

4 Foreign workers and spaces for community life

Taipei's Little Philippines

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Foreign workers and spaces for social life

Research on migrant workers has become a major theme in globalization studies, including research on Asia (Castles, 2003; Douglass and Roberts, 2003; Flanagan, 2006; Hewison and Young, 2006; Oishi, 2005; Yeoh and Willis, 2003). The import of large numbers of foreign workers into the “newly industrialized economies” of Pacific Asia began from the mid-1980s when the labor force in these economies began to decline in number. Mostly drawn from Southeast Asia, and more recently China, the majority of foreign workers have gravitated to metropolitan regions, filling in not only the “3-D” (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) occupations in construction and manufacturing but entering as domestic workers for middle-class households. The focus of this chapter is on the ways in which these workers navigate the spaces of these cities in their efforts to create meaningful social lives beyond the sites of work and residence.

As explained in Chapter 1 (p. XX), these urban spaces of associational life can be collectively called civic spaces—“actual sites where people can gather and build relations with each other ... that are free from the overt control or interference of both the state and the private sector (or the market) and are inclusive and open to everyone.” Drawing from this concept, the discussion following explores the question of how the social spaces formed by the migrant workers from the Philippines functions as civic spaces in Taipei. From the many restrictions on foreign worker access to urban space in Taiwan, the initial assessment might be that foreign workers have little chance of realizing their quest for associational life in the city. As the case of Taipei's “Little Philippines” shows, however, the continuous efforts of foreign workers to overcome these restrictions underscores a very basic human desire for camaraderie among people from similar cultural origins and social identities.

In attempting to engage in social life, the plight of foreign workers begins at the point of employment. Cheap and disposable, foreign workers are subject to the overarching power of their employers in ways that extend working hours and severely diminish time available outside of the workplace. In addition, foreign workers in Taiwan are not allowed to own property and, with work visas limited to a few years, they have no chance whatsoever to become long-term residents, let

alone citizens. Further, foreign workers face systematic discrimination in access to housing, services, and social resources needed to enjoy the fruits of their labor in the host country. In sum, building a life in the city is exceptionally restricted in both time and access to urban space.

Yet the resilience of these people in making efforts for community life is remarkable. Just focusing on the workers as victims overlooks their agency and puts aside the various forms of both resistance to marginalization and proactive engagements in making the city change to allow for their fuller presence. To counter social discrimination and onerous control by employers, foreign workers have mobilized for collective political actions. Taiwanese NGOs have also emerged to champion the rights of foreign workers.

More commonly, foreign workers seek to form less confrontational networks among themselves to provide emotional and social support in their daily lives. As the case of foreign workers from the Philippines in Taiwan amply reveals, having a known location to enjoy everyday forms of associational life in situations of extreme limitation of time and the right to the city is crucial for both single encounters and long-term continuity of community life as migrants come and go. For Filipinos in particular, having a specific place and day—typically Sunday—for social encounters has been well researched in other Asian locales, notably Singapore and Hong Kong, as well as Taipei (Lan, 2003; Law, 2002; Yeoh and Huang, 1998). These studies confirm that because personal space and time are extremely limited at work and living sites, the conventional notion of a private life does not apply to most foreign workers. This is especially so for domestic helpers who live in cramped quarters and are on duty day and night. They turn instead to public spaces of the cities where they can exercise their own autonomy in meeting with others. These become the civic spaces for planned and spontaneous social encounters. They are also sanctuaries for which there are no alternatives (Yeoh and Huang).

Shops, parks, and sidewalks provide the spaces for social encounters among foreign workers. Some occupy the same corners of parks and railway stations for their Sunday gathering (Lan, 2003; Law, 2002). Commercial areas also turn into enclaves for foreign workers on Sunday. In the intensity of convergence of workers at specific urban locations on a single day per week or, even less frequently, spaces for shopping, dining, and other commercial transactions such as sending remittances abroad become intertwined with those for social encounters. The clustering of commercial services can even revitalize old urban centers by catering to a new clientele that is drawn there by the thousands every weekend (Wu, 2003). This often contrasts sharply with the common and biased portrayal of the presence of migrant workers as an invasion of local society. Rather than being invaders, they generate a periodic economy that the city would not otherwise have.

As Lan (2003) notes, foreign workers play the stereotypical role of maids or caregivers to demanding employers during the workweek (i.e., on the “front stage” of their lives in Taiwan). They then develop their tactics for the “back stage” of life on Sunday. On that day, they often dress up for their outing to participate with festive glee in meeting friends, eating home cooking, and sending money

and goods back home. All of these activities are necessary for migrant workers to maintain their self-esteem and identity (Lan).

Foreign workers in Taiwan

After decades of high economic success, Taiwan now employs hundreds of thousands of foreign workers from Southeast Asia. In 1989, under the urging of industries suffering from chronic shortages of cheap labor, the government opened the door to foreign workers. By the end of 2005, their numbers reached 327,396. Of the total, Thailand and the Philippines had the largest shares, with approximately 30 per cent each (Council of Labor Affairs [CLA], 2006). With the maximum length of stay ranging from 3 to (now) 6 years, the total number of migrants who have come and worked in Taiwan over the past 16 years is in the millions. None is afforded resident's rights or citizenship opportunities.

Most of the male foreign workers are in manufacturing and construction, including labor-intensive work in higher-technology industries.¹ Some 35,000 Filipinas work in social services, which means health workers, caretakers of the elderly, or domestic helpers. The working environment for foreign workers is generally far worse than that of local workers. Their income level is only about 70% of the local labor in the same categories. In addition, foreign workers typically have to pay job brokers hefty service fees that can be the equivalent of several months' wages. Working overtime is a common practice to earn enough income to pay brokers, which further diminishes the already low amount of free time from work.

