Living and Dying without a Care in the World:
Twenty-First Century Sinophone Cinema's Affective Attunement to the Growing Deficit Yet Enduring Feminization of Care

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Living and Dying without a Care in the World: Twenty-First Century Sinophone Cinema's Affective Attunement to the Growing Deficit Yet Enduring Feminization of Care

This project asserts that recent Sinophone narrative films — Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* (2011), Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* (2013) and Oliver Chan's *Still Human* (2018) — lauded for portraying domestic workers respectfully warrant critical attention not for their ostensibly progressive representations, but the affective resonance they create among middle-class viewers in response to the care deficit under neoliberal austerity. Rather than approaching the films as players in the realm of representational politics or international film festival circuits, my analysis attends to their affective registers, from what I term as reticent nostalgia to bearable awkwardness to tears of joy, as validation of and misgivings about the neoliberalism's disregard for social reproductive needs unless they come with profit-making prospects. Without scrutinizing these texts' promotion of acquiescence, albeit conflicted, to the privatization of and inequitable access to care, the transnational domestic work industry using Southeast Asian women of color and in poverty to ensure low-cost care for white-collar workers and their offsprings or those who have fallen through the cracks of the porous social safety net in East Asia would remain a well-oiled machine.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

If the 1990s witnessed overwhelming international acclaim for Sinophone productions by auteurs such as Taiwan-based Tsai Ming-liang 蔡明亮 and Hong Kong-based Wong Kar-wai 王家衛[1], the past decade in the 21st century (2010 to 2020) saw a modest "renaissance" of Sinophone films regaining visibility on the world stage. While Tsai and Wong are lauded for their idiosyncratic style and choice of subject matter, the films that managed to both garner awards within the international film festival circuit and achieved domestic box office success in recent years share multiple affinities. Apart from belonging to the genre of slice-of-life drama with a largely naturalistic style, these films all ostensibly revolve around a domestic worker and her relationship with her employer or charge. They are Ann Hui's 許鞍華 *A Simple Life* 桃姐 (2011), Anthony Chen's 陳哲藝 *Ilo Ilo* 爸媽不在家 (2013) and Oliver Chan's 陳小娟 *Still Human* 淪落人 (2018).

The debut feature film *Ilo Ilo* by the Singaporean Chinese filmmaker is the first film from the Southeast Asian country to win the Caméra d'Or award at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival. Hong Kong Chinese director Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* took home four awards from the 68th Venice Film Festival and *Still Human* by Oliver Chan, who is also from Hong Kong, received two awards at the 21st Far East Film Festival. *Ilo Ilo* as a narrative of a Filipina domestic worker hired by a Singaporean Chinese family has expanded appreciation of Sinophone film productions beyond the more established East

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[1] Tsai's *Vive L'Amour* 愛情萬歲 (1994) and *The River* 河流 (1997) won a Golden Lion at the 51st Venice International Film Festival and the Silver Bear at the 47th Berlin International Film Festival respectively whereas Wong received the Best Director award at Cannes Film Festival with his *Happy Together* 春光乍洩 (1997) and the FIPRESCI prize at the Stockholm International Film Festival for *Chungking Express* 重慶森林(1994), to name but a few of the accolades the two filmmakers has received in the 90s.

Asian film industries. *A Simple Life* on the bond between a retired Cantonese domestic worker and her employer is credited with reviving interest in Hong Kong local productions vis-à-vis "the influx of Chinese capital and the opening up of the mainland's fast-growing film market" (Li 24). In his review of *Still Human*, which traces the symbiotic relationship between a Filipina domestic worker and her Hong Kong employer living with paraplegia, Far East Films critic Andrew Saroch commends the film for serving as "a reminder of how good Hong Kong cinema can be." Saroch enthuses how "it's been a long time since [he has] been able to write that with confidence." It is an inkling that these films released in the same decade successfully charting new grounds or recovering lost ones for Sinophone cinema with a strikingly similar constellation of style and subject matter is no coincidence that first set this project in motion.

The fact that the three films are the first of its kind — *A Simple Life* and *Still Human* as the first Hong Kong production where a local Chinese domestic worker takes center stage and a Filipina domestic worker is the protagonist respectively and *Ilo Ilo* the first Singaporean feature film with a domestic worker from the Philippines as the lead — no doubt contributes to their notability to critics and the public alike. Each constitutes an event in itself considering how long the industry has gone without any such representations when these workers had and have been an integral part of the social fabric in Hong Kong and Singapore since the 20th century. Well-to-do families in these Sinophone communities used to outsource domestic labor to sworn spinsters and refugees from southern China in the 1930s till these Chinese domestic workers found employment in factories or the service industry during the 1960s and1970s boom in Hong Kong and Singapore's economies (Constable 53-54; Dodgson and Auyong 2-4).

The British colonial government in Hong Kong "has permitted foreign domestic helpers to work in Hong Kong since the 1970's to meet the shortage of local full-time live-in domestic helpers" (Labour Department). Around the same time in 1978, the Singapore government put forward "the Foreign Maid Scheme to facilitate the hiring of domestic workers" (Dodgson and Auyong 4). Merely a decade after the Foreign Maid Scheme was introduced in Singapore, the population of foreign domestic workers grew from 5000 to 40,000 (5). By late 1995, the number of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong surged from a few hundred in the early 1970s to 150,000 (Constable 3). Taking into consideration how far from recent the emergence of domestic worker populations, local or foreign, was and the exponential growth of the latter as the former dwindled, it is certainly surprising to only see representations of these workers on the Sinophone silver screen as protagonists in the 2010s.

As the founder of Sinophone studies Shih Shu-mei presents for our consideration, the Sinophone designates "place-based, everyday practice[s] and experience[s], and thus it is a historical formation that constantly undergoes transformation reflecting local needs and conditions" (30). The Sinophone productions this project examines not only share the cultural root in the Chinese patriarchal societal structure where social reproductive labor was performed by female and feminized bondservants, but also evince the ramifications of the differing developmental trajectories in Hong Kong and Singapore as former British colonies and international financial hubs. While Shih's caution against mainland-Chinese-centrism is well-taken, I intend to acknowledge the common cultural heritage/baggage shared by the Hong Kong and Singaporean Sinophone communities and attend to their specificities conditioned by colonialism and quests for a competitive edge with scant natural resources in the globalized world.

Many are quick to construe this recent development in Sinophone cinema where domestic workers are represented front and center as reflecting or heralding inclusivity taking root in the respective communities. An overview of the films' favorable reception reveals the contour of the predominantly positive affective resonance they have created among viewers. I am using the term "affect" to foreground the social nature of emotions both elicited by and projected on cultural texts, an insight I am indebted to independent feminist scholar Sara Ahmed for (*The Promise of Happiness* 37). As affect theorists Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg posit figuratively, "affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body [...] in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds" (1). Rather than considering emotions and affect as mutually exclusive entities, I see the former as the latter entangled and in motion, amid emergence. As such, my project shares Latin American film and cultural studies scholar Laura Podalsky's preoccupation with tracing "how some films plug us into emergent subjectivities that vibrate with the pulsations of the globalized present while others help to instantiate new communitarian sensibility by establishing "affective alliances" " (8).

The affective alliance I observe as having emerged from the release and reception of the three films in question is suffused with positivity, the radical communitarian potential of which is dubious. U.S. film critic Roger Ebert commends *A Simple Life* for observing "two inward people as they express love and care in their quiet ways" and conveying "hope in human nature." British critic from *The Guardian* Peter Bradshaw extols *Ilo Ilo* as “filled with sweetness, humour and humanity.” Writing for *The Hollywood Reporter*, critic Justin Lowe commends *Still Human* in no less lofty terms. The film, according to Lowe, depicts “the often precarious lives of overseas Filippino workers with compassion and insight, gracing them with the humanity and dignity they’re often denied in real life.” The general affirmation of the films in humanitarian and sentimental terms aligns harmoniously with how the filmmakers have chosen to introduce their works through promotional posters.

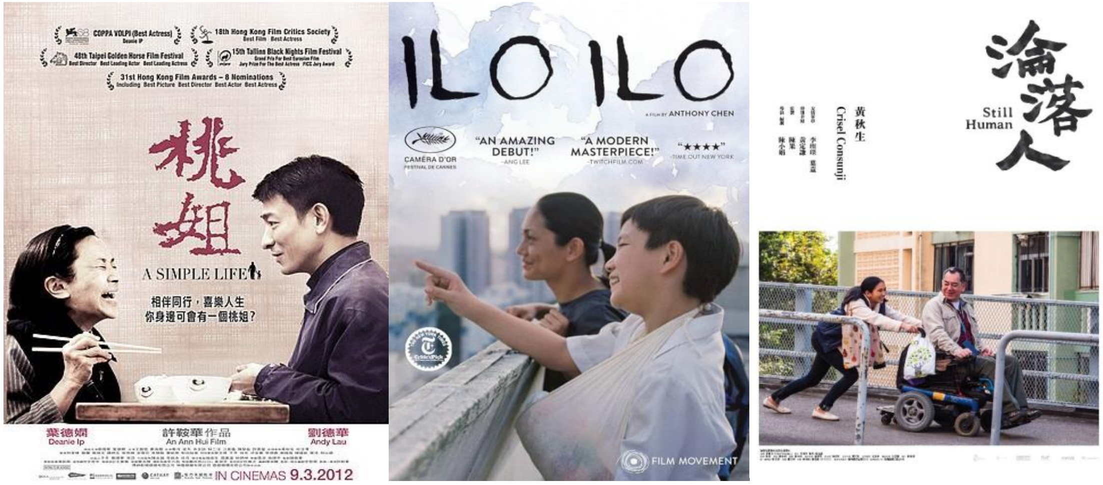
桃姐
A SIMPLE LIFE
相伴同行，喜樂人生
你身邊可會有一個桃姐？
葉德嫻 Deanie Ip
許鞍華作品 An Ann Hui Film
劉德華 Andy Lau
IN CINEMAS 9.3.2012
ILO ILO
A FILM BY ANTHONY CHEN
CAMÉRA D'OR
"AN AMAZING DEBUT!" ANG LEE
"A MODERN MASTERPIECE!" TWITCHFILM.COM
"★★★★" TIME OUT NEW YORK
FILM MOVEMENT
淪落人
Still Human
黃秋生
Crisel Consunji

Figure 1

This juxtaposition of the posters for the three films in question (Figure 1) demonstrates their common affective orientation. Each domestic worker is shown beaming together with her employer or charge. The duos are either facing each other or looking in the same direction. Prospective viewers are presented with what appear to be in-media-res snapshots of the films’ protagonists having an amusing conversation in everyday settings. These films no doubt differentiate themselves from other derogatory verbal and visual representations of domestic workers prevalent in Hong Kong and Singapore. The childlike, gleeful facial expression of the Chinese domestic worker in the poster for *A Simple Life* clashes with the perception of her real life counterparts in the 1970s, when they were about to be substituted by foreign domestic workers, as "money-grabbing, unscrupulous and downright difficult" (qtd. in Constable 28). The radiant Filipina domestic workers in *Ilo Ilo* and *Still Human*'s respective promotional materials appear to have nothing to do with what Singaporean scholar Angelia Poon observes as the longstanding reduction of foreign domestic workers into spectacles, "a source of contagion or an object of violent abuse" in mainstream media (4).

Yet, despite the apparent proliferation and validation of apparently progressive filmic representations of domestic workers, all is not well offscreen. In her acceptance speech for the Best New Performer award at the 38th Hong Kong Film Awards in 2019, Crisel Consunji, who plays the domestic worker in *Still Human*, shares that the resounding success of the film "seems to tell the world that in Hong Kong, when we celebrate our diversity, we move forward together."[2] Shortly after Consunji making history as the first actor of Filipina descent to be nominated and win an award at Hong Kong Film Awards, the city went into lockdown owing to the COVID-19 outbreak in February 2020.

A survey conducted by the Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body finds 40,000 foreign domestic workers had their only day-off in the week denied and 20,000 could only take one day off per month during the pandemic, given their employers' fear of them contracting the virus when out and about (Hogan). Employers would face no consequences for locking their workers out or firing them upon learning about the latter's positive COVID-19 test results. Turned away by both the local hospitals and their employers, some domestic workers found themselves sleeping in public parks or parking lots before they could fly home or access the resources NGOs made available (Chau; Khurram). Foreign domestic workers in Singapore faced similar issues of overwork, heightened vulnerability to employers' abuse and unreasonable termination during the country's lockdown (Loong).

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[2] This is the link to a YouTube video of Consunji's speech at the award ceremony: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ap9KfSpD054

It is, to say the least, ironic that domestic workers bore the brunt of the panic and peevishness the virus triggered among the Hong Kong and Singaporean populations, many of who had only recently contributed to the domestic box office success of *Still Human* and *Ilo Ilo*[3]. This disheartening discrepancy between a cultural phenomenon and domestic workers' lived reality ought to unsettle any sanguine faith one may still place on cultural texts changing, let alone transforming, the latter in any straightforward manner. Perhaps I am the one plagued by unwarranted sanguinity, however, since "collaborating with Hollywood" remains one of the key approaches the U.S.-based National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) adopts to advocate for domestic workers' rights[4]. The NDWA describes its awareness campaign built around Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018), which tells the story of an indigenous woman as a domestic worker for a middle-class family in Mexico City during a politically turbulent time, to be "highly successful" for "bursting open the conversation about the visibility and value of domestic workers."

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[3] *Still Human* is the fifth highest-grossing domestic film of year 2018 in Hong Kong whereas *Ilo Ilo* broke the SGD1 million box office record in 2013.

[4] This is the link to the webpage detailing NDWA's ongoing "Changing the Story" campaign: https://www.domesticworkers.org/programs-and-campaigns/changing-the-story/

U.S. film theorist Kaja Silverman shares the advocacy organization's confidence in the predominantly visual filmic medium's capacity to "change hearts and minds" (NDWA). In her monograph *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Silverman posits that political cinema "would "light up" dark corners of the cultural screen, and thereby make it possible for us to identify both consciously and unconsciously with bodies which we would otherwise reject with horror and contempt" (81). Much faith is placed by both Silverman and NDWA on flattering representations of the marginalized on screen compelling and moving the privileged to stand in solidarity with the former. How exactly viewers would develop "*loving* identifications" (40) with rather than simply consume the image of the Other, presented as appealing or otherwise, is sidestepped in Silverman's utopic vision for cinema's political import. Sara Ahmed points out astutely that " 'to love the abject' is close to the liberal politics of charity" and actually "sustains the relations of power that compel the charitable love to be shown in this way" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 141). The many instances of ruthless mistreatment and dismissal of domestic workers during the pandemic mentioned earlier, which sporadic acts of kindness could hardly make up for, are attributable precisely to the entrenched asymmetrical power relations between employers and domestic workers.

The celebration of shared humanity also overlooks the crux of the problem plaguing the transnational domestic work industry — "the inhuman way of developing the human condition in our current global conjuncture" (Cheah 183). "The human" in the form of well-nourished white-collar workers in developed economies such as that in Hong Kong and Singapore respectively is dependent on the subordination and exploitation of women from the underclass in less developed Southeast Asian countries for extraction of their social reproductive labor. Ruling out collective responsibility for as well as entitlement to sustenance and reproduction of self in favor of individualism and corporate self-interest, the neoliberal condition in which the human is produced and sustained in service of capital necessitates the relegation of a sizable group to abjection and precarity. So long as "humanity" envisioned in neoliberal terms is taken for granted, domestic workers' nominal humanity may be celebrated as they continue to toil in inhuman conditions where human flourishing beyond instrumentalization is foreclosed.

It then begs the question of why any critical attention should be directed to these "loving" representations of domestic workers in Sinophone cinema when they have obviously left many of these workers "unloved" or "loved" with stringent conditions in reality. What motivates this project is certainly not an optimistic estimation of the filmic medium as an emancipatory or empowering tool that can be freely wielded by the more privileged for or in collaboration with the less so. Neither does my engagement with the three films in question consist of a cynical or indignant dismissal of cinema as if it offered viewers nothing but mindless, feel-good content for consumption. Rather than guided by an a priori programmatic view of the medium's affordances in opposition or support of the status quo, I am drawn to the ambivalence towards the current state of affairs encapsulated and metabolized to varying degrees of success in my objects of study.

The effusive celebration of *A Simple Life*, *Ilo Ilo* and *Still Human*'s respective flattering representations of domestic workers may be indicative of lower tolerance of blatantly racist, classist and sexist caricatures in the cultural industry and the wider society. Nonetheless, the strong and wide-ranging resonance of the films with *A Simple*

Life and *Ilo Ilo* even receiving standing ovations at their respective premieres in Venice and Cannes (Jayne; Peace) arguably goes beyond mere satisfaction of target viewers' liberal humanitarian sensibility. Focusing on how these films represent domestic workers and their supposed merits accordingly would be skimming the surface to little avail. Beyond representational gatekeeping purportedly for the sake of domestic workers, my analysis starts from what could have motivated these representations in the first place and rendered them relatable to the general public, especially those the domestic work industry relies on as demand for inexpensive domestic labor.

No filmmaker is an island. The seemingly coincidental choice to tell the story of a domestic worker and her employer/charge bespeaks, I posit, a shared preoccupation with what the authors of the Care Collective aptly calls "endemic care deficits and abject failures to care at every level" under neoliberal capitalism, which "undermines all forms of care and caring that do not serve its agenda of profit extraction for the few" (Chatzidakis et al. 9-10). Apart from having a domestic worker as one of the lead characters, these films reflect and comment on issues of care, be it for the elderly, children from double-income households or people with disabilities. The pervasive privatization of care coupled with government austerity since the global neoliberal turn in the 1980s, spearheaded by prominent political leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, has led to the steady precaritization of lives beyond the working class and underclass. The previously secure and assured middle-class subjects may easily find themselves becoming members of the precariat today in the 21st century, to use a term popularized by British economist Guy Standing with his monograph *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*.

The threat the growing precariat may pose to the neoliberal status quo has so far been neutralized by the regime's self-help ideological tenet, the entrenchment of which serve to direct grievances inward. Market deregulation and ever-dwindling welfare budgets matter not or are even necessary for individuals supposedly in need of fear and lack as motivations to help and make something of themselves. As early as 1979, in his lecture series later titled as *The Birth of Biopolitics*, philosopher and historian Michel Foucault described the model subject in neoliberalism is an "entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his earnings]" (226). The Care Collective puts it in no less succinct terms: "[t]he ideal citizen under neoliberalism is autonomous, entrepreneurial, and endlessly resilient" (Chatzidakis et al. 12).

The last phrase "endlessly resilient" brings to mind a strained state of existence when one finds little shelter from life and the free market's vicissitudes. I detect in all three films ambivalence brought about by the widening gap between the supposed viability of self-reliance and the increasingly careless societal structures guided by neoliberalism. My analysis seeks to illustrate these films' affective responses and attunement to the status quo, where care becomes increasingly inaccessible for the majority and the burden of which continues to fall disproportionately on the underprivileged.

Given my focus on the pacifying dialogue established between these films, which are ostensibly about domestic workers, and middle-class viewers likely dependent on underpaid domestic labor amid the careless status quo, this project diverges from existing scholarship on cultural texts offering representations of domestic workers. In the introduction for the anthology *Domestic Labor in Twentieth-First Century Latin American Cinema*, cultural studies scholars and editors Elizabeth Osborne and Sofía Ruiz-Alfaro take heart in the more complex and dignified characterization of domestic workers in recent Latin American productions. The acclaimed *Roma* by Alfonso Cuarón is used as the prime example of a conscious director refraining from "making [his domestic worker character] some type of heroic character, or, […] deciphering her as the Other" (12). The editors concede that "a number of films featuring domestic labor do not directly critique the systems that maintain such exploitation and hierarchical power relationships" but figure the stories told carry "the potential to affectively engage viewers to reflect on their roles as participants in an ongoing problem" (19).

