

Social Integration of Immigrant Communities in a Multicultural Context: A Case Study of Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

Qingyang Tian^{1,a,*}

¹*Beiyangyuan Campus, Tianjin University, 135 Yaguan Road, Jinnan District, Tianjin*

a. 1515362622@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper focuses on the diverse cultural landscape of Hong Kong and examines the social integration of Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers to the local society. It analyzes the challenges they face in achieving social integration, the underlying factors contributing to their integration issues, and the measures taken by the Hong Kong government and non-governmental organizations to enhance immigrants' social integration. The study reveals that Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers experience lower levels of social integration, requiring further improvements in personal safety and employment protection.

Keywords: social integration, immigration, intersectionality theory, Hong Kong

1. Introduction

Due to the influences of deindustrialization and globalization, Hong Kong, as a globalized city, has gradually transformed from a traditional industrial city into an international service-driven center since the 1990s. Previous studies have shown that immigration plays a significant role in the development of Hong Kong. The main categories of immigrants in Hong Kong can be broadly classified into mainland immigrants, immigrants from developed countries, and immigrants from underdeveloped regions. According to the 2021 population census, the social integration of immigrant workers in Hong Kong's multicultural context has become a phenomenon of great academic and practical interest.

In the late 1950s, Hong Kong's economy experienced rapid growth, leading to a continuous increase in local employment and extremely low unemployment rates. The economic development also elevated the living standards of local residents, shaping people's perceptions and preferences over decent jobs accepted by the local community. They tended to reject "three-dimensional" jobs perceived as dirty, dangerous, and demeaning, of which an example is the domestic work. Consequently, there was a labor shortage in these job sectors, which continued until the 1970s. In 1969, the Hong Kong colonial government allowed foreign nationals to bring domestic workers to the city, sparking a trend of hiring domestic workers among the middle and upper-class families in Hong Kong. However, the Hong Kong government did not permit domestic workers from the mainland to work in the city, leading to suppressed demand for local domestic workers. Meanwhile, Southeast Asian countries, located on the periphery of the global economic system, experienced continuous economic decline starting from the mid-1970s, leading to increased poverty and

persistently high unemployment rates. As a result, the governments of Southeast Asian countries promoted labor export to stimulate their citizens to seek overseas employment opportunities. In the harsh economic environment, the pool of laborers shifted towards women, prompting some Southeast Asian women to join the labor force and migrate to economically developed areas, such as Hong Kong, for work. As a result, since the mid-1970s, a large number of foreign domestic workers, predominantly from the Philippines, have been employed by middle and upper-class families in Hong Kong.

This paper focuses on the migrant domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia in Hong Kong, analyzing their social integration in a multicultural context from the perspectives of social policies, cultural communication, public perceptions, and occupational identity.

2. Literature Review

Existing research on social integration and identity has analyzed factors influencing social identity. Zhang Wenhong and Lei Kaichun [1] used a structural equation model to study the intrinsic structure of the formation of immigrant social identity. In their study, the authors identified five main factors affecting immigrant identity: group identity, cultural identity, regional identity, occupational identity, and status identity. They concluded that immigrants' identification with their occupation promotes their identification with their status and group identity. Additionally, individuals with higher education tend to prefer living in societies where they have a satisfying status identity and tend to identify with the local population. Wang Shujiao [2] proposed the "Immigration-Isolation-Inclusion" model to explain the cultural aspect of immigrant identity. According to this model, immigrants first define and seek their own identity, gradually discerning and separating themselves from the local population, resulting in "isolation." Subsequently, they deconstruct their self-identity and integrate into the local culture. This process of "inclusion" is bilateral, involving both the socialization of immigrants and the absorption of newcomers and foreign cultures by the local population. Wu Xiaoman et al. [3] expanded on the existing "Immigrant-Local" bidirectional perspective and innovatively extended it to a two-dimensional framework consisting of two main subjects: immigrants and locals. This extension reinforced the impact of objective structural environmental factors on social integration. Yao Yelin and Zhang Haidong [4] employed quantitative research methods to study foreign nationals residing in Shanghai for more than three months, excluding those from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. Their study analyzed the structure of immigrant social integration, incorporating dimensions beyond "cultural integration," such as "economic integration" and "psychological integration." This approach broke away from previous research that often conflated "economic integration" and "psychological integration."

