Opening the scene…

On a Sunday afternoon in April 2013, for the first time I acted as a judge for the Miss Pinoyshots Princess, a beauty pageant held in a bar and restaurant in a landmark office building in Central, Hong Kong. The venue looked like a wine cellar with a stage at the centre for live performances, a ring of wooden tables and seats, and a rise-up area with cocktail tables. Event organisers and supporting teams rustled around in tense excitement. Friends of the competing beauties rejoiced in greeting each other and taking selfies. All the candidates, their make-over artists and assistants feverishly spun around at one semi-open corner of the restaurant to do final touch-ups. When the master of ceremonies announced the beginning of the show, the music stopped, and the spotlight on the stage made everyone wink, the lady in a bright red bikini costume with red feather wings like the “Victoria Secret’s Angel” appeared on the stage. She wore a gorgeous smile. When she confidently moved around the catwalk and introduced herself with an air of elegance, I almost forgot that she was also a Filipino domestic helper in the city… (Figure 2-1)

Introduction

Hong Kong, a largely Chinese metropolis with a population of seven million, currently has over 300,000 foreign domestic helpers. Among them, the majority (over 90 percent) are women from the Philippines and Indonesia. The law of Hong Kong requires all foreign domestic helpers to live-in with their employers and grants them “not less than 1 rest day in every period of 7 days”. This means that every week foreign domestic
helpers have one free day for themselves. In almost all cases, the rest-day for the 300,000 domestic helpers is Sunday. Due to this arrangement, most people living in Hong Kong are familiar with scenes that feature foreign domestic helpers crowding certain public spaces. Among them, the most well-known are Victoria Park in Causeway Bay for the Indonesian workers and Statue Square, Chater Garden, and the ground level of HSBC headquarters in Central for the Filipino workers. Less known to the general public is that not every domestic helper spends her Sundays sitting in a park or on a footbridge to rest. Instead, many have busy schedules joining religious gatherings, attending friends’ birthday or farewell parties, running errands in Worldwide House, holding general meetings of various associations, or participating in sport competitions or beauty pageants.

This chapter examines various beauty pageants and talent performances of Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong, which require enormous investments of time, work, and money from the participants. Based on interviews of a number of domestic workers and participatory observation of the processes of “event-making”, this chapter will analyse the Filipinas’ motivations for joining such activities and their experiences of self-making and community building in such processes.

No rest on rest-days?

There are different types of festive events and contests going on regularly among the Filipinas. On Sundays (and public holidays), in the open space of the pedestrianised Chater Road in Central district, one may come across colourful and cheerful events: for example, the Sinulog Festival in January, Philippines Tourism Day in May, Philippine Independence Day in June, and Kalilang Festival in September. Most of these events include stage performances and parades that demonstrate Filipino cultural and ethnic diversity, as well as beauty and talent competitions that give fame to the winners and honour to the related supporting societies. In addition, different beauty or modelling competitions are also from time to time held indoors, such as in bars and restaurants in Central and elsewhere. The most celebrated indoor event is arguably the annual Ms. Barkadahan contest at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre. In less prominent places, such as district community halls and the Bayanihan Centre in Kennedy Town, Filipino events regularly take place on Sundays. Most of the organisers and participants are overseas Filipinos – domestic helpers and Filipino expatriates in Hong Kong. Occasionally, celebrities from the Philippines are invited to participate. Sponsorships from travel agents, wireless
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