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**A Reflection on the Transboundary Mothering of Female  
Domestic Workers:  
Comparing the Global Cinderellas with a Domestic Worker  
in Guangxi Province from the Perspective of  
Intersectionality**

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## 1. Introduction

This book review consists of three parts. Firstly, it overviews the book *Global Cinderellas* by discussing the structural forces and their cooperation and dynamic interactions in shaping global Cinderellas from an intersectional perspective. Then, it explores the expected gender roles of the global Cinderellas and how they use the intersecting structural forces to bargain with the patriarchy. The last part focuses on the discussion of mothering in *Global Cinderellas*, further interpreting the transboundary mothering by comparing a domestic worker in Guangxi province with global Cinderellas in the book.

## 2. Book overview

Entering the 1990s, the newly rich in Taiwan grew rapidly. More Taiwanese women started to work outside the home. As a result, their demands for female domestic workers experienced unprecedented growth. However, the shortage of local laborers forced them to find female migrant workers, namely, global Cinderellas. The abundant female workers from the Philippines and Indonesia met their needs to care for the domestic work. Meanwhile, these female workers acquired more income and broadened their modern horizons.

The book mainly revolves around two intersectional threads to describe global Cinderellas' life in Taiwan. Specifically, the first thread is their upward mobility benefited from the cooperation of three structural forces: Governments, the intermediate agencies, and the patriarchal discourses. The patriarchal discourses are mainly manifested in societies' expectations of mothering. The "intensive mothering" trend in Taiwan and more reliance on women becoming "maid breadwinners" in the Philippines and Indonesia drive women to work outside, constituting the supply and demand of migrant female workers. Governments in home countries and Taiwan collaborate to facilitate female workers' transboundary shifts and make profits from fee-charging and foreign exchanges. The intermediate agencies also play an important role in female workers' migration by offering employers matching, domestic work training, transportation services, etc.

The second thread is global Cinderellas' downward stratified otherization resulting from the three structural forces mentioned above. The patriarchal traditions in Taiwan highly value loyal and tender women servants, which 'justifies' employers' monitoring, demarcation, and discipline of female workers. Besides, the strict policies



in Taiwan prohibit workers' rights to shift in the labor market, treating them as stratified ethnic others since they are blue foreign collars. The intermediate agencies also disciplined the female workers to become stereotypical "the traditional others". Last, the mass media reinforces the stereotypes and stigmas of these female workers (e.g., high crime rate and indecency).

However, the three structural forces can have conflicts sometimes. For example, the market mechanism idealizes that global Cinderellas can find domestic work as they pay enough money, which contradicts the fact that jobs are limited. When the excessive migrant female workers threaten the employment of Taiwanese, the local government will put pressure on home countries' policymakers and then limit the intermediary agencies' operations to guarantee a stable employment rate.

Most importantly, female Taiwanese employers and global Cinderellas have cooperated to bargain with patriarchy by utilizing state and market forces. Outsourcing domestic work to global Cinderellas facilitates newly rich Taiwanese women to pursue their careers. Meanwhile, it can help them escape from the extended patrilineal family by relieving the tension between themselves and their mothers-in-law. They also have more time to care for children and strive for more equal marriages. The migrant female workers can also benefit from this process. They shift from unpaid homemakers to paid domestic workers by crossing the traditional gender division of labor, enhancing their financial independence and bargaining power with patriarchy. Some of them also escaped from the mandatory engagements made by parents to strive for their happiness.

### **3. The expected gender roles of global Cinderellas and their resistance**

Due to the high unemployment rate, people in the home societies of the Philippines and Indonesia limit women's job opportunities in the local labor market. Female workers continue to pursue economic independence by entering the global labor market with the help of the state and market forces. They cross the territorial and gender boundaries concurrently to bargain with the patriarchy. However, the ideal gender roles of loyal wives and responsible mothers for married women still burden them significantly. Many people oppose women working overseas. To face the challenges, they conduct 'transnational homemaking' to make money in Taiwan to improve the living conditions of their families, using overseas calls to maintain marriages and motherhood.

The Taiwanese society expects global Cinderellas to be meek and loyal.



“Being hardworking and caring” is most employers’ ideal role for domestic workers. Meanwhile, they set clear status boundaries between themselves and migrant female workers. To negotiate with the downward stratified otherization, female workers, especially the Filipinos, actively find ways to assimilate their life in Taiwan. First, since many Filipino workers are highly educated, they will feel superior if their employers speak worse English. Besides, some female workers will feel proud if female employers do not have jobs outside. Second, many female Filipino workers seek a shared identity by attending activities (e.g., Karaoke) with their Filipino friends at weekends, enhancing their confidence and cultural identity in an exclusive culture.

#### **4. The reflection on the transboundary mothering: Global Cinderellas and a domestic worker in Guangxi**

The discussion of mothering in *Global Cinderellas* involves women employers’ intensive mothering and female domestic workers’ transnational mothering. This section mainly focuses on the latter and uses an interview case to further interpret transboundary mothering.