Regarding labor migration, some existing literature has examined the social integration of migrant workers in Hong Kong. Lai and Li [5] categorized migrants in Hong Kong into three representative groups: migrants from mainland China, migrants from developed countries, and migrants from underdeveloped countries. They noted that foreign nationals from underdeveloped countries, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, predominantly engaged in the "three-dimensional" jobs—dirty, dangerous, and demeaning—that local residents were reluctant to pursue. Kevin Hewison [6] interviewed Thai workers in Hong Kong and found that while they received respect from their employers' families, their "low status" in society prevented them from gaining broader social respect. Sending remittance back home was their primary motivation for migration, and was also the main reason why they could endure the difficulties in life and the arduous work. Raees Begum Baig and Ching Wen Chang [7] employed quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers and religious organization workers in Hong Kong. They observed that Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong occasionally engaged in the same activities or appeared in the same places as local residents in their daily lives (e.g., at mosques).

However, interactions between them were limited. Domestic workers preferred to maintain their social identity from their home countries and organize various activities in the host country to recreate their a cultural community with compatriots. As a result, while they retained some sense of belonging due to their preserved original social identity, they mainly interacted with fellow migrants from the same country, limiting their access to local social resources. The literature indicates that foreign workers in Hong Kong experience social stratification compared to other professions. Their low societal recognition of the work they perform contributes to their relatively low social status in Hong Kong's social life. Moreover, their low identification with their occupation leads to a lack of motivation for social integration.

To address the above mentioned issues, the Hong Kong authorities have implemented some policies to promote the social integration and protect the rights of migrant domestic workers. Ming Yan Lai [8] combined Hong Kong's management system for domestic workers and pointed out that due to the specific limitations of their employment contracts, migrant domestic workers live in Hong Kong as "temporary" foreign contract workers. Additionally, the "two-week rule" states that if migrant domestic workers remain unemployed in Hong Kong for 14 days, they must leave the city. These reasons contribute to the instability of their residency in Hong Kong and enhance their attachment to their home country identity, maintaining emotional ties with their country of origin. Kara Chan et al. [9] found that communication is an effective method to enhance social inclusion. However, due to the diversity of languages spoken in Hong Kong, there is often a language barrier in communication between immigrant workers and local residents, leading to lower social inclusion of immigrants by the local community. Kim Kwok et al. [10] interviewed South Asian immigrants in Hong Kong and noted that they were encouraged to accept language courses, job training, and support services that better align with Hong Kong's local culture but neglected to preserve their own cultural identity. Some South Asian immigrants considered these measures to have assimilationist tendencies.

3. An Intersectional Approach and Social Integration

In this study, social integration refers to the process through which immigrants in multicultural Hong Kong become integrated into the local social life in different aspects. The process of social integration is dynamic and involves factors at the individual, family, community, and even global levels. The essence of social integration is multi-layered, multi-dimensional, and dynamic [9].

Since the late 1960s, the number of migrant laborers in Hong Kong has significantly increased [6]. According to the 2021 population census data from the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government, in the past decade, Filipinos and Indonesians accounted for nearly two-thirds of the non-Chinese ethnic population in Hong Kong. Based on the 2021 survey of the working population in Hong Kong, nearly 94% of Filipino immigrants in Hong Kong were engaged in the profession of domestic work, with females accounting for approximately 97%. Similarly, nearly 96% of Indonesian immigrants in Hong Kong were involved in domestic work, with females making up a substantial 99.3%. From these data, it is evident that the majority of female immigrants from the Philippines and Indonesia working in Hong Kong are engaged in domestic work. In this context, the term "migrant worker" specifically refers to migrant domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines in Hong Kong.

The concept of intersectionality describes the nature of the interconnection and mutual influence between different and multiple identities based on an individual's gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and disability. Intersectionality emphasizes that each individual possesses not only a singular identity but also multiple identities, and these identities cannot be analyzed in isolation from one another. They are not mutually exclusive but interconnected. The concept of intersectionality posits that discrimination and unequal treatment faced by individuals result from the combined effects of their multiple identities. In this study, the intersectionality perspective is used to