The provision of the working/living environment for foreign workers falls under the Employment Services Act adopted in 1992 to regulate employer-worker relations. Its provision suspends many social rights of foreign workers. For example, the recruitment of foreign workers must be arranged through brokers in Taiwan connected to those in sending countries, which gives brokers overarching power to choose employers and work locations. Workers are not readily allowed to change their employers once they are placed.² If they stop coming to the assigned place of employment, they become "runaway" workers subject to immediate deportation when apprehended.

In addition, since January 2002, the extension of the working term to a maximum of 6 years was deliberately designed to prevent migrant workers from gaining citizenship, which requires at least 7 years of stay in Taiwan (Tseng, 2006). No matter how long they are in the country, foreign workers are not allowed to bring their family members to Taiwan. If a woman should get pregnant, she is typically forced to leave the job and is deported.³ This regulation makes having a social life very difficult for foreign workers in Taiwan, as household formation and long-term residence are effectively barred.

Mechanisms available to employers, such as holding power over the worker's visa or subtracting broker's fees from paychecks, force workers to save money monthly and confine them to an intensive working environment instead of allowing them to nurture a social life that is needed for human well-being. With

one eye closed, the government considers these regulations to be a way to avoid social contact and the “interruption” by workers’ presence in local communities, which reflects and simultaneously reinforces the prevailing social fears of foreign workers among Taiwan society. It is ironic that while political reform in Taiwan has empowered its citizens to create their own parks and community spaces (Huang, 2005), foreign workers are severely inhibited from taking part in actively using public spaces, not to mention creating their own social spaces.

For those who work in Taiwanese households, the situation is even more heartrending. Mostly women, they suffer from extreme social isolation. Confined to a dwelling unit, they cannot even see or associate with other foreign workers. No law yet exists to protect them from labor abuses such as no days off set by their employers. Working in individual homes isolated from other workers, they can be treated far worse than factory workers from abroad. Many do multiple jobs, work overtime, serve multiple bosses, and are on call 24 hours a day. As providing separate room for them is not legally required on the employers’ side, domestic helpers or caregivers often live in the same room with the people they attend, so they do not even have their own personal space or manageable time. Only by finding a way to get out of the house can they begin to have a social existence:

Their social spaces are so suppressed that for many who don’t or seldom get days off, hospitals and parks become places where they could meet friends by taking care of their charge at the same time. Besides, everyday the short time of waiting for the garbage truck to collect garbage serves as the only chance they can take to briefly meet friends working in the same neighborhoods or call friends or families.

(Sr. Wei, 2006)

Under these working and living conditions, the opportunity to participate in some kind of social life becomes critically important to a migrant’s welfare (Wu, 2002; Wu, 2003). Yet according to a survey taken in 2002, 50% of employers never give days off to domestic workers. Only 4.4% stated that they give 1 day off per week, while the others give irregular days off. On average, foreign workers as a whole get less than 1 day off per week.

Such limited time off is a major focus of employer-labor conflict (CLA, 2002) that employers often seek to resolve by directly providing for excursions or recreation programs within the dormitory or factory areas. However, the purpose of such programs is to further discipline workers by controlling the substance of both their leisure time and working hours. For domestic helpers, even these activities are rarely possible or offered, and many employers are not willing to give days off because they believe that workers will be “contaminated” by getting more information from their fellow workers and through comparing their working environment and benefits and thus will seek to renegotiate their time and duties.

In these situations, foreign workers understandably still seek to have their own free time. However, even when granted, time is still insufficient to be able to contact and coordinate meetings among fellow countrymen and women. Thus,

having a commonly known site that is regularly visited to allow for predictability without intensive communications beforehand becomes invaluable. In the case of most foreign workers, the likely day to get time off, Sunday, is already well known. The question then becomes one of where to meet. This is important to know in advance because, in fact, most workers who are allowed a day off have *de facto* only about half of a day to meet and interact socially. For factory workers, leaving work in the morning is possible from about 8:00 o'clock, while 10 p.m. is usual the curfew hour set by the dormitory management. Leaving and returning to factories, typically located on the outskirts of a city, subtracts precious time from the day. For the domestic workers, before dinner is their "Cinderella time" (Yeoh and Huang, 1998). Because of the short time available, the use of space on Sunday must be very efficient. The functions must be multiple (i.e., going to church, getting a haircut, shopping, dining, and socializing), and all these spaces must be clustered. Owing to the considerations of access and cost, nodal places with high transportation accessibility tend to swarm with foreign workers on Sundays. Train stations in major cities hosting the industrial zones such as Taipei, Taoyuan, Chungli, and Taichung serve well for this category of space. Taipei station, with its large open spaces including air-conditioned indoor space and outdoor promenades with benches, is especially attractive and often lures a large number of foreign workers.

The commercial spaces around the area also provide the workers with cheap prepared food. In response to its huge draw for foreign workers, the mall located above the ground floor in the train station now caters to Thai, Malaysian, Indonesian, and Filipino workers, complete with wage goods, souvenirs, music, and even a karaoke café. These social activities of migrant workers have gradually changed the original sense of the train station as a space of flows to one of destination in and of itself—at least for many foreign workers (Wang and Wu, 2004).

Open public spaces such as urban parks and squares close to the station areas are also popular sites for foreign worker to gather. Here in these civic spaces they can stay for a long time and have no need to pay an admission fee. They might meet an unfriendly gaze from the local people, but since urban parks are big, they typically allow for peaceful coexistence. Though some might begrudge the presence of others, public parks present a space in which it is extremely difficult for anyone to assert rights of privileged access and use over others (Douglass, 2002). After democratic reform in the late 1980s, this is the case in public places in Taiwan as well.

