

Chapter 10

Derrida's Hospitality and Serres' Parasitism: The Case of Hong Kong

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10.1 Background—Hong Kong's Modernizing Process

Hong Kong's rapid and successful modernization in the past 4 decades has earned its name as the Asian Miracle; together with Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea, these four dragons or tigers have established themselves as the economic giants of SE Asia. Less than 40 years ago, Hong Kong's economy was primarily industrial, generating its wealth through textile, plastic and other types of manufacturing. But China's economic reforms and marketization in the 70s attracted many of these factories—which were labor and land intensive—to move North across the border where costs were lower. This prepared the way for Hong Kong to shift to a more service-oriented economy. For the literate and educated middle-class housewives, the job market became more appealing as working conditions improved and options were no longer restricted to manual labor. The fast growing city's need for a larger labor force was answered in part by working women, but demographic changes of a modernizing economy also created gaps in other areas: working parents of nuclear families in small urban apartments lacked support for everyday domestic chores, elderly or childcare.

In a certain sense, the city's development reflects the global trend—its modernization follows the shift from industrial to service or finance economy. However, the timing of Hong Kong's growth happened in parallel to the economic downturn of the neighboring Philippines. In 1974, President Ferdinand Marcos decided to adopt labor export as a way to boost the Filipino economy by reducing unemployment and increasing its GNP through remittances. For Hong Kong, importing labor for domestic purposes was a policy that killed two birds with one stone:

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179

migrants filled the gap of household needs, enabling more people to join the work force which in turn solved the labor shortage problem the city was facing. Since the introduction of the Foreign Domestic Helpers (FDHs) scheme in the 70s, Hong Kong has steadily increased its demand for and dependency on this population of workers to provide domestic care. Today there are 320,000 FDHs in Hong Kong, of which 51% are from the Philippines and 46% from Indonesia. Based on Hong Kong's population of seven million, the Government Census and Statistics Department calculated there are 2.3 million households (3 persons per unit)—which means that one in seven families are employing a full time domestic helper at home.

This article aims to look at the unique phenomenon of FDHs in Hong Kong. In his famous chapter titled “Asia as Method,” Chen highlights the need to multiply our “frames of reference” so that the problems and issues emerging out of the experience located in Asia could offer points of reference and contribute to the self-reflexive movement which he calls “Asia as Method” (2010).¹ While migration has been the subject of global debate, the case of Hong Kong offers different aspects for consideration. The complexity of having full time, live-in domestic helpers challenges traditional notions of guest workers or migrant laborers. The intimate nature of domestic work meant that the private domain of home often becomes the intersection where tensions between the private and the public, alien and the citizen are played out. The contradictory demands of receiving workers at home compel us to question our understanding of our treatment of foreigners. This article begins with the abuse case of Erwiana Sulistyarningsih, which confronted the city of Hong Kong to the issues of FDHs; however, I argue despite the fight for justice for Erwiana, the case did not serve to challenge the precarious status of this population of workers, which is constituted within the contradictory nature of their status.

Elsewhere² I have argued that this population of migrant workers are treated as an exception to the norm: they are an integral part of Hong Kong's labor force, but are not necessarily recognized as such. Their particular status recalls Partha Chatterjee's concept of populations, which he defines as “empirical categories of people” (136); in *Politics of the Governed*, he explains that populations are “identifiable, classifiable and describable by empirical or behavioral criteria” but they are not part of what the city considers as citizens; their specific social or economic attributes are relevant for the administration of developmental or welfare policies, but they are not included in the center of politics (34).³ This socially visible but excluded population is an oxymoron that has been termed aptly by Erni as “included out” referring to those who dwell as a stranger in the sphere of home.⁴

¹See Chen *Asia as Method* (2010).

²See Tam “Little Manila” (2016).

³See Chatterjee *Politics of the Governed* (2004).

⁴See Erni “There is No Home: Law, Rights, and being ‘Included-Out’” (2013).

