



Affective-discursive Practices in Southeast Asia: Appropriating emotive roles in the case of a Filipina domestic helper in Hong Kong who fell to her death while cleaning windows



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[*Abstract*]

The paper demonstrates the potential contribution of integrating discursive and affective analytic regimes in framing the study of Southeast Asia. I examine the “emotional possibilities” available to migrants with particular focus on the experience of Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong thrown into relief in 2016 by news of maids falling to their deaths while cleaning windows of their employers’ above-ground apartments. First, I situate the study in recent calls for Critical Discourse Studies and Migration Studies to transcend foundational methodologies in their respective fields in order to apprehend formerly disregarded aspects of the human condition, including affect and emotion. I then briefly present the debate in the affective turn in social analysis, which has to do with rethinking the attachment of affect and discourse. My own inquiry is premised on the assertion that emotion is multidimensional. I specifically explore the usefulness of taking emotion as “affective-discursive practice” by focusing on an analysis of the appropriation of the victim role by foreign domestic helper employer groups that could be seen in pertinent news reports of selected online Hong Kong

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newspapers. In the end, I also emphasize the necessity of reflexivity in projects that take affect as central object of inquiry.

Keywords: Emotion, affective-discursive analysis, Filipino, Hong Kong, victim

I . Introduction

Since the 1970's, contemporary Southeast Asia has become a significant area for anthropological inquiries of "bodily and emotional control" furthering the argument that understanding emotions should be within the context of an analysis of culture (Boellstorff and Lindquist 2004: 438). Emotions are tricky, both as an actual experience and as an academic object of study. Conventional notions of emotion place it in the easy dichotomy of the "individual" (physiological or psychological) and the "cultural" (or social). Going against this polarizing direction, Ian Burkitt (1997, 2012), for one, posits that emotions should be seen as "multidimensional" – neither just personal nor just social. Such a viewpoint drives a rethinking of the place of emotions in the changing social, political, and economic landscape of Southeast Asia. Byron Good (2004), in his cogent remark about the need to sharpen how emotion and culture are theorized on both an individual and social level, compels anthropologists to find ways of taking into account the meeting points of psychological research and the critical frameworks of social theories. Although he was addressing practitioners in a specific academic field, it will benefit the entire academic enterprise of understanding the human condition to place emotions, emotional experience, and the politics of emotions in both the individual and the social. On the other hand, Analiese Richard and Daromir Rudnycky (2009) proffer an alternative way of framing inquiries of emotional life in order to get out of "individualism" as a convenient trap for viewing emotions. Constructing the idea of "economies of affect" as a conceptual tool to investigate the limits of rationality as a mode of subjectivity in the area of economics, they insist that moving from emotions to the more encompassing notion of "affect"

provides a multifaceted lens of understanding not just emotional moments but "powerful embodied practices" (Richard and Rudnycky 2009: 61). It is important to note that their outline of the concept includes, but does not limit to, discursive or meaning-making events in the honing of "proper" economic subjects to fulfill the neoliberal agenda. This point, as will be made clearer in the theory section below, espouses a strand of looking at affect that does not reject language, meanings, and representations entirely in contrast to an extreme view that considers affect and semiosis as mutually exclusive processes in an individual.

My paper aims to contribute in the effort of bringing emotions out of the person, so to speak, in order to see its social and political underpinnings while recognizing the fact that experiences and meanings of emotions are as much personal as they are social. As an entry point into the matter, I respond to two challenges that come from two distinct but undoubtedly intersecting fields of inquiry: critical discourse studies and migration studies—both of which have recently been part of my personal research interests. Merging critical studies of discourse and a more cultural take on the phenomenon of migration, with all their potentials and shortcomings, is an opportune academic moment for investigating emotion and affect as particularly practiced in Southeast Asia. The specificity of placing affective practice in the region implicates it as a site of specific cultural, political, and economic development despite the overarching effect of late modern or globalizing trends.

In particular, I would like to demonstrate the value of *affective-discursive practice* (Wetherell 2012) as a framework for social and cultural analysis. I do this by outlining the theoretical premises and methodological proposition of integrating affect and discourse in the study of emotion in migration before focusing on a small sample of news reports about foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong plunging to their death while cleaning high or mid-rise apartment windows. News reports here are taken from online sources, or the digital version of newspapers, which offer certain affordances unique to online media such as a ready archive of past articles, immediate references to related articles through suggested links, and more diverse semiotic resources (e.g. images and video

clips). These online news media are considered in the study as "affective-discursive channels" (Wetherell et al. 2015; McConville et al. 2014) that do not only convey events of certain news value but also has the potential to "fix" subject positions by configuring emotional conventions allowed or precluded particular social actors in the context of particular events. I reference once more Richard and Rudnyckj in employing a notion of affect that is closer to a Foucauldian formulation of "conduct," which is the ability to structure the possible courses of action of others without losing sight of the fact of these conducting efforts' indeterminacy—possible but not definite, hence, creating contingent subjects (2009: 61). The news reports, then, serving as a particular means of delivering affective-discursive patterning possess the potential to "regulate" emotional and bodily performances consistent with ideal subject positions.

To achieve my main objectives, I first take time to present the theoretical and methodological basis of the call for critical discourse studies (CDS) and migration studies—my current disciplinary belonging—to find more potent and creative avenues of understanding their respective objects of analysis—including a turn to affect and revaluation of emotions. The next section considers the theoretical footing of the study prior to presenting details about the data in hopes of laying down the grounds for moving towards the affective course in social analysis more productively by apprehending its contribution in concert with discourse. I then proceed with providing a brief backdrop of Filipino labor migration in general and in Hong Kong in particular before focusing on my reading of the news materials and their potential affective-discursive maneuverings, the emotions they evoke, and the subjectivities evident "feelings structure" (Richard and Rudnyckj 2009: 62). Due to space constraints, I am only focusing on the single thematic thread pertaining to domestic helper employers and their representatives in my discussion to exemplify the possible form an affective-discursive analysis might take. I couple this with a brief section on reflexivity that I deem an indispensable component in affect-inclined projects.

