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# Domestic Workers in Hong Kong: Their Stories, Self-Perception, and Their Portrayal in Hong Kong and Filipino Media

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DOMESTIC WORKERS IN HONG KONG: THEIR STORIES, SELF-PERCEPTION, AND THEIR PORTRAYAL  
IN HONG KONG AND FILIPINO MEDIA

By

Lauren Ernst

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of the Requirements for  
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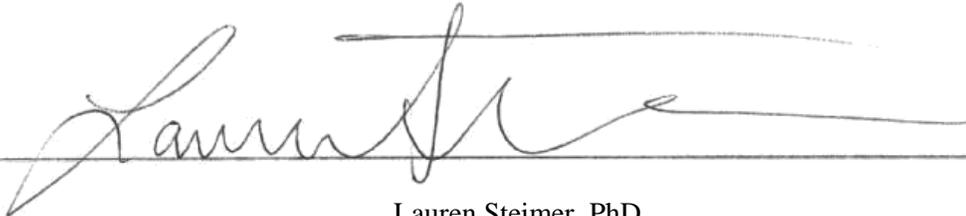
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## Abstract

Foreign domestic helpers are one of the most common and unique sights in current-day Hong Kong. On the weekdays, they can be seen walking dogs, taking children to school, and completing chores around the house. On Sundays, they flood the streets in full force, relaxing and taking advantage of their one day off a week. This population faces many challenges during their time in Hong Kong – these challenges are modern as well as historical and include financial, governmental, emotional, and social challenges. Along with the challenges of day to day life, they also face challenges in that their stories are co-opted by various forms of media and they are shown in various ways without the opportunity to have their voices heard – their voices are invisible to many members of the Hong Kong population. A few examples of this include a Hong Kong art film that portrays the domestic helper as a completely loyal family servant, even in old age while a Hong Kong documentary attempts to portray these women as adventurous and outgoing, even if it is untrue that every foreign domestic helper falls into this mold. Even interviews that I conducted with a few selected foreign domestic helpers fails to completely convey their stories accurately, as I am writing from my individual perspective and not their own. Not only do these women leave their home countries and families for hard work in an unfamiliar place, but they also have to deal with the challenges involved in not being able to properly express themselves.

## Part A: Introduction

Everyone is aware of the concept of differing points of view. Due to differing points of view and representation, the same subject can be presented in many ways, some of which are inconsistent with other representations. This can become extremely complicated when the subject one is trying to portray and generalize a large population of humans, where every individual has their own story and capability of telling said story. One of these groups of people that have their stories co-opted are foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong. Even though these women consist of almost 10% of the GDP of Hong Kong and are a population of around 160,000, there are a very limited number of films that are focused on their demographic. They are also considered somewhat invisible by many members of the Hong Kong population – they solely exist to clean houses and take care of their children and they are not thought of beyond that. In essence, they are invisible. The selected media covered in this paper attempt to provide them a voice and make them visible, although these films all accomplish this in different ways.

The main media forms discussed in this thesis are the documentary film, art film, and the maternal melodrama with these forms of film coming from two relevant areas to foreign domestic helpers – Hong Kong and the Philippines. All of these films focus on different aspects and write differing narratives on the lives of foreign domestic helpers. For example, the Hong Kong documentary film, *The Helper*, focuses on the time that the helpers are not on the job – what their lives are like outside of the hours they spend working. There is very little time spent in the film showing the helper's relationship with her employer – in general, it focuses on their lives outside of their occupation. It focuses on those who have individual hobbies they excel at and why they chose to do these hobbies on their time off. By contrast, the art film, *A Simple Life*, focuses on differing themes. The film explores the aging of a helper who has been with her family for generations; it explores her aging, her relationship with her employer, and how she

interacts with other residents in the nursing home she chooses to go to. The film focuses heavily on the helper's position within her family – it only very briefly discusses what the helper's, Ah Tao's, life could have been like had she not been employed by the Leungs.

By contrast, the Filipino films focus upon an aspect that seems untouched by the Hong Kong films – how the helpers' families are affected by her departure and the aftermath of her returning home after many years. The film *Anak (The Child)* does not focus on the time the helper spent in Hong Kong raising money for her family. Instead, the film discusses how her family has been torn apart by the mother leaving for six years – her children do not know how to mend their relationship with their mother and the oldest daughter rebels frequently – even beginning to do drugs and become pregnant. This film, while portraying the helper as a strong woman who is forced to leave her family behind while she supports them, only focuses on the aspect of her returning to her homeland and her relationship with her family, not with her employer. *Sunday Beauty Queen*, a documentary film by a Filipino director but shot in Hong Kong, does a good job balancing between a helper's relationship with her employer and her time outside of her job. The film focuses on the relationship between Maryann and Jack while also telling about the other women and their time participating in the beauty pageant. However, it still has a biased narrative as it only tells the stories of a small selection of women outside of a population of almost 300,000.

It becomes difficult for the filmmaker to show an unbiased representation of this population, as they are such a large population with diverse experiences. In order to rectify the biases seen in these films, I interviewed two foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong in order to see how they represented themselves and their stories. While directly interviewing members of the population is one of the only ways to get a true representation of how the population views

itself and its own stories, it is impossible to take the individual experience of two women and generalize it amongst such a large population of 300,000 women. It should also be noted that although the original source of the information was the women telling their own stories, I am manipulating their words in order to fit them within the context of this thesis. Even when the original source of information is from the population, it is impossible to keep their stories completely impartial as I am not a member of this population.

Representations of domestic helpers are changed frequently depending upon the style of the film they are portrayed in, the audience for whom the film is being made, and the stylistic choices of the filmmaker. This thesis aims to explore and demonstrate these differences as well as present a new narrative for the domestic helper based on interviews that the author did with members of this vulnerable population. In order to do this, this paper will discuss the day-to-day life and challenges of the modern-day foreign domestic helper, the historical precedent of labor in the region to help explain why they face these challenges, will provide summaries and analyses of each film discussed in the introduction, and will compare the representations in these films with the data collected by the author during her interviews with members of this population.

## Part B: Background: The Foreign Domestic Helper in Hong Kong

To date, there has not been much academic research into the lives of this population, as the phenomenon of foreign domestic helpers is relatively new – this immigration wave of service worker from the Philippines did not begin until the Philippine domestic economy began to suffer in the 1970s (De Guzman, 2003). The most comprehensive study to date on the foreign domestic helper was completed by Nicole Constable in the 1990s with a second edition of her book, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*, released with updated information in 2007. The following section discusses the daily lives of foreign domestic helpers and details some challenges that they may face in immigrating to Hong Kong, including social, financial, and emotional challenges.

As of 2017, there are 336,000 domestic workers in Hong Kong. They comprise about 10% of the working population of Hong Kong (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). According to a recent study, 1 in 3 Hong Kong families with children employ a domestic helper (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). This number has doubled from 150,000 in 1995, the first time that major academic research was done on foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong (Constable, 2007). The demographic makeup of foreign domestic workers has changed as well – in 1995, a large majority, 130,000, were Filipina, with the remaining 20,000 coming from different countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal (Constable, 2007). However, estimates from April 2017 shows that there are 193,680 Filipina foreign domestic helpers and 156,569 from Indonesia with the remaining 8,000 coming from Thailand and other countries (AHKA, 2017). This trend of growth is not expected to slow in the near future. The South China Morning Post reported in 2017 that Hong Kong will need at least 600,000 foreign domestic helpers over the next thirty years to ensure that there are caregivers for the rapidly expanding aging population in Hong Kong (Siu, 2017). There are also concerns that these women will rapidly move to Mainland China to seek higher wages (Siu,

2017). Domestic helpers are an integral part of the Hong Kong economy – without these women immigrating to watch Hong Kong children, many families would be forced to survive on a single income. This might not be possible for many, as Hong Kong is considered one of the highest-cost-of-living cities in the world. Even though these women are essential to the economy, they are still bound very strictly by rules set forth by the Hong Kong government regarding their employment.

The Hong Kong government has published an extensive Practical Guide For Employment of Foreign Domestic Helpers. It outlines all the regulations that foreign domestic helpers and their employers are subject to (Hong Kong Government, 2016). Some of the more notable regulations that are set forth in the document are those that seem to be broken on a regular basis. The document says that the employer is responsible for giving the helper a daily food and travelling allowance of \$100HKD/day when they are en route from their home country to Hong Kong (Hong Kong Government, 2016) as well reimbursing the helper for any fees they may incur in the process of immigrating, such as the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) fee, mandatory insurance, or a medical examination fee, however, there are many times when this regulation is not met. Constable claims that “Most of the domestic workers that I had met...had paid such fees themselves and had not been reimbursed by their employers” (2007). The employer is only required to reimburse fees that the domestic helper can provide a receipt for, however, many of the agencies that the helpers go through do not provide the helpers with a receipt. This allows them to collect double fees – they collect one set of fees from the helper and charge the employer fees from the initiation of the employment as well (Constable, 2007).

Another clause in the contract that is frequently ignored to the detriment of domestic helpers is the clause regarding rest days. The clause in the employment guide addresses the employer and states “You should provide your 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” (Hong Kong Government, 2017). Despite the regulation stating that the domestic helper should be given 24 continuous hours to rest, many employers do not follow this rule. Many employers set curfews for their domestic helpers, stating that they should be home at a certain time during their rest day, such as 9PM or 10PM, therefore not allowing them to have a full twenty-four rest day (Constable, 2007). The employers put these rules in place under the guise of safety. They claim that they are concerned for the safety of their domestic helpers, so they attempt to ensure that they will be back at home before their employer goes to bed – they claim that this means that the employer will not be up worried waiting for the domestic helper to return home (Constable, 2007). While this view is well-meaning, it does not take into account the fact that the domestic helpers are generally grown women with families of their own who believe that they can take care of themselves, even in a foreign country. Many helpers that have been interviewed state that they are aware of the rules that are put in place, but they put up with the rule-breaking because they are afraid of losing their jobs and being forced to go back to their home countries (Constable, 2007). One notable exception to this rule is Linda, a domestic helper whom Constable interviewed for her research. Even though Linda’s employer places many stringent rules on Linda, such as making her go to bed at 9:30 every day and waking up at 6:30 or having a strict dress code for Linda. Linda is happy for these rules, because she feels that she is treated as a part of the family. She says “I don’t mind...because my employer is looking out for me like she does her daughter” (Constable, 2007). Instead of wanting to be treated as a separate entity –

solely an employee, she feels more comfortable having a closer relationship with her employers than a professional relationship.

