

Negotiating Gender, Sexuality, Class and Ethnicity:
Women-Loving Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Globalization has seen the acceleration of migration and movement across national borders. Prompted by a gap in the economic development between the two places, many Filipinas move from their homeland to Hong Kong to work as Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs). Academic attention on their lives has flourished over the last two decades. However, the lesbian practice of FDWs remains under-investigated. Through participant observation of two Filipina FDW groups and in-depth interviews of ten Filipina lesbian domestic workers in Hong Kong, the current research investigates how their lesbian practices intricately relate to their social position in the Philippines and in Hong Kong, as well as the Filipino concept of gender and sexuality. As independent wage workers, these Filipinas enjoy elevated status at home while familial control decreases with distance. In the work destination, which offers better protection towards personal autonomy, the level of societal surveillance they face is further limited with their non-integration into the host society. Hence, their positions at both societies help shield them from tight social control, allowing them to practice homosexuality with relative ease.

This ethnographic study thus affirms the liberating effects of migration for opening up new sexual / gender possibilities: as well as engaging in same-sex relationships for the first time, some of these Filipina FDWs assume masculine identities only after coming to Hong Kong. Yet, the assumption of new gender identity runs contrary to the Filipino concept of gender, which privileges on a persistent inner self. Novice tomboys, therefore, often suffer much from social stigma as the change in gender identity is even

more inexplicable to the Filipinas than a change in sexual orientation.

This current research meanwhile documents the performances of masculinity and femininity by these lesbian Filipina FDWs. While observing the significance of gender role-playing in Filipina lesbian relationships, this thesis highlights the presence of a more balanced mix of masculinities and femininities in both butches and femmes.

Findings of the present study thus repudiate the dichotomous divides between masculinity and femininity; heterosexuality and homosexuality.

在全球化發展下，各國人民、資金、原料和貨物的跨境流動，越見頻仍。菲律賓與香港的經濟發展存在龐大差異，很多菲律賓婦女因而來港當家庭傭工。近二十年來，外來家傭的處境引起學術關注，但她們的同性戀生活，却鮮為人深入探究。本研究通過對兩個在港菲傭團體的參與觀察、及十位女同性戀菲傭的深入訪談，探求她們的同性戀生活，與其於兩地的社會地位，以及菲律賓的性／別觀念，有何關連。由於具備獨立經濟能力，菲傭在原生家庭地位提昇，家人亦難以越洋監視其生活。在香港，個人自由受法律保護；而菲傭無法融入社會，也讓她們有更大戀愛自由。本民族誌學研究，肯定了移徙的釋放力量，能幫助開啟性向和性別的可能：一些菲傭不單在香港首次實踐女女愛，更首度以陽剛氣質示人。但菲律賓人普遍相信性別身份不變，故菲傭的性別身份逆轉，較其性向的改變，更難為菲律賓社群接受。本論文並紀錄了同性戀菲傭的男／女性別氣質表現：同性戀菲傭雖多扮演男／女性別角色，但兩個性別氣質的展現，往往較為平衡。本研究遂否定陽剛／陰柔氣質、以及同性戀／異性戀之間，有二元對立式的劃分。

Chapter One Introduction

Sexuality is often seen as a highly private matter centering on an individual's idiosyncratic instinct, desire, preference, and object. The organization of one's sexual life, however, is closely tied to one's gender, race, socio-economic status, as well as the prevailing laws and governance of the society in which one resides. A change in one's locale might bring about important alterations to one's private life which were previously unimaginable by the individual in question. The sexual and gender performances of migrants may be bound up with the changing environment, modifying old behavioural patterns, opening up new possibilities while giving up other established practices.

With its advanced development in business and finance, Hong Kong is seen as a place full of job opportunities by nationals from less developed parts of the world, especially foreign domestic workers (FDWs) from Southeast Asia. According to the Immigration Department of the Hong Kong government (personal communication, 23 November 2012), there are more than 311, 000 FDWs in the territory today. Despite their hard work and contribution to society, these domestic workers are not expected to be assimilated with the local population. Their personal, emotional, and sexual needs are largely left unattended in a territory that neither welcomes their integration nor allows their spouses to join them (unless spouses come to the territory on separate contracts where each contract remains individual and binding).

The observations above form the background of this study, which looks into the

sexual and gender identity of lesbian Filipina migrant domestic workers¹ in Hong Kong. During casual conversations over the dining table, I learned that the domestic worker I employed had many more lesbian friends than I have. I began to realize the unusual visibility of lesbianism among local Filipina domestic workers as she told me that Filipino lesbians were far less commonly seen in her home country. I became curious to know more about the phenomenon. This was the catalyst for this research project focusing on same-sex relationships amongst Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Research Goal Statement

In an attempt to further understand the lives of these migrant domestic workers, the current research focuses on a group of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong: the Filipina domestic workers who engage, or have engaged, in same-sex relationships. The first goal of this research is to examine how the socio-economic status of these Filipinas in both the Philippines and in Hong Kong, as well as the Filipino concept of gender and sexuality, help shape and impact their same-sex practices and thus their identities. I will argue that the practice of same sex relationships among these Filipinas is much more than a simple expression of their sexual desires; rather, it is intricately implicated in their class, ethnicity, sex, and gender.

Second, this study investigates the concepts of masculinity and femininity among

¹ The Filipinos working as foreign domestic workers are referred to as “Filipina foreign domestic workers” in this thesis because of the highly feminised nature of the occupation, as well as the focus of this research. Men contributed to approximately two percent of all the Filipinos who worked as foreign domestic workers (POEA, 2010).

the Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, with a special focus on the gender role-playing of these women-loving women. Despite the large population size of Filipina FDWs in Hong Kong, their lives, and especially their love lives are seldom documented. This thesis will provide a thick description of the gender performances and practices of same-sex relationships among Filipina domestic workers in the territory.

Overview

With the uneven social and economic development in various parts of the globe, coupled with the advanced growth of communications and transportation, we see economic cooperation between and among different societies accelerating to an unprecedented level. People's movements worldwide, in the form of migrant workers, for instance, have become more commonplace despite the presence of national boundaries guarding against free flow of labour into and away from individual countries.

The Philippines is a major labour exporting country. Sizable export of labour from the Philippines can be traced back to the 1970s. Today, it is a state policy of the Philippines to facilitate the export of labour. A specialized agency, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), was set up in 1982 to promote overseas employment. The 2010 Survey on Overseas Filipinos (SOF) estimated a total of two million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) were deployed all over the world in 2010. This group of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) is approximately 21 per cent of the country's total population, taking into consideration of the projected national population in 2010 of 94 million. These migrant workers are vital sources of foreign exchange to

the country. The Asian Development Bank (2008) estimated that the remittances that migrant workers sent home in 2007 contributed to approximately 10 per cent of the country's GDP in that year.

The outflow of migrant workers to the economically more advanced countries sees the gendered division of labour on a global level. The single most frequently-chosen occupation among the landbased Filipino overseas workers is that of domestic worker. Official figures released by POEA show that in 2010, more than 28 per cent of newly employed landbased overseas workers had obtained positions as domestic helpers or related household workers. Among them, more than 98 per cent were women. Women from poorer countries take up highly feminine roles as domestic caretakers in advanced countries where local females work in the formal economy along side with their male counterparts.

Hong Kong is one of the major destinations of Filipina domestic workers. According to POEA 2010 statistics, Hong Kong is the third largest destination of Filipino migrant workers in the world, after Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the Middle East. The great majority of Filipino migrant workers here are Filipina domestic workers. Filipina domestic workers, along with their Indonesian counterparts, are among the largest group of migrant workers in the territory. According to statistics provided by the Hong Kong Immigration Department, the population of FDWs in Hong Kong in October 2012 was 311, 455, of which approximately 49 per cent, or 153, 842, were from the Philippines (personal communication, 23 November 2012). The services

rendered by foreign FDWs are an integral and indispensable part of lives for many middle-class families in Hong Kong.

Despite their important role in Hong Kong, the social, personal, and emotional needs of the FDWs are seldom considered by Hong Kong's mainstream society. Being a highly marginalized group, these home-away Filipinas, who have come to Hong Kong separately and individually, usually turn to their fellow countrywomen for friendship and support. They gather together on Sundays (their usual rest days) and develop close relationships with one other. Along with their sisterly bonds, they also form 'tomboy' relationships, which are thriving in the territory. *Tomboys, tombois, thunderbirds* or *T-birds*, are "female-bodied individuals who identify with and choose to live 'like men'." (Johnson 2005: 85). Many of these masculine-identified females also harbour desires towards women as their gender identities develop, along with their sexual orientations. According to a number of my informants, although tomboy relationships, or lesbian relationships, also exist in the Philippines, they are much less visible, especially when compared to their increasingly outstanding perceptibility in the local Filipina community.

Being a highly feminized job, the provision of domestic work does not confer the worker high social or economic return. However, as there is a considerable gap in the standard of living between the sending country and the receiving country, Filipinas working as domestic workers are able to provide major financial support to their families in the Philippines. Instead of attending to the personal needs of their own family

members while earning wages to supplement those provided by male heads of the family, each of these Filipinas has to take on the traditionally male role of primary wage earner, or “breadwinner”. As independent wage earners, these female migrant workers do not have to rely on the support of the family for survival. They enjoy elevated status within the family and therefore have stronger bargaining power with regards to their choice of alternative lifestyle, which bears resemblance to the mainstream norm. Their improved financial strength brings them closer to the heterosexual ideal as they can build families with offspring via adoption. Also, the physical distance between home and their new place of work means greater freedom to explore their interests and desires. While social control from their originating society loosens up with migration, the private lives of these Filipinas are not tightly monitored by their host society where there are social, economic and legal barriers preventing their integration. The liberal structures of Hong Kong, on the other hand, facilitate their same-sex pursuits with a guarantee of personal freedom.

In Filipino culture, the notion of gender identity privileges depth and core-ness (Garcia, 2010). The gender behaviours of a tomboy are traceable to her “essence”: her persistent masculine psychospirituality, which in turn forms the basis of her same-sex desire towards feminine women. When gender identity is privileged over sexual orientation, tomboys are often highlighted in the discourses on Filipino lesbianism. In everyday conversation, “lesbians” is conventionally used by the Filipinos to mean tomboys but not their feminine partners, whom are largely being seen as unable to be differentiated from straight women. While the “girls” are said to be exercising their

personal choice when choosing tomboys over biological men, Filipino tomboys or lesbians are allegedly driven by their natural impulses in their pursuit of feminine women.

Indeed, the masculinities of tomboys are often believed to be inborn and have predisposed them to same-sex orientation. The Filipino lesbian relationship is therefore understood as a variant of the heterosexual relationship, where a masculine partner woos a feminine partner following her masculine sexual instinct. While their gender roles, love, and desires towards women might be seen as “copies” of the heterosexual model, the present research has found that the actual practices of these tomboys and their relationships with their “girls” deviate from heterosexual norms in important ways, such that tomboy relationships studied under the present context tend towards more flexible and reversible gender roles and are less hierarchal between the masculine and feminine partners.

That is to say, though both heterosexual and homosexual Filipinos couples are compelled to follow a similar set of gender norms that are highly regulatory in nature, these norms should not be seen as deterministically producing cookie-cutter subjects. Rather, possibilities for alternative articulation of these mainstream, heteronormative norms are opened up in their actual rendition, especially where the underlying circumstances are different. In the context of the Filipina FDW tomboys, some of them can deploy resources other than male biological attributes to fulfill the masculine roles of assuming fatherhood and conferring sexual gratification successfully. The tomboys

therefore have actually helped undermine the unique cultural supremacy of the male body while faithfully adhering to prevailing norms in their gender performances.

For some of the Filipinas who engage in homosexual relationships, lesbianism is a continuation of their sexual practices at home, although usually with new partners. For some others, however, the development of homoerotic relationships here are to them completely new experiences. These newly converted lesbians are called “non-pure” lesbians in the local Filipino community. They are masculine in appearance and behaviour, indicating their desires for feminine women. But they had heterosexual experiences back in the Philippines and were mandated by culture to be feminine when playing their roles as girlfriends or wives. The newly-found masculinities of a “non-pure” lesbian are incomprehensible under the Filipino notion of gender which privileges an inborn and consistent self. These novice tomboys are therefore commonly accused of faking their sexual desires and gender behaviours in order to take advantages of their feminine partners, usually in the form of soliciting material comforts. Conversely, feminine partners who are newly engaged in lesbian relationships face fewer social stigmas and suspicions with their consistent femininities and desires towards masculine partners.

The prejudice against “non-pure” lesbians reminds us that the Filipinas’ practice of same-sex relationships, although made easier with the new socio-economic positions they enjoy as migrant workers, is circumscribed by the gender / sexual concepts brought along with them to the local Filipino community. These gender norms powerfully

constrain the practice of sexual relationships but are less than deterministic, as described above.

Literature Review

During the last decade, there have been a number of published studies on migrant workers, which look at the outflow of migrant workers as a part of the globalization process. Here, migrant workers are regarded not just as human capital but more importantly as human subjects whose gender, class, race, and ethnicity bears inscriptions in their lives as they move in counter current with the flow of global capital.

Studies of migrant domestic workers would further put “woman” at the centre of discussion, as domestic work is highly feminised in nature and its practitioners are overwhelmingly females. With globalization being a gendered process, these studies try to examine the racial, cultural, and class issues accompanying these migrant workers in their receiving countries, as well as the problems created at home as a result of this migratory process (Cheng, 2006; Lan, 2006; Parreñas, 2001).

With “woman” being at the centre, a major issue featured in these discussions includes the care deficit problem in labour sending countries under the “international division of reproductive labour”. The problem sees a subjugated mother depart from the family to provide care to a host family located in a more economically advanced country. The work of Rhacel Salazar Parreñas is one of the best examples of such debate. Her book, *Servants of globalization: women, migration and domestic work*,

published in 2001 has documented the agony of family separation in the transnational outflow of labour, from the Philippines to Rome and Los Angeles, highlighting the pain suffered by children whose mothers have left home to work as migrant domestic workers, and the sense of dislocation suffered by these migrant mothers. In her discussion about the misery endured by these transnational families, she located a major source of pain in “socialized gender norms” that stress maternal obligations to nurture and provide care of various types to their children. A mother working and living away from home has effectively broken the ideal of the heterosexual nuclear family where the mother provides on-site, constant attention and care to the family members.

Parreñas’s description of international division of reproductive labour has inspired a number of other researches in the area. A recent study by Shu-Ju Ada Cheng (2006) entitled *Serving the household and the nation: Filipina domestics and the politics of identity in Taiwan*, portrays the lives of foreign domestic workers in Taiwan, exploring the nexus between nation-building and home-making, with the latter referring to the management of heterosexual families in both the labour sending and receiving countries. When discussing the sexuality of the Filipina domestic workers in her book, Cheng has positioned it as a perceived threat being guarded against by the heterosexual host families in Taiwan and an area for self-policing among the Filipinas.

Another recent example is the work by Pei-Chia Lan (2006) which aimed at investigating the complex dynamics of employment relationships of migrant domestic workers. *Global Cinderellas: migrant domestics and newly rich employers in Taiwan*

discussed a variety of topics that includes the transformation of family lives, especially in the labour-sending families. She gave a detailed picture of how the families struggled to provide care for their children and to maintain their houses in order whilst mothers were working abroad in Taiwan as foreign domestic workers. Commenting on the reasons why these women were working abroad, Lan cited several factors that were not necessarily related to the financial imperative that many associate with domestic workers abroad. One factor was the need to “search for autonomy and to escape domestic constraints” (Lan, 2006: 126). Another was the hope for “a ticket to an adventure in the global modernity” (Lan, 2006: 126). In the discussion, she insightfully pointed out that neither Indonesia nor the Philippines is the poorest country in Asia, but they supply a great number of migrants in this region. Lan’s assertion echoes with the findings of Parreñas on the hidden causes of migration which include liberation “from the demands and responsibilities of familism” (Parreñas, 2001: 64). Both propositions act as reminders that the stereotypical depiction of migrant domestic workers as mothers who, out of economic necessity, have to make the painful decision to leave their families for work abroad may be too simplistic to be inclusive or illuminating. In other words, migrant domestic workers may have other, more personal reasons, in addition to the financial imperative, to work overseas. Not all domestic workers are married or mothers and whatever their family situation, their personal pursuits are individual and may or may not be consistent with their idealized mother roles as transnational providers of care and financial support.

The brief review above is far from exhaustive; it only represents an effort to

survey some notable examples of studies that look at the lives of migrant domestic workers as part of the transnational flow of labour. On the whole, the scope of these studies has been restricted. While centring on “woman” in migration, they have unwittingly confined their focus to the conflict of roles between woman’s traditional role as the family care provider and her new role as economic provider. Such a depiction highlights the migrant workers’ roles as dutiful and docile mothers, wives or daughters, much more than their development of a measure of personal autonomy commensurate with becoming the family breadwinner. The personal needs of these migrant domestic workers, such as their sexual needs, are seldom looked at in detail, whether they are heterosexual, homosexual, or whether they follow other queer practices. In general, their sexuality is mostly discussed as a form of seduction to men, especially male employers whom they serve, thus undermining the well-being of heterosexual families as these household service providers intrude into the personal confines of homes.

In most countries, heterosexuality is the social and political norm. If not mandated by law, it is made compulsory by practice in accordance to the prevailing expectations of mainstream society. Migrant workers, being temporary residents in the host country, are often psycho-socially positioned half-way between their old homes and their new places of residence. While migrant workers are expected to honour their familial obligations of providing finances, their improved financial position and physical absence offers them the opportunity to live a different life from the one they were living at home. Coupled with the obstacles they meet in integrating into their new environment, they are, to varying degrees, left to their own devices in leading the lives that they want.

Thus, dutiful women who love their family members and send home money regularly can also choose to pursue their sexual desires in non-conforming ways.

In the essay “Queer Intersections: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies”, Martin F. Manalansan IV (2006) examined the historical and theoretical development of sexuality in migrant research. The essay criticized existing literature on migrant Filipina domestic workers for taking heterosexuality for granted, assuming the migrant workers to be heterosexual women and mothers. It further investigated how a queer perspective on sexuality can enrich gender and migrant research by unravelling under-examined assumptions about kinship, marriage, desires, and social roles.

Although there are few studies on the same-sex practices of Filipina migrant workers, Manalansan IV (2006) was able to cite an article written by Nicole Constable (2002), “Sexuality and discipline among Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong”, to suggest that the de-feminizing discipline measures imposed by the Hong Kong employers, such as a gender-neutral dress code, can be a starting point in examining the desire and erotic practices of lesbian Filipina domestic workers in the territory. The article by Constable talked about how Hong Kong employers imposed gender-neutral dress code of loose-fitting T-shirts and blue jeans as work uniforms onto the migrant domestic workers, in order to reduce their perceived attractiveness and sexual threat in the eyes of their heterosexual female employers. The imposition of this dress code, however, has allowed room for tomboy Filipina domestic workers to present themselves in a masculine way.

The article discussed the differences in perspectives between the female employers and the Filipina domestic workers on what constitutes decent and appropriate dress for a domestic worker. Such variations in opinion see the cultural differences between the Philippines and Hong Kong, as well as class-control faced by the Filipinas when they come to Hong Kong to provide domestic services within the intimate confines of local households. Constable has provided important contribution to the study of the sexuality of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, illustrating how class and ethnicity are involved in the practice of homosexual love. As the focus of this particular article is not on homosexuality, what is missing is a more in-depth description of the tomboys, their feminine partners, and how Hong Kong has increasingly served as fertile soil for lesbian relationships to develop. The pages given to this issue are too brief to sufficiently impart knowledge on the subject.

The Constable article discussed above is not her only attempt to describe the presence of masculine-identified lesbian Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. In a book chapter entitled “Dolls, T-birds, and Ideal Workers” (Constable, 2000), she documents the enthusiastic reception received by a tomboy (“T-bird”) as one of the ten awardees for an outstanding domestic workers contest. Describing the tomboy winner as having her identity “very much tied to Hong Kong”, Constable says in the article’s footnotes that the “identity may also be linked in a particular way to her life in Hong Kong”. Quoting several domestic worker informants, the author indicates in the footnote comment that it is “far more difficult to publicly assume or maintain” a T-bird identity in

the Philippines. Such a gender / sexual identity, however, “clearly conflicted with the ideals of employers, agents, and government public relations officers.” Although Constable has fallen short of analyzing the factors leading to Filipinas’ formation of tomboy identities (or engaging in lesbian relationships as a related development) in Hong Kong, her article has accurately suggested the anomaly underlying lesbian practices among Filipina FDWs in Hong Kong: while the city has not offered positive social sanction towards tomboy image or same-sex relationships, it has paradoxically provided other conditions favouring the growth of such practices among Filipina FDWs. With such a proposition, we can reasonably deduce that the Filipinas’ development of same-sex relations is much more than an exercise of personal agency in a pluralistic society. A more in-depth discussion on the social position of the Filipinas would be necessary in understanding how this alternative form of relationship can thrive among these migrant workers who are generally regarded as vulnerable to possible human rights abuses at work².

In their article “Globalization and its Intimate Other”, Kimberly A. Chang and L. H. M. Ling (2000), attempt to provide reasons for the choice of tomboy partners by local Filipinas during their temporary stay in Hong Kong. The authors briefly outline

² The Hong Kong government implements the “New conditions of stay” such that any FDW has to leave the territory within two weeks after the termination of her employment contract. As Filipina FDWs often have to pay a placement fee as high as three to four times her monthly salary before coming to Hong Kong, a return-home order would mean considerable financial loss to her. Such a policy therefore encourages FDWs to endure unfair working conditions and even human right abuse in order to stay on current employment. For a more detailed discussion on the policy, see Constable 2007. For a report on placement fees paid by Filipina FDWs, see "Overcharging by recruitment," 2007.

