

## **“They Have More Money but I Speak Better English!” Transnational Encounters between Filipina Domestics and Taiwanese Employers**

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*This article explores how Taiwanese employers and Filipina migrant domestic workers negotiate their class locations and identities, with an emphasis on the symbolic struggles surrounding linguistic exchanges in transnational contexts. Taiwanese newly rich employers validate their middle-classhood with the consumption of migrant labor service and the investment of English tutoring for their children. Filipinas flee underpaid middle-class occupations in their stagnant national economy to work as foreign maids; they maneuver their linguistic capital, inherited from the American colonizer, to enhance their status vis-à-vis Taiwanese employers. This South-to-South employment relationship illustrates the ambiguous micropolitics of producing class boundaries. The English language serves as a means of symbolic domination and resistance in their daily communication and job negotiation.*

*Key Words: linguistic capital, English, domestic worker, Filipina migrant, Taiwan*

A Hungarian domestic worker, during an interview with Kim England and Bernadette Stiell (1997), described her Canadian employers: “They think you’re as stupid as your English is!” Here, the English language embodies the economic and symbolic domination of First World employers over their Third World maids, a scenario linked to the history of slavery and colonialism. By contrast, a Filipina domestic worker I met in Taipei offered a quite different comment on her Taiwanese employers: “They have more money but I speak better English!”

These two quotes, reflecting diverse modes of employment dynamics, illustrate the multilayered “new-world domestic order” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001): migrant women now depart for domestic jobs not only in postindustrial societies in North America and Europe, but also in the newly industrialized countries (NICs) of Asia and the oil-rich nations of the Middle East. Most Asian host countries have lacked a prevalent practice of domestic servitude in the past. Growing numbers of migrant domestic workers in these countries are serving the middle-class households whose numbers have expanded very recently. Compared to the pairs between white

employers and colored workers, South-to-South domestic employment involves a more concurrent and ambiguous construction of social distinctions along class and national divides.

Taiwan and the Philippines have experienced diverse trajectories in the global economy during the last few decades. The “new middle class” in Taiwan celebrate their recently attained affluence by purchasing imported cars, mobile phones, and domestic service, whereas Filipina migrants flee their underpaid middle-class occupations in their stagnant home economy to work as maids in foreign lands. The latter’s advantage in the global labor market is related to their fluency in English, the tongue of their American colonizer. Given the complexities of this transnational linkage, the encounters between Taiwanese employers and Filipina migrants have thus become an arena of daily struggles for the recognition of economic, cultural, and linguistic capital.

Previous studies have made clear that domestic employment is a critical site for the reproduction of social differences and inequalities (e.g. Rollins 1985; Romero 1992). This research further examines how employers and workers negotiate their class locations and identities, with an emphasis on linguistic exchanges in transnational arenas. Class boundaries in domestic employment are not merely given, but require constant confirmation and construction. They are validated not only by economic disparity but also through symbolic struggle for legitimacy, including domination and resistance in linguistic communication. The migration linkage between Taiwan and the Philippines demonstrates an ambiguous process of class identification situated across multiple national territories and cultural landscapes.

## **Remapping class in transnational arenas**

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, I define social class in terms of “similar positions in social space”—social classes as groupings of individuals sharing similar life chances and dispositions (Bourdieu 1987: 6). He argues that class distinctions are based not only on the distribution of economic capital (wealth, income, property) but are also reproduced through the deployment of cultural capital (education, manners, taste), social capital (acquaintances, networks), and symbolic capital (legitimation). Class boundaries are the sites of conflicts that are not fixed but take shape only in the process of symbolic struggles—different social groups maneuver symbolic power to impose their visions of social divisions as legitimate (Bourdieu 1984).

Bourdieu’s class theory has been criticized for a “holistic assumption about an objective social space” (Hall 1992: 279) and a structuralist analysis “that was conceived in a relatively homogeneous and static fashion” (Ong 1999: 89). Echoing these criticisms, my study attempts to elaborate on Bourdieu’s class theory by highlighting the constitution and negotiation of class boundaries in transnational arenas. Along with recent scholars who have explored identity formation in

“transnational social fields” (Basch et al. 1994), I call for a transnational framework to analyze capital accumulation and class identification<sup>1</sup> beyond territorial constraints. Capitalists and professionals possess multiple passports, pursue overseas degrees, and accumulate their assets on a global scale. With much less social privilege, migrant workers seek jobs in foreign lands and sustain social ties back home. When these “transmigrants”<sup>2</sup> extend their life horizons beyond one national territory, they often experience contradictory class locations and conflicting identities.

In her study of Hong Kong emigrants in California, Aihwa Ong (1999) found that these affluent Chinese deliberately convert their economic capital into the acquisition of cultural capital (British education, command of English, and cultural tastes) and “flexible citizenship” (possessing multiple nationalities) to seek social recognition in their new country. Despite navigating multiple political arenas and global trade, these transmigrations are still subject to the discourse of juridical citizenship and the scheme of racial stratification in their new country. Their strategy of “flexible cultural accumulation” faces structural limits when these affluent Chinese are still categorized as “racially inferior others” in the United States.

In a similar yet distinct way, lower-order migrants experience contradictory class identities in their overseas journeys. Rhacel Parrenas (2001), in her study of Filipina domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles, calls this situation “contradictory class mobility.” Despite substantial financial gains, migrant workers have to cope with downward social mobility when working overseas in stigmatized occupations. I further argue that these migrants not only slide along contradictory paths in home and host countries, they are also subject to conflicting class identities. They identify themselves as middle class based on their college education and previous occupations, but they are now employed in demeaning, deskilled jobs and treated as ethnic others in foreign countries.

Transmigrants not only travel through multiple frameworks of class and racial stratification, but they often transgress linguistic barriers. The association between language and class has recently received much attention among scholars. Bourdieu (1991) illustrates “the economy of linguistic exchanges,” by which he means that every linguistic utterance is a conjuncture between *the linguistic habitus* (the expressive interest to say certain things and the linguistic capacity to generate grammatically correct discourses and socially appropriate usages) and *the linguistic field* (a system of specific sanctions and censorship that produce and reproduce linguistic legitimacy). Linguistic capital, like other forms of cultural capital, can exist in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting disposition through a process of education and cultivation, and in the *institutionalized* state, such as when certain languages are accorded recognition or dominant use by authorities (Bourdieu 1986).<sup>3</sup>

Abiodun Goke-Pariola (2000) applies Bourdieu’s thesis to discuss the linguistic politics in colonial and independent Nigeria. The English language was a

principal tool in the imposition of British colonial rule on Nigeria, including an English-privileged school curriculum. Colonial administrators normally would speak only to the local people with the aid of an interpreter; hence, the competence of speaking “white man’s language” (linguistic habitus) becomes a necessary certification for locals to be included into the dominant political and economic fields. After independence, the elite class in Nigeria imposed a two-tier standard language system: English and three designated “national languages” chosen from a variety of indigenous languages. Postcolonial Nigeria is repeating a familiar scenario: the elite class appropriates language as a critical means of symbolic power, which facilitates the centralization of political power and legitimizes class/ethnic stratification in the society.

In the postcolonial twentieth century, English has become the most powerful global language due to the political and economic hegemony of the United States (Crystal 1997). It is the primary medium of communication in most international political, business, and academic meetings. Through the establishment of universal exams such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and teaching certificates such as Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL), English skills become an objective resource whose possession is legitimated and supported by institutional authorities.<sup>4</sup> The recent expansion of the Internet has consolidated the leading status of the English language in the cyber world, across national borders.

This study does not focus on the institutionalization of the global hegemony of the English language. Instead, I look at how subordinate players in the international linguistic field, including postcolonial Filipina migrants and newly rich Taiwanese, may enhance their class interests through the appropriation of English skills. The capacity for speaking “good English,” i.e., correct grammar and proper accent, has become a cultural privilege that can be converted into competitive advantages and monetary values in the global market. Besides, the accreditation of linguistic capital (e.g., which language is more valuable and which accent is more authentic) constitutes a site of symbolic struggle in institutional arenas as well as in daily linguistic exchanges.