This personal and professional entanglement can be exacerbated because the domestic helper is required “to work and reside in [her] employer’s residence in accordance with Clause 3 of the standard employment contract” (Hong Kong Government, 2016). To ensure that the domestic helper is not given inadequate living space, the employer is expected to fill out a Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties that outlines the personal space that the domestic helper will be allowed in the apartment as well as a list of duties that they are expected to complete during their employment, such as taking care of the children, cleaning the apartment, and elder care (Hong Kong Government, 2016). Even though in many scenarios the domestic helper is given adequate personal space within the apartment, the relationship between the employer and the domestic helper can become difficult or awkward. Because the domestic helper is expected to live with her employer, she mostly interacts with her employer during their private time at home. She is expected to maintain a totally professional relationship six days a week while ignoring the negative behavior or outbursts of her employer, who are not expected to act professionally at all times (Constable, 2007). The domestic helper is also expected to complete “emotional labor” – to provide a listening ear when the employer is experiencing tough times or potentially having personal familial problems. This emotional labor that the domestic helper is expected to do stems from a perceived difference in class and status between the employer and domestic helper. Judith Rollins says that “Employers can feel free to tell domestic secrets they would not share with their friends or family precisely because the domestic is so far from being socially and psychologically significant to the employer” (1985). Because domestic

helpers are perceived as someone of a lower class who has no distinct impact on the lives of the employer, she is considered an open listener in whom the employer can confide.

Even though domestic helpers immigrate to Hong Kong in large numbers, they generally are not afforded true legal rights. They are allowed into Hong Kong on special contracts specifically written for domestic helpers. The terms of their contract are rather stringent, especially regarding termination of the contract. The Guide for Employment claims that a contract can be terminated by giving one month's notice, or, in lieu, of notice, either party can pay the domestic helper one month's wages (Hong Kong Government, 2016). However, because it can be difficult for a domestic helper to save up one full month of wages, it is generally much easier for the employer to terminate the contract – the figures set forth by Constable claim that 85% of contracts that are terminated are done so by the employer, however, this figure may have changed in recent years. After the termination of the contract, the domestic helper is subject to the “two-week rule,” which states that the domestic helper has two weeks to find a new employer and contract in Hong Kong before she is considered an illegal resident or forced to return to her home country (Constable, 2007). This rule was put into place to attempt to curb “job hopping” on the part of domestic helpers. However, because a large majority of contracts terminated are done so by the employer, the problem of job-hopping is not largely seen. There have also been no studies published to this point that demonstrate that the two-week rule has definitively cut down on job-hopping (Constable, 2007).

The Hong Kong government does not lay out any rules regarding how long a workday should be for these domestic helpers, as they claim there is no way to define what domestic work is and there could be instances in which the domestic helper is resting throughout the day, such as when a private tutor visits the house and takes charge of the children for an hour (Constable,

2007). As such, domestic helpers are generally forced to work extremely long days – many domestic helpers work anywhere from twelve to sixteen hours a day with only one day off a week (Constable, 2007). Even though these type of work hours are not that desirable, many foreign domestic helpers deal with the working conditions in Hong Kong because working in Hong Kong as a domestic helper pays the equivalent of being a doctor, nurse, or architect in their home countries (Constable, 2007). Their home countries' governments also push working abroad because they profit from the venture – the Philippine government collects a Philippines Overseas Employment fee as well as the fees for visa and passport processing (Constable, 2007).

Foreign domestic helpers are generally viewed negatively by the public in Hong Kong, even though this perception has improved in recent year. Historically there were campaigns against foreign domestic workers. In 1986, the Hong Kong Employers of Overseas Domestic Helpers Association (HKEODHA) was established, which claimed that employers were being exploited in favor of their foreign domestic workers (Constable, 2007). There were editorials written that claimed that Filipinas were too loud on the streets during their days off – the writer of the editorial, J. Ong says that because the Filipinas were in a foreign country, they should ““be on their best behaviour”” (1992). Someone else wrote that Hong Kong Chinese are ““increasingly wary and resentful of these Filipina maids whose general attitude to work and carefree lifestyle is incompatible with the hardworking ethics and serious attitude of the Chinese”” (Chow, 1987). In response to these negative criticisms, some Filipina women have written guides in magazines meant to be circulated among the Filipina community, saying that the best response is to be on their best behavior and put their best foot forward to quell the criticism (Constable, 2007).

Despite these criticisms and their relative inability to stage a large-scale protest, Filipinas and other domestic helpers resist in more subtle ways. One of the ways that they resist their

situation is humor – many domestic helpers have common jokes that they tell to make light of their situation (Constable, 2007). They also celebrate their home countries every Sunday through singing local songs, wearing local dress, and eating local foods on their days off (Constable, 2007). Even though the general perception is that domestic helpers only sit on the streets and relax on Sundays, there is much more that goes on beneath the surface. There are many festivals and beauty pageants that domestic helpers participate in on Sundays to form deeper social networks and enjoy themselves, including the Sinalog Festival, Philippines Tourism Day, and the Philippines Independence Day Celebration (Chen, 2015). Some of these beauty pageants include the independent Miss Pinoyshots Princess Pageant as well as the corporate SmarTone sponsored Ms. Barkadahan, which literally means “joining a friendly group” in Tagalog (Chen 2, 2015).

Even though immigrating foreign domestic helpers under a strict contract system is a relatively new phenomenon that came about with globalization, there is a distinct historical precedent for domestic laborers in Hong Kong households.

## Part C: Historical Precedent for Domestic Workers

There are two main types of domestic workers that are present in historical Hong Kong: *muijai* and *amahs* (Constable, 2007). The current foreign domestic helpers share similarities to both *muijai* and *amahs*.

*Muijai* were women who were indentured or bond servants – their parents sold them as young girls against their will; they were not allowed to leave the families to whom they were of their or their parent's will (*Report*, 1937). They could be sold not only once, but multiple times (Jaschok, 1988). Generally, when the *muijai* reached marriageable age, late teens or early twenties, she was sent to be married and was thereafter considered a free person. However, she was generally sold as a concubine and not as a proper wife (Stockard, 1989). In 1923, the Anti-Mui-Jai Society successfully lobbied the British government to ban the purchase and sale of *muijai* in Hong Kong (Jaschok, 1988), however, there is evidence that the practice of buying and selling *muijai* lasted until at least World War II (Jaschok, 1988). Ah-Tao as depicted in Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* may have been sold to the Leung family as a *muijai*, but later in her life, she took on the more respected role of an *amah*. *Muijai* were generally the least respected of household servants due to their young age and gender. They were generally also treated as products – they were bought, sold, and married for monetary purposes (Constable, 2007). They resemble modern-day foreign domestic workers in the way that “both resemble ‘commodities’ in the way they are inspected, bought, traded, owned, generally objectified, and treated as economic investments” (Constable, 2007). This is most clearly seen in the difficult hiring process that foreign domestic helpers go through. At the agencies in the Philippines, the prospective foreign domestic helper is subject to multiple tests. She is videotaped introducing herself and is asked to answer multiple questions, including what domestic duties she would be willing to complete,

how she will be able cope in a foreign environment, and other personal questions like how many children she has and her fathers' and husbands' occupations (Constable, 2007). They are subject to medical examinations and evaluations of their personal appearance and personality. Some criticisms levied towards the potential domestic helpers involve her being “too chubby” or “too dark” – it is said that if the complexion of the domestic helper is too dark, she may scare the children whom she is taking care of (Constable, 2007). The domestic helper is also potentially subject to many strict rules regarding personal hygiene and how their work gets completed. For example, some domestic helpers are not allowed to wear fingernail polish, must wear their hair up, or are not allowed to wear shorts, even in the sweltering heat of Hong Kong (Constable, 2007). The main similarities between *muijai* and foreign domestic helpers lie in their bodies' manipulation by outside sources.

The other, more-respected historical form of domestic worker is the *amah*. The term *amah* is thought to be “an Anglicized form of the Chinese *ah mah* – *Ah* being a common name prefix, and *mah* a term of endearment meaning ‘little mother,’ which was sometimes used to refer to a worker who looked after children” (Constable, 2017). Different cultures within the Chinese diaspora refer to *amahs* in different ways. In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, *amahs* generally refer to domestic workers, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds (Armstrong, 1990). However, these women do not like to be referred to as such, preferring to be referred to as a housekeeper or houseworker or someone who works for a family (Armstrong, 1990). In Hong Kong, English-language newspapers generally refer to women who receive wages for their labor, which differentiates them from *muijai* (Constable, 2007). It is also important to note that many foreign domestic workers in the region do not like to be referred to as *amah* – they believe that the term only applies to Chinese women (Constable, 2007). Many *amahs* of the past were sworn spinsters

– they forewent having families of their own, instead devoting their lives to serving the families they were employed by. These women generally immigrated from the Canton Delta; they were forced to move to Hong Kong after the silk industry went into a depression and they were no longer able to be employed by their family farms as they shifted from silk to cash crops like sugarcane and tobacco (Gaw, 1991). This type of *amah* “unquestioningly dedicate her life to the master’s family in return for which she expects, but does not always receive, respect and care in sickness and old age” (Sankar, 1978). These women protected themselves by belonging to sworn sisterhoods. These types of sworn sisterhoods were almost like a labor union – members of the sworn sisterhood were not as dependent on their employers to care for them in old age. Instead, they were able to live with and support each other in their old age (Constable, 2007). They also provided support throughout each other’s careers. Constable says that “if women who belonged to sisterhoods were maltreated, sisters lent them economic and emotional support and helped them find new jobs, and other sisters refused to work for the offending employer” (2007). This type of support network, while no longer formalized, is very similar to the social networks that domestic helpers form while they are in Hong Kong. Through meeting up on Sundays with people from nearby villages and getting involved in religious and social groups, foreign domestic helpers form support groups and social network despite being isolated at different employers’ houses throughout most of the week.