How more sensitive representations of domestic workers coupled with couched or muddled critique of an unjust societal structure can eventually lead to viewers' critical reflection on their complicity is unclear. I believe taking a step back from the actual representations of domestic workers and the environment they are in to evaluate the affective work they are called on to perform for and elicit from viewers is more likely to yield specific insights on these films' impact on the status quo.

Literary scholar Ena Jansen, in her monograph *Like Family: Domestic Workers in South African History and Literature*, reflects on the potent affective force of "stories dealing with uncomfortable choices, or experiences of exclusion and exploitation, where authors dare to engage with the full implications of entanglement, and foreground feelings of guilt and shame" (272). I personally share to an extent Jansen's preference for texts refusing to take the domestic work industry for granted and harbor the hope that my critique of texts that subtly bolster the status quo can help prompt more appreciation and creation of those Jansen admires. Not only is it impossible and unwise to dictate the directions and stances cultural production takes, there is also the need to understand and thus loosen the affective hold tales perpetuating injustice have on us. While a sense of guilt or shame may prove effective in prompting the renunciation of privileges and rectification of entrenched inequity, a plethora of positive and neutralizing affects, such as love, gratitude, resignation, indifference and so on, can be mobilized in support of the status quo. My study dwells on and problematizes the latter for the sake of undermining their potency, much like ruining a joke by dissecting it in minute detail.

Media studies scholar L.S. Kim similarly devotes critical attention to appeasing rather than potentially antagonizing popular cultural texts in *Maid for Television: Race, Class, Gender and a Representational Economy*. Kim's work delves into the consolidation of the ideal white American family through the racialized figures of domestic workers in the U.S. televisual culture spanning the second half of the 20th century. I find particularly perceptive one of her concluding remarks regarding how "the figure of mammy or a subservient servant or the invisible-but-viewable domestica say more about their creators and consumers than about the person or community being characterized" (160). My project is also partly an inquiry of what these Sinophone films about domestic workers reveal pertaining to the filmmakers and target viewers' tussle with the careless status quo as relatively well-to-do neoliberal subjects new to living precariously. It is in a way picking up where Kim leaves off by not assuming it is simply self-satisfaction that such representations of the marginalized do for the privileged.

I depart as well from Kim's notion that television or other media as "a product of social power already in place as well as a producer of social power" (161), which runs the risk of erecting a simplistic empowered and disempowered separation between content creators/consumers versus domestic workers. My project seeks to illustrate the ways in which the persistent subordination and exploitation of domestic workers can partly be attributed to middle-class neoliberal subjects' acceptance of their own disempowerment and increasing lack of entitlement to care under neoliberalism. With "the violence perpetrated by neoliberal markets, which has left most of us less able to *provide* care as well as less likely to *receive* it" (Chatzidakis et al. 4; emphasis in the original) remaining unquestioned, the urge to shift one's care burden or have one's needs for care met at the expense of historically marginalized women of color and/or women in poverty would likely stay if not become more pronounced.

My specific attempts to pry open the conversation are as follows. Chapter II "Reticent Nostalgia: Tracing the Affective Resonance of Reserve as Management of Expectations in *A Simple Life*" grapples with what I identify as a reticent nostalgic affective circuit Ann Hui's film constructs for viewers. Heeding Svetlana Boym's call in her monograph *The Future of Nostalgia* to critically examine the workings as well as substance or the lack thereof of nostalgic longings, my engagement with *A Simple Life* hones in on its indulgence in reminiscing about the past when well-to-do middle-class families in Hong Kong could count on Chinese women in the early 20th century for live-in domestic services in exchange for as little as room and board. These women from Southern China, displaced by rapid industrialization of the textile industry and economic as well as political upheavals, were not entitled to any form of protection as workers from the British colonial government in Hong Kong. The stark disempowerment of the group is hardly detectable in *A Simple Life*'s portrait of an exceptional member of such a group.

Viewers are invited through understated but intentional cinematography and mise-en-scene arrangements to share the employer's nostalgia for his now retired domestic worker's untiring care, catering to his physical and emotional needs without fail.

Yet, the nostalgic longing for the ideal domestic worker who needs no contract, let alone union, to hopefully counteract the employer's power is at the same time curtailed by a sense of resignation pervading the text. The employer depicted in *A Simple Life* and viewers are encouraged to mourn but acquiesce to the irrevocable loss of the class of domestic workers in an overwhelmingly profit-driven societal structure today. The commercialization of nursing homes and domestic workers who "dare" to bargain are portrayed to bring wry, knowing smiles to viewers' faces. My formal analysis informed by affect theory and economic criticism traces the complex ways in which the film elicits nostalgia among viewers for a romanticized past, hinting at the underlining undesirability of the present, yet facilitates their acceptance of the status quo where being cared for can be a luxury even for the formerly well-off.

Chapter lll "The Bearable Awkwardness of Being: Existential Compromise Under Neoliberalism as Struck in Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo*" similarly seeks to unravel the affective push and pull the film engages viewers in. The parameters of its specific affective circuit, however, are arguably more nebulous than those in *A Simple Life* for the former concerns awkwardness, a nagging sense of being out of place or line in social settings. The thread of awkwardness throughout the film I lay out in my analysis is attributable to the split within neoliberal subjecthood between self-possessed sovereignty and abject dispensability, which the filmmaker might or might not have intentionally captured with pointed critiques in mind. Both scholarship on the film and the director's own discussion of his work never broach the awkwardness permeating the film's form and content. I intend to disturb the silence by offering a close reading of the affective forces and ideological import of three recurring symbols—chickens, lottery and lipstick—and their awkward parallels with and divergences from the plot development of a middle-class family in Singapore navigating the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

If awkwardness, like nostalgia, carries the potential of gesturing towards what is amiss in the here and now, it calls for careful management by those with vested interest in sustaining the status quo and/or those who have had their imagination constricted by neoliberal ideology. After calling attention to the awkwardness of being within the neoliberal socioeconomic order, *Ilo Ilo* does viewers a (dis)service by delivering them from the unease with a life-go-on pat on the shoulder, ironically coming from the foreign domestic worker with the least secure footing in the Singaporean society and her edification of the boy she provides care for in the narrative. How awkwardness in *Ilo Ilo* is ultimately attenuated and made bearable for viewers with the promotion of a "realist" stance, which implies that nothing can be done about growing precarity except for cultivating one's equanimity, is another key question this chapter seeks to think through.

Still Human, the object of study for chapter IV "Straightening up for Tears of Joy: Oliver Chan's Still Human as Motivational Anthem for World-weary Neoliberal Subjects," as a heart-warming dramedy of a foreign domestic worker and her paraplegic employer developing trust and affection for each other over time appears much more straightforward than *A Simple Life* and *Ilo Ilo*. While the latter two promote acquiescence towards the status quo among viewers in different ways, *Still Human* urges viewers to celebrate their capacity to thrive and carve out their own lives, irrespective of scant social support and inequitable access to resources as well as opportunities. Its seemingly simplistic affective circuit's ambivalence rests in the coexistence of scorn, pity and admiration for the marginalized protagonists the film painstakingly evokes among viewers.

To deliver its will-over-matter lesson for the average more privileged neoliberal subjects in an affectively engaging manner, *Still Human* piques viewers interest with the disabled protagonist's abrasive behaviors and Othered presence before taking them on a journey of him reembodying the normative ideal for a benevolent patriarch vis-à-vis his obliging domestic worker. My analysis of Chan's work traces the workings of an uplifting affective circuit for an overcoming story of marginalized individuals. The universalization of this story entails a meticulous screening of differences. How the film mobilizes ableist, hetero-patriarchal ideals as well as progressive representational politics in a tale normalizing neoliberal austerity and individualism warrants interrogation. So does the celebratory, or "cruelly optimistic" as cultural theorist Lauren Berlant would put it, affective resonance generated as a result.

The three films' respective affective imprints can be visualized as such: *A Simple Life* calls to mind an individual taking a momentary glance backwards before heaving a sigh and shrugging their shoulders; *Ilo Ilo* shaking one's head while trudging along a lone path; whereas *Still Human* straightening up and casting one's gaze on the distant horizon. This hypothetical individual I posit as the films' target viewer is a middle-class neoliberal subject in need of affective coaching in the face of "the dissolution of optimistic objects/scenarios that had once held the space open for the good-life fantasy" (*Cruel Optimism* 3).

CHAPTER II

RETICENT NOSTALGIA: TRACING THE AFFECTIVE RESONANCE OF RESERVE AS MANAGEMENT OF EXPECTATIONS IN *A SIMPLE LIFE*

For prospective viewers of Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* drawn to the title's promise of modesty, it would not be an issue at all to find assurance in multiple reviews of the film that "simplicity" is indeed what it offers. Both Alice Shih and Roger Ebert commend Hui's work with negative statements, highlighting elements the film admirably does without. Shih gushes over the director's ability to "depict this rather incredible relationship [between a domestic worker and her employer] through the sentiments of the two characters, and *not* by didactic or expository dialogue," (my emphasis) whereas Ebert characterizes the film as one "with the clarity of fresh stream water, flowing *without* turmoil to shared destiny. *No* plot gimmicks. *No* twists and turns. Just a simple life" (emphasis mine). While Shih and Ebert assess *A Simple Life* favorably based on an acquired distaste for mainstream narrative films' heavy-handedness and emotional manipulation of viewers, Perry Lam faults the film for its simplistic characterization of the protagonist, one he deems "pale, flat, lacking in roundedness and depth 蒼白、扁平、寫得欠完整和深度的角色" (my translation).

Despite offering such opposing evaluations of the film's worth, all three reviewers would concur that Hui's work shows marked reservation, be it pertaining to character or plot development. However, I do not intend to take this feature at face value and proceed to pass judgment on its merit or the lack thereof for I doubt that the text's restraint either evinces a kind of unalloyed emotional authenticity or betrays the director and scriptwriter's "obtuse 遲鈍" moral sense (Lam). Instead, this chapter examines *A Simple Life*'s understated style and its ostensible simplicity. Whether following a less-is-more logic in terms of aesthetics or asserting that less *is* less morally, what the text actually holds and withholds in tension is sidestepped, remaining unaccounted for. Specifically, my engagement with Hui's work seeks to illustrate its critical import as a film whose reserve can be read as a delicate balancing act between expressing trepidation at and acquiescing to the neoliberal hypercommercialization of care in twenty-first- century Hong Kong. Such an oscillation has arguably less to do with the filmmaker's supposed moral laxity or insensitivity than the imperfect constriction of imagination and wiring of desires within neoliberalism. The neoliberal conditioning of thoughts and longings is and will remain "imperfect" since its brand of possessive individualism and atomism necessarily falls short of addressing the undeniable interdependencies among living beings. On the structural level, this 'shortcoming' is a symptom of neoliberal capitalism's functional dysfunction. As Nancy Fraser posits incisively, "[o]n the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies" ("Crisis of Care" 22).

In this light, *A Simple Life* calls for a reading attentive to the ways in which an ideological impasse attributable to the far-from-watertight neoliberal hegemony and a muted aesthetics exhibit a mutually reinforcing relationship. To unravel the latter, I find particularly pertinent Lauren Berlant's conception of "underperformativity" as "a mode of flat or flattened affect that shows up to perform its recession from melodramatic norms, foregrounds the obstacles to immediate reading, without negating the affective encounter with immediacy" ("Structures of Unfeeling" 193). It is precisely this insight from Berlant prompting consideration of the implications of potential disjuncture between one's intellectual and affective engagements with a text characterized by underperformativity that guides my analysis of Hui's work. Undoubtedly, the flattening of affect in a representational mode can come to muddle or even stunt viewers' criticality, albeit in ways distinct from those of a melodramatic mode. At the same time, such an understated style offers a unique vantage point through which ambivalence towards domestic and care labor, rendered all the more acute under neoliberal austerity, that elicits the affective flattening in the first place can be unpacked.

I locate the film's apparently universal appeal[5] in its capacity to not only register, but also reconcile, however temporarily, the conflicting longing for and disavowal of care by neoliberal subjects whose subjectivation entails constant calibration to keep at bay disillusionment from the system's supposedly unrivaled viability. It is *A Simple Life*'s evocation of what I identify as reticent nostalgia through underperformativity that offers a passably satisfying compromise of warring impulses for its viewers.

Written at the turn of the century in 2001, Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* posits that "[m]odern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values" (8). The scholar designates nationalism veering to an extreme and fostering a yearning among the public for the return of a nation's former grandeur as "restorative nostalgia" (xviii). This form of nostalgia evacuates the future of its emancipatory potentialities by casting one's gaze backwards in tunnel visions and justifying the violent exclusion of those deemed to be less-than-ideal national subjects. Focusing on Europeans' futile longing for "continuity in a fragmented world" (xiv) in the aftermath of the Second World War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the late 20th century, Boym characterizes restorative nostalgia as a defense mechanism against "accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals." In contrast, over three decades later with the consolidation of the neoliberal world order, the novel form of reticent nostalgia that has emerged operates more as a coping mechanism, devoid of restorative nostalgia's combative tendencies as denoted by the word "defense."

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[5] From 2011 to 2013, A Simple Life garnered a total of 38 awards at film festivals worldwide, ranging from the Golden Horse Awards to Venice International Film Festival, from Okinawa International Movie Festival to Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival.

The former's yearning for the good old days is tempered by mildly disgruntled acquiescence to the status quo, hence its "reticence." Rather than envisioning a future framed by a doctored rendition of the past like a restorative nostalgic would, the reticent nostalgic cares not for the lack of futurity in the present as they regard the idyllic past with a pensive look. There is no national grandeur or manifest destiny to be restored for a neoliberal subject adhering to economic pragmatism and preoccupied with survival in a "careless" society. Notwithstanding the fact that restorative nostalgia is still mobilized by those in power to divide and conquer today, a less conspicuous channeling and containment of desires is at work, not only ensuring neoliberalism's predominance, but also perpetuating the gender division of labor in the 21st century. Here lies another divergence between Boym's and my examination of nostalgia. While her diagnosis of restorative nostalgia for a glorious homeland mainly concerns macro-level national politics, mine attends to the form of nostalgia for a personal home, the upkeep of which has historically fallen on women as gendered and classed subjects. Granted, this more insidious and ostensibly private strain of nostalgia may not “bree[d] monsters” (xvi), as what the scholar sees restorative nostalgia to be giving rise to with its cultivation of extreme nationalism. Nonetheless, reticent nostalgia’s prevalence warrants critical attention for it helps banalize inequity, wasted potentialities and unnecessary sufferings within the neoliberal order.

In a similar vein, my reading of *A Simple Life* diverges from those foregrounding issues of Hong Kong’s political and cultural autonomy vis-à-vis mainland China. Han Li extols the film for not encouraging “the illusive indulgence in creating a Hong Kong past” like other contemporary local productions do (34) whereas Ruby Cheung is compelled to read it “from the angle of the identity negotiations Hui and her fellow Hongkongers must make about being ‘Chinese’” (176). Performing an allegorical interpretation of the film as an expression of existential angst plaguing the city necessitates abstraction from details in the narrative pertaining to characterization and dynamics between characters framed by normative gendered and class differences. The film’s representation of a domestic worker and her relationship with the employer in her dying days is taken for granted as Li and Cheung locate the production’s significance in relation to the phenomena of Hong Kong cinema becoming increasingly eclipsed by Hong Kong-China co-productions in recent years and part of the Hong Kong population’s quest for autonomy from their estranged motherland. Such a focus on geopolitics and questions of sovereignty overlooks the biopolitical implications of *A Simple Life*’s equivocal portrayal of domestic and care labor performed by and provided for a marginalized woman in an age that sees neoliberal ascendency.

Before delving into a close analysis of the underexamined import of Hui's affectively and stylistically muted work on the valorization of social reproductive labor and the concomitant subjectivation of neoliberal subjects, a brief synopsis of the film is in order. Chung Cheun-to 鍾春桃 (Deanie Ip 葉德嫻), who goes by the nickname To ze 桃姐, has worked as a domestic worker in the Leung family for over half a century since she was 13 years old and her foster mother could no longer afford to support her. Although the rest of the family have emigrated to the US, Roger Leung 梁羅傑 (Andy lau 劉德華) stays in Hong Kong as an accountant for film studios. Back from a business trip to the mainland, he finds Chung unconscious from a stroke. Shortly after regaining consciousness, the latter expresses her intent to resign and asks to be sent to a nursing home. The bulk of the narrative traces the deepening of the bond between the two as Leung partially takes on the caregiving role for the retired domestic worker when he finds time to visit her at the nursing home till she passes away.

The stoic homebound traveler

Among the notable contradictions in *A Simple Life,* I would like to first direct attention to the discrepancy between the film's titles and its content. Both the English and Chinese titles of the film—being *A Simple Life* and 桃姐 respectively—give viewers the idea that the narrative would revolve around To ze, a woman who only worked as a domestic worker for one family all her life. Even though the English title is not a direct translation of her name in Chinese, the noun phrase seems to designate her existence as being a paradoxically exemplary one free from complications that come with 'greed' and 'ambition' from the filmmaker's perspective.

Yet, it is actually Roger's character and his life as touched by To ze that is front and center in the narrative. This is evident from the film's opening and the ending that echoes it. Both show Roger to be a weary traveler on his way home from work. The fact that he crosses the border to and fro mainland China, managing the finances for a HK-China co-production, lends the film to the reading of Ann Hui making a meta-commentary on the Hong Kong's film industry migrating northward and answering to capital from mainland China. Apart from this no doubt valid interpretation, I find it fruitful to simultaneously enlarge the frame of reference and hone in on the specificities of Roger's homecoming journeys. Linked to China's economic ascendency since the country's "reform and opening up" in 1978 is the cementing of the neoliberal order, under which capital is supposed to enjoy unbridled freedom of movement across borders. The heightened geographical mobility of capital has created cross-border employment like that of Roger's. While capital has much to gain from becoming unmoored from fixed physical spaces, those who follow its lead for a living can find the lack of moorings alienating. Roger is portrayed as one such alienated subject nostalgic for the home made by To ze, a domestic worker having no access to the supposed plethora of job opportunities and ever-growing geographical mobility as capital transcends borders.

Right from the film's opening, viewers' affective alignment with Roger is established. The very first shot is a static establishing one showing an empty railway platform with a rustic metal structure on an overcast day (Figure 2). The tracks extending to the background across the frame coupled with the muted colors call to mind a lackluster journey with no end in sight. The subsequent extreme long shot taken

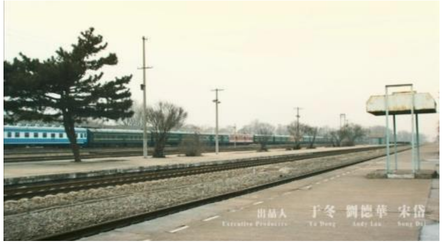


Figure 2

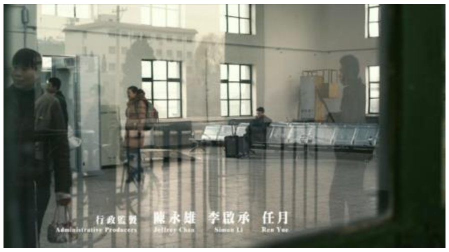

行政監製 陳永雄 李啟承 任月
Administrative Producers Jeffrey Chan Simon Li Ren Yue

Figure 3

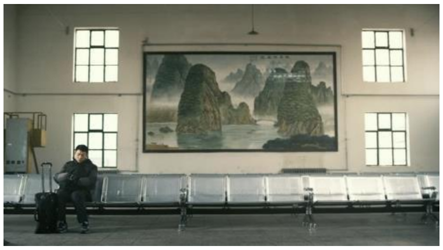


Figure 4

from outside the station’s concourse of Roger sitting alone (Figure 3) confirms how devoid of pleasure the travel is. In the frontal long shot within the concourse (Figure 4), the seated Roger occupies the bottom corner of the frame, dwarfed by the vacant seats, 3-by-3 windows and a large landscape painting as part of the set dressing. The visual composition foregrounds the traveler’s solitude in a foreign environment, the inhospitality of which is accentuated by the montage of shots showing barren trees through the concourse’s worn windows (Figures 5 & 6). The conspicuous lack of warmth signals to viewers that Roger is unmistakably far from home.