II. Facing disciplinal challenges: Affect and emotion in CDS and migration studies

Krzyzanowski and Forchtner (2016) recently issued a call to critical discourse analysts to expand their theoretical and methodological remit in search of new directions for thinking and doing analysis of discourse in late modern neoliberal conditions. The need for post-foundational lenses to fill in the gaps created by a largely textualist and linguistic outlook is imperative in attempting to understand the human condition in an ever-evolving world. For instance, they suggest that pioneering paradigms in critically engaging discourse in society, notwithstanding their contribution to critical social analysis with a focus on the role of language, no longer suffice if the aim is to cover the complexities of living in what is considered as the post-crisis era (Krzyzanowski and Forchtner 2016). In sum, although language still plays a big role in how we construct and apprehend personal and social reality, a focus on the linguistic or even the semiotic alone fails to offer full understanding when it comes to questions that escape the web of words, signs, symbols, and representation. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a strand of European discourse analysis that emerged in the 1980's and considered to be the origin of CDS, had to contend with such criticism. After about two decades of establishing the CDA practice, the assessment by Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) centered on two striking critiques: first, a lack in serious consideration of "context" when making sense of particular texts, a remedy to which, they suggest is a careful ethnographic accounting; second, the over-dependence of CDA on linguistics which prevents the field from effectively considering the intersections of linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of semiosis. To be fair, proponents in the field have responded to these challenges in various ways as evidenced by projects that take into account the further theorizing of context (Van Dijk 2009) along with the integration of ethnographic research in CDA projects (see for instance Krzyzanowski 2011), and the development of "multimodal" models of critical discourse analysis that take into account the use of different semiotic resources in daily meaning-making (Kress 2009; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; van Leeuwen 2003; Machin and Mayr 2012).

Recently, an interrogation of the value of a critical discourse paradigm has been dispatched that seems to question its very core. The so-called "affective turn" in social and cultural analysis not only brings to the fore the limits of a language-centered paradigm; it also seeks to undermine the legitimacy of learning about social life by reading human experience as if it were a text. Although there is not enough space in this paper to comprehensively lay down the arguments for and against both the discursive and affective turn in socio-cultural analysis, the theory section is an attempt at a brief explanation of the nature of the polarizing debate and the actual paradigm I favor because of its potential in integrating—as opposed to dividing—aspects of the human experience that are usually assigned to distinct arenas of the semiotic and the sensual.

The call to recalibrate an academic endeavor's basic assumptions and refocus theoretical and methodological lenses to capture previously ignored aspects of an analytic object is also true for other disciplines such as migration studies. For instance, Paolo Boccagni and Loretta Baldassar (2015) recently signaled the need to address the challenges of the "emergent" field of migration and emotion. Although they do not claim that dealing with the emotional aspect of moving across the globe has been non-existent before their efforts, they insist nonetheless that the social sciences has generally overlooked emotions in migration studies. Ann Brooks and Ruth Simpson (2013), in fact, earlier issued the similar observation that although it may appear quite obvious the natural link between migration and emotions, it has been largely ignored in migration analyses that tend to focus on neo-liberalist projects that restructure sites of production and consumption.

There can be no over-emphasizing the necessity of bringing into the center stage the role of emotions in migrant life. At the most basic level, notions and actual lived experiences of being uprooted as well as rekindled hopes of new beginnings—familiar and prevalent components of the migration situation—are all "potent sources of emotions" and have strong "emotional connotations" (Skrbiš 2008: 236). What an emotion-focused lens affords us is a unique viewpoint that goes beyond the reification of migrant subjects as *homo economicus*, defined only by rational

choices to gain advantage or suffer the "natural" consequences of structural factors that define transmigratory practices. Boccagni and Baldassar in the aforementioned article underscore the exciting and pivotal insights that could be gained from investigating migrants' emotional experiences as these happen in shifting personal and social contexts, cultivate channels for emotions that extend beyond the self and conventional connections, and engage other "actors" in various forms without necessarily being limited by physical distance.

In both the CDS and migration studies disciplines, the call to redirect attention is made to open avenues for more creative and more daring work. These efforts to explore hitherto untrodden grounds compel practitioners of the designated fields to break boundaries set by foundational tools and go beyond conventional ways of understanding society and the human condition, not by abstaining from them every inch but by integrating them, if only to interrogate and eventually dismantle, in more complex, nuanced, and textured inter and trans-disciplinary ways instead of relying on specialist, discrete, and unwieldy disciplinary silos.

III. Not a zero-sum game: Theorizing affect and discourse

Proponents of a turn to affect such as Brian Massumi (2002, 1995) and allied efforts of a "non-representational" model of studying social life as outlined by Nigel Thrift (2008) are convinced that the richness of human experience in general should be rescued from the reification and reductionism imposed by the textual, semiotic, and representational frames of investigation. Further, they assert that such modes of inquiry unjustly focus on language and meaning at the expense of the more primary and therefore "truer" and more important dimension of human experience—embodied, extra-linguistic, and precognitive: the affect. Massumi gears the affective turn based on the premise of semiosis (meaning-making) and affect (embodied experience) being disengaged registers of an experience in an individual wherein the former as an "autonomous or semi-autonomous stratum run[s] counter to the full registering" of the latter (1995: 89). This manner of explaining affect as an

epistemological paradigm sees meaning-making as separate from the realm of the senses. In accordance with such logic, emotions cannot even be considered an affective instance since they are made real by words and made significant by meanings. Emotions, then, much like discourse are derivative and secondary to affect, which should be construed as intensity felt by the body and is capable of unconsciously (pre-consciously) acting on the body and in effect making the body act through uncontrollable force, beyond words and cognition, as excess.