Foreign workers also gravitate to shopping areas that cater to their needs.⁴ Though migrant workers tend to purchase low-cost goods, price alone is not sufficient to attract them. Easy access in terms of time is equally important when shopping. Repeat visits also make shops and shopkeepers more familiar and help to make patrons feel free to chat and engage with them in ways that can become more sensitive to their needs. Cultural identities are also an important characteristic for an ethnic economy. In a society that does not appreciate the migrant workers' cultures, the shops that cater to their preferences often turn into social enclaves, especially businesses such as restaurants and karaoke. These establishments

provide nostalgic food, use a familiar language, and provide opportunities to chat and sing as well as information. They comprise a particular “consumptive ethnoscape” in the space of flows (Wang, 2006).

Religious spaces are also among the most important sites attracting foreign workers. The closer the religion of a foreign worker is to Taiwan’s own religious profile, the more likely is such a site to be found. For example, employers of Thai workers in Taiwan often arrange for them to visit a Buddhist temple or send monks into the factory to preach, which, again, serves to further employer control over workers’ time (Wu, 2002). Because the common days off do not fit with the regular Muslim services on Friday, the mosques in Taiwan do not play a significant role in terms of anchoring migrant workers’ leisure time, and thus Muslim workers need to carry out their practices in factories as well.⁵ In contrast, as is the case in South Korea and Hong Kong (Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants [APMM], 2002; Tsujimoto, 2003), Catholic churches in Taichung, Chung-li, and Taipei have organized to protect human rights and promote welfare for Filipino migrant workers in Taiwan and, thus, anchor the migrant workers’ life on Sunday. Beyond their spiritual and political roles, churches are often a principal catalyst of ethnic economies that emerge in surrounding areas.

The case of Section 3, Chung-Shan North Road: “Little Philippines”

Section 3 of Chung-Shan North Road, the most famous site for Pinoy (Filipino) social gatherings in Taipei, is also the most identifiable and thriving social, cultural, and commercial area for foreign workers in Taiwan. Through nearly 15 years of history, a wide range of services have gradually clustered here, including church services, restaurants, finance operators, small shops, and sidewalk vendors. The parks in the area are vital meeting places for friends and for chance encounters with others from the Philippines. Filipinos who gather here say they rarely see foreign workers from other countries, which is confirmed by the absence of any shops oriented to other foreign groups. All in all, Chung-Shan North Road has become an important place for nurturing social life among Filipinos and a base for forging cultural identity and even political action.

This is not to say that Chung-Shan North Road has already turned into a Filipino-run or even wholly Filipino-friendly community. The actual social conditions that keep foreign workers marginalized and even invisible as urban dwellers also prevent them from being on an even footing with Taiwan citizens in access to and uses of urban space. When further extrapolated to Taiwan society, these conditions seriously inhibit the recognition of the multi-cultural population now in Taiwan’s midst.

Origins and spatial organization of Chung-Shan North Road

For more than a century, sections 1 to 5 of Chung-Shan North Road in Taipei have been exposed to high levels of foreign presence and influence. In Japanese

colonial times, it was the major quarter of the city that housed Japanese banks and government staff. After World War II, when the United States had a large military presence in Taiwan, Chung-Shan North Road was the main activity area for Americans with its clustering of the American Consulate, restaurants, hotels, bars, and shops selling American goods not readily found elsewhere in Taipei. Later, in the 1970s, after the U.S. military departure, the economic development of Taiwan brought large-scale construction of modern buildings to the area, and it gradually developed into an up-scale area of mixed commercial and residential use.

In the 1980s, when the eastern side of Taiwan rose to be the new business and commercial center of Taipei, the glamour of Chung Shan North Road started to fade. When the Filipino foreign workers first arrived at Taipei toward the end of this decade, the area they swarmed to on Sunday was not the Chung-Shan North Road area but rather Section 4 of Chung-Xiao East Road, which was the most prosperous commercial-residential area at that time and was also where the Manila Economic and Cultural Office was located. In addition, it had good bus access, shopping areas, bars and parks.

St. Christopher's Church

From the early 1990s, however, as the number of Philippine foreign workers rapidly increased, Section 3 of Chung-Shan North Road area emerged as their favorite locale and quickly replaced Chung-Xiao East Road as the major Filipino urban enclave on Sunday. Approximately 5,000 to 6,000 Filipino workers are estimated to rush to this area each Sunday. The principal reason for the shift to Chung-Shan North Road was the new leadership by Filipino clergy of St. Christopher's Church located in the area. Today called "Little Philippines" by the city government, though not by many Filipinos who frequent it, the Sunday gathering of Filipinos in Section 3 of Chung-Shan North Road centers on this church, which geographically links two public parks, a commercial strip along a major boulevard, and several smaller lanes of commerce and services.

A modest building with modern architecture built in 1967 by an American Catholic priest and renovated in the early 1990s (Figure 4.1), the church was originally intended to serve Americans and other Westerners and was initially the only church regularly holding English services in Taipei. In 1996, as more and more Philippine workers visited the church, two priests originating from the Philippines came to serve and offer mass in *Tagalog* along with the English services.

To Filipino foreign workers in Taiwan, the importance of St. Christopher's Church cannot be overemphasized. A good indication of its meaning to the community is the always full occupancy of its frequent Sunday mass services.⁶ Many Filipinos had heard of the church even before they arrived in Taiwan. After arrival, going to the church on Sunday also becomes an expedition to find new friends and build a social life in this foreign land.