“tomboyism” in a two-paragraph section in their study of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. They state that many of the “tomboys”, the masculine partners in female homoerotic relationships, are attractive to local Filipinas because of their “strong” and “faithful” image, which is at the same time a challenge to the stereotype of Filipinas as sexually promiscuous. Feminine Filipinas in tomboy relationships often cited a strategic reason for their choice of partner: they wanted to enjoy the romantic intimacy away from home without breaking their marital vows during their limited residence in Hong Kong.

The need to balance the quest for intimacy and the obligation to remain faithful and / or chaste is a well-documented predicament of the migrant workers who are uprooted from their originating societies but are not expected to stay in the host country for long periods. However, we have to read this claim with caution. It is true that there is a need for Filipina domestic workers to avoid pregnancy while working overseas. Avoiding pregnancy, nonetheless, is not the equivalent of keeping “marital vows”. As homosexuality is explicitly condemned by the Catholic Church, same-sex love is not an acceptable replacement for heterosexual sex. Under such cultural and religious mores, the Filipinas claims of entering into same-sex relationships in order to stay faithful to their husbands, would appear naïve, if not ingenuous, way of side-stepping their genuine interest in homoerotic or homosocial relationship.³ Perhaps more importantly, these

³ In her ethnographic study of Thai female same-sex relationships, Sinnott (2004) cited informants who told her that an advantage of having sex with “toms”, the masculine partner in a female same-sex relationship, was that you would not risk scorn for adultery. However, given the different cultural and religious context in the Philippines, there is limited scope for the Thai case to be applied here as an argument for homosexual practice being a morally acceptable alternative to heterosexual relationship.

claims, which focused on Filipinas who have experienced fluidity in sexual orientations, failed to explain why homosexual relations were considered viable, or in some cases better, alternatives to heterosexual love. While it is true that there are Filipinas flip-flopping on their sexual orientations, there are others who are so committed to their same-sex relations that they refused to enter into heterosexual relations even when such chances offer a view to forming long term partnership. How do these Filipinas compare their homosexual relationships with the heterosexual ones is an interesting area that has yet to be thoroughly studied.

The description by Chang and Ling of the tomboys as “strong” and “faithful”, for instance, echoed with heterosexual ideal of a masculine lover who provides unflinching and long-lasting care and affection to his partner. However, as the tomboys are “strong” and “faithful”, would they be just temporary substitutes to their partners’ heterosexual counterparts back home? Or would they be able to turn the tables to cultivate homosexual relationships that strive and thrive in similar ways as one expects of heterosexual relationships? How these tomboys see their relationships and how they compete with men for women are interesting questions that could lead us to a deeper understanding of the tomboys, their partners, and the homosexual relationships they have formed in Hong Kong.

In an article developed from her Master thesis, “Women Loving Women: The Experience of Some Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong”, Marilen Abesamis (2002) has provided the thickest description of the lesbian relationships practiced by

Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong by far. Describing their jobs as deskilling and subject to humiliation from employers, the tolerance of homosexual practice by Hong Kong society has however allowed them room to foster same-sex relationships. Such relationships help the Filipina domestic workers to “exercise agency” and “reclaim dignity” and are part of their daily struggle against discrimination from their employers and Hong Kong society at large. Quoting the interviews of some of the Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong who were in same-sex relationships, the article provided a number of reasons for these Filipinas to enter into lesbian relationships, described the shock and pain experienced as some of them went through changes in sexual orientation, and suggested that their homosexual experience would probably bring long-term impact on their return home.

According to Abesamis, her study is important in the sense that it helps fill a gap in gender studies: the divide between the study of development issues (often in the developing world) and that of sexuality (often in the developed world). If this indeed is her goal, the study needs to show more persuasively how the Filipinas’ status as migrant domestic workers (as a development issue) impacted onto their practices of same-sex relationships (as a sexuality issue) in order to be an effective bridge connecting the two areas of study.

Abesamis highlighted the tolerance of the Hong Kong people towards homosexuality as a conducting factor to the practice of lesbian relations among the Filipinas. But with Hong Kong depicted in the article as a society rife with oppressions

and discrimination against migrant domestic workers in general, the tolerance and acceptance by the same society towards these women-loving Filipinas' sexual practices warrant further investigation and discussion. There is indeed a considerable degree of tolerance towards the Filipinas' same-sex practices in Hong Kong. Yet, contrary to what has been implied in the article, homosexuality is not a socially sanctioned sexual practice in the city. Tolerance in this case may be more related to the socio-economic status of the Filipina domestic workers than the general attitude towards homosexuality in the territory. As the Filipina FDWs are highly marginalized and socially excluded in Hong Kong, their same-sex practices are often perceived as irrelevant to the mainstream society despite the fact that their tomboy images (and thus the same-sex relationships connected to them) in fact run contrary to society's expectations (Constable 2000).

While the practice of same-sex relationship is an exercise of agency by these Filipinas that brings them emotional and sexual gratification, how these relationships can effectively protect them from or help them cope with the discrimination and humiliation they experience as a migrant worker in Hong Kong has yet to be discussed. Whilst the people in Hong Kong, foreign domestic workers included, enjoy the right of association and the freedom of expression, the advocacy of labour rights would appear to be a more direct and immediate answer to the difficulties the domestic workers meet at work. If these Filipinas need reassurance and support from romantic relationships while fighting for their rights, the choice of same-sex Filipinas, rather than men of similar or higher social economic status, demands further elaboration.

Scholastic attention on the same-sex practices of Filipina FDWs in Hong Kong is limited. But then if we widen the scope of our survey to include studies about Indonesian FDWs, we can at least find one more notable example. In “Lesbianism among Indonesian Women Migrants in Hong Kong”, Amy Sim (2010) notes that there is an increasing number of Indonesian FDWs who are openly lesbian, in contrast with the “near invisibility of lesbians in Indonesia”. She reports that the acculturation to homosexuality often began in the training camps in Indonesia, where the harsh conditions helped breed deep friendships. When explaining the conditions favouring the development of same-sex relationships after the FDWs have reached their destination, Sim cites the physical distance from home and financial independence as impetus for “destabilizing previously unquestioned arenas of power, definition of symbolic boundaries, and social and moral codes that govern behaviour”. It would be most illuminating if she could expound on the above statement such that we would know exactly how and what has Hong Kong contributed to the increasing visibility of lesbian practices of the Indonesian FDWs. According to Sim, there are a number of reasons for these FDWs engaging in lesbian relationships: some of them found the practice “trendy” or being an “alternative lifestyle” to a prescribed path to adulthood; some others engage in same-sex relationships as a result of strained relationships with men or as a measure to stay away from reproach from men. When homosexuality stands as a viable alternative, we would expect it to be comparable to heterosexuality and yet having its distinctive merits. Hence, it would be useful if we could learn more from the article on the nuanced differences between lesbianism and heterosexuality, such that butch and femme identities are unique and similar to, but not indistinguishable from that of the

heterosexual males and females.

The practice of homosexual love among Filipina lesbians, which has gained greater prominence in the territory over the last two decades, has become the blind spot in a number of scholarly works – and though there are articles that have briefly touched upon the issue, academic heed and more thorough discussion are still much needed in this regard. The lack of systematic study is one of the reasons for a general lack of understanding amongst both the Hong Kong public and the Filipina domestic workers who are involved in such relationships. This was confirmed by one of my informants, who, while very helpful in providing me information about herself and her partner, told me that she knew little about the topic in general and that all her knowledge of the subject did not go beyond the relationship that she was having at that time. This study of the gender identities of women-loving Filipina domestic workers aims to explicate how lesbian Filipina domestic workers make sense of themselves under the dominant cultural matrix through their same-sex practices in Hong Kong, which are intricately related to their sex, gender as well as ethnicity and social class in both the sending and receiving territories.

Theoretical Framework

I have chosen Judith Butler's theories on gender, sexuality and subjectivity as the theoretical basis of this thesis, drawing upon her insights presented in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) to frame the discussion on the field data that I have collected. The interviews that I have conducted and observations that I have made

in the field may not fully support Butler's arguments, but her ideas have helped shape my own arguments on the subject. The choice of Judith Butler is based upon, first, that she is widely recognized as an expert theoretician and primary authority on gender and sexuality, a subject that has gained increasing prominence since the 1990s. Second, she is also well acknowledged in her field for her concern for what makes a "proper" or "regular" human subject (Brady, 2011:1). During conversations with my informants, I have learned about the difficulties faced by some Filipina tomboys as they try to live like a "decent" and "proper" human being who is entitled to love and respect. Ali, a tomboy, stated, "I don't ask you to accept me as a lesbian. I just ask you to please respect me as a person." Ali's comments have highlighted her deprivation of respect because of her sexual practices. I hope that with the help of Butler's theory, I will be placed in a better analytical position to understand my informants with regards to their gender and sexual identities which are indispensable components of "proper" subjects.

Sex / Gender Construction Butler's sex / gender theory represents a critical departure from both the so-called essentialist and the constructivist points of view, as she insists that there is no subject before subject formation. To the essentialists, one's conformance to the sex / gender norms is a natural consequence of one's biological makeup. Both sex and gender are seen by the essentialists as stable and fixed, free from the influence of history or culture. The constructivists, on the other hand, see the fallacy in the essentialist argument, as gender norms vary from culture to culture, while the criterion for determining sex (by their genitals) seems universal across cultures. They therefore stress the role of society and culture in shaping the gender of the subject. A

person's anatomical sex, according to the constructivists, is a gender-free biological given upon which the society imposes gender attributes. Hence, gender is regarded as an add-on development forced upon the pre-gendered, culturally-neutral body via socialization. Since gender is determined by society and culture, gender norms vary between cultures and women from different cultures are feminine in different ways, as variably mandated by their societies.

If sex is a gender-neutral given, Butler (1990: 6-7) questions why women are almost always feminine and men almost always masculine. If, according to the constructivists, sex is a biological pre-given, organically unrelated to culture or gender, it cannot explain why we only have two genders, not three or four, mirroring the popular belief that there are only two sexes in humans. The fact that empirically, there are connections between one's sex, gender and desire leads us to conclude that sex is not as neutral as it seems, or, we may say sex is already gendered. The connection sex has with gender and desire is an artificial construct made to privilege and rationalize heterosexuality, making it compulsory to all. With the presence of homosexuals and people with non-conventional gender identity, however, we begin to realize that sex is not a cause of gender or desire. Far from being a truth, gender norms and their relationship with sex and desire are the effects necessitated by a preferred sexual practice (Butler, 1990: 22-23).

With the culturally mandatory order of sex, gender and desire, our understanding of sex is already tainted with the notion of gender. It is true that the body is a biological

given, but our understanding of the body is bound to be circumscribed by the cultural meaning of the body. Hence, there is no “innocent” body. Once a baby is pronounced as “girl” by the obstetrician (or predicted to be a girl with the help of ultra-sound scanning), the “girling” of the baby starts. Before that medical interpellation starts, the baby is not even seen as a proper human subject by the majority of people. (Salih, 2002: 77-78)

“Girling”, however, cannot be understood as the effect of gender as a standalone modality. Gender is so intricately related to class, ethnicity, race, and other attributes that it is “impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural, intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler, 1990: 3).

Butler (1990: 7-8) claims that there is no subject before its gender formation is a refutation against the theorization of the constructivists, whose theory implies the presence of a viable human being passively waiting to be constructed by society. Sex / gender construction, according to Butler (1990: 24-25, 142), sees the act and the subject come together as one in persistent recitations of gender norms. It is through the repeated recitation that the rendition of such norms materializes to gain its naturalized effect. In Butler’s own words, construction is “*a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*” (Butler, 1993: 9, emphasis in original).

Cultural Intelligibility According to Butler (1990: 16-17), in order to qualify as a viable subject, one must be understandable and recognizable by the dominant culture in the community to which one belongs, in terms of a number of

attributes, including sex. In order to attain such cultural intelligibility, the subject must conform to the gender norms prevailing in the society in its assumption of sex. Hence, sex is normative in the sense that it serves as regulatory ideal prescribing socially acceptable behaviours. The notion of masculinity or femininity in any given society, for instance, goes beyond an accurate and appropriate description generalizing the gendered behaviours of the sexes. Being masculine or feminine is indeed the governing and constituting effect of the guiding principles in gender, presented in the form of discursive practices. Any behaviour that contravenes the gender ideal but is commonly found among members of the male or female sex, will not be regarded as a feminine or masculine trait, but denounced as a sign of a failed women or failed man. The “juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent.” (Butler, 1990: 2, emphasis in original) is a summary that Butler gave on the relationship between gender norms and the intelligible subject.

Sex in this sense is not a static status enjoyed by a subject. It is, rather, the effect of a forcible recitation of regulatory norms, materialized via repeated gender performances (Butler, 1990: 33). Unlike a theatrical performance put on for a limited period of time, gender performance is a series of incessant acts reciting sex / gender norms in the self-constituting process of becoming a subject. The need for repeated performance or rendition of sex / gender norms shows that the materialization of sex cannot be fully attained in one single act (Butler, 1993: 2). In other words, the assumption of sex is unstable, it is a trial-and-error endeavour recurrently played to comply with and to actuate the sex / gender norms, in the process of qualifying as a

culturally recognizable being. Meanwhile, the authority of the norms is established in so far as they are being recited and abided by gendered subjects.

The Cultural Disruption In the course of defining culturally sanctioned subjects, the dominant sex / gender system not only produces viable subjects but also abject beings that are kept away from the realm of the subjects by rejecting their sex / gender identifications (Butler, 1990: 17). That is to say, when putting down a line delineating the realm for the subjects, a realm of non-subjects is simultaneously drawn out. In order to render the realm of subjects sustainable, abject beings have to be barred from entrance to maintain an internal consistency. While the production of abject subjects is necessary for the formation of viable subjects, the former's potential threat to the internal coherence of the realm of the subjects via cultural re-articulation provides an additional reason which warrants its exclusion and rejection (Butler, 1993: 3). This proposition helps explain the stigmatization of homosexuality under the patriarchal system which privileges heterosexuality.

Sex is performative in the sense that the performance comes before the performer. The performer only comes about with the repeated recitation of sex and gender norms. But this does not mean that gender norms are fully deterministic. In the course of the repeated recitations, possibilities of subversion are opened up in each and every citation through cultural re-articulation (Butler, 1990: 30).

Through re-articulating the unstable meaning of gender norms under appropriate

circumstances, the abjects of the hegemonic sex / gender system can create new meanings for these norms which may lead to an undermining or subversion of the norms' authority. Such disruption of the dominant order, which opens up new possibilities with regard to gender and sexuality, is done with proper citation of the prevailing gender norms. That is to say, one cannot just annul all the gender norms at will. Any change can only be realized through cultural disruption via reiteration and re-signification of norms (Butler, 1990: 29-30).

As naturalization is privileged in the sex / gender system, the consistent playing of either set of gender attributes, being masculine or feminine, is necessary in delivering a compelling performance. Gender performativity cannot be operated on mere voluntarism as the assumption of sex is compelled by the regulatory mechanism of heterosexuality (Butler, 1993: 12). As said, the exercise of agency in destabilizing the dominant social norms, therefore, can only be enabled and actualized in the norms' recitation. The apparent adherence to the heterosexual norms by the "butch" and "femme", for instance, can open up possibilities of disrupting these norms by bringing about their internal consistencies and redefining the significance of these norms (Butler, 1990: 123).

The Present Study Butler's theory helps us see the political nature of naturalization in sex / gender, demystifying the coherence between sex, gender and desire. We understand from Butler that homosexuals are no more unnatural than heterosexuals as the seemingly indissoluble connection between sex, gender and desire

in the mainstream heterosexual context is just a cultural construction, fallacious but forcible on human subjects who have to gain cultural intelligibility. In the Philippines, heterosexuality is privileged as the normative gender and sexual practice. Such gender norms regulate human subjects insofar as women-loving Filipinas are obliged to persistently perform their gender with reference to the idealised masculine or feminine partners in heterosexual relationships.

In part to share the cultural supremacy and authority of heterosexuals, the Filipino butches very often try to naturalise their masculine gender behaviours and same-sex desires as inborn traits, modeling on the gender and sexual behaviours of heterosexual males. Failing to comply with this hegemonic naturalisation discourse, the so-called “non-pure” lesbians, who are newly converted tomboys with previous heterosexual experience, and were almost always feminine when they were in the Philippines, suffer from discrimination in the local Filipino community. Without a stable and innate masculine essence, these “non-pure” lesbians are frequently accused of faking their gender and sexual desires with ulterior motives.

However, Butler’s theory helps us to understand these “non-pure” lesbians. Bearing in mind there is no choosing subject, her theory of gender performativity further enables us to see the possibility of gender fluidity under certain enabling conditions. As being female does not necessarily imply femininity or desire for men, a Filipina could play the feminine role in heterosexual relationships in the Philippines but pursue same-sex relationships as a masculine subject in Hong Kong, if and when conditions in the

new locale could help truncate her past, allowing her to assume a gender afresh.

In the assumption of sex, Filipino butches and femmes are mandated by their pertinent cultural imperative to incessantly cite and re-articulate the unstable meaning of the fallible gender norms. Although these hegemonic gender norms are not as natural as they appear, the homosexuals have no ways to annul them and practice gender outside of the existing regulatory regime. However, when heteronormative gender norms are appropriated under different context, that is, among the Filipina women-loving-women in the present study, their internal inconsistencies and fallacies can be easily revealed, leading to a possible cultural disruption of the heterosexual paradigm. In the chapters that follow, we can see the fallacious nature of the dichotomous representation of genders as well as the successful performance of masculine roles by Filipinas with an absence of biological male attributes.

Research Method

Through the network of a Filipina with whom I am in regular personal contact, I have access to two Filipino groups in Hong Kong. One is a native group whose members come from the same island in the Philippines and the other is the Filipina lesbian group Lesgroup⁴. Members of Lesgroup have more exposure to lesbian issues, as the group provides education seminars to its members and participates in LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) activities such as the IDAHO (The International Day Against Homophobia) Parade.

⁴ All the names of persons and organizations used in this thesis are pseudonyms to help keep my informants anonymous.

For more than a year I visited these Filipinas and joined their activities approximately once a month, indicating to them my interest in their lives. When they gradually got used to my presence and when I had done with the coursework part of my studies, I began to pay weekly visits to the field – mainly Chater Road at Central, as well as Admiralty Garden and the flyover at Admiralty in Hong Kong – for approximately six months, conducting ethnographic research more actively than before. I continue to visit them once a month or bi-monthly after the bulk of the field data collection has been completed.

In the field, I conducted participant observation of the two groups of domestic workers' gendered behaviours when I took part in their activities. Through general conversation, I gathered information from a considerable number of their members, regardless of their sexual practices. Most of the time I spent with them was used for relationship building, rather than active data collecting, though, and such relationship-intensive interaction was useful to my study as it laid the foundation for me to conduct in-depth interviews in an atmosphere of trust and friendship.

I approached members and ex-members of these two groups who were having or had experiences in same-sex relationships, recruiting them for interviews. As the present study is a small-scale one, I chose my informants for in-depth interviews selectively, with the aim of recruiting a good mix of butch, femme, “pure” (i.e. masculine-identified women who had experienced homosexual relationships only) and “non-pure” (i.e.

masculine-identified women who had experienced both heterosexual and homosexual relationships) lesbians. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 informants, with each interview lasting for one to five hours. These ten interviews were conducted in an informal, semi-structured, and open-ended way. The purpose of the research was explained to the informants and they were encouraged to talk about their own experiences in homosexual relationship and to give their comments and understanding about such relationship, under the condition of anonymity. All these interviews were conducted under a friendly and sympathetic atmosphere in order to encourage informants to tell their stories.

Positioning of the Researcher All the data collected in this study are extracted from the interactions between the researcher and the informants. As the researcher is a major research vehicle in the study, her social background has inevitably exerted an impact onto the data collected. We therefore have to understand the positioning of the researcher to contextualize the research findings.

Sexuality. Before embarking this research study, most of my understanding of lesbians was from a post-graduate class on gender and from several articles on the subject. I have no personal experience of homosexuality; none of my friends had “come out” to me as a lesbian, nor discussed their same-sex practices with me before I started working on the project. I chose the topic because I am interested in people’s life experiences and because I considered that a study on the sexuality of the Filipina domestic workers would add to the existing body of knowledge on the lives of this large

group of migrants in Hong Kong. The choice was made without understanding the difficulties my potential informants might face in discussing their sexuality, especially in front of a heterosexual researcher. However, once I made my choice of subject known I received useful advice that helped me to see my naivety. I entered the field with some trepidation about my ability to build relationships with my informants and how much I could ask about their personal lives without excessive invasion of their privacy.

The experience, however, was much smoother than I expected. First, the Filipina lesbians do not stand out as a separate social group within the local Filipino community. As the partners of these tomboys generally appear no different from heterosexual women, there is much interaction between the two groups of Filipinas. I gained access to Filipina lesbians and was accepted into the Filipina lesbian group with less difficulty than I had expected, after making my intentions known. Second, many of the Filipinas I met in the field mistook me as a tomboy lesbian as I usually wore short hair, black T shirts and trousers. There appeared to be a marked difference in how Filipinas and local Chinese women presented themselves in society and I had to explain to my informants my gender identity to prevent further misunderstandings. While I felt that I was misunderstood, the assertion was an indicator of the rapport that I had developed with my informants. So I was welcomed to this new world in spite of my own sexual identity.

As a heterosexual researcher, I felt obliged to study and present the homosexuals sympathetically, avoiding being judgmental to a marginalized and stigmatized group struggling for survival in the dominant social / cultural system. Hence, I am interested in

the loving and meaningful aspects of this group of lesbians' relationships. Impressed with the great contentment enjoyed by my femme informants, I have gladly highlighted the more flexible and reciprocal gender relationship between butch and femme as an important finding of this study.