Margaret Wetherell (2013, 2012, 2015), among many others, has responded to such claims with critical caution. Perhaps, the most relevant of her arguments for the purposes of the paper is the point about affect and meaning-making not being autonomous registers on the body but actually integrated eventualities, as shown by research in neuroscience and psychobiology. She mentions, for example, advances in emotion research in experimental psychology that demonstrate strongly how affect involves mobilizing both "somatic and mental resources" at the same time (Scherer as cited in Wetherell 2013: 355). In this sense, although there is value in distinguishing affect from emotion as an academic exercise, in actual experience, these two happen in synchrony, such that bodily reactions during emotional moments cannot be neatly isolated from meanings attached to feelings.

Wetherell makes another very important point regarding the attempt at this divorce, creating a turn away from discourse to privilege affect as excess: the move is, in the final analysis, theoretically and methodologically unsustainable. She cites this time attempts of the non-representationalists to do away with language altogether in the study of the experience of the body since words supposedly tend to water down embodied registers of intensity. For example, Wetherell critiques an effort to document the force of bodily expression in Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) without resorting to conventional modes of documentation and representation. Ultimately, what the attempt shows is that the nonrepresentational agenda of "dividing affect from discourse" acts as a "straitjacket" when making empirical accounts of how the body expresses beyond language (Wetherell 2013: 357). Since the only way that the

experience of the body can be made intelligible to interested readers is by putting what the senses apprehend into words, using the capacity of language to convey embodied happenings ironically demonstrates how the experience of the body and meaningful processing of such are intertwined as opposed to being cut off from each other.

Because empirical work, even of the affect and of the non-representational, renders abandonment of discourse and language an unhelpful, if not impossible, methodological agenda, Wetherell proposes a thoughtful placement of affect in the arena of social practice. In what she calls an analysis of *affective-discursive practice*, she recommends the fruitfulness of going back to the detailed investigations of discursive projects that account for not only words and utterances but more "embodied" aspects of communicative acts, in other words, "embodied semiosis" or "embodied meaning-making" (Wetherell et al. 2015: 59).

Social practice in this case is defined in reference to Schatzki's elucidation: "a nexus of doings and sayings" (Schatzki cited in Wetherell et al. 2015: 60), which for this paper is deployed as the patterning of emotive spaces that social actors can occupy in the unfolding of particular socio-historical events and conveyed through the affordances of particular affective-discursive channels. More particularly, I take inspiration from the works of Wetherell et al. (2015) and McConville et al. (2014) which employ the notion of affective-discursive practice in print news that act as conduit of "not just a cognitive or intellectual experience but also an emotional one" in the process, setting "the kinds of emotions on offer," which inevitably "will be bound up with broader power relations" (McConville et al. 2014: 5). Although the corpus I consider is smaller in size, narrower in scope, and more limited in generic type (i.e. I focus on news reports only), I similarly explore the "ordering" of subjects' conduct or actions that are mediated through the news as channel of "the articulation of affective-discursive positions to speak and emote from, affected and affecting identities, and positions for others who are spoken about" (Wetherell et al. 2015: 61).

Another departure I wish to make is in the matter of

interpretive model through which the data is processed. Whereas the two cited studies employed the discursive analytic approach of deducing "interpretive repertoire" from the data set, I am reading affective-discursive positionings from my chosen corpus through the concept of *nodal points*, defined by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) as "master signifiers" around which other signs gather to temporarily "fix" discourse, that is, meanings and as regards this paper, "emotive roles" that could either widen or narrow down the emotional path afforded certain social actors. Emotive roles, as mentioned above, I define as emotional conduct capable of forming subject positions when articulated. *Articulation* here is also understood as a form of social practice that, to Laclau and Mouffe, involves pinning down "discourse" by "establishing relations among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (1985: 105). For instance, "hope" and "guilt" have been endorsed as composing the "emotion canon" (Wetherell et al. 2015; McConville et al. 2014) or established and expected emotional experience of migrants who leave the homeland in search of a better lot in life (e.g. to provide a better future for the family) but cannot fully shake off the feeling that leaving is not entirely a good thing (e.g. abandoning the family that one ironically seeks to support). To cite a more incisive example, Filomeno Aguilar Jr. (1996, 2014) argues that the feeling of "shame" and "embarrassment" as a Philippine national sentiment attributed to the unabated entry of Filipinos into the transnational labor market as predominantly low-pay service workers signals a "loss of face" not so much for the entire nation as for the country's elites who imagine suffering a tarnished national identity in the international stage. The cases demonstrate how the articulation of particular emotional conduct also constructs emotive roles for particular actors who take on the performance of *feeling* the emotion as a defining moment in establishing their identity. It is as if to say that to be a proper migrant, one has to feel hope or guilt as contradictory but merited emotional episodes in leaving, or as a Filipino, one's class attachment conducts the self to possibly adopt shame as the warranted feeling towards branding Filipinas as domestic workers or worse, slaves, for instance. In both cases too, there appears to be a narrowing of emotional leeway by making "hope," "guilt, or "shame"

as the nodal points through which Filipino migration could be affectively apprehended.