Through the years, the church has broadened its activities for social and legal assistance and religious practices. It established foreign workers' concerns desks.



Figure 4.1 Sunday mass at St. Christopher's Church

Regular lectures such as those on taxation and other legal matters are given to help them deal with living in Taiwan. It also provides a venue for Filipino groups to host activities. It is highly aware of the tension with the Taiwanese community and tries to serve as an agent to represent the migrant community to the local society (Wang, 2003; Wu, 2003). Every year in late May, for example, it hosts activities for the Santacruzian Festival and invites the local Filipino associations to participate. The church is such an important social space that it crosses religious borders. When Tsu-Chi, the major Buddhist organization in Taiwan, collaborated with Taipei City government to provide free health check-ups for foreign workers, the church was one of the regular stops along the route.

Parks and public places

Meeting others, forming groups, and spontaneous chatting mostly take place in the open public spaces of Section 3 of Chung-Shan North Road. Along its covered sidewalks, Filipinos stand or sit on the limited number of benches, on portable chairs they bring themselves, or lean on railings and low walls. Because many employers forbid foreign workers from using the telephone during working hours, which for domestic workers can mean all the time, calling home to the Philippines or to friends in Taiwan via cell or public phones becomes a common activity around the church area and in the parks. While the church is a small building and is already overcrowded, and the Won-Won Building (below) is a crowded indoor commercial place, the parks in Chung-Shan North Road offer free open space and allow people to sit comfortably and converse with friends for hours.

Near the church are three main parks that Filipinos often visit. One, the Chung-Shan North Road Fine Arts Park, is an urban park with huge meadow-like areas. Located about 300 meters north of the church and somewhat separated from the residential area so that few local visitors tend to use the space, the park makes foreign workers feel at ease. Since the area of the park is large, it also serves as venue to host big outdoor events for Filipino workers that are occasionally provided by the local government or groups organized by Filipinos themselves. About 400 meters in the opposite direction is the much smaller Ching-Kuan Park, which tends to be a destination for those who would like to enjoy a quieter atmosphere and who do not particularly aim to meet new friends but still want a familiar sense of a Philippine community.

The most important park for Filipinos is Xuan-cheng Park, which is located just about 170 meters behind the church. It is often the first stop after mass ends in the morning, especially before stores and restaurants open. It is compact and is surrounded on three sides by residential buildings and one side by an office building. The use of this park is comparatively intensive. It was designed with stone benches running around its outer perimeter, which allows people who sit around the park to keep visual contact with other frequenters. Greeting and engaging in conversation with old and new friends is common here (Figure 4.2). People take turns making food to bring and share with others at lunchtime, which



Figure 4.2 Xuan-cheng Park, a popular place for migrant workers to greet friends on Sunday

lowers costs of Sunday outings. Domestic helpers who have access to a kitchen are the principal food providers.

Xuan-Cheng Park is also a popular site for Filipino groups and clubs. During our 1 year of frequent visits, we saw many identifiable groups using the park who gave an exuberant social existence to it on Sundays. Most people say that they stay in the park 3 or 4 hours, while two people interviewed stayed 9 hours. With shopping tending to taper off as an intensive activity for workers as they stay longer in Taiwan, the park becomes increasingly vital and frequented as the best free space to host their activities. When asked about where she would go on Sundays if there were no places like Xuan-cheng Park, a Filipina who has worked in Taipei for 5 years and tries to save every penny she earns, said, 'I would have gone back to the Philippines already.'

Filipino use of the park has met with resistance from the local Taiwanese community, with some residents complaining that foreign workers occupy their places in the park and make it dirty. However, Taipei City has eliminated trashcans in the park as a way to compel residents in the area to pay a fee for house-to-house trash pickup by the government. Alternative trashcans, such as those on the sidewalk on Chung-Shan North Road, are very small and cannot hold much trash. This often creates a trash-dumping problem that brings complaints from local residents about foreign workers who are assumed to be the culprits. However, to the contrary, for a place such as Chung-Shan North Road that has thousands of people visit it on Sunday, trash is an indicator that shows how urban space design and public management inadequately address the needs of the minority groups that cannot have their own residences in what the government itself calls Little Philippines.

Street-shops and vendors

As the attendance grew and the church became the anchor institution for Filipinos in the city, more and more activities began to proliferate around the church and into the neighboring spaces. On Sunday, the church and the commercial activities in the neighboring area open their services as if on cue. The mass services start at 7:30 a.m. Between 8:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m., vendors, who occupy sidewalks and the sidewalks of the shopping arcades, flock to display their goods. Shops and money remittance services open around 9:00 a.m. While the Taiwanese communities in Taipei observe a day of rest and office areas are empty, on Sunday morning Little Philippines has already warmed itself up for its busy Pinoy day. Other businesses catering to Taiwanese clientele are mostly closed on this day, providing a striking contrast between the ghostly streets of locked shops devoid of Taiwanese people and the vivid animation of the once-a-week Pinoy activities in the area.

Commercial activities are plentiful and are spatially concentrated within about 300 meters to the south of the church along Chung-Shan North Road. The businesses can be roughly divided into two types: street vendors and fixed shops. The vendors locate themselves around the church, which includes the sidewalks and the arcade on Chung-Shan North Road and the back lanes of the church.

Most vendors are Taiwanese who sell cheap goods such as shoes and garments (Figure 4.3). They often run their businesses elsewhere on weekdays. Prices are communicated in large-size English letters on cardboard placards. As they prosper from the foreign worker economy, these vendors must keep alert for the police who suddenly arrive to catch and fine them for illegal vending.