Cultural Background. The biggest general stereotypical assumption that Filipinas have about the Hong Kong Chinese is that they are rich, and more important socially than the FDWs. As a researcher, I presented myself as a friend but my position as a member of a perceived privileged group acted as a barrier to in-depth friendship. As well as being a researcher who has the privilege to study their lives, I am a Hong Kong Chinese woman with a middle-class background, and the employer of a Filipina domestic worker in a city more economically advanced than their own. Although my position presented obstacles to profound friendship with members of the group I was researching, it helped me to gain access and acceptance within the group. As social underdogs, my informants were pleasantly surprised to see a researcher who is interested in their lives. They are also impressed with the "down-to-earth" attitude of a Chinese (employer) who is willing to sit down on the kerb sharing food with them.

However, my privileged social position might have inhibited my informants in their display and revelations of romantic / sexual practices to me. Although I made my liberal attitudes towards homosexuality clear, my marital status as a married woman with a child places myself as a representative, or personification, of the mainstream society where heterosexual family values are upheld. I therefore should not be surprised if the

Filipinas sensed, rightly or wrongly, the limits of my values. One of my deeply held beliefs, which bears resonance to the mainstream sex / gender values in Hong Kong and in the Philippines, is that meaningful relationships should all be long lasting. It might be more than a co-incidence, therefore, that a number of my informants emphasized the duration of their relationships. I learned both during and after the interviews that some of the informants had overstated, either by accident or design, the length of their relationships and understated the number of partners they had. All my informants presented themselves as devoted, long term partners, in current, stable relationships or as unattached women seeking life-long partnerships.

It would appear that both I and my informants were avidly creating common ground with each other. When I was trying to win their friendship, I tried to show them my acceptance towards their alternative sexual practices; when my informants were trying to win my friendship, they tried to show me how close their relationships were to the heterosexual ideal. As a marginalized group holding transient occupancy on Chater Road or at Admiralty Garden during Sundays, it is likely that they adjusted their comments to the researcher who is a member of the host society, to keep lines of communications open, rather than challenging her points of view with their experiences.

Revealing Sensitive Materials. My personal background and my position as a researcher are established facts that have both aided and hindered my interviewing this group of Filipinas. But I do have a (partial) choice in the way I related to my informants. My training as a feminist researcher, which has constantly demanded me to

put my informants' needs first, helped me a lot. I told the women-loving Filipinas that I would like to learn from them and persisted in participating in their activities diligently. The effort I exerted in building relationships with my informants steadily yielded fruitful gains as initial reticence was gradually replaced by warm reception. Many of them willingly shared with me their private experiences, with an unexpected degree of frankness and intimacy, during the interviews.

Most people have a need to confide to others their experiences and emotions but at the same time they worry about how they may be judged by the listener and whether the information revealed will be used against their interests. As I am a researcher outside of their social circle, the Filipinas are willing to disclose to me their personal histories for academic purposes, under the promise of confidentiality. One of my informants even said that she had revealed more secrets to me than to her best friend, as she saw my interview as a good chance for her to reflect on her life.

Aside from the promise of confidentiality, I have also made conscious efforts to put the informants at ease with me both inside and outside of the interviews. Whenever I talked to them, I made sure that I listened to them attentively and sympathetically. The interviews I had with the Filipinas were littered with nods, parroting, laughter, and sometimes silences – these pauses were made when I saw the agony of the tomboys over their gender identities. When feelings were shared and understood, informants were willing to further disclose themselves. I see the interviews as opportunities to share emotional intimacy with my informants and my appreciation for each of them grew as I

got to know them.

The scale of my research is small. I have only interviewed 10 people although I have talked to many more Filipinas in the field. I refrained from engaging in snowball sampling and conducted interviews only with the people who had at least briefly talked to me for two to three times, as I wanted the interviewees to feel comfortable when revealing to me their sensitive personal experiences. All my interviewees, except Alice, had known me for a while before being invited for interviews. The interview with Alice was made when she was still the partner of Ali, on the eve of her return to the Philippines for a prolonged period. Alice later returned to Hong Kong and I learned more about her background outside of the interview that I had conducted with her.

Situated somewhere along the insider / outsider continuum, the findings of this study are the result of the negotiation between what I wanted the informants to say and what they wanted me to know. I set the main theme of the investigation and my informants responded to it with what they thought was relevant and appropriate. Informants made earnest efforts to provide useful information to help me with my study but what they actually said was shaped by what was seen as appropriate by them. The data collected is a co-creation between my informants and me. While not referring to this particular research, one of my informants has once aptly remarked on Facebook: “Don’t judge me by what you have seen in me ... what you see is only what I have chosen to show you ...”

Qualitative Research I have chosen a qualitative research method to understand the lives of the Filipina lesbian domestic workers in Hong Kong. As discussed earlier, the lives of same-sex Filipina domestic workers is a seldom researched topic. We know little about the issues involved in the topic, so theory-testing quantitative research which measures quantitative relationships among variables may not be the best method for the current study. Conversely, ethnographic research that generates thick descriptions showing the intricate relationships between and among ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality is the preferred choice in the exploration of this under-researched, sensitive subject. It is believed that by listening to the Filipinas' life stories, it would be easier to contextualize the subject matter in which different variables are so interwoven that it would be difficult to measure the strength of each one of them quantitatively.

Table 1, on the following two pages, shows the personal information of the informants. The data in the table mainly focus on the informants' gender identities and sexual experiences, with their group affiliations indicated as additional information.

Table I: Demographic Data of Participants in In-depth Interviews

Pseudonym	Gender Identification	Relationship Status	Affiliation
Adam	Masculine-identified	Separated from husband in the Philippines. Had homosexual relationships in Hong Kong.	Lesgroup
Ali	Masculine-identified	Had experiences in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. In a now defunct homosexual relationship during the time of interview.	A native group
Alto	Masculine-identified	In a homosexual relationship.	Lesgroup
Nat	Masculine-identified	Was single. Began a homosexual relationship during the course of the research.	Lesgroup
Yoesman	Masculine-identified	Separated from husband in the Philippines. Now in a homosexual relationship.	Lesgroup
Zenith	Masculine-identified	In a homosexual relationship.	Lesgroup
Alice	Feminine-identified	In a now defunct homosexual relationship during the time of interview.	A native group

(Table 1, continued)

Emilia	Feminine-	Separated from husband in the Philippines. Now in a	Lesgroup
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	identified	homosexual relationship.	
Evelyn	Feminine-identified	Had experiences in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Now in a homosexual relationship.	A native group
Teresa	Feminine-identified	Separated from husband in the Philippines. Had a homosexual relationship in Hong Kong. Now single.	Lesgroup

The structure of this Thesis

After presenting an overview of the thesis in Chapter One, Chapter Two gives an account of the Filipinas' practice of lesbian relationships in Hong Kong, with respect to their socio-economic status in the host city (that is, Hong Kong) and the originating city. Culturally situated half-way between their country of origin and the city of destination, the Filipinas are partially suspended from their family network, making alternative sexual practices easier, as new possibilities opens up with their employment.

Beginning with a brief discussion on the conventional understanding of sexuality and gender in the Philippines, Chapter Three provides with a thick description of the gender behaviours of the Filipina femmes and butches in same-sex relationships. With data collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews, this chapter aims at portraying the gender roles of the femmes and butches, and the dynamics between the masculine and feminine partners in a relationship.

Chapter Four focuses on the negotiations made by the tomboys with regards to

their female bodies, their masculinities and in some cases, changing sexual orientation. The gender-inverted tomboys, rather than their feminine partners, are more susceptible to social criticism for their perceived gender misperformance. This chapter also examines the significance of masculinities and stable sexual orientation to these masculine-identified tomboys, against the Filipino concepts of sex and gender which privilege naturalization.

Chapter Five concludes the thesis with the significance of the study, research summary, major findings, and recommendations.

Chapter Two In-Between Hong Kong and the Philippines

Aptly described by Butler (1990: 3), “gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities,” the practices of same-sex relationships by the Filipina FDWs in Hong Kong are bound to be entangled with their unique socio-economic positions in the territory and in the Philippines. These Filipinas are situated in-between the sending and the receiving societies in which their socio-economic status is vastly different. Prompted by a gap in development and standard of living between Hong Kong and the Philippines, the Filipinas travel to Hong Kong to obtain employment as domestic workers. The current minimum allowable wage of the FDWs is low by Hong Kong standards. But that amount is comparable to the earnings of professionals back home. Therefore, Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong are often marginalized and invisible but in the Philippines, this same group is seen as upper middle-class by their fellow nationals, enjoying elevated standing and greater negotiation power in their families. Apart from the money they earn, these Filipinas also benefit from Hong Kong’s civil liberties, which allow them room for various pursuits, including same-sex relationships. Filipina lesbians in general practice their alternative relationships here with greater social tolerance and less personal fear than in the Philippines. Such social liberties have significantly impacted their gender identities as, for example, one of my informants told me that her masculine appearance came to a “full bloom” in Hong Kong. This chapter examines how the liberal structure of the host city, together with the Filipinas’ new socio-economic status in the Hong Kong and in the Philippines, confers freedom to Filipina FDWs in their lesbian practices.

The Distant Host City

For approximately half-a-year in 2010, I went to Chater Road in Central Hong Kong, every Sunday for my research. In that pedestrian-only area, Filipinas ate, drank, and chatted with their friends; lovers here and there held hands, hugged or leaned onto each other. The public display of intimacy among Filipina women-loving women was a familiar and accepted sight in Central. Pageants and contests searching for outstanding lesbian couples or handsome tomboys have been held from time to time in the Filipino community in Hong Kong. The visibility of lesbian relations among Filipinas in Hong Kong is said to be a contradiction to the practice of lesbian love in the Philippines where lesbianism is considered a deviant orientation and such relationships are taboos, and therefore usually conducted in secret. Abesamis (2002), who studied lesbian relationships among Filipina FDWs in Hong Kong, concluded that “[t]omboy’ relationships are flourishing ... Filipina tomboys have found a home in HK.”

My informants also agreed that the practice of lesbian love among Filipina FDWs is gaining increasing prominence in the territory. Alice told me how she witnessed the trend:

[B]efore, I worked here the first time with a British employer, I didn’t notice there are tomboys anywhere. It was not very rampant then. ... My first job here was from 1995 to 1997. ...

I was really surprised when I came back [after a 7-year break] to work with a Chinese boss. That’s when I noticed and – Wow! How come it’s all open and everywhere? With the Indonesians, with the Filipinos ... I was just so surprised

that so many girls were now tomboys ... I was so surprised. I don't know why.

But as none of us can observe the world with an omniscient point of view, in a way we all see with a tunnel vision. Nobody can say for sure when the phenomenon started to become visible or popular. While Alice said she had not noticed any Filipina tomboys in Hong Kong in the late 1990s, a now-defunct Hong Kong-based magazine for the Filipinas, *Tinig Filipino*, had talked about the increasing visibility of tomboy relationships at that time. (Eronico, 1994 as cited in Constable, 2002) Most of my informants agreed that the phenomenon was becoming increasingly discernible. Zenith, leader of a local Filipina lesbian group, described the Filipino lesbians of today as “[having] started to come out and be proud”, unlike the great majority of those in the 1980s who “were closet lesbians”.

The increased visibility of Filipina lesbians among the local Filipino community, however, has not brought about a proportionate increase in the interest in their lives by their host community in Hong Kong. After a nervous outcry by a local employer on the popularity of tomboy relationships among the Filipina FDWs in an English newspaper in mid-1990s (Ching, 1996), there have been few subsequent press reports on the issue. The lukewarm response to the topic is especially pronounced in the local Chinese press.

In 2001, the local Chinese newspaper Oriental Daily News (ODN), reported on the research findings by Abesamis on the pervasive practice of lesbian love among the Filipina FDWs in Hong Kong. ("Lesbian practice popular," 2001) While The ODN is a

daily that very often carries sensational stories, it only devoted 400-plus words to this potentially salacious item of news. On top of the story's brevity, the paper did not run any sidebar report to give out details on how Filipina FDWs carry out their same-sex relations. It is also worth noting that no other local dailies aside from the ODN reported the findings of such a research on the Filipino residents in Hong Kong.

The media's almost apathetic attitude towards the Filipinas' lesbian practice should not be seen as an open acceptance of lesbian love in general. Nor should we regard the topic of lesbian practice in general not to be of public interest. Hong Kong society is not generally open to homosexuality. To quote directly from a government-commissioned survey conducted in 2006 (MVA Hong Kong Ltd, 2006), 38.9 per cent of the surveyed agreed that "homosexuality contradicts the moral of the community", and 41.9 per cent disagreed that "homosexuals are psychologically normal people". In Hong Kong, homosexuality is still seen as a taboo which is often discussed clandestinely as gossip and scandals – and this is how the issue of homosexuality among migrant domestic workers is usually discussed on cyber forums. But lesbian practice is just one of the many different topics local employers talk about online. Same-sex relationships are of less concern to local employers than work attitude and competence. It seems that local employers are much more interested in the services the FDWs provide than in their private lives. Employers use work performance, much more than sexuality, as criterion to judge their FDWs.

The limited public discussion on the same-sex relationship among the Filipina

domestic workers can hardly be seen as an open embrace to the practice. Rather, it is the community's "turning a blind eye" to the phenomenon. Local scholar, Lo (2008), held that the Hong Kong community is markedly insensitive to the lives of non-Chinese ethnic minorities, which make up approximately five percent of the local population. Lo wrote that in view of the strong presence of its former and current sovereign states, the United Kingdom and the People's Republic of China respectively, the Hong Kong Chinese has a pressing urge to let its underrepresented and marginalized voice be heard. But in so doing, Hong Kong has failed to address and articulate the demands and aspirations of the various ethnic minorities in the city.

Hence, the non-Chinese are seldom seen as Hong Kongers. In everyday life, whether one is regarded as a Hong Kong citizen is neither judged by how long he or she has lived in Hong Kong nor his or her contributions to the territory. Instead, the person in question will be evaluated by his or her fluency in Cantonese, the mainstream local dialect, and whether he or she lives a mainstream Hong Kong Chinese lifestyle. Any person failing to live up to such standards will be seen as a non-local and thus becomes invisible to the local Chinese population. Under such criteria, the Hong Kong Filipina FDWs are seen as non-locals. What is ironic in this case is that some of the Filipinas are employed for their fluency in English to help provide an immersion environment for their employers' children to learn this foreign language. These Filipinas are thus not encouraged to learn the local dialect, which would greatly help them to move around in the city, interacting with the local Chinese.

Apart from ethnicity, the Filipinos are further marginalized by their class, as it is perceived by the local population. The great majority of Filipinos in Hong Kong are Filipinas, working as FDWs who are confined to the lower rung of the social ladder. Migrants from poor countries like the Philippines earn meager salaries from least favoured occupations. Their lives offer neither resonance nor goals to the local population. The conservatives among the locals have a bigger reason to remain blind to the lives of these migrant workers from the developing nations than those coming from the developed world to work as executives or professionals in the territory. In Hong Kong, immigration legislation mandates FDWs to work as live-ins, rendering them vulnerable to exploitative working conditions, like long working hours and a lack of proper or private space for rest, as policing the private domain of home is difficult. Labour law also excludes live-in domestic workers, typically FDWs, from the application of minimum wage ordinance under which the lowest hourly rate stands at HK\$28⁵. Instead, the minimum allowable wage of the FDWs is currently mandated at HK\$3,740 per month, in comparison to a Hong Kong worker who earns at least HK\$5,600 for working 8 hours a day, 25 days a month.⁶ The salary we pay a FDW in terms of hourly rate is therefore much lower than that given to local domestic workers who are not required to live in their employers' home. The exploitation of migrant workers in this free economy is made possible by the differences in economic strength and opportunities between the sending and receiving societies. The exploitation brings us economic and other gains but it is an inconvenient fact that we do not want to face as

⁵ The revised statutory minimum wage rate of HK\$30 per hour will come into force on 1 May 2013.

⁶ Other extra costs that an employer of FDW has to shoulder include a bed-space, food, medical and life insurance, as well as a round-trip plane ticket to the FDW's place of origin in every two years.

it contradicts the values of justice and equality cherished by many of us. If we seriously consider how we deprive the migrant workers of protection and how such a lack affects their lives, we are more likely to admit that we have an unfair advantage over them. By refraining to understand or to imagine how the marginalized lives, the conservative locals can comfortably hand down to them 3D (dangerous, dirty and demeaning) jobs for which we are unwilling to pay a good price. Another strategy that conservatives use is to exclude the FDWs from our community economically, socially and culturally, justifying their small salaries with the low standard of living in the Philippines and ignoring the fact that these migrant workers are in fact living in Hong Kong where the standard of living is high. In other words, the importation of FDWs with a low minimum allowable wage is part of the systematic exclusion we devise to check their assimilation into our society.

In line with the local sentiment that FDWs are not part of the mainstream society, the immigration law of Hong Kong also prevents them from gaining citizenship in the territory. In Hong Kong, the work and stay of FDWs is not a qualifying criterion to becoming permanent residents. While other migrants who “ordinarily reside” in the city for 7 years are eligible for application for permanent residency, FDWs (Filipina domestic workers including) are currently prohibited to earn citizenship irrespective of the length of their stay and work here. This position was successfully challenged in 2011 but the Hong Kong Court of Appeal overturned this decision in the following year amid local fears of mass immigration and strain on local resources. By the prevailing immigration policy, Filipina domestic workers are not meant to be integrated into Hong

Kong by virtue of the fact that they are FDWs.⁷

The more conservative members of society frown on masculine women who transgress the gender divide and pose a potential threat to the existing patriarchal structure of society. Likewise, lesbians are generally seen as a latent danger to the patriarchy because of their non-conforming sexual preference. However, as Filipina domestic workers live in a separate society from the rest of Hong Kong population, their alternative lifestyles are unlikely to have any profound impact or to threaten the local, patriarchal establishment. As a marginalized group with limited financial and social assets, opportunities for them to break into mainstream society are slender. They are neither role models to local women nor competent competitors to local men. The vested interests in the system have little incentive to criticize these lesbian FDWs for their sexual preferences as these practices do not impinge on the lives of Hong Kongers.

⁷ In 2010, three Filipinos and their families filed for judicial review to seek the right of residency in the territory. The High Court of Hong Kong has in 2011 ruled in favor of a Filipino domestic worker seeking the right to apply for permanent residency with her 25 years of service in the territory. The ruling has irked a large number of Hong Kong people who fear that the verdict will open the gate to Filipina and Indonesian migrants, leading to an enormous welfare burden onto the local economy. Subsequently in March 2012, the Court of Appeal overturned the ruling of the High Court. The Filipino concerned is planning to appeal to the Court of Final Appeal. However, The Department of Justice has requested the Court of Final Appeal to refer the right of abode case to the Standing committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) of China, seeking for an interpretation of the Basic Law. It is expected that the NPCSC interpretation, when formally sought, will provide mandate for the government to maintain its current immigration policy and reject time-qualified FDWs to become citizens.

Stranger in the Family

In everyday experiences, domestic workers are not considered part of the families that they serve. Whilst they live physically close, they are socially distant from the rest of the Hong Kong society. The psychological distance has, however, rendered ample space for the Filipina FDWs to pursue same-sex relationship, a practice largely seen as non-conforming by the mainstream society.

As argued above, the Filipinas' non-integration into Hong Kong is related to both their ethnicity and their class. Although living under the same roof, the host family seldom, if ever, sees its FDW as a family member. This is a professional, working relationship marked by physical proximity and by social distance that generally exists in the employer-employee relationship and that is increased by the class and ethnic divisions between the two cultures. There are certainly a lot of Hong Kong families who enjoy harmonious working relationships with their domestic workers. But such congenial ties emerge out of operational necessity more than a genuine concern for the FDWs. The multifarious nature of domestic work, when compared to other poorly paid jobs, calls for a high degree of versatility and coordination skills from the employee. The highly personal nature of the job also means that a blatantly antagonistic working relationship is counter-productive. The majority of employers, who are heavily dependent on their domestic workers for convenient housekeeping services, especially mothers who need child minding services in order to work outside the home, tend to facilitate positive relationships with their domestic workers to the extent that such relations are conducive to the services required by the employers.

In a research on the Filipina domestic helper – Chinese employer relationship in Hong Kong, Ozeki (1995) has described and privileged a kind of quasi-familial relationship between them. Such a relationship, in effect a superficial family play in which the employer assumes the role of a senior family member exerting authority over the domestic worker, is said to be an “equilibrium” between two fallible forms of relationship: the hostile relationship and the friendly relationship. An overtly exploitative relationship creates tension in the family, drives the domestic worker away, and eventually does harm to the family. On the other hand, a friendly relationship, which would raise the expectations of the domestic worker and lead to “a greater emphasis on their equality”, is also problematic. The quasi-familial relationship, however, is a play featured with a collage of ritualistic, symbolic elements without depth. And the essence of this play is: it can hardly lead to a real friendship, the boundary is usually drawn at the private matters of both the domestic worker and her employer.

“A”, one of my informants who described her relationship with her employer as “family like”, was once being interviewed by a local reporter working for a magazine which was renowned for its humanistic concerns. “A” trusted the reporter, revealed frankly her sexual orientation, and agreed to have her pictures run on the periodical. The feature report, which was highlighted as the cover story, provided sympathetic glimpses of the love lives of FDWs. I bought a copy of the periodical for “A” who was equally pleased with the report. But then, when “A” returned to her employer’s home, she was astonished to see another copy of the same magazine lying on the coffee table.

Neither “A” nor her employer, who was said to be kind and understanding, mentioned anything about the cover story. The employer’s family did not ask “A” about her sexual orientation but the unease was obvious. Everybody, including the employer’s family and “A”, just pretended not to have read that particular magazine which ran the interview and photos of “A” and her girlfriend, avoiding possible embarrassment and even confrontation that might be brought about by the subject. Indeed, good fences make good neighbours. An employer gets along well with her homosexual domestic by keeping her at arm’s length. While “A” felt the objection to her lesbian practice by her boss, she was spared of any penalty. The lesson thus learnt is: do whatever you like, just not in front of me.

