city, including in the Sunday spaces themselves. The community of the future may be more united even when FDWs are not physically in each others’ presence, supported by stronger networks through blogs, Facebook, and other platforms.

### **5.5.1 What does this mean for Hong Kong?**

Further extensive research needs to be conducted in order to be able to confidently predict the effects of these modern network technologies. If the city postulates that the future FDW community will be stronger, however, authorities should assume that FDWs’ tie to the space will also grow stronger. A close-knit community can suggest greater presence, as referred to above with the possible increase of rallies and demonstrations. Most importantly, it is critical to note that this long-standing community and their spaces are not static, and in fact, are continually changing.

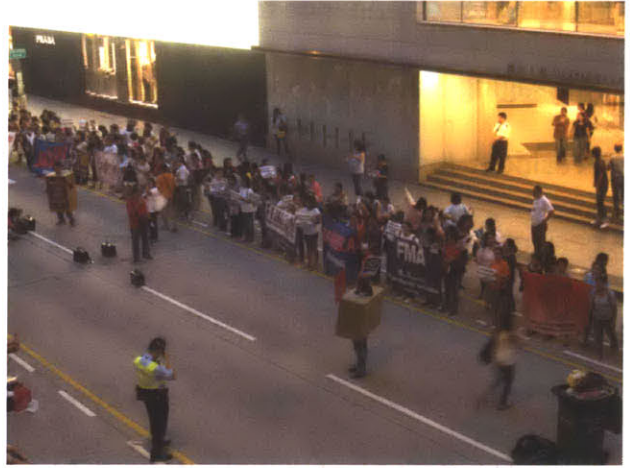


Figure 5-4: FDW Demonstration in Central, August 2010



# Chapter 6

## Conclusion

We pour [out] our tears on Sundays, so when we get back to our employers, we are no longer full of emotion "Sunday is one day, only for Filipinas" our special day and special place.

-FDW in HSBC space

The executive director of the Asian Migrant Centre, Rex Varona, succinctly described the domestic worker situation in Hong Kong, "They live based on the denial of space – Living space, personal space, and space for [professional] growth" (Varona 2010). This denial of adequate space has prompted the FDW community to create their own personally programmed spaces on Sundays where they are able to interact with their peers to decompress from their work week. This ethnography analyzes their use of space and ultimately examines what this might mean for the FDW community at-large and for the city of Hong Kong. This thesis uncovers and describes the physical and programmatic subtleties – the spatial configurations, how the space is claimed, the various activities, why the specified location –

and has shown how the space acts as an outlet from the strenuous work week for FDWs.

The underlying theme that emerges from my analysis is the strong sense of ownership felt by FDWs, which leads them to speak of the spaces as a kind of home. While the Philippines remains their true home, the Sunday spaces constitute a “second home” or “home away from home.”

The spaces have become a home because they provide an alternative identity for the FDWs. The spaces allow FDWs to see themselves as members of a community and as more than an overseas domestic worker. On Sundays, FDWs are “united Filipinas” in Hong Kong. On this day, they are not Mrs. Wong’s “maid;” rather they are again mothers, sisters, spouses, cousins, talent-show winners, and catalog representatives. On this day FDWs cast aside their self-image as domestic workers, and allow themselves to have additional identities deriving from the other roles they play. Above all, the Sunday spaces should be viewed critically as empowering spaces for the FDW community.

From this analysis it is clear that Central has been chosen not because FDWs desire to feel a certain higher status, choosing a location that implies this in the downtown near posh shops, but, rather because it is a suitable and effective space. It is conveniently accessed from most areas in Hong Kong and close to key products and services such as close proximity to remittance agencies, the post office, and Filipino products available at World Wide House.

Citizens who view the FDW Sunday spaces as a “nuisance” and “of no value” need to reassess their perception of this ritual, as must the Hong Kong government. Although the

authorities seem to have tacitly accepted the Sunday spaces, evident from the area's history and multi-lingual signage, the government must comprehensively understand and take very seriously the implications of these spaces and activities. It is important for the government to remind itself that the past attitudes have caused conflict and that its current stance of accommodation has led to a stabilizing effect.

It is also necessary that the government keep in mind the impact of modern network communications on the FDW community. The proliferation of the cellular phone and internet technologies will likely strengthen the community and reinforce their permanence in the spaces, and therefore presence in society.