To explore class identification and linguistic struggle in transnational domestic employment, this article asks the following questions: How do Taiwanese employers and Filipina migrant domestic workers accumulate and convert different kinds of capital to improve their life chances in transnational contexts? How do they identify and negotiate their class locations and in relation to whom do they establish such boundaries? How does English, a privileged linguistic capital on a global scale, become a means of symbolic domination and resistance in their transnational encounters?

## **Taiwan vs. the Philippines**

Rapid industrialization in the East Asian economies has produced a change in these

countries from net emigration to net immigration (Skeldon 1992). Contemporary intraregional migration in Asia characterizes a restructuring of the international landscape on a hierarchical basis. While global cities such as New York, London, Tokyo, and Los Angeles function as the apex of the international investment flows (Sassen 1992), lower-order global cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taipei are interwoven as control nodes in the international spatial division of labor (Friedmann 1986). These circumstances have stimulated two kinds of migration flows in East Asia: the first involves professionals, managers, and English instructors from Western core countries; the second includes migrants from Southeast and South Asia, employed in areas such as construction, caretaking, and domestic work (Findlay et al. 1998).

Taiwan's government officially opened the gate for migrant domestic helpers and caretakers in 1992. This policy is viewed as a solution to the growing demands for care for children, the elderly, and ill family members among the expanding nuclear households and aging population. The number of Taiwanese households employing migrant domestic workers has rapidly increased within a decade. Currently, over 120,000 registered migrant domestic workers reside in Taiwan, and women from the Philippines and Indonesia constitute 90% of the population (CLA 2002).

Unlike the governments in Canada and Singapore, which require a minimum income for households hiring migrant domestic workers, Taiwan's government sets employer qualifications solely on the basis of family need (families containing young children, the elderly, or patients). Yet, in practice, this policy still favors those with sufficient economic, linguistic (some proficiency in English), and social (personal networks for application and recruitment) capital.<sup>5</sup> The government survey shows that the majority of Taiwanese employers are middle-class dual-earner households in which either one or two members have a college education or higher (CLA 1999).

The Philippines was once a leading economy in Asia, grounded on its colonial and postcolonial ties with the United States. Yet it has suffered economic depression since the early 1980s and remains burdened by substantial foreign debts and periodic political turmoil. In 1974, the Marcos administration initiated the "labor export policy," which was announced as a "temporary measure" to ease massive unemployment and to bring in foreign currency, but became "permanently temporary" in the following decades (Constable 1997). Today, the Philippines is the biggest labor-exporting country in Asia and is ranked second in the world only after Mexico. Domestic helpers, cleaners, and other service occupations account for half of the female migrant labor force in the Philippines.<sup>6</sup>

The predominant destinations for Filipino migrants have gradually switched from North America and Europe to the Middle East and East Asia. Taiwan is now the fourth major destination for Filipino migrants (11%), only next to Saudi Arabia (33%), Hong-Kong (15%), and Japan (12%).<sup>7</sup> The monthly wage of a migrant worker in Taiwan is New Taiwanese Dollar (NT) \$15,840 (approximately US \$460).

This amount equals only the minimum wage in Taiwan but is about three times the amount of a secretary's wage or twice that of a teacher's salary in the Philippines. The wage gap thus attracts large numbers of middle-class Filipino/as to seek better-paying jobs overseas—in salaried occupations as well as manual positions, including maids and nannies (Pinches 1999).

Filipino migrant workers are known for their adequate education and English proficiency, both legacies of the U.S. colonization. The U.S. established colleges in many parts of the Philippines. The proportion of college graduates, 9% of the total Filipino population, is relatively high compared to other countries of equivalent economic development.<sup>8</sup> The English language was declared to be the basis of all public school instruction in the Philippines in 1901, three years after this archipelago was taken over by the U.S. from Spain. This policy was supported by the colonial belief that “a knowledge of the English language was essential for adoption of the American way of life” (Bresnahan 1979: 65). To this day, the domination of English still prevails in government documents and curriculum materials in the Philippines.<sup>9</sup> Educated people use a hybrid language of Tag-lish (a mixture of Tagalog and English) in their daily conversations. English is still preferred in professions and higher education, while local languages are considered less intellectual and modernized (Sibayan 1991).

The cultural and linguistic heritage of their colonizer ironically became a valuable human resource for Filipino/as to escape economic depression in the postindependence era. As such, they possess a competitive advantage over migrants of other nationalities in the global labor market. For example, Taiwanese factory owners prefer Filipino workers to Thai workers, because the former can read English instructions on imported machines and equipments. Filipino musicians are widely employed in prestigious hotels in major Asian cities, because they can sing English songs well but command a wage much lower than American musicians.

By contrast, Taiwan was never a colony under British or American rule.<sup>10</sup> Although English is a required subject in secondary education, the average Taiwanese does not attain English fluency, even among college graduates. English, however, has been recognized as a valuable source of human capital in the last few decades, parallel with the development of Taiwan's export-dependent economy and inflows of multinational capital. Taiwan's government has recently initiated English courses in elementary schools to improve the quality of English education. President Shiu-Bien Chen once even suggested the possibility of assigning English as the second official language, next to Mandarin Chinese.<sup>11</sup> Public opinions are also pushing the government to lift regulations on the employment of white-collar foreigners in order to meet the growing demand for native English-speaking instructors.<sup>12</sup>

The current generation of Taiwanese parents, who emphasize children's education in line with Confucian beliefs, are eager to invest money to equip their children with English linguistic capital. Upper-class households hire home tutors to

teach their children English; middle-class parents send children to after-school language centers or summer programs. As English has become a vital tool for the Taiwanese middle class to pursue upward mobility in the global economy, hiring a well-educated English-speaking Filipina maid is a double-edged sword—it may validate their recently achieved status, but also may challenge their employer authority.

## Research methods

From August 1998 to July 1999, after residing in the U.S. as an “alien” graduate student for several years, I returned to my home country of Taiwan to study a group of foreign workers—Filipina migrant domestic workers. The primary site for my ethnographic observation is a Filipino migrant community associated with a Catholic church-sponsored nongovernment organization in Taipei (referred to as the pseudonym *Holy Spirit* in this article). All members of this community were aware of my research. In the beginning, I detected subtle messages that signaled their doubt about my presence as a Taiwanese. After a few months of volunteer work, including teaching a Chinese course and assisting in some case counseling on labor disputes, their distrust in me gradually faded in place of friendship and interdependence. I was their linguistic and cultural translator when communicating with taxi drivers or bargaining with street vendors. They were my guides to a variety of migrant activities, such as shopping trips, birthday parties, disco dancing, karaoke singing, picnicking in parks, and lunch at fast-food restaurants.

The other set of data came from in-depth interviews with 42 Taiwanese employers (36 women, 3 men, and 3 married couples) in metropolitan Taipei.<sup>13</sup> I approached these informants through snowball referrals—through the networks of my families, relatives, friends, and acquaintances—but limited each referral to one person in order to avoid sample bias. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 3 hours in length. All the interviews with Taiwanese employers were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. Some interviews with Filipina workers were conducted in public settings filled with noises and interruptions, for which I only took notes. I communicated with all Filipina workers in English; the interviews with Taiwanese employers were conducted in Chinese and translated into English by myself. Readers should keep in mind that most employers actually speak limited or moderate English. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

## Learning to employ<sup>14</sup>

Most Taiwanese employers have no previous experience in hiring a live-in local domestic worker. Only a small proportion of their parents had hired maids or nannies during their childhoods. The expansion of the domestic employer strata, grounded on inter-generational upward mobility, happened in other Asian countries as well. Christine Chin (1998) argues that Malaysian employers use the pur-

chase of migrant domestic service as a marker for their recent achievement of middle-class status. In Singapore, the employment of migrant domestic workers is considered a critical solution to the domestic crisis in the expanding dual-earner middle-class households (Huang and Yeoh 1998).