focus on the social category of Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong and analyze the impact of this social category on the discrimination they experience. In studies adopting the intersectionality theory, gender, class, and race are the three dominant social categories whose combination and interaction influence the power structure faced by individuals [11]. The majority of Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong are female. As a gender, females are marginalized in male-dominated political and cultural structures. In terms of occupational status, domestic work is classified as low-status work in society. As mentioned earlier, there is a social stratification among practitioners in Hong Kong, and the low-class status of domestic workers results in their vulnerability to exploitation in daily life. In terms of ethnicity, Indonesia and the Philippines belong to Southeast Asian countries, and there is ethnic discrimination against them in the local Hong Kong community. Discrimination by local residents is not limited to but includes mainland Chinese, Filipinos, Indonesians, Pakistanis, and Africans. As a result of this discrimination, domestic workers in Hong Kong face various risks in their lives and work. When the identities of female gender, domestic worker occupation, and Southeast Asian ethnicity are combined, individuals bearing these triple identities encounter significant economic pressure, work-related oppression, and inadequate protection of their rights in their daily lives and work.

4. Challenges of Social Integration for Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

4.1. Challenges of Immigrants' Social Integration

The difficulties in the social integration of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong mainly manifest in several aspects, including discrimination from local residents, communication barriers in daily life, low occupational identity, and limited cultural identification.

Regarding discrimination against domestic workers in Hong Kong, deep-rooted postcolonial and racial discrimination ideologies exist among the local population. Southeast Asian ethnic groups in Hong Kong are relatively vulnerable, and domestic workers experience discrimination from local residents in their daily lives. For instance, some Hong Kong residents hold negative perceptions of Southeast Asia as a region characterized by dirtiness, danger, and underdevelopment, which fosters geographical and racial prejudice. Moreover, they view these domestic workers from Southeast Asia as cheap labor. Consequently, when interacting with domestic workers, they inadvertently display a sense of superiority based on class. For instance, individuals born in the 1950s to 1970s in middle-class families in Hong Kong used to refer to these domestic workers as "髒髒" (pronounced "jí jí") or "賓賓" (pronounced "bīn bīn"), which carry somewhat derogatory connotations. In daily life, the Hong Kong society also demonstrates discrimination against Southeast Asian ethnic groups, which translates into a lack of services and resources provided to this community. During the pandemic, domestic workers infected with the virus did not receive adequate medical services and proper treatment.

Domestic workers also face challenges in social integration due to communication barriers with non-compatriot immigrants. Communication is generally considered an effective means to improve social integration, but domestic workers in Hong Kong are perceived as a group that is relatively difficult to communicate with. Specifically, when domestic workers and local residents participate in the same activities or appear in the same places, they seldom interact with each other. Furthermore, language barriers make domestic workers face various difficulties in daily life. For instance, during the pandemic, domestic workers lacked crucial information about the virus because they could not effectively communicate with the outside world, greatly increasing their probability of infection.

Low occupational identity is another predicament faced by domestic workers. In their daily work, the minimum wage stipulated by the Hong Kong government for domestic workers is far below the average local wage. They often encounter the issue of excessive intermediary fees, meaning that

despite working hard for over 12 hours a day, they do not receive appropriate compensation. As a result, they frequently experience significant economic pressure. Additionally, their living conditions are strictly controlled by their employers, making them vulnerable to verbal abuse, physical abuse, and even sexual abuse from their employers during the work process. The lack of basic welfare and job security severely diminishes their occupational identity and job satisfaction.

Low cultural identification also presents a major challenge to the social integration of domestic workers. Cultural identification refers to the recognition of one's cultural identity and the answer to the question of "which cultural model should I adopt as an immigrant" [1]. In the multicultural context of Hong Kong, domestic workers with dual cultural backgrounds from their home country and the host country tend to retain their social identity from their home country. They are enthusiastic about participating in various activities in Hong Kong to reconstruct the social and cultural environment of their home country.

4.2. Reasons for the Challenges in Immigrant Social Integration

The reasons for the social integration challenges faced by domestic workers are mainly divided into four aspects: the diverse local language and culture in Hong Kong, insufficient government support, class differences, and difficulties in cultural assimilation. Focusing on the diverse local languages in Hong Kong, this section provides an in-depth analysis of the problems faced by domestic workers.

Hong Kong is home to multiple languages, including some local dialects, Indonesian, Filipino, and Japanese, among others. The populations using Indonesian and Filipino languages account for 0.9% of the language users. The linguistic diversity in Hong Kong makes it difficult for migrant domestic workers to communicate with individuals outside their own ethnic group. Language barriers imply that domestic workers cannot access timely information about their lives, creating an information gap that prevents them from being aware of their rights and related information regarding safeguarding their interests. Language barriers also confine them to socializing only with their fellow compatriots during holidays and leisure time, lacking communication bridges with the surrounding society. As a result, their social integration becomes even more challenging.