10.2 Justice for Erwiana

2015 has seen some rare victories for foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong. Of the scattered reports usually relegated to the sidelines of local news, the case of Erwiana Sulistyarningsih broke the sound barrier and made international headlines as the case of her abuse came to light.

Erwiana Sulistyarningsih was a high school graduate when she decided to leave her Indonesian home in May 2013 to work abroad in Hong Kong. Her goal was to save enough money so that she could continue her studies in Accountancy at university. Like many young women in poorer neighboring Asian countries, Hong Kong's FDHs scheme offers her a way to combat the lack of financial opportunities back home. Earning the minimum allowable wage of HK\$4010 (approximately US \$517) per month represents the double or more than that of a professional's income in their home countries. For many, this means access to higher education, home improvement and future security for themselves and their families.

Unfortunately for Erwiana, things did not go according to plan. Upon arrival at her employer Law Wun-tung's home, she was immediately put on a grueling twenty-one-hour work schedule: she cleaned throughout the night and slept on the floor during the day. She was fed only a bowl of rice, not allowed to leave the apartment and denied of her statutory days off. When failing to meet her employers' demands, she was physically aggressed, hit and beaten with various household items. When her injuries became infected, she was denied medical attention and her situation slowly deteriorated until she was physically too weak to work. Then she was abandoned at the airport with HK\$70 in her pocket and a threat to the lives of her family if she was ever to reveal the details of her assault. A fellow migrant worker saw her weakened state and escorted her to the hospital upon arrival in Indonesia. When the case came to light, the Hong Kong police stalled, claiming there was a "lack of evidence" and judged the case to be "miscellaneous" (Mok et al., *SCMP*),⁵ but public outcry and civil rights groups pressured them into opening a criminal investigation. The employer Law Wan-tung was then arrested, charged, consequently found guilty of eighteen accounts of abuse and sentenced to six years in prison.

Erwiana became the name that was equated to the struggle against exploitative labor conditions and her victory a symbol of justice. She became an icon, heralded as "the migrant worker who fought back" and named one of the top 100 most influential people of *Time* magazine in 2014 (Mam, *Time*).⁶ In a city where not everyone saw eye to eye on migrant worker rights, the case of Erwiana brought together disparate groups: foreign domestic workers joined hands with local employers and took to the streets calling for justice, lawmakers (usually silent on FDH rights) and labor unions united to condemn the cruelty and violence inflicted upon Erwiana. The physical lacerations and scars were all too real; the face of abuse

⁵See Mok et al. "Police investigate case of alleged maid abuse" (2014).

⁶See Mam "Erwiana Sulistyarningsih" (2015).

galvanized the city and prompted discussions about the way this population of workers are treated in Hong Kong.

10.3 Just or Fair Treatment?

The weekly televised discussion program on current issues, *City Forum* (城市論壇), dedicated one of its sessions to discuss the “Employment Situations among Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong.” On the panel were representatives from employer groups, domestic helper labor unions, NGOs and recruitment agencies. Without exception, all the panelists agreed that Erwiana’s abuse was of an extreme nature therefore an exception to the norm—the majority of 320,000 FDHs in Hong Kong are not starved or beaten. Michael Lee of the Liberal Party insisted that 99.99% of employers in Hong Kong are ethical and treat their helpers with respect. Deng, representative of the domestic labor union, took the floor in Cantonese, saying that she herself has been lucky to work for a great employer and was sure that the majority of Hong Kong employers are good. The highlight of the forty-minute televised session was when Erwiana herself appeared and speaking through a translator thanked the supporters of her case, and asked that Hong Kong employers treat their helpers well.

