

Dissertation Abstract (English)

Dissertation title

Competing Narratives: an Islamic-writing group of Indonesian Domestic Workers in Hong Kong “Forum Lingkar Pena Hong Kong”

Author

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This dissertation investigates an Islamic-writing group of Indonesian women who work as domestic workers in Hong Kong, to illustrate the members’ attempt to project desirable senses of Self in their lives that straddles over Indonesia and Hong Kong, as portrayed in the narratives appeared in this group’s activities. This group is named Forum Lingkar Pena (FLP-HK) established in 2004 by Indonesian domestic workers (IDWs) in Hong Kong.

Over the past few decades, the globalization of intimate labor has been becoming an important issue. Intimate labor denotes the kind of labor that relates to providing care and affection for others’ comfort, such as nursing, medical/child caretaking and domestic work. Most notably, an increasing number of women in less-affluent countries migrate to take up domestic work in the households in more affluent countries, and this sets the migrant women in a number of predicaments as social minorities. At present, over 150,000 Indonesian women are employed in Hong Kong to serve Hong Kong families for domestic work. Given the large number of this migration pattern, this study aims to investigate its social impact by taking up the IDWs’ social movement.

This dissertation sets forward the discussions based on my field research; (1) in Hong Kong for six months from 2008 to 2009 (2) in Indonesia for a month in 2010 (3) in Indonesia for two years from 2006 to 2008. It will pose questions such as;

- (1) Why and how has this movement taken place?
- (2) What is the purpose and the outcome of this movement?

With regard to question (1), it discusses that the social environment both in Indonesia and Hong Kong has hand in hand brought about this movement.

The recent increase of Indonesian IDW’s population in Hong Kong since the turning to this century has resulted in mushrooming Indonesians’ social movement groups in the region, many of whom embracing Islamic themes as the nation’s most dominant religion. Nonetheless, for many IDWs who have limited educational attainment, writing rather stands a challenging practice. Hence, this study portrays how this movement was established,

providing the members the opportunity to conduct both religious practice and writing. Indeed, this establishment process links to the social development in Indonesia in the last two decades, in which the country achieved an impressive growth in literacy rates, as well as developing the freedom of speech and publishing industry that increased both the number of potential readers and writers of commercial publications. In addition, the social circumstances in Hong Kong has also enabled the emergence of social movements of IDWs, or foreign domestic helpers (FDHs: Hong Kong's official term) by providing relatively good rights protection compared to other host countries of IDWs. Taking these two social contexts into consideration, this dissertation addressed that FLP-HK emerged rather contingently out of the two originally-separate social developments.

Regarding question (2), this study contends that collective religious practice and the navigation of desirable subjectivities are two main purposes of this movement. This relates to the fact that the members experience multiple discriminations based on their social locations in Hong Kong for being Muslim, female, and domestic workers. To come to terms with such stigma, the members attempt to empower themselves by gathering in a large public park and practicing their religion collectively.

However, this movement's primary efficacy was indeed found within their acts of projecting desirable subjectivities by the biweekly regular meeting participation. To test this argument, this dissertation present extensive narrative analyses both taken from the members' conversations and their writings.

For example, the members produced monthly bulletins, for which they divided the tasks and collaborated amongst the members. This dissertation scrutinized the members' conversations and written texts, to capture how the members' honest feelings can be seen in the guise of their narratives. Consequently, the main themes of narratives were found around the following themes; (1) the meaning of transnational domestic labor migration (2) desirable femininities (3) social relations within domestic labor.

Accordingly, this study indicates how the above main themes are found within the members' physical and written narratives. By doing so, it outlines both the resonance and dissonance of meanings found within them, at once underlining the re-articulation processes of the taken-for-granted meanings of domestic labor migration to an alternative one, which the narrator tries to create as the more desirable of sense of Self. In short, this study argues that these competitions of narratives stands for the members' struggle over the ever-shifting meanings of being an IDW. To put differently, such complexity and ambivalence symbolizes the subject positions of IDWs found at the intersection of religion, class, nationality and gender, which incorporates multiple senses of desirable personhood at the time of the Globalization of intimate labor.