I draw on Taiwan's case to further explore the constructive nature of class distinction and the emergent formation of employer identity. Two features are emphasized in my portrait of this new generation of Taiwanese domestic employers. First, employers must learn to employ—they gradually comprehend their position as “employer” and internalize class codes during their interactions with migrant domestic workers. Second, Taiwanese employers are not a monolithic group and they learn to employ in different ways. These employers, equipped with different volumes of cultural and linguistic capital, develop various approaches to identify their class positions vis-à-vis the foreign maids.

### *“Our maid has to match our status”*

Mr. Wang, now in his early sixties, grew up in an agricultural family and migrated to Taipei in the 1960s to start a wholesale business. Catching a ride on the booming economy, Mr. Wang established a successful business and achieved a social status distinct from his upbringing. I visited him in his three-story house located in a neighborhood occupied by a mixture of working- and middle-class residents. Although Mr. Wang only has a high school diploma, he is proud that all his children received college degrees. During the interview, he drew an explicit link between his achievement of class mobility and the employment of a foreign maid:

Do you remember what you said when you came in? You said, “Your Filipina maid is pretty.” That's right. Our maid looks classy, not like some others. They look just like a maid. Ours is not. So she's a good match for our family. My children are all college graduates, although not as high as you to study abroad, but all well-educated. Our maid has to match our social status.

Many employers, like Mr. Wang, pay attention to the physical appearance of migrant domestic workers in the recruitment process: dark skin is associated with a “lack of civilization” and “plumpness” is considered to be a sign of “laziness.” Migrant women not only maintain the subsistence of these Taiwanese households, but also serve as a status symbol confirming their employers' financial advancement. Many Filipina migrant workers are keenly aware of this symbolic role. Theresa and her sister, Eliza, respectively worked for two affluent Taiwanese families; they both noticed that their employers would “display” them to friends and visitors:

*Eliza:* You know one thing I notice? They will show us to their friends. Sometimes [when] they have guests coming, they call me. I don't understand what they are saying, but I think they are saying who she is and what she can do.



*Theresa:* When they tried to find a maid, they told me they wanted someone young, tall, white, and beautiful. They are looking for a Miss Philippines!

*Eliza:* But they end up having me! [*laughs*] The first time they saw me, they looked at my eyes, my feet, my ears. They want someone white and beautiful, not from Africa. They asked me if I know how to drive.

*PCL:* They let you drive?

*Theresa:* Yes, they will just ring the maid: “Theresa, I am here at school. Why don’t you pick me up?” It’s a bossy, choosy, social world. That’s why we are here now!

The employment of a live-in domestic worker becomes a facet of “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen 1994) to evidence the pecuniary strength of employers. This luxurious lifestyle is displayed by ceremonial tasks performed by domestic workers, such as answering the door for the employer (who surely has the key) and receiving phone calls (despite the fact that the Filipina speaks no Chinese). A Taiwanese employer described her uncle, also hiring a Filipina maid: “My uncle said he is living like royalty now. Every time we go to his house, he asks the Filipina maid to squeeze fresh juice for us.” The service of making fresh juice distinguishes the employer from “ordinary” people who can only purchase the mass product of bottled juice.

It should be remembered that the status attribution of Taiwanese employers is not necessarily an intentional process. Only a few employers deliberately purchase domestic services to enhance their social status. The majority of the employers, especially those in dual-income households, seek domestic employment in need—to solve the problem of child care and/or to relieve the burden of housework. Yet, as their experience of domestic employment grows, these employers gradually acquire and internalize class dispositions, such as getting used to condescending verbal expressions and distant body language toward their maids.<sup>15</sup>

Employers often acquire a sense of superiority in facing the deferential performance of the workers. For example, Mr. Yu went to Manila with his employment agency to interview candidates for his children’s nanny. He described the situation: “There were hundreds of people over there waiting for me. When I walked in, everyone said to me, ‘Good morning, sir. Good morning, sir.’ Wow, I felt really puffed up with pride and vanity.” Employers also comprehend their class positioning by learning the image of themselves in the eyes of other Taiwanese. When I asked my informants how their friends or acquaintances responded to the fact that they hired a Filipina maid in the house, many employers had experiences similar to Pei-Chi’s:

One day, my son’s teacher called us and the maid answered the phone. The teacher was freaked out and hung up when she heard someone speaking English. The next day she said to my son, “Is your family very rich? How come you have a Filipina maid?” They made a big deal out of this. Well, this is how people think.

This quote shows that the English proficiency of Filipina domestic workers is a major constituent in the conspicuous consumption of migrant domestic service. Such linguistic capability also provides substantial benefits for some Taiwanese employers. One Sunday, I was hanging out in a coffee shop located in a scenic foothill of the Taipei city. Several children were playing in the yards in the company of their Filipina or Indonesian nannies, while the parents were sitting inside enjoying their meals or drinks. Next to my table sat a couple: the husband seemed in his mid-thirties and the wife, holding a toddler on her lap, looked ten years younger. I overheard their conversation and jotted it down on my napkin:

*Husband:* Look, those are all foreign workers, watching the kids.

*Wife:* I am thinking we can also hire a Filipina maid, so our child can speak English.

*Husband:* But people say that children brought up by Filipinas would become idiots.

Kids in Hong Kong are now like that. They are idiots, too dependent.

*Wife:* Their job is only to attend the kids, to watch their safety, that kind of thing.

Their wage is only 15,000 NT [approximately US \$435] a month! It's not that we can't afford. And she can help me with housework. Then I can take an English course on Saturday. I would have time to do other things. . . .

*Husband:* Well, we'll think about this later.

This couple enjoyed a stable financial situation (owning a car and some leisure time) but probably lack advanced education and cultural "taste" (my guess from the way they talked and dressed). Their conversation, like those of many other couples I interviewed, revealed a gender battle about the division and transfer of household labor. What attracted my attention in particular was how the wife rationalized the employment of a Filipina maid. First, she emphasized the extra benefit of teaching the child English, leading to the potential of upward mobility for the next generation. Second, the hired help would release her from the domestic burden and allow her to take an English course, an investment of human or cultural capital for the current generation.

Scholars have pointed out that the expanding middle class in Taiwan in the 1980s is mainly composed of two social groups: the owners of small- and medium-sized business and the intellectuals and professionals (Chu 1996). This categorization also explains the diversity among Taiwanese domestic employers. The former, such as Mr. Wang, accumulate sufficient economic capital, but lack advanced education; they send children to study abroad and hire foreign maids at home to mark their upgraded status. Later I will demonstrate how these employers encounter difficulty in claiming their authority over those Filipina workers who have higher educations and English skills. The other category of Taiwanese employers includes better educated professionals. They mark their middle-class identity by distinguishing themselves and other employers who fail to carry "appropriate" cultural tastes and linguistic habitus.

*"We are educated intellectuals. We don't treat her like a servant."*

Not all Taiwanese employers enjoy an overt display of their privileged social status. A substantial proportion of them, mostly the middle class of younger generations, tend to downplay social distance between themselves and their domestic workers. They feel uncomfortable, uneasy, or even guilty about status hierarchies inherent in domestic employment. Wen-Jen is a college professor and a mother of two in her late 30s. Our interview was conducted in her office, a room with simple decoration just like her casual dress code. In her view, the deferential verbal and body languages of the Filipina domestic worker bring her no desired status markers, but psychological burdens:

It's the maid herself who acts like that. I never request it. Actually it's more difficult for me to get along with her when she's acting like that, like she wants to SERVE you. Many things, I just want to do them myself. . . . [Like what?] For example, when I am cooking, to move the food in the pan to a plate, this is no big deal. But she thinks that's something she should do, if you don't let her do it, she becomes really nervous. Or when we are talking, she would say, "Your family is rich, mine is poor, I envy you," etc.