Some related policies also hinder the protection of the rights and social integration of migrant workers. Firstly, their immigrant status leads to the lack of belongingness to Hong Kong. Due to policies such as the "two-week rule" and "mandatory live-in," as well as the government's opposition to granting permanent residency to domestic workers, they only possess temporary contract worker status in Hong Kong. Domestic workers lack the right to choose their place of residence, leading to a sense of helplessness and insecurity in Hong Kong. In terms of welfare and protection, employers control the living conditions of domestic workers, holding power over their basic living rights.

From the perspective of class differences, domestic workers are generally reluctant to initiate communication with local Hong Kong residents when they are off duty. The primary reason for this is that these residents may be their employers, and the two groups exist in different social classes, with significant power disparities hindering their interaction. Because individuals from the same country share similar cultural backgrounds and social experiences, domestic workers tend to interact with fellow compatriot workers to maintain their pre-existing social networks [12]. These three reasons interact and influence each other to produce difficulties in immigrants' cultural assimilation. The communication difficulties resulting from language barriers, the class differences between immigrants and local residents, government policy restrictions, and social discrimination collectively limit domestic workers' access to deeper and broader social networks and resources. Consequently, in their daily lives, due to the similarities between domestic workers from the same country, they find it easier to establish close relationships and retain their home country's culture.

In Hong Kong, domestic workers face multiple challenges in social integration due to the interaction of their multiple identities, such as gender, class status, and racial identity. In their daily

lives, they encounter discrimination from local residents. In their work, their basic rights are not adequately protected. In social security policies, they belong to marginalized groups. These challenges are primarily caused by language communication barriers, low occupational identity, low cultural identification, and policy restrictions, among other factors. The combination of these multiple reasons deprives domestic workers in Hong Kong of security and a sense of belonging. To address these issues, both the Hong Kong government and non-governmental organizations need to make changes to ensure the welfare of domestic workers and promote the orderly functioning of Hong Kong society.

4.3. Measures Taken by Government and NGOs

The Hong Kong government has implemented relevant policies to protect the legitimate rights and interests of domestic workers. In terms of economic income, in 2019, the government set the minimum wage for domestic workers at HKD 4,520. Regarding welfare benefits, employers are required to provide appropriate accommodation and protect the reasonable privacy of domestic workers. Additionally, before the contract expires, employers are obligated to pay for the travel and agency fees domestic workers spend on international travel. These measures to a certain extent safeguard the personal safety and economic income of domestic workers. The Hong Kong Labor Department and the Immigration Department provide free consultation and mediation services for domestic workers, addressing the inconveniences caused by their language barriers.

Furthermore, non-governmental organizations have been continuously working to safeguard the rights of domestic workers. Among these organizations, social work groups have been significant contributors to helping protect the rights of domestic workers and assisting them in overcoming difficulties. Hong Kong social work organizations continually improve social work services and provide feasible new approaches to address the challenges of immigrants' social integration. These approaches can be categorized into short-term and long-term plans. In the short term, the plans to enhance immigrant social integration involve in-depth analysis of the reasons behind integration difficulties and providing effective solutions to problems such as language communication barriers, cultural background differences, and employment challenges. As service providers, social work organizations help immigrants access social resources and assist them in overcoming their current difficulties. For example, they offer English and Cantonese language courses for South Asian immigrants and provide entry training and employment support services, all of which promote immigrant social integration. Additionally, they frequently host seminars on Hong Kong's local cultural system and multicultural festivals to promote cultural understanding and harmony among different ethnicities. In the long-term, social work organizations promote immigrant social integration by adhering to the principle of "integrating into Hong Kong and preserving ethnic culture." They organize training for foreign young immigrants in temples, providing them with new channels to promote their home country's culture. This promotional activity is a two-way interactive process that facilitates cultural identification among immigrants. At the same time, social work organizations unite immigrant women and help them establish handicraft groups where members can learn from and teach one another techniques. The establishment of these handicraft groups promotes the preservation of traditional embroidery and culture from their home countries. Social work organizations assist these handicraft groups in selling their products, resulting in the formation of a sizable social enterprise specializing in selling South Asian handicrafts. This enterprise not only helps immigrants preserve their home country's culture and promote cultural exchanges but also provides employment opportunities for foreign workers [10]. Among non-governmental organizations that help with immigrant social integration, in addition to social work organizations, there are religious organizations such as mosques and churches. They provide emotional and psychological support to domestic workers through various means. Mosques and churches aim to strengthen the connection