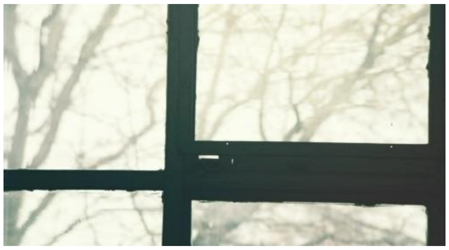


Figure 5

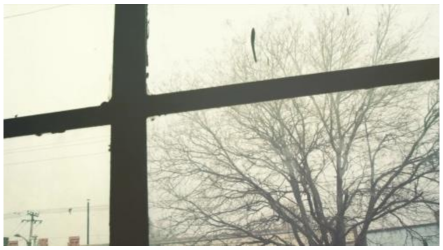


Figure 6

The extreme long shot of a dreary desert Roger travels past (Figure 7) constitutes the finishing touch to the stage-setting for his nostalgic voiceover, reminiscing about the presence of To ze in his life until two years ago. The non-diegetic plain piano accompaniment to the voiceover conveys the protagonist’s longing for comfort. Yet, the expression of this yearning is restrained by the actor’s stoic demeanor, as shown in the medium close-up shot of his profile with a neutral look (Figure 8). His reminiscence is also more factual than sentimental.

Figure 7

At 20, I went to college in the States

Figure 8

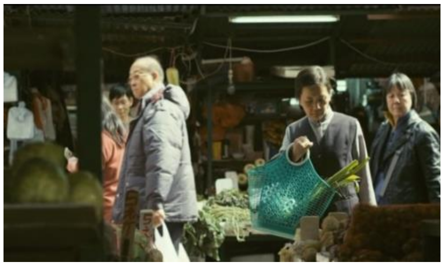


Figure 9

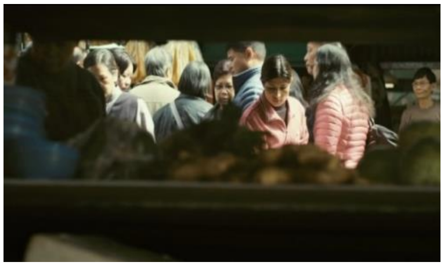


Figure 10

More vibrant colors enter the frame with the cutaway to the recent past, prior to To ze's retirement. The camera follows To ze as she shops at a wet market for Roger's lunch (Figures 9 & 10). Viewers are transported to a time when Roger could return to a home tended to meticulously by the domestic worker, as evinced by the care she shows in picking the best produce to put on her employer's dinner table. With their ellipses of time, the jump cuts underscore To ze's thoroughness with the purchases she makes for Roger. The nostalgia this scene may trigger among viewers who have been employers of domestic workers like To ze, however, is once again contained by the significant distance between the camera and its subject. The interior of stores selling vegetables occupy the foreground, partially obstructing viewers' field of vision. The domestic worker as an object of desire that makes a home homely and ensures her employer's sustenance is presented to be out of viewers' reach. The concurrent evocation and containment of nostalgia right from the beginning of the film fosters resignation to the world-weariness neoliberal subjects pursuing financial stability or career advancement are prone to feeling.

The narrative comes full circle as Roger arrives home with his black carry-on

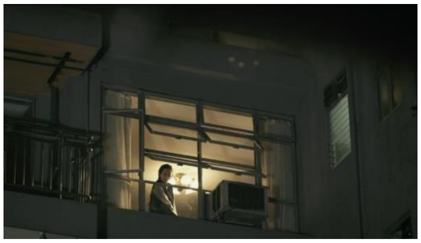


Figure 11

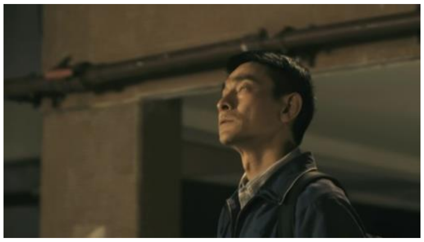
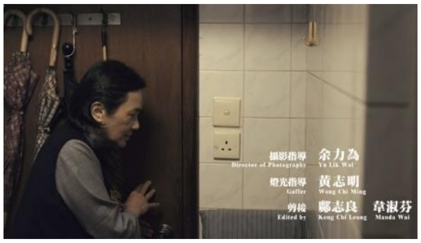


Figure 12

suitcase in the ending sequence. Shot during night time, the notion of a tedious journey drawing to a close is conveyed. In darkness, the warm-hued lights from the living room of Roger's apartment are especially welcoming (Figure 11). The low-angle long shot of To ze sitting by the window and waiting up for her employer is succeeded by a medium close-up of Roger looking up (Figure 12). The yellow light cast on his face highlights his longing for home, which is first communicated through the shot taken from his point of view of To ze by the window in Figure 11. Unlike the opening sequence which shows To ze outdoors performing a household chore, the film's ending places her squarely at home, akin to a permanent fixture at a beacon emitting light and offering solace for a travel-worn neoliberal subject. Measured and plaintive, the orchestral non-diegetic music reminds viewers of Roger's, with To ze's death, irrevocable loss of home as a refuge from the drudgery cross-border work entails.


攝影指導 余力為
Director of Photography Yu Lik Wai
燈光指導 黃志明
Gaffer Wong Chi Ming
剪接 鄺志良 韋淑芬
Edited by Kong Chi Leung Manda Wai
Figure 13

Preceded by the sequence of To ze's funeral, the flashback to a time when the domestic worker cares tenderly for her employer has the film end on a particularly poignant note. The futility of the longing for care in the neoliberal present is thrown into sharp relief. The appeal yet obsolescence of the kind of domestic service To ze offers is emphasized by the mise-en-scène in the final shots. She is shown retreating to her room and putting her ear to the door to make sure that Roger is home safe (Figure 13). The several umbrellas on the door To ze leans against complement her role as Roger's 'guardian angel,' offering refuge from the inclement reality. As the loyal and self-sacrificing domestic worker is likely to inspire viewers' affectionate regard, To ze's costuming is marked by archaism. The light gray shirt with a mandarin collar coupled with the dark gray vest constitute an outfit akin to a uniform a *mah ze*[6] would wear. Her hair being combed and clipped back carefully adds to her 'presentability' as a servant.

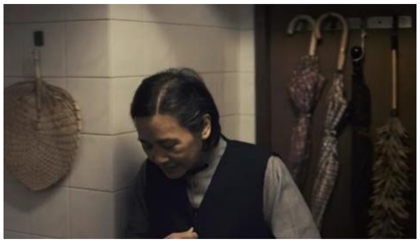


Figure 14

With a smile on her face upon confirming that Roger is back, To ze turns and presumably gets ready for bed. The medium close-up shot shows one of her hands reaching to unbutton her vest (Figure 14). The fact that she does not change into sleepwear till Roger sets foot in the apartment reinforces her image as the ideal domestic worker going the extra mile to ensure her employer's well-being without imposing on him. Returning to mise-en-scène, the umbrellas are kept within the frame when viewers are shown a palm-leaf fan on the wall to To ze's right. Since Hong Kong's economy took off in the 1960s, fans that require wielding manually have been replaced by electric fans, which have become one of the staples in even most low-income households. So have feather dusters like the one on the other side of the frame, next to the umbrellas, become obsolete over time. The palm-leaf fan, feather duster and the semi-uniformed To ze all belong to a 'simpler' past viewers no longer have access to. The low-key lighting with the shadows it creates also contribute to keeping the ending's nostalgic air in check. There is little room for any fantasy of turning back time that viewers can linger with.

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[6] *Mah ze* is a combination of the Chinese characters for "mother" and "older sister" respectively. The term is generally used to refer to sworn spinsters from the Shunde, Guangdong, who became migrant domestic workers in Malaya, Hong Kong and Macau after losing their livelihood upon the obsolescence of the silk industry in the 1930s. As more and more new immigrants from the mainland have became upwardly mobile and no long found themselves limited to providing domestic services for a living since Hong Kong's industrialization in the second half of the 20th century, domestic workers from Southeast Asia have been recruited to fill the void left as a result.

Despite its flirtation with the past, reticent nostalgia paradoxically situates one firmly in the present. At the core of such reticence is a form of stoicism that Roger shows in the face of losing one's haven, albeit built at the expense of the marginalized whose potentialities are unjustly circumscribed, while the neoliberal present where no one can count on being cared for continues to occlude the hatching of alternative futurities.

The future is now

If restorative nostalgia as identified by Boym first emerged amid the volatility and unpredictability besetting late modernity in the wake of large-scale warfare and rapid globalization, reticent nostalgia harbors little misgivings about what the future has in store. The reticent nostalgic *A Simple Life* speaks to and molds is convinced that the future is bound to be deficient in care and the past offers little besides residual warmth to be basked in momentarily.

Generational devolution 新不如舊

It is in its interview sequence where the film communicates the conviction that being cared for will become a luxury rather than a given, even for the more privileged, owing to a perceived generation gap. In hopes of finding a domestic worker who can take her place, the retired To ze takes it upon herself to interview a few candidates at a local diner. Unlike other parts of the film with the camera maintaining a considerable

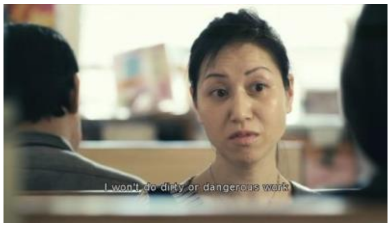
I won't do dirty or dangerous work

Figure 15

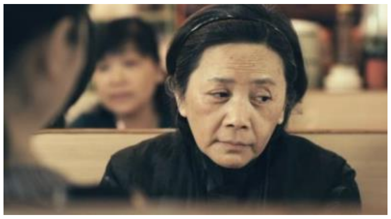

Figure 16

distance from its subject, frontal medium close up shots are employed for the first two interviews. The first medium close-up in the sequence (Figure 15) shows a new immigrant from the mainland, identifiable by her accent when speaking Cantonese, enumerating assertively what she considers to be outside the bounds of the job, ranging from washing men's boxers to cleaning up after the employer hosts a party. As the interviewer, To ze remains silent and expresses her disapproval by rolling her eyes. The exchange, if it qualifies as one, ends with To ze casting her eyes to the side, away from the candidate, with pursed lips (Figure 16). The wordless critique of a prospective domestic worker *presumptuous* enough to set boundaries is delivered through a medium close-up shot, which is adept at capturing subtle facial expressions.

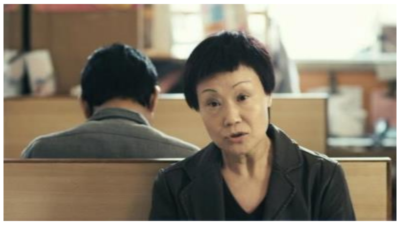

Figure 17

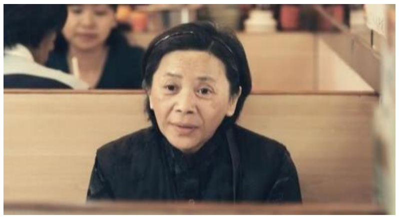

Figure 18

The camera pulls out slightly for the second interview while still keeping its subjects in the medium close-ups (Figure 17). Clad in a blazer, the applicant makes it clear that becoming a domestic worker is beneath her for she used to be a white-collar worker in Hong Kong's central business district. Without commenting on the candidate's prideful self-introduction, To ze inquires what cookware she uses to cook rice. The former-office-worker responds in a condescending manner that she of course uses an electric rice cooker as if To ze asked a senseless question. The scorned interviewer explains with equanimity that cooking rice with clay pots is the only way to bring out its aroma. Same as the previous interview, the second one also concludes with a shot of To ze (Figure 18). Here her facial expression shows pride in her work, which is by no means unspecialized or inferior to white-collar work.

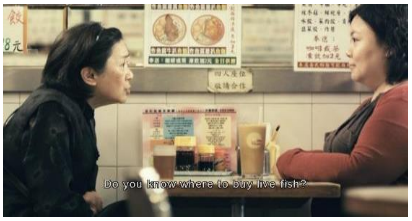
Do you know where to buy live fish?

Figure 19

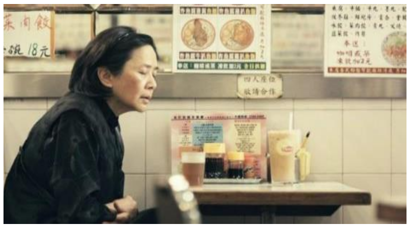

Figure 20

The last interview is shown with the camera moving to the actors’ side and creating a two-shot of To ze asking the third applicant if she knows where to buy fresh fish these days and walking her through the delicacies, for instance, abalone, sea cucumber and fish maw, she is expected to make in rotation for her prospective employer (Figure 19). The repositioning of the camera prepares viewers for the abrupt termination of the meeting as the interviewee storms off, incredulous as to how demanding it is to work for Roger. The surprise To ze feels concerning such a fuming reaction against duties she considers to be perfectly manageable and reasonable is accentuated by the visual asymmetry caused by the interviewee’s exist from the original two-shot frame (Figure 20). The camera lingers with her wearing a listless expression on one side of the frame and the vacant seat across from her on the other side, implying that there is no one who can fill her place in the Leung household.

The clear divide between the third interviewee and To ze in terms of the types of domestic workers they make is also subtly reinforced by the respective drinks they have in front of them (Figures 19 & 20). The former has iced milk tea, one of the signature drinks at a Hong Kong-style café, whereas the latter a cup of complimentary tea every customer receives upon being seated at the café. The props bring out To ze's self-abnegating thriftiness and hint at her interlocutor's self-indulgent tendency, rendering her a poor fit for a job that knows no set working hours or duties.

While the sequence reinforces the representations of To ze as the ideal domestic worker, in other words an object of desire, the frontal shots of her having the last word in each interview also invite viewers' identification with To ze and judgment of the prospective domestic workers. This is not simply a matter of how "[t]he image of the loyal, humble servant who passively acquiesced in her master's every wish can […] be viewed as a tool with which Hong Kong people (not only employers) try to control and subdue contemporary domestic workers" (Constable 62). No less concerning is the scapegoating of individuals, specifically women from the working class and underclass, for the pervading 'carelessness' in the present and future. In stark contrast with To ze's exemplary characterization, all three prospective domestic workers come off as overbearing and 'ungrateful' for the job opportunity they are presented with.

The nostalgia for a self-sacrificing and scrupulous domestic worker like To ze overlooks not only the dearth of alternative job opportunities in early twentieth century that pushed single women in poverty towards domestic work in the first place, but also the persistent gender division of labor as the 21st century sees extensive privatization of care in the city. The nostalgia evoked, which is reticent concerning both disjuncture and continuity between the past and present, implicitly faults the younger generation of women as prospective domestic workers for being mercenary and somehow lacking in the 'virtues' their counterparts from the older generation possess. Such a misdiagnosis diverts attention away from the ways neoliberal societal structure and operational logic of possessive individualism and the maximization of profit trumping all else condition individuals' actions, or the lack thereof, and their interrelations. The supposedly bleak future where quality domestic and care labor is hard to come by, as implied by the failure of the search for To ze's successor, is simply attributed to an elusive generational 'mutation' for the worse.

The good old human touch

It is important to note that the film does touch on the overall privatization of care in the Hong Kong society instead of focusing solely on the individual and their purported greed as the source of evil. Yet, even the momentary glimpses *A Simple Life* offers regarding care as a commercialized industry the government plays little part in regulating are arguably tainted by its nostalgia for 'genuine' human connections formed by the more 'virtuous' older generation. Rather than timeless and universal, 'the human touch 人情味[7]' is located in the past. What is found lacking and problematic on the societal level is supposedly brought about by personal vices and by extension, resolvable among individuals. Unfortunately, as far as the filmmaker is concerned that is, individuals who have their hearts in the right place are dying out. The film thus acclimates viewers, with its evocation of modest nostalgic longing, to a foreseeable future when even the arbitrariness and unpredictability of the individual cannot be called on to fill the void left by careless neoliberal governing.

Apart from the camera's distancing from its subjects almost throughout the film,

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[7] A literal translation of this term in Cantonese would be "the taste of human sentiment." It generally refers to the kindness and sympathy people show one another in everyday life.

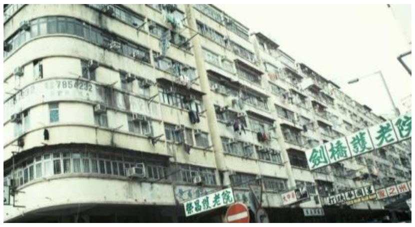


Figure 21

its eschewal of stylized shots constitutes an aesthetics more akin to that of a conventional documentary. Among the 'plain' shots, the opening one for the sequence where Roger goes on a search for a nursing home for To ze stands out. A dutch tilt and low angle are used for the establishing shot that shows a row of dilapidated tenement buildings housing two nursing homes, whose signboards are in white and green (Figure 21). This out-of-place, stylized shot defamiliarizes and compresses the space further, rendering it more inhospitable than it already appears to be with the buildings' observable disrepair and the units' overcrowdedness. The care industry as represented is by no means in good shape.

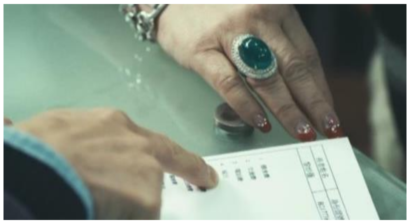


Figure 22

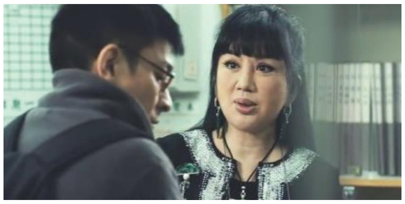


Figure 23

Roger's conversation with a receptionist at one of the nursing homes (Suet-Fa Kong 宮雪花) offers an explanation for the upsetting phenomenon in an oblique manner. To evaluate the facility's trustworthiness, Roger demands to see past invoices issues to residents at the nursing home. The tight shot includes the receptionist's and his hand in the frame as Roger inquires about the additional charges for diapers, hospital visits and so on (Figure 22). The heavily accessorized hand with a sizable diamond studded jade ring and sparkles on acrylic nails, connoting avarice and vanity, resting beside an invoice constitutes a critique of the facility as an excessively profit-driven one. A stark contrast is also established between the lavish look the person in charge wears and the drab façade of the care home. An earlier over-the-shoulder shot (Figure 23) presents her decked in matching jade earrings, necklace and brooch. The provision of care for the sake of monetary gain and quenching materialistic desires rather than well-being of the old and people with chronic illnesses or disabilities is made apparent.

Equally noteworthy is how the part-owner qua receptionist, costumed as greed incarnate, takes pride in conducting honest business. After informing Roger of the option of applying for aid if he is inquiring on behalf of someone whose savings do not exceed thirty thousand Hong Kong dollars, she makes a point of adding that her care home does not make under-the-table deals with families of the residents for kickbacks from government subsidy. Her self-righteous declaration is soon debunked as Roger questions her about several miscellaneous surcharges imposed on residents. More significant is the fact that the only and brief mentioning of the part the government plays in the care industry merely concerns maintaining a level of consumption of care services among the underprivileged population. The absence of regulation to prevent the impoverished from falling victim to the collusion between money-grubbing facilities and family members or relatives is taken for granted.

The stoic Roger making a mockery of the complacent proprietor places the blame, again, on the individual. The circumstances created by minimal governance which give free rein to capitalist opportunists' pursuit of self-interest are overlooked as the film focuses on the symptom instead of the disease of neoliberalization. This is not to veer from concentrating only on the individual to the other extreme of seeing the circumstantial as the sole driving force. Rather, it is to draw attention to the way in which *A Simple Life*'s representation of the care industry may occlude an understanding of the interpenetration of the personal and societal with its myopic concentration on the former and a definitive judgment of human nature, which could only be a baseless, arbitrary one.