Without being explicitly requested, Wen-Jen's worker acts like a servant. Based on my interviews with other Filipina workers, they would rather "overperform" deference than run the risk of crossing a boundary. Some domestic workers even strategically underline the enormous differences between their lifestyles and those of their employers, so the employers may cut some favors for them out of class guilt (Ozyegin 2001: 145–146). Wen-Jen does not favor the "upstairs, downstairs" model of segregating masters and servants. Similar situations are reported by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001: 188) about the employment style among contemporary American middle-class employers. Although class boundaries continue to underlie the employment relationship, these employers would rather not constantly acknowledge their existence or make the markers explicit.

When employers try to downplay status hierarchies in domestic employment, they are, intentionally or unintentionally, validating their middle-class identity in contrast to other class groups. Middle-class employers underscore their *achieved* status in opposition to the heritage-based prestige of upper-class families. They describe their employment relationship as an equal-footing business arrangement in contrast to the feudal tradition of domestic servitude. Hsiao-Wei is a college-educated travel agent in her early forties. During interviews, she repeatedly emphasized her moderate household income and respectful attitude toward her Filipina worker:

Today is no longer the age of authoritarianism. We are just a middle-class family. We hire a Filipina maid only because of need. So we don't treat her like a servant. We told the children that you have to say "thank you" whenever you ask her to do some-

thing. We know it's an issue of human rights. We respect that.

Employers like Hsiao-Li underscore their belief in democracy and meritocracy in opposition to authoritarianism and aristocracy. The expanding middle class in Taiwan has been said to be one of the driving forces in the process of political democratization in the 1980s (Hsiao 1989). The cohort of Taiwanese between the ages of 30 and 45, the primary population who hire migrant domestic workers (CLA 1999), went through their youth during Taiwan's dramatic political transition marked by the termination of martial law in 1987. Moral values such as democracy, liberalism, and self-reliance constitute the core of middle-class identity for this generation of Taiwanese. Some employers are worried that their children may become spoiled or snobbish under the care of migrant domestic workers. One of them is Wan-Ru, a government employee and a mother of two in her late thirties:

The maid goes to school to pick up my son every day. You know the way kids talk to each other, he said my Filipina maid this and that. The teacher told him, don't say "Filipina maid," say "nanny." [*How did these kids talk about the Filipina maid?*] He [the son] said [to other kids] that we have a Filipina maid at home, and your family doesn't. My Filipina maid can do this and that for me . . . Children compare everything nowadays. They compare who has better toys, whose family is richer. It's really bad.

Jack and his wife are both managers in international corporations and in their early forties. They hire two Filipina workers to take care of his ill father and their young children. During the interview, Jack was not shy at all to brag about his achievement distinct from his modest upbringing (his father retired from the army). As a first-generation domestic employer, Jack expressed concern that his family might be destroying the moral principle of self-dependency:

When people hear we have two Filipina maids at home, they all envy us a lot. There is nothing to envy. I don't encourage people to hire a Filipina maid. You only do so when there is a need in your family. Employers become lazy, like getting addicted to drugs. It's better to do it yourself. Be self-reliant.

Well-educated employers who hold managerial and professional positions tend to underscore the distinction between themselves and lower-middle-class employers. Advanced education and English skills are said to be the primary markers that impact their distinct management methods or interactive styles. Some employers consider English fluency to be a necessity for establishing the employers' authority. For instance, Mr. Yang, a business manager in his late thirties, contrasted himself with his uncle in the provinces:

My uncle's family also hires a Filipina. Nobody in the family speaks English, so they

can barely ask her to do anything. She only plays with the kid every day. My aunt even has to cook for her! She offers little help but they have to serve her. My uncle said she's a guest, so they feel embarrassed to ask her to do this and that. That's why I said the rural people do not fit that well with Filipina maids, because they cannot communicate and cannot place demands on the maid.

According to Mr. Yang, "rural" employers lack the linguistic skills to communicate with and, more specifically, to "place demands on" their foreign maids. Because these employers are unable to establish proper authority, the maid is not placed in an "appropriate" position but becomes a "guest." Other employers regard their English proficiency as a precondition of exercising efficient management on their migrant domestic workers. For example, Pei-Chi, in her mid-forties, is the owner of a family-run computer business. She hires a Filipina maid because she frequently goes on overseas business trips. Sitting in her spacious office, she explained to me the difference between *her kind* of employers and others:

Most of my friends have positive employment experiences, probably because most of us work in the computer industry and we all know how to speak English. Those who have negative experiences are less educated people. [*Why is there such a difference?*] Because they don't know how to speak English and they don't know how to establish rules! Not like us. We set up clear rules and nothing would go wrong. So I say, it's the fault of the employers.

Pei-Chi typed up a list that details all the chores requested to be done by her worker with specified schedules of daily, weekly, and monthly routines. As long as these bureaucratic rules are followed, Pei-Chi makes no further requests on her maid and avoids interference in the maid's life. She and other professional employers like to underscore their respect of the human rights of their migrant domestics as a legacy of their advanced education. As Yi-Ling, a 32-year-old journalist, described: "We are educated intellectuals. Of course we don't want to treat them like master and servant. We always eat together, interacting on the same level. . . . Those abuse cases in the newspaper, I think their employers are mostly less educated."

Previous experiences of living or studying abroad are quoted by a few employers as evidence for their English fluency and liberal attitude. Several employers described themselves like this: "Many of my friends have been studying in the U.S. We are all pretty liberal intellectuals." Pursuing a foreign graduate degree, mostly in the U.S. and recently in England, Canada, and Australia, is a common path of socialization for Taiwanese elites. A famous slogan in the 1970s and 1980s said, "Come, come, come to NTU, go, go, go to the USA." NTU (National Taiwan University) is the top university in Taiwan and many of its graduates go abroad to pursue further studies. The U.S. has always been the primary destination for Taiwanese students, because of their familiarity with the English language and American popular culture. The turbulence of Taiwan's international relations in the 1970s

motivated many overseas Taiwanese students to seek immigration to the U.S.<sup>16</sup> Those who returned became a major force of political dissidents in the 1980s; their overseas academic achievements won them high positions in academic, business, and political spheres (Chu 1996).

The number of Taiwanese students studying abroad continued to rise in the 1990s. About three percent of college graduates pursued overseas education in 1997.<sup>17</sup> The majority now return to Taiwan after graduation for the rich employment opportunities in the local economy. The booming high-tech industry in Taiwan has also attracted a substantial number of professionals who relocated from the Silicon Valley. These U.S.-trained professionals now reproduce an American lifestyle in contemporary Taiwan, based on the influx of goods and information across borders. They are so-called “global citizens” or “cosmopolitans” who are capable of communicating in English and maintaining transnational ties in their business and personal lives.

In sum, the identification of class membership is an ongoing process of constructing “us” and “them.” Middle-class employers draw social boundaries not (only) to highlight their difference from their foreign maids—a distinction perhaps transparent enough for them—but to distinguish themselves from “people above” and “people below” (Lamont 2000). They establish their middle-classhood with local as well as global references, to identify with the imagined community of cosmopolitans who share similar linguistic habitus and cultural tastes in a global village.