IV. The data: Of dirty windows and maids falling to their death

Five data sets accessed online are used in the study. News reports from two English-language newspapers in Hong Kong – *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) and *The Standard* (TS) – gathered from August 2016 to December 2016, the period of coverage of a Filipina maid plunging to her death while cleaning the exterior high-rise windows of her employer's apartment and the resulting clamor for foreign domestic helper welfare and rights in the city voiced through the organized actions of migrant labor groups, the reaction of state parties, employment agencies, and employer support groups. The online versions of the two newspapers were the sources of the news reports and only "news" articles are considered at the moment (i.e. opinions, editorial, features are not included). The SCMP and TS are two of the most popular and established Hong Kong newspapers catering to an English-speaking audience and have constantly been viewed as credible news agencies (*Public Evaluation on Media Credibility* 2016). Starting 2007, TS took on a free distribution model although both newspapers provide general access to their digital content without need for subscription. In April 2016, SCMP removed the paywall for its digital content, a move that Alibaba Group Vice Chairman Joe Tsai explains as the first step in realizing a global readership, delivering objective and in-depth report on China from the unique vantage point of Hong Kong (see <http://www.scmp.com/faqs>).

Supplementing these news articles are some write-ups on the incident by the "not-for-profit, free-of-charge, and completely independent" media agency *Hong Kong Free Press* (HKFP) that like the first two sources caters to an English-speaking market and digital in distribution (<https://www.hongkongfp.com/about/>). The fourth source of data is the Chinese-language tabloid-format *Apple Daily* (AD), known for its pro-democracy stance (Chan et al. 2007). Only one news item was considered from the online version of the said

news agency although accompanying this lone article is a short video clip that departs from the coverage of the other three news agencies. As will be revealed in the discussion below, the *Apple Daily's* report of the incident contains details, small as they are, that struck me as of consequence given my general position as reader, particularly as an academic, and especially as Filipino. The final data samples are two news reports picking up the window-cleaning incident from online versions of two Philippine local newspapers – *Philippine Star* (English-language "quality" daily) and *Abante News Online* (Filipino-language tabloid). In total, 25 news articles (SCMP: 13, *The Standard*: 6, HKFP: 3, *Apple Daily*: 1, *Philippine Star*: 1; *Abante*: 1) were analyzed in the study. Added to this are multimodal data such as images and a short video clip relevant to the objectives.

The news articles considered in the paper are primarily seen as affective-discursive conduits through which emotional possibilities are enacted. Although the "identity" of news agencies becomes relevant in the assessment of their credibility, objectivity, and trustworthiness as sources of factual information especially, since "news" as a particular journalistic genre is supposedly typified by impartiality, such detail is not fully considered in the paper. What is more relevant at this point is the premise that even in news and the news-making practice in journalism, objectivity and impartiality are unattainable stances. The belief that news is an unbiased reporting of hard facts is challenged by the idea that language mediates the construction of reality where accounting for news values, making choices, executing representations of different groups through stereotyping for instance, and editorial voice make objectivity in news more of a myth than a reality in actual practice (Fowler 1991).

V. Affect and migration in context: Filipino labor migration in Hong Kong

Though Filipino emigration for labor has long been in existence, its immensity as seen at present was initiated in the 1970's and was promoted in the 1980's when the government recognized the huge

economic potential of trading its human capital abroad (Alcid n.d.; Bello 2011; San Juan 2000). It was in fact during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos that the government institutionalized exporting labor to mitigate the economic slump. Deployment increased in spectacular fashion in the following years, and this was not unrelated to the program of structural adjustment dictated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on the country in the 1980's in order to "free market forces" and improve economic performance (Bello 2011). This reveals the complexity of Filipino labor diaspora that is camouflaged by discourses of personal agency, individual decisions, and natural tendencies on the part of the migrant worker.

Roughly 11 percent of the Filipino population lives abroad, 20 percent of the workforce is deployed overseas and nearly half of the population depends on Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) remittances of relatives (Bello 2011; POEA 2011). In 2014, the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency deployed 2.14 million Filipinos to various host nations, the highest record in its history, whose remittance contribution of US \$ 24.3B broke the previous record (POEA 2014). OFW is now a category of citizens in the Philippines and in so-called "receiving" societies from Hong Kong to Yugoslavia (San Juan 2009, 2000). These Filipinos are bestowed identities that have largely been defined not by their inherited culture and history but by their occupation and, in many cases, lower status as a group of people in host nations.

Occupations that take the top spots among land-based OFWs include service work, production work, and professional and technical work - more than 46 percent are in service while 32 percent are in production (POEA 2011). Although each receiving country is unique, there are common problems and issues that OFWs have to confront such as discriminatory, xenophobic, and racist policies; laws and practices that legitimize violations of migrants' rights (e.g. gender-based violence); the lack of effective redress mechanisms; and, illegal recruitment and trafficking of girls and women (Alcid 2003; Quina 2010). Rhacel Parreñas (2001), in probing the imagined global community of Filipina migrant workers, highlights the issue of "partial citizenship" that haunts them daily in

a foreign land where they are left vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, given that they are considered of a lower race and unwanted citizens. Although few nations seem to be relatively more accepting by granting foreign workers a chance at full citizenship (e.g. New Zealand, Spain, Canada, and the USA), political and social inequalities still hound them.

Foreign domestic workers, in particular, are not entitled to permanent residency even after working for decades in Hong Kong. This is despite the fact that what the Basic Law requires is that persons not born in the territory need just consider Hong Kong as one's only residence for at least seven years to qualify for a permanent resident status. In a landmark legal battle over immigration rights to the right of abode, the Court of Final Appeal in 2013 ruled against granting foreign domestic helpers (specifically, Filipinos Evangeline Vallejos and Daniel Domingo) such a status stating that the nature of their employment as domestic helpers denies them the right to be considered "ordinary residents," a prerequisite to permanent residency. Mark Daly, the lawyer who represented the domestic helpers in the case, asserted that the decision was an unfortunate reinforcement of their "second-class" status (Bradsher 2013).