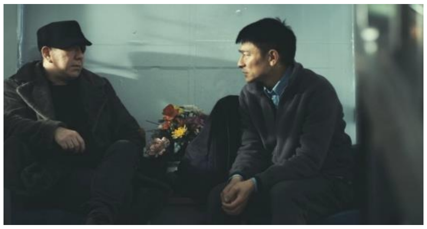


Figure 24

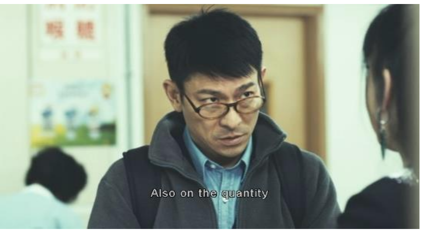


Figure 25

Unsurprisingly, the tension arising from the paradoxical lack of care within the care industry in the sequence is quickly resolved by the intervention of another individual in honor of an old friendship with Roger. Grasshopper, the other owner of the place and the receptionist’s romantic partner, (Anthony Wong 黃秋生) is called out to deal with Roger, who is considered a difficult client by the receptionist. It turns out that he used to work with Roger no film sets and are friends. The two move to a room to have a private conversation. Roger appears to be more relaxed in the medium two-shot (Figure 24), as opposed to earlier when he is guarded and skeptical when dealing with the receptionist (Figure 25). Upon learning Roger is here for his retired domestic worker, Grasshopper expresses his admiration for the former’s generosity and is inspired to follow suit. He offers Roger a discount for To ze’s room and the services she would need. The issue of deregulation leading to predatory business practices among care providers becomes nothing more than a backdrop against which individual acts of kindness shine brilliantly.

While Grasshopper’s brown fur coat appears lavish, like the receptionist’s jade jewelry set, his Breton cap and eye patch give him an idiosyncratic look of a swordsman or captain from the bygone days (Figure 26). In addition to highlighting the

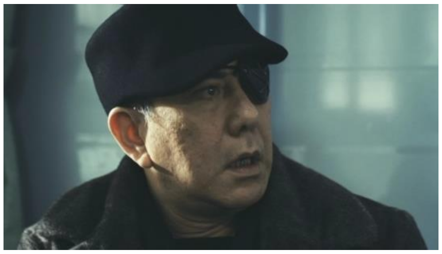


Figure 26

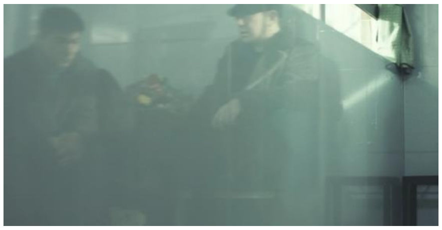


Figure 27

character's distinctive style, the close-up shot captures his surprised reaction to Roger taking up the responsibility to ensure To ze's well-being in old age. Roger's care for a former employee he is not legally required to look after, "a human touch" that is supposed to be increasingly hard to come by, inspires the care home owner to help out instead of maximizing his profit. As the two men bond through their subscription to the same moral code against the neoliberal tide, the camera pans to their right and ends the sequence with a two shot of their faint reflections on the wall (Figure 27). The human touch, which appears to serve as remedy to insatiable corporate greed within the narrative, is presented to be on the verge of disappearance. The nostalgia for a time when people purportedly looked out for one another is thus elicited and attenuated in a timely manner.

Social fixity as lesser evil

In addition to giving a mildly critical commentary on but fomenting acceptance of the unholy alliance between profit-making and care-giving in 21st century Hong Kong, *A Simple Life*'s subdued nostalgic vein is of service to neoliberal subjects increasingly beset by the threat of precarity. The film captures and offers temporary relief from the existential crisis brought about by on the one hand, formal equality that promises upward mobility while leaving intact different classed subjects' uneven access to resources and on the other, the nonexistence of social security that an offset life's vicissitudes. The fleeting respite is made possible with its nostalgic rendition of social fixity among an older generation where precarity affects mainly the acutely marginalized like To ze, a ‘superfluous’ daughter sent/sold to a well-to-do family as a live-in domestic worker in the mid-20th century, and mitigated by the employer’s good will.

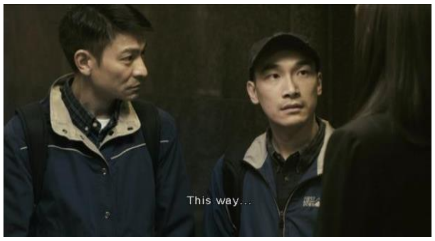


Figure 28

The identity crisis triggered by neoliberalization’s impact on the class hierarchy is touched on in *A Simple Life* through the vantage point of an upper-middle class subject. At first glance, Roger being mistaken as an air-conditioner technician and a taxi driver by a receptionist at a bank and a waiter respectively seems to constitute innocuous comic relief. The medium shot of him standing side by side with the actual technician the receptionist has been expecting makes evident that it is an honest mistake on the receptionist’s part for Roger’s outfit looks near identical to the latter’s (Figure 28). Roger staring at his doppelganger with surprise upon noticing the striking resemblances between them and the slightly confused look on the technician’s face owing to the palpable awkwardness in the room add to the comedic effect of the sequence. Although the exchange may be brushed off as an amusing incident included in the narrative to sustain viewers’ interest, the fact that the incident is brought up again later on in the film bespeaks its significance beyond entertainment.

While having a meal with To ze at a local diner, Roger is alerted by a waiter than the police are issuing tickets for the latter assumes that the former is a taxi driver who has his vehicle parked illegally on the street. There is again a look of surprise on

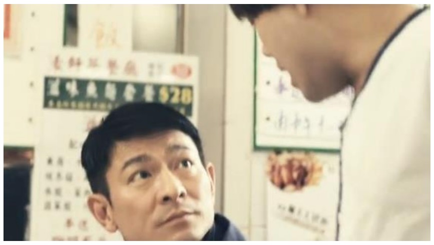


Figure 29

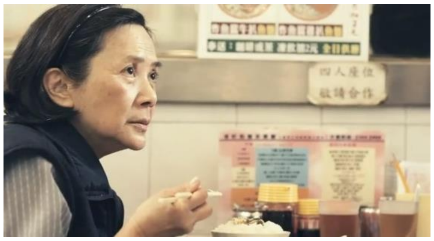


Figure 30

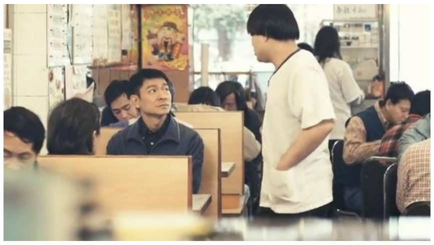


Figure 31

Roger's face as he stares at the well-meaning waiter with raised eyebrows (Figure 29). The shot that follows shows To ze also staring at the waiter but with a concerned look, heightening the tension of the scene (Figure 30). The timid look communicates To ze's unease with the waiter mistaking her 'young master 少爺' from a well-to-do family working as a high-paying accountant for a blue-collar worker. Roger himself taunts the waiter by saying that he is actually an air-conditioner technician, not a taxi driver, reminding viewers of the earlier mix-up at the bank. While he appears to be making a joke at his own expense, his disdain for the 'presumptuous' waiter is unmistakable. It is evident from the beginning of the sequence, when Roger inquires if the dinner has cobia and the waiter lists the kinds of fish available instead in a brusque manner. Despite the distance between the camera and its subject in a medium shot, Roger's displeasure is conveyed through his stare with pursed lips before telling the waiter his order (Figure 31).

Co/Subordination

The foregoing of social niceties at local diners serving predominantly working-class customers is aggravating to someone who is used to giving orders and being catered to as the master of the household like Roger. Consider one of the first sequences in the film that portrays his life prior to To ze's retirement. In contrast with the local

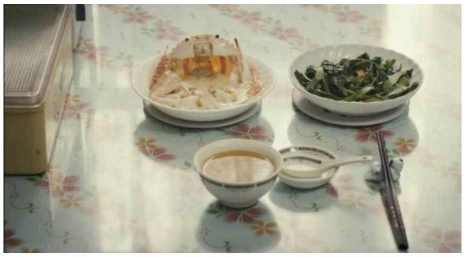


Figure 32

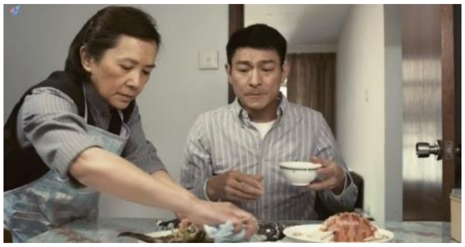


Figure 33

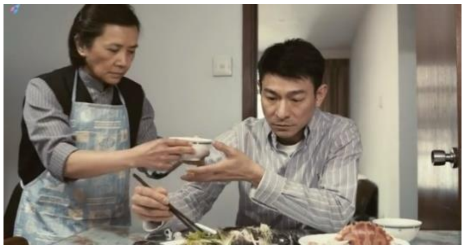


Figure 34

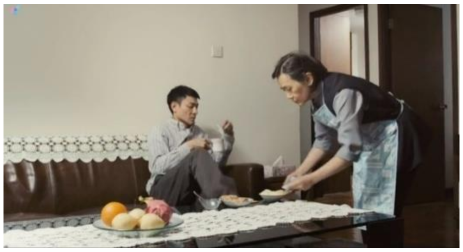


Figure 35

diner sequence where a handheld camera only shoots the characters from a distance, this opening sequence presents viewers with a static, close-up shot of the meal To ze prepares for Roger (Figure 32). The bright natural lighting brings out the vibrant colors of the steamed crab, stir-fried vegetables, and clear soup. The care taken by To ze to serve an appetizing meal is further highlighted by the thoughtful use of a holder for the chopsticks and spoon respectively.

The camera then moves to the other side of the table and observes Roger as he enjoys his soup. To ze enters the frame with the last dish for the meal. The only word uttered, “trivet”, is from To ze, who has no hands to retrieve it for the fish dish. Instead of getting a trivet from where To ze points to with her chin, Roger “helps out” by placing the vegetable dish elsewhere on the table to free up the trivet underneath it for the fish. As To ze wipes excess sauce from the edge of the dish, Roger keeps his gaze on the fish (Figure 33). His eyes never stray from the fish as he holds out his hands for the rice To ze brings him (Figure 34). The non-meeting of eyes continues after the meal when Roger moves to the living room for a sip of tea and fruit. The medium long shot sees Roger relaxing on the sofa with his legs crossed while To ze places the sliced fruit on the coffee table (Figure 35).

Apart from conveying familiarity and a sense of routine, the meticulous choreography of the two actors foregrounds the hierarchical nature of their relationship. Roger as a self-assured bourgeois subject who has what he wants delivered to him in a timely and respectful manner by To ze is a far cry from him attempting to commanding respect with his intense stares upon being treated and misrecognized as a member of the working class. The harmony of the home-cooked-meal sequence with the two characters knowing and unquestioningly occupying their places within a social hierarchy sets the stage for the evocation of nostalgia for a time marked by a glaring lack of upward mobility. Social fixity is represented in A Simple Life as beneficial to both the privileged like Roger and the marginalized like To ze. The former's supposed exceptionality is perceived as a given and their accumulation of wealth thereby justified whereas the latter can to an extent appeal to the former's paternalistic propensity for sustenance and survival.

Notwithstanding the outstanding domestic work she has consistently performed in the Leung household for over half a century, To ze is considered fortunate to be taken care of by Roger after retirement. The film ensures that the notion is not lost for viewers by having not only Grasshopper, but also Roger's sister expressing admiration for him in two separate sequences. Such 'good fortune' is likely to be deemed all the more deserving with To ze never losing sight of her place in the relationship by only ever asking for the bare minimum from Roger, that is when she does ask for anything at all for herself. Shortly after regaining consciousness subsequent to a stroke, To ze decides to resign and claims that she would like to move to a nursing home. A medium

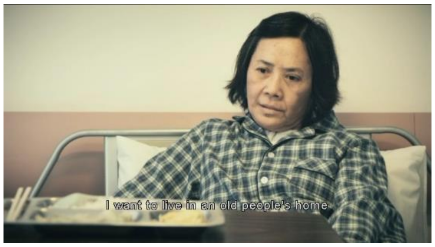

I want to live in an old people's home

Figure 36

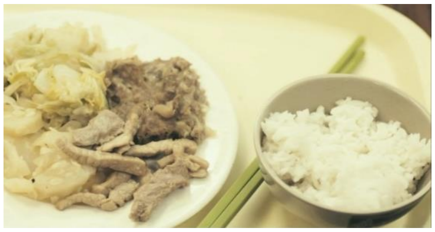


Figure 37

shot shows her still disheveled from the ordeal but looking determined to minimize any trouble taking care of her would create for Roger (Figure 36). The bland meal on a metal tray in the foreground foreshadows the quality of sustenance she has access to at the care home at Roger's discretion and *within his budget* (Figure 37), contrasting sharply with the lunch she prepares for her employer when she can still work (Figure 32).

Figure 38

Figure 39

Yet, the desirability of an unequal relation akin to that between To ze and Roger is reinforced by the depiction of reciprocity. By the end of the film's opening lunch sequence, Roger remarks that it has been a long time since he last had ox tongue, which is a request for To ze to make it for him upon his return from a business trip. Concerned about the adverse impact the high cholesterol content of the delicacy may have on his heart condition, To ze tries talking him out of craving it by saying that "since you haven't had it for a long time, you may as well let it stay this way 好耐冇食咁咪咪食囉." The script is flipped when Roger pays To ze a visit at the nursing home and utters the exact same line—"好耐冇食咁咪咪食囉"—in response to her request for him to bring her a jar of mildly spicy fermented tofu when he is free to do so, given how

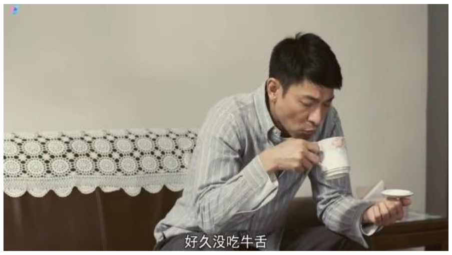


Figure 40

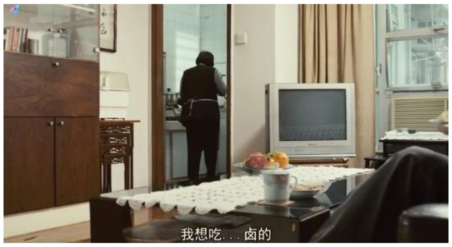
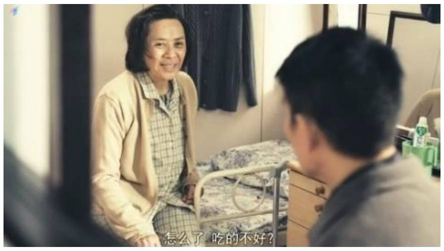


Figure 41



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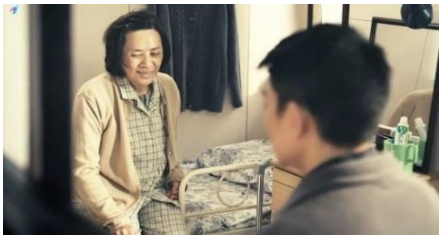


Figure 43

unpalatable the food at the care home is. Just as To ze has Roger’s heart health in mind, Roger is wary that since preserved bean curd is high in sodium, To ze consuming it as an elderly who has just had a stroke may be risky. In spite of their concern for each other, both end up satisfying the other’s craving. Viewers are shown at different points To ze braising an ox tongue for when Roger is back from the mainland (Figure 38) and her at the nursing home digging into a jar of fermented tofu which is most likely brought to her by Roger (Figure 39).

The heart-warming reciprocity of care, however, is not to be confused with parity between the two. As he relaxes on the sofa after a hearty meal and before taking a sip of tea, Roger brings up his craving for ox tongue casually with a neutral expression on his face (Figure 40). The medium shot shows him focusing on the tea while addressing To ze. The delivery of this line coupled with the expressionless face earlier evince an offhand attitude, contrasting sharply with To ze’s comportment when asking if Roger can bring her a jar of condiment. The sheepish and ingratiating smile on her face (Figure 42) indicates her discomfort with asking him for anything. The fact that she chuckles weakly in response to Roger stealing her line to talk her out of having fermented tofu and looks down (Figure 43) instead of reiterating her ask highlights her deference to him. Considering how little time and energy it takes to purchase fermented bean curd from a grocery store or supermarket, compared to procuring and braising ox tongue from scratch, To ze’s hesitancy in making the request and swiftness in giving it up reflects that she does not believe that she is entitled to having even a modest wish fulfilled. The harmony of the relationship hinges on To ze knowing and staying in her place as a passive and thus deserving recipient of Roger’s benevolence, which the film confers approbation to directly with different characters’ mouths.

Men coming to grief

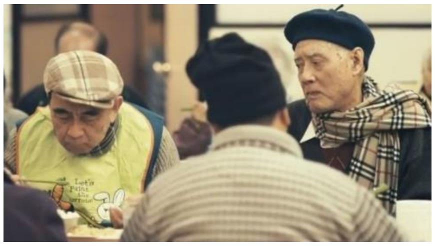


Figure 44

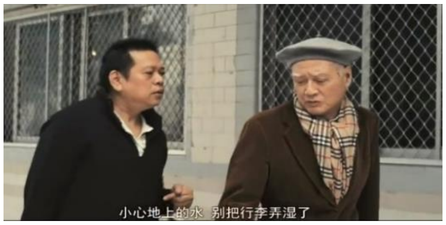

小心地上的水 别把行李弄湿了

Figure 45

The longing for obliging members of the underclass serving as the bedrock of one’s self-worth among the privileged, who are now besieged by precarity as well under neoliberalism, is most pronounced in the film with the characterization of a retired headmaster. Throughout the film, the headmaster is the odd one out at the care home with his refined clothing and manners. Upon arrival at the care home, To ze witnesses the conflict between the disgusted headmaster and a resident whom the former considers to be a sloppy eater (Figure 44). The beret and checkered scarf draped on the head master with style place the character on a social standing noticeably higher than the resident next to him, who wears a bright yellow bib with cartoon characters as decoration. Viewers are not privy to his past and how he finds himself living below his station. Similar to Roger, he is used to being cared for

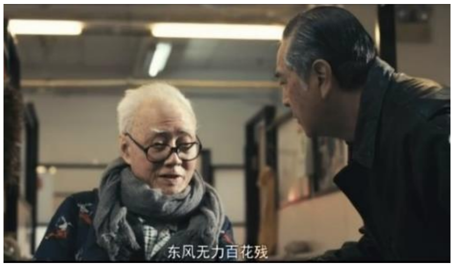


Figure 46

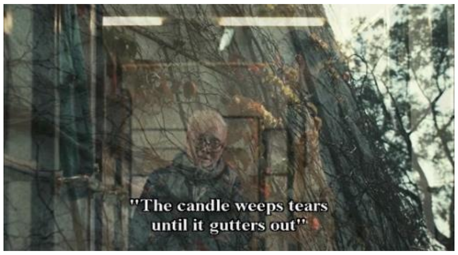

"The candle weeps tears until it gutters out"

Figure 47

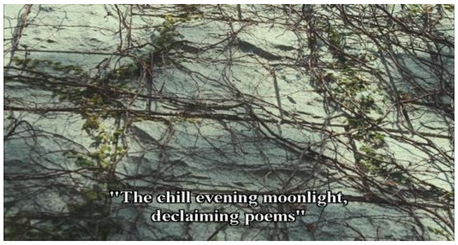

"The chill evening moonlight, declaiming poems"

Figure 48

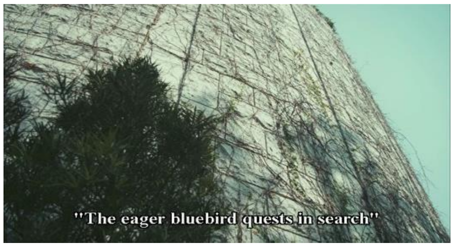

"The eager bluebird quests in search"

Figure 49

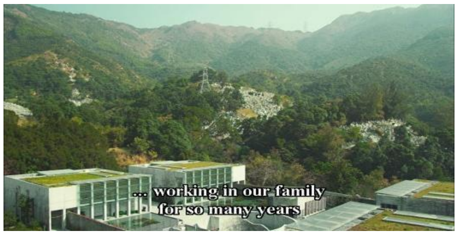

... working in our family for so many years

Figure 50

personally by hired help. As he leaves for his offspring's or relatives' home during the Chinese New Year, he momentarily relieves the days of being a master. With furrowed brows focusing on his possessions, the headmaster asks his driver to be careful and not get his belongings drenched from the wet sidewalk (Figure 45).