For many of these workers, being placed with a good employer is a matter of luck. The nature of domestic labor is such that work takes place within the confines of home where environment and conditions vary widely subject to individual employers. In the process of doing fieldwork and interviews with migrants, I learned what it means to be “lucky,” to have a “good” employer and to be well treated: in general, being able to take their days off on Sunday is considered lucky—it is the day when most activities tailored to FDHs are held—church services in Tagalog, workshops, competitions, but most important of all: it is the day for them to meet up with friends and relatives who are working in other households in Hong Kong. Some “bad” employers prefer to isolate their helpers and choose to give them a day off during the week. One of my informants, Malou, told me that she is lucky because her good employers allow her to take walks in the evenings, so she could see Hong Kong at night. Another worker, Lita, is lucky because her good employer paid for her driving lessons in Hong Kong so she could have a license. Lita is also lucky because she gets an extra HK\$500 per month for cleaning the home of her employers’ parents once a week, whereas Malou, Riza and Myra do not get extra payment for cleaning a second house. These workers met at a training run by a local NGO, where the focus was on financial literacy and saving for their goals; they were thankful for the learning opportunities and considered themselves lucky to be in Hong Kong.

In a way, these workers could perhaps be considered as being well treated—their employers are nice, treat them as part of the family, take care of them and offer them extra opportunities to learn. All this stands in stark contrast to the horror of Erwiana’s journey—the physical and mental abuse she had to endure was a clear

case of being unfairly treated—which was a violation of her rights as a worker and as a fellow human being. After her employer was sentenced, Erwiana issued a statement in which she said, “Maltreatment of migrant domestic workers or anyone is not okay” (Lau and Chan, *SCMP*).⁷ Whether it is by the understanding of contract, labor rights, rule of law, human rights or common humanity, Law has clearly crossed all lines. But on the flip side, what does fair treatment mean and entail in the context of FDHs? What governs the rule of hospitality for this population of foreign women? On what basis and in what capacity do we judge whether the treatment extended to these guest workers are apt or not—are they guests or are they workers?

10.4 Foreign Domestic Helpers—Contradictions of the Name

By the 80s, a decade after the introduction of the policy, widespread employment of domestic helpers from the Philippines has made “ban mui” (pinoy girl) or “fay yung” (Filipina maid) a common term. The forged link between ethnicity and domestic work was so strong that the entry for “Filipina” in the Oxford English Dictionary was defined as “a female citizen of the Philippines; a servant or an amah” in the 1990s (Constable 42).⁸ The Hong Kong government uses the term “foreign domestic helper,” but it has been criticized that “helper” denotes a lower position than “worker” which perpetuates the perception of their lower status. Adwina Antonio, the executive director of Bethune House, a shelter for domestic workers in Hong Kong, says “migrant domestic workers are being treated as modern day slaves. They do dirty jobs. That means they can be treated badly. They are not treated like workers, they are treated as helpers.” Nowadays, most employers take the middle ground and call their helpers “jeh jeh” (older sister); “jeh jeh” is pseudo-familial; she is not blood related, but someone close to the family and takes on the role of a caretaker. The term “jeh jeh” allows employers to avoid confronting the contradictory demands of a waged laborer who also share the intimate space of home. Whether it is the official term “Foreign Domestic Helper” or the commonly understood, politically correct term “jeh jeh,” either embodies a contradiction which lies at the heart of the question of hospitality.

“Foreign domestic helper” contains within itself an oxymoron—“foreign” is something strange, alien and unacquainted; “domestic,” on the other hand, is used to describe the intimate and familiar. “Foreign domestic” describes the inherent tension between the alien and the citizen; abroad and home; private and public; familiar and strange. In the paradoxical term of foreign domestic lies the wider

⁷See Lau and Chan “Erwiana’s former boss jailed for six years as judge calls her behavior ‘contemptible’”(2015).