Still, Hong Kong has been among the top destination sites for Filipino labor migration (Philippine Statistics Authority 2015) and Filipinos are acknowledged as one of the more prominent foreign nationals in the city ("Hong Kong : The Facts" 2015). The vast majority of Filipinos in the region are females and most are employed as "unskilled" workers (Philippine Statistics Authority 2015), in particular, as Household Service Workers (a more palatable alternative to the former term DH or domestic helper). In Hong Kong too, the domestic worker as an enduring stereotype of Filipino women is not easy to dismiss. The former president Macapagal-Arroyo's pronouncement in 2006 of establishing intensive training programs to produce "super maids" did not help in quelling the longstanding image. Recently, however, the news of a young Filipino domestic worker being awarded a fellowship to the New York University's Tisch School of the Arts for her photographic skills appeared to take the HK-based Filipino migrant discourse in a

different direction. The 27-year old Xyza Cruz Bacani became the case for a discursive counterpoint to perennial stories of abuse suffered by many in her position. Regardless, foreign domestic helpers, due to their low status and lack of opportunities in the city, generally are left to suffer a vulnerable state. The ethnographic research of Nicole Constable (1997) details this situation and possible future. Focusing on the daily lives of Filipina domestic helpers in the city in and outside their designated role as foreign employees, Constable puts a spotlight on the "regulation" of their bodies, practices, and aspirations from influences emanating from both their attachment to the homeland and the conditions of the host culture that on the whole leave them with little chance for self-improvement.

Despite abject living conditions, the subclass treatment, and risk of abuse and human rights violation, Hong Kong remains one of the most popular destinations for Filipinos, as shown earlier. In the 2011 Hong Kong Population census, Filipinos, along with Indonesians, were the two largest non-Chinese ethnic groups (Census and Statistics Department 2012). In 2013, 50 percent of the 320,000 domestic workers in Hong Kong were Filipinos (Foreign Domestic Workers in Hong Kong 2015). Although there are Filipinos in other professions or industries, such as education and teaching, banking and finance, information and communication, manufacturing and trade, an overwhelming majority (94.9%) belongs to what the 2011 Hong Kong population census terms as "miscellaneous social and personal services," which also covers foreign domestic helpers. Of this proportion of Filipinos in the said occupation, 97 percent were women (see <http://www.census2011.gov.hk/>).

VI. Discussion

6.1. *Who dies of cleaning?* A sequence of events and an assemblage of incidents

On August 9, 2016, a Filipino domestic helper fell to her death while cleaning the exterior windows of her employer's apartment on the

49th floor of a Lohas Park housing complex in Tseung Wan O, Hong Kong. The incident ignited a series of actions from foreign domestic workers represented by organizations composed of workers and those that support their cause (e.g. Asian Migrants Coordinating Body). They took to the streets in September of the same year issuing a call that centered on the need for the Hong Kong state to recognize the welfare, protection, and security of foreign domestic helpers by, first and foremost, and as triggered by the aforementioned incident, banning employers from requiring them to clean specifically the exterior part of the windows of above-ground apartment units. The demands however had expanded to cover other issues that concern domestic helper rights such as higher wages, standard working hours, and an end to the "live-in" policy (i.e. requiring them to reside with their employers).

Said case however was the fifth during the year of helpers falling to their death either while fulfilling their tasks or in apparent acts of suicide. This was probably the reason for concerned groups urging Hong Kong government to seriously consider foreign domestic helper psychological wellbeing in connection with other pertinent concerns. The pattern of incidents prompted the Philippine consulate in October to unilaterally issue a directive "pushing employers to stop forcing Filipina domestic helpers to clean windows" (SCMP September 22).

The Hong Kong state party represented by the Labor Department enters the scene as an arbiter between parties in dispute whose goal is to come up with a "winwin situation" (sic) (SCMP October 14) that will satisfy the demands of both the workers and the employers (represented by groups such as Employers of Domestic Helpers Association). As a result, the implementation of the ban issued by the Philippine consulate was delayed and a series of consultations with affected groups were held with the aim of introducing clauses in new domestic helper contracts that will ensure their safety in the line of duty, specifically when cleaning apartment windows. Within the months of October and November, the drafting of the clauses became one of the main tasks of the efforts headed by the Hong Kong labor department in dialogue with concerned parties for although in principle, all agreed that worker

safety should be ensured, "proper wording" of to-be - introduced terms was also paramount. On November 14, 2016, the Hong Kong Information Services Department posted on its website news about the new clauses to be included in foreign domestic helper contracts beginning January 2017:

The new clause stipulates that when the helper has to clean the outside of any window which is not located on the ground level or adjacent to a balcony or common corridor, the window must be fitted with a grille which is locked or secured.

No part of the helper's body can extend beyond the window ledge, except the arms. (Hong Kong Information Services Department 2016)

It is important to note that in earlier drafting, another clause was being considered that requires helpers to clean windows under adult supervision. This apparently did not make it to the final version, supposedly due to opposition of employer groups. In addition, there will be no criminal liability for employers who violate the rules. Migrant workers' organizations expressed dismay over the finalized terms since, according to Shiella Estrada of the Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers' Union, for instance, "It's a very weak protection. Very poor" (TS November 15).

In December, migrant domestic workers staged another rally to commemorate International Migrants Day declaring "We are not slaves" and demanding uninterrupted rest, meal breaks, safe working conditions, pay rise, among other concerns.