## Conflicting class identities

When I asked Filipina migrant domestic workers about their previous occupations, most of them would contrast now and then with a deep sigh or in a self-mocking tone:

A friend of mine worked in the government office, but you know what she’s doing now [in Taiwan]? She’s cleaning chicken every day! I always say I was a manager in the Philippines, and I am a manager in the house now! [Vanessa, previously a supervisor of a chain bookstore]

My friends in the Philippines were making fun of me. They said my instruments before were pen and papers, and my instruments now are knife, blender, and cutting board! [Jorita, previously a high school teacher]

I was a *maybahay* [Tagalog: housewife]! I played *mah-jong* every day, doing nothing! [Priscila, previously a housewife whose husband was a doctor, now separated]

You know how I feel? Last time I had a babysitter. Now I am the babysitter! [Rosemary, previously a secretary]

Most Filipina migrant domestic workers in Taiwan have no previous experience working as domestics in the Philippines. A significant proportion of them possess high levels of education or professional occupations in their home country. According to a survey conducted by the Taiwanese government, 50% of the migrant workers (of all nationalities) in Taiwan received a high school education, 40% had attended college, and 2% even held a graduate degree (CLA 1999). Among the informants in this study (all Filipina migrants), one-third were high school graduates, another one-third had a college degree, and the rest had received some college education.

When compared with the general report of Filipina overseas domestic workers (employed in all host countries),<sup>18</sup> the demographic profile of Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan indicates a higher proportion of older, married, college-graduate women who were employed in middle-class occupations in the Philippines. This bias results from a two-way selection process. Most Taiwanese employers prefer married workers with childcare experience and favor college graduates who are considered more “civilized” and capable of teaching their children English. In addition, the relatively high wages paid to migrant workers in Taiwan (compared to other Asian host countries) attracts applicants with more economic, human (education), and social capital (personal networks for referrals and loans).

Although working overseas brings about a substantial financial improvement for migrants, the job of domestic work is stigmatized as one requiring few skills and little education (Parrenas 2001). To cope with such contradictory positions, Filipina migrant workers have to bracket their previous background and “act like a maid.” Several informants offered comments about their fellows similar to these:

Since they work as a maid, they must act as a maid. If they think about how they used to work in the bank, they cannot do a good job. They feel down; then they feel conflict.

Since you already come here, you shouldn't talk about if you have a car, you have a maid in the Philippines. If you have everything in the Philippines, why do you come here? Keep quiet. Now you are here, you need to follow the rules here. You are a domestic helper; you have to do everything. You cannot complain you don't know how to do this, how to do that.

The stigma of domestic work and the indignity of downward mobility are exacerbated by a decline of social status in host countries where migrant workers are treated as inferior nationals. The uneven development of the world system is translated into unequal micro-dynamics in the interactions between Taiwanese employers and Filipina maids. Many Filipina migrants expressed feelings of deprivation and humiliation in their overseas experiences:

*Trina:* Most Filipinas didn't have the experiences before. We were not maids in the Philippines. Some of us didn't even do housework!

*Maya*: You know the case in Kaoshong<sup>19</sup>? The Filipina got abused? She was a teacher in the Philippines! Her employer must think she is stupid. . . .

*Trina*: Difficult [at work] is ok, but they [employers] don't respect you.

*Maya*: They look down at us. Because our country is poor, we become very small.

Filipina domestic workers are not the only group of migrant workers who experience conflicting class identities. According to Romero (1992) and Salzinger (1991), Latina immigrant domestic workers in California, many of whom held middle-class occupations at home, have upgraded this “dirty work” by establishing an informal contract specifying tasks and creating a business-like environment. Such a scenario, however, does not happen to Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan. It is mainly because of the policy context and work organization encountered by migrant contract workers in Taiwan. The prohibition from transferring employers and the live-in condition constrain their ability to bargain with employers or to rationalize their working conditions.

Unable to develop a collective identity as professional housekeepers, Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan develop more individualized strategies to cope with reality. They frame their jobs in host country as a temporary passage that would lead them to upward mobility in the future. As to the conflicting class identities in the present, many Filipina migrants seek reconciliation through disassociating themselves from the general category of “maid”—by reference to migrant domestics of other nationalities and local domestic workers in the Philippines.

Filipinas and Indonesians, the two major groups of migrant domestic workers in Taiwan, are associated with distinct stereotypes by Taiwanese employers and employment agencies. Filipina workers have received a reputation in Taiwan for being “smart but unruly” in contrast to the “stupid but obedient” Indonesian domestic workers. Filipina domestic workers also draw a hierarchical line to distinguish themselves and their Indonesian competitors.<sup>20</sup> They establish their capability and reliability by embracing the negative image of Indonesian workers. They describe “those Indonesians” as being uneducated, flirty, short of English skills, stealing employers’ belongings, and being too backward to handle housework in a modern household.

In addition, Filipina migrants underscore their superior status from local domestic workers, many of whom are hired by overseas migrants to take care of their families left behind in the Philippines (Lan 2003; Parrenas 2001). For instance, Christina is a college graduate and a former teacher. She hired a live-in domestic to take care of her children while she was working in Taiwan. Despite holding a similar occupation, Christina drew a clear distinction between herself and her maid: “My sister was laughing, ‘You have a maid in the Philippines, but you are a maid in Taiwan!’ I said it’s different. They are undereducated. Not everyone can work abroad. You have to be very serious, very determined.”

Local domestic helpers are the women who possess less economic and cultural capital; they are neither sufficiently qualified nor can they afford the costs of seek-



ing employment outside the Philippines. The average wage of a live-in helper or nanny in major cities is about Philippine peso (Php) 1,500–2,000 (US \$30–40 in 2002) per month. The wage rate is even lower in the provinces. In 1999, I met a Filipina domestic worker in the Philippines whose wage was a meager Php 500 (US \$17 in 1999) per month. When I asked her if she ever thought of working abroad, she answered me in broken English: “Me? No money!” By contrast, English proficiency is a crucial linguistic capital quipped by Filipina overseas domestic workers; it also mediates their interactive relationship with Taiwanese employers. The next three sections approach this topic from three dimensions: work-related linguistic exchanges, ridicule and jokes during backstage activities on Sundays, and resistance and domination on the work front.

### **A maid or an English tutor?**

Several Taiwanese employers and Filipina workers reported difficulties in communicating with the other in English. This kind of complaint is especially common among employers with a high school education or lower. They have to rely on the assistance of a third party, such as brokers, adult children, or even young children who are enrolled in English classes. Some use an electronic dictionary to mediate their communication with workers.<sup>21</sup> When I asked Judy if her employers, a family that runs a small apparel business, speak English, she answered:

No, only the young granddaughter. She studies in Canada. But she is not in Taiwan now. If I have a problem, I write it down on a letter, my employer brings the letter to the factory. The secretary there can speak a little English. It’s very complicated. Sometimes I want to complain [about] something, they just say I am sorry, I don’t understand.

Language barriers made it difficult for Judy to negotiate terms and conditions with her employers. For the same reason, some employers face obstacles in making requests in English to the migrant domestic workers. Fang-Pin, a high school graduate who runs an electronic appliances store, made a complaint in this aspect:

Local workers—you ask them; they don’t necessarily listen to you. Foreign workers—you ask them; they don’t necessarily understand you. She [the foreign worker] would ask you, “Ma’am, what were you saying?” She was confused and so were you [laughs]. Every day you are worried about how to express your request [in English]! Sometimes I think—forget it. I’ll just do it myself.

Another example is Shu-Hwa, a high school graduate and a shoe-store owner. Although she tries to “catch on the trendy flow” (in her own words) by enrolling in her forties in an English course, she still feels frustrated in communicating with her Filipina worker, a situation that seriously obstructs her exercise of employer authority:

Sometimes she [the maid] did something wrong and I would want to scold her. But I didn't know how to scold her in English! Then I got even angrier! I had to wait until my English class to ask my teacher how to say what I wanted to say.

Some Filipina domestic workers consider language barriers beneficial because their employers are thus unable to enforce many work regulations: "It's good if your employer doesn't know much English, then they cannot ask you to do much work." There are also Filipina workers who manipulate English as means of resisting employers' demands. For example, Mercy, who worked in Singapore for five years and then came to Taiwan to be employed by a family who own a small factory:

Last time my employer told me to clean the factory office, I said, "What?" Then I kept mopping the floor and pretended not hearing anything. Then he didn't say anything more. Because he didn't speak much English! [*But in Singapore you cannot do this. The employer there speaks English?*] I still could [*smiles secretly*]. I pretended I didn't understand English!