⁸See Constable *Maid to Order* (2007).

problematic of the foreigner question, which the French philosopher Jacques Derrida terms a question of hospitality. The “problem” of migrant population needs to be understood in terms of hospitality because it is a problem that crucially involves the forms in which we relate to the Other, the foreigner (*l'étranger*), both in the realm of the public and in that of the private. Hospitality, in the common understanding of the word, describes a form of reception, a friendly and generous welcoming. It inscribes in its understanding a form of right—the right of the host and the right to be treated well in the customary reception of the guest. This right, according to Derrida, in the private or familial, can only be exercised and guaranteed by the mediation of a public right or State right (Derrida and Doufourmantelle. *Of Hospitality* 55).⁹ But there is a paradoxical relationship between the customary understanding of hospitality and the force of law. Erwiana’s case and her subsequent call for the rule of law to ensure the well treatment of guest workers demonstrate the clash of such forces.

Derrida points out that hospitality is an aporetic concept, for it involves an insoluble tension between the unconditional and the conditional. In his lectures on hospitality at *École Pratiques des Hautes Études* in Paris, Derrida explained the law of hospitality by telling the story of Telemachus’ arrival at Menelaus: King Menelaus¹⁰ welcomed the foreigners, opens his doors to the visitors, places them at the head of the table and offers them food and drink. They were not asked where they were from nor were they asked who they were; the treatment was offered without question or condition. This is what Derrida refers to as the absolute law of hospitality, a hospitality that welcomes without question, without the need to provide identification. “Does hospitality consist in interrogating the new arrival? Does it begin with the question addressed to the newcomer... what is your name?” (*Of Hospitality* 29). Hospitality is therefore *rendered, given* to the other before they are identified, a host welcomes “the other in his alterity, without waiting, and thus not to pause to recognize his real predicates” (Derrida, *Adieu* 111–112). It is therefore a double effacement: the effacement of question and the name (See footnote 9).

However, the unconditional law of hospitality becomes challenged when put in the context of legal laws and migration. A nation state’s welcome to foreigners is always conditional, dependent on who they are and what identification documents they hold, hospitality is contingent upon their name and their reason of visit. These laws are explicit and regulate the entrance of “aliens” into a territory; their rights and obligations are restrictive and laid down in treaties and domestic laws. The antagonistic relation between the law of hospitality and the rule of law are contradictory but intrinsically related at the same time. According to Derrida, the unconditional law of hospitality informs, guides, inspires the rule of law; but it stands above it, transgressing the boundaries to become a sort of lawless law (*nomos anomos*). Yet, it does not exist independent of the rule of law, it requires it,

⁹See Derrida and Doufourmantelle *Of Hospitality* (2000).

¹⁰Homer *The Odyssey* (1919): “Then fair headed Menelaus greeted the two and said: ‘Take the food, and be glad, and then when you have supped, we will ask you who among men you are.’”

demand in its constitution to have an effective, concrete application, otherwise it risks becoming abstract, utopic, illusory. These two regimes of law are both anti-nomic and inseparable, they both imply and exclude each other, "they incorporate one another at the moment of excluding one another, they are dissociated at the moment of enveloping one another" (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 81).

How should a host, a family, an employer, a city-state or a nation receive unquestioningly or with restrictions as the rule of law demands? Which should prevail: the unconditional or the conditional laws of hospitality? Telemachus, who was welcomed unquestioningly and unconditionally, was eventually asked to reveal his identity after the king's feast. It shows that even within the customary law of absolute hospitality, the foreigner's welcome is premised on his status as foreigner—a guest has to be named as the other, to be subjected to the host and his welcome. In the rule of law, the name becomes the criteria by which hospitality is ceded—there is "a foreigners right, a right of hospitality for foreigners" (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 19). In the same way, there is a right of the host—a host cannot offer hospitality if he is not the master of his home and to have jurisdiction over whom to invite as guests, this is what makes possible the welcome in the first place. There is therefore no hospitality without sovereignty. Derrida also points out that since there is no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing and thus by excluding and doing violence. Hospitality is the threshold where the inclusionary and exclusionary forces are played out, it is the frontier where these two regimes of law collide and the demands contradict each other.

The Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong prescribes within its laws the Conditions of Stay Act to exercise sovereignty over its territory. For Foreign Domestic Helpers, their entry and permission to stay is directly tied to their status, as FDHs they are not allowed to work in any other capacity apart from domestic labor; under the mandatory live-in requirement, they are obliged to live with their employers; and the two-week rule demands that they leave the territory within 2 weeks of their termination of contract. Advocacy groups that challenge the Conditions of Stay Act argue that the restrictions create situations where the cost of leaving a job is high: with no guarantee of better working conditions and an added risk of deportation, most workers choose to put up with their employers. This creates precarious situations and perpetuate precarity as a way of life for domestic workers: that the well treatment of these workers becomes a matter of luck, rather than their right inscribed and protected by the rule of law. Those who are in favor of keeping the act argue that these conditions have been laid down as part of the agreement for FDHs; as such these are fair terms as these workers are temporary and cannot be considered as part of the normal citizens of Hong Kong.¹¹ They argue these are necessary border control methods as Hong Kong cannot be an open-for-all city. Lee of the Liberal Party insists that Hong Kong is already very

¹¹In "*Bu Su Zhi Ke* (不速之客)" (2014), I have discussed the case of Evangelina Vallejos, a foreign domestic helper who attempted to apply for permanent residency in Hong Kong after having worked here for 26 years. Despite fulfilling all requirements for the right of abode, Vallejos's case was overturned by the Court of Final Appeal in 2012.

generous to these workers—offering health insurance and return airfare as part of their package. The emphases on their status as extra-ordinary reflect the tension between the sovereign host and the guest worker. A guest cannot overstay even the most hospitable welcome—there is understanding that the stay is temporal and within that limited time, the guest should adhere to the rules laid down by the host; otherwise the host loses dominance and control over his territory and the situation risks turning hostile: “Anyone who encroaches on my “at home”, on my *ipseity*, on my power of hospitality, on my sovereignty as host, I start to regard as an undesirable foreigner, and virtually as an enemy. This other becomes a hostile subject, and I risk becoming their hostage.” (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 53–55). This is what Derrida terms the perversion and the pervertibility of this law—the very act to protect the host’s right to be hospitable very often turns into a drive to reinforce borders when what is defined as home becomes too porous, perceived to be threatened or violated. Those who are deemed unwelcomed, their arrival are treated as illegitimate, clandestine, a parasite liable to expulsion. The welcome offered have to be submitted to a basic and limiting jurisdiction tied to a name (Ibid. 59–61).

10.5 Who Is the Host/Guest?

The problem with discussing the issue of Erwiana only in light of her abuse is that we allow our focus to be taken by the violence placed on the individual; therefore justice is served when the employer was charged and found guilty. The wider, more systemic problem occurs at the frontier where the demands between two regimes of law collide—the demands of the guest/host, public/private, conditional/unconditional. Public debates that argue over what constitutes good/bad employers do not challenge the inherent contradictions built into the conception of this population; instead it reinforces a logic that places Hong Kong as the unequivocal host to this population of workers, often it sidetracks into discussions where immigration is portrayed one-sidedly as a challenge to the host’s sovereignty. In the final section of this piece, I would like to problematize such logic by questioning the grounds upon which the roles of the host/guest have been conceived, and ask whether it may be possible to approach the question using a paradigm that takes into account the fluidity of how these roles can be reversed.

Here, Michel Serres’ figure of the parasite is well suited to the discussion. In contemporary political media, migrant workers, refugees, asylum seekers are often portrayed as poachers, perceived through metaphorical associations of taking without giving back, profiteers of the host country. Like many of the discourses surrounding contemporary immigration debates, migrant workers are portrayed as a “burden for society,” who threaten to “take advantage, abuse and exploit the system” (The Pulse). The figure of the parasite regarded as a purely negative, destructive or undesirable agent is widely deployed to stigmatize and evoke distrust, such as the blaming of economic problems and unemployment. Serres’ reading however begins with the etymology of the word *para/sitos*, the being that eats

alongside, and proposes a paradigm in which the interdependent relationship of hosts and guests are foregrounded such that new dimensions can be approached through a consideration of the potential ethical and political implications of more universal questions of "living-together."