Although many FDWs feel it is their right to have a space and that they should be given permanent permission to continue their activities in the Sunday spaces, many FDWs recognize and are grateful for the level of accommodation made by the Hong Kong government. They understand that Hong Kong provides more leeway than in many other neighboring cities in the region.

Clearly, it behooves Hong Kong and other governments to support and accommodate spaces for live-in domestic worker populations. Although this temporary "city within a city" has been occurring for decades, it is constantly changing and should not be viewed as a static phenomenon. As the oldest sizable foreign domestic worker population in Hong Kong, the case of the Filipinas can provide a "best practices" example for how to accommodate foreign domestic worker populations in the city. It can inform how Hong Kong can approach other growing domestic worker populations, namely the Indonesian domestic work-

ers, whose population just surpassed the FDWs in 2009. This population occupies specific areas in the Causeway Bay district.

This case study can help other less-dense cities with significant domestic worker populations determine how to accommodate for spaces workers need during their day off, before it escalates to the Hong Kong case. While Hong Kong faces particular challenges, it can provide useful lessons for other growing cities. Other cities can avoid the conflict that Hong Kong faced with this population.

Transnational foreign domestic labor is high in demand in many countries around the world. With increasingly diverse populations within a city, cities must adapt to serve the needs of all its residents. Clearly, city governments should take migrant worker populations very seriously and develop a nuanced understanding of their needs for space and community development.

# Appendix 1

## Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties

1. Both the Employer and the Helper should sign to acknowledge that they have read and agreed to the contents of this Schedule, and to confirm their consent for the Immigration Department and other relevant government authorities to collect and use the information contained in this Schedule in accordance with the provisions of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance.
2. Employer's residence and number of persons to be served
  - A. Approximate size of flat/house \_\_\_\_\_ square feet/square metres\*
  - B. State below the number of persons in the household to be served on a regular basis:  
 \_\_\_\_\_ adult \_\_\_\_\_ minors (aged between 5 to 18) \_\_\_\_\_ minors (aged below 5) \_\_\_\_\_ expecting babies.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ persons in the household requiring constant care or attention (excluding infants).  
 (Note: Number of Helpers currently employed by the Employer to serve the household \_\_\_\_\_)
3. Accommodation and facilities to be provided to the Helper
  - A. Accommodation to the Helper
 

While the average flat size in Hong Kong is relatively small and the availability of separate servant room is not common, the Employer should provide the Helper suitable accommodation and with reasonable privacy. Examples of unsuitable accommodation are: The Helper having to sleep on made-do beds in the corridor with little privacy and sharing a room with an adult/teenager of the opposite sex.

Yes. Estimated size of the servant room \_\_\_\_\_ square feet/square metres\*

No. Sleeping arrangement for the Helper:

    - Share a room with \_\_\_\_\_ child/children aged \_\_\_\_\_
    - Separate partitioned area of \_\_\_\_\_ square feet/square metres\*
    - Others. Please describe \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. Facilities to be provided to the Helper:
 

(Note: Application for entry visa will normally not be approved if the essential facilities from item (a) to (f) are not provided free.)

(a) Light and water supply	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
(b) Toilet and bathing facilities	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
(c) Bed	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
(d) Blankets or quilt	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
(e) Pillows	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
(f) Wardrobe	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
(g) Refrigerator	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
(h) Desk	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
(i) Other facilities (Please specify)	_____	
	_____	
	_____	
4. The Helper should only perform domestic duties at the Employer's residence. Domestic duties to be performed by the Helper under this contract exclude driving of a motor vehicle of any description for whatever purposes, whether or not the vehicle belongs to the Employer.
5. Domestic duties include the duties listed below.  
Major portion of domestic duties:-
  1. Household chores
  2. Cooking
  3. Looking after aged persons in the household (constant care or attention is required/not required\*)
  4. Baby-sitting
  5. Child-minding
  6. Others (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
6. The Employer shall inform the Helper and the Director of Immigration of any substantial changes in item 2, 3 and 5 by serving a copy of the Revised Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties (ID 407G) signed by both the Employer and the Helper to the Director of Immigration for record.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Employer's name and signature      Date      Helper's name and signature      Date

\* delete where inappropriate.  
 tick as appropriate.

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