Foreign domestic helpers have more legal protection than *amahs* of the past did. They are allowed to legally leave an employer after two years and there are stipulations regarding the number of holidays that foreign domestic helpers are allowed to have as well as sick leave and long-service pay (Hong Kong Government, 2016). However, the benefits that an *amah* received at the end of her long career totally depended upon the generosity of her employer. Constable

says that “The benefits an *amah* received depended upon the emotional pressure she could exert on her employer and the extent to which she could convince them that she really was “like one of the family”” (2007). If an *amah* had a somewhat rocky personal relationship with one person in her family or she is not talented at forming personal relationships, she could be left alone and destitute in her old age with no familial network to fall back on. Foreign domestic helpers, on the other hand, although they are separated from their families, have their familial network in their home country to fall back on.

Currently, foreign domestic helpers are a fact of Hong Kong society. They share some similarities with the *muijai* and they share some similarities with the *amah* – even though they are a totally separate concept, the precedent for their labor is still there.

## Part D: Analysis of Two Hong Kong Selections

Even though both of these selections were conceived, produced, and released in the same time period and the same country, due to stylistic and genre differences, they both present disparate representations of the Hong Kong domestic helper. The first film, Joanna Bowers' *The Helper*, is an independent documentary that focuses greatly on the lives of domestic helpers outside of their job – what their hobbies and pastimes are and even focuses briefly on the narrative of one domestic helper, Analyn, whom the cameras follow to the Philippines as she returns home to witness her younger son's college graduation. Because it is a documentary, it uses stylistic choices that are not used by other forms of film – for example, it relies very much on testimonials from the affected group. However, the second film, an art film, has different a different audience and themes and, as a result, the director chose to utilize different techniques and choices to convey said themes. The following are synopses of the two Hong Kong selections followed by a brief analysis of their techniques.

### Joanna Bowers' *The Helper*

It is difficult to piece together a true picture of the perception of domestic helpers, both Filipina and Indonesian, as in general, domestic helpers are not the direct subject of many forms of media released in Hong Kong. Even though they are considered by many to be the backbone of the Hong Kong economy, their struggles and triumphs are not discussed in detail in movies or television. One notable exception to this rule is Joanna Bowers' 2017 documentary *The Helper*.

The South China Morning Post describes *The Helper* in its film review as “an honest and heartfelt portrayal of an incredibly challenging lifestyle” (Marsh, 2017). The film distinctly follows three separate narratives – that of Liza, a domestic helper and mountain climber, Analyn, The Unsung Heroes, a choir group led by Jane Englemann, and specifically its talented soloist,

Joy, as well as an Indonesian helper Nurul (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017).

Liza's narrative explores her motivations for leaving her family in the Philippines to go work in Hong Kong. Her motive differs from many of the other foreign domestic helpers that are seen in the film as she expresses that her motivations for coming to Hong Kong are not solely for supporting her family, but also for exploration and adventure – she says that her first time on an airplane is in her journey to Hong Kong (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). When she got to Hong Kong, at the behest of her employer, she became involved in hiking groups around the city, eventually beginning to lead the groups on their hikes after two years of involvement (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). She eventually expressed a desire to hike internationally, hiking around Southeast Asia, finally changing her environment to go hiking in Japan, somewhere that is much colder than she is used to. She states that even though she considers hiking in Japan a huge accomplishment, she feels attracted to the Himalayas and saves up two years of her salary, roughly equivalent to \$3,500USD, to join a hiking excursion into the Himalayas. Even after two years of saving and training, her guide realizes that she is unprepared for the physically grueling journey and tells her to turn around after they reach the base camp (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). The documentary follows her on her training journey as she saves up money again to join another Himalayan excursion. One of Liza's yoga instructors says to her “My personal model is that if you fall down seven times, you get up eight” (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). Liza takes this motto personally – she rejoins the Himalayan excursion and becomes the first Filipina of her profession to successfully climb to Crampon Point (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). Liza continues

to reach new heights, literally, after the documentary wrapped filming, successfully climbing Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro in August 2017 (Blundy, 2017). Liza's extremely unique narrative aligns with the intention of the director to show domestic helpers as a unique population with equal capabilities of those whom they serve.

The major narrative of the film follows *The Unsung Heroes* and two of its members, Analyn and Joy, as they prepare to perform in Clockenflap, one of the largest Hong Kong music and arts festivals held annually in November (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). The choir considers this performance to be their biggest to date – it is estimated that 60,000 people attended the three-day festival (South China Morning Post, 2016). The film explores the founders' motivations for starting the choir and drafting the original song that they sing during their performance, "I Wish I Could Kiss You Goodnight." (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). The founder, Jane Englemann, explains that she founded the choir as a gesture of appreciation to all the domestic helpers in the city and to demonstrate the effects that her domestic helper had on her in the 1990s. Englemann explains that she was a single mother of two who was living in a foreign country and had no familial network to fall back on at the time. She expresses appreciation for her domestic helper at the time, saying that she likely would not have gotten through the experiences that she had if it were not for her domestic helper (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). She writes the song, titled "I Wish I Could Kiss You Goodnight," to attempt to express into words the loss and sadness that the domestic helpers feel at emigrating and leaving their children behind. Many members of the choir, presumably upon being asked their opinion of the song and its lyrics, repeat the sentiment that the lyrics promote – they express sadness and disappointment at having to leave their families to take care of others' families in Hong Kong (Verb,

Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). One of the members, Narcing, even says that she cries upon hearing the emotionally touching lyrics for the first time (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). They attempt to alleviate their sadness through forming social networks on their days off, namely joining the choir. Through joining the choir, Bowers attempts to show that the members of the choir are individuals, they are not solely defined by their label as maid and they come into their own on their days off (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). The Unsung Heroes practice for weeks leading up to their performance. On the day of their performance, they are very grateful to receive free hair and makeup from a salon in Central, The Space. The members of the choir once again reiterate how grateful they are to perform – one member of the choir proudly reads a letter to the camera that the child of her employer wrote her – the child says that they are proud of her and are excited to see her performance later in the day (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). Right before the group takes the stage, the director reminds them that their goal for the day is to “Get that audience to see you as real people with real stories because that [a maid] is not what you are” (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). The group finally excitedly performs at Clockenflap at a crowd that seems to be thousands, happy that they can touch the lives of their audience and show themselves to be more than just domestic helpers.

The director explores the lives of two of the members of the choir more deeply, Joy and Analyn. Joy is the soloist in the choir – she is extremely talented and attributes this to her growing up in a musical family in the Philippines (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). She says that upon her employer hearing her sing, he immediately signed her up for voice lessons and gave her connections to sing in a studio in Hong Kong. She is also

the singer in a jazz band in the area (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). Analyn's narrative is a bit more typical of domestic helpers – the cameras follow her as she returns to the Philippines to watch her second son graduate from college. She shows her house in the Philippines, saying that her wages as a domestic helper in Hong Kong paid to build the house. She talks about her children's feelings towards her leaving for Hong Kong when they are very young. She expresses that her older son is still somewhat resentful towards her even in adulthood – he does not like the fact that his mother was forced to leave for his entire childhood to support the family. However, the younger son, the son who is graduating, is described as understanding of the situation – he knows that his mother does not necessarily want to leave her sons behind but is forced to do so because of the economic circumstances (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). The cameras go to the graduation ceremony and show how happy Analyn and her family are at seeing her son graduate – this mood changes rather quickly when the cameras soon show her returning to Hong Kong to work, this time not solely for her family, but to save for her retirement (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T. and Bowers, 2017). While these narratives that have been previously shown are all positive, there is one glaringly negative narrative demonstrated in Nurul's story.

Nurul, unlike many of the helpers previously shown in the documentary, is a young woman from Indonesia. Her story begins when she is accused of theft by her employer – however, this is done with no grounds. When a domestic helper is accused of theft, even falsely, she is generally unable to retaliate because of the two-week rule, which says that after a domestic helpers' contract is terminated, she must leave Hong Kong for her home country within two weeks of the termination (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). This is meant to prevent “job hopping,” however, it just puts the domestic helper in an impossible

place, as she is unable to stay and fight the charges in court without overstaying her visa (Constable, 2007). This happened to Nurul – she attempted to go about fighting the charges, however, because she was unable to legally work during the court battle, she was forced to turn to illegal work. It can be extrapolated that this type of illegal work, although not explicitly mentioned in the film, was likely prostitution, as Nurul soon falls pregnant while homeless (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). While pregnant and sleeping on a public beach, she runs into a shelter that is running an event there. The shelter, Pathfinders, assists domestic helpers who have fallen pregnant in pre and post-natal care. Nurul takes advantage of this shelter and later gives birth to a baby girl, whom she names Leila. Her troubles are far from over, however, as she is soon sent a hospital bill for 100,000HKD, a bill 1000 times higher than the cost of birth for a Hong Kong citizen or legal resident (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). She is charged this bill as she has given birth on an overstayed visa and is technically not allowed in Hong Kong. Even though Pathfinders and their pro bono legal team succeed in obtaining the medical waiver for Nurul, she is still in a precarious situation. At the end of the documentary, Nurul and Leila are applying for refugee status in Hong Kong – Nurul is not allowed to legally work and they only receive 2250HKD a month for all their necessities, including expensive milk powder for the baby (Verb, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017).

Other than the three larger narratives presented, the documentary also deals with the ideas of racism, indebtedness, and identity construction. Many workers interviewed in the documentary feel that they are subjected to racism in Hong Kong – they stand out from Hong Kongers because of their darker skin and the cultural and religious dress that they wear on Sundays, including headscarves for the practicing Muslim Indonesians (Verb, Chamberlin,

Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). The documentary also discusses in detail the debt cycle that the helpers enter upon their immigrating to Hong Kong – some examples of the amounts that the women pay to agencies to immigrate to Hong Kong are \$2,100USD, \$750HKD, and \$1,200HKD (Vice, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). The helpers are generally unable to pay for their debts – their salary is \$4210HKD (\$526.86USD)/month and a large majority of their salary is sent home to their families to help pay for necessities in their home countries (Vice, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). The women get stuck in a cycle of debt – the documentary also mentions a non-profit, Enrich, founded by Victoria Ahn in 2006, that aims to improve the financial literacy of domestic helpers and assist them in getting out of the cycle of debt that they have found themselves in (Vice, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). Finally, the documentary's main focus is identity construction and a specific portrayal of domestic helpers apart from the way that many in Hong Kong view them.