After-all, domestic workers are useful to their employing families and bosses do not wish to lose them or vex them unnecessarily. And FDWs themselves would like to believe that their employers are kind to them so that they can have good reason to provide highly personal services to the host families apart from making money. It is therefore to the interest of both sides not to tread on sensitive toes by raising issues such as homosexuality in order to foster productive work relationships. With such deliberate avoidance of personal clashes, FDWs have been granted a space to develop lesbianism in Hong Kong. To the extent that their lesbian practices do not tamper with the service quality delivered, employers do not want to interfere into their private lives. But without a positive reception of lesbianism, this attitude would mean that the FDWs’ lesbian practices will be steadfastly resisted by employers in cases (to be elaborated below) they

are seen as hindrance or harm to the employers' families.

It is true that some of the employers see the gender-neutral attire of their FDWs only as signs of modesty, as indicated by Constable (2002). Comparing to Filipino culture, there is a smaller demand for women to look feminine in Hong Kong culture. Although women wearing long hair are considered more feminine in both Hong Kong and the Philippines, Hong Kong women can wear their hair above their ears without being considered gender-trespassing. Working class women in Hong Kong, in particular, tend to wear short hair. It is however highly unusual for feminine Filipinas to wear any hairstyles short of shoulder-length. Hong Kong women who wear gender-neutral attire – loose-fitting tees and baggy jeans – are often considered simple and modest in appearance; but the same clothes on Filipinas would be seen as tomboyish. When Filipina FDWs wear what they consider as masculine costumes, their bosses may see those as gender-neutral clothes. However, as the territory has gained 30-plus years of experience in the importation of Filipina FDWs, more and more employers are aware that Filipinas who wear short hair are taking up deviant gender identities, and possibly homosexual practices. We can see on online blogs or forums veteran employers advising prospective employers not to hire short-haired FDWs as they are most probably lesbians.⁸

Tomboy Filipina FDWs do have a way to evade such social surveillance. An example can be seen in Yoesman, a tomboy informant of this research. She had worked

⁸ See for instance Little Horse. (2010, February 10). The annual return of Bear. Retrieved from <http://maggiemarket.myftp.org/wordpress/?p=958>.

out a strategy to exhibit her masculinity while shunning any possible penalty from her employer. When she was newly employed, she always put on feminine clothing like blouses, in a conscious effort to look womanly. But then, as time went by, she gained the trust of her employer and began to change her wardrobe gradually and cut her hair short little by little. The transformation was subtle enough to be acceptable to her Chinese boss, who probably was either not as sensitive about short hair as the Filipinas, or did not want to bother with the personal appearance of her FDW. The fear about being reprimanded for gender transgression still loomed among the Filipina tomboys, but the magnitude of the risk was manageable to them. Repression of their cross-dress desire is no longer a must to the Filipina tomboy FDWs. With tact and skill, a Filipina FDW can put on masculine clothes to make her feel more like a man without being penalized by her boss.

As said, the alternative sexual practices of FDWs will largely be tolerated to the extent that the quality of service they provide is not affected by their sexual orientation. With the well-being of their family members in mind, local employers with young daughters in their families might have more reservations employing tomboy FDWs. The highly personalized nature of domestic work means the worker can have easy access to the intimate confines of the employer's household. And it is in our culture that sexual minorities are often seen as sexually perverted, including implications of paedophilia. Young children are understandably more vulnerable to sexual advances, especially those from their caretakers. I have personally talked to an employer who refused to employ any Filipinas with shortly-cropped hair in order to protect her daughter from possible

molestation from masculine-identified, and probably homosexual, Filipina FDWs. There are other times when employers, whose FDWs are trusted to be honest and upright, fear the latter might bring adverse influence onto the sexual orientations of their own children. In these cases, employers will strongly refuse to give in to lesbianism practiced by their FDWs, giving rise to the possibility of employment termination.

But such worries have to be balanced against the risk of having a feminine domestic worker who can be seen as a lure to the male boss. The biggest worry female employers have over the sexualities of their FDWs is often about the possibility of them seducing or being seduced by their husbands. In a patriarchal society, women of a lower social status are often seen as easy sex preys to men of a higher social status. There are a number of scholarly studies on the fear and jealousy of women employers towards their female FDWs. And there are even more urban legends on how FDWs develop extra-marital affairs with their male bosses. Seen under this light, masculine-identified domestic workers can be a stabilizing factor in the families and welcomed by employers.

Employers' attitudes are mixed with regard to their FDWs' homosexual relationships. Living under one roof, the presence of the Filipina FDW as a stranger at home is sometimes too close for comfort. Local employers want to enjoy round-the-clock provision of household service but have much reservation opening up themselves to their FDWs and vice versa. The private lives of their FDWs are most often taken by default as taboo subjects that are not to be discussed. While many of the local employers do not celebrate homosexuality, they would avoid making comments on their masculine-

identified FDWs as long as they are providing good household services. Many Filipina tomboys have experienced discrimination for their gender transgression in the Philippines. When they were newly arrived in Hong Kong, they had experience of discrimination and feared that such transgressive behaviour might risk work termination and acted cautiously. But Hong Kong was much more liberal than they had expected. Filipina domestic workers have learned that so long as they do their work well, employers will not be too critical of their appearance or private lives. To the FDWs, the non-intervening attitudes of their employers on their mannish appearance are encouraging consent to their alternative gender practices. As Filipinas take their masculine demeanour as an indication of their women-loving sexual orientation, an acceptance from their bosses on their tomboyishness would mean to them a tacit approval of their same-sex practices. Many of the tomboy informants told me that their employers “should have known” but raised no objection to their sexual orientations, as they routinely put on masculine attire. Putting their minds at relative ease, they can carry out their same-sex practices and identify themselves as lesbians with more confidence.

Liberal Structure of Hong Kong

Hong Kong is not a place that warmly embraces FDWs by giving them large salaries or attractive benefits. They are, however, protected by law to enjoy basic labour rights and benefits which may not be available to FDWs elsewhere in Asia. Apart from benefits like long service payment and mandatory health insurance coverage, employers in Hong Kong are required to give their FDWs a weekly rest day, 12 days of labour holidays yearly, on top of at least 7 days of annual leave. Employers in general follow

the labour laws in granting holidays to their FDWs. The number of days off enjoyed by FDWs in Hong Kong is generous when compared with other countries in Asia.

According to labour activists (Loa, 2011), as Taiwan legislation allows employers to compensate FDWs for their labour on rest days, the great majority of foreign domestic workers in Taiwan cannot enjoy all the rest days they are entitled to have. There are only 5.5 percent of FDWs who can have regular days off on public holidays and weekends. And there are as many as 42.4 percent of FDWs in Taiwan who did not have a single day off in 2011. Meanwhile, Singapore has in 2012 announced a new rule, to be effective from 2013, which stipulates a weekly rest day for FDWs. But the rest day regulation is not mandatory as employers are given “the flexibility to compensate their FDWs with extra pay if the FDW agrees to work on their rest day” (“Weekly rest days”, 2012). Both Taiwan and Singapore enjoy a similar level of development as Hong Kong, but FDWs in these two countries benefit much less in terms of the number of holidays they enjoy. Elsewhere in Asia, countries that do not have a legislated rest day for FDWs include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, Thailand, and South Korea (“Weekly rest days”, 2012).

Hong Kong Filipina FDWs can gather with friends, remit money to the Philippines, or pursue their interests during their holidays. They can also spend time with their dates on a weekly basis. Developing a relationship here is much easier than in places where foreign domestic workers are denied of the rights to regular days off. Furthermore, given the right of association in Hong Kong, Filipina FDWs in Hong Kong are able to organize interest groups among themselves or participate in activities held by

these interest groups.

Filipinas enjoy freedom of association in Hong Kong and the territory sees the presence of a large number of Filipino associations. Membership in none of these organizations is essential to the survival of the Filipina FDWs in Hong Kong. Turnover at these associations is considerable and the Filipino community in Hong Kong remains loosely organized. If any one of these organizations exhibits hostile attitudes towards their homosexual members, the latter can simply quit the group to join, or to set up, another. As no group enjoys an absolute dominance over the other and forming new group is relatively easy, organizations with different or even competing values are present in Hong Kong. Lesgroup, a group to which a number of my informants belong, is a Filipina lesbian concern group in Hong Kong. Set up in the mid-2000s, the organization is one of the pioneer Filipino LGBT concern groups in Hong Kong and in the Philippines. The group organizes various activities to help build a positive image for local Filipina lesbians and to promote their visibility. The group has made good use of the freedom of expression permissible in Hong Kong, joining LGBT-rights parades and shouted pro-lesbian slogans openly on the street. An ex-member of Lesgroup, who left the group because of personality clashes with the other members, had said she was more confident when she was in the group.

The Need for Love

The distancing and fairly lenient attitudes of the employers and society, coupled with the fact that the FDWs are staying on foreign soil away from their significant

others, are major factors facilitating a growth of Filipina lesbian practice in Hong Kong. Filipina FDWs cannot bring their families or spouses to Hong Kong. Instead, they are bound by law to live in their host families, isolated from other Filipinos and together with a house of strangers. The loneliness felt by these FDWs in Hong Kong, where the local community is not ready for their assimilation, may prompt them to seek love and acceptance from their fellow countrywomen.

As Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong are subject to economic exploitation and social exclusion, many of them felt alienated in this city. “We are all vulnerable here”, is the generalization made by Teresa, an 8-year FDW in Hong Kong, on their lives in the city. Under such circumstances, Teresa said it was very comforting to have someone who cares about her. Living apart from her husband and three children who are in the Philippines, Teresa is now seeking a new relationship.

Indeed, while alone on foreign soil, Hong Kong Filipinas are longing for love. Becoming intimate with a stranger in an unfamiliar place can be both comforting and risky. Filipinas fear that they may face an abuse of trust by their stranger-turned-partners who might ask them for material possessions, when the FDWs now have better access to finances with their overseas employment. They thus have to seek love from someone whom they can trust. Filipino men or women, rather than people from other countries offer a logical choice to them. However, Filipinos in Hong Kong are predominately women and most are domestic workers. The 2011 Hong Kong Census shows that Filipino males are rare in the territory, making up only about 6.5 percent of all the local

Filipino population. It is definitely hard for the Filipinas to find suitable countrymen to be their lovers in Hong Kong. Although there are Filipinas who try to find love among similarly marginalized male labourers from South Asia in Hong Kong, some of my informants have expressed suspicions towards them, wary of their sincerity. The anxiety of these informants echoes with an *Apple Daily* article ("Filipina domestic workers prefer their own countrymen in mate selection," 1995) which said Filipino men are the most sought after lovers for local Filipinas. Indians and Pakistanis, on the contrary, are chosen by the Filipinas only for their easy availability.

But this does not mean that Filipinas have to settle for less desirable choices should they insist to partner with their fellow natives in Hong Kong. Some of the "girl" partners of tomboys have testified that tomboys can play the masculine role appropriately. Teresa, for instance, compared her tomboy ex-partner favourably to her husband in the Philippines. Teresa was disappointed with her husband, a complacent man who had "no real goal for our children." According to Teresa, her husband did not possess the "qualities" that she was looking for in a man. Her tomboy ex-partner, on the contrary, had done much better, "... she is much much much better than my husband: in the way of thinking ... in the bed, the sex..." Teresa said her ex-partner is "a lesbian with all the qualities I'm looking for as my husband ... so I go for her." In the next two chapters, how tomboys play their masculine roles will be discussed.

Parental Acceptance in the Philippines

Filipinas travel far to their work destinations. Barred by country boundaries,

Filipina FDWs are living in an entirely new world where they experience a partial suspension of the family network. The suspension is partial in the sense that the FDWs usually send home part of their salaries and maintain communications with their families who, however, cannot actively monitor and control them. The FDWs can, to a certain extent, hide their same-sex relationships from their families. Failing to do this, they can negotiate with their families for acceptance of their same-sex practices, with their heightened financial strength.

Increased Bargaining Power Filipina domestic workers come to Hong Kong as independent wage earners who do not depend on their families as an economic unit for survival. The labour they provide in Hong Kong earns them enviable salaries by Filipino standards and their families often depend on the remittances they send home for survival. Their families therefore can have reduced control over them, and have little knowledge of what they are doing in Hong Kong should the FDWs choose to keep them in the dark.

Moreover, FDWs' heightened earning power is translatable into bargaining chips when trying to gain approval or tolerance from their families on their alternative sexual behaviour. With the financial resources they have, they are in better positions to convince their parents in the Philippines that they are capable of leading a life comparable to one enjoyed by an ideal heterosexual family.

One of my informants, Alice, told me how the money she earned helped her gain

parental approval of her commitment to a lesbian relationship. Alice, whose father is a lawyer and whose siblings are all medical practitioners, has managed to obtain parental support for her choice of same-sex partner, despite their initial resistance. When asked if the professional background of her family helped ensure a more liberal attitude towards homosexuality, she gave a negative answer. She explained to me that it was the money that she brought home, rather than the family's own education levels, which facilitated the winning of the parental green-light: "I guess not. It's ... how you can feed your family. It's not whether you have a better, higher educational background. It's how you feed your family. The next day you have food on the table."

With the remittances that Alice sends home, she has gained more respect, and thus more negotiating power in the family. She was then able to persuade her family to accept her choice of partner at that time. And the knowledge that her then partner, also an FDW, was able to earn a big enough salary to start a small business in Hong Kong also helped to prove her ability in providing finances to Alice. While not being physically male, Alice's partner can shoulder the financial responsibilities of a man in a patriarchal society. The criterion for a good masculine partner here goes beyond biology: the partner is a man in the financial-provider's sense.

Children The Philippines is a country where the economy is not performing well and natural disasters are frequent. With an underdeveloped social security system, material and emotional support from the family is important for survival both during fair-weather days and in times of misfortune. In the Filipino society, aside from the

financial protection provided by her husband (plus the salary that she “supplemented”), a woman also typically pin her long-term hopes on the children that are expected from a heterosexual marriage. To the Filipinos, children are a major source of joy and retirement security, as grown-up children can provide them with companionship, care, and financial support.

The butch Filipina Zenith told me, “Some Filipinos believed that the destiny of every woman is to have a family, or else you will not have a future.” To her, it is extremely important to have children so that she will not “be alone” when she grows old. Her views have been echoed by a number of other informants. The fact that lesbians cannot have their own children with their same-sex partners is one of the major objections parents have over same-sex relationships. Adam, along with other informants, told me that there were tomboy lesbians who later in their lives adopted more feminine appearances in the hope of getting married to heterosexual men and having a traditional family of their own.

The solution adopted by many homosexual Filipinas, who refused to have children through heterosexual sex, is to raise their own families through adoption. Being migrant workers, these Filipinas are in a better financial position than before they left the Philippines and are therefore able to pay for the adoption process. With the help of their families in the Philippines who look after their adopted children, these women-loving Filipinas are able to raise children for whom they provide financial support from a distance.

Zenith, who had spent “a fortune” in the adoption process, described to me how her family started to accept her sexual orientation when she was able to adopt children with the money she earned from working in Hong Kong, “Now they said they are happy that I have ... gained the direction they want. Because even as a lesbian, I have built a family ... I will not be alone when I [laughed] go ...”

It is fairly common for tomboy Filipina FDWs to adopt children in order to help build a nuclear family. Alto, for example, has adopted her own sister’s baby boy. In an illicit arrangement between herself and the midwife, she had herself registered as the birth mother, leaving the father’s name blank on the birth registration certificate. Further, in order that the baby would develop a stronger bond with her rather than with the biological mother, Alto has arranged to have the baby taken care of by the family of her girlfriend, instead of by her own family.

Woman-loving Filipina domestic workers who were previously in heterosexual relationships also stand a better chance of winning custody of their own children as they are financially better off than their estranged partners. Yoesman, who has two children from a previous relationship, has successfully gained custody of her children using her improved financial strength. Yoesman arranged for a small part of her salary to be remitted back home regularly to support her parents who took care of the grandchildren. Yoesman willingly took over the custody and financial responsibility for the children from her ex-partner with a lofty sense of dominance, as she described it:

... actually I have taken that responsibility [for the children] out from him. ...
Yeah, I told him, 'don't think about the kids anymore. I have the money, I can send them to school. I can give whatever they want. You're free.'

With her parents' help, Yoesman was able to raise her children whom she said were "like our investments". And if they really are an investment, they are high-yielding, as the children were close to Yoesman and were expected to look after her in her elderly years. As her future was secured, Yoesman said her parents were more comfortable with her lesbian practice.

With the financial resources at hand, women-loving Filipina FDWs can build families that mimicking the heterosexual ideal of a reasonably high standard of living, as well as children, who are the defining elements of families. Further discussion on the procreative power of tomboys can be found in Chapter Four of this thesis.

Conclusion

Working abroad, Filipino FDWs are partially suspended from their families, and thus their societal network. The suspension is partial in the sense that while communications with families are usually maintained, their originating families have little direct control over them, as they are not under the scrutiny of their families and do not rely on them for economic survival. Being independent wage earners, they are very much standing on their own feet with their heightened economic power and are largely free from familial control over their sexual practices.

Societal control on these migrant workers is limited as they are not seen as part of the host community in Hong Kong. Their employers are primarily concerned with their work performance and their private lives are of little significance as long as they do not impinge upon the FDWs' job performance. They are very much left unnoticed and undisturbed in the territory. Local labor protection laws ensure FDWs in Hong Kong have enough leisure time to follow various pursuits and the freedom of association facilitates the growth of a large number of local Filipino groups in the territory, with no group dominating. Few, if any, of their fellow Filipinos in Hong Kong are in a position to penalize the deviant sexual practices of the Filipina domestic workers. Conversely, by affiliating with the pro-lesbian groups, women-loving Filipina domestic workers can find the necessary support for their same-sex practices.

Under a fairly lenient and distancing environment, Filipina FDWs are granted considerable autonomy in practicing transgressive gender behaviors and sexual practices. They can identify themselves with deviant gender and sexual identities more easily. Without explicit and immediate threats from the host society, many of them believe that they should be true to themselves and come out with pride. What began as the courageous move of a few Filipina lesbians has grown over the years, creating a lesbian-tolerant environment in the local Filipino community, facilitating the formulation of lesbian identities with relative ease of mind.

Chapter Three Gender Identities

With the physical distance from home and social distance from the host society, Filipina FDWs find more room to practice same-sex relationships in Hong Kong. However, as the Filipinas are not living in a cultural vacuum, their same-sex practices are highly influenced by the prevailing Filipino gender norms and ideals. As in a number of other countries, the dominant gender norm in the Philippines is heteronormativity, which holds that human beings are born into two sexes: men and women, each with their dichotomized gender traits and sexual preference. Butler (1990: 22-23) however told us that the binary, oppositional representation of sexes is a construction made to privilege heterosexual practice. The construction gains hegemony as it is naturalized as the ideal. Filipina lesbian FDWs draw on such norms when practising same-sex relationships, with one partner playing the masculine role and the other playing the feminine role. We should note however that “identification is not identity” (Butler, 1998: 227); the actual rendition of the heterosexual model under the lesbian context may differ from the ideal in subtle ways. Through close examination of their same-sex practices, we investigate in this chapter how the Filipina lesbian FDWs resemble or differ from heterosexuals in terms of their gender identities, on top of the fictitious nature of the gender dichotomy. Before we can further examine these issues, we first have to understand two interrelated Filipino notions with regard to homosexuality: gender inversion and naturalization.

Conceptualization

Gender Inversion When talking about lesbians with a Filipino in everyday conversation, we very often see a slippage of reference between 1) a woman-loving

woman who is masculine-identified and 2) a woman-loving woman regardless of her gender identity. In the Filipino community, the term, “lesbian”, is frequently used as an equivalent of “tomboy”, referring first and foremost to the woman’s masculine gender identity. Although many Filipinos are aware of the textbook definition of lesbian being a woman-loving woman, they still habitually restrict its everyday reference to the mannish woman, excluding her feminine partner. The partners of these tomboy lesbians are referred to as “girls” or “women”, rather than “lesbians”, in daily conversation. Although the terms “butch” and “femme” are also used among the Filipinos, their circulation is mostly restricted within lesbian groups.⁹ In addition to their limited circulation, the exact meaning of “femme” remains unclear aside from being the partner of a butch. For many Filipinos, there is no difference between heterosexual women and feminine partners of tomboys.

Tomboys and their masculinities are highlighted in the Filipino understanding of homosexuality. Such an understanding is related to the prevailing notions of gender and sex prevailing in Filipino society. The heterosexual gender ideal, according to Butler (1990: 22), “suggests ... that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire.” Hence, the deviant sexual desire of a lesbian necessitates a deviant presentation of gender identity, and vice versa. This helps explain why a gender-inverted woman is most often considered a lesbian. By emphasizing gender inversion, homosexuality in the Philippines is conventionally understood as a variant form of

⁹ Marin (1996) suggested the terms “par” and “mar” as Tagalog counterparts of “butch” and “femme”. But informants whom I have talked to are unaware of these terms and it is doubtful whether they are popularly used among the Filipinos.

heterosexuality: while the physical bodies of the partners are similar, their gender traits are distinctively masculine and feminine. Gender role-playing as masculine and feminine beings is therefore common, or routinely practiced, among Filipinas in homosexual relationships. As heteronormativity prevails, many of my informants even see the feminine – masculine duo as a norm that should be followed.

In the Filipino context, tomboy masculinity is often assumed to be the root of the Filipina's sexual preference for women. In other words, we can say that being a boyish girl is the first necessary marker of a lesbian. When this boyish girl matures, she develops sexual desires for women. Sexuality of the tomboys is often subsumed under her masculinity, with the latter forming the core of her identity. To the Filipinos, mannish gender behaviours in women, together with their same-sex desires, are expressions of their inner, unchanging selves. Masculine-identified informants repeatedly stressed that their lesbian practices are part of their personalities. The Filipino author Garcia (2010) also stressed that “gender identity among the Tagalog-Filipinos is premised on a concept ... that privileges depth, psychospiritual plenitude, and core-ness or *kalooban*.” Refuting Butler's theory of gender performativity, Garcia rejected the suggestion that gender role-playing is a performance without essence. Following his logic, we can deduce that a mannish Filipina in Hong Kong who wears men's attire and short hair is making a statement about her psychospirituality: her persistent masculine inner self.