Recounting the stories that surround and was prompted by the death of the Filipina maid who fell off a building while cleaning windows has two purposes. It is obviously a way of providing a brief outline of events based on an assemblage of news reports from different sources in the hope of providing a clear enough picture of what transpired following the accident. At the very least, it shows that the incident inspired a network of related events because it brought different interests into play. But also, my efforts at summarizing the succession of happenings that the news stories

provided is to be regarded as yet another assemblage, drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), the connections of which are not natural but "reterritorialized" in terms of my own agenda. This moment of reflexivity is of course a vital component of any research project especially of the qualitative and interpretive kind that relies on the notion of trustworthiness, sensitivity, and openness to outside assessment as a measure of its contribution to knowledge creation (Shenton 2004). Reflexivity, however, gains a special consequence in affective-discursive projects since the main object of analysis has something to do with feelings, emotions, and the reaction of the senses to *things* that may prove relevant to the research aims. My own reflexivity has been made obvious earlier when I mentioned that I read the data sets from three viewpoints: as a news reader, as an academic, and as Filipino – again, an assemblage that for all its fluidity tends to be a recurring identification that gives me comfort. The value of this reflexive practice in the study with an affective trajectory still has to be made more prominent later but suffice to say for now that this entire search to make sense of the news about the death of a Filipina maid, because she was cleaning the windows, was prompted by the *feeling* that something's awry upon initial encounter with the story.

6.2. Breaking a thousand hearts: Appropriating vulnerability and victimhood

In order to detect the emotive nodal points that potentially install an emotive role with which people can identify, or in Richard and Rudnyckyj's words: establish "a way in which affect serves as a medium in which different types of subjects are formed" (2009: 63), I employ the concept of "salience" as used in the multimodal analysis framework and defined by Kress and van Leeuwen (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; van Leeuwen 2003) as the means by which one element of a composition (i.e. an entire text or discursive event) is made more noticeable than others. The best way to deploy this analytical technique, as I have learned through reading the news items, is to rely on frequency, repetition, or consistency of nomination of specific affective stances or evocation of emotional

states that are attached to particular social actors or situations. Hopefully, these instances prove relevant to the objective of establishing forms of subjectivities that are allotted particular subjects who are spoken of. If, for instance, "joy" is consistently mentioned as an emotional state inhabited by particular persons or groups in different news articles, then I take it as a strong indication of pinning the emotive role of "joy" on the supposed group. The next question is *why* or *what for*?

One of the most noticeable affective disposition gathered from the news articles is occupied by employers who are often represented by employer groups as mentioned above and mostly given voice by the chairwoman of Employers of Domestic Helpers Association Betty Yung Ma Shanyee or Support Group for Hong Kong Employers with Foreign Domestic Helpers convenor Joan Tsui Hiutung. Although their names were nominated the most among other employer organizations and their representatives (e.g. employment agencies), giving their opinions space in the news reports was most likely the means of the newspapers to represent the employer side of the issue. What is most striking is how the feeling of fear, disposition of worry, and state of concern are attached to the employers and employer groups making these emotive roles resonant whenever they are addressed. The following excerpts from the news reports demonstrate this point:

1. "The SAR's immigration and labor departments have not taken their stance yet," Liu said. "Employers should not worry too much at this stage." (TS October 13)
2. However, she is concerned this will set a precedent, with more conditions to come and more countries doing the same. (TS October 31)
3. Employers of Domestic Helpers Association chairwoman Betty Yung Ma Shanyee said she feared that employers would have to bear criminal liability if their helpers fell to their death while they were under their supervision. (SCMP October 30)
4. The move sparked uproar among employers, who protested

against the lack of consultation. There were also fears there may be bans on other chores. (TS October 31)

5. However, she (Joan Tsui Hiutung) expressed worries on the insurance arrangements. (TS November 15)
6. Speaking on local radio this week, Support Group for Hong Kong Employers with Foreign Domestic Helpers convenor Joan Tsui Hiutung said the ban could serve as an excuse for domestic helpers to leave their job. (SCMP November 19)

Although most of these samples use actual emotion words to convey the affective state of the employers (e.g. worry, concern, fear), there are also instances when instead of an actual emotion-related term, an entire situation is described to signal the said emotional state, such as shown in Excerpt 6. While I am highlighting at this point particular emotions repeatedly mentioned alongside the mention of employers, I do not mean to say that these are the only affective space they occupy. The recounting of events above presents their "pushy" side when they apparently "force" maids to clean the windows. In other cases, a different word is used to convey the same behavior, as shown by this extract:

... the two governments had agreed that "as a matter of principle" employers should not compel their workers to clean the outside of windows if the environment was "unsafe." (SCMP October 17)

The existence of the presumption that employers are (capable of) forcing their foreign helpers to engage in "unsafe" domestic tasks such as cleaning the exterior part of windows, even when they are located above ground, is a good cause for performing the affective position of vulnerability. By "affect of vulnerability," I pertain to the moments when unpleasant emotions caused by outside forces are articulated in order to embody susceptibility thus the need for special attention or care. Employers being abusive or unjust are common enough narratives in the case of foreign domestic helpers not only in Hong Kong but in other receiving countries as well. The vulnerable role as appropriated by the employer groups, at least

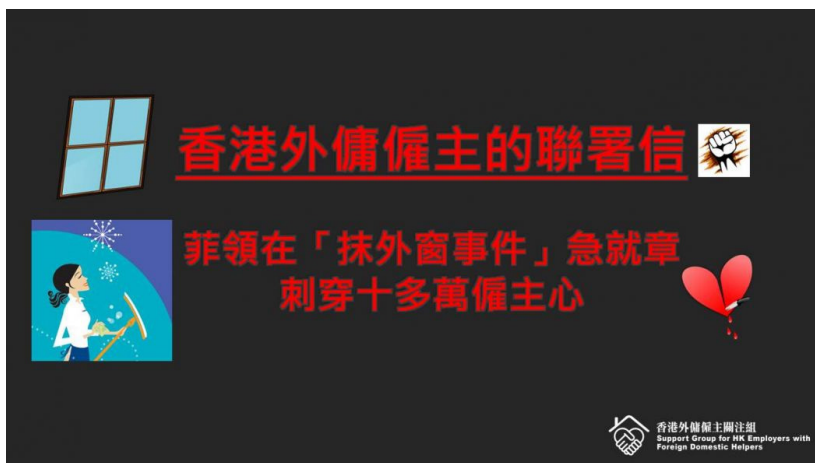
based on its articulation in the news write-ups, deflects the attribution of an expected role in the employer-employee relationship conveniently provided by particular dominant narratives. Taking on the underdog persona in situations where power disparities are clearly in place guarantees agreeability and sympathy, or at least a better chance at getting on the good side of a potential public. The articulation of fear, worry, concern, and anxiety are components that cement the emotive role of vulnerability, which potentially creates the proper response of care, support, and protection from others. This affective practice is probably most pronounced in the online campaign the Support Group for Hong Kong Employers with Foreign Domestic Helpers launched in response to the proposed ban on window-cleaning by foreign maids.