Bowers uses distinctive film techniques to impart the seriousness of the subject matter and pack an emotional impact with the stories. The main visual technique that the filmmaker uses is montage – the film is very minimalistic, with many portions of the film being voiceover of the woman over B footage, allowing the viewer to not be distracted by background action and instead focus on what the storyteller is saying (Vice, Chamberlin, Mitchell, J., Mitchell, T., and Bowers, 2017). The film also uses very minimal music, only employing light piano tracks when an emotional impact is meant to be made, once again serving the purpose of allowing the viewer to more closely pay attention to what the domestic helper is saying rather than be distracted by an extensive soundtrack.

Through these distinct narratives, with the arguable exception of Nurul's narrative, Bowers attempts to humanize domestic helpers in Hong Kong and portray them as more than just maids. Bowers puts it eloquently, saying that "my goal with this film in exploring their stories of maternal sacrifice and struggles is to humanize these women to the population at large and simultaneously celebrate their tenacity, strength of character, and indefatigable outlook on life" (2017). She states that her motivation for making the film came after a high-profile court case, where the employer of an Indonesian domestic helper, Erwiana Sulistyaningsih, was sent to jail for five years after it was found that she was abusing her domestic helper. A secondary goal in making the film was to portray Hong Kong employers in a better light – to show that they are good to their employees and that cases of this nature are quite uncommon (Bowers, 2017). However, the film does not quite achieve this purpose. Although many helpers are interviewed, more than ten in total, only two employers are interviewed, and they are both Western employers. By interviewing only Western employers, the filmmaker misses out on a vital element to the idea of domestic helpers, the Chinese employer. It was found in a 1998 study that domestic helpers are generally much happier with their Western employers than their Chinese employers – 75.7% of maids surveyed who had served both Western and Chinese employers named Western employers as the best employers compared to 10.8% Chinese employers, while 79.7% named Chinese employers as the worst employers compared to only 9.5% for Western employers (Cheung and Mok, 1998). This trend demonstrates a large bias towards Western employers. It is important to note that of all the domestic helpers featured who had done incredible things and who were explicitly enabled to do so by their employers, especially Liza, who was encouraged to take weeks off to go on trekking excursions and Joy, who had received singing lessons from her employer, had Western employers. While the documentary does an

excellent job framing the women as more than just domestic helpers and as humans with distinct interests, it does not do enough to demonstrate the typical story of domestic helpers or profile the typical employer in Hong Kong.

While *The Helper* focuses on the true stories of domestic helpers in the twenty first century, there are different interpretations of domestic helpers from other eras. Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* more directly deals with a previous era of domestic helper, the *amah*, and explores deeply the fictional relationship between an aging *amah* and a member of the family for whom she worked for over forty years.

### Ann Hui's *A Simple Life*

Rather than exploring the real struggles and stories of foreign domestic helpers in the twenty-first century, Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* explores the relationship between an *amah*, or what is referred to as a "superior servant" (Constable, 2007) and the family that she serves for generations.

The film claims that it is based off the real story of a woman named Ah-Tao, whose father died during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong in World War II. Her mother, too poor to take proper care of her daughter after her mother passed away, sold her daughter to the Leung family to work as a servant, where she stayed with the family until her seventies (Lee, Hui, Chan, Shi, Hong-tat, Lam, and Hui, 2011). The film opens on the aging Ah-Tao continuing to serve one of the Leungs, Roger, even though he seems to be middle-aged and capable of caring for himself. It is referenced multiple times throughout the film that Roger received an education from an American university and that the rest of his family has immigrated to the United States – it is implied that because Roger was able to care for himself for at least four years at university, he is capable of cooking and cleaning for himself. Roger travels often for his work in the film industry, generally to Beijing as he is working on a reboot of the ancient story, *Three Kingdoms*. When he returns from one of these trips, he finds that Ah-Tao has been taken to the hospital because she has suffered a stroke. Knowing that he is incapable of taking care of Ah-Tao due to his busy working schedule, Roger pays for Ah-Tao to have a place in a nursing home owned by one of his acquaintances (Lee, Hui, Chan, Shi, Hong-tat, Lam, and Hui, 2011).

The rest of the film follows Ah-Tao during her time in the nursing home. Even though it is shown that Ah-Tao is somewhat dissatisfied with her time at the nursing home and her physical condition, she makes the best of the situation. She becomes friends with many of the

residents, including a much older woman for whom she takes on somewhat of a role of caregiver, helping her to sew a button that has fallen off her jacket and providing for the other woman in general. Ah-Tao also helps one of the other residents financially, Uncle Kin, even though she knows full well that the reasons that he gives for needing money are farcical. In terms of being an *amah*, Ah-Tao is ridiculed for her name by one of the other residents, who said that her name seemed like a servant name. It was not until a third resident chastised the woman ridiculing Ah-Tao that the woman let up (Lee, Hui, Chan, Shi, Hong-tat, Lam, and Hui, 2011).

Throughout her time at the nursing home, Roger comes to visit her many times. Instead of saying that Ah-Tao is his family's *amah*, Roger and Ah-Tao both claim that Ah-Tao is his elderly aunt. It is unclear whether the others in the nursing home believe this lie, but if they are doubtful, they still refer to Roger as Ah-Tao's nephew to Ah-Tao's face. Considering that we very seldom see the perspective of those who are not Roger or Ah-Tao, this question remains unanswered. The other residents comment upon the fact that Roger takes very good care of Ah-Tao, he visits frequently and provides for her financially (Lee, Hui, Chan, Shi, Hong-tat, Lam, and Hui, 2011).

Roger also attempts to provide for Ah-Tao in other ways as well. A plotline throughout the film is Roger's attempting to buy back and rehabilitate the old family flat in Sham Shui Po, one of the poorest and oldest areas of Hong Kong, for Ah-Tao to live in until her death. He does so not by his own volition, but because his mother suggests that he should do so to provide better for Ah-Tao. He succeeds in buying back the flat, although Ah-Tao is not able to live in the flat for a long time before her death (Lee, Hui, Chan, Shi, Hong-tat, Lam, and Hui, 2011).

Roger is not the only person in the family with whom Ah-Tao has a deep relationship. Even though the rest of Roger's family has emigrated to the United States, Ah-Tao still seems to

have a familiar and emotional relationship with the rest of the family. Before Ah-Tao passes away, she says that her last wish is to see the new baby that Roger's cousin has had, Jason. The film shows a scene where Ah-Tao reunites with the whole family after they come to Hong Kong for a visit. During this scene, Ah-Tao gives the jade rings that she wears on both hands to the wife of Roger's cousin. It is unclear whether the woman is a blood relative of the family. Jade forms a highly important part of Chinese culture – because jade was so rare in ancient China, it was highly valuable and is still valuable today. It also holds religious significance - jade is said to be the jewel that connects heaven and earth and is said to have powers that ward off evil (Christie's, 2018). By gifting her jade rings, Ah-Tao performs a significant gesture by solidifying her place in the family and welcoming Roger's cousin's new wife and baby to the family. As well as gifting the jade rings, Ah-Tao is also included in the family picture taken at the end of the night. The other members of the family respect Ah-Tao – she is likely what many members of the family consider to be a second mother and loyal servant to the family (Lee, Hui, Chan, Shi, Hong-tat, Lam, and Hui, 2011).

As well as Roger's family, Roger's friends have fond memories of Ah-Tao as well. During one scene in the movie, Roger has old classmates over to drink and play cards while Ah-Tao is in the nursing home. They discover some ox-tail that Ah-Tao had left in the freezer right before she had her stroke. All four happily eat the ox-tail while they reminisce on Ah-Tao and her influence on their lives. They eventually call Ah-Tao in the nursing home, recite an old Cantonese chant to her, and ask her if she remembers them. She does and they all reminisce on Roger's and the classmates' schooldays, talking about the trouble that they used to get into at Roger's house and how Ah-Tao would discipline them. As well as having a distinct influence on

the family that she serves, Ah-Tao also has an influence on their friends and surrounding social circles (Lee, Hui, Chan, Shi, Hong-tat, Lam, and Hui, 2011).

After what seems to be an extended time in the nursing home, Ah-Tao suffers another stroke and passes away quietly. The film shows a quiet funeral attended by Roger and a few others. The film ends when one of the residents of the nursing home who regularly took advantage of Ah-Tao financially, Uncle Kin, enters the funeral holding flowers (Lee, Hui, Chan, Shi, Hong-tat, Lam, and Hui, 2011).

The film does an excellent job exploring the theme of loyalty, both of a servant to the family she serves and vice versa. Because Ah-Tao has served the family for over forty years and for multiple generations, it is clear that she has earned a place of respect in the family. One of the main themes that the film explores is nursing homes and the aging population in Hong Kong. Even though many of the residents in the film feel that they are unlucky to live in the nursing home or feel that their family has abandoned them, Ah-Tao feels grateful that she is able to live in such a place rather than the alternative, which was likely to be homeless. It also explores the idea that being a servant is negative occupation – even though Ah-Tao has earned a place of respect from her family, she is ridiculed by strangers, told that her name is a “servant’s name,” and not treated with respect.

The film also indirectly explores how living a servant’s life changes one’s personality even beyond retirement. Roger Ebert, in his review of the film, says “But having spent a lifetime of caring for others, she now feels badly about being cared for” (2012). Even though Ah-Tao is not obligated to help others in the nursing home, she still serves until her death. She helps other residents both with physical tasks and financially, even though she knows that the motives are negative. When Ah-Tao was given an extravagant gift by Roger’s mother, a birds’ nest that

Roger's mother has imported, Ah-Tao does not selfishly keep the birds' nest for herself after she catches other residents looking through her gift. She walks up on them searching through her things and when they look guilty for doing so, she does not chastise them, but instead says "Let's share!" (Lee, Hui, Chan, Shi, Hong-Tat, Lam, and Hui, 2011). Being a servant for years has fundamentally shaped Ah-Tao's personality and actions.

The film uses distinct techniques to convey the main themes and ideas. One of the main techniques that come across is the slowness of the shots and of the plot development. The time in which it takes to film a quick scene seems to be magnified and multiplied – this is perhaps to reflect the slowness and degeneration that comes in old age. Because of this nature of filming, it could be difficult for the typical viewer to keep fully involved in the film – this means that only those who are truly sympathetic to the relationship between Ah-Tao and Roger are able to see the film to fruition. In terms of the score, the film is very similar to *The Helper*, however the motivations for using a minimalistic score are different. This film uses a minimalistic score to fully convey the experience that Ah-Tao is having in the nursing home. The director and producers likely want the viewer to fully experience the sounds and feelings of a lonely nursing home – the viewer hears the coughs, cries, and conversations of other residents very clearly. This is meant to convey the severity of Ah-Tao's situation very clearly and convey to the viewer the situation that she has placed herself in by refusing Roger's offer of hiring an individual caregiver.