##### *4.1 The discussion of transboundary mothering*

According to the author’s field research, many global Cinderellas are mothers who become ‘maid breadwinners’ to cover their children’s school fees and improve the family conditions. This phenomenon is the most direct representation of “transnational mothering”. It has become more common in many areas worldwide due to more education opportunities for females and people’s declining support for the traditional gendered labor division (Almy & Sanatullova-Allison, 2016; Cunningham, 2008). Some families have even formed a labor division of female breadwinners and male homemakers, challenging traditional gender roles.

However, unlike male migrant workers who only need to send money to their families, the female migrant workers also shoulder the mothering responsibility. They make overseas calls and send gifts to their children to perform the “transnational motherhood” in intensive, collaborative, or passive ways (Peng & Wong, 2013). The truth is many of them suffer more from patriarchal disciplines by acting like selfless “martyr moms” under the double burden of “maid breadwinners” and “transnational homemakers”. Parreñas’ (2010) study claimed that transnational mothering could backfire on fathers’ willingness to undertake the housework, which reinforces gender inequality in the families.

Besides, the increasing physical distance between female domestic workers



and their children can result in psychological alienation, fostering their “diverted mothering” and emotional bonds with employers’ children. However, they cannot cross the line between mothers and nannies since their female employers will feel insecure. Chib et al.’s (2014) study viewed “diverted mothering” as a double-edged sword. Female domestic workers can seek emotional comfort by taking care of employers’ children, but they may also be significantly exploited by extra unpaid work. Besides, this can further weaken the relationships between them and their own children, negatively affecting children’s psychological health. Thus, the construction of more beneficial transboundary mothering is essential.

#### *4.2 The case study of Luo: A female domestic worker in Guangxi*

Luo is a 45-year-old domestic worker in Guangxi. She has a 24-year-old son and a 14-year-old daughter. They live in a small village in Yulin, Guangxi. Many women in this village become *dagongmei* who work in the factories or do the domestic work in other cities. Some women do temporary jobs locally. However, many men farm and take care of the elder and children at home. Luo’s husband is one of them.

Luo became a transboundary domestic worker in 2014. In the first four years, she was a *yuesao* who needed to stand by 24 hours per day and barely slept. Currently, Luo has worked as a nanny for a wealthy family in Beihai (a city about a three-hour drive from Yulin) for four years. People who live in this city have benefited from the fishery and foreign trade. Thus, some families busy with their business may have a demand for female domestic workers. Luo is satisfied with her current job because the workload is much less than before. Besides, the employer’s family treats her like their own family member, significantly different from the global Cinderellas. Though her salary is less than before, the employer offers her meals, clothes, and a living place. They even promise to cover her pension and medical insurance every month.

To cover her children’s school fees and family budget, Luo decided to become a “maid breadwinner”. She spent most income on her children, keeping a small income for herself. In contrast with global Cinderellas, she doesn’t view working outside the home as individual liberation since she devotes everything she earned to her children.

Compared with global Cinderellas, Luo’s family relationship is more stable. Since Luo’s husband always works at home, she asks him to take care of the family



members and housework. Her husband cooks meals and picks their daughter up in daily life. Since the employer is very easy-going and gives Luo enough freedom, Luo makes phone and video calls with her family every day to maintain the emotional bonds. This echoes the collaborative mothering in Peng and Wong's (2013) study.

Because Luo's employer is very busy and Luo barely goes home, she has built deep emotions with the employer's seven-year-old son. However, Luo thinks it is incomparable to the blood relationships between her and her own family, different from the contradictory situation of global Cinderellas. The collaborative mothering and the favorable treatment of Luo's employer (e.g., they sometimes buy snacks and clothes for Luo's daughter) demonstrate the value of reciprocity, enhancing Luo's transboundary mothering.

Though Luo also shoulders the double burden of "maid breadwinner" and "transboundary homemaker", she and her family have enjoyed more benefits from transboundary mothering than global Cinderellas. The employer's favorable treatment of Luo and her daughter has lightened her burden. Meanwhile, Luo's husband actively undertakes the housework and child-rearing. From Luo's experience, it is significant to build more equal employment relationships and family gendered labor division to perform the collaborative mothering. In this way, the beneficial transboundary mothering can be finally constructed.



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## Appendix

### *Interview protocol and transcripts*

1. When did you start doing domestic work, and what kind of domestic work have you done?

*Luo: I started doing domestic work in 2014. In the first four years, I mainly worked in Zhanjiang, Beihai, and Yulin. During this period, I only worked as a yuesao (maternity matron) and moved from one employer to another every one or two months. Being a yuesao means you have to take care of the newborns, cook 'Yuezi' meals (specific meals for mothers who just gave birth to newborns), and do the housework. The workload is very tiring, you need to work almost 20 hours per day and barely have a long-time sleep. Every time I finished a service, I needed to rest for one or two months before finding a new employer. Currently, I work as a nanny for a wealthy family in Beihai. I've worked in this family for about four years. They don't want me to leave them since we've become so close like a family. Besides, their son is seven years old and goes to school every day. I am much more relaxed than before since I only need to cook meals and take the boy to school. I do the housework sometimes. But all in all, it's much easier than before when I worked as a yuesao. I don't even stay up late in my daily life.*