It is likely that the filmmaker includes this interaction, which has little to do with the relationship between To ze and Roger as its main arc, to draw attention to the fact that residents at the nursing home are from different walks of life, signaling the universality of the need for care. Yet, the character of the headmaster takes on a different level of significance when he is assigned the task of mourning To ze's death. His recitation of the Tang dynasty poet Li Shanyin's 李商隱 untitled piece on a persona's forlorn yearning for a far-away lover immediately precedes To ze's funeral sequence. As he recites the poem (Figure 46), the camera slowly pulls out, adding to the solemnity of the performance. A dissolve transition (Figure 47) is employed to not only transport viewers to where the funeral is held, but also accentuate the sense of abiding but futile longing the poem conveys with the image of vines clinging to a concrete structure superimposed on the medium shot of the headmaster in reverie at a corridor of the nursing home. The L-cut has the continuation of the headmaster's elegiac recitation accompanied by a montage of shots connoting barrenness in what appears to be the outdoor area of where the funeral service is carried out (Figures 48 & 49).

The passing of To ze as signaling the definitive end to a social order that is desirable to both Roger and the headmaster alike as upper-middle-class subjects is cemented with the J-cut that follows the latter's recitation with the former's speech at the funeral. Before taking viewers to the venue of the memorial service indoors, an establishing shot of the tucked-away funeral parlor surrounded by mountains is shown as Roger starts delivering his eulogy for To ze as a loyal worker for the family (Figure 50). The consecutive shots of nature deepen the sense of inevitability concerning mortality and the 'extinction' of a reliable servant class content with their lot in their neoliberal present, when the entrepreneurial spirit is meant to be embodied by all. Nonetheless, Roger's matter-of-fact rather than emotional tribute to To ze differentiates itself from the headmaster's sentimental recitation. The poignant longing for social fixity made possible by the marginalization and disenfranchisement of girls and single women like To ze in colonial Hong Kong is reined in and gives way, yet again, to stoic acquiescence to increasingly widespread precaritarization today and the concomitant loss of privileges historically reserved for educated men.

The reticent nostalgia for To ze as a classed and gendered object of desire to keep one's existential angst at bay is also shared by a man occupying a rung of the social ladder considerably lower than that Roger and the headmaster seem to be losing

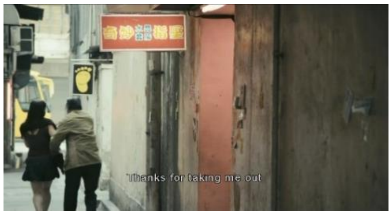

Thanks for taking me out

Figure 51

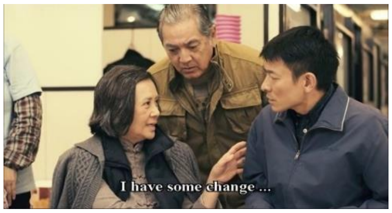

I have some change ...

Figure 52

their foothold on. The mourning of To ze is at the same time a lamentation of the perceived waning dominance of a man’s world. The man in question is Uncle Kin 堅叔, another resident at the nursing home. This character repeatedly approaches To ze and others throughout the narrative to borrow money in order to purchase sexual services elsewhere. Uncle Kin’s specific use of the money he manages to gather is revealed through Roger’s point of view as he recognizes the former outside of the care home, arm in arm with a sex worker (Figure 51). The distaste Roger shows for what is represented as Uncle Kin’s undignified sexual compulsion and his reluctance to lend Kin money again are countered by To ze’s gentle nudging. In an appeasing manner, she persuades Roger to let Kin indulge while the old man still can. To ze appears to be the focal point in the three-shot where both men direct their gazes at her (Figure 52). The previous tension between the two men caused by Roger telling Kin off dissipates.

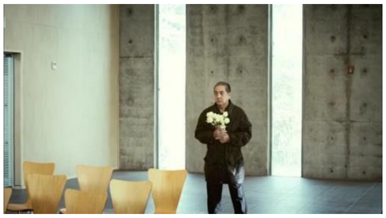


Figure 53

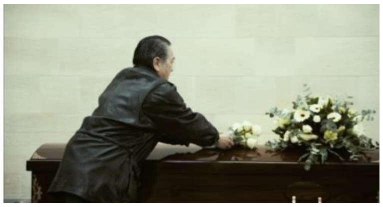


Figure 54

To ze’s ‘kindness’ as a woman who understands that a man somehow cannot help himself is then repaid by Kin borrowing money not for sexual services but to buy flowers for her at the funeral. Kin’s attendance is given special attention with the light streaming through glass walls flanking him in the medium long shot as he arrives late at the service and stands timidly by the entrance (Figure 53). His placing the white roses on the casket with both hands underlies his appreciation for To ze (Figure 54). The choice of white roses is telling as the flowers conventionally symbolize purity and loyalty in floriography. It is To ze's 'virtues,' which paradoxically help Kin maintain access to women's bodies coded as 'impure' socially, that are underscored as a result. The fact that the narrative arranges for the headmaster, Roger and Kin to mourn for To ze verbally or with a physical gift after another imparts shared nostaliga for the fixity and 'harmony' of a patriarchal social order, which overlaps with a class hierarchy yet to be permeated by precarity under neoliberalism. The absence of a melodramatic display of emotions on the men's part coheres with the film's overarching naturalistic or 'simple' aesthetics and resignation to the perceived ills in the present.

Averting awkwardness for simplicity

The text's ostensive simplicity, underneath which lie conflicting evocations of longing and renunciation, is also constituted by careful attenuation of awkwardness throughout. Adam Kotsko's keen observation concerning the nature and significance of awkwardness is of interest here. He notes that awkwardness appears to be "continually on the move, ever present yet impossible to nail down." According to etymology, the word 'awkward' was first conceived to describe something or someone turning in the wrong direction. The threat of awkwardness can be indicative of the fact that, as Kotsko posits, "no social order is self-evident and no social order accounts for every possibility." For a film seeking consolation from the promise of security within social fixity in the past as it attempts to stomach growing precaritization today with equanimity, tolerance of awkward moments would chafe against its quest for control and predictability.

Awkwardness potentially occasioned by transgressions of or deviation from the normative social hierarchy is thus forestalled, constituting another facet of the film's reticence, to allow for viewers' fleeting indulgence in nostalgia for the 'pre-neoliberal' bond To ze is depicted to enjoy with and foster within the Leung family.

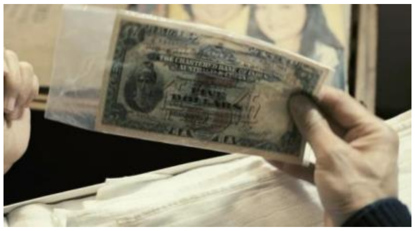


Figure 55

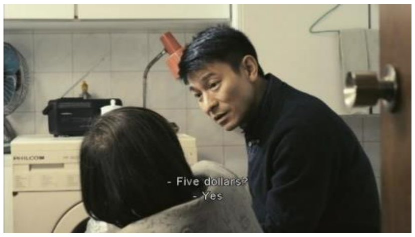
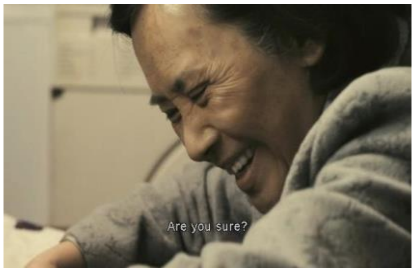


Figure 56



Are you sure?

Figure 57

Figure 58

Figure 59

As To ze returns to the Leung's apartment after living in the care home for some time, Roger and her spend some time going through her memorabilia to figure out what to keep or dispose of in her room. A well-preserved five-dollar bill To ze earned for the first month of labor in the Leung household is spotlighted with a close-up shot (Figure 55). The amount To ze was paid takes Roger by surprise, leading the latter to ask again if it is indeed her entire salary. The awkwardness that can potentially come with a serious consideration of wage theft perpetrated by the supposedly 'honorable' family is swiftly preempted by To ze jokingly claiming that back then five dollars would suffice for the purchase of a house. Roger's querying look as an accountant proficient in numbers (Figure 56) is overwritten by a close-up shot of To ze laughing at her own joke shortly afterwards (Figure 57), drawing attention away from the unpalatable issue of renumeration. The exchange reinforces the portrayal of To ze as the ideal domestic worker who labors out of love and for a sense of personal fulfillment. The five-dollar bill taken out of circulation and kept in a plastic pocket sleeve exemplifies her ‘simplicity’ for being all but calculating and materialistic.

The attenuation of awkwardness is observable as well in the sequence where Roger’s mother pays To ze a visit with homemade bird’s nest soup. Upon tasting the soup, To ze comments on its ‘fishiness’ for the madam has neglected to add ginger to it and an awkward pause ensues. At the center of the frame in a medium shot, Roger’s mom has her lips pursed while staring into space, visibly upset from To ze’s disapproval (Figure 58). The group, nonetheless, quickly recover from the disconnection caused by To ze failing to play the passive and grateful recipient of favors from her employer for once (she later on receives as gifts the free socks Roger’s mother saves from the flight to Hong Kong and the scarf the latter is wearing with effusive gratitude). To ease the tension, Roger reminds his mother of the good news she intends to share with To ze of the family expecting a baby, who would be Roger’s great nephew, next year. The camera moves closer to its subjects upon the delivery of the news. The tighter frame highlights not only the joy the two share and harmony restored, but also To ze’s devotion to the family given how ecstatic she looks learning that the family is thriving (Figure 59). A heteronormative social order where women unite and rejoice over reproductive futurity becomes front and center, defusing the tension induced by To ze’s transgression as a momentarily ‘ungrateful’ employee.

The film’s acknowledgement of the role To ze plays in the reproduction of the family is certainly free from awkwardness. Her emotional investment in the well-being

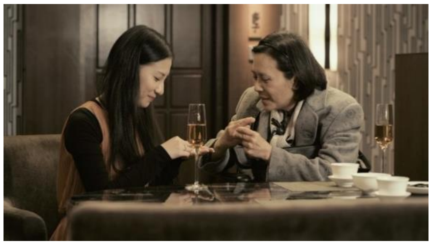


Figure 60

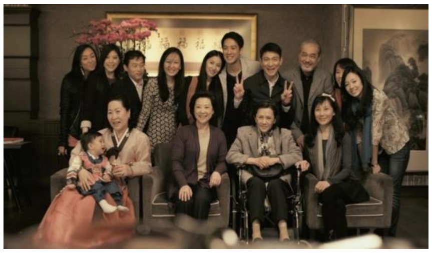


Figure 61

and sustainability of the family is shown to have earned her a place in the family despite the lack of blood connections. To express her appreciation for Jason's wife, who has brought Roger's grand-nephew into the world, To ze passes on the jewelry from Roger's grandmother to her. To ze's selfless renunciation of worldly possessions is again foregrounded in the cozy two-shot between two characters who are only meeting each other for the first time (Figure 60). The whole sequence where the family gathering takes place has little to do with awkwardness as To ze's inclusion is presented to be well-deserved. The family making room for To ze in a wheelchair to be part of the family photo may prove to be one of the more heart-warming moments in the narrative for viewers. Roger posing playfully behind To ze and her content smile (Figure 61) accentuate the connection between the two, whose 'purity' is to be longed for, albeit to no avail in the 'heartless' present. The warm and high-key lighting employed for the shot also adds to the scene's uplifting mood of togetherness.

Equally, if not more, remarkable is the absence of awkwardness when Roger and his sister, Sharon, have a conversation about expenses related to To ze. After praising her younger brother for taking good care of To ze and inquiring if he can afford the cost of nursing home care for To ze, Sharon offers to pay for their former domestic worker's funeral for To ze took care of both her son and her. It is curious to note the film's presentation of the conversation as a heartwarming one when it concerns what

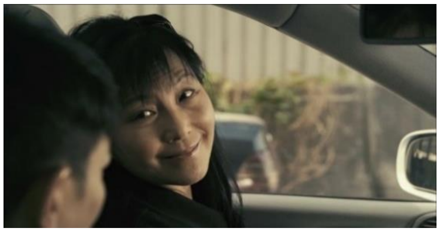


Figure 62

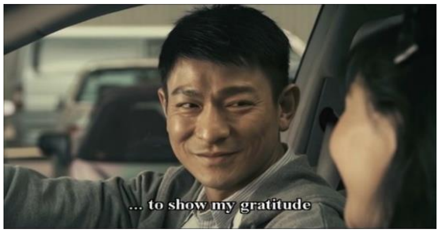
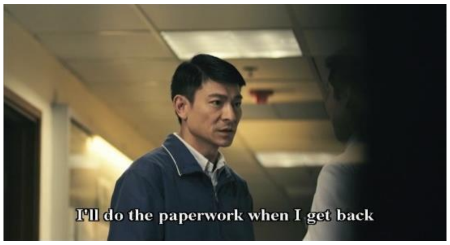


Figure 63

expenditure of money the two are willing or can afford to bear for their former domestic worker. The oddity of bringing up funeral expenses for someone who is still very much alive at that point in the narrative also runs counter to the actor's performance. The shot/reverse shot shows Sharon smiling sweetly at Roger and vice versa (Figures 62 & 63). The mercenary and morbid nature of the topic under discussion is lost amid the exchange of knowing appreciation between the brother and sister, bonding through giving 'generously' to the destitute To ze facing impending death. The fact that the conversation takes place in the enclosed space of a compact car accentuates the supposed intimacy of the moment.



I'll do the paperwork when I get back

Figure 64

Awkwardness certainly has no place in a narrative with underlying reverence for a harmonious class hierarchy upheld by the bounded benevolence of the privileged and the corresponding gratitude of the underprivileged. The film's reticence is at its most pronounced when Roger informs the doctor of his decision to discontinue life support for To ze, who has been in an unconscious state, and instructs the doctor to send To ze's body straight to the morgue if she passes while he is in the mainland for another business trip. The camera placement mimics that of someone eavesdropping around the corner with an out-of-focus wall or door frame in the foreground as Roger communicates his final decision as To ze's caregiver (Figure 64). In addition to opting for adhering to his work schedule and thinking ahead again regarding the ‘disposal’ of To ze, his immediate negative answer to the doctor’s question about whether the patient has any family members who would want to see her for the last time is noteworthy. The possibility of Roger’s mother and/or sister taking his palce and keeping To ze company during her final moments is out of the question.

The idea of To ze as part of the family, which is entertained in the earlier sequence where the Leungs save a spot for her in the family photo, is revealed to be nothing but nominal. The film’s reticent treatment of its supposed protagonist’s death and its affective charge or the lack thereof is fitting for the Leung family’s conditional inclusion of To ze. At the same time as the film’s nostalgic commendation of conscientious employers like Roger fosters acceptance of the privatization of care, the clear limits shown and validated by the film to the care, physical and emotional, the Leungs grant To ze serve to ease anxiety brought on as care responsibilities are heaped on neoliberal subjects today.

Following the examination of the mutual exclusivity between awkwardness and reticent nostalgia as evoked in *A Simple Life*, the next chapter lingers with awkwardness as amplified rather than extenuated in Anthony Chen’s *Ilo Ilo*. Apart from considering the critical uses awkwardness can be put to and its limitations, my analysis departs from the premise that like reticent nostalgia, the awkwardness *Ilo Ilo* dwells on should be read as an ambivalent affective response to the neoliberal condition.

CHAPTER III

THE BEARABLE AWKWARDNESS OF BEING: EXISTENTIAL COMPROMISE UNDER NEOLIBERALISM AS STRUCK IN ANTHONY CHEN'S *ILO ILO*

If Ann Hui's 許鞍華 *A Simple Life* 桃姐 (2011), my object of study for the previous chapter, temporarily revived interest in the proverbially "dying" Hong Kong cinema[8] with its resounding success in the international film festival circuit, *Ilo Ilo* 爸媽不在家 (2013) by Anthony Chen 陈哲艺 put the hitherto obscure Singaporean cinema on the map as the first film from the country to garner a Caméra d'Or award at the Cannes Film Festival. The narratives of both internationally acclaimed local productions revolve around the relationship between a domestic worker and her charge. While Hui's work broaches the subject of care or the lack thereof for the elderly in Hong Kong, among whom the retired domestic worker originally from mainland China finds herself, Chen's feature touches on childcare outsourced to a foreign domestic worker from the Philippines by a double-income household in Singapore beset by the Asian financial crisis in 1997. The everyday human drama tied to care labor is rendered in an understated manner by both filmmakers, whose apparent artistic restraint is widely lauded. In fact, at a televised interview celebrating the Singaporean director's glorious homecoming, Chen attributes the bestowal of Golden Camera award on *Ilo Ilo* to the film being “so pure […] so simple,” “this humble little thing that wasn’t trying to do anything.”[9]

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[8] The late twentieth-century saw the boom of the Hong Kong film industry with both its commercial and art house productions, followed by a sharp decline at the turn of the century owing to an acute economic downturn, overproduction, growing dominance of Hollywood productions and so on. For a nuanced analysis of the phenomenon, refer to Laikwan Pang's "Death and Hong Kong Cinema" (2001).

Just as chapter II on *A Simple Life* examines the seemingly simplistic film’s complex affective negotiations with the pervasive privatization of care for the elderly under neoliberalism, involving a blend of cynical realism and consolatory fantasy that I designate as reticent nostalgia, this chapter does not take at face value *Ilo Ilo*’s purported simplicity. A reading against the grain is warranted as, beneath the film’s subdued cinematography and slice-of-life narrative, I find an elaborate affective dance choreographed to neoliberalism’s insistent calls for its subjects’ self-responsibilization pertaining to their own and their offpsring’s reproduction amid government austerity in the face of an economic recession.

Critical theorist Nancy Fraser posits that “[o]n the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very process of social reproduction on which it relies” (“Crisis of Care” 22). For Fraser, this contradiction constitutes “a built-in source of potential instability” for the capitalist system (24), which can arguably be tipped in anti-capitalist directions. I intend to add to the theorist’s trenchant observation by drawing attention to the awkward positionality of neoliberal subjects who find ourselves both prized *and* slighted, one that stems from capitalism’s fundamentally conflicting imperatives. We seem “prized” in the sense that we are constantly urged or shall we say, hounded to practice self-love and care as if our worth was a nonnegotiable while our very existence is "slighted" daily by the blatant and persistent undermining of job, housing and food security within the neoliberal regime. Possessive individualism and entrepreneurialism as the twin pillars of neoliberal ideology justifying governments' retrenchment in social welfare provisioning have remained dominant. The insidious potency of the neoliberal ideological tenets lies in their permeation of spheres previously not concerned with profit-making, such as education, healthcare and childrearing. Given the almost all-encompassing entrenchment of neoliberalism, when babies are put to work by parents who can afford it to get a head start in life at "play groups" and pre-school programs, cultural texts carry the potential as they defamiliarize everyday life in engaging ways to inspire both introspection and a healthy dose of skepticism among their audience about a particular sanctioned way of life. New vistas can, in turn, be opened up and explored. Narrative films which tell their stories in one sitting and have the heightened capacity to immerse as well as intrigue with sight and sound are especially promising. That said, the filmic medium itself is neutral and can certainly be wielded in ways that uphold the status quo too.