The title, *A Simple Life*, is meant to reflect the life of Ah-Tao. She has spent her entire life in the service of one family and has not done or experienced anything extravagant. However, the title does not reflect accurately the true impact that Ah-Tao has had on the family that she serves. The film does depict the servant's life as a simple one, where the main goal is to

ensure the happiness of the employer, however, it does not mention the deep emotional relationships that Ah-Tao had on the family members she raises. Ah-Tao is like a second mother to Roger and his siblings – she raises them and while forming deep emotional bonds. While Ah-Tao's life may be a simple life on the surface, the emotional impact that she has on the family that she serves makes the impact of her life far less simple and far more complicated.

## Analysis of Hong Kong Film Selections

The directors of these films take disparate approaches to the lives of domestic helpers due to the differing natures of their respective genres and the themes that the filmmakers are attempting to convey. The first film, *The Helper*, focuses its narrative on the real-life testimonies of exceptional domestic helpers in order to demonstrate to its audience that domestic helpers are autonomous figures who can complete amazing accomplishments outside of their position as a helper. It turns the idea of a “helper,” or someone who is subservient, on its head in order to demonstrate the character and autonomy of these women. However, the director of *A Simple Life* made different artistic choices in order to convey different themes to its audience. As well as portraying the domestic helper as someone totally loyal to their employer family, it also explores themes of aging and the state of elder care in Hong Kong. It also utilizes differing stylistic techniques due to the motivations that the audience has for seeing the film.

*The Helper* deliberately chooses to show the stories of some of the most exceptional domestic helpers in Hong Kong in order to confirm the filmmakers’ assertion that these women are more than their career choices. Specifically, the choice to cover Liza and Joy’s narratives is a concerning choice because of their distinct relationship with their employers. Both of their employers recognized their distinct goals and talents and are willing to help them financially to achieve their goals – Liza’s employer is willing to give her weeks off at a time in order to go on mountain climbing excursions while Joy’s employer recognized that she has a phenomenal singing voice and decided to give her time in a professional studio. This kind of behavior is extremely unusual for an employer, especially as a majority of women are only with their families for the duration of a two-year contract. The support that these women receive from their employers allows them to be exceptional and achieve amazing things as they work at their

hobbies on their days off. The choice to profile exceptional rather than average women matches with the theme that the director is attempting to convey to the audience. By contrast, the filmmaker chooses to show Nurul's story to cause the audience to garner sympathy for domestic helpers. Only a small percentage of foreign domestic helpers become pregnant during their stay in Hong Kong. Through demonstrating the emotionally-jarring story of a young Indonesian domestic helper, the filmmaker helps the audience to feel sympathy towards domestic helpers in general, even though very few of them undergo situations like Nurul.

The choice to profile these women also matches with audience expectations for the documentary. This film falls into two categories of documentary – activist and testimonial. The potential audience for this film is watching this because they have a vested interest in the issues that domestic helpers face every day. It can be extrapolated that the audience of the film have sought out this rather obscure film from an unknown director because they want to learn more about domestic helpers or are sympathetic to their situation. By portraying some of the most exceptional women in the entire population, the filmmaker panders to the audience's previous interest in the topic and garners sympathy from the viewer.

In terms of the techniques for the film, the filmmaker makes deliberate choices in order to fortify her narrative. The film relies heavily on testimonial from different domestic helpers. Instead of focusing on a high production value and adding a lot of "bells and whistles" to the film, the director instead chooses to make the background and score of the film very minimalistic – the audience is meant to focus upon the words that the domestic helper is saying rather than be distracted by other elements in the filmmaking. This film follows many similar classic documentary techniques through these choices. By choosing this type of film and implementing

these techniques, the filmmaker is able to successfully demonstrate her narrative that the women are more than just their occupation and that they are capable of exceptional things.

As an art film, *A Simple Life* utilizes different techniques in order to impart upon the audience its narrative regarding the *amahs* of Hong Kong and the elder care system in place in Hong Kong. The film focuses upon the inside relationship that Ah-Tao has with the family that employed her for generations, the Leungs. It does not focus at all upon her life outside of her work for her family other than a small scene where Ah-Tao, discussing her lack of husband, claims that she did not marry many of the men attempting to woo her because she thought they all smelled “fishy” (Lee, Hui, Chan, Shi, Hong-Tat, Lam, and Hui, 2011). One of the main themes seen throughout the film is the elder care system in Hong Kong – Ah-Tao goes, of her own volition, to a nursing home where she is separate from many of the other residents. She goes there because she chooses to – however, many of the residents of the nursing home feel abandoned by their family. This theme of elder care and eventual death is one of the prevalent features of the film.

The director of the film uses different narratives than the documentary film due to the differences in audience and genre of the two films. This selection is an art film from one of the most well-regarded directors in Hong Kong cinema – it also stars two of Hong Kong’s most successful actors, Andy Lau and Deannie Ip. Ip, who played Ah-Tao, received widespread critical acclaim for her performance as Ah-Tao, even winning the award for Best Actress at the 68<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival (“Deannie,” 2018). The audience of this film is likely watching the film for entertainment purposes. This film also caters to a different demographic of person than the other selections – instead of being a film that caters to domestic helpers to give them empowerment, it is likely a film meant for middle-to-upper class Hong Kongers who are

able to watch the film and be reminded of their relationships with their long-time helpers. This is demonstrated as the focus of the film is the relationship between the Ah-Tao and Roger and not Ah-Tao herself. They are also likely of the demographic that is knowledgeable of film and its techniques – as a result, the director, Ann Hui, is very deliberate in her artistic choices for the film.

The artistic choices for the film help the director to convey the representation of a loyal domestic helper for the family. The director, like Bowers, utilizes a minimal score, however, the reasoning is very different. The minimal score in this film is likely to convey to the audience the stark reality of staying in a nursing home before death. The silence is to make the audience focus more closely on the conversations between the characters and underlies their relationship throughout the film. Another element seen through the film that backs up the representation of the helper that the filmmaker is trying to convey is the slowness of the film's pace. Many of the shots are languorous – there could be a long shot of something in the background that the director means to convey that would likely not be seen in a different genre of film. The director utilizes many long hanging shots of scene backgrounds to demonstrate the lack of action happening in the scene. For example, to demonstrate that Ah-Tao was using the bathroom in the nursing home by herself, the camera hangs over the stall for three seconds with no movement – the only action the viewer has is hearing water dripping from a faucet. There is then a cut shot to Ah-Tao shuffling slowly towards the camera down the hallway for around five seconds – this five seconds feels much longer to the viewer because there is no other action happening in the scene. Film techniques like this help to set the mood of the film and impart to the viewer the slowness involved in old age. The fact that this is a character-driven drama also means that there is not distinct plot to the events – it follows Ah-Tao through her time in the nursing home, but

many of the plot devices are meant to showcase the interactions between the characters, not to drive the plot itself.

These devices all together help to form a more complete picture of the representation of the *amah* in current-day Hong Kong. Ah-Tao represents a previous form of domestic labor – she is one of the last remaining remnants of what Constable refers to as “superior servants” (2007). She remained dedicated to the family she served until her death from a stroke in the nursing home. This type of domestic helper is unlikely to make a return in Hong Kong. The population size of Hong Kong combined with the readily available stream of domestic helpers from other countries makes it unlikely that there will be a dedicated servant for many years who gain respect from her employer in her old age. There is a distinct juxtaposition between the two different forms of domestic laborers.

Constable claims that the “‘ideal’ Chinese servant of old...has become a coercive symbol used to control workers who are referred to locally as foreign domestic ‘helpers’ or ‘FDHs’” (2007). She cites news articles that state that amahs combine warmth and professionalism and as a result are considered to be superior servants. The modern-day foreign domestic helper is supposed to be held to this standard, however, because labor laws and social standards have changed drastically since foreign domestic helpers became the main source of labor, it is impossible to hold the two types of workers to the same standards. Because of the model of two-year contracts, it is highly unlikely that a woman will work for a family for multiple generations – there are also now laws written regarding how much a domestic helper must legally be paid. One of the helpers whom Constable interviewed when she was researching for her book, Elsa, was friends with a Chinese *amah*. Elsa reports that the amah was always saying “‘You are lucky you have a contract; you have more benefits...’ That’s why I think that most of the *amahs* here

don't have the benefits that the Filipinas are taking" (Constable, 2007). This shows that the public considers the motives of foreign domestic helpers and Chinese *amahs* differently – foreign domestic helpers only come to Hong Kong for the money that they can make performing domestic labor while *amahs* are a distinctly lower class that works for their families for the sake of loyalty and national pride. Chinese *amahs* have “become symbols of an idealized past in which power, status, and class differences were unquestioned” (Constable, 2007) while “FDHs’ in contrast symbolize a rapidly changing global terrain in which local cultures take on postmodern qualities” (Appadurai, 1991). The juxtaposition between the *amahs* of the past and the laborers of the present are most clearly seen in *A Simple Life* where Ah-Tao interviews potential new domestic helpers for Roger. She asks the helper complicated questions, such as where they would shop to buy a certain type of fresh fish. She claims that Roger is very particular and only wants his food cooked a certain way. This angers the people she is interviewing – they say that Roger is too particular, and they would never work for him and they get up to leave (Lee, Hui, Chan, Shi, Hong-tat, Lam, and Hui, 2011). This clearly shows that a present-day worker could never live up to the standards that Ah-Tao has set for herself after working for the family for generations. This reflects the “nostalgic bias [that] is typical of many Chinese in Hong Kong, whether they hired Chinese domestic workers in the past, grew up with them in their homes [or]...believe they know what they were like” (Constable, 2007). These two films reflect perfectly this hypothesis, with *The Helper* showing domestic helpers travelling internationally and taking advantage of a rapidly globalized world to communicate with their families and reach their personal goals. However, it can be seen that Ah-Tao is definitely from a different class from her employer – she has sacrificed her entire life to work for her employer and after years of hard work for the family, only feels enabled to take advantage of their

generosity slightly, as she refuses a caregiver and instead relegates herself to a retirement home, a place that is not respected in the filial Chinese culture.