As reported by the HKFP on October 20, the campaign was a result of a "crushing" emotion endured by the employers at the turn of events: *'The Philippines Consulate General's hasty decision on the 'window cleaning ban' broke the hearts of hundreds of thousands of employers,' the petition said* (Leung 2016). The highly emotional state is actually introduced in the headline "'Heartbroken': Domestic worker employer group decries window cleaning ban," clearly demonstrating an affective-discursive practice that aims to enact a particular position from which to conduct or elicit some action from others. In fact, the HKFP reported that the petitioners had several demands, a couple of which is to review the unilateral ban on window-cleaning and "monitor the quality of domestic workers" (Leung 2016).

Although the use of "broke the hearts" purportedly suffered by "hundreds of thousands of employers" is daring in its attempt to shift the issue from the safety and security of foreign helpers in performing their duties to the worries and concerns of employers of foreign domestic helpers about their own interest and welfare, a visual analog (see Figure 1) of such sentiments makes for a more powerful impact and from an analytic point of view, provides a clearer emotive agenda the campaign wishes to make and identifies the audience the petitioners attempt to speak to.

As to the question of audience, it is easy to realize that by

using Chinese as the medium of expression, the visual campaign's target is specific, if limited. Judging by this image alone, it is safe to say that the employers' group is speaking to the local Chinese-speaking Hong Kong public—other local employers included—by virtue of this code choice and the locality of the incidents involved. It could also be argued that the employers the petitioners represent do not include foreign (non-Hong Kong local) residents who also employ foreign domestic helpers. Naturally, non-Chinese speaking foreign employers of foreign helpers are not the audience the petitioners seek. If not for the caption supplied by HKFP, the statement on the image will not have made sense outside the Chinese-speaking world. I hazard to claim then that the visual campaign in Figure 1 desires to speak to a local Chinese Hong Kong audience and the local employers of domestic help possibly to garner support for the cause they promote. What this could also imply is that the Support Group imagines the local employers as the real target of the ban on window-cleaning of employed helpers. In this case, the affect of vulnerability is further emphasized by donning the victim role.



<Fig. 1> Image for the online campaign by the Support Group for HK Employers with Foreign Domestic Helpers as used in the HKFP news article. Original image in full color. (<https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/10/20/heartbroken-domestic-worker-employer-group-decries-window-cleaning-ban/>)

"The victim stance is a powerful one" as the person taking on such a position tends to be seen as "morally right, neither responsible nor accountable, and forever entitled to sympathy" (Zur 2008: 17). Activating the "broken heart" status indicates this appropriation of the victim stance by the employers' group. A few other multimodal details correspond with this claim demonstrating further how design choices is seen to deliver a potential affective register, that is, a sensual experience, in the audience. For instance, the image of the red heart being sliced in half with a knife on the right side of the composition somewhat repeats the "broken heart" idiom. This time, however, the pain supposedly brought on by a received offense is denoted more graphically by the act of slicing (there must be a supposed perpetrator) naturally causing the heart to bleed. The closed fist at the right end of the first line, on the other hand, is a clear deployment of the conventional symbol for struggle or crusade propelling the message that the employer group is fighting for a worthy cause. It is also imperative to note that allocating this militant identity to the group is an attempt to arrogate upon themselves the role easily bestowed on migrant workers in events that throw into relief rights and welfare issues, in effect granting them an empowered position in contrast to the low status they experience structurally and interpersonally. By the same token, the color choice of red characters over a black background confirms the impassioned plea. Through high color contrast coupled with the conventionally attributed connotations of red (passion) and black (tragedy), the entire image "loudly" expresses the feelings of pain, misery, and perhaps, indignation. The affect of being pained or scorned is, thus, a performance of moral evaluation (van Leeuwen 2008) where matters of "good" and "bad" need to be resolved through perhaps some form of recompense.

In contrast, the image of a woman on the left, appearing to hold a cleaning implement while also managing to keep a smile on her face is strategically placed below an image of a window. Where these details are trying to take the reader should not be hard to explain. The image of the window indexes the incident that inspired the series of events. It is not farfetched to say that this representation of domestic helpers being "happy," or at least

content, is a discursive counterpoint to the alleged hardship and distress they endure in fulfillment of their employment duties, including the risk of falling off a building when cleaning windows. While the norm is that foreign maids are given a subclass treatment in many host nations, this visual aid aims to dampen such an observation. Just as all the other elements in the composite image work toward allocating the emotive role of victimhood to the employers, I would argue that it is at the same time dissipating the dominant notion of domestic helpers being underserved, which proves especially relevant in the case of Hong Kong. The window placed above the image of the helper's head is a "snide remark" at the uproar created by recent incidents of maids falling to their deaths. Contentment or joy as an emotional state is a role assigned to the helpers. The message seems to be a visual reiteration of the employer groups' claims that employee safety is their priority, as evidenced by this excerpt:

Betty Yung Ma Shanyee, chairwoman of the Employers of Domestic Helpers Association, said she believed employers in the city would be happy to provide such safety measures mentioned in the discussions between the two governments, and that therefore a ban was unnecessary. (SCMP October 17)

Even as the employers suffer the pain and heartbreak delivered by the "selfish" act of the Philippine consulate or its proxies, so the campaign claims, they still manage to deliver joy in their helpers' faces by being concerned for the latter's safety. In a moment of magnanimity, I could probably view the campaign as a critique of the automatic assignment of the "antagonist role" to the employers in sensitive cases of worker abuse and suffering. By claiming the emotive role of the victim, the employers are capable of assuming the position of sufferance as the conduct of a "proper" employer: enduring hardship while fighting for a good cause; upholding what is right even when undergoing emotional distress.