Quoting Kennedy and Davis (1993), Trumbach (1997) described butch lesbians in pre-1950s Buffalo, New York as using masculine behaviour to mark their sexual

identity. These butches were likely to feel that they were born to be lesbians while femmes would believe they had acquired their same-sex identity through involvement with butches. Femmes in New York 60 years ago shared a similar femininity with other straight women and the two groups of women were both potential partners of butches. According to Altman (1996), the confusion between sexuality and gender is common among traditional societies, with the Philippines and Indonesia being examples. The term “third sex” is often used in the discussion of homosexuality in these old-style societies, referring to the gender-inverted persons who are expected to be, more than actually being, homosexuals at the same time.

Naturalization Naturalization is often used by the Filipinos as the overarching framework in understanding gender and sexual behaviour. Naturalization carries two meanings here. First, naturalization means using innateness to explain one’s gender and sexual behaviour. Second, when emphasising one’s gender and sexual behaviour as inborn, naturalization confers the implication that such behaviours are proper and morally acceptable. Naturalization is therefore a political tool deployed by heterosexuality to achieve cultural dominance, as put forward by Butler (1990: 126), “the category of sex and the naturalized institution of heterosexuality are *constructs* ... not natural categories, but *political* ones” (Emphasis in original). Similarly, naturalization is also a political tool used by the homosexuals to explain and justify their deviant gender behaviours and sexual practices.

Biological attributes, such as genetic traits, are often cited to account for

tomboys' alternative gender identification and sexual orientation. Masculine gender behaviours and same-sex desire towards women are seen as two sides of the same, biologically determined coin. Conversely, the "girls" or "women" are seen as making personal choices when they decide to take tomboys as their partners. Gender inversion in both sexes is said to share the same roots. My tomboy informants, Adam and Gabriel, both told me that some of their uncles and aunties are homosexuals. Using this logic, then, as the queerness runs in the family along the blood lines, one of Adam's sons is also gay.

"Prenatal influence" is another reason given to explain tomboys' alternative gender / sexual behaviour. While talking about the innateness of her being a masculine-identified lesbian, Zenith described to me how her mother, when she was pregnant with Zenith, loved watching a movie star who played an excellent cow-girl on screen. The implication is that Zenith's gender identification and hence sexual preference are somehow influenced by her prenatal exposure to a gender deviant female image.

What is common between hereditary and prenatal influence is that both are forces exerted onto the lesbians even before they were born, and hence are considered difficult, if not impossible, to change. As lesbians have no way to counterpoise these forces, they can only practice love in a deviant way. Innateness is of course a feeling shared by many lesbians when they are searching for their identities. But then it is also used tactically as the strongest mitigating factor in defence of the stigma attached to their non-heterosexuality. The use of naturalization to shield lesbians from social

condemnation for their gender identity and sexual orientation can be illustrated by a conversation between Zenith and I. When I suggested to Zenith in one of the interviews that homosexual practice was seen by some as an exercise of personal choice, she reiterated emphatically that she was born to be a lesbian and had no control over her sexual preference.

Raising her voice, she cited witnesses from her family as the strongest proof available showing that the non-mainstream gender behaviour and sexual preference were natural to her, and thus she was a genuine lesbian whom should not be discriminated against. This is how she used naturalization to provide justification and proof of authenticity as a lesbian:

Because I was inborn, I felt that I was inborn. You can ask my parents, you can ask my brothers and sisters. ... [M]y sister in Canada always tells them that I started small. That's why she also discriminates other lesbians - I also tell her not to discriminate. Because she said, 'I only know of somebody who is a true lesbian, and that's my sister, nobody else.'

To some of the Filipinas, "born tomboy" lesbians, whose gender behaviours have been boyish / mannish since childhood, are the "true lesbians" being sincere to their lovers. On the other hand, there are "fake lesbians" who adopt masculine gender behaviour and same-sex sexual orientation, in order to become intimate with women and take advantage of them for self-interest, and especially material comfort.

While such an understanding of “born lesbians” prevails, Ali, another tomboy informant, refuted such claim. Minding the differences between a boyish girl and a homosexual woman, and thus gender behaviour and sexuality, she argued against the idea there were inborn lesbians:

I don't believe you are inborn – you're already a lesbian [when you were born].

... When I was still small, I loved to do these ... boy things. But ... I don't think when I was still young, I was already a lesbian. ... Because we could not tell [if a] person is a lesbian [from] the way she plays ... unless [and until] this girl ... goes into a relationship. ... I choose to be a lesbian because ... I really want to be like [that]. ... I just want to be happy.

To Ali, being a boyish girl does not automatically lead to the development of same-sex desire. She just happened to have developed “emotions” towards women which she chose to act on but not settle for a less-satisfying heterosexual relationship, for the pursuit of happiness. While Ali has tried to delink gender behaviour and sexuality conceptually, empirically she strives hard to perform masculinity and is self-critical about her own performance. In other words, although Ali is actively trying to de-privilege naturalization as the only cause for lesbian practices, she is compelled by the notion of gender inversion to act like a masculine lover of a feminine woman.

Gender Identities

Given the prevalence of heterosexual gender norms, it is hard for the lesbians not to have at least part of their desires structured by them. As discussed earlier, it is

common for each of the Filipino partners in a same-sex relationship to assume a different gender role (masculine / feminine) in their relationship. Is this recitation of heterosexual norms by the Filipina lesbians a simple repetition, or copy, of their heterosexual counterparts? Or, have they created new norms or new patterns unique to their same-sex practices through the repetition? These questions will be answered by analyzing the information I gathered from the in-depth interviews and participant observations.

Butch Role-Playing

Are butches men? All the butches that I have talked to described themselves as “acting like men.” But who, among biological men, are their real role model? It seems unlikely for the tomboys to model on their countrymen as many of these tomboys have serious criticism of Filipino men in general for their character and behaviour. Bearing in mind that no man in their actual lives is perfect, these tomboys refrain from copying the behaviour of biological males. They are instead using an idealized concept of “men”, as opposed to their experience of most of the males in their home country, as their role model. With that frame of reference in mind, the tomboys go through an incessant process of trial and error, day in and day out, to act out the idealized “men” in their cultural norm.

The tomboy Zenith, for instance, has once criticized heterosexual Filipino men for their being “macho” and “conservative”. By “macho,” she meant men would like to be the masters of the house, “to be served... [such that] the partner [have to] do everything, all the household chores... They want their partners to be slaves in the

house.” These men are at the same time “conservative” as they do not support women’s liberation. Also a tomboy, Alto, denounced a substantial number of Filipino men on another front. She condemned those men whose wives had to earn their living by working overseas as just “cowards ... [who were] too lazy. They [were] not men.” Alto was clearly restricting the definition of “men” to those who could live up to social expectations of providing financial support for their families. The ideal man, who may exist in reality or just in fiction, is the role model for the tomboys.

These Filipino tomboys are trying to act like idealized men. But no matter how successful they are in their endeavours, they do not actually see themselves as men in the biological sense. This is evidenced in their choice of public lavatories. Unisex lavatories are a non-existent in Hong Kong; all public lavatories are instead segregated into men’s room or women’s room. When away from their employers’ homes during rest days, they have to use the public toilets. Given only two choices: the men’s room and the women’s room, these tomboy Filipinas usually go to the latter. Some insist on doing this when they are fully dressed up as men, and against other people’s allegations that they have gone to the wrong bathroom. These tomboys employed different strategies to tackle the hurdles they faced in order to gain access to women’s rooms.

Zenith was once being barred from the women’s room when she was trying to respond to an urgent call of nature. Unable to fight her desperate need, she resorted to using her anatomy to prove her right of access. She pulled the hands of the janitor to press over her own breasts, in order to show that she was in fact a woman. Harry,

another masculine lesbian, conversely did not even raise an eyebrow when she met a similar obstacle. She just straightened her back and told the janitor her sex as a literal fact, “Girl ah ma.”¹⁰ To Harry, despite her masculine appearance and behaviour, her sex was a factual truth that needed no proof. Therefore, she believed without a doubt that she had the full mandate to use the ladies’ room when needs arose.

On the other hand, there were also cases where the tomboys did not bother to argue with the janitors and went straight to the men’s room instead. But then unlike the case of Harry, they did this without the confidence and legitimacy conferred by their biological makeup. When I asked Adam, a lesbian who wanted to become a man, if she felt more comfortable going to the men’s room, she gave me a categorical denial. Even though Adam claimed that she did not consider herself a woman, she lacked the penis that she had tried in vain asking her mother to buy for her when she was small, so the women’s room was still her first choice.

Profile of a Butch. Gender role playing is common among Filipina lesbian partners. The masculine tomboy is expected to court her girlfriend actively, taking charge in the development of the courtship as well as the subsequent relationship. With the tomboy being an active pursuer of love, she asks the woman out, takes her to lunch / dinner, sends her flowers, chocolates and other presents. The woman can reciprocate but it is the tomboy who takes the initiative and responsibility. Below, I highlight some of the Filipino tomboys’ behaviours and the roles they play, in order to act like men.

¹⁰ The meaning of the phrase can be roughly translated as “Girl, of course.” It is spoken in a mixture of English and Cantonese, the latter being the mainstream local dialect in Hong Kong.

Appearance. A typical Filipino tomboy in Hong Kong wears short hair, as well as loose fitting shirts / tees and pants. Their hair is cut up to above their ears, or be allowed to grow to the chin, but it is rarely shoulder length or below. Those with longer hair sometimes hide it with caps.

Short hair is the most important marker indicating the masculine identification of a Filipina. Because of the stigma associated with being a tomboy, Nat was undecided about her hair when she was at school. During her college days, Nat cut her hair into two layers: a layer of short hair hiding underneath an outer layer of long hair. So Nat usually looked like the other girls. But when she tied up her long hair in summer, her shortly-cropped hair below was exposed. “Professors would get mad at me [when they saw my hair],” she said, indicating the significance of short hair in her culture and revealing the conservative attitudes of her professors. Yoesman, on the other hand, had much sweeter memories with her short hair. She realized her sexual orientation during her teens and decided to cut her hair short as part of the transformation into a more masculine image. Coupled with her decision to play basketball regularly, she became a sensation among her girl schoolmates overnight. “Oh my God! So many girls approached me that week. ‘Wow! I may be better this way’, I said.”

Loose fitting shirts and pants are also a must for the tomboys. Clothes that are wider in dimension somehow help visually enlarge the wearers’ bodies. A wide top can also help conceal the body contours of a tomboy, downplaying her breasts. A bra is

optional but a close-fitting vest is usually worn underneath a light-coloured shirt in summer, to help shield the lesbian's body.

I once accompanied a tomboy, Nat, to Christmas shopping. In the department stores, she browsed both men's and women's pants with interest, provided they were not tight on her legs. After choosing a pair of black pants, Nat did ask the shop assistant not to take them up too much, such that her pants were 2 inches longer than I and the shop assistant believed would be the right length for her. Her extra-long pants created creases and folds on her legs, making them bulkier, and perhaps, stronger visually.

Nat was much choosier with her shirt, picking only men's shirts. In a local garment store, a shop assistant gave Nat a shirt to try on after measuring the girth of her neck. The shirt, which I would say was not too tight on her, revealed the silhouette of her figure nonetheless. Seeing this, Nat asked for a bigger shirt immediately. She finally settled down for a shirt two sizes bigger than the first one that the shop assistant handed to her, with reference to the measurement of her neck.

Nat has a preference for clothes in black and white tones, especially during formal occasions, when she wears a tie. She also has some more casual tees, pants and jackets in earth and other darker colours. Other tomboys, especially the young ones and the dancers, did not always stick to such sombre colours however. One can also find lavender, indigo or light green on them, although these colours are less commonly worn by the tomboys.

Some of the tomboys also wear men's briefs as underwear. However, as live-in domestic workers, they usually have to hide these from their employers, as men's briefs are unmistakable sign of doing gender wrong. Other Filipina tomboys, on the other hand, have chosen not to wear men's underwear because of their ambivalence over their gender identities. Ali, for instance, had chosen to wear low-leg panties, something she called "panty-shorts", as her underwear. While she could not stand wearing the high-leg panties which were "too sexy" to her, neither could she wear men's briefs, saying the latter were "too masculine" for her. "It's very hard to balance actually," she said.

Leadership.

Financial Provider. Just as Filipino men are expected to be heads of families, tomboys would like to show people their leadership in order to play the role of an ideal man. One of the first things that a good man should do is to provide finances for his partner and family.

The tomboy Nat, for instance, saw herself as the ultimate provider in a devoted relationship. When asked whether her job or her love life was more important, Nat responded, "For me, [they are] the same thing ... How can I give something to my partner if I don't have a job?" As a tomboy lover, she maintained that the financial burden is an obligation of love which should rest on her.

Planner and Decision Maker.

Lesgroup is a Filipino lesbian group in

Hong Kong whose members consist of butches, femmes and other supporters. Many of its core members are butches and they are so visible that I thought there were more butches than femmes in the group when I was new to the field. But then Zenith, who is actively involved in Lesgroup, corrected me and pointed out that there were more femmes than butches in the organization. She attributed the visibility of the butches to the fact that

[They] want to be more superior to the femmes, so they want to be more active than the femmes. ... Yes, there is still this type of thinking: that once they are the butches, they [should be] more superior to their partners. We still, we still have to explain this to them that there should be equality in a relationship. There's no superiority. Because we always tell them that in a relationship ... your partner and yourself should be [equally] respected.

Despite Zenith's intentions to reform the group, the leadership role of the butches was still taken for granted by its members. When the group was preparing for one of its general elections, two group members, a femme and a butch, were running for presidency. While the femme had much more experience leading an organization, an insider told me that she was only an "also-ran," as members were unwilling to be led by a femme. In the end, the femme candidate withdrew from the race, citing her busy schedule. Her withdrawal was not met with any objection and her butch counterpart won the top seat uncontested. In this case, the superiority of the butch is not earned through her ability or contributions to the group, but her domination over the femme assumed in gender stereotype.

Those tomboys who are not actively participating in organizations can also demonstrate their abilities in giving advice and direction to their partners in alternative ways. The tomboy Ali, for instance, told me that she saw her role as a problem-solver in the relationship. She loved to provide solutions for her partner, measuring her own masculinity in the process. Ali said:

My feelings [are] ...you are my partner, you tell me your problem and then I could help you solve the problem. I feel like, I'm a boy... But it seems like if there's a problem that I cannot solve, that's a very, very big frustration with me.

Being the brains seems to be a further step in the assumption of masculine role than minding the outward aspects of one's personal presentation. The masculine-identified lesbian, Yoesman, admitted that when she was young, she thought that being a tomboy lesbian was about giving oneself a masculine look. But as she matured with age, she believed that she had a much bigger part to play as a tomboy. Here is how she elaborated her conviction in desire, appearance, and gender role:

For me, before I thought being a lesbian is enough with the look. That you have to be a man in look - but it's not. ... First it's the strange feelings towards the same sex. [Then] you can say you're a lesbian, of course. ... But in a relationship, you must know that if ... you're acting the masculine side, you must [make] the decisions that will bring the two of you to a better ... stage. You must not let ... your partner to drive you with her moods, not of course that one. You [should make] decisions [that] ... will bring [about a situation] better for her and

better for you, not just for your own sake.

According to Yoesman, a tomboy should be held responsible for the growth of the relationship. She therefore should be rational, not be driven by the moods of her partner and led with the mandate that the decision she made would be mutually beneficial. Here, Yoesman recited the dichotomies of masculinity versus femininity, “rationality versus emotion”, and “thought versus look” which are popularly applied to males and females, in a lop-sided description on the differences between herself and her partner. Yoesman was, in fact, a romantic lover who proclaimed her love towards her partner more than a dozen times in a three-hour conversation between us. Rationality and emotions were evidently a part of her makeup.

Chivalrous Caretaker. Some butches choose to act like gentlemen, taking care of the personal and emotional needs of their partners with tenderness and meticulous attention. Teresa had previously been betrayed by her tomboy ex-partner; yet, she still recollected fondly how her ex-lover lavished care and protection onto her. This is how Teresa recounted her ex-partner’s behaviour:

She opens the door, carries your things. You’ll feel you’re protected. ...

Sometimes you know, especially ... in ... Worldwide [Worldwide Plaza in Central which is], so very crowded, [she] always pushes people away from you, so [that] ... you’ll walk freely ... And then in the karaoke bar, [when] there’s something bad happening ... your lesbian partner will ... think of your safety first. [Lesbians] don’t care they’ll be the ones who [get] hurt.

Evelyn, an ex-president of another local Filipino group, has a tomboy partner, Albert, in Hong Kong. Evelyn sings well, and has a cheerful and outgoing disposition. Albert, on the other hand, is quiet and shy. When I befriended the couple, it was Evelyn who did all the talking. Although Albert did not stand out like a leader, Evelyn saw her as an ideal masculine partner. According to Evelyn, “a true lesbian is like a man ... they take care of you.” To her, Albert is “just like a gentleman.” When the two were on the pavement, Albert always walked closer to the traffic shielding Evelyn; on the MTR train, Albert let Evelyn take the seat flanked by the glass partition against which she could lean; and when friends were sharing food together, Albert would never start eating before Evelyn was ready to do so. “She always protects me, just like a man,” said Evelyn.

Evelyn was impressed with her partner’s intimate understanding of her needs and wants, saying Albert must have conducted a thorough research on her even before the two entered into relationship. Being a good cook, Albert was able to prepare a great variety of dishes and obviously enjoyed feeding her girlfriend with all sorts of delicacies. Evelyn told me how she gained weight under the care of Albert:

Because Albert, she cooks delicious food for me. ...Sometimes if her boss is not around ... she will cook and then call me, ‘you can come to Kowloon Tong [the place where Albert works] to ... eat’ ... [She does that] [s]ometimes seven days a week.

In her eyes, Albert was close to perfect. Evelyn told Albert:

You're so polite, you're so behaved, you're everything, you're so caring! So don't break my trust. Don't drop it. Yeah. It's like a glass. ... So, just stay who you are. Continue [with] ... what you want to share with me ... continue [with] that one.

She felt like a princess having Albert with her.

Evelyn enjoyed having a central place in Albert's world. And such a privilege she enjoyed as a femme was seen as rightful even to the tomboys. Yoesman, a tomboy, said, "of course, girls have more pride than lesbians" and she was always the one who did the begging to end the fight she had with her partner. Alto also saw it as her obligation to end a quarrel with her girlfriend with an apology:

I think I'm the one who's acting like a boy. I need to beg the girl ... [E]ven if she's wrong, I need to tell her that I'm still here and understand and love you and I'll always be the one who say sorry.

When assuming the caretaker role, it seems that tomboys have put aside their rationality and gave way to their partners unconditionally. They are sensitive to the feelings of their girlfriends, respect their opinions and preferences, and give them assistance, rather than direction. It is noteworthy that in a number of cases, tomboys take up both the leader role and the caretaker role at various times, as can be seen in the case study described below.

The Self-Sacrificing Leader. The activist, Nat, is now in a romantic relationship with Yoyo after separating from her previous girlfriend for almost a year. These two passionate lovers had earlier found it difficult to maintain a steady relationship, primarily because of Nat's insistence on spending more time on activism than on her girlfriend. Nat firmly demanded a girlfriend who could accommodate her busy schedule and respect her commitments to the two activist organizations that she led.

Described by one of her femme friends as "masculine", Nat often took charge in planning and organizing various functions for the welfare of the other Filipinos, with which her girlfriend was expected to help out. Yoyo was usher, registration attendant, or singer of the Filipino National Anthem at the events in which Nat was the person in charge, and / or speaker of opening remarks or keynote speeches. The girlfriend also wrote letters soliciting donations which were signed by Nat at her official capacity in the organization. I observed Nat giving orders to Yoyo at an event and Yoyo obeyed without complaint.

But outside of her activist commitments, Nat is sweet and tender to her girlfriend and even ex-girlfriends. Nat's last ex-girlfriend had been deserted by her husband in the Philippines, and their child was left without a father-figure until Nat came along. Having grown up in a single-parent family, Nat had a lot of sympathy for this little girl who longed for parental love. She treated the girl as her own child and tried "to be a responsible dad" to her. Nat even maintained her fatherly role to the girl for more than a year after the relationship with the girl's mother had ended. She hid the breakup from the

child and kept encouraging the little girl to work hard on her studies.

In a way similar to a heterosexual mother providing care to her family back in the Philippines, Nat communicated with her ex-girlfriend's daughter on a daily basis, providing emotional support and general advice in spite of the distance between them. In taking care of the miscellaneous needs of the little girl, Nat was more motherly than fatherly to her ex's daughter. The tomboy told me how she spent money, time, and patience on the girl:

Not only in financial matters, but also in giving her support, moral support. I see to it that I call her, I send SMS to her every day. Every day. And during the time in the Philippines before I came here, we spent [time] together ... I'll see to it that once a week, we go to the mall, watch movies, and then go shopping, like that. But what I really, what I really, really impose to her is the importance of studies, the importance of education. ... So I always make sure that I check her activities. And you know what? Even, even her mom doesn't know her activities, just me. Sometimes, sometimes she told me, "Daddy, I need this because I need to go there." Just like that. But her mom doesn't know it.

The tomboy, who was patient and encouraging to her child, did not stand as an authoritative father-figure. She took a different parenting approach from that of her ex-girlfriend, fearing that stringent discipline might lead to rebellious behaviour. The caring attitude of this tomboy "father" is a striking exhibition of contrast with the distant image of Filipino father who may use corporal punishment on children and is much closer to

the Filipino ideal of a nurturing mother (Andres, 1987). For example, this is how she responded when the child made a mistake:

[I] never [scolded her]. I'll try to communicate to her in a proper way. Just want to know the things that she did, what was her mistake. Because I believe that if you always scold a child ... that's a possibility that she will [become] ... rebellious. And I don't want it to happen. ...