Serres begins with Aesop's fable of the country rat and the city rat. Whereas the fable is traditionally understood as suggesting that a humble yet secure existence is preferable to a life of opulence and danger, in Serres' account, the salient theme becomes "dining at another's table": the city rat eats well from the leftovers at the table of the tax farmer, who himself "produced neither oil nor ham nor cheese" but "can profit from these products" (Serres 3).¹² The city rat's guest, the country rat, benefits from this flow of goods, parasiting from it in his turn. Rather than sets of isolated pairs (between citizen and tax farmer, tax farmer and city rat, city rat and country rat) conducting reciprocal exchanges, Serres examines this as a "cascade" of parasitic relations, where each flow of food, energy and information allows a little of what is exchanged to be redirected to a third party. Serres draws our attention to where each of these pairing is linked to the one before and eventually the cascade closes into a loop and "the host counter-parasites his guests" (52). The point is, ultimately, the status of host and parasite fluctuate to such an extent that one can no longer say who is parasitic upon whom—unless we simply allow that all are parasitic upon all. If parasitism is the process of intercepting "what travels along the path... money, gold, or commodities, or even food," it is "the most common thing in the world," then it is possible that any figure or agent identified as host to a given parasite will be, when some other relation between them is foregrounded, identifiable as playing the role of parasite to its host. Serres draws frequently on the fact that the French word *hôte* is used for both "host" and "guest." Serres' point is that the parasitic relation is intersubjective, that roles of the host/guest are not fixed, that every identifiable actor is capable of taking up the place of the other with the shift of circumstances or what is conceived of as the plane or environment.

In the retelling of the tale, Serres demonstrates a different logic of social relationships, communication and cohabitation which offers an alternative to certain established ways of approaching cultural-economic interactions, in particular those based implicitly or explicitly on the notion of unidirectional giving/taking (host/guest). At the most basic level, Serres' method begins with telling the story from another's perspective as he playfully suggests constructing the fable in reverse, "at the door of the room, the rats heard a noise..." (Serres 13). Later on, he tells another story of a villager and a snake. A villager walks by and sees a half-frozen snake lying in the winter snow, he picks it up and brought it into the warmth of his home where the snake wakes up, turns and strikes the villager. The villager accused the snake of being ungrateful, that it has repaid hospitality with hostility. Serres then retells the story from the snake's perspective: it was peacefully hibernating in the winter's cold, safe in its nest, when it was rudely awakened by the warmth of an unfamiliar environment. The snake wakes up to find that its home

¹²See Serres *The Parasite* (2007).

has been taken away, and was accused of being ungrateful to a deed that was never called for—the snake was not looking for another dwelling, it did not ask to be indebted to the villager. Serres asks, “who is the host and who is the guest? Where is the gift and where is the debt? Who is hospitable, who is hostile, again the same word, the same thing” (23).

It is true that from a scientific viewpoint, to be classed as a parasite an organism should live on and/or in its host, in permanent or semi-permanent contact and that rats or humans who merely benefit at the expense of others are not parasites at all. Serres admits that he is “using words in an unusual way,” however, he refuses to privilege either such a scientific discourse or that of the fable: literary or fabulated applications of the term “parasite,” he suggests, are not metaphorical uses of a scientific concept; rather these discourses inherit their different notions of parasitism from a shared origin, in “such ancient and common customs and habits that the earliest monuments of our culture tell of them, and we will see them, at least in part: hospitality, conviviality, table manners, hostelry, general relations with strangers” (Serres 6). The deployment of the term “parasite” entail both in vocabulary and conception, an anthropomorphism belying their shared origins in this sphere of custom or habit.