The dramaturgy is provocative but ultimately inimical. First, by turning the tables on efforts that give currency to worker safety, the "real" victims—the domestic helpers—who are relegated to

marginalized positions on a daily basis fail to achieve larger structural change to better their status and are perhaps denied more fulfilling interpersonal relationships with their employers on a daily basis. This second point leads to the other danger that possibly comes out of employers taking on the victim role in this particular context—the continued antagonism between foreign domestic helpers and their employers. Wanning Sun (2009) is able to paint a disheartening picture of employer-domestic helper relationship in China, which is likely to also be the case in Hong Kong and other contexts. The employer-helper connection is defined by "a paradox of intimacy and distance," Sun claims, as "many employers display little interest in their maid as a person" despite having close proximity, "and often behave as if she were invisible" (Sun 2009: 14). The image of an uncaring or indifferent employer is hard to counter when campaigns such as that launched by the Support Group for HK Employers with Foreign Domestic Helpers espouse a claim to vulnerability and victimhood instead of, for instance, performing the role of supportive or just employer. It will be beneficial for all parties to see depictions of employers in mainstream media, such as the news reports covering the window-cleaning incident, that run counter to an antagonist position.

The reaction from the migrant workers' groups that could be gathered from the HKFP write-up on "heartbroken" employers proves relevant at this point. Eman Villanueva of the Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body asserted that instead of making counter demands, the employer group "should think of ways for workers to have enough rest, to have proper pay, to have proper treatment in order to increase productivity.' (Leung 2016). In addition, Villanueva claimed, "Many employers in Hong Kong don't share the same beliefs as this support group" (ibid). Unfortunately, at least based on the news samples in this paper, these "differently" positioned employers were not heard.

VII. Coda/reflection/confession: It would be funny if it were not too tragic or does the nameless lifeless have no right to feel?

In demonstrating how the affect of vulnerability and victimhood were appropriated by the employers/employer groups as the issue of foreign domestic helper safety and welfare unfolded, I hope to have shown how the affective-discursive channel of online news potentially enact an "emotive role" that those who are talked to and talked about can occupy. Further, I endeavored to illustrate how an analysis of affective-discursive practice is capable of bringing to light the construction of subjects and subjectivities by articulating certain emotion-focused dispositions as "affective practice" or more particularly "routine that social actors can drop into" (Wetherell et al. 2015: 58).

Even with these assertions, however, I do not claim determinacy to affective subject positions or emotive roles, far from it. In addressing the charge of determinism, Wetherell explains that "affective practices are pervasive but with cultural limits," thus, providing space for emergent and necessarily contingent articulations of affective or emotional positions that "typically play out with performative and situated variabilities—a sketch, then, rather than a recipe or rulebook" (2015: 58). Nonetheless, these "sketches" are choices on offer, the potential enactment of which are realized in the first instance by their articulation, considering the many other possible sketches that never get articulated.

As a means to close the paper, I am forwarding a proposal to further develop the affective-discursive project. Since affect, feelings, and emotions form the crux of this academic venture, I reiterate the special and indispensable place of researcher reflexivity in all efforts that claim to *see* issues from an affective lens. In other words, critical consciousness about one's own feelings and emotional involvement in a particular project must be taken as a fundamental researcher disposition. Interpretive projects, such as those in the field of critical discourse studies, put a premium on reflexivity since meaning-construction is always performed from a particular place. I imagine this "positionality" to be doubly tricky to navigate in

affective-discursive work as one would have to contend with an interpretive stance and emotional stance at the same time (or perhaps, they are not really disconnected). This means that the processing of data would also have to be carried out and conveyed by opening oneself up to scrutiny from an academic and affective standpoint.

Hence, my little confession. The first news articles that acquainted me with the incident of a Filipina maid who fell to her death while cleaning the windows of her employer's apartment were from the SCMP. What prompted me to search further was not so much academic interest as personal emotion: I was saddened by the namelessness of the person whose tragic death ignited events that ultimately became bigger than herself. I felt that it was adding insult to injury (pardon the insensitive idiom) that she was not even recognized as a person whenever she was spoken of in the news reports but just a mere 35-year-old female body that fell from a high-rise window. I felt the need for some form of closure by obtaining a name to call the body and, in a sense, give her a certain strand of humanity.

My search led me to the two Philippine online newspapers that, thankfully, gave me what I wanted, and more. The *Abante News Online* report of August 11 was picked up from the *Apple Daily* story dated August 9 and it mentioned "Dulluog" as the name of the helper (Abuel, 2016). Upon checking the latter's website, I confirmed that it was indeed the actual name (translation from Chinese sought). The *Philippine Star* August 28 article did not indicate a source but it gave more information by providing a full name: she was "Renalyn Dullog" (Santos 2016).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is part of a larger research project on identity work of Filipino migrants in Hong Kong and Internet-based media, which received a PhD Incentive Award under the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Development, University of the Philippines Diliman. I am grateful for their support.

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Received: Apr. 17, 2017; Reviewed: May 24, 2017; Accepted: June 8, 2017