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[9] This is the link to Chen’s interview with CNA on YouTube: Interview with Anthony Chen, Director, Ilo Ilo - YouTube

Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo*, specifically, by no means counters or bolsters the dominance of neoliberalism in any straightforward manner. The film's elusiveness should come as no surprise when considering the director's "war[iness] of making a sort of activist film or a huge socio-political statement" in honor of what he perceives as life's complexity, as he shared in an interview with Steve Rose for *The Guardian*[10]. More significant than the understandable impulse to distance one's work from bald-faced propaganda is Chen's understanding of the transnational domestic work industry, in which domestic and care labor in Singapore is outsourced to women of color from less prosperous Southeast Asian countries, as "simple economic pragmatism" and "a necessity." Taking for granted a problem stemming from the prioritization of profit-making over workers' well-being—as in parents in Singapore being too busy to care for themselves and their off-springs—and the "solution" these workers pay out of their own pockets for—hiring women of color in poverty from overseas to perform social reproductive labor—bespeaks the director's unwitting internalization of neoliberal and patriarchal ideologies.

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[10] This is the link to the full interview: Ilo Ilo director Anthony Chen: 'A lot of maids have forsaken their own children' | Ilo Ilo | The Guardian

Through these ideological lens, alternatives such as implementing in actuality inclusive work accommodation that do not require workers to leave their concerns and responsibilities as parents or caregivers at the door, demanding the government's provision of quality and accessible public childcare services, or establishing an equitable division of domestic labor between heterosexual couples so that working women are less likely to be overburdened with housework or guilt are bound to be overlooked or discounted. In broad strokes, *Ilo Ilo*'s understated, documentary-like aesthetics is arguably in sync with its director's acceptance of the notion that the free market and private individuals' adaptiveness to its whims offer the only answer to, ironically, the childrearing challenges labor deregulation has exacerbated, if not given rise to. A closer look at the use of symbolism throughout the narrative, nonetheless, reveals the intellectual and emotional acrobatics coming to terms with such an unsatisfactory answer entails.

On the level of form, the lottery, chicken, and lipstick as recurring symbols assume an awkward presence in *Ilo Ilo* for being extraneous to plot development, especially for the latter two, and at times clashing with the overall naturalistic style of the film. Despite the considerable screentime these symbols take up, existing scholarship on the film offers little consideration of their significance. Cultural studies scholar Carlos M. Piocos III commends Chen's work for shedding light on the simultaneous exclusion and conditional inclusion of foreign domestic workers in the Singaporean social fabric whereas Joanna Leow considers its reminder of domestic workers as flesh and blood beings to be the film's chief merit. Both take *Ilo Ilo*'s ostensible focus on a domestic worker as the departure point for their respective critical engagement with the text. From my vantage point, however, the film's use of symbolism and such a device's aspirational claim to universality alongside the director's assertive grasp of the nature of the domestic work industry through a depoliticizing, neoliberal ideological lens call for an examination of how *Ilo Ilo* speaks to the average neoliberal subjects who are promised access to financial abundance and often satiated by pie crumbs.

This is not to dismiss the film's representation of a domestic worker and the predicaments she faces in the host country. Critics rightfully appreciate *Ilo Ilo*'s more nuanced and respectful portrayal than that found in sensationalized media coverage. Yet, the regard the film can inspire in the audience for domestic workers is ultimately limited owing to its tacit acceptance, encapsulated in the ambiguous symbolism to be unpacked in the following pages, of the indignities plaguing a subject within the neoliberal system. Attributing the mistreatment of domestic workers to the small-mindedness of individual employers, which the film portrays and critiques with the characterization of the controlling female employer Hwee Leng (Yeo Yann Yann), leaves the fundamentally exploitative domestic work industry untouched. Sorely missing is an interrogation of why life-sustaining domestic labor is actively shunned by or rendered overly burdensome for full-time white-collar workers in the first place, leading to its extensive outsourcing. The contribution *Ilo Ilo* may have made with its relatively sensitive depiction of a domestic worker is offset by the support it ends up lending to an inequitable and precarious socioeconomic arrangement of care guided by the market logic.

Those of us who are middle-class neoliberal subjects constituting the target audience of the film learn vicariously to metabolize the awkwardness arising from being called on to care for ourselves and at the same time, increasingly deprived of the means to do so. The existential compromise thus struck can render us tolerant to our own exploitation, further desensitizing us to the subordination of those worse-off. The dissipation of doubts and grievances, which are challenging to articulate or grasp in the first place within a careless regime ceaselessly preaching self-care, is instrumental to naturalizing the responsibilization of neoliberal subjects for our own well-being and perpetuating an unjust yet pacifying socioeconomic hierarchy, without which the domestic work industry as it is would not exist. This chapter seeks to illustrate that *Ilo Ilo* warrants close attention not for telling us anything particularly insightful about the predicaments faced by a foreign domestic worker or reminding the general public of her humanity, but for generating remarkable affective resonance with its initial evocation and latter diversion of unease its target viewers are prone to experience given the growing precaritization of life since the neoliberal turn in the late 20th century.

Awkwardness as an affect is characterized by acute undecidability and its ineluctably interpersonal nature. Awkward silence or maneuvers and clarity as to where one and others stand are mutually exclusive. For feminist scholars Carrie Smith-Prei and Maria Stehle, “exploiting, using, and keeping with the awkward—instead of smoothing it over or explaining it away—is a mode of politics” (12). I share the scholars’ identification of the promise of awkwardness in raising questions, among those experiencing or witnessing it, about the legitimacy and desirability of the status quo. In this light, the attenuation or aversion of awkwardness tends to depoliticize and reinforce existing social parameters that ease/numb the mind. An immersive narrative film’s staging and resolution of an awkward exchange or scenario can be especially affecting, whether it causes viewers to furrow their brows, cringe or let out a sigh of relief.

While, *Ilo Ilo* does end with “moving on” from the awkwardness of being and relationality within a neoliberal system, I do not intend to simply write it off as failing to harness the potential of awkwardness as an unsettling affect. The film’s initial divulgence of misgivings about a neoliberal subject’s positionality is as illuminating as its impulse and approach to restore harmony in the end, especially given its popular and critical success. It is through attending closely to its management of awkwardness, rendering the neoliberal precarious state of being bearable that my engagement with *Ilo Ilo* aspires to invite critical reflections on the subtle ways in which our affective attunement to the status quo has been and will continue to be sustained if left unexamined.

The narrative in broad strokes goes as follows: Hwee Leng as a pregnant working mother amid the 1997 Asian financial crisis in Singapore finds it increasingly burdensome to work double shift and decides to hire a domestic worker from the

Philippines as her ten-year-old son, Jiale (Koh Jia Ler), keeps getting into trouble at school and her husband, Teck (Chen Tienwen), offers no help around the house. Terry (Angeli Bayani), the Filipina domestic worker joining the family of three, finds herself closely monitored by her madam while unwelcomed by her rebellious charge. However, she gradually develops a bond with the boy, only to be sent home as her employers can no longer afford to outsource care with Hwee Leng losing her savings to a self-help guru whereas Teck being fired and going in debt from stock market speculations.

Odds and ends

While similarly drawing attention to the affective work performed by the film, cultural studies scholar Michelle Ho reads the various characters' preoccupation with the lottery literally. For Ho, these characters are shown to be "dangerously attached to capitalist and material understandings of success," supposedly demonstrating what Lauren Berlant conceptualizes as cruel optimism (183). The scholar understands participation in the lottery as depicted in *Ilo Ilo* to be driven by the characters' materialistic penchant or naïve faith in the power of money, which the film itself refrains from judging but offers for viewers' consideration and perhaps introspection as far as Ho is concerned. What I find questionable is not only the applicability of the concept of cruel optimism for characterizing the affective circuit between the characters and lottery when the latter show little sanguinity, but also the straightforward interpretation of playing the lottery as a quest for immediate material wealth alone. Far from serving as a moral story cautioning against affective investment in " 'bad' objects of desire" (174), *Ilo Ilo*'s portrayal of different characters' engagement with the lottery is marked by ambivalence and opacity. My reading below delves into the symbolic significance of the lottery in relation to the film's complex affective charge.

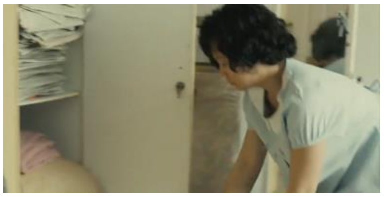


Figure 65

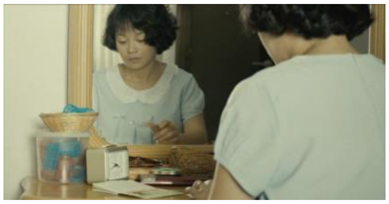


Figure 66

Lottery as s recurring symbol is first introduced in the sequence where Hwee Leng, the Singaporean madam, introduces Terry, the newly-hired Filipina domestic worker, to the room the latter would be sharing with her charge while working for the family. The already awkward encounter of strangers with Terry mostly remaining silent and her charge, Jiale, upset with sharing his room is made more so by a cascade of newspaper pouring out as Hwee Leng opens the cabinet meant for Terry's personal belongings (Figure 65). The handheld camera following Hwee Leng drops as the stack of paper topples over and she tries to catch it to no avail. The initially assertive madam instructing her son to behave so as not to cause the family to lose face in front of a stranger is momentarily flustered by the unexpected interruption from the boy's collection of newspaper. It is later revealed that Jiale keeps the newspaper to study the 4-Digits lottery, tracing a pattern with the winning numbers.

Apart from the boy's preoccupation with the game taking up the little personal space Terry is allotted, Hwee Leng demands to hold on to Terry's passport and is shown filling out a lottery ticket with the passport number (Figure 66). This detail in a sequence when Terry first joins the household certainly highlights the asymmetrical power relation between the employer and employee with the former illegally keeping the latter's travel document to prevent the latter from "running off." More curious is the association established between the arrival of the domestic worker and the lottery. Rather than presenting the Singaporean characters—Hwee Leng and Jiale—to be unwisely attached the lottery's promise of riches overnight, the linkage drawn can partly be read as a commentary on the randomized nature of the encounter between the family and Terry, how the strangers from distinct class backgrounds and countries who otherwise would never cross paths are thrown together. This messaging aligns with the director's characterization of the transnational domestic work industry involving Singapore and the Philippines as driven simply by economic pragmatism, rather than the convergence of racism with sexism and the difference in "luck" at the hands of former colonizers which fostered the economic development in one part of Asia that served as a trading port and stifled that in another rich in natural resources.

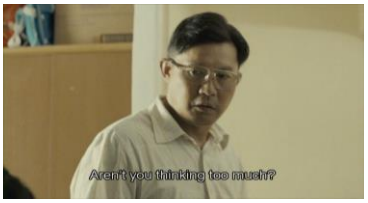

Aren't you thinking too much?

Figure 67

On the one hand, the reference to lottery attributes Terry's awkward first meeting with the family to its purported random nature. Such an attribution, one that overlooks the ways the encounter is overdetermined by inequity on multiple fronts, paradoxically helps contain the social awkwardness viewers bear witness to. The medium shot taken from Hwee Leng's back as she copies Terry's passport number (Figure 66) presents her action in a detached manner. Following this shot of her face off-center in the reflection of the mirror, the side-eye of Teck, her husband, at the center of the frame in a frontal medium close-up shot as he passes by serves as the film's mild critique of Hwee Leng's misuse of power as an individual employer (Figure 67).

On the other hand, from early on in the narrative, the characters' engagement with the lottery is suffused with an awkward coexistence of faith and suspicion, hope and

Figure 68

cynicism in a neoliberal society ostensibly guided by rational secularism. Hwee Leng buying a lottery ticket with Terry's travel document number and Teck later winning a small prize with Jiale's birthday are indicative of a shared longing for personal meaning in an impersonal game of numbers, much like a neoliberal subject's futile yearning for self-actualization in a system that only validates economic actors. Yet, the optimism the couple seem to hold is at best underwhelming for the fate of Hwee Leng's ticket is not revealed as the character does not bother to check the result and Teck informs his spouse of his winning as a feeble peace offering after an argument about him reverting back to smoking. Him slipping the winning ticket as a crumbly piece of paper on the dresser as he exists the bedroom (Figure 68) and the ticket as a prop not given the spotlight at all undercut the sense of exceptionality the win is supposed to bring. Viewers are left unsure what to make of the moment.

Also evoking ambivalence is Jiale's interaction with the lottery. The fact that he has an ever-growing collection of newspaper clippings of past winning results, with which he intends to trace a pattern, differentiate his affective orientation towards the lottery from his parents. While the latter is characterized by modest hopefulness, the former bespeaks a mixture of self-confidence and cynicism, in that Jiale not only aspires to be knowing subject versus assuming the unknowability of the game à a la "fate" or the "invisible hand" like his parents do, but also suspects the game to be rigged. The boy's preoccupation with cracking the code is palpable in a school sequence where he busies himself gluing clippings on winning numbers to a workbook during an English lesson. He is so absorbed in the task that he has no idea when the teacher calls on him to read out

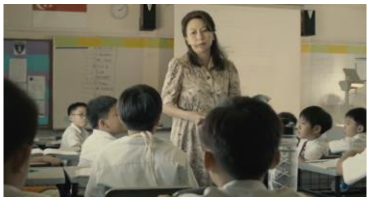


Figure 69

loud a sentence from the textbook. Silence ensues as the adult glares at Jiale after flipping through the workbook and appears to find the student's transgression unfathomable (Figure 69). The awkwardness of Jiale being caught red-handed as other students look on competes with that arising from his complete irreverence for education, delivered in the form of rote learning, vis-à-vis the invested English teacher and his compliant peers.

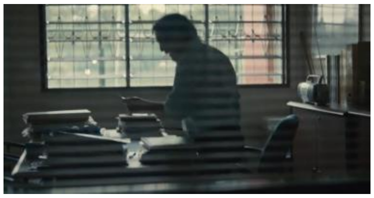
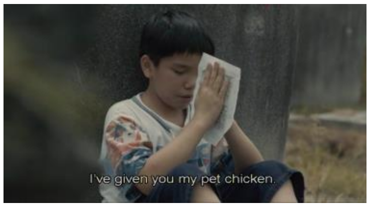


Figure 70

His later success in bribing the discipline teacher by sharing the winning numbers he found to recur every two months deepens the discomfort viewers may feel upon being confronted with the false promise of standardized education as the key to financial security today in the 21st century. The teacher's acceptance of the bribe, thus refraining from contacting Jiale's parents to address the student's inattentiveness in class, is not surprising given how educational institutions are no less driven by profit-making imperatives under neoliberalism, despite their painstaking lofty pretense to be dedicated to nurturing the next generation. The low-key lighting employed and the out-of-focus blinds in the foreground of the medium shot of the discipline teacher in his office, having leapt up from his chair upon learning that he won the first prize with Jiale's numbers from the radio announcement, distance viewers from the corrupt "educator" (Figure 70). Should viewers struggle to come to terms with the education system's impotence and hypocrisy, which Jiale acknowledges in a matter-of-fact manner with his devotion to studying the lottery at school, the discipline teacher reduced as a silhouette while celebrating his win can serve to divert viewer's attention from the systemic issue to his greed as an individual without coming off as overtly moralizing.


I've given you my pet chicken.
Figure 71

Second prize.
Figure 72

Figure 73

What remains unresolved is whether Jiale has really successfully cracked the code to the lottery or it is with his late grandfather's help that the teacher wins. If we see the game as symbolizing the neoliberal system itself, the mystery gestures towards how it calls for its participants' appeal to both rationality and superstition. A system constantly dealing out exponentially more losses than wins necessitates such an awkward balancing act from its participants in order to keep legitimating and perpetuating itself. Prior to showing the discipline teacher tuning in to the radio announcement of the lottery result, *Ilo Ilo* casts doubt on whether the win can be squarely attributed to Jiale's detection of a pattern by having him pray to his grandfather for blessing so that the teacher can win a prize and leave him alone. After performing the tomb sweeping ritual with his parents, Jiale moves to a spot where he can be alone to call on his grandpa with a page from his lottery workbook between his hands. Leaning against the tombstone, the boy has his eyes shut in an earnest prayer to his former caregiver (Figure 71). He also reminds the latter that the sacrificial offering of one of his pet chickens (more on this later) should suffice as compensation for the blessing solicited. It is therefore uncertain as to whether the win that follows is a result of Jiale successfully gaming a rigged system or supernatural intervention.

The oscillation between knowing cynicism and wondering awe among viewers is eventually curtailed by Jiale buying a lottery ticket with the same combination of numbers in a desperate attempt to keep Terry, whom his parents can no longer afford to employ, by his side but not winning any prizes. The glare of the desk lamp complements the crude revelation of his defeat as the knowing or blessed one (Figure 72). The "integrity" of the lottery as nothing but a probability game is somewhat restored. The humbled and disillusioned Jiale takes his frustration out at the old newspaper he has kept, shredding it with scissors, the next day when the family is supposed to see Terry off at the airport (Figure 73). Topless with a buzz cut, the character appears particularly vulnerable. Yet, the camera staying on the side and making only part of his profile visible limits viewers' emotional alignment with Jiale. Rather than sympathizing with a child the system plays a cruel joke on, viewers are encouraged to see the emotional turmoil Jiale goes through as a necessary rite of passage to accepting the system as unreproachable and untouchable.

The narrative also comes full circle with the boy's newspaper falling out of the cabinet reserved for Terry when they first meet and him tearing up the paper prior to her departure. Both Terry scraping a living far from home and being dismissed before the end of her employment contract are presented as determined by chance, not the built-in instrumentalization and dispensability of foreign domestic workers in a minimally regulated industry. The character's maintenance of equanimity in the face of returning home with nothing to show for being away for a few months or even saddled with debts to an employment agency is essential to rendering the final parting sequence a moving rather than awkward one. From hastening to express her understanding and sparing Hwee

Leng of the need to articulate the couple's decision to terminate her employment to urging Jiale to learn how to take care of himself, Terry's concern for her employer and charge's well-being helps direct viewers' sympathy towards the middle-class subjects. They are presented as beset by life's vicissitudes instead of occupying a relatively privileged position within a differentially exploitative system.

Chicken and Egg

Ilo Ilo's focus on and commiseration for the awkwardness of being middle-class neoliberal subjects find themselves navigating is unmistakable with its extensive and provocative use of chicken as a symbol. While Jiale's interaction with the lottery is partly connected to plot development, chickens often appear unmoored from the narrative. The awkward narrative intrusions made by the animal can be ascribed to the affective imprint of the growing but normalized dispensability of neoliberal subjects in the twenty-first century vis-à-vis our essential needs for nurturance and sustenance on the film.

This uneasy juggling of "expectation" of carelessness and yearning for care is introduced right from the beginning in the opening sequence where chicken shows up in the form of a digital pet—*Tamagotchi*[11]. Jiale is detained for playing his Tamagotchi in class and about the scamper off after pretending to have been beaten by the teacher. Amid the scuffle where the latter tries to restrain the former, the boy still remembers to grab his toy (Figure 74). The bright red shell of the "egg" stands out against the pale blue folders on the teacher's desk. His absorption in

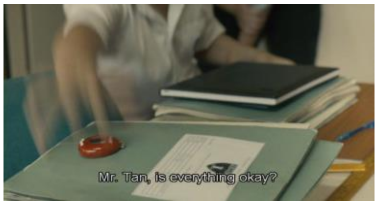


Figure 74

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[11] *Tamagotchi* is translated literally as "Egg watch" in English. It is an egg-shaped handheld video game that has players take care of digital pets by clicking on buttons to feed, play with and clean after them. The toy was released by the Japanese multinational toy manufacturer, Bandai, in the 1996.