Here I would like to interrupt (parasite) with 2 excerpts from my informants:

Lita is from Ilos Norte in Luzon, the eldest of 8 siblings. Her family was not rich, but she wanted to finish her education so she could build a better life for herself and provide for her younger siblings and family. She worked hard to put herself through school, and won an official studentship from the government for her university degree. The studentship was set up to help children from poor families achieve higher education and promises a job within the government upon graduation. The studentship covered accommodation and university fees, and Lita was housed with a government official when term started. Unlike other studentships however, Lita was asked to work on the domestic chores at the official’s home, she had to cook and clean in between her classes, often having to run back during lunch hour to prepare the meals. Realizing she would never finish her studies this way, she decided to take a year off to make money so she could return and concentrate on her studies. When she graduated, the Marcos government dismantled and Corazon Aquino’s new government no longer honored the promise of a civil service job at the government. Holding a BA in Agricultural Studies, Lita could not find any prospects in the Philippines and decided to go abroad as a foreign domestic helper. As a fresh graduate, she had no capital to invest in her tickets, but a “fly now, pay later” scheme was available, so she took her first plane ticket to Singapore. Every month she was paid S\$300 (Singapore dollars), 250 of which has to go back to the “fly now, pay later” company. For the first six months she had S\$50 to live. When asked if she had holidays, she told me that she was lucky and got every other Sunday off because she had good employers. Six years later, she got a job in Hong Kong and moved to the city. She currently works for an employer that has paid for her driving license so she could serve as the family driver as well.

Iriz is from Ilo Ilo, located in the Western Visayas region of the Philippines, once known as the Queen City of the South. She is a trained nurse, as is her elder

sister, and the youngest is still in school finishing her studies in accountancy at university. Together with another cousin, they lived together with their mother in their family home where they have resided since 1992. In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan (or Typhoon Yolanda as it was known in the Philippines) hit. It was recorded as the deadliest typhoon in modern history, devastating everything in its path. Visayas was badly affected and Iriz's family home was destroyed, its roof taken off by the force of the wind. For the two following years, the temporary roof leaked and they did not have sufficient funds to repair it. Iriz's mother worked hard to put all her children through school and they are considered lucky because of that. Iriz and her sister both worked in the hospital, earning a nurse's salary to sustain the household while Iriz tried to finish her Master's Degree in nursing. Iriz's sister worked in the infectious disease unit but she was diagnosed with *myasthenia gravis*, a condition too risky for her to continue working in the unit so she transferred to the office to work as a medical transcriber. In 2013, Iriz was invited to accompany one of her relatives to come to Hong Kong where she was shown the prosperity of the city. Upon her return to the Philippines, the relative offered her a job in Hong Kong where she was promised room and board, a decent salary and time to continue her final semester of studies. Seeing the opportunity to earn a better living, Iriz decided to take the offer and take it upon herself to raise funds to fix the family home. She felt lucky to have found something through her relatives which saved her the hefty agency fees that most FDHs have to pay in order to be placed in employment in Hong Kong. She only had to worry about the cost of the air tickets, which her mother covered by taking out another mortgage on the house from the local co-operative bank.

In 2014, Iriz came to Hong Kong to her relatives' house and started working as a foreign domestic helper. Every morning, she woke up at 4:30 a.m. to prepare breakfast and pack lunch for the family. While they were out, she did the cleaning and shopping, and prepared for the dinner that evening. When the child finished school, she followed up on the homework while finishing her domestic chores. She was given a budget of HK\$500 per week to cover her travel, food and supplies for the household of 4 people and paid HK\$3000 per month for her services. Yet she was still considered lucky because she was with her relatives who treated her like family and included her in their festivities. When she arrived, with the help of her relative, who worked in a micro-finance company, she took out a loan of HK \$18,000 and remitted the amount immediately to cover the expenses needed to repair her family home and cover the cost of her air ticket. She had a repayment of HK\$1891 per month for a period of twelve months.