In Taiwan, Filipina workers with English fluency are often assigned duties beyond the scope of domestic work that signal a status more advanced than a "maid." Claudia, with a college degree in pharmacology, proudly told me that she could speak better English than her employers so she was asked to answer phone calls in an upper-class private club:

My employer used to be the vice-president of a women's club. She always brought me to their meeting. [*Why? Do you have to serve them there?*] No, she just asked me to take phone calls, and told me to call this person, that person. They have many Americans there. [*So she wants you to speak English!*] Yes, I think so. They have more money, but I can speak better English than most of them [*smiles*].

Tutoring is another English-related job requirement that is commonly assigned to Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan. While I was teaching a Chinese course in the church-based non-governmental organization, several of my Filipina students complained that they had no chance to practice Chinese at work, explaining, "Our employers like to talk to us in English. They want to practice English!" Many of their employers request that they instruct the employers' children in English, such as in the experiences of Olivia and Imelda:

My boss told me, When they were reading my bio-data, my lady employer didn't like me. She said I looked old and ugly in the picture. But my boss said, "But she is a college graduate and she has a BA in English! Maybe she can teach us English!"

They hire us because they want to learn English. Like the children in my house, they go to an American school. They don't speak Chinese to me. They want to practice their English. I know if they hire an English tutor, it will be very expensive. But they

hire us for everything and it is cheap!

Josie, a college graduate from the Philippines, worked in Guam as an English instructor for a few years. Afterward, she was employed as a domestic helper in a small town in Taiwan; she was also asked to teach English courses in the after-school center owned by the employer. Josie cautiously told me not to reveal her nationality when calling or visiting her at the school. Her employer did not want the students and their parents to know that Josie is from the Philippines—she was presented as a migrant from Guam. In this case, Josie received extra wages for teaching English (the price is still much lower than that for hiring a native English-speaker). In many other cases, the Filipinas receive little monetary reward for their English tutoring, but are burdened with extra workloads and exploitation.

The request of English tutoring usually comes from employers who possess less linguistic capital. In contrast, well-educated employers are concerned that their children may pick up a “bad,” “substandard,” or “unrefined” English accent from Filipina domestic workers. Some employers thus enroll their children in English courses instructed by American, British, or Australian teachers to rectify alleged negative influences from their domestic workers. Parents of young children who are beginning to speak are also concerned that their children may speak their mother tongue in Tagalog or other local dialects spoken by Filipina domestic workers. Shu-Wen, a college graduate, and Emily, with a master’s degree, both expressed concern in this regard:

Once I was talking to my Filipina maid and one customer heard us. Then she asked me, “So you know how to speak Tagalog?” I was shocked when I heard that. I said to myself, “Oh my God, my English was mistaken for Tagalog. Have I been assimilated by them?” No, No, my children cannot learn English from them.

Sometimes I heard her [the maid] speaking some Filipino dialect to my daughter. I really cannot bear this. I am worried once she (the daughter) starts talking, she will speak their local dialect! So I am thinking that maybe I better send my daughter to a local nanny.

Some employers object to the idea of having Filipina domestic workers as English tutors because they believe this arrangement would cause “role confusion”: the role of tutor/instructor involves a certain degree of authority and superiority, contradicting the role of “maid,” associated with a subservient and inferior status. A Filipina worker, Evita, reported her previous experience in Singapore, which clearly exposed the tension of working as an English tutor and a maid at the same time:

I had an argument with the madam. She asked me to teach the kid English. I said OK, then I asked the child to learn, but he didn’t want to. He said bad words like “you bloody Evita, you shit!” I was angry. My son was his age but never said [things like]

that to me! So I slapped him. I said to my employer, "It's not my fault." But she wanted to dismiss me. I said, "Fine, I will go."

In some ways, the employment of Filipina domestic workers with a college degree benefits Taiwanese employers. This arrangement brings about the side benefit of teaching children English and enhances the glamour of such conspicuous consumption. However, the mix-up of "maid" and "tutor" contains an intrinsic contradiction. Highly educated workers may even maneuver their linguistic capacity to challenge the supremacy of those Taiwanese employers who have no college degree or cannot speak fluent English.

### Ridicule and jokes backstage

One Sunday, a few Filipina workers and I were having picnics in a park. Lazily sitting on the grass, Grace and Carlita chatted about their English communication with their Taiwanese employers in comparison to their previous employment in Singapore:

*Grace:* I feel more comfortable speaking English here [in Taiwan].

*Carlita:* In Singapore, they correct our English. Because they learn British English, but we learn American English, more similar to here. In Singapore, they don't say "vase" and "God" [*in an American accent*]. They say "vahse" and "Gohd" [*in an exaggerated British accent*].

*PCL:* They think your English is wrong?

*Carlita:* Yes, they think we are wrong and we should speak in their way.

*PCL:* So when you said you feel more comfortable speaking English here, this is because English is similar here or because people here speak English worse than you?

*Grace:* Of course it is the second reason [laughs] . . .

*Carlita:* My employer said, "Oh, you speak very good English." I am thinking, "No, I speak lousy English." They ask me to speak slowly, but I think I already speak very slow!

*Grace:* My employer's friends also said to her, "Oh, it's very good you have someone teach English free of charge!"

Several Asian host societies, including Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore, were part of the British Empire. British English remains powerful in these societies in the postcolonial era. In Singapore, a bilingual education system has been in place since the 1950s, and the use of English in both official and family settings has been widespread among younger generations of Singaporeans.<sup>22</sup> In Hong Kong, despite the dominance of the Cantonese language among local residents, English was the official language widely used at all levels of education before its transfer from a British territory to part of China (Crystal 1997).

As shown in the quoted conversation, the Singaporean employers hold the view that there is a "correct" accent or "standard" English, which refers to "orthodox"

British English. They consider themselves to be the proper carriers of colonial linguistic habitus, despite that what they speak is actually a Singaporean emulation of the British accent. In this way, however, the Singaporean employers establish their authority over Filipina maids by validating the superiority and legitimacy of their linguistic performance vis-à-vis the workers' "mispronunciation" (American English with a Filipino accent).

In Taiwan, English has never been a dominant language, a condition that increases the relative value of this linguistic capital and enlarges the gray area for symbolic struggle around English in transnational domestic employment. Some Filipina domestic workers gain a sense of cultural superiority over their Taiwanese employers based on their command of English, a language they consider to carry more economic value and cultural recognition. As they embrace the symbolic hegemony of this global language, they devalue other languages in a way similar to how their employers belittle Filipino dialects. The Chinese lessons I gave at *Holy Spirit* covered some basic vocabulary of Holo-Taiwanese, a dialect widely used in Taiwan, especially among older generations and in rural areas. Among the Filipina attendants who complained about the difficulty of learning this dialect, Helen bluntly said:

I don't understand—why people here don't speak English? Those ladies in the department stores, they are pretty and dressed in fashion, but they can't even speak English! I don't know what they learn at school. They are wasting their time, and now we have to waste our time to learn this stupid language!

Another college-graduated Filipina, Suzanna, worked for a Taiwanese family in a small town. During the interview, she expressed similar complaints about learning Taiwanese dialects:

They want me to teach their children English, but I have to learn Taiwanese first. They say if I don't learn Taiwanese, I am still stupid even [if] I am a college graduate. . . . Don't tell them this—they are stupid! English is useless here. Maybe I should go to Canada. I don't want to learn Taiwanese. It's very difficult.