By utilizing different techniques and focusing on different forms of domestic labor in Hong Kong, these two films show drastically different narratives and representations of domestic helpers in Hong Kong.

## Part E: Selections from Filipino Media

The Philippines has historically and currently been one of the biggest sources of foreign domestic helpers for Hong Kong. Because the directors come from a different background and have a different perspective on the labor migration, as the women are foreigners in Hong Kong, the films they chose to produce on the subject represents the foreign domestic helpers differently and focuses on different aspects of their lives. The following two films, Baby Ruth Villarama's *Sunday Beauty Queen* and Rory B. Quintos' *Anak (The Child)* both take different approaches to domestic helpers than the Hong Kong films and show different representations and narratives than each other. Through focusing on different aspects of the lives of foreign domestic helpers than the Hong Kong films, these films have a different representation of their lives and of who they are as people.

### Baby Ruth Villarama's *Sunday Beauty Queen*

Baby Ruth Villarama's *Sunday Beauty Queen*, filmed over the course of four years, follows five Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong who spend their Sundays off involved in beauty pageants (Lee, 2016). The film follows the women before, during, and after they take part in the pageant. Unique to the film is the depiction of one Hong Kong domestic helper who is lucky enough to rent her own home away from her employer, something that not many domestic helpers get to do because of the terms of their contract (Lee, 2016). The film closely follows a few other domestic helpers, including Mylyn, who is employed by Jack Soo, an important figure in the Hong Kong entertainment industry who also happens to be immobile (Lee, 2016). The film closely displays the relationship that Mylyn and Jack have and how they depend on each other (Lee, 2016).

The film ends with the domestic helpers participating in the pageant, showing them being free from their jobs and having fun participating in the pageant (Lee, 2016).

This film and the main theme seems to correlate well with the research conducted by Dr. Ju-Chen Chen, a Taiwanese researcher based in the Anthropology Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Chen spent two years of her weekends with domestic helpers who participate in beauty pageants around the city. Chen notes that even though participating in beauty pageants can be emotionally, physically, and financially draining, the women participate to foster “moral, emotional, and material linkages with each other, and to build up intimate relationships with members of their community, many of whom are people from nearby towns or villages” (Chen, 2015b). As well as participating for social reasons, the women participate in order to show off “their talent” – they feel that they are talented. They understand that they have put in a lot of time into preparing for the pageants, and they want to show off their hard work to the audience members in the pageant and Hong Kong in general (Chen, 2015b).

Rory B. Quintos' *Anak (The Child)*

In general, the discourse surrounding domestic helpers in the Philippines is to position them as “heroes” – as women who bring money into the Philippines but who cause social problems by migrating away from the Philippines while their husbands stay at home (Ogaya, 2004). Many of the problems viewed as the negative effects of migration are “disruption of family relationships, marital infidelity, delinquency of children, early marriage among migrant children, and increasing income inequalities between migrant and non-migrant families” (Ogaya, 2004). This film explores some of the problems listed above when a Filipino woman returns from Hong Kong to find her family in chaos.

Instead of taking place in Hong Kong, this film takes place in the Philippines after a woman returns home from working in Hong Kong for many years and finds that her family has degenerated. The main character, Josie, returns to the Philippines after several years of working abroad in Hong Kong to support her family, only to find that her children do not trust her and instead find her to be a stranger to them. She comes back to discover that her oldest daughter, Carla, is distrustful and harbors anger towards her for what she views as Josie’s abandoning her family and children, especially during their time of need in their father’s death and funeral (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). Although her middle child, Michael, is happy that Josie has returned from Hong Kong, he is experiencing academic difficulties, losing his scholarship from failing grades and on the brink of being suspended from school for not settling his tuition (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). Finally, her youngest child, Daday, does not even recognize her at first because Josie left for Hong Kong when Daday was less than a year old (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000).

Although the film focuses in general on Josie’s healing relationship with all three of her children, it especially follows the relationship between Carla and Josie as they clash repeatedly

over their longstanding resentment and eventually find healing (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). In her resentment, Carla is extremely dramatic, claiming that her mother does not understand the challenges that her family went through when her mother was away, most notably the death and funeral of her father and Josie's husband (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). She bears a grudge about the fact that her mother did not return home for her father's funeral (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000), even though she does not understand that Josie would have liked to return home, however, her employers did not allow her to return, locking her in their apartment when they go on vacation and hiding her passport (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). She does many things to attempt to get under her mother's skin, including bringing a boy home just so her mother would see, smoking cigarettes in the house, and running away from home to stay in what is presumably a drug den (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000).

Along with the challenges that Carla is facing regarding her relationship with her mother, Carla is also dealing with many other challenges. Although it is not fully touched upon, it can be extrapolated that her academics are not in their best state (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). It is also shown in the film that, after being confronted by her family and her "boyfriend" Brian, she has experienced a miscarriage (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). Carla later tells her mother that this is not her first pregnancy, but she had also been pregnant before and had gotten an abortion (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000).

After multiple confrontations between the mother and daughter, including an extremely physical confrontation at the drug den and a confrontation in the rain ending with Carla falling into a pile of trash, Josie decides that it would be best to return to Hong Kong rather than starting her taxi business, as her other two partners had already backed out the business for various reasons (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). It takes one more emotional confrontation between the

mother and daughter pair as Josie is packing to return to Hong Kong for their relationship to finally be rectified, with Carla apologizing for not seeing her mother's point of view and finally understanding that the only reason that Josie left was to give the best life for her children, not because she wanted to escape her family in the Philippines (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). The film ends with the entire family having mended their relationships and moving on into new stages in their lives – Carla dating Brian and presumably later marrying him, Michael dating Bernadette, a classmate who supported him through his financial difficulties and suspension, and Josie once again returning to Hong Kong to provide for her family (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000).

While the film mainly focuses on Josie and her familial relationships, it also explores other women, Josie's friends, and their motivations for working in Hong Kong. One of Josie's friends, Lyn, reveals that she only went to Hong Kong to escape her life in the Philippines, not necessarily to provide a better life for her family. She calls her unemployed husband and sons her "five thorns," claiming that she no longer recognizes them after she returns from Hong Kong, where she has stayed for many years (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). During her time in Hong Kong, she met a man named Edgar and started a relationship with him – she receives a letter from Edgar during the film and her friends comment that it is not good to have two relationships happening at the same time (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). At the end of the film, she returns to Hong Kong to start a new life with Edgar (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). The idea of leaving to go abroad for differing motivations is also explored by Josie as she waits to get her paperwork filed as she returns to Hong Kong (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). Her internal monologue expresses that all the people waiting might be going to Hong Kong for the second or third time – she wonders if the reasons for their returning are purely financial or whether they are going back for different reasons (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000). The final scene of the film is Josie walking into a crowd of

foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong with the final scene expressing her feelings that foreign domestic helpers are the “true heroes” (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000).

The main techniques that the film uses to heighten its emotional impact for the audience are the flashback and the voiceover. At many points throughout the film, instead of expressing their feelings to each other, the true feelings of Josie and her daughter Carla are expressed through their internal monologue. The monologue starts with the camera holding on the face of whomever is speaking and the voiceover starting. One of the most obvious examples of this is when the family is visiting the grave of their father and Josie does not cry. Carla’s voiceover expresses that she feels disappointed for her mother’s lack of emotion, however, Josie’s voiceover that starts after Carla’s ends expresses that she does not cry because she already cried enough when she was in Hong Kong (Dayrit and Quintos, 2000).

This film is widely regarded as one of the best Filipino films of all time (“Film,” 2016). It was submitted by the Philippines to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Academy Awards under the category of “Best Foreign Language Film,” however, it did not receive a nomination later (“Film,” 2016). Unlike many of the other films, this film falls under the genre of maternal melodrama: a popular film drama documenting a melodramatic relationship between a mother and her children. The film caters specifically to a Filipino audience, especially regarding the leading star of the film, Vilma Santos. Vilma Santos is regarded by many as the most successful Filipino actress of all time (“Vilma”, 2015). Vilma Santos has been acting since she was a child – her first role was at the age of nine in the film *Trudis Iiit*, for which she won a FAMAS Best Child Actress Award (“Vilma Santos,” 2018). Since then, her film career has been long and illustrious – she has been in over forty Filipino films and has won many awards for her appearances in these films (“Vilma Santos,” 2018). She is also popular in the realm of politics, becoming the mayor of her second

husband's hometown and proving her outstanding popularity among the Filipino community ("Vilma Santos," 2018). Through choosing Santos as the leading lady in this film, the director increased the film's visibility among the Filipino population and made sure that it would be seen by many.

## Analysis of Selections

The representation and stylistic choices of the directors reflect the different aspects of the lives of foreign domestic workers that are demonstrated in the film. Baby Ruth Villarama's *Sunday Beauty Queen* is similar to the representation that is seen in Joanna Bowers' *The Helper* – it is in a documentary style and follows the women as they participate in a time-consuming and difficult hobby. However, the hobby that the film chooses to follow is much more common than the hobbies and narratives that are seen in *The Helper*. Beauty pageants is one of the most popular pastimes in the Philippines; it makes sense that, even those these women are in a foreign country, they choose to participate in something that is so common as a hobby in their home country. The barrier to entry to entering a beauty pageant is also much lower than that of competitive international mountain climbing and singing professionally in a band – anyone who has the time, dedication, and enough money for the entry fee can join the beauty pageant.

The social network between the helpers is also more largely explored in *Sunday Beauty Queen*. The pageants are generally something that the women enter in order gain friends outside of their employers home; as noted by Ju-Chen Chen, it is also common for the women to be sponsored by their friends in order for them to gather enough money to enter the pageant. The social nature of the activity and the women's desire to enter it represents the foreign domestic helpers as somewhat lonely. However, instead of being lonely because they miss their family and their children, they are lonely due to the nature of being isolated in their workplaces. However, it also does a good job documenting the relationship between the foreign domestic helper and their employer through its showing the close relationship between Mylyn and Jack Lee. This film puts forth the representation that these women are attempting to form social groups outside of their workplace despite their having deep and fulfilling relationships with their

employers. The narrative presented by this film shows that these women have good relationships both inside and outside their workplace, rather than only focusing on one aspect of their lives.