[T]hat's why I always argue with her mom. Most of the time she scolded her child: blah, blah, blah, blah. I told her: it's not a proper way. You [should] learn how to communicate with your daughter. So this maybe is the reason why my daughter is more open to me than to her mother.

Likewise, Nat also treated the feelings of her girlfriends with great care. Despite her masculine front, Nat was willing to tell me how depressed and lonely she was when she was single. But then she refused to reveal the grievances she had with her ex-girlfriend, whom I was unlikely to meet. I also observed how she fetched food for Yoyo at a party and how she helped Yoyo to change clothes in public (private space is a scarcity for FDWs) in order to prepare the girlfriend for the next event. According to Nat, "a woman just needs eh ... attention. If you show too much attention, you'll own her." She has a strong sense of ownership over her girlfriend whom she cherished with meticulous heed.

Nat revealed to me her experience of approximately a decade previously when she was in the Philippines: with respect and love, she had successfully courted her

supervisor who was already married with children. She spent time with her supervisor and the children, as the husband was frequently sitting at coffee shops talking to business associates. “Her husband is always busy with the job ... And ... when they are together, she cannot feel that she's being important. That's why, maybe that's why she fell in love with me ...”

Nat and her supervisor had some happy times together. But then, as time went by, Nat began to feel uncomfortable with the relationship. As a tomboy, Nat believed that she held eventual responsibility for the happiness and well-being of her girlfriend. And as a tomboy, she found herself inferior to a man, especially in terms of her lack of procreative power. She was guilt-ridden with her inability to give her partner children, which she believed were essential to all women. She also regretted that she was not as masculine as a “real” man. Hence, she made the decision to end the relationship, relinquishing her supervisor to the husband, whom Nat believed was a better alternative. I was surprised when Nat, a tomboy lesbian, explained her decision to me using heterosexual values:

Am I crazy? Of course I'm not. ... [W]hat's on my mind is: I cannot give you - of course, I am trying to be masculine, in my mind, I try to be responsible. But you have your husband. You have your husband that can provide you with what you need and can stand for you. So ... I let her go.

... [A]s our relationship went by ... I tried to tell her how important a family is, how important of having a husband and kids [is] ...

The decision was a difficult one for Nat, as apparently she still loved her then girlfriend. Nat described her feelings after making the decision: “it's of course so painful ... to accept the reality that she has sex with her husband. Well ... my purpose is, hm, just to [make] her happy.”

At various times in her love life, Nat made the same decision – relinquishing her girlfriend – whenever a man came between them. So this tomboy who loved to exert control and took charge in relationships went to the extreme by arranging her girlfriend to leave her for a better choice. Aside from her apparent feelings of inferiority, Nat demonstrated self-abnegation and self-sacrifice for other people's welfare, a quality which is said to be typical of a traditional Filipina. (Mulder, 1996 and 1997; Roces, 1994)

In her biggest effort to be a responsible person, Nat gave up her own interest for the sake of her girlfriend. It is indeed ironic that when strictly adhering to the rules for men, shouldering the ultimate responsibilities of bringing happiness to her partner, Nat found herself assuming the traditional female role: downplaying her own interests and sacrificing her own needs and desires for the benefit of others. Indeed, Nat combined a mixture of both masculine and feminine qualities. When advocating for a cause, she was a resourceful activist leader. When looking after her child, she was a patient and loving parent. What we have seen in Nat is a case which dramatizes the fallacies of the so called mutual exclusivity between masculinity and femininity. Both “masculine” and “feminine” qualities do exist in the same person, whether male or female, and actions

can either be seen as masculine or feminine, or both, depending on one's interpretation.

The masculine / feminine binary opposition is a myth as there are so many overlapping and ambiguous areas between the two that a sharp dividing line just cannot be drawn. Looking at these Filipina lesbians, not only do we see the fictitious nature of the sex – gender – desire alignment, but also the shaky proposition about the masculinity - femininity dichotomy. According to Butler (1990:6-7, 22-23), it is only when the desire between the male sex and the female sex is naturalized under the heterosexual matrix that sex, gender, and desire cohere in a way that shows a dichotomized representation. In the course of constructing such sex / gender fiction, a number of gaps and loopholes are glossed over in order to neatly polarize the gender traits. Even if there exist women with only feminine attributes and men with only masculine traits, it is highly doubtful if their unbalanced development could be seen as either “natural” or “ideal”.

Femme role-playing

On top of the usual label “girl”, people in Lesgroup sometimes use the term “femme” to refer to the partner of a “butch”. While the name is at least partially in place, the profile of a femme remains obscure. Emilia, a femme active in Lesgroup, believes that there is no difference between a straight woman and a femme. People outside of the group, like Evelyn and Alice, also share the same view, despite not using the term “femme” themselves. What exactly is a femme and how different it is from a heterosexual woman are not well understood, even to the Filipinos themselves. If a femme is the partner of a butch, perhaps we can try to understand her role with regard to

her partner. We will analyse the profile of a typical femme in this section before discussing how a femme differs from a heterosexual woman who partners with a heterosexual man.

Appearance. The pairing of a feminine partner and a masculine partner is considered by many Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong as necessary in a same-sex relationship. Teresa's ex-partner did not present herself as a tomboy before meeting Teresa. But when the relationship bloomed, Teresa's ex assumed a masculine role, both within and outside of the relationship. I asked how the two came to an agreement on "who-plays-what". Teresa found it hard to explain why she didn't take up the masculine role herself. Below was how she put it:

Actually I don't know how to explain it also. ... But I still love the girls' things. I mean I still love the clothes, I still love the colours, I still love the fancy things. Not like them, I still like the feminine way...

Focussing on the clothes, colours, and fancy accessories, Yoesman said feminine women in lesbian relationships usually wore big earrings and heavy make-up, when compared with their heterosexual counterparts but this claim was not echoed by other lesbians. From my own observations of the feminine members of Lesgroup, I did not find their make-up heavier than that worn by other Filipinas. However, I did notice that a number of them wore body-hugging tees or vests, boldly showing off their sexy figures. Long hair or medium long hair was also a must for them although heterosexual Filipinas also wear the same length of hair.

Feminine Gender Role

Supportive aide. Everybody needs emotional support from their significant others, irrespective of whether they are leaders or followers in a group. But as leaders usually play up their rational side, the supportive aides are usually assigned as providers of emotional support. When butches want to be leaders, femmes are expected to be patient with the psychological or emotional needs of their partners. Also, tomboys endure more social pressure with regard to their gender transgression, they are very often looking for partners who can understand the feelings and thoughts they have with regard to their gender identities. Nat told me that her ideal partner should be accepting and understanding, “The most important thing for me is: you must learn how to respect me as I am. And you must learn what a lesbian is, what the mentality of a lesbian is.”

Ali, who was constantly concerned about her inability to act like a man, said that her then-partner, Alice, was a great source of support to her:

When I was frustrated ... and if I call Alice, she's wow – she's my great comfort. And sometimes she inspires me a lot of because I have this attitude ... like self-pity ... because I [can't] get it. ... Then [it's] just like I'm useless, something like that. And then she said: No, just try it again. She encouraged me so much. That's why I could not do all the things that I've been doing without her.

Emilia also told me how she coped with the hot temper of her busy partner:
It's her ... mood swing. It's very hard. That's why she's also lucky with me

because I have a lot of patience. You know... sometimes she is angry... I just ignore her. And then later on we'll talk together, and then... nothing [unpleasant will] happen.

Femmes in general are expected to be supportive companions providing various kinds of assistance to tomboys, even if they are not partners to each other. On a number of Sundays, Lesgroup offered free blood pressure taking service on Chater Road. While both butches and femmes who possessed the skill would do the measuring for their fellow Filipinas, it was almost always a femme who recorded the readings. Among the lesbian couples, the leader butches usually delegated small, miscellaneous tasks to their partners. Some of the butch lesbians saw their girlfriends as secretaries who answered their phones, sent text event invitations to group members, and sent photos to participants after the events. While the leadership of tomboys is established in the relationships, it is worthy to note that the supportive role of femme is sometimes reversible. That is to say, in the events where femmes are at the centre of attention, butches are willing to help.

Yoyo, for instance, is a keen participant in beauty contests. I saw her taking part in different pageants, winning trophies and other prizes. Her partner, Nat, did not seem to mind seeing a scantily-clad Yoyo walking confidently on stage. Instead, Nat helped with her make-up, dress, and took care of other sundry tasks back stage. The activist leader, Zenith, was a similarly devoted follower and helper to her partner when the latter took part in a drama performance. For two or three weeks, Zenith, who had numerous

commitments inside and outside of Lesgroup, woke up at six in the morning to escort her partner to the rehearsal space and stayed there the whole day to provide various kinds of general help until the amateur actress finished rehearsing her parts. The tomboy, Gabriel, is an equally enthusiastic helper to her girlfriend who is a celebrated dancer in the local Filipino community.

Thus, despite being support aides, many of the femme partners told me that they enjoyed a less hierarchical relationship with their partners when compared with their previous heterosexual relationships. These femmes that I talked to, be they activists or quiet girl-next-doors, were all confident women who were positive about their talents or accomplishments.

Liberated Women. Not a wearer of tight tees, Teresa was nonetheless proud to be a femme, as she saw femmes as “more broad-minded, more rational, more sophisticated ... [and] much more progressive.” To her, femme is the antithesis of “Maria Clara,” a stereotypical or idealized woman in the Filipino society who is:

very graceful ... will not say any bad words... got all the right manners in the right place. ... [She is] traditional, ... wears ... long skirts, long sleeves, doesn't wear any skin ... [nor] talk to strangers ... walk in the street alone. ... They're boring.

Roces (1994) also described the “Maria Clara” image of a woman as “shy, demure, modest, self-effacing, and loyal to the end”. The author said further that “[t]he

openly provocative, sexually aggressive female ... is still comparatively rare in the Filipino culture.”

Although “openly provocative” females are rare in the Filipino culture, I have been fortunate to meet some of them in Hong Kong. They were the friends of the tomboy, Nathan. Being intelligent, articulate, friendly, and reasonably good-looking, Nathan is a butch at the centre of attention in the local Filipino community. I have, on several occasions, witnessed Filipinas making a beeline to hug Nathan and kiss her on the cheek. Her friend Alto further testified to us how Nathan got a long row of lipstick marks on her shirt at a karaoke bar. The tomboy has so many invitations to dates that she has to ask a friend to help fend off these enthusiastic suitors from time to time.

While none of my femme informants have described themselves as sexually aggressive, they are nonetheless outgoing in their daily interactions with people. In terms of notional definition, the “girls” are identified in terms of their relationships with tomboys. In everyday practice, however, these women are often independent enough to draw people’s attention to their own personalities, refusing to be confined to the role of girlfriends of these tomboys. Erica, a femme informant of mine, was bold and forward in emphasizing her willfulness and independence. She was determined not to comply with the stereotypical image of a good Filipina girl who is always polite, meek, and kind (Mulder, 1997; Roces, 1994). This is how Erica described herself publicly on the networking website Facebook:

Hmmnn... I’m kind of person who is too interested in eating and drinking. I

talked too much in uncontrollable and full of life to the person I'm comfortable with. but I admit sometimes I'm THOUGHTLESS... but I'm FERVENT to the 1 I love.. mwah!

I'm a strong and dedicated person. I'm friendly and frank, i can manage to fit myself in with any kind of people. i hate people who are rude and think they are better than anyone. I'm not kind but i have good qualities which my friends admire a lot... I love collecting bags and perfumes too...

Bold, confident, cheerful but professes herself to be neither shy nor kind, Erica loves sharing her pictures on Facebook and she named one of her albums "My Intrinsic Value." The album holds her individual portraits that make up the majority of her profile pictures. In contrast, her partner Nicolas usually uses romantic pair photos of herself and Erica as her own profile picture on the social media. I once told Nicolas half-jokingly that: "You are now defining yourself in terms of Erica". Nicolas refused to respond to my comment.

Both femmes and butches agreed that femmes are far happier and carefree than their masculine-identified partners. Some believed it was because the tomboys unreservedly showered their partners with all their love, as they had to compete with males without being "real" men. As Alto states, "Because... we don't have the men's appearance [anatomy], that's why we are using our hearts; we are showing much love to the girls, we want the girls to feel how important [they are] to us..."

The popular tomboy, Nathan, who insisted that heterosexual women and femmes were “the same”, nonetheless said that she would like to have a partner who has no experience in homosexual relationships. Nathan said that some of the femmes had been so spoilt by their partners that she would like to stay away from them to avoid being constantly asked for favourable treatment.

Teresa informed me that she gave less to her lesbian ex-partner than to her husband but was getting more from the former in return. She was very much satisfied with the love she got from her ex and attributed the happiness of femmes to the attitudes of butches. “Because they shower all love. You’ll feel much ... luckier, much happier, fewer fears. You feel you’re much cared for.” According to Teresa, the negative aspect of such relationship is that, “if they break up, all the world crumbles down” as it was so hard for femmes to leave their partners but so easy for butches to find new girlfriends. It seems that while the femmes are privileged with love and care of the tomboys, they are at the same time vulnerable to the betrayal of their partners.

It is acceptable to characterize a number of femmes as assertive, bold, and direct in seeking love. With their choice of partners, they defy the social convention that mandates heterosexual unions. Their liberation is achieved without having had to share the anxiety experienced by tomboys who transgress gender norms. They face relatively less stigmatisation for their normative gender practice. Unlike tomboys, femmes are culturally recognizable beings who do not have to explain their gender behaviour as they

are seen as doing gender right. With the love and care provided by their partners, many of them feel that they are worthy of love and are proud of their nonstandard choice of partners which they feel has done them good.

Conclusion

Gender inversion and naturalization are important concepts in understanding the Filipino notion of homosexuality. Filipinos see gender behaviour as an expression of one's sex. Along the same lines, their sexual preferences are regarded as natural extensions of those gender behaviours. Hence, inverted gender behaviour, as an external marker, is taken to imply same-sex desire, which is far more subtle to the observer. The tomboy who is a visible gender deviant is highlighted in such an understanding of homosexuality, leaving the identity of her feminine partner not well understood. As gender behaviour and sexual desire are considered as one unit, a Filipino tomboy uses her masculinity to indicate her desire for the feminine women. At the same time, she most often relies on the happiness and satisfaction of her girlfriend to prove and show her own masculinity, and to feel like an ideal man.

Data from the field show that the roles played by a tomboy are both the smart and responsible leader, and a courteous and attentive caretaker. In other words, she is a commander who serves – intelligent and reliable as a leader who is noble enough to put her girlfriend's interests before her own. When performing the two roles, a tomboy shows both strength and tenderness, and is variably masculine and feminine. Indeed, the dichotomous representation of gender attributes is a fiction constructed to privilege the

complementary functions of males and females, in order to idealize heterosexuality. On the other hand, the role of a femme partner of a butch tomboy is very similar to that of a feminine woman, especially in giving miscellaneous care and emotional support to her masculine partner. As “femme” is not a well-established concept, feminine women are expected to partner with either biological men or tomboys. Facing competition from biological men, tomboys usually work extra hard to make up for their cultural disadvantage and place the happiness and well-being of their girlfriends at the centre of their relationships. Femmes are most often contented and fulfilled with regard to their love lives. As testified by some of my femme informants, they are happier being with tomboys than their former male partners. These femme informants exhibit a strong sense of confidence not always found among the masculine tomboys. Femmes thus show a marked departure from the idealized Maria Clara stereotype, described above. In other words, we see strength in femmes and tenderness in butches as they enjoy more equalitarian relationships. There is a more balanced mix of masculine and feminine qualities in both partners in a lesbian relationship.

While modeling on heterosexual ideals, the lesbian version we have seen in the present study has revealed the fictive nature of the masculine / feminine dichotomy featured in heterosexual gender norms. The redeployment of the heteronormative norms in the Filipina lesbian context has allowed the partners more gender possibilities. While the masculine partner being the leader guiding the feminine partner is still the norm, a significant portion of my informants has reported having less hierarchical, more reciprocal relationships with their partners. With a plurality of gender potentials and

more flexible gender roles found in both partners, lesbian relationships in the present context are much more than the mere, or inferior, copies of their heterosexual counterparts.

Chapter Four Tomboy Negotiations

According to Butler (1990: 11), the cultural matrix in society lays down criteria for defining culturally intelligible subjects and culturally unintelligible objects. Under the dominant culture in a society, people whose gender and / or sexual desire do not closely follow sex in a heterosexual way are deemed to be culturally unintelligible. Despite being social rejects, the survival of those unintelligible gender identities is important as they help “provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility”, leading to the opening up of new gender possibilities.

These abject gender identities survive, not by refusing the cultural power that governs them, but by redeploying such powers in an alternative way. (Butler, 1990: 124)

We have seen in the last chapter how Filipina FDWs assume masculine or feminine identities regardless of their sex. This chapter will show how Filipina tomboys play the masculine role in spite of their sex and sexualities – that is, when there are apparent contradictions between their anatomical sex, gender and desires. The first half of this chapter focuses on the negotiations made by the “non-pure” lesbians who have heterosexual backgrounds but are now engaging in same-sex relationships as tomboys. As sexual orientation implies a stable and fixed sexual preference, how do the newly-converted tomboys account for their sexual fluidities while maintaining cultural intelligibility? The second half of this chapter looks at the assumption of masculine identities by biological women whose bodies are seen as limiting their masculinities. We will also see whether their gender performances under such a context will bring about a

“reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established”
(Butler, 1990:140).

Sexual Identities

In Hong Kong where the social environment is more accommodating to Filipinas' alternative sexual practices, what is significant is that many of these Filipinas not only engage in same-sex relationships but also take up the homosexual identities. While this is a liberating process to some of the tomboys, the assumption of such an identity – which implies fixity – can be problematic in cases where the Filipinas have established heterosexual relationships, whether they are historic or active ones, back in the Philippines. With such experiences, it is much harder for them to use the naturalization discourse (the “born this way” rhetoric) to justify their alternative sexual preferences. Many of them are therefore attacked for disguising their gender behaviours and sexual orientations, deliberately choosing to practice deviant sexualities, perhaps with insidious ulterior motives.

“Pure” and “Non-Pure” Lesbians. In the Filipino lesbian community, the privilege of “pure” lesbians over “non-pure” lesbians is evident. “Pure” lesbians are tomboys who have been masculine throughout and have never developed heterosexual relationships. “Non-pure” lesbians, on the other hand, are those who have become mannish and formed homosexual relationships after having previously experienced heterosexual relationships and most likely, a greater level of femininity before, especially those with heterosexual family ties in the Philippines. Far from being equals,

the “pure” and “non-pure” division is, however, often talked about with the same implications as being “genuine” and “fake” lesbians. In other words, the “non-pure” lesbians are often accused of faking their gender behaviour and sexual preferences in order to cheat their new partners for money or other material benefits.

Alto, a “pure” lesbian, was highly sceptical about the “non-pure” lesbians. Citing examples from her social circle, she discredited “non-pure” lesbians as they were, first, too busy with their own families to be good and attentive lovers, and second, some of the “non-pure” lesbians she knew were extorting money from their partners. On the whole, Alto believed that “pure” lesbians usually had “men’s hearts,” offering genuine love to their women. “Non-pure” lesbians, however, did not usually have such “hearts”, unless they had gone through extremely unpleasant experiences with men, such as being raped. Alto’s comments reflect her understanding of sexuality as necessitated by gender – and the latter in turn is largely an inborn trait.

Apart from the “pure” lesbians, feminine-identified lesbians such as Evelyn had also expressed scepticism towards “non-pure” lesbians. At the time of our conversations, Evelyn herself had been involved in four romantic relationships – with two men and two women, alternating sexes. Despite her own experiences of changing sexual partners between men and women, she found it hard to accept the pursuit of same-sex relations by heterosexual wife-turned-tomboy.

Evelyn had a female friend in Hong Kong, Baby, who had proclaimed herself an

inborn tomboy. However, it was found out later that this woman had been married in the Philippines and was not mannish before coming to Hong Kong. When the tomboy went home on vacation, she made sure her hair was long enough to fall over her face but when she returned to Hong Kong from home, she cut her hair short right away. Evelyn found Baby's lie about her past and her double life objectionable. So she confronted the tomboy, saying 'what is the difference between [the] Philippines and Hong Kong? It's the same. We come here to earn money, not to do something bad or ... Why [do] ... you make yourself like that?' The tomboy was then reduced to tears as she could not defend herself against the confrontation posed by her friend. Evelyn further accused Baby of having "so many denials to herself" and concluded that "she's not a lesbian." It seems that Evelyn was a firm believer of the unchanging nature of gender identity. Instead of levying her attack on Baby's infidelity to her husband, Evelyn focused on the Baby's change in gender performance and denial of her true self, an act that Evelyn believed was doomed to failure.

Having had relationships with partners of both sexes, Evelyn however, saw no problem with her own change in object of desire and described herself as a liberated woman. She had consistently practiced the same gender behaviours as a feminine woman and had always been attracted to masculine persons, both biological men and tomboys. When "lesbian" was conceived primarily as a gender category referring to masculine women much more than a female homosexual, Evelyn consistently played her role as a (feminine) "woman," not a (masculine) "lesbian". But then her friend, Baby, changed her gender behaviours, from feminine to masculine, in Hong Kong to adapt to

her desire towards feminine women, in addition to lying to cover up the change.

Although both had changed their objects of desire from men to women and engaged in same-sex relationships, it was the newly converted tomboy Baby, rather than Evelyn, who had to bear the sharper brunt of accusation and reproof. If we look at Evelyn's interrogation again – 'what is the difference between [the] Philippines and Hong Kong? It's the same' – the major focus of her blame is on the change that Baby has exercised, much more than on her lie. From this instance, it can be inferred that a change in one's gender invites more social stigmas and suspicions than changing one's sexual orientation among the Filipinas.