I interviewed Suzanna in her room in the employer's house. She lowered her voice and requested my promise of keeping her words secret from the employer. Despite her reluctance to learn Holo-Taiwanese, she had to show some cooperation as deferential performance in front of employers. The lives of Filipina domestic workers are divided into two distinct territories, which can be captured by Goffman's (1959) metaphors of front- and backstage. During the week, in the residence of employers, domestic workers have to "act like a maid" to reflect the image held by the audience, their employers. They perform acts that manifest deference and subservience and refrain from open confrontation of the authority of employers. In contrast, on Sundays, the only day of rest for migrant workers in Taiwan, they perform an offstage identity outside the territory of their employ-

ers.<sup>23</sup> Dressed in brand-name jeans or mini skirts, these “maids” exchange funny stories and family secrets of their employers and criticize the employers’ bad manners and vulgar tastes.

Another common backstage activity among Filipina domestic workers is to ridicule their Taiwanese employers’ poor English or funny accents. Nicole Constable (1997) made similar observation among Filipina migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong; several workers take the form of a “quiz” that demonstrates the special skills of a domestic worker in interpreting the employer’s poor English. The following examples are two of the many jokes I heard among Filipina migrants in Taiwan:

One day they [the employers] went out and I stayed home by myself. They called from outside, “Jamie, you go sleep first. Don’t wait for us. We will come home eleven YEARS (eleven o’clock).” I yelled on the phone, “Eleven years? But I’m here only for three years!” (the length of a contract).

My employer called from the office and said, “Luisa, twelve hours, don’t forget to EAT my children!” She actually meant, “twelve o’clock, don’t forget to FEED my children!” [laugh]. [*Oh my God. Did you correct her?*] No. Some employers don’t like that. So I just answered, “Don’t worry! I already EAT your children!”

These jokes are usually related to job directions given to migrant domestic workers by their employers. For example, one employer instructed how to fry chicken: “DIVORCE (divide) the chicken and PRY (fry) it when oil is DANCING (boiling).” English directions like this often lead to miscommunication. As a consequence, the domestic worker often fails to perform the duty; in some cases, they even consciously twist the order as a way of resistance. For instance, one employer asked her maid to THROW the letters (drop the letters in the mail) and the maid actually dumped them in the garbage.

To some degree, these “jokes may temporarily reverse the pattern of dominance and subservience between employers and workers or between local Chinese and overseas workers” (Constable 1997: 176). Nevertheless, the exchange of jokes and laughter is mostly hidden in the backstage activities of migrant workers on Sundays. In front of employers, they mostly follow the work transcript of deferential performance, exercising linguistic resistance with disguise and caution.

## Linguistic resistance and domination

Some Taiwanese employers prefer not to hire college-educated Filipinas, because these workers are “too smart, too opinionated” and “not like a maid.” Yu-Mei, a college-graduate government employee in her mid-thirties, confessed to me that she sometimes feels intimidated by her Filipina worker, who has a college degree and speaks fluent English. “She probably thinks very highly of herself, so she likes to talk to us. But they [Filipinos] have a pretty heavy accent and she likes to use

rare or difficult vocabulary, so oftentimes I don't quite understand what she's talking about."

When Filipina migrant domestic workers maneuver the English language as a means of symbolic resistance, their strategies may be as delicate as using advanced vocabulary or as blunt as correcting the grammar or pronunciation of their employers. For instance, Mr. Yu, a college-graduate business manager, preferred hiring less-educated migrant workers after receiving frequent linguistic confrontations from one Filipina maid who worked in a bank in the Philippines:

Sometimes, when we had different English pronunciation, she would want to correct me, to teach me. [*Mrs. Yu*: They had arguments like this all the time!] In the beginning, I thought my English was wrong. Then I went to ask my colleagues, and, well, I was right! In my perspective, she just couldn't accept her position. She didn't want to stay in the Philippines, but she didn't feel like being a maid in Taiwan, either. So she didn't want us to treat her like a maid.

Open confrontations like this are not common. Most Filipina domestic workers are aware that their employers may feel insecure or offended when their English pronunciation or usages are being corrected. Norma, for instance, recalled a piece of her conversation with her employer:

[Once] when we talked at dinner, my employer said, "when I am a children. . . ." I thought it was wrong, so I corrected her, "when I was a child." She repeated what I said, but I could tell from her tone [that] she was not happy about this. She was offended. So after that, I never do it again. I don't correct them unless they ask me. I just pretend nothing. Like last night, the husband said to me, "four units of noodle," he means four packs of instant noodles. I tried very hard not to laugh in front of him!

Filipina domestic workers have to keep the jokes related to their employers' poor English among themselves. At work, they consciously avoid correcting their employers' English errors; they avert confrontations with authority to avoid the risk of contract termination. For example, Vanessa illustrated her "never-argue-with-the-boss" strategy in comparison with her outspoken friend, Carina, who was dismissed by her employer:

You remember Carina? She likes to argue with her employer. She corrects her employer's English. I told her, whatever they say, you accept it! Don't correct them! They said, you "drop" the soup. They meant, "put it down." Carina said to them, "Ma'am, not right." That's why they don't like her! Never argue with your boss! They don't like you to be the higher place. I know everything, but I don't show it to my boss. I just bow and nod, yes and no.

Recently, the proportion of Filipinas among all migrant domestic workers in Taiwan has decreased from 83% in 1998 to 17% in 2002. Accordingly, the proportion of Indonesian workers has risen from 15% to 71%<sup>24</sup> (CLA 2002). Similar

nationality-based decline and growth are also found in Hong Kong and Singapore.<sup>25</sup> Many employers replaced Filipina workers with Indonesians for the latter's "docility." Such ethnic characterization should be explained by social factors rather than by racialized stereotypes. Indonesian workers, who speak little English in general, are less capable to verbally bargain with their employers. Besides, Indonesian migrants are even more isolated in Taiwan than their Filipina counterparts, who are at least able to retrieve information by reading English newspapers and have affiliations with Catholic churches and NGOs that offer some legal assistance and counseling.

The replacement of Filipina workers by Indonesians is especially acute among Taiwanese employers who hire caretakers in the province. Yet, when hiring childcare workers, a significant proportion of employers, especially in urban areas, still prefer Filipinas, who are perceived to be more educated and "civilized" than Indonesians.<sup>26</sup> This situation confirms my argument that the English proficiency of Filipina migrant workers may bring Taiwanese employers the extra benefit of teaching children English, but they are considered a disadvantage by those employers who speak little English, especially elder clients. Indonesian workers in Taiwan, on the other hand, have no choice but to learn Mandarin Chinese or Holo-Taiwanese for the sake of communication. As such, Taiwanese employers get the upper hand in their linguistic exchanges and social interactions with Indonesian maids. Again, language becomes a means of symbolic domination to consolidate the employer's authority and silence the migrant workers.

## Conclusion

Class positioning and identification are complex and ambiguous in transnational contexts, in which language becomes a critical site of symbolic struggle that affirms or contests the legitimacy of social divisions. The Taiwan–Philippines migration linkage poses a poignant example for the micropolitics of constructing social distinctions in the global South. The encounters between Taiwanese employers and Filipina migrant workers demonstrate the multilayered identification of class boundaries, as well as the significance of linguistic capital in the power dynamics of a transnational employment relationship.

Both Taiwanese employers and Filipina migrants accumulate and convert a variety of capitals with their transnational connections to upgrade their status in local societies. Taiwanese employers use economic capital to establish a middle-class lifestyle based on the consumption of imported goods and migrant labor, and attempt to equip their children with appropriate human and cultural capital—overseas education and English skills—to improve their career chances in the future. These employers validate their middle-class identity by distinguishing themselves from people above—upper-class, old-money employers—and people below—those who cannot afford to hire a maid or those who cannot manage English dialogues with their foreign maids. Filipina migrants, based on their education and linguistic



capital, secure opportunities to work overseas and enhance their position in the interactions with Taiwanese employers. Despite taking on the stigmatized job of domestic service, they upgrade their status by dissociating themselves from non-English-speaking Indonesian migrant domestics and local maids in the Philippines.