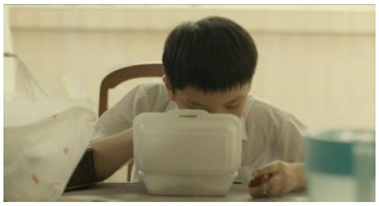
Figure 75

I'm sorry, Mr. Tan.
Figure 76

Figure 77

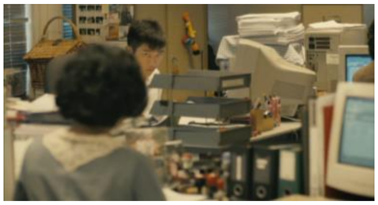
Figure 78

playing the game of raising and caring for a pet is underscored shortly afterwards by a medium shot of him clicking on the toy while feeding himself takeaway food (Figure 75).

This is prior to the employment of Terry, whose responsibilities involve cooking for the family. At this early point of the narrative, viewers are confronted with the paradox of care rooted in carelessness. The family is having takeaway food like a chicken leg with white rice that does not make a balanced meal instead of homecooked one as Hwee Leng gets her co-workers' side-eye for just taking a call from Jiale's school (Figures 76, 77 & 78). When her obligations as a worker take precedence, performing the taxing household chore of prepping and cooking meals can become out of the question, especially when it would fall solely on her to do so in a patriarchal household. The use of a styrofoam container, which Jiale buries his face (Figure 74), when its potential health risks are scientifically established exemplifies the skewed prioritization of a business's profitability and productivity over consumers' physical well-being. The provision of sustenance is ironically marred by latent toxicity.

Caring for profits' sake and the fundamental abdication of responsibility for others are aptly encapsulated in Jiale's *Tamagotchi*. The toy company successfully taps into and conditions the desire to care by turning the endeavor into one that is high-reward, in terms of the instant gratification players can get from seeing their pets satisfied or grow at the click of a button, and low-stakes, given the ease to "resurrect" a digital pet which "dies" from neglect or poor care. *Ilo Ilo* as a bildungsroman traces Jiale's growing acquiescence to and facility with semblances of care under the guidance of more seasoned neoliberal subjects who, at times reluctantly, share the carelessly caring ethos of the corporation that created *Tamagotchi*.

Teck, Jiale's father, is one such conflicted mentor. His distaste for the pretense of care under neoliberalism is most evident in the sequence where he snatches Jiale's *Tamagotchi* and throws it out of his car while driving. Prior to this dramatic outburst, viewers are privy to his unceremonious dismissal from the glass manufacturing company he had served for over a decade as a sales associate. His attempt to counter his utter dispensability by envisioning owning a bubble tea shop as a self-employed entrepreneur is shot down by the level-headed Hwee Leng, who is then unaware of her husband's unemployed status, on the way to a family gathering. The man then takes his frustration out at Jiale's toy, which is making loud beeping noise throughout his conversation with Hwee Leng. The disillusioned and undermined patriarch's disposal of the toy is also accompanied by an expletive: 他媽的雞, translated to "goddamn chicken" for the English subtitles. The original mandarin phrase –tā mā de jī, translating literally as "his mother's chicken" – is a wordplay on the Japanese portmanteau *Tamagotchi*.

His vexation with the carelessness pervading life within the neoliberal regime, whether pertaining to work or play, motivates his later purchase of live chicks for Jiale's birthday. After being reminded by Hwee Leng that he needs to make up for feeding his

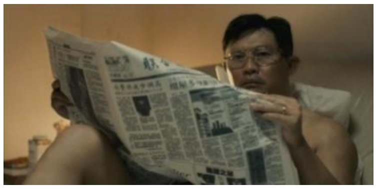

Figure 79

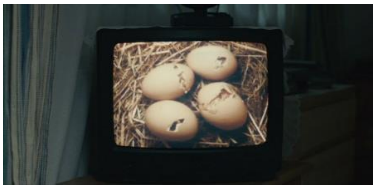

Figure 80

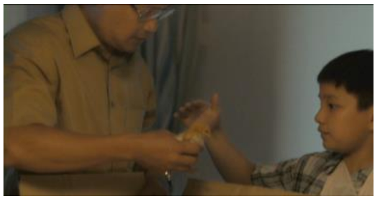

Figure 81

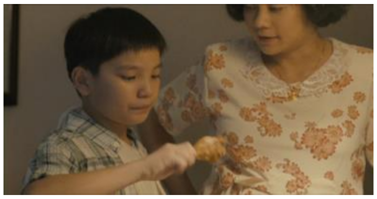

Figure 82

son's beloved digital pet to oncoming traffic by coming up with an appropriate gift, Teck is shown through point-of-view editing to be directing his attention from newspaper-reading to a documentary footage of eggs hatching on the television (Figures 79 & 80). The medium shot that has the newspaper taking up almost half of the frame hints at the tough days ahead with one headline reporting upward adjustment of water charges and another on the public housing allocation. The high-key lighting used for the hatchlings in the documentary contrasts with the dim lighting around Teck, signaling how the latter finds consolation in the animals' ostensible entitlement to life and attention.

In this light, the father's handing of baby chicks to the son as birthday present (Figure 81) is nothing short of a bestowal of hope. It is also an attempt on Teck's part to counter Jiale's socialization into carelessness and disrespect for life, in addition to disposing of the *Tamagotchi*. As one of the few two-shots in the film with both father and son in the frame, it accentuates the former's eagerness to convey to the latter the importance of care. Yet, the teacher himself hardly practices what he preaches. His self-contradiction is glaring with the juxtaposition of fried chicken as food and live chicks as pets, both purchased by Teck, in the sequence. The same hand that has gently petted a baby chick is soon employed to hold a KFC drumstick (Figure 82). Despite Teck's grievances against the carelessness around him, he is nonetheless an unwitting follower of the care-to-use operational logic himself.

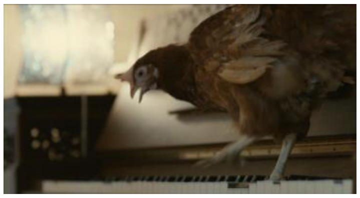

Figure 83

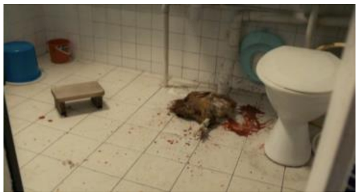

Figure 84

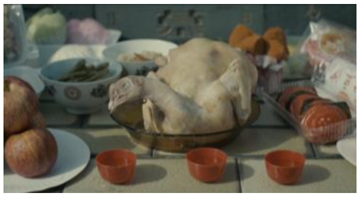

Figure 85

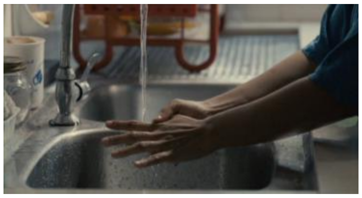

Figure 86

If the baby chicks being a stone's throw away in the balcony from their older, breaded counterparts in the adjacent living room are not jarring enough, the camera also captures one of the grown pet chickens roaming the apartment freely only to be slaughtered as an offering for the late grandfather of the family. The awkward positionality of the chicken which can be demoted in an instant from an object of cloying affection to that of unfeeling consumption is foregrounded when a whimsical shot of the chicken walking on piano keys (Figure 83) is shortly followed by a high-angle one of it writhing and bleeding to death on the bathroom floor (Figure 84). The utter abjection of the creature is underscored by its proximity to the toilet bowl and the blood splatters against the white tiles. The last viewers see of the pet chicken is from a frontal shot of it among other offerings laid out at the tomb (Figure 85). The pallid, plucked chicken is a far cry from the playful piano player that might have amused viewers earlier.

In contrast with Teck, an ambivalent mentor for Jiale as a neoliberal fledgling, Terry is characterized to be a steadfast guide for her charge. The fact that she is the one handling the chicken is telling. Rather than showing viewers the slaughtering, the film presents the before with Terry's hands picking up the chicken and after when she washes her hands (Figure 86). The camera's focus on her hands and forearms, not ever tilting up to show her facial expressions, evacuates the scene of any emotional import and

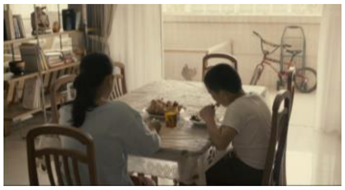

Figure 87

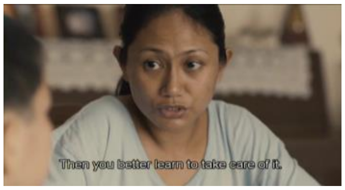
Then you better learn to take care of it.

Figure 88

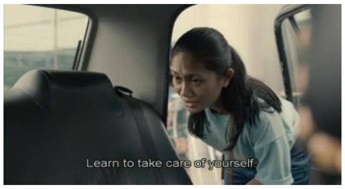
Learn to take care of yourself

Figure 89

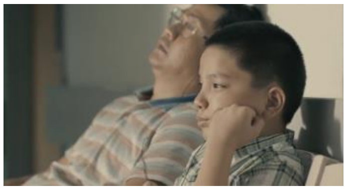

Figure 90

normalizes the thorough instrumentalization of the pet chicken. The efficient domestic worker's stoic affective attunement to the crude reality of life reduced to its uses is portrayed to be instructive to Jiale and by extension, viewers. With another pet chicken on the dining table, the two characters in the foreground flank the only chicken standing in the fenced enclosure in the background (Figure 87). In response to Jiale's question of whether they can refrain from killing the last chicken to keep it instead, Terry advises the boy to then learn to take care of it with a solemn look on her face (Figure 88). Interestingly, her earnest expression (Figure 89) and parting words to Jiale at the airport is almost identical with the "it" replaced by "yourself."

An association is thus drawn between the animal and Jiale, both in the vulnerable position of dependency in a careless world. How Jiale is called on to care for the animal and himself as the solution is in keeping with neoliberal ideology's responsibilization of the individual to mitigate and "power through" endemic carelessness driven by the bottom line's sanctity. The ending sequence hints at Jiale's sharing of Terry's teaching with Teck as the two use the cassette player she left behind to listen to her favorite song (Figure 90), reversing the mentor-mentee relationship between the father and son as neoliberal subjects. The characterization of Terry as the voice of neoliberal reason, edifying her employer and charge alike, can be attributed to the recent spread of precarity to more and more formerly secure middle-class subjects. The absence of awkwardness when the character occupying the most precarious position as a brown woman in poverty is also the one most at ease with the prevalence of precarity and as such, presented to be worthy of emulation is indicative of the film's acceptance of systemic carelessness as an integral part of life. Progressive precaritization where workers are routinely used and discarded is not an issue but one's level of resourceful and resilience in the face of the said phenomenon is, as far as *Ilo Ilo* is concerned. The ostensibly positive representation of the domestic worker as a role model for her charge and even employer comes at the cost of taking for granted the hurdles set up for the benefit of some and to the detriment of others that demand the latter's mustering of exceptional tenacity in the first place.

A Lipstick of One's Own

While Terry helps guide Jiale, Teck and viewers through the awkwardness of living in a system that does not care for life, exchanging ambivalence about the status quo for self-assurance, she is not shown with poise when interacting with Hwee Leng. In fact, awkward tension permeates the two women's relationship throughout. Red lipstick is employed as a gendered class status symbol that both drives a wedge between two and brings about reconciliation. *Ilo Ilo*'s use of this symbol to first register and then resolve the awkward relationality between women has, I assert, the unintended but inevitable effect of legitimating the patriarchal capitalist system and its continued dependence on women's subjugation to sustain social reproduction at as low a cost as possible.

The lipstick is presented as a shared object of desire for the two female characters in the sequence where Terry is alone cleaning the apartment and takes a break to try Hwee Leng's lipstick on. A shot slightly above hip level is used to make sure viewers can

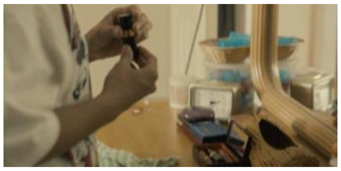

Figure 91

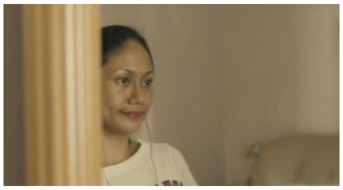

Figure 92

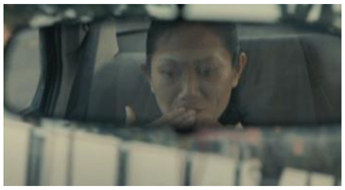

Figure 93

see the lipstick in Terry's hands and the others in a delicate case with a mirror on the dresser, implying that they are Hwee Leng's priced possessions (Figure 91). The camera then moves to the other side of the subject to show Terry's reflection in the mirror. Remaining on the side, the medium close-up of Terry with red lips is off-centered and partly concealed by the frame of the dresser mirror (Figure 92). The camera placement and off-balanced visual composition convey a sense of secrecy, as if viewers were shown a private moment of transgression but at arm's length to curtail any sense of complicity with Terry.

The framing of Terry's use of the lipstick as her deriving guilty pleasure from a trespass is consolidated with a later frame-within-a-frame shot of her heading home with the family after Jiale is hit by a car (Figure 93). As Terry is contemplating her own reflection after putting on lipstick (Figure 92), she is interrupted by Hwee Leng's call to have her get Jiale to complete his homework as soon as possible. Terry chasing after the boy as he is adamant about staying out results in a bicycle-car collision. While Hwee Leng warns Terry about the consequences she may face if Jiale gets into another accident under her watch, the latter sees her reflection in the rearview mirror and realizes she has painted lips the whole time for she rushed to fetch Jiale from downstairs after receiving his mother's call. The reflection shows her eyes widen in surprise before she looks down and hastens to wipe her lips (Figure 93). The low-key lighting, predominantly gray color palette and her demeanor convey a sense of shame for having stepped out of bounds by touching the madam's cosmetic product. The frame-within-the-frame image reinforces the notion of Terry being caught red-handed.

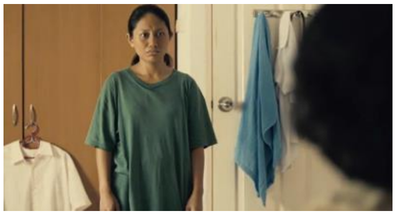
Figure 94

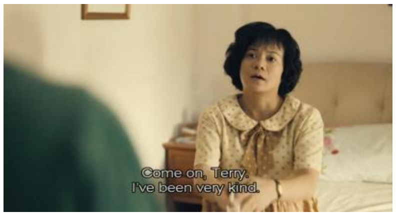
Come on, Terry.
I've been very kind.
Figure 95

Figure 96

Figure 97

Figure 98

The ambiguity regarding whether the shot is taken from Hwee Leng's point of view, which would mean that she is in the know, is dispelled in a later sequence when she sees a cigarette butt in the toilet bowl and suspects that Terry smokes in the household. To get the truth out of the latter, the former reminds the domestic worker that she has been a very kind employer for she knows that Terry has been playing with her makeup but has decided to let it slide. Throughout the interrogation, Terry stands defenseless as she entreats for the madam's trust. The oversized T-shirt emphasizes her frailty and infantilized state (Figure 94), contrasting sharply with the form-fitting and adorned dress Hwee Leng has on (Figure 95). Terry's arms hanging by the sides befit her assigned role as a suspect who cannot defend herself for being indeed "guilty" of something else. It is Teck who arrives home from work and delivers Terry from an even earlier dismissal by admitting to having taken up smoking again.

Yet, the tension between the madam and domestic worker merely recedes for the time being. The threat Terry poses to Hwee Leng, whose privileged position as a middle-class career woman is marked by her access to luxury goods like lipsticks and the “right” to adorn herself, is portrayed early on when the former enjoys a day-off. In this sequence, Hwee Leng is the one tending to Jiale in a loose-fitting pajama with a bare face (Figures 96 & 97). Frustrated after a day of domestic work without much appreciation from her son, the madam regards the well-dressed and made-up Terry with suspicion, forgetting that the familiar dress the latter has on is a hand-me-down gift from herself (Figure 98). Beneath the implied accusation of theft as Hwee Leng comments on the familiarity of the dress is a sense of being robbed of her own day-off from her office work owing to her obligation as a parent, which the film never conceives to be shareable with Teck. The discomforting fact that one woman’s freedom from the drudgery of housekeeping hinges on another woman’s commitment, willing or otherwise, to it is foregrounded but left unquestioned as if it were inevitable.

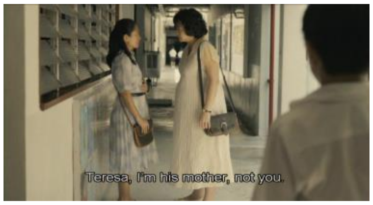
Teresa, I'm his mother, not you.

Figure 99

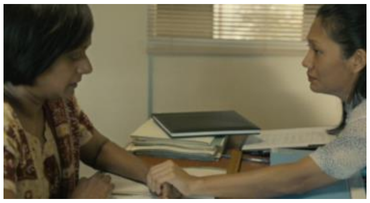

Figure 100

The tension between the two female characters comes to a head when Jiale hurts a classmate in a fight and Terry rushes to the school to plead to the principal for a second chance on his behalf when Hwee Leng is held up by work. After rushing to the principal’s office and ousting Terry, Hwee Leng confronts Terry and asserts herself as Jiale’s rightful mother. The awkwardness of the confrontation where the obvious has to be stated and ownership of a child claimed is accentuated by the two’s almost identical looks. The chiffon dress and leather crossbody bag Terry has on mirror her employer’s. Hwee Leng’s dread of being replaced by her doppelganger is conveyed through costuming and a long shot of the two (Figure 99). Jiale on one side in the foreground is decentered. Again, the conflict seems to have less to do with the boy than the mother's own identity crisis, which the mise-en-scene for the sequence visualizes. As viewers are privy to Terry earnest plea on Jiale's behalf for a second chance prior to Hwee Leng's arrival in a medium close-up (Figure 100), the employer's outburst likely comes off as particularly mean-spirited. The affectively charged scene speaks to the fragility of a bourgeois woman's sense of self, which at times requires aggressive gatekeeping to maintain its integrity.

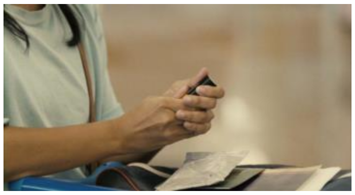
Figure 101

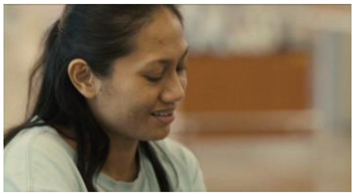
Figure 102

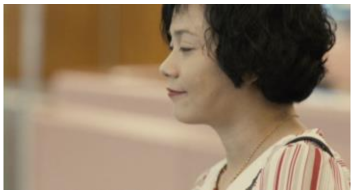
Figure 103

The opportunity to problematize the awkwardness arising from the arbitrary construction of bourgeois womanhood and the concomitant erection of barriers to attaining it is missed, however, by the end of the narrative as reconciliation between Hwee Leng and Terry is reached with a parting gift. The camera drops below eye level to reveal the present to be a lipstick, which Terry clutches with both hands (Figure 101). The shot/reverse shot that follows (Figures 102 & 103) shows Terry chuckling weakly, partly embarrassed by the memory of having taken the liberty of using her employer's lipstick and partly delighted, and Hwee Leng with a knowing smile. The lipstick is used as an olive branch by the employer to signa; that while she has certainly not forgotten Terry's "trespasses," she has forgiven them and is happy to share the "joy" of adorning oneself as a woman with Terry. The absence of lines conveys the mutual understanding the two women supposedly have. From rivals to "sisters," the desirability and exclusivity of the lipstick within the patriarchal capitalist system are taken for granted and affirmed. The change in the relationship dynamic for the better only takes the party who is dealt the upper hand to be the bigger person and the other party to accept the act of generosity with gratitude.