The documentary nature of the film relies heavily on testimony from the women and their employers. The film also explores the preparation of the domestic helpers for a large event that they are preparing for, a beauty pageant. This is similar to the narrative seen in Bowers' *The Helper*, as one of the main narratives of that film follows a choir group of foreign domestic helpers as they prepare to perform at Clockenflap.

Rory B. Quintos' *Anak (The Child)* focuses entirely on a different aspect of the foreign domestic helper not seen in the other selections – what happens to her family after she goes abroad to work. The film, like many of the other films, represents foreign domestic helpers as hard workers, as women who sacrifice their relationships with their families in order to improve their families' quality of life. However, this film represents these women as women who have somewhat lost control once they go abroad. When Josie returns to find her family in chaos, she is shocked at their behavior. She is unable to control the behavior of her older daughter, who rebels and participates in what is considered immoral activity in Filipino society. This representation of a hard-working, yet imperfect, woman is a distinctly Filipino representation of the issue. However, because this film is fictional, there is no guarantee that this is what actually occurs when a woman returns home to her family after working abroad. The glimpse of this aspect of the lives of Filipino workers seen in Joanna Bowers' *The Helper* shows that this is likely untrue, as she is returning to the Philippines because her son is graduating from university, a difficult and rewarding achievement. This representation of foreign domestic helpers as imperfect women who are giving their all for their family is a unique representation not seen in other films.

## Part F: Their Stories

During my time studying at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the Fall 2017 semester, I was lucky enough to be given the opportunity to interview two domestic helpers regarding their experiences, their families at home in the Philippines, and their relationship with their current and former employers. I really enjoyed this experience as I was given the ability to learn more in-depth about their lives. The most I had seen of domestic helpers before this point was on Sundays when they would sit on public streets on their days off and interact with each other, eating food, singing songs, and laughing together. Even though I was interested in learning more about their lives, I did not get the opportunity to interview them in this setting – these interviews provided this opportunity. Both of these women were selected because I had a previous relationship with the children of their employers, both of whom were over the age of twenty. It is somewhat uncommon for a family to still have a domestic helper after the children of the family had grown up. As a result, the nature of the position for these two women had changed from spending a large majority of their time taking care of the children to spending a lot of their time cleaning the house and assisting their employers with other work. The following is a summary of my findings after talking with these women.

These interviews were conducted on two weekdays, Betty's on a Thursday and Mustiola's on a Monday. This changes the context of the interview, as Sundays are a very special time for many domestic helpers, as it is their one day off to have to themselves, form social relationships, and pursue their passions. Betty's interview was conducted at a café on campus at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Because Betty was there to help out her employer's child in taking graduation pictures, it was not a problem for her to participate in the interview with me as she was not expected to do traditional work that day. However,

because the interview with Mustiola was conducted at her house, it can be assumed that she took a break from her work around the house to conduct the interview with me.

My relationship with the employer's children also needs to be considered when analyzing the findings from these interviews. Because I have a good friendship with their employer's children, they may be hesitant to tell me their full opinion of the employers, and especially their children. A large majority of the information I received regarding these two elements seemed to be positive, and it is likely due to this confounding factor.

The following two sections document my findings from my interviews with these two women.

### Betty

The first helper to whom I spoke, Betty, had been in Hong Kong for fifteen years. She was with her previous employer for eight years and has been employed with her current employer for six years. She expressed that she intended that this would be her last contract in Hong Kong – she had gotten married to her suitor of twenty-three years and they had adopted a baby in the Philippines during the time that she was in Hong Kong. She is looking forward to going back to the Philippines and being with her new family. Unlike many foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong, she viewed being in Hong Kong as a stepping stone to moving on to bigger and better things. She stated that she was university-educated in physical therapy and she had family employed as physical therapists in the United States. She wanted to use her time in Hong Kong to save up money to move to the US and become a physical therapist there. However, her life did not work out the way that she planned, and she ended up in Hong Kong for many years.

Betty has a thriving social life outside of her work during the week. On Sundays, she takes three separate busses to Yuen Long, one-way journey of about two hours, to spend the entire day at church. The church is like a big family for her – many of the domestic helpers that go to the church go there because their employers attend as well, so there is a large social network of both domestic helpers and employers. She learned of the church through her first employer, and after her first employer no longer needed a domestic helper, she was able to get a referral to another family in the church, her current employer, and therefore avoid the two-week rule. Through her service at the church, she discovered a talent for cake decorating and she now decorates cakes and makes edible arrangements for the church and for the primary school at which her employer works. Her time to herself on Sunday, like for many domestic helpers, is very important to her and serves as a method for her to create social networks amongst other domestic helpers, something that she is not able to do due to the disparate nature of the profession.

She expressed that she has a very close relationship with her employer, especially with her employer's son. She said that she has conversations with her employer's son regarding complicated topics, such as the meaning of life, the existence of a benevolent creator, and many other topics. Because the employer's son is currently enrolled in university in the United Kingdom, he made her promise that she would not leave Hong Kong until he graduates and comes back to Hong Kong, expected to be this May. She knows that once her contract is up, she will have a difficult time leaving the family that she has formed such a close relationship with and whom she considers to be members of her family.

Even though she loves working for her current employer, she mentioned that her previous employer was not as nice or accommodating to her. Betty mentioned that she was the sixth

helper employed by this person – it is unclear why the other helpers quit or were terminated, but it likely because of the treatment they received by their employer. She said that her previous employer was emotionally volatile – she would keep her on call during her rest day with no explanation of when she wanted her to come home or not. She would then become angry and berate Betty for her not returning home when she was not explicitly told to do so. At one point, the employer became so angry that she threw an orange at Betty. Even though she was making more money at her previous employer, Betty much prefers her current employer, as she says that her treatment is better and that she has a better relationship with her employer.

### Mustiola

The second domestic helper that I had the privilege of interviewing is named Mustiola. She has been in Hong Kong for an extended period of time, almost twenty-three years, and all with the same family. The eldest daughter, now twenty-two years old and in her last year of medical school, was only six weeks old when the family hired Mustiola. She was able to watch both girls grow up and change while she had her own children at home. Currently, her children in the Philippines are aged 39, 37, 35, and 33. The first and third children finished university and are employed as a schoolteacher and computer scientist respectively. The second child, however, did not finish university. Some of her children are married and she has seven grandchildren. Her oldest grandchild is sixteen while her youngest grandchild is only a year and half old. She expressed that she missed her children and grandchildren, but after being apart from them for so long, her longing got easier. If she were not a domestic helper in Hong Kong, she would be a housewife in the Philippines. Unlike many domestic helpers who immigrate to Hong Kong, her husband was gainfully employed. He worked for a metal foundry before he retired.

Before she worked in Hong Kong, she worked for a time as a foreign domestic helper in Singapore. She said her time in Singapore was more difficult as she was working for a large family on a large property. She was working with two other domestic helpers and her responsibility was the third floor of the property. She says that even though things are more expensive in Hong Kong, it is easier being the only domestic helper for one family in a small flat rather than working with a team of helpers on a large property.

Her relationship with the family whom she works for, while not as close as the relationship that Betty has with her employer, is still smooth. She says that she has a much better relationship with her employer than many other domestic helpers in Hong Kong. As the children she takes care of have gotten older, she says her job has gotten a lot easier. She mostly spends her days cleaning the house rather than taking care of the children, which was her job in the previous years.

On her days off, she also spends time at a church, however, the church she attends is much closer than the church Betty attends – it is only one MTR stop away from her apartment complex. She attends the Tagalog Mass. She says that she sometimes also attends the English mass that is held at the church.

## Analysis

If one were to misguidedly attempt to represent the entire group of foreign domestic helpers based upon my findings interviewing these two women, one would think that every domestic helper has renewed contracts consistently for a long period of time. They would also believe that almost every domestic helper has a healthy relationship with their employer. It is impossible to generalize the experiences of two, ten, or even twenty foreign domestic helpers and apply their individual experiences to that of the whole group. Herein lies the problem of representation – as the author of this paper, I am attempting to co-opt the stories of these women for my own personal gain. I am taking their experiences over many years and boiling down what they told me in an hour of conversation to a few pages in a larger paper.

My representation of foreign domestic workers is limited to many factors. I only interviewed women who had self-identified Christian employers, children of employers over the age of twenty, and women who had good, even great, working relationships with employers. By limiting to these very specific factors, a clear picture of the foreign domestic helper in Hong Kong cannot be seen.

The themes conveyed throughout these interviews included the effect that their relationship with their employers had on their personal lives and beliefs as well as their overarching relationship with their employers. I represent the foreign domestic worker as a hardworking woman with her own passions and talents, including a deep religious background. She is someone who desires to have a good relationship with her employer and her family back home. She is so used to not seeing her children that she causally brushes off the fact that she has not seen her children or grandchildren in years. She is extremely close with the children of her

employers – a second mother of sorts – one who will renew to another two-year contract in order to stay in Hong Kong to be there after her employer's child graduates from a university abroad.

In general, my representation of domestic helpers is somewhat disparate from the representation seen in many of the films. Although the type of domestic work that they do is similar, the relationship between employer and domestic helper differs greatly. In my representation, their relationship is good, they are very close emotionally and rely on each other, and they stay with their employers for the long-term. In *The Helper*, the helpers also have a very positive relationship with their employers – they are given time off to pursue their passions, however, the work and duration of employment is different. The helpers portrayed in Bowers' film have all been with their employers for ten years or less and the bulk of their work consists of taking care of young children rather than solely cleaning the house as the children are grown. The relationship that I observed in my interviews and the relationship portrayed in Rory B. Quintos' *Anak (The Child)* is extremely different – in the film, the relationship is extremely negative. Even though it seems like Josie is fond of her employers, they frequently mistreat her, even going so far to lock her in their apartment when they go on a month-long vacation. The element of their relationship consistent with Constable's research is that Josie's employers take her passport away so that she is unable to visit her family during their time of need in her husband's death. This action further deteriorates the already tenuous relationship between Josie and her daughter. The reason for these differences in portrayal is due to the different ideas that the films are attempting to convey – in *Anak (The Child)*, Josie is portrayed a strong woman through all the challenges she's faced – because of her hard work and mistreatment from her employers, she is unable to return home when she needs to and thus her relationship with her children has deteriorated. However, the focus of the other films is not the relationship of a

mother and friend with those from back home, but rather how they pursue their passions while they are in Hong Kong.