English proficiency is not merely a human capital that would facilitate acquiring job opportunities and competitive advantages in the global economy.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it is a cultural capital in the sense that certain languages, and even particular accents, receive higher symbolic value and prestige in the international linguistic market. In transnational domestic employment, language often becomes a crucial means of symbolic domination and resistance in employer-worker daily interactions. On the one hand, Singaporean and Taiwanese professional employers resort to their colonial links or overseas experiences to certify the authenticity of their English skills vis-à-vis Filipina maids. On the other hand, Filipina migrant workers manipulate their colonial linguistic tool to challenge Taiwanese employers' authority in the semi-periphery. Their linguistic proficiency helps them negotiate job terms or reduce their workload; it also empowers them in communication with their employers, such as deliberately using advanced vocabulary or correcting the grammar or pronunciation of employers.

However, the value of the linguistic capital acquired by Filipina migrant workers is limited and relative. Their English accent and fluency are considered "sub-standard" and "inauthentic" versus Euro-American English. They can maneuver the colonizer's tool, but are excluded from the inheritance of linguistic legitimacy. Although Filipina migrants may gain some advantage and benefits in converting their English skills in comparison with their Indonesian competitors, English skills may bring with them an extra workload or the stigma of being "not like a maid." After all, the power dynamics in employment relationships are primarily determined by the distribution of economic capital. Facing the potential consequences of contract termination and replacement, most of their acts of symbolic resistance around English remain hidden backstage.

## Notes

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1. Following Brubaker and Cooper (2000), I use the processual, active term, derived from a verb, "identification," to avoid the reifying connotation of "identity."

2. Basch et al (1994) use the term “transmigrant” instead of “immigrant” to emphasize that these migrants maintain back-and-forth trajectories and multiple ties between their new and home countries.
3. Together with Passeron and Saint Martin, Bourdieu (1994) argues that the curriculum content and style in France offer advantages to those who possess “bourgeois language,” i.e., a tendency to abstraction, formalism, intellectualism, and euphemistic moderation. This language constitutes an “educationally profitable linguistic capital” that helps reproduce class hierarchies in French society.
4. Bourdieu’s metaphorical extensions of capital have received criticism for lacking analytical precision. Alan Smart (1993: 393) suggests that we should distinguish the concepts of “capital” in terms of, first, how objectively a resource can be possessed and, second, whether this possession is legitimated and supported by institutions.
5. Social capital (personal networks for medical documents) is needed for those who hire migrant childcare workers with quotas designated for the recruitment of patient caregivers.
6. Press release on the 2001 survey of overseas Filipino workers, the Census Bureau of the Philippine government, <http://www.census.gov.ph/data/pressrelease/2002>, accessed on 12 May 2002.
7. In 2001, about 78% of the 1.03 million overseas Filipino workers worked in Asia (including the Middle East), followed by 10% in Europe and 7.58% in North America, <http://www.census.gov.ph/data/pressrelease/2002>.
8. Data released by the Census Bureau of the Philippine government in 2001, <http://www.census.gov.ph/data>.
9. Since the establishment of the Philippine Constitution in 1935, the postcolonial government has pursued the formation of a national language based on Tagalog, the main indigenous language spoken in Manila, now referred to as Pilipino. Yet it was not until the 1970s that the bilingual education policy shifted in emphasis from English to Pilipino.
10. Taiwan was a colony under Japanese rule from 1895 to 1945.
11. *China Times*, 31 March 2002.
12. *China Times*, 4 April 2002.
13. I did so to amend a shortfall in the literature of migrant domestic service. Many studies collected data on the stories of workers only, thereby offering limited examination of social stratification and identity politics in host countries. This article is part of a broader project on boundary making between Taiwanese employers and Filipina domestic workers (Lan 2000).
14. This title is inspired by Paul Willis’s book (1977), *Learning to Labor*.
15. In my observation, “old money” employers, who have hired domestic service in their original families, usually carry more condescending verbal expressions and distant body language toward their maids. As Bourdieu (1977) argues, the cultivation of “habitus” requires a slow, lengthy process. Like Veblen, Bourdieu emphasizes the significance of consumption in the reproduction of class distinctions, but he emphasizes the processes beyond the reach of individual intentions or consciousness: “status signals are mostly sent unconsciously, via the habitus, or unintentionally, because of the classificatory effects of cultural codes” (Lamont and Lareau 1988: 164).
16. Two turning points marked the crisis in Taiwan’s international relations. In 1971, the General Assembly of the United Nations voted to recognize the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the only legitimate representative government of China. The government led by Chiang Kai-Shek [the Republic of China] then gave up its membership in the United Nations. In 1979, the United States severed its diplomatic relationship with Taiwan (the ROC) and established formal ties with China (the PRC).
17. The number of Taiwanese students departing to study abroad was 3,641 in 1987 and doubled to 7,016 in 1997. Although these numbers include students of all levels, most pursued graduate degrees. In 1997, the college graduates in Taiwan totaled 215,412. We may estimate that about 3% of them pursued overseas studies. All statistics here are provided by the Ministry of Education, Administrative Yuan, Republic of China, <http://www.edu.tw/statistics>, accessed on 15 July 2001.
18. According to a survey gathered from 3,099 Filipina prospective overseas domestic workers in a predeparture orientation seminar from July 1990 to January 1991, 61% of the total respondents were 21 to 30 years old, and 28% were 31 to 40 years old. 43% were high school graduates, 36%

- finished a part or full term of college education, and 11% finished vocational courses. Over 80% of respondents were single and 18% were married (Palmer-Beltran 1991).
19. Kaoshong, the second largest city in Taiwan, is located in the Southern part of the island.
  20. Rhacel Parrenas (2001: 174–179) made a similar observation about the stratification of migrant domestic workers along national lines: Filipina domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles embraced a nationality-based racial categorization, claiming that they provided services of better quality than their African and Latina counterparts.
  21. These employers input Chinese words into this palm-sized machine, so workers can read the English translation that shows up on the screen of the machine.
  22. In a 1975 survey, only 27% of Singaporeans over age 40 claimed to understand English, whereas the proportion rose to over 87% among the population between 15 and 20 years old (Crystal 1997: 51).
  23. Elsewhere, I provide more details on how migrant domestic workers integrate or segregate their work frontstage and Sunday backstage (Lan forthcoming). Chin (1998) and Yeoh and Huang (1998) both offer brilliant discussion on the “hidden transcript” (Scott 1990) of migrant domestics in *public* sphere vis-à-vis their “public transcript” in *private* residences.
  24. The rest were Vietnamese workers, who were not introduced into Taiwan until 2000 but have now occupied about 10% of all migrant domestic workers.
  25. According to Chiho Ogaya (forthcoming), the share of Filipinas among all foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong decreased from 85% in 1995 to 72% in 2000, while the number of Indonesian migrant domestic workers tripled. In Singapore, Indonesian migrants occupied only 20% of foreign domestic workers in 1995, but one recruitment agency estimated that about 70% of newly hired foreign domestic workers are now from Indonesia.
  26. In 1998, 90% of the migrant domestic helpers and 82% of the caretakers in Taiwan were from the Philippines and only 6% of the domestic helpers and 17% of the caretakers were from Indonesia. In 2001, Indonesian labor accounted for 53% of the domestic helpers and 71% of the caretakers, whereas the proportions of Filipina domestic helpers and caretakers dropped to 40% and 20% respectively. The decline of Filipina caretakers in the Taiwan province is most obvious (18% in 2001), while the decline is less severe among Filipina domestic helpers in the Taipei city (48% in 2001). Data is provided by the CLA.
  27. Spanish is another example of linguistic capital in the field of domestic employment. Some white employers in the United States prefer hiring Spanish-speaking nannies to increase their children’s exposure to the language (Wrigley 1995). The value of the Spanish language is especially appreciated in California, which contains a growing Spanish-speaking population (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). Yet the Spanish language, remaining a minority language in the United States, does not give as much leverage for Latina caregivers to use to bargain with white employers as English does for Filipina workers vis-à-vis Taiwanese employers.

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