The few Filipino vendors are less fortunate than the Taiwanese vendors who regularly occupy the sidewalks or corridor space doing business in this area. They carry very few goods—mostly food items that can all be put in a handbag or small cart—which they sell almost secretively to their kindred Pinoy. Obviously, they have less capital, and they run very high risks. Unlike the Taiwanese vendors, if foreign vendors were to be caught by the police, they could be deported.

As the foregoing descriptions reveal, the area represents a unique flexibility in the use of urban space that stems from the radical shift in clientele every Sunday. Certain types of businesses experience a Sunday makeover from fixed shops to a once-a-week periodic market. For example, a breakfast restaurant for Taiwanese



Figure 4.3 Sidewalk vendors in Little Philippines

customers during weekdays releases its shop space on Sunday for a cheap clothing mart, and a fortuneteller and stamp kiosk changes into an accessory store. In this manner, Taiwanese landowners and leasers can maximize rents for every day in the week through a flexible practice not common in other parts of the city.

The most organized concentration of Sunday businesses for Philippine customers is in a few large shops on Chung-Shan North Road. Here on Sundays appear stores selling such items as cell phones and prepaid telephone cards. Some relatively large shops catering to Filipinos do not change into shops catering to Taiwanese on weekdays. The most eye-catching shops are chain stores that are funded with overseas capital, such as Bing Go (dry goods), EEC (cargo service), and iRemit (banking and remittances). Some of the staff in these shops are overseas Chinese from the Philippines who are able to come to Taiwan on business visas, Philippine students who are doing part-time jobs or, increasingly, Filipina spouses of Taiwanese. Two stores have television screens facing out to the sidewalk along the arcade that show sports programs or concerts of popular Filipino singers. This works very well to attract large crowds to the entrance of the store (Figure 4.4). These are the shops that tend to portray a certain sense of permanency to the idea that Taipei has a Little Philippines community.

Inside the stores, among the most popular items for sale are canned food and cookies from the Philippines. Often, in an inner corner of the grocery stores, a small stand is put up to handle remitting money and sending small cargo shipments to the Philippines. After shopping and stopping at the cashier area, customers will see information displayed, such as the photos of Philippine celebrities visiting from the motherland to this area or fund raising for the homeland for education or relief programs. In other words, the shops are not only commercial spaces but are also places of maintaining or strengthening the cultural identity of the foreign

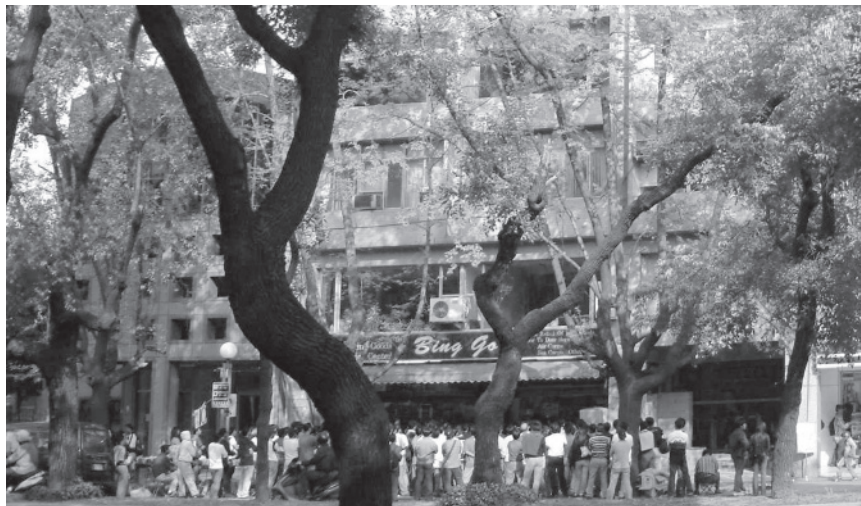


Figure 4.4 People flock to the store next to St. Christopher's Church (left) to watch programs from the home country on overhead TV screens

workers as the Philippine collectivity. Such community-oriented provisions of information and entertainment serve to increase commerce as well.

Some stores are also places that function to bring foreign workers closer to home. One of the media for this is the *kabayan* box, a uniform one-square-meter box that is kept in the shop until each customer fills it at her or his own pace, normally within 2 months. The clients are mostly female, as McKay also points out in her research on Filipina workers in Singapore (2004). It is through sending home the *kabayan* box of household goods that the Filipina workers contribute their labor to households back home during their absence. Some interviewees report that because they are given no personal storage spaces where they live, they come over to these shops to save things on almost every available day off to avoid things piling up where they live. They also worry about causing confusion among their employers who may mistakenly think they get their possessions through illegal or in improper channels.

The photos posted at the petty freight companies best express the close bond between the foreign workers and their families back home (Figure 4.5). Each displays photos of packages heroically being delivered by trucks, small boats, and other conveyances over unpaved road and rivers to remote rural areas in the Philippines, with the happy faces of the families back home as proof of good delivery. To celebrate its fifteenth anniversary in Taiwan in July 2005, EEC, a Philippine-based global cargo company, went a step further in making Philippine



Figure 4.5 Photos posted at a small freight company of successful deliveries in the Philippines

connections by inviting one of the Philippines most popular singers to Taipei to hold a concert for more than 20,000 people.

Another way to foster close ties between foreign workers and their families is through money remittance services. iRemit Global Remittance, which looks more like a bank than simply a money-forwarding service, is one of the most frequented places on the block (Figure 4.6). It not only provides a money remittance service but includes a wide range of services such as insurance, savings accounts, and even loans to buy houses in the Philippines. The remittance business is so prosperous in this area that at the end of 2005, Cathay United Bank, a local Taiwanese bank, rushed in to share the market after finally getting permission from the government to run its remittance activity on Sunday, normally a bank holiday. According to the staff, every remittance transaction at the time of Christmas festivities was for about US\$500, which equals 1 month's income, or even more, of a foreign worker.