Each of these stories, retold from the perspectives of the migrant workers themselves, describes a complex set of interdependent relations where the role of the host and guest cannot be clearly delineated. Lita, who leveraged her background and hardwork gained rural-urban mobility which gave her access to higher education. The government official that provided her accommodation as part of the program asked in return for her time and labor as a domestic helper. The "fly now, pay later" scheme made it possible for her to fly to Singapore to take on a higher

paid job but tied her to six years of labor to repay the interest from the cash advancement. Her employers in Hong Kong paid for her driving lessons, but she has to work as a driver in addition to her role as a domestic helper. Iriz similarly is also caught up in a web of host/guest relations. Iriz's relatives offered to host her stay in Hong Kong and helped her with the documents allowing her to sidestep the high agency fees. The higher net pay in Hong Kong allowed her to pay off the repairs that needed to be done on the family home. Having Iriz take care of the house enabled the employers to become more sociable, Iriz said half-jokingly, "I don't know which came first, maybe I gave them the chance to become sociable," referring to the regular parties that were thrown in the flat.

The tax farmer is a parasite and benefits from the exchange of produce that he himself did not produce. In a similar manner, Hong Kong could also be seen to parasite from its poorer neighboring countries for the provision of cheap labors. Institutional rules restricting qualified individuals to domestic work and upholding classification systems that maintain populations in their place guarantees the continuous supply of labor at such cost. Agencies profit from the complicated bureaucratic system and take cuts from contracts for workers and employers. Households profit from the affordability of hiring help for childcare and housework to take on higher paid employment. The government benefits from a larger labor force without having to develop infrastructure for social welfare. Despite these stringent conditions, Filipinos themselves profit from the higher net salary that they can earn in Hong Kong. Their families benefit from their remittances which money transfer agencies in turn profit from. Mobile phone companies and SIM card providers grow based on the large number of migrants' need to keep in touch with their families. The remittances also contribute significantly to the GDP of the Philippines. In essence, these parasitic relationships can be traced indefinitely through series of different planes as they extend into different directions involving multiple actors and circles.

Every medium of exchange, movement, flow of information and migration of people generates new relationships forming new hierarchies. The parasite (no longer a purely negative figure) diverts, siphons off from the exchange and in turn adds to the possibilities of new relationships being formed. At each level of parasitism, the individual is always already involved in several relationships of exchange, playing the role of host and guest simultaneously. This introduces the possibility of a quasi-equal relationship amongst actors, which prompts us to reconsider the political and ethical implications of the relationships among Filipino workers, Hong Kong residents and the environment in which they interact. The host city and its guest population function as an interrelated collection of cultural, social and economic spheres, where all levels of activities (both legitimate and illegitimate) contribute to the effective functioning of the overall system. Adopting Serres' generalized model allows for a wider, more coherent paradigm where individuals are placed in a network of interdependent relationships, shifting away from the isolated conception of the essential character of parasites as non-reciprocal and subtractive.

In an increasingly global world, the applicability of Serres' relativized logic of parasitism is vital—recognizing the interdependencies of host/guest, and the ease with which such relationships can be constantly inverted and displaced, is a step towards widening the horizon in which these relationships are valued. In reformulating the empirically determined systems of producing populations, we could see that these migrant workers are a necessary part of Hong Kong: they are an integral part of the labor force; despite their low wages, they contribute to 1% of the city's GNP; they are also consumers, spending and contributing directly to Hong Kong's economy. Indirectly, their presence saves Hong Kong households billions of dollars in childcare (2.1 billion) and elderly care (2.5 billion). More than just figures and numbers, the awareness of the contributive role that migrants play in the development of Hong Kong ought to lead to a greater appreciation and acknowledgment of their necessary position within the socio-economic system. Including-out this population, is a strange “illogical logic,” an oxymoron which Derrida calls autoimmunity—a state which parallels the immune system of the body when it starts to attack itself.¹³

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¹³See Derrida “The Principle of Hospitality” (2005).

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