## Conclusion

Foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong are a fact of life for the region – the city would likely not be able to function without them due to their ubiquity and necessity. Even though they are so common, they undergo many difficulties and challenges, including being forced to follow strict rules in the hiring process and during their employment, working long hours, being subject to strict laws, and not understanding their legal rights. Along with these challenges of their employment, their stories are co-opted for entertainment and they are frequently misrepresented in the media. It is incredibly difficult for a filmmaker to correctly represent the individual stories of a population of 300,000. Differences in genre, audience, and representation cause films to represent foreign domestic helpers and different aspects of their complicated lives in different ways.

All of these films serve to make this generally underserved population visible in different ways. Even though these women are seen socializing on the street by the general population of Hong Kong every Sunday, they are not widely represented in the media or politically. These films all make domestic helpers visible to the public in different ways. *The Helper* provides insights into the passions and desires of domestic helpers outside of their careers and their families back home. It validates the group as real people with distinct hobbies and passions. *A Simple Life*, a film not aimed towards domestic helpers, allows their Hong Kong employers to consider their relationships with their previous helpers who served their families for generations and potentially change the way they treat their current helpers. It also provides an accurate portrayal of the relationship between an *amah* and her employer and makes the point that these women are generally disenfranchised after they stop working for their families and they need someone to take care of them in some capacity, whether that be their employers' family, a

nursing home, or their own family. *Anak (The Child)*, by contrast, is a film meant for foreign domestic helpers. It demonstrates the strain that being a foreign domestic helper can put on one's relationship with her family. It also expresses the idea that supporting one's family might not be the only reason that one immigrates to work; they might also do so because they are running away from an abusive relationship or want to have an adventure. Finally, *Sunday Beauty Queen* makes these women and their social networks visible. It helps to demonstrate to the Hong Kong people that on Sundays, there is more that Hong Kong helpers do than sit on the street – they also participate in social activities like these beauty pageants in order to increase their social capital and find new forms of validation.

*The Helper* and *A Simple Life*, two selections from Hong Kong media regarding domestic helpers takes totally different approaches to domestic helpers due to differences in genre, audience type, and narrative. While one film solely focuses on the extraordinary members of the population through an activist and testimonial documentary perspective, the other discusses the aging of a domestic helper who has been with her employer for generations. Because this is an art film, it also uses very different techniques in demonstrating these narratives. Even though these representations are all very different and co-opt the stories of these women in some form, it is better to have some sort of representation and understanding for this population than no representation at all and the subsequent misunderstanding that stems from it.

Finally, direct interviews with domestic helpers in Hong Kong that I conducted represent foreign domestic workers who, even though they experience many challenges, are still able to form deep personal relationships with their employers and participate in extra activities on Sundays that help them to determine and enjoy their passions. I also represent these women as

people who care deeply about their employers and have a good relationship with them, an aspect that goes largely unexplored in many of the selected films.

The representation of a population in the media can change drastically depending upon who is forming the narrative. The difference in genres, audience, and style cause distinct differences in representation of the same population among different films.

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## Appendix A: Author Notes from Interview with Betty

- 1) How long have you been working in HK? How long with your current family?
  - a. Almost 15 years, 2 families, current for 8, older for 6
  - b. The first family did not need a helper anymore, first daughter left for university.
  - c. Given only 14 days to stay without a new employer in Hong Kong. Cannot leave HK without visa. Recommended to current family from someone in the church
- 2) Where are you from?
  - a. Philippines, Ilo-Ilo
  - b. Very peaceful city, really enjoy city, friendly
    - i. Opposite of Hong Kong
  - c. Really hard to adjust to Hong Kong for the first time. Have to adjust to the environment and pleasing your employer. Homesickness
- 3) How did you find your contract to come to Hong Kong/how did you end up working in Hong Kong?
  - a. Came to HK as a stepping stone. Graduated as a physical therapist in Hong Kong. Easy to move to other countries after HK. Wanted to go to the US at the time that she moved to Hong Kong. Physical therapists from California supported to her during her studies. Her first employer was a Christian, learned about Christianity. Forgot her plan. Enjoyed serving in the church
  - b. Goes to a Filipino fellowship here. Around 80 to 100 people in the fellowship. They don't stay long
- 4) Do you have children in your home country? Who takes care of them when you're gone/how often do you see them?
  - a. Married at forty-one. He was her suitor when he was 18. Waited for her for twenty-three years. Never enjoyed her life in the Philippines, only studied and worked. Her life is different in Hong Kong, can do anything that she wants here, her parents are very strict.
  - b. Husband in the Philippines. Adopted a baby boy who is 18 months old. Husband resigned from his job and they need to take care of the baby. Only has seen her baby two times. Adopted the baby over a year ago (August 2016). Named Matthew
- 5) Tell me about your typical day.
  - a. Wake up and prepare mom's breakfast, prepare separate breakfast for dad, prepare breakfast for daughter as well. Prepare individual dinners because they don't come back at the same time. They all have different foods because one is vegetarian. Salad, meat, soup. Daughter is very simple, she likes rice. Will eat almost anything, but not too much meat. Goes to mom's school if they have activities. Decorate the table when they have birthdays. Loves arts and decorating. Didn't know her talent until she started serving in her church. She likes making everything presentable in the house.
  - b. Wash clothes, cleaning the house. Family just moved, house is under renovation. Moved to smaller house, washing, ironing, cleaning a little bit. 1,200 sq ft house is bigger house, more cleaning
  - c. Dad does business meetings in the house, she has to serve the people in the business meetings

- d. Sometimes acts as a runner for documents
- 6) What are the most difficult parts about doing your job?
  - a. Adjustment to doing the job. Hard to gain employer trust. Can take 8 months to one year to gain employer trust. Cultural difference, difficult to get their employers to trust them. Why many helpers pray for employer trust. Hard to adjust. “very stingy”
- 7) How have your duties changed throughout your time with your family?
  - a. Nothing much has changed. The kids are grown up, but the workload is more, because the father has changed jobs, initially was working in office outside the home, but now he works inside the house. Difficult to have employer inside the house all the time. Difficult because you cannot do your job with freedom. Cannot make noise, sometimes has to rush her job when he leaves to finish by the time he comes back.
- 8) What do you do on your days off?
  - a. Stays at church the whole day. Yuen Long (outskirts of Hong Kong). About an hour to get there. 3 separate busses to get there. The church is located at a private residence, so they have a private shuttle bus.
  - b. Her first employer brought her to that church. The mother church is the Chinese congregation. Her employer was one of the members. Their mission when they hire one of the helpers is to introduce them to the church. Going to the church is like a family gathering. Most of the helpers that go to this church have families that go to the main church. Like a family, even with new employers they still get together for holidays.
  - c. No Christmas plans yet
- 9) If you weren't working in Hong Kong, what would you do to work in your home country?
  - a. Worked in a restaurant. After she graduated, she worked in a hospital in Taiwan. Did physical therapy in Taiwan. Took care of the paralyzed elderly people in the hospital. HK was only a stepping stone. Taiwan was only for experience.
  - b. Five years of college to become a physical therapist. Four years of university, one year of clinicals – requirement to work one year before graduation.
  - c. Specialization is in paralysis
- 10) Quick overview of your relationship with the family that you work for.
  - a. I feel like they are my family. We have ups and downs. The love is still there. When I think about leaving them, I am sad. Daughter treats me like a mother. They give me strength.
  - b. Just signed a new contract. Difficult to leave current family because they are part of her life. Son is very close with her, even though he is studying in UK. Asked her to stay with the family until he is done with university so he can see her again.
  - c.

Other: Super talented at making edible arrangements

Thinking of leaving HK and going back to the Philippines because she has to take care of her baby. When she adopted her baby, she wanted to go home, but family asked her to stay. Promised annual holiday, but only for a few days.

- Some other domestic helpers have nightmare stories, but she feels that her experience is average
- First employers she really suffered, because she was the sixth helper

- First employer was really mean, always fought with her helper, threw things. Threw an orange at her
- Didn't have a helper for one year, she was the last helper that they hired
- Told her employer that they have to develop a good relationship with the helper in order to help them
- Her employer always changed her mind, etc. Would ask her to stay during her holiday. Kept her on the stand-by during the holiday.
- Suffered emotionally from her first family
- Maggie's family doesn't quarrel or argue with her – treat her helper well.
- Current family is stingy
  - Even though she had more money with current family, they are better emotionally and they treat her with respect
  - “Never mind the money, I am happy working with”
- Hard to serve someone if they are hurting you
- Love begets love

## Mustiola Orbite

- 1) 23 years the whole time with the same family. She was 6 weeks old when they hired her.
- 2) Philippines, Manila
  - a. Big difference. Everything is easy in Hong Kong, easier travel, etc. However, it is more expensive here. Worked in Singapore before Hong Kong. Domestic helper in Singapore.
  - b. Harder for her in Singapore because she had 3 people working in the same house. A huge house, so they needed 3 helpers. 3<sup>rd</sup> floor is all for the family. Worked in the kitchen. Cooking and cleaning, etc. On the day off, she also took care of their duties.
- 3) Salary is better in Hong Kong. Sending money to her children to pay for their university.
  - a. University in Philippines. Eldest is a teacher, second one didn't finish, last one computer science. Already married, 39, 37, 35, 33
  - b. Have their own family already
  - c. Only see them every two years, at the end of her contract.
  - d. Okay for her, she is well-adjusted to being away from her family
  - e. 7 grandchildren. Youngest one is 1.5, oldest is 16
- 4) Not really difficult. Was more difficult when they were younger. AS they got older, things became easier. Stays at home and cleans now, cleaning is her daily routine.
- 5) Goes to church on her day off. Goes to church in Shatin, St. Alfred Church. Tagalo language mass that she goes to. Also an English mass that she sometimes attends as well.
- 6) Most difficult part was when they got sick, and she was not always able to take care of them. Not really difficult to balance multiple schedules, time in the household was well managed.
- 7) They've gotten easier as she's gotten older, a lot easier to manage the things that she does now.
- 8) She would still be a housewife. Her husband was a machinist before he retired. He worked in a metal foundry.
- 9) The relationship with her family now is really smooth. They treat her very well. Better than typical relationship with other families of domestic helpers in Hong Kong.