2. How long is your holiday as a domestic worker and what do you do during the holidays?

*Luo: I barely have a holiday. To be honest, I can go home for three to four days every two or three months. The Covid 19 makes me much more difficult to go home these two years. At weekends, the family always brings me out with them to attend activities like visiting the aquarium and barbecue parties.*

3. How were the relationships between you and your employers' families?

*Luo: Honestly, all the employers I've met have treated me very well. The living conditions are always comfortable. They are very easy-going, and most of them treat me as one of their family members. My current job is relatively stable since the employer's families like me a lot. They bring me out at weekends. The child likes me very much. Every time I went back home, the child started to cry. They also treat my daughter very well and sometimes buy her clothes and snacks. They even promise to pay for my pension and medical insurance if I don't leave them!*

4. How are the salary levels of becoming a domestic worker?

*Luo: When I was a yuesao, I could earn 7,000 to 8,000 RMB per month. This is just the salary of a junior yuesao. The senior yuesao can earn more than 10,000 RMB per month. Currently, I can make 6000 RMB per month in this family. Luckily, I don't need to pay for my meals and live in their house. Besides, they spend more than 1,000 RMB on my medical insurance per month. They even buy clothes for me sometimes!*

5. Have you been through any training before being a domestic worker?

*Luo: Of course. I was trained to be a yuesao in a specific training center in Zhanjiang. I spent only 2,000 RMB to take the training sessions. We were trained to take care of newborns and make baby food. After training, we need to obtain a certificate to become qualified domestic workers. Then we can finally get access to*





*the labor market and find employers.*

6. What did you do before becoming a domestic worker?

*Luo: I was a temporary worker before. I worked as a cashier in the supermarket. I also helped babies bathe in the maternal & child SPA center. I could only earn about 1,200 RMB per month, though I just needed to spend eight hours per day on these jobs. Besides, I raised pigs with my husband at home. However, the income was very unstable, and we always operated at a loss. Several years ago, swine fever happened a lot. We even lost 100,000-200,000 RMB in a year.*

7. What was the division of labor and the financial resources in your family before you became a domestic worker?

*Luo: Generally speaking, I worked outside and made money for the family, while my husband took care of the housework at home and looked after the elderly and the children. I worked very hard to send my son (born in 1998) and my daughter (born in 2008) to school. My husband wanted to make money from the farming business. However, the small farming scale and our lack of money made it very difficult to come true.*

8. What is the division of labor and the financial resources in your family now?

*Luo: The same as before. The only thing that has changed is my income. I've earned much more than before. Besides, your brother has his own work now. He no longer needs my money since he can make money independently. He can even support our family with his own income sometimes.*

9. Why do you choose to be a domestic worker instead of doing other jobs?

*Luo: My education level is very low. I heard from others that being a domestic worker can make relatively more money even if you don't have a good education. They told me that the employers prefer young women who can take care of the housework and their children. That's why I chose this job. All I want to do is make as much money as possible to support my family. I needed to send two children to school, now is better since your brother is already economically independent. I believe knowledge changes fate. I don't want them to go through what I did. Besides, your grandparents need us to take care of them. I barely use money myself since my employer offers me meals and clothes. I spent the extra money on a house in Beihai, hoping your brother can get married and live in this house in the future.*

10. Do you think working away from home is a kind of individual liberation?

*Luo: No. That's why I kept working in Guangxi and Zhanjiang (A Guangdong city close to Guangxi). I don't want to stay too far from home. Some of my sisters go to do domestic work in Guangzhou or Shenzhen since they like the modern lifestyle there. But that's too far from home. I can't do that since I always miss my family.*

11. How do you balance the family life as a domestic worker?

*Luo: I came home to see my family during the holidays. During ordinary times, I made phone and video calls to contact them. My daughter is in middle school now. I give money to her at weekends on WeChat and let her buy the snacks and clothes herself. We are in a perfect relationship. She misses me a lot and asks me when to come back every time we make phone calls. I make video calls with my husband every day to ask about the family issues and the physical situation of your*



*grandpa. Though I'm far away from home, I keep stable and good relationships with my family members.*

12. Have you built deep relationships with the employers' family members? What do you think about this issue?

*Luo: I have already built deep emotional bonds with my current employer's family. They like me a lot, and they don't want me to leave. Since the parents are very busy, I accompany the boy in the family every day. Sometimes I even feel that he treats me like his mother. My daughter sometimes becomes jealous since I cannot accompany her. But she knows I am working for her. If I don't do domestic work, I can't make enough money to cover her school fees. I think I can balance my family life by making phone calls and providing her with the material support and my love. I don't think the bonds between my employer's family and me can compare with my own family bonds. I am forever the worker who provides services for the employer and live on the income made from them. But I am the mother, the wife, and the daughter in my family, and my support and love for them are selfless.*