between domestic workers and society, helping them establish more intimate relationships. They organize diverse activities to facilitate socialization among domestic workers. Moreover, these organizations help domestic workers access resources and link them to formal support systems. For instance, they teach domestic workers how to contact local government offices and employment agencies to receive practical assistance [7].

5. Conclusion

This paper provides a review of immigrant social integration, with a specific focus on the social integration of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. It is evident that the social identity of domestic workers in Hong Kong is relatively low. They face challenges in social integration, including language barriers, work pressures, social discrimination, threats to personal safety, and a relatively low level of identification with local culture. The underlying reasons behind these challenges have been analyzed: in terms of policies, foreign domestic workers are not allowed to reside in Hong Kong permanently; economically, they bear the burden of low wages; in terms of social class, they are categorized as a vulnerable group due to their race, occupation, and gender; culturally, they tend to retain their original culture. Ultimately, the fundamental reason behind the social integration difficulties faced by domestic workers lies in the inadequacies of the Hong Kong government in safeguarding their social welfare. In the future, the Hong Kong government needs to develop relevant policies to ensure the personal safety and labor rights of domestic workers. Additionally, other non-governmental organizations, such as social and religious organizations, should focus on enhancing the overall capabilities of domestic workers, linking them to social resources, and addressing real-life difficulties. These efforts will promote the welfare and social integration of foreign workers in Hong Kong, contributing to the development of local society, culture, and economy.

References

- [1] Zhang, W., & Lei, K. (2008). *Analysis of the Structure, Current Situation, and Influencing Factors of Urban New Immigrants' Social Integration*. *Sociological Research*, (5), 25.
- [2] Wang, S. (2023). *Alienation and Integration: Immigrant Identity from a Cultural Perspective*. *Journal of Chongqing Technology and Business University: Social Sciences Edition*, 40(03), 131-136.
- [3] Wu, X., Xue, L., Fang, W., Jing, W., & Li, S. (2022). *Social Integration and Development of China's International Migrants: Construction and Application of Analytical Framework*. *Journal of Xi'an Jiaotong University: Social Sciences Edition*, 42(5), 115-122.
- [4] Yao, Y., & Zhang, H. (2018). *Research on Social Integration of International Migrants: A Case Study of Shanghai*. *Learning and Exploration*, (6), 9.
- [5] Lai, Yingtong; Li, Aijia (2019). *Migrant workers in a global city: the case of contemporary Hong Kong*. *Asian Education and Development Studies*, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print), -. doi:10.1108/aeds-02-2019-0028
- [6] Hewison, K. (2004). *Thai Migrant Workers in Hong Kong*. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 34(3), 318-335. DOI: 10.1080/00472330480000131
- [7] Baig, R. B., & Chang, C. (2020). *Formal and Informal Social Support Systems for Migrant Domestic Workers*. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 64(6), 784-801. doi:10.1177/0002764220910251
- [8] Lai, M. (2011). *The Present of Forgetting: Diasporic Identity and Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong*. *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 17(4), 565-585. DOI: 10.1080/13504630.2011.587309
- [9] Chan, K., Evans, S., Ng, Y. L., Chiu, M. Y. L., & Huxley, P. J. (2014). *A Concept Mapping Study on Social Inclusion in Hong Kong*. *Social Indicators Research*, 119(1), 121-137. doi:10.1007/s11205-013-0498-1
- [10] Kim, K., Lee, K. M., & Law, K. Y. (2018). *Multicultural Social Work Practice and South Asian Migrants in Hong Kong*. *China Journal of Social Work*, 11(1), 56-72. DOI: 10.1080/17525098.2018.1512367
- [11] Zhang, Y. (2018). *Intersectionality Feminist Theory and Its Applicability in China*. *Foreign Theoretical Trends*, (7), 83-95.
- [12] Vertovec, S. (2004). *Migrant Transnationalism and Modes of Transformation*. *International Migration Review*, 38(3), 970-1001. doi:10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00226.