This happy ending's romanticization of patronization is as concerning as its paradoxical emphasis on the common ground the two supposedly share as consumers and mothers. Such a focus essentializes both female characters at the same time as it overlooks the class and racial divide that overdetermines their employment relationship. The medium close-up shots of Terry and Hwee Leng after the gifting of the lipstick (Figures 102 & 103) present the two on the same level, occupying the left and right half of the frame respectively. Apart from conveying how they both enjoy beautifying themselves as women, the mirroring visual compositions call to mind the formal equality consumers enjoy in front of commodities as long as they possess the corresponding purchasing power. The representation of a red lipstick as an appropriate, even welcomed, gift for the now unemployed Terry, who is the only provider for her toddler son and is shown to be hounded by her sister for more remittance back to the Philippines in an early sequence where she calls home with a payphone, is rather obtuse.

Yet, from another perspective, the portrayal of the object as one that brings about consolation and harmony between the characters is to an extent in touch with reality. The freedom to consume goods available in different price ranges in a consumerist economy helps offset the sense of impotence navigating entrenched precarity under neoliberalism brings. Just as cosmetic companies unabashedly interpellate and socialize their target consumers with commercials, *Ilo Ilo* as an unassuming narrative film inadvertently validates the trappings of bourgeois womanhood with Hwee Leng and Terry's final exchange despite having touched on how the construct creates an even greater divide between the two at one point in the narrative.

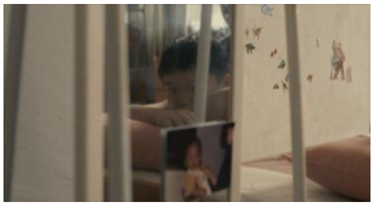

Figure 104

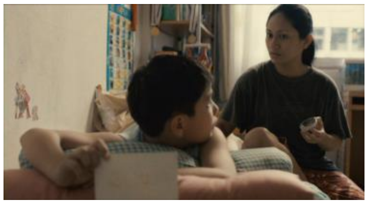

Figure 105

In addition to the impulse to beautify oneself encapsulated in the lipstick as a shared object of desire, the madam and domestic worker are presented to be comparable as working mothers who outsource their childrearing responsibilities to someone else. As Terry is tending to the wound on Jiale's buttocks from the caning he receives in front of the entire student body for hitting a classmate, the boy catches sight of the photo of Terry's son on the inside of the wardrobe door. The photo remains out of focus (Figure 104), coming into focus for only a split second as Jiale reaches for it, and has its back towards viewers in the foreground (Figure 105). He expresses incredulity upon learning that Terry has left behind her son, who is not even one year old, to come work in Singapore. Judged for being an absentee mother, Terry retorts by reminding Jiale of the fact that his own mother hires a stranger to take care of him and is at work rather than home most of the time. The shot of Jiale's reflection in the mirror occupying the center of the frame along with the photo of Terry's son (Figure 104) actually anticipates the equivalence established by Terry's rebuttal, in that both children are cared for by someone other than their birth mothers.

As adamant about not taking a grand political stance as the filmmaker is, Chen does feel compelled to share with viewers his observation of the irony in the phenomenon of "a lot of the maids hav[ing] forsaken their own children in the same way these working parents [in Singapore] have, in pursuit of a better life."[12] The sequence communicates what the director sees as a striking commonality between foreign domestic workers and their Singaporean employers explicitly with the dialogue between Terry and Jiale. Although Hwee Leng is absent in this sequence, an association is drawn between her and Terry both as mothers who have somehow failed their offsprings. Note that there is no mentioning of the father of Terry's baby or Teck's part in the equation.

Like the red lipstick as a universally desirable commodity for women, childrearing is portrayed to be within the purview of women exclusively. Terry certainly stands up for herself in response to Jiale's judgmental comment about her leaving her infant son behind and by doing so, leading to a moment of awkward silence between them. Nonetheless, her defensiveness and bringing in Hwee Leng into the conversation belie her and the film's internalization of the demand on women as mothers to be devoting themselves wholeheartedly to their children's needs. Also noteworthy is the way both the filmmaker's and Jiale's language, the use of the verbs "forsake" and "leave," exaggerates the agency, especially that of those with few job opportunities and the outsized responsibility to provide in Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines, women enjoy in determining whether to work away from home or not.

The awkward positionality of women differentially torn by and at times rebuffing conflicting patriarchal norms and neoliberal aspirations vis-à-vis the worsening precaritization of workers in general and particularly for those not protected by labor laws and citizenship, all of which the domestic work industry revolves around, never comes into critical focus in *Ilo Ilo*. Apart from reinforcing the stereotype of women's penhant for beautification through makeup in the parting gift sequence, the film's coda places women firmly back into the timeless mothering role they are supposed to play for their own and others' good. Low-resolution home video footage of Hwee Leng giving birth is shown, conveying to viewers the truism that life goes on even though the family is in financial straits with most of their savings lost with stock market speculations and to a self-help guru/conman. The final shot is an overhead medium-closeup shot of the mother with a radiant smile cheek-to-cheek with her new-born baby (Figure 106). Hwee Leng's previous awkwardness as she stands apart from her family and looks on as an outsider (Figures 107 and 108), which the film implies to be stemming from guilt and jealousy, dissipates as she fully embraces her role as a mother.

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[12] This is from the same interview *Ilo Ilo*'s director had with Steve Rose referenced earlier: Ilo Ilo director Anthony Chen: 'A lot of maids have forsaken their own children' | Ilo Ilo | The Guardian

It is the actual footage of the actor Yeo Yann Yann, who plays Hwee Leng, giving birth to the child she was pregnant with while filming *Ilo Ilo* that is shown. The inclusion of the home video blurs the boundary between the fictional narrative and reality even further[13]. Fear, indignation, torpidity and other affective responses to acute precarity in awkward coexistence under neoliberalism fade away in the face of what Lee Edelman identifies as *reproductive futurism*, "the secular theology on which our social reality rests" with "the child as the prop" (12), and the matter-of-fact joy and hope a new life is supposed to bring. Yet, it seems like only the mother enjoys access to such happiness as the footage of her and her baby having their first intimate moment is preceded by Teck

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[13] The character of Terry is loosely based on the domestic worker from Ilo Ilo in the Philippines who worked for the director's family for eight years.

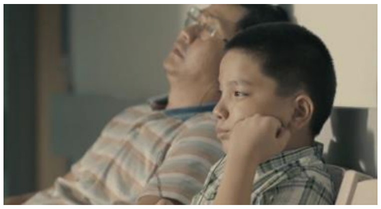

Figure 109

and Jiale waiting outside the birthing room, showing little enthusiasm for the arrival of the new family member (Figure 109).

The spotlight cast on the mother as the chief buttress and beneficiary of reproductive futurism perpetuates the unequal sexual division of labor with women obligated to provide or supervise care for the next generation with emotional gratification as their reward for doing so. In this light, even with its significantly more respectful characterization of Terry as a domestic worker, *Ilo Ilo* ends up bolstering the instrumentalization of women to extract no or low-cost reproductive labor within a neoliberal regime imposing austerity on the general public while encouraging ever-growing avarice from corporations.

CHAPTER IV

STRAIGHTENING UP FOR TEARS OF JOY: OLIVER CHAN'S *STILL HUMAN* AS MOTIVATIONAL ANTHEM FOR WORLD-WEARY NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTS

As a briskly-paced comedy-drama, *Still Human* 淪落人 (2018) by Oliver Chan 陳小娟 is stylistically the odd one out among the objects of study for my project. Both Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* and Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo*, examined in previous chapters, move at a much slower pace with sparing emotional display from actors. The understated aesthetics employed by Hui and Chen for differing ends is nowhere to be seen in *Still Human*, which can perhaps explain its local success and relative obscurity within international film festival circuits partial to art cinema[14]. Characterizing Oliver Chan's work as "another victim of the overly stylized sentimentalism that plagues much of mainstream Hong Kong cinema," film critic for ScreenAnarchy Teresa Nieman muses on how the film has the potential to be "truly great, even echoing Ann Hui's *A Simple Life*" with "[a] few serious tweaks." Yet, the perceived drastic discrepancy in the films' merits is exemplified by Nieman following up their comparison immediately with the condescending comment that "[Hui's] are perhaps unfairly large shoes to fill" for Chan. Other praises for and critiques of *Still Human* tend to commence by weighing in on its alleged derivativeness. Its narrative arc of a caregiver and a paraplegic care recipient from distinct backgrounds developing a heartwarming bond shares striking parallels with the French blockbuster *The Intouchables* by Éric Toledano and Olivier Nakache (2011). Critic Justin Lowe opens his review of the film by characterizing it as “a working-class take on the 2011 French box office hit *Intouchables*” whereas Fionnuala Halligan feels the need to preface her appreciation of the film’s “strong local flavor” by conceding to readers that *Still Human* “may superficially look like a re-tread of French hit *Intouchables*.” Disability studies scholar Alex Cockain suggests the striking parallels between the French film, Hong Kong production and *The Upside* (2017), the U.S. remake of the former, “may index growth in a “disability buddy movie” genre and trends for films centred upon disabled characters portrayed by unimpaired actors to be critically-acclaimed, award-winning, and commercially successful” (21).” While *Still Human* is not recognized within the most established international film festival circuits, Hong Kong veteran actor Anthony Wong, who plays the paraplegic protagonist in *Still Human*, did win the Best Actor award at the 38th Hong Kong Film Awards and the 25th Hong Kong Film Critics Society Award.

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[14] *A Simple Life* and *Ilo Ilo* achieved arthouse status with their wins at the Venice Film Festival and Cannes respectively whereas *Still Human* was not recognized by any of the "Big Five" film festivals, garnering acclaim at Hong Kong Film Awards and Hong Kong Film Critics Society Award instead.

Performing elitist gatekeeping or dismissing the film for reinventing the wheel, however, runs the risk of overlooking the affective coaching *Still Human* offers to disheartened or even disgruntled neoliberal subjects amid pervasive carelessness. I include Chan’s work in this project for it performs affective work in service of the neoliberal regime just like *A Simple Life* and *Ilo Ilo* do, regardless of its level of formal sophistication or originality as a film. While *A Simple Life* sustains resignation to the privatization of care with its restrained evocation of nostalgia for the “good old days” and *Ilo Ilo* serves to attenuate the awkwardness being subjugated yet supposedly sovereign neoliberal subjects brings,

Still Human boosts viewers' morale so that they can keep aspiring for single-handed self-actualization despite general disinvestment in social support under neoliberalism.
The story begins with Evelyn Santos (Crisel Consunji) arriving at the public housing estate in Hong Kong to work for Leung Cheong-wing as a caregiver. The former dreams of becoming a photographer but has to put her aspiration on hold to make money for annulling her marriage with an abusive partner whereas the latter was a construction worker and is paralyzed from the waist down from an accident at work. He has been living alone with his son pursuing further education overseas, ex-wife remarried and sister estranged. Evelyn and Cheong-wing's relationship evolved from one of mistrust and misunderstandings, mainly caused by language barrier and biases, to that of mutual support. Cheong-wing pushes and enables Evelyn to pursue a career in photography while she nudges him to repair bonds with his loved ones.

The broad strokes of the operation of the uplifting affective circuit can be detected in the film's official Chinese and English titles. The literal translation of the original Chinese title of the film — 淪落人 *leonlokjan* — would be "degraded people." Both verbs – 淪 *leon* and 落 *lok* – making up the adjective designate downward movements, the former concerns submersion whereas the latter dropping from height. When combined to describe an individual, they designate a state of debasement within a social hierarchy. The full film title, 淪落人, is drawn from a line in a Tang dynasty poem titled "Ballad of the Lute" 琵琶行 by Bai Juyi 白居易. As a courtier exiled to an obscure prefecture for critiquing those in power, the poet sees himself in the woman he came across who had also lost her place as a famed lute player in the capital for having aged and lost her looks.

The Chinese and English titles of the film echo the poet's foregrounding of shared marginalization and attendant erasure of power dynamics between the marginalized, evinced by the lute player performing for and spoken for by the dejected courtier. The bare bones of the film's messaging, if we move from the Chinese title to the English one, can be put this way: Even though the protagonists both suffer debasement 淪落 owing to disability or having to perform domestic labor for a living, they are *still human* like you and me. Viewers are primed for the film's inspirational conclusion with its initial foregrounding of the protagonists' debased states. All the while the film moves from its initial low point to a swelling crescendo accompanied by the characters' tears of joy, the existence of a social ladder determining one's access to resources and opportunities or lack thereof is taken for granted.

My examination of the film seeks to unravel its questionable claims of universality for the aspirational neoliberal subjecthood with superficial reckoning of differences embodied by the two main characters. Rather than modeling ways to exercise mutual care where different bodily and intellectual capacities as well as ethnicities are honored, as scholar Alex Cockain posits in his generous assessment of the film (32), *Still Human* arguably legitimates neoliberal carelessness with its use of differentially marginalized characters to retell the mind-over-matter overcoming narrative for all. Historian and disability activist Paul Longmore summarizes the subtext of many an ableist inspirational story most succinctly: "If someone so tragically "crippled" can overcome the obstacles confronting them, think what you, without such a "handicap," can do" (139). The obstacles are mere props accentuating the disabled protagonist's exceptional will power and ultimately the able-bodied consumer's boundless potential.

The same goes for what the representation of a disadvantaged individual like Evelyn in *Still Human* does for the more privileged viewers.

In need of disentanglement, however, are the ways in which not only ableist ideals but also heteronormative and patriarchal ones are mobilized as the film propounds the neoliberal ideological tenet of self-actualization. The following pages trace the film's introduction of the paraplegic protagonist as unapproachable and miserable through an ableist filter followed by his transformation with the help of the abled-bodied domestic worker. In *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*, film historian and theorist Martin Norden terms the wife of a maimed soldier in the U.S. war film *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* (1944) a "repaternalizing" agent restoring her disabled and thus feminized husband's masculinity (319). Well over half a century later, we find a "repaternalizing" figure in a different guise in *Still Human*'s Evelyn. In addition to pushing Cheong-wing to confront himself and get better at coping with his disability from her able-bodied vantage point, her hapless positionality as a foreign domestic worker with little means of achieving her dream to become a photographer grants him the opportunity to transform into a benevolent patriarch and at times a pining lover.

However favorable Cheong-wing becomes to the audience as he comes to embody the proper patriarchal and heteronormative ideals, straightening up in other words, his disability is portrayed to be a decisive limiting factor rendering him a "dream giver" rather than chaser. The young and able-bodied Evelyn is the one viewers are encouraged to emulate. For scholar Ting-Ying Lin, Evelyn being able to pursue photography constitutes "an emancipation process through which [she] can construct her self-awareness and autonomy, regardless of the biased and unreasonable demands imposed on Filipinos by patriarchal and racial domination" (58). Attending to Evelyn's repaternalizing role as a damsel in distress mentioned earlier and her supposed self-actualization by way of consumerist feminism, my close-reading of the film will throw Lin's celebratory claim in question.

The respective straightening up of the protagonists has little to do with changes in their surroundings but changes in their attitudes and mindsets. Cheong-wing's transformation upon realizing that he can still make something of his life, which is facilitating Evelyn's pursuit of her dream, is indicative of the film's subscription to the notion that "disability is primarily a problem of emotional coping, of personal acceptance" (Longmore 139). The leaps of faith Evelyn takes with only her benefactors' good will to count on demonstrates an even more optimistic way of coping with the absence of a social security net and support system. I suspect that through reinforcing this misconception of disability and marginalization as a test of one's emotional intelligence and resilience, *Still Human* inculcates too effectively the importance of emotional coping among middle-class viewers in the face of increasingly widespread precarity while further desensitizing them to the unnecessary sufferings and struggles of those less privileged. This focus of the emotional and personal conveniently diverts attention from the unlivable socioeconomic reality for many thanks to neoliberal market deregulation and austerity. In the following pages, I seek to problematize the seemingly innocuous and "edifying" tears of joy the film elicits with its portrayal of marginalized individuals achieving success or finding consolation amid carelessness at each other's expense.

Look, they are just like us!

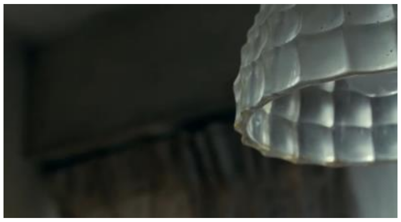

Figure 110

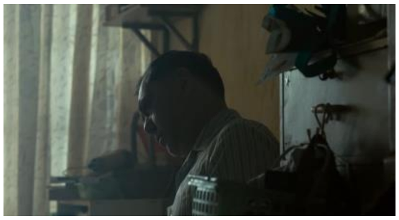

Figure 111

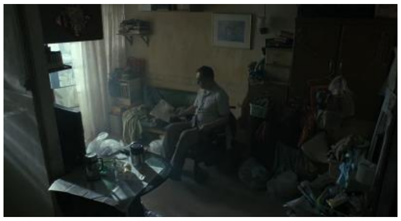

Figure 112

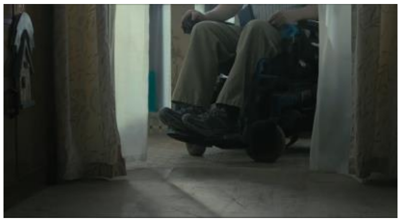

Figure 113

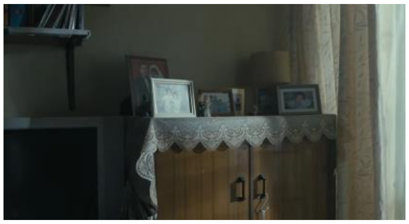

Figure 114

Still Human does not waste any time in setting the stage for Cheong-wing's awe-inspiring transformation with a dreary opening sequence. A lamp shade covered with dust occupies almost half of the first frame on one side (Figure 110). The asymmetrical composition of the shot is accentuated by the dim ambient light reflected by the semi-translucent lamp shade and the darkness of the background, where the top of a window curtain is only faintly visible. With the only source of light being ambient light, presumably from an overcast sky, viewers can barely make out Cheong-wing's features in the next medium close-up shot from the side (Figure 111). Even though the character occupies the center of the frame, his head tilted to one side and the clutter of objects in the foreground echo the previous shot's off-balanced composition. The man is dozing off and waken by the sound of construction work in a nearby apartment. The camera stays with its subject as he stretches his neck, indicating to viewers that he has been in this position for a long time.

The high-angle shot that immediately follows reveals that he is on an electric wheelchair (Figure 112). Cheong-wing's solitude is emphasized by the clutter surrounding him and the drab color palette. A ground-level shot is used to guide viewers' attention to the grimy floor, highlighting how unpleasant the character's living condition is (Figure 113). As he glides across the frame of a medium shot, viewers are shown framed wedding and family photos on display (Figure 114). The laced tablecloth, the studio red backdrop for the wedding portrait and the wedding figurines in particular signal that the now solitary man once enjoyed domestic bliss. The implied dissolution of the character's marriage appears to be part of the explanation the film offers for the sorry state viewers first finds Cheong-wing in.

The subtle diagnosis of the character's issue from a heteronormative vantage point is followed by an ableist one as Cheong-wing leaves his place to get to the bus station to pick up Evelyn, who just arrives in Hong Kong to start working as his caregiver. The ableist trope of "the maladjusted disabled person" in need of "emotional education" (Longmore 137) is evoked and perpetuated by a series of long shots where Cheong-wing charges ahead in high speed and makes no eye-contact with other pedestrians, who all appear wary of a potential collision (Figures 115, 116 & 117). The shot in which an adult pulls the kid she is with closer to her and away from Cheong-wing (Figure 116) is especially telling regarding the film's stereotypical characterization of him as wearing his disability as a chip on his shoulders. The

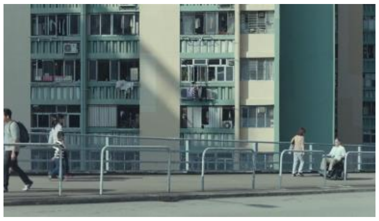
Figure 115

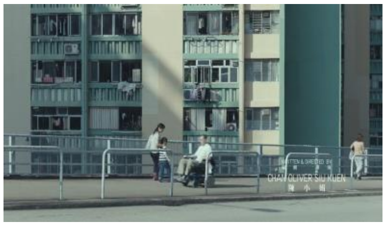
Figure 116