The feminine women in same-sex relationships that I interviewed did not shy away from revealing their love towards both men and women. Emilia, for example, quickly acknowledged that she was bisexual. Although they were automatically stigmatized for being in love with tomboys, their experience of both heterosexual and homosexual relationships has not tarnished them further. This is in stark contrast with masculine-identified lesbians who are most often uncomfortable in describing their earlier heterosexual experiences. Under the Filipino concept of homosexuality, a gender inverted person – that is a tomboy in this case – is much more socially problematic than her girlfriend, who is seen as a regular woman. When the novice tomboy, who is not born to be boyish and women-loving, cannot use naturalization to justify her alternative gender behaviour and sexual preference, she will meet with more social stigmas.

Rationalizations. I was not able to talk to those "non-pure" lesbians who

have been maintaining active contacts with their husbands or male partners in the Philippines while developing same-sex relationships in Hong Kong but I have interviewed three tomboys who previously had husbands or boyfriends in the Philippines. These tomboys described themselves as generally boyish throughout their lives. Their marriage and heterosexual relationships were ascribed to societal pressure and various other practical necessities unrelated to their sexual preferences. Below, we see how these “non-pure” lesbians justify their seesaw sexual history while staying within the limits provided by the naturalization discourse.

Yoesman, for instance, was at odds with her parents during her teens. In despair, her parents put her under the guardianship of a very strict uncle for some time. Life then was so hard that she accepted a proposal from a friend, in the hope that the marriage would be “like an escape from being captive”. The decision was also prompted by the belief that she had to raise a family for her own future: “I need to settle down ... I was just [a] girl. Who would take care of me when I get old? ... Maybe I need to have a man to look after me, have kids to look after me.”

Alternatively, the self-proclaimed inborn tomboyish woman, Ali, chose to partner with a boyfriend during her college days, in order to stay away from the negative implications of being a lesbian. But then, the decision only led to a failed relationship. The process brought about a self-discovery which enabled Ali to come to terms with her sexual orientation. Ali said:

Because I didn't want to accept it that I was a lesbian. I didn't want to accept –

that's why I tried to have a boyfriend. [Two years down the relationship,] he was asking [for sex], but I didn't want to ... Actually he ... wanted to marry me. But ... I was not happy ... Oh no, I [realized that] I am not a girl.

Adam, a mother-turned-tomboy, had a same-sex relationship during her teens which was ended reluctantly under parental pressure. When Adam reached 19, a young man frequented her workplace for business purposes and became her friend. Seeing this, Adam's parents arranged for her to marry the young man as they assumed that there were romantic elements in the relationship which necessitated a formal union between the two youngsters, despite Adam's denial that they were in love.

In giving a personal account of their lives, none of these "non-pure" lesbians reported having a change in sexual orientation, nor did they portray themselves as bisexuals. With gender inversion emphasized and homosexuality positioned as a variant of heterosexuality, "non-pure" lesbians can only downplay their inconsistencies in sexual orientations and gender behaviour to stay culturally intelligible within their community. According to the rationalizations they provided, it was almost like their heterosexual experiences were mistakes that they or their parents had made. However, upon further investigation, they revealed that their previous heterosexual relationships did bring them pleasures, and they did experience heterosexual desires previously. The accounts below describe a more nuanced picture with regard to their gender and sexual identities.

Gender / Sexual (In)Consistencies. The “non-pure” lesbians whom I had interviewed all emphasized the early development of their same-sex desires and gender inversions at the expense of their heterosexual desires. They put it in such a way that their other sex desires were almost nonexistent. However, when these tomboys were pressed for more detailed descriptions of their sexual / relationship histories, a more complicated story emerged.

These heterosexual Filipinas who later engaged in lesbian relationships looked back at their earlier heterosexual desires or relationships with various degrees of fondness. Although they were not inclined to immediately admit their heterosexual desires, we can see that their heterosexual experiences were pleasurable to them.

Yoesman, for example, admitted that she was also sexually drawn to men:

[I have] maybe some lust [towards men], of course, at the young age, but I never get to that point of having sex with a man [before my marriage].

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Interviewer: “Did you feel anything towards men when you were young?”

Yoesman: “Yes, sometimes. But more to girls.”

Although Ali described her earlier heterosexual relationship as a deliberate move to rebel against the lesbian label imposed onto her, she did acknowledge the attraction she felt towards men even after she had switched her partner from male to female. Ali also hinted that she had to restrain her feelings towards the good-looking men she met because of her tomboy identity:

When I had the relationship with my first girlfriend, I still ... like [somebody

who's] handsome. It's still there, it's still there. ... Something like there's a feeling of liking someone [who is male], something like that. ... I like a boy but not to the extent that [I'm] going to have a relationship with [him]. Because - I don't know - when I realized that I am a lesbian ... he's just a friend -- but [having with him] the relationship, no.

Even Adam, a self-proclaimed inborn lesbian forced by her parents to marry, also confessed that she had some “woman’s feelings” during love-making with her husband when the two were in amicable terms. Upon learning about the extra-marital affair of her husband while she was working overseas, Adam resigned from her job, returned home and had a baby with her husband in an attempt to save the marriage from falling apart. She did everything possible to reconcile with her husband until the time he fathered a child with his mistress. Adam may probably have seen herself as a heterosexual woman when she was trying to keep her marriage intact.

When these lesbians were having their heterosexual relationships, all of them wore women’s clothes – skirts and blouses, long hair and some even put on make-up. Adam did say that she was beautiful when she was staying in the Philippines as a wife to her husband. When these tomboys were girlfriends or wives, they were all actively and appropriately playing the role of heterosexual females, in accordance with social expectations of women. It is hard to know how much they loved their husbands / boyfriends and how much desire they had for them, but regardless of the amount of affection or sexual craving they had, the only available option to them was to act like

feminine women as long as they were partners to men. The need to adhere to the prevailing gender norms is so forceful that Ali, whose case we have just discussed above, had to repress her desire for handsome men when she had taken up the identity as a tomboy. Consciously or subconsciously, they adopted the correct gender behaviour for their choice of partners.

The need to conform to mainstream discourse and stay culturally intelligible is paramount. Filipina tomboy domestic workers have to conform to their cultural rules, even in the practice of alternative sexual relations. When Garcia (2010) put forward the importance of “depth” and “coreness” in one’s gender identity, the “essence” of being a tomboy is at least as vital as her performances in the Filipino culture. Hence, the heterosexual-turned-homosexual tomboys are compelled by culture to downplay, if not to erase, their heterosexual desires from their personal histories, in order to help construct stable gender and sexual identities that are considered the basis for their gender behaviours. While having had heterosexual desires per se is already problematic in tomboys who are supposed to be women-loving, what is perhaps more unsettling is the implication such heterosexual experiences have on their gender identities. Changing sexual orientation implies changing gender identities, which is incompatible with naturalization, the unchallengeable overarching discourse in understanding sex and gender in the Filipino culture. “Pure” lesbians can therefore privilege themselves over the “non-pure” lesbians with their “inborn” masculinities. The accusations Filipinas make on the sincerity of the “non-pure” lesbians in a way reflect their incomprehension over the novice tomboys’ unstable gender identities (and thus sexual orientations) as

well as doubt over their qualification as proper persons. The justifications these tomboys have put forward with regard to their changing sexual orientation are defences made against the challenges posed to their consistent inner selves – the basis for their masculinities, sexualities, and adequacies as culturally proper persons.

Procreation

Importance of offspring. While both “pure” and “non-pure” lesbians try their best to emphasize that their masculinities are inborn and natural, they both face challenges when carrying out certain masculine roles that are conventionally seen as prerogatives of biological men. One of the biggest regrets some of the tomboys have over their biology is that as biological females they are unable to impregnate their partners. To the Filipinos, the number of children one begets is a testimony to the vitality and masculinity of the father. Likewise, giving birth is also considered a significant part of womanhood. Hence, childless partners have their masculinity and femininity truncated and their relationship is often seen as incomplete.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the prominence of procreation is highlighted by the Filipinos against the cultural background of the Philippines which values the family, as well as the country’s lacklustre socio-economic development, which sees an underdeveloped retirement system. It is a moral obligation for the Filipinos to look after their aged parents, taking care of both their financial and emotional needs. Filipinos often see their future in their children. A tomboy, whose masculine role is to take charge of the relationship, must address the lack of offspring in the relationship resulting from

her own biological “deficiency”.

Avoidance of pregnancy. While Filipinos in general treasure children, the timing of pregnancy is also crucial. Imported domestic workers cannot bring their families to Hong Kong. Alone in an alien society, they are longing for love and support but the romantic relationships they developed in Hong Kong are often temporary in nature. If they conceive a child out of wedlock, they will face both stigmatisation for lack of chastity and an immediate threat to livelihood. Although there are local labour laws protecting the rights of pregnant workers¹¹, the chances for pregnant domestic workers to retain their jobs are significantly reduced. It is widely believed that pregnant women cannot carry heavy work and that domestic work, despite being the same work that mothers with no help do every day, cannot be efficiently continued by FDWs. Upon learning of pregnancy, many Hong Kong employers will negotiate with their FDWs for early conclusion of contract with a compensation of not less than two months’ salary¹². As FDWs are not earning handsome salary, the cost for compensating their job loss is not lofty. In addition, the market supply of FDWs is usually ample, making termination

¹¹ According to labour laws in Hong Kong, it is an offence for an employer to dismiss a pregnant employee. The employer is liable to prosecution and, upon conviction, to a fine of \$100,000. In addition, the employer is required to pay the dismissed employee (1) wages in lieu of notice; (2) a further sum equivalent to one month's wages as compensation; and (3) 10 weeks' maternity leave pay. (Source: Labour Department, Hong Kong).

¹² According to a Ming Pao (25 May 2012) report, Joseph Law Kwan-din, chairman of the Hong Kong Employers of Overseas Domestic Helpers Association pointed out that an employer can negotiate with his / her pregnant domestic for a mutually-agreed early conclusion of contract. The compensation that the employer pays the domestic is usually no less than her two months’ salary.

a practicable option for the employers. Furthermore, Filipinas might find it hard to ask their families back home to look after these illegitimate children¹³, and harder to keep them in Hong Kong due to their limited financial and human resources in the territory.

Hence, the development of a same-sex relationship in Hong Kong, without the risk of unwanted pregnancy, is said to be a desirable way to enjoy romance in the territory. “With a lesbian, I’m safe” (Eronico, 1994 as cited in Constable, 2002). The lack of procreative ability of the tomboys therefore can be seen as strength, not a weakness, under the FDWs’ context.

Long-term relationship. Indeed, with their masculine qualities and non-procreative abilities, tomboys enjoy high popularity in Hong Kong. Some of the tomboys in the territory are thrilled by their choices when they are looking for a partner; others are however less sanguine. The tomboy Nathan expressed her grievances towards the Filipinas who sought to build temporary relationships with her. Nathan criticized her admirers for being “flirtatious” and “insincere” as they are looking for brief romance and worse still, for “safe sex and money” only. While “safe sex” refers to sex without pregnancy, “money” refers to an incident in which Nathan lent HK\$18,000 to her girlfriend, who secretly immigrated to Canada soon afterwards. The incident gave Nathan the impression that short-term lovers harbour ulterior motives in developing a

¹³ Filipino society is said to be adopting a “double standard” towards the extramarital affairs of men and women. The sexual affairs of men are largely tolerated and their illegitimate children accepted. Extramarital affairs of women are however deemed morally unacceptable. Further discussion on this can be found in Medina (1991).

relationship, and reinforced her determination to seek along-term relationship in Hong Kong instead. With luck and perseverance, Nathan finally found a girlfriend who was committed to the relationship and accepted her procreative inability. The tomboy has now adopted the niece of her girlfriend and the pair is planning to get married¹⁴ soon.

Adoption. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Nat the tomboy was so tortured with her inability to father a child that she asked her girlfriend to return to her husband. Other tomboys tried to make up for the missing component in the family through adoption – a scheme made easy with their increased financial power. While adoption is a usual measure used to help lesbians build their families, some would consider this a second-class solution. One informant held that adopted children are not as good as one's own as adoptive parents do not usually have control over the quality of the child's progeniture. This point was put forward by a "non-pure" lesbian who had both heterosexual and homosexual experiences. She had given birth to three children of her own before engaging in same-sex relationships in Hong Kong. While this "non-pure" lesbian made this comment in part to de-privilege the "pure" lesbians, the comment can find support in a heterosexual, Filipino context. Trisha, who is one of Teresa's sisters, is not involved in any lesbian relationship. She once told me that some heterosexual, childless couples in the Philippines would consider adopting children in the hope of getting good luck in conceiving their own children. If conceiving and bearing one's own children is the ultimate aim, it is apparent that adopted children are acceptable but not the best choice for some of the Filipinos, probably due to the

¹⁴ Same-sex marriage is not legalized in either Hong Kong or the Philippines. But there are a number of dedicated homosexual Filipinas in Hong Kong who have held ceremonies to celebrate their unions.

hegemonic cultural demand of naturalization.

Sexual Gratification

Sex in relationships. A more immediate problem for some of the Filipino tomboys than procreation is their lack of penises to provide the traditional, heterosexual sexual gratifications to their partners. Penis-vaginal penetration is seen in mainstream society as a defining act in an intercourse that confers sexual gratifications. Without penises, some of the tomboys worry about the amount of erotic pleasure they can give to their partners. Ali is one of these anxious tomboys. She told me it was common for tomboys to worry about their performances in bed and many of them would compensate their girlfriends with material rewards. But then as generosity might turn out to invite insatiable blackmailing, other tomboys would prefer to stay away from this quick fix. Ali said some of her tomboy friends had instead chosen to use vibrators when making love to their girlfriends:

Researcher: Apart from money, do they have some other ways to solve this problem?

Ali: [Drawing a deep breath] I don't know. Honestly speaking there are lots of lesbian friends [who] told me ... they are using the thing to satisfy the girls. The vibrator, just to be honest.

Ali was clearly disturbed by her difficulty in giving sexual pleasure to her partner. While she understood that the vibrator was an effective tool, so helpful that "girls just don't really want to let them [tomboys] go away", the tool was not an option

to her. Ali did not fully explain why she decided not to use the sex tool. Instead, she rationalized the decision with a de-emphasis of sex in a relationship:

You don't have to do that with your partner every time anyway. When a masculine [man] and a feminine [woman] get married, they are not doing that every time... And when they get old, what [will] happen? When they get old, almost there [will be] no more. It's just the companionship. You'll be happy together. Because you are old already, how can you do that anymore?

Relationships in sex. Similarly, Nat did not use a sex toy. But she was more positive about her ability to make love to her girlfriend. She believed that the presence of a penis is not crucial to the satisfaction of her partner. Instead, making love is a mind game to her. This is how Nat theorized the key to sexual pleasure:

[O]ther lesbians are using ... the sex toys just to satisfy their partners. But for me, no. ... [B]ecause I believe, you know, satisfaction [hinges] on the mind. ... The most important [approach] for me is to show how I love my partner, how I respect my partner. So, it's the satisfaction itself.

Nat stressed the power of love, care, and respectful deference in love making. A former girlfriend of Nat, for instance, had found much more pleasure making love with the tomboy than with her own husband, because “she cannot feel that she's being important” when the heterosexual couple was having sex. According to Nat, she excels in giving sexual pleasure to her girlfriend as she is a lesbian – that is, a biological woman. Being a woman, she understands women's needs better: they had to be made the

centre of their partners' attention. "[M]any men don't know what women need," said Nat. Even when they realize the women's needs, their egoism prevented them from being good lovers. "Why should I do that, I'm a man," said Nat in a mockery of men who thought only about their own pleasure.

Yoesman had once done a mini-survey, asking a couple of her friends how they compared their lesbian partners with their husbands. The general response was that lesbians did much better than men in terms of sex. She maintained that it was because "we lesbians, we do it for the girls, not for our own." The femme lesbian Emilia echoed the claim, saying that her partner took the initiative to ensure she gave sexual pleasure, both in terms of quantity and quality. Teresa, another femme lesbian, also compared her tomboy ex-partner favourably to her husband in terms of her sexual performances, among other merits.

Uniquely tomboy pleasure. As a woman who "by nature" understood women, Nat highlighted her superiority in giving sexual pleasure to her partner, a point agreed upon by her tomboy friend Adam. Another of my informants, Yoesman, similarly said that she understood her partner's needs better as she was a woman. She said proudly that her girlfriend, Edwina, got from her a kind of physical pleasure that was different and more satisfying than that given by Edwina's own husband. And Yoesman stressed that her girlfriend should only stick to the unique tomboy sexual pleasure that she gave. She would go as far as banning Edwina from using a dildo:

If you are going to use this toy, your girl could say, 'Okay, let's break up. And

then I would buy my own toy. Then I will satisfy myself.' ... [Interviewer: But what if one day, your partner asks you to use a...] No way! She'd better go away. Maybe that's the time... I'll let her go. ... It's like insulting me. ... [I]f she wants that toy, she's thinking not me. She's thinking of that somebody that has that kind of, you know, figure [a penis]. ... I want you to like me for what I can. I want you to stay with me the way I can give you.

The dildo, being a representation of a penis, reminds Yoesman of her lack and of the sexual preference of a number of women. Yoesman further saw the dildo as an effective challenge to her presumably unique position in giving erotic pleasure to her partner. The use of dildo by her partner is therefore regarded by Yoesman as a threat and a ridicule of her (lack of) masculine privilege and should be avoided at all cost. Indeed, the use of dildo, while not exceptional among Filipina tomboys, is a taboo few would like to admit. When I talked about the dildo with my tomboy informants, no one admitted to using one while some emphasized they did not use it. But from my conversations with their partners, I was informed that at least one of these tomboys did use a dildo in love making.

Yoesman wanted to dominate the sexual relationship she had with her partner, as she strongly objected the idea of using a dildo. But we cannot say that she ignored the sexual needs of her partner. Yoesman saw it a masculine role to give her girlfriend sexual satisfaction. The more sexual pleasure she brought to her partner, the more she felt like an ideal man. Yoesman was a stone butch who became sexually aroused by the

responses of her girlfriend but not from her own physical sensations. She was pleased, and proud, of her ability in enabling her partner reach orgasm. “I told her, ‘I can’t really say I am a lesbian – I am a man.’ She said, ‘Why?’ ‘Of course. I have brought you to heaven for so many times.’”

Femininity-aided masculinity. The provision of sexual pleasure is seen by the tomboys as a masculine responsibility. Those tomboys who play this masculine role well usually attribute their success to their own experience as women. That is to say, these tomboys draw on their own womanly experience to better understand their partners’ sexual needs, so that they can properly play the masculine role as pleasure givers. In providing sexual pleasure to their partners, they also have to avoid the self-serving masculine chauvinistic behaviour often seen in Filipino men [Medina, 1991: 99, 105] and prioritize their partners’ desires over their own. By being more feminine, these tomboys play their masculine roles successfully.

Un-masculine Gender Behaviour

Many Filipinos hold that one’s gender identity stems from the physical body. Tomboys, for instance, are seen as having incoherent biology. They have the anatomy of women but are believed to have the hormones or other biological attributes of men. Such conflicting makeup is envisaged to both support and hinder their masculine gender performances. Their masculine identities are said to be unstable, as they exhibit feminine behaviour occasionally. Although a common occurrence among all gender identities, mixed gender behaviour in tomboys is often singled out to highlight their biological and

gender incoherence against the dominant heterosexual discourses which privilege clear-cut binary oppositions in sex, gender, and desire. The next section demonstrates how tomboys negotiate with their feminine behaviours and masculine gender identities.

The dread. Ali downplayed sex in the relationship but she still felt anxiety over her masculinity in everyday life. Like a woman, she said, she changed her mind very quickly over decisions that she had made. Ali was aware of the importance of good decision making in tomboy leadership but the awareness could not lead automatically to masculine behaviour. The tomboy revealed that it was easy for her to lapse into acting like a woman:

You want to do things which are what boys do. But you cannot just simply say: this is a girl thing, I don't want to do it. Sometimes ... you just realize it after you've done it – this is a girl thing but I have done it. Something like that.

Ali explained her under par masculine behaviour with her biological sex: “I accept that I'm not really a boy. ... just I have to think like a boy, I have the feelings of a girl.” As there was no way for her to change her biology, Ali believed that by paying conscious effort to keep herself mindful of her own deeds, she could act like an ideal man, “I don't know ... I am trying to realize what I am doing... Sometimes I realized that this is a girl thing and I have done it. But most of the time, I have done the boy thing.”

It is highly doubtful that the solution that she adopted – “I am trying to realize

what I am doing” – could actually help her to perform gender. Empirically, despite Ali’s denial of having regrets over her gender behaviour, her reluctance in discussing her gender non-performance and the “I don’t know” she habitually uttered throughout the interview indicated that she suffered from a lack of confidence and worried about her masculinity. In terms of theory, Butler (1990: vii) told us that “gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real”. But deliberate acts are not spontaneous and can hardly pass as “real”. Rather than the product of “the exercise of an unconstrained voluntarism”, gender is the result of “forced recitation or norms” (Butler, 1993: 94). Ali’s conscious efforts may not help her gender performances.

The joy. Un-mannish behavior, however, can be seen in positive light if it can help foster the relationship with one’s partner. As tomboys are responsible for the development of relationships, the creation of intimacy to enhance their tie is also one of her roles. Yoesman had suffered from multiple phobias (rain, lightning and thunder) ever since she was a teenager. She was afraid and vulnerable when it rained and had to seek immediate shelter and protection. While admitting that this was not considered masculine behaviour, Yoesman was not afraid to let her partner, Edwina, know her weakness. Instead, she made use of her own shortcoming to ask for tender care and loving protection from her partner. When the two of them were together during a rainstorm, Edwina would not hesitate to take Yoesman into her arms and comfort her. Yoesman expressed the great joy she felt when Edwina was there to comfort her during the bad weather:

So the sweetest part of my life with Edwina [happened when] ... it was raining

the other day. And she hugged me. 'It would be fine. Don't worry. I am here.' ...
When you are so scared and there's someone who's ready to comfort you. Oh...
It's just so good that I have Edwina in my life. When it rains, then I have my
Edwina to cover and comfort me. I was really scared of rain.