The Won-Won Building

The Won-Won Shopping Mall, located about 300 meters away from the church, is a major Sunday shopping complex for Filipino workers. The first and second floors of this 14-storey building were designed to accommodate small shops; the third floor and above have office space. Once an up-scale mall for imported goods in the early 1980s, the building gradually lost its prosperity to other commercial areas. Now the ground floor of about 44 shops, mostly boutiques, is closed on



Figure 4.6 Migrant workers, mostly female, gather at iRemit Global Remittance to send money to the Philippines and take care of other financial needs

Sunday. However, some corners of the building are unexpectedly packed with people. They include the bench area on the two sides of the arcade and vendors selling household goods at the entrance. People flock into the entrance area to buy accessories and try on shoes. Almost all customers are Filipinas.

An escalator brings people from the relative quiet of the ground floor to the second floor bustling with Philippine commerce and services. The large influx of Filipinos into the area for church and relaxation on Sundays has revived business in this building. According to one shop owner, who herself is an overseas Chinese returning from the Philippines, when she rented her store and started business in 1992, only a few other shops remained. She needed to leave the building before dark in consideration of her own safety. With the increasing arrival of Philippine workers in Taiwan, and after the church became a center of their religious and social life, more and more shops opened to sell commodities and services to Philippine costumers, and these businesses became both more numerous and prosperous. Virtually all of the shop owners on this floor are either returning Chinese Filipinos or the Filipina wives of Taiwanese.

Compared with the space at the first floor, which has gorgeous window displays, wide corridors and shiny floors, the Philippines cosmos on the second floor operates in an opposite fashion. It is very crowded with almost double the number of shops (nearly 80). Except for only a few tailors serving Taiwanese customers, 90% of the shops serve Filipinos. Their design looks similar to some up-scale brands, but their prices are considerably lower, though stores selling luxuries such as name-brand watches also do business.

At some corners there are shops serving the demand for entertainment, including Internet cafés and video and CD shops with Philippine merchandise. A stall renting *Tagalog* romance novels can be found as well. Small Philippine eateries start to be busy from mid-morning and attract even more people to come into the building. These tiny restaurants are important because some foreign workers could have experienced hunger on weekdays. Their feelings of deprivation could be due to insufficient foods offered from the employers, the difficulties in adopting the taste of Taiwanese food, or a certain frugality in saving money and eating out only for special occasions such as going to this area. Lacking the personal space to store food ingredients and access to the kitchen for cooking food to their own taste, they rely on places on Chung-Shan North Road to provide them with the flavors of home.

Hair and beauty salons also bustle. Looking their best on Sunday is important for the Filipina workers to keep up their own self-image as other than simply that of a maid or health care giver. Beauty salons become a social space for Filipinas. A common sight in the area is females strolling around, shopping or chatting, with their half finished hair-dos, combining an unusual intimacy among other Filipinas with the haste of trying to accomplish so much on Sunday.

As almost all of the Filipino serving shops in the Won-Won Building are open only on Sundays, owners tend to maximize the use of the space to pay their rent. Almost every shop extends or leases its shop front to small stalls to maximize revenues from their shop space. Many owners provide chairs for TV programs

along the corridors so that the costumers can sit to chat before being served. Thus, the 2.5-meter-wide corridors are so crowded that patrons have to rub shoulders to pass each other (Figure 4.7).

The secret of business here is not only the commodities or the physical space to make people feel like home. Shops clustering in this building visibly appear to be more socially conscious than are other local shops. The sense of friendship is basic to keep costumers. Though friendship could be expressed by discounts and delayed payments, special services are important to Filipinos. Some shops offer free delivery in Taipei. A Philippine spouse of a Taiwanese who runs a chocolate and cake shop organized a co-op for foreign workers from her home region in the Philippines. She also hosts a picnic or field trip to the outskirts of Taipei for her members every month.

In this manner, the social and the commercial dimensions of Sunday life meld into each other in the Won-Won Building. On Sundays, the indoor spaces welcome Filipinos and filter out the Taiwanese. Possibly, at certain moments, it might be seen as a cultural oasis. Except for the church, it is the only building or the only space in this area that provides the Filipinos with shelter and seats on rainy days, air conditioning in the hot summer, and toilets for personal needs.

Interpreting Little Philippines

Section 3 of Chung-Shan North Road—Little Philippines—is vital to the social life and well-being of Filipino workers. However, it cannot be said to really constitute



Figure 4.7 Crowded interior space in the Won-Won Building on Sunday

a full sense of civic space for the Philippine community. Despite its appearance on Sunday, even the name *Little Philippines* is not widely used by Filipinos who frequent this area. With the exception of the church and a few of the shops, it is a Taiwanese-run area, and many Filipinos continue to call it Chung-Shan, the name of its major road and location of transit stops (Wu, 2003). The area reveals its Pinoy garb only on Sundays. It follows the schedule of the foreign workers' free time, which is tightly controlled and suppressed by government, employers and, less visibly, Taiwanese society. Like Cinderellas, after midnight Sunday, the Filipinas who comprise the majority of foreign workers that congregate there turn back into domestic helpers hidden in private households. Little Philippines is, once again, a shopping area for Taiwanese people.

Little Philippines as hyperspace

Competing concepts can be called upon to help understand and characterize Little Philippines. In many ways it fits the idea of a "hyperspace," or a "hyper-reality" (Jameson, 1998). That is, while it might appear to be a Filipino community when casually observed on Sundays, such perceptions are illusions that have no deep social or substantial geographical reference. Pinoy signage and intense usage of the space by Filipinos mask the reality that the Philippine community is ephemeral and Filipinos are not in control of the production of any type of community space for themselves.

From this perspective, the entire panoply of Pinoy identity markers is so unanchored in a Filipino community that they "transcend the capacities" to map it as a community space (Jameson, 1998: 86). Filipinos attend church, go shopping, and meet in the park, but they do not reside in the area; they converge on it for a day. Except through seeking the sanctuary of the church, practicing their rights to the city can be expressed only when they act as customers or as the marginalized users of the public space. The message was well delivered by a Filipina interviewee who said, "Sometimes if it can be, we want transient rooms to take a rest instead of roaming around," when asked about what additional types of spaces foreign workers would like for this area. Thus, what might appear to be a mini-Manila is more accurately a temporary circulating Pinoy presence in a Taiwanese-controlled space. The Taiwanese state preserves this evanescence by keeping Filipinos in Taiwan as disposable labor stripped of rights to actually control the means to form authentic community life.

Little Philippines as liminal space

Yet to simply call Little Philippines a hyperspace misses the more fine-grained networking of Filipinos who use it as a base for organizing activities that begin to have their own life and are passed on to new Filipinos entering Taiwan. The Pinoy signage, too, is not just a superficial gimmick to attract Filipinos. As the foregoing discussion indicates, there are kindnesses and mutual assistance occurring in the church, parks, and shops that stem from Pinoy identity and caring.

Filipino organizations have also been created that have continuity beyond a given individual. As an anchor of Little Philippines, the church provides continuity to associational life and also mobilizes workers for their own social empowerment. In addition to providing religious activities, it has also become a place for political causes in support of workers' rights and has been involved in several social efforts to counter discrimination and biases in Taiwanese media. It also provides a gathering point for foreign workers to respond to policies that affect them back in their home country, as seen in August 2005, when tables were set up outside the church to gather signatures to protest the pending decision of the Philippine government to charge all workers an additional \$25 per year.

Many migrant worker organizations depend on the church and public spaces of Little Philippines.⁷ As one example, in April 2005, the Samahang Makata Taiwan International Filipino Group of Writers, which regularly meets each month in Xuan-Cheng Park (Figure 4.10), celebrated its sixth anniversary at St. Christopher's Church. The strength of this organization is shown by its ability to fine those who arrive late for meetings, which also reflects the extremely tight time constraints with which they must contend.⁸ Though most of its members were not writers or poets before they came to Taiwan, they all eagerly participate in the annual poem competition hosted by the Taipei City Government, and several members have won top prizes.⁹

From 2000 to 2004, this group of writers regularly used a building next to the park that was managed by a local NGO, the Taiwan International Workers Association (TIWA). In 2000, TIWA collaborated with the then-progressive Department of Labor Affairs in the Taipei City Government, which gave rent and other financial support for the House of Migrant Empowerment (HOME) run by TIWA to serve foreign workers in Taipei (Figure 4.11). The location chosen for the HOME was right beside Xuan-Cheng Park; therefore, Filipino workers called the Park "HOME Park." The HOME provided legal and other counseling to workers and mobilized people to push for reform and monitor legal regulations of foreign workers. It also provided assistance for workers to self-organize. Under its coordination, Indonesian and Filipino workers formed two groups and regularly gathered at the HOME. Its office space became a civic space for the foreign workers to get new information and mobilize collective action to improve the situation of foreign workers. It was also a space for people to chat, access the Internet, and enjoy companionship of others.

However, in 2005, the city government decided to terminate its contract with the TIWA on running the HOME because it said the building was inefficiently being frequented by foreign workers only 1 day a week, Sunday. The city's decision to cut its connections with an activist NGO indicates a withdrawal of the government from its strong support of labor and social justice issues and shifts to a soft approach of social service and cultural events. It also revealed the precarious, even fickle, nature of relations between foreign workers and the Taiwan government.

The writers association, the HOME, and the TIWA all suggest that a certain degree of sedimentation of Philippine culture and social power is apparent in Little Philippines. These organizational efforts interject Filipino ways of acting

into a non-Filipino society and culture. As such, rather than reduce it to only an unauthentic Pinoy hyperspace, a contrasting way to see this area is as a “liminal space” (Turner, 1977) that is neither Filipino nor Taiwanese but has elements of both that are in constant processes of negotiation (Smith, 2006). The idea of such spaces can be used to underscore how cultures mix and interact to create new hybrid forms or what others have called a “third space” (Soja, 1996).

Little Philippines is in this sense ambiguous in its identity, and because of this ambiguity and active exchanges of ideologies, concepts and methods of working become possible. For example, despite the fact that the surrounding communities show their reluctance, and even resistance, toward the “invasion” by the foreign group, through the years the park has come to demonstrate another dimension of intermingling between the local people and Philippine people and groups. There are, for example, Taiwanese husbands who bring their Filipina wives to meet friends in the park. Some residents bring their children to play in the park in the midst of Filipino gatherings. Some Taiwanese people from the surrounding area come to this park to practice English and to make friends with Filipinos. They view the presence of foreign workers as part of making Taipei a more international city.

From this perspective, Little Philippines might be thought of as a space that is in a transition from a marginalized Philippine entry point to a multicultural space the likes of which is found neither in the Philippines or elsewhere in Taipei. Accommodation as well as contestation occurs simultaneously in such a space. As elaborated by Mitchell (2003: 280) from the Australian experience, liminality and liminal spaces allow “migrant mobility and flexibility which operates independently from nation-states” to construct a “fluid sense of identity.” Liminal spaces can thus be seen from this perspective as benefiting the longer-term process of assimilation of marginalized people, such as immigrants.

While compelling in terms of pointing to the ambiguities of identity in the production of space, liminal space as applied to Little Philippines is problematic if the thesis is that Filipinos can and do negotiate the shape and meaning of urban space. Mitchell (2003) and many others writing on liminal or third spaces tend to assume a political context that has a certain minimum level of rights, such as freedom of speech and assembly, protection against labor abuses, freedom to change employment at will, and possibilities for foreigners to buy land, to become permanent residents and, ultimately, citizens. Most of these assumptions do not apply to foreign workers in Taiwan, or throughout Pacific Asia for that matter. While freedom of assembly and speech is now allowed, one point of this investigation is the absence of time off from work to express these freedoms. When only 2 days a month at best are given to workers in most instances, negotiating spaces away from work is extremely difficult. Under the current visa and labor regulations, no foreign worker in Taiwan has a chance of bringing or forming a family and no chance for permanent residence or citizenship in Taiwan. In such circumstances as these, the hopefulness contained in the characterization of Little Philippines as a liminal space that provides for flexible inclusion of Filipinos into Taiwan society can only be partially realized without basic reform that would grant rights to live,

have families, and participate on a more equal footing in producing urban spaces with Taiwan citizens.

In sum, neither the terms *hyperspace* as a geography without palpable locational reference nor *liminal space* as a malleable space of inclusion fits Little Philippines perfectly well. On one hand, the scale of Filipinos in terms of numbers and institutions, such as the church and the many social organizations that use this site, is too great to dismiss the area as a hyperspace, even though there is a superficiality to Little Philippines as a geographically definable community. On the other hand, unqualified ideas of liminality give too much credence to the flexibility of this space in terms of Filipino agency in changing its form and content or deeply engaging in place making and endowing it with collective identity. *Hyperreality* and *liminality* are terms that help capture the relationships between foreign workers and place making in Taipei. The context is, however, both richer and poorer than either can capture—richer in the associational life that springs forth on Sundays, poorer in the limited capacity of the Filipino foreign workers to directly make any significant changes in the area or its physical design.

Like the position of foreign workers in Taiwan, this vital social space of Little Philippines is vulnerable to many kinds of pressures. Some residents of the area see the foreign workers as noisome intruders, and efforts have been made to prevent them from using certain public spaces. From another direction comes the expansion of upscale shops just a block away from Little Philippines. Pressures are apparently being exerted to move the church to an outlying area, which would have the likely affect of killing the community and its supporting economy.

Gentrification of the area would have a similar impact. The artificiality of Little Philippines as a Filipino geography becomes all the more apparent when signs appear in buildings warning that police will be called to stop rowdy behavior, presumed criminal tendencies, drug use, and other unwanted activities attributed to foreign workers. All such expressions are tantamount to wishing them out of a neighborhood in which they cannot even establish their own residence. How Chung-Shan North Road develops in the coming years will be a vital experience for both the Filipino workers and the people of Taiwan. Taiwan's population growth is falling rapidly and will soon begin to decline in absolute numbers. In response, the number of foreign workers is likely to rise to meet the widening gap in labor supply and demand. International marriages are also rapidly increasing and comprise up to one-third of the total newly married cases in recent years in Taiwan (Huang, 2006).

From both a labor and a household perspective, Taiwan is fast on its way toward becoming a thoroughly multicultural society. In this context, with almost all attention on foreign workers given to work conditions and sites, there is a manifest need to advance research and coverage of social spaces in the city where multiculturalism will either be characterized by marginalization, ghettos, and low-income enclaves of people from other Asian countries or will instead thrive through mutual accommodation. If the latter occurs, this locale might some day become an authentic Little Philippines and a geographical marker of the cultural diversity that foreign workers bring to Taiwan.

Notes

- 1 Because they are better educated and have high English fluency, Philippine women are also hired in low-wage segments of hi-tech companies. In 2004 in Hsinchu Science Park near Taipei, among the total of 6,220 migrant laborers, 4,831 were Philippine female workers (Chang, 2005).
- 2 If workers wish to change employers, they are required to first make a full report of the problems encountered; if approved, they can be placed with a new employer. However, they often complain that local governments stand up for employers and will not speak out on the worker's behalf.
- 3 In November 2002, the regulation of prohibiting pregnancy was abolished and changed to one that depends on employers' claims of whether the employee is incapable of carrying out the work.
- 4 Lucky Plaza, an older shopping complex located along Singapore's upscale Orchard Road, is a well-known site where foreign workers, particularly domestic helpers, congregate owing to its many shops' catering to them and the concentration of agencies for domestic helper employment (Douglass, 2002).
- 5 The Grand Mosque in Taipei, the major mosque in Taiwan, has about 1,000 followers who regularly participate in the weekly service, but only a few of these are migrant workers. The Grand Mosque mostly attracts Muslim migrant workers on specific holy days.
- 6 Along with the increase of foreign workers from the Philippines in Taiwan, the numbers of church services are also on the increase. Now on Sunday, five masses are conducted from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Three are conducted in English, and two are in *Tagalog*. The church was built to accommodate around 400 people.
- 7 Organizations also arise from commercial interests. In the Won-Won shopping mall, shops run by owners with Philippine backgrounds organized their own commercial association.
- 8 During a farewell party hosted for one member returning to the Philippines, a young man arrived late. A senior woman pointed at him and said in a serious tone, "You are late by half an hour; so you are fined 100 NT."
- 9 One woman, who was a prizewinner in 2002, proudly said she has written 100 poems and hopes to publish the collection someday.

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