Even when the couple was working separately in their respective employers' homes, Edwina would not forget to call or send messages to Yoesman to keep her at ease in poor weather. In fact, Edwina was so protective that the tomboy hoped for a heavy thunderstorm whenever the pair had had a fight. The stormy weather would provide the best excuse for Edwina to forgive Yoesman and resume her love.

When she is angry ... I was just praying that it will rain. Come on! Keep on raining! Come on! More lightning, more thunders – even if I am in the corner ... hiding. Because ... she would really call me when it's raining. She would make a call, 'Are you okay? Are you okay?' Because she knew I was so scared of that. 'Oh! Come on! Are you okay? Oh! It's just okay. Later it will be gone. I'm here. I'm here.'

The persona. Instead of playing up her strong, invincible front, Yoesman showed her soft sides to her girlfriend from time to time to solicit care and affection. She called Edwina "Mama" and was always begging for kisses over the phone. Edwina told Yoesman that "you are like a baby! You need a mammy." Yoesman was fully aware that it was un-masculine to reveal her emotional needs to Edwina, yet she did it repeatedly ("maybe because I was also a girl"). Similar to Ali, Yoesman found herself having

feelings like a woman. Contrary to the claim made by Garcia (2010) that it is in the Filipino culture to emphasize depth in one's gender identity, she described her masculine appearance as a persona only, "Maybe I just look like man, but deep inside, I'm still female [feminine] there. So fragile, they said".

Yoesman's revelations pose a powerful attack on the "natural" coherence of sex, gender, and desire, as well as the stability of gender identity. Upon realizing her desire for women, the adolescent Yoesman made a conscious decision to cut her hair and played basketball regularly to build up a masculine image (as described on P. 83 in Chapter 3). When she matured with age, she understood more about the masculine role she had to play in a relationship: she had to think and plan for the future (P. 87-88 in Chapter 3), and give her partner sexual pleasure (P. 124-125 in Chapter 4). Yet, on an emotional level, she admitted that she was feminine and fragile. Being a biological female with a desire towards the same sex, Yoesman swayed back and forth between masculinity and femininity, adhering to masculine gender norms yet drawing on her feminine resources in carrying out the masculine role. While some tomboys worry a lot about their masculinity (Ali and Nat), lesbians like Yoesman are using their femininity to advance their relationships with feminine women – which probably is the ultimate goal of Yoesman when learning to play the masculine role.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have reviewed a number of unique tomboy experiences: how tomboys face their perceived shortcomings in procreation, in conferring sexual pleasure,

in presenting masculinities while feeling feminine; and the difficulties some of them face in explaining their sexual fluidities. We saw how tomboys make sense of themselves and stay culturally intelligible when their anatomical sex, gender identities, and sexual preferences are in (multiple) conflicts with each other.

All these Filipina tomboys are mandated to justify their desires towards feminine women with their masculinities, as compelled by the heterosexual norms in their culture, making the persistent display of masculinities an almost essential part of their makeup. To cope with the difficulties in gender performance, tomboys employ a variety of methods to act like men, with various degrees of success. Money is useful to these tomboys when they choose adoption to help build families. Tomboys will also use resources like their feminine experiences, to help play the masculine roles of giving sexual pleasure or creating emotional intimacies with their partners. The employment of financial and feminine resources to perform masculinities helps us realize that firstly, certain body parts are heavily laden with cultural values. Instead of being a gender-neutral biological given, the male genital system is coded to signify masculinities. When penises and sperms are naturalized to appear as the only means in sexual gratification and family building, the presence of other resources to perform the same function has helped to decentre their cultural supremacy. Secondly, we once again see the false dichotomy of masculinities and femininities in the examples cited in this chapter. When used appropriately, the feminine attributes of the tomboys are not obstacles but aids to their masculine performances.

While we cannot say that the masculine strategies that these tomboys adopted are foolproof, they have helped broaden, or re-articulate, the conventional meaning of masculinities. The strategy of understanding women's sexual needs, giving and showing them intense attention and respectful deference when having sex, for instance, can hardly be described as displaying the macho dominance which is very often emphasized in Filipino masculinity (Medina, 1991: 105; Mulder, 1996: 132). The successful employment of this strategy, which gives sexual pleasure to the femme, helps to set a new benchmark for Filipino masculinity. And it is under this revised understanding of masculinity that Yoesman, who was so proud of her sexual ability, refused to allow her partner to use a dildo for an assimilated taste of penis-oriented sex.

However, tomboys can only alter the notion and broaden the definition of masculinity; they cannot eradicate it altogether or choose masculinity or femininity at will. As pointed out by Butler (1993: 15), the agency in doing gender differently is not mere voluntarism; we cannot presuppose a choosing subject who is not constrained by the regulatory regime of gender. The cultural mandate for observing gender norms is always present, just like the "non-pure" lesbians had to be feminine when they were wives or girlfriends, and masculine when they were having same-sex relationships. When desire U-turns but the change is inexplicable under the naturalization imperative, the "non-pure" lesbians have no way to overturn the existing gender rules but to retell their personal lives, downplaying their heterosexual histories, to smooth over the gaps and twists in their gender and sexual identities.

Chapter Five Conclusion

The preceding chapters have presented and analyzed the data collected in the current research. This final chapter will state the significance of the research topic, before proceeding to present a summary of the study with reference to the two research goals put forward at the introductory chapter. The main findings of the research, which is a synthesis of the analysis of the data, will also be given. The thesis will end with the recommended areas for further research.

Significance of the Study

This research study is conducted against the globalization backdrop. The accelerated pace of globalization sees an increase in the volume of people moving across national boundaries. Such movements bring about meeting of cultures leading to impacts, big or small, onto the lives of people in both the sending and receiving countries. It is important for researchers in the humanities and social sciences to further investigate these resultant phenomena, documenting the lives of people they affect, in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the world around us. This thesis represents a step forwards in this direction.

This thesis has analysed an understudied but flourishing phenomenon: the practice of same-sex relationships by Filipina FDWs in Hong Kong, focussing specifically on their gender identities. The phenomenon has been reported by a number of academics specializing in the lives of FDWs but has not previously been examined in great detail. The current research, although small in scale, has made an attempt to profile

these masculine and feminine lesbians, the negotiations the tomboys made with regard to their culturally incoherent sex, gender and sexual identities, as well as conducive factors for the increasing visibility of practices.

It is true that the decision to work overseas is very often made with the aim of improving family finances. However, as the migrant worker leaves home to work abroad, his / her relationship with the family and the originating society changes subtly. While previous studies have focused on the functional disintegration of the heterosexual families back home and the preventive measures against such disunity, this study focuses on the liberating effect of migration: how Filipina FDWs are given more autonomy in practicing alternative forms of relationship. This freedom allows not only the old hands to continue their same-sex practice with relative ease but also new bloods to experience such alternative relationships, indicating possibilities for sexual desires to change under conducive factors. The Filipinas' same-sex practices can be understood as variants of heterosexuality, adhering to its hegemonic norms but differing in significant ways in actual performances. Butch and femme lesbians thus have, at different maturity levels, developed separate gender identities from heterosexual males and females, with a more balanced mix of masculinities and femininities found in both genders. Their practices present an alternative to the mainstream heterosexual gender model, revealing the limitations of the naturalized, hegemonic ideal and opening up more gender possibilities.

Summary

The first research goal. The first research goal of this thesis is to examine

how the new socio-economic status of the migrant Filipina domestic workers in both the Philippines and in Hong Kong, as well as the Filipino concept of gender and sexuality, help shape and facilitate their same-sex practices. The queer practices of migrant workers are not a well-researched area and call for a perspective that connects their sexual practices and thus identities with their socio-economic position both in the sending and the receiving societies at large. To attain this goal, we have earlier discussed the liberal structure of Hong Kong, which is quite unique in Asia, the distancing attitudes of the host society, and the employing families of the Filipinas, as well as the new economic strength and bargaining power of the FDWs. On the whole, Filipinas domestic workers enjoy more relaxed sex and gender regulations from both the host and the originating societies regarding their same-sex practices, thus helping them to build stronger lesbian identifications.

Many people, especially the Filipinas in discussion, have their love lives organized around survival. The fact that it is easier for Filipinas to practice same-sex relations in Hong Kong than in the Philippines is related to their new social position in their work destination and their originating society. First, these Filipinas are now less dependent on their families back home. When the Filipina FDWs were in the Philippines, they often lived with the male heads of their families and / or their proxy stakeholders who have a major influence over the deployment of family resources. Although it is not uncommon for Filipinas to work and contribute to their families financially, they are regularly seen as secondary workers whose small earnings are just supplementing the salaries of the male family heads. While these Filipinas work in Hong

Kong, they turn themselves into independent wage earners who provide vital finances to their extended families. Hence, overseas employment brought about important changes to their familial roles, leading to elevation in the family hierarchy. They thus have a stronger voice in defending their own way of life. Coupled with the distance between the Philippines and their work destination, these Filipinas are very much left to their own device in terms of the organization of lives, which includes the pursuit of love and relationship. Their originating family is not in a good position to intervene in their homosexual practices in Hong Kong.

The Philippines is underdeveloped in economic terms, with an underdeveloped social security system that provides little protection against the frequent natural disasters it faces and little support for the aged, unemployed and infirm. It is customary for Filipinos and Filipinas to rely on members of their close-knit, extended family in times of need. Heteronormativity is generally assumed in Filipino families who see procreation a key aspect of family life. Unlike heterosexual couples who are usually able to provide offspring to support the continued survival of the family, Filipina lesbians are not expected to contribute to their families in terms of human resources. However, with the relatively high income they earn from overseas, these women-loving Filipinas can also raise a family of their own through adoption. It is true that some Filipina FDWs privilege having biological sons or daughters, but a family raised through adoption is also an acceptable alternative to some of them who see adopted children as a major step towards the heterosexual family ideal. The financial strength of the FDWs helps both their extended and nuclear families to grow and thrive. There is hence one more reason

for these FDWs to feel that they can live socially sanctioned lives with their alternative sexual relationships.

There are critics citing Hong Kong's open society as a contributing factor to an environment conducive to Filipinas' practice of same-sex love. Although a cosmopolitan city by international standards, Hong Kong is not a place which openly embraces homosexuality. Results from a government-commissioned survey in 2006 (MVA Hong Kong Ltd, 2006) showed that 38.9 per cent of the surveyed agreed that "homosexuality contradicts the moral of the community", and 41.9 per cent disagreed that "homosexuals are psychologically normal people". Homophobic sentiments are widespread in Hong Kong society. The liberal structure of Hong Kong, however, can be seen in the relatively large number of holidays, as well as the freedoms of association and expression enjoyed by these Filipinas. While the former provides the Filipina FDWs with leisure time for same-sex practices, the latter helps ensure the proliferation of a number of Filipino organizations with diversified values and ideologies, including concern groups for the lesbians that promote lesbian visibilities and reinforce their identities in the local Filipino community.

Hong Kong citizens adopt a *laissez faire* attitude with regards to the Filipinas' lesbian practice, as the FDWs are generally not expected to be integrated into the society. Relationships with the employers' families are often distant, as Filipina FDWs are typically not considered part of the family. Although there are friendly employers, they do not usually ask about the private lives of their domestic workers. The society in

general and the conservatives in particular, do not concern themselves with the lives of the migrant domestic workers. Indeed, the Hong Kongers, in emphasizing their unique Hong Kong-Chineseness as the defining element of their identity, vis-à-vis its former and current sovereign states: Britain and China, have not paid enough attention to the presence, contribution and needs of the non-Cantonese speakers or the non-Chinese in Hong Kong. In terms of law, the Filipina FDWs are also denied of local citizenship, despite their work and residency in the territory. This immigration regulation has gained support from Hong Kongers who fear welfare expenses may escalate with the inclusion. On top of being a racial bias, such social exclusion is also a job-based discrimination – the immigration rule has expressly prevented FDWs from filing the citizenship application.

Tomboy Filipinas, with their low socio-economic status in the territory, are unlikely to pose a threat to local men. Although they trespass the gender line, these tomboys are not expected to share any of the privileges enjoyed by the indigenous males, in terms of social status, economic opportunities or access to Hong Kong Chinese women and thus are not a cause of alarm to the Hong Kong patriarchy. The Filipinas' exclusion from the mainstream society has however helped create a space for them to practice same-sex relationships without having to face heavy reprimands from the host society. The relatively lenient attitude of the Hong Kong people towards their homosexual practice, though rooted in a narrow sense of community, has indirectly encouraged these lesbian Filipinas to assume non-conforming sexual and gender identities.

It would be too optimistic to say that the Filipinas can pursue love with total freedom of will. Their practices, though being deviant in nature, are largely shaped and defined by the Filipino concept of sex and gender. There are two major organizing principles with regard to sex and gender in the Filipino culture, namely gender inversion and naturalization. Gender-inversion is seen as the root for same-sex practices. Social attention thus falls on the gender-inverted tomboy, rather than her feminine partner. This understanding of homosexuality in this case privileges “butch” lesbians, leaving the concept of “femme” lesbians under-developed. The notion of gender-inversion helps maintain the neat coherence between gender and sexuality, despite the same-sex nature of homosexuality. Women who have developed desires towards feminine women are culturally compelled to “invert” their genders, adopting masculine gender identities. With naturalization, tomboys defend their alternative sexual and gender behaviour as “inborn” but the understanding is restrictive with regard to the fluid development of sexuality. Chapters Two and Three of the thesis have provided detailed discussions on the above-mentioned conducting socio-economic conditions and guiding gender concepts under which the Filipina FDWs practice same-sex relationships.

The second research goal. The second goal of this thesis lies in the documentation of the gender self-conception as well as gender performance of the masculine and feminine partners among women-loving Filipina FDWs in Hong Kong. Chapters Three and Four of this thesis have provided an ethnographic account of their gender behaviour which is a much under-researched area in both the study of migrants

and of sexuality.

A Filipino tomboy, or a “butch”, is expected to play the masculine leadership roles and concurrently be the attentive caretaker who always bears the girlfriend’s interests in mind. She therefore is both strong and tender, being variably masculine and feminine. Conversely, a “femme”, partner of a butch, is expected to provide miscellaneous care and emotional support to her masculine partner in a way highly similar to her heterosexual counterpart. As “femme” is not a well-established category of identity, feminine women are expected to partner with either biological men or tomboys. Tomboys studied in the present research therefore will not lose sight of the well-being of their girlfriends, in order to survive the strong competition from men who are privileged in the mainstream heterosexual society. Under the care of butches, femmes are observed to be most often content with their love lives and exhibit a strong sense of confidence that is not always found among the masculine tomboys. Among the Filipina lesbian FDWs we have seen, there is a more balanced mix of masculine and feminine qualities in both partners, in a marked departure from heterosexual gender norms.

Under the hegemonic heterosexual matrix, each one of the two anatomical sexes is dichotomously represented against the other, with its associating gender behaviour and sexual desire coherently aligned. Hence, a woman should be feminine and desire a masculine man. Being culturally unintelligible under such a notion, tomboy lesbians in the current study have to work out different ways to negotiate their female body with their masculinities and desires. Firstly, they use their new financial strength to build their

families via adoption, thus largely eliminating the procreation problem. Secondly, being biological women, tomboys understand better the sexual needs of their partners and are willing to prioritize their partners' needs over their own. Being more considerate and less dominant, a number of these tomboys can effectively give erotic pleasure to their partners without penises. And their imperfect masculine behaviour, like their sense of insecurity, though being at times worrying to some tomboys, can be used by others to create intimacy with their partners. One of my informants, Yoesman, was even comfortable to say that she was feminine within her masculine exterior. The use of financial and feminine assets to play the masculine role helps us realize that masculinity is neither an inborn trait nor the binary opposition of femininity. The gender performances of the Filipina lesbian domestic workers in the present study have thus helped to alter and broaden the definition of the masculinities.

The Filipino community often raises suspicions over "non-pure" lesbians who have had heterosexual experiences in the Philippines but practice same-sex relationships in Hong Kong as tomboys. The suspicions reflect the community's incomprehension over the sexual fluidity, or rather, the gender fluidity of these tomboys. With the Filipino culture privileging gender identities over sexual identities, gender fluidity is more problematic than sexual fluidity. The present research sees that there are fewer stigmas imposed on feminine lesbians who have been involved with both sexes than the "non-pure" lesbians. In view of the cultural imperative to present a stable self, "non-pure" lesbians have to downplay their heterosexual past in order to emphasize their masculinities and desires towards feminine women.

Main Findings

This thesis has shown how emigration has enabled the fluidity in gender behaviour and sexual orientation. Among the women-loving women that I interviewed, half of them have changed their sex partner from men to women after coming to Hong Kong. Two of the “non-pure” lesbians I interviewed, even openly took up masculine gender identities after the migration to adapt to the new sexual practices of having feminine women as partners. The fluidity in sexuality and more importantly, in gender identity, are inexplicable to many of the Filipinos who believe in naturalization.

In the queer theory she put forward, Butler told us that gender is performative, meaning it is an unstable identity constituted with repeated citations of cultural norms but not a reflection of our inner “essence”. Meanwhile, Butler has cautioned against the presence of choosing subjects who can freely pick either the masculine role or the feminine role at will. Seen under this light, the sexuality and gender reversal experienced by the “non-pure” lesbians in the current study might not be understood as unrestrained voluntarism. The drastic changeover could be indicative of the emancipating effects of migration on sexuality, together with the cultural demand of gender to reflect sexuality. Moving across country boundaries can lead to a complete makeover of one’s social network and positioning, enabling a life-changing, and sometime liberating, development.

Furthermore, the presence of “non-pure” lesbians and women who flip-flop

between same-sex and other-sex partners shows the deficiencies of the heterosexual / homosexual dichotomy. If we see our sexual preferences not as fixed orientations but a continuum of desires towards people of the same sex or opposite sex, it is easier to understand the sexual practices of these migrant workers who change partners from men to women. The limitation of the naturalization discourse, which implies fixity, is seen in its inadequacy to protect the rights of the homosexuals. When naturalization is used to privilege heterosexuality, the homosexuals are cast as rejects of the society. When the homosexuals try to use the same excuse – naturalization – to justify their same-sex practices, they have perhaps unconsciously marginalized those who have experienced sexual and gender fluidity. The “born this way” rhetoric put forward by some of the LGBT activists is feeble in defending people’s rights to seek love and relationships.

From the ethnographic study in this research, we may conclude that lesbian practices by some of the Filipina FDWs in Hong Kong have offered an alternative version of masculinity and femininity, opening up more possibilities with a blurred gender divide. This confirms Butler’s theory that power, which produces the subject, cannot be refused only to be redeployed. The redeployment of power is seen in the re-signification brought about by the alternative performances of the dominant gender norms. The cultural re-signification is believed to be latently subversive to the hegemonic gender norms.

The magnitude of subversiveness will probably be correlated to the social pervasiveness of the same-sex practitioners. In the case of the lesbian Filipina FDWs, it

is highly unlikely that they could bring much impact to the Hong Kong patriarchy, as they are socially distant from the local population. When these FDWs return home for good, the amount of impact they have will be proportionate to the degree of independence they can enjoy vis-à-vis their family network. In the Philippines, the family is the basic functioning unit, and in some cases “the only real effective social institution” (Medina, 1991: 54). It holds the important social function of disseminating culture and values which include gender regulations. If the returning Filipinas can remain as independent wage earners having self-sufficient finances, it will be more likely for them to practice alternative sexual relationships at relative liberty. Failing that, chances for them to continue their same-sex practices will be limited and their influences onto the heterosexual system will be curtailed.

Recommendations

This thesis explains how the Filipino concept of sex and gender, as well as their socio-economic conditions at home and abroad, help constitute their same-sex practices, facilitating the development of relationship in some ways and prohibiting growth in other instances. However, it would also be useful to include an analysis of the role of religion and the church in the research. The Philippines is a Catholic state and the Church openly condemns homosexuality. However, some of my women-loving informants are also regular church-goers. I suspect that there might be nuanced differences between the official line and the views of the frontline ministries. How the local Church views this group of homosexuals is an issue worthy of investigation.

Another aspect that deserves further exploration is the role of lesbian organizations in empowering women. To what extent is the flourishing of same-sex relationships in the local Filipina community related to the presence and efforts of the various lesbian groups in Hong Kong? What are their agenda for advocacy? How do they see the naturalization discourse prevailing among the Filipino community, especially in view of the presence of “non-pure” lesbians? Have they tried to groom femme leadership and what are their experiences? Have these Filipino groups tried to stretch out and communicate with the local Hong Kong lesbian groups? These are all interesting questions calling for scholarly attention. The current research focuses more on the private lives of the informants, leaving the significance of the activist organisations unexamined. How and how far do these groups help to advance lesbianism is crucial to our understanding of the Filipina lesbians in Hong Kong.

A third area needing more investigation is the lives of these Filipinas after they return to the Philippines. With more money at hand but closer surveillance nearby, how they practice love in the community to which they belong is an interesting question calling for more scholarly attention. Some of my informants were prepared to face, and ignore, comments from their neighbours and relatives when they returned home for good. Others were casually suggesting building a lesbian village in the Philippines. A study on their lives in the Philippines will help us understand the strategies they employ and the obstacles they meet in sustaining a long term alternative relationship in their originating society. However, given that the Filipinas we now conveniently meet in Central come from various parts of the Philippines, a follow-up research on their lives in

their home country will involve visiting a number of different (and perhaps remote) locales. More research support, in terms of manpower, money, and time would be needed to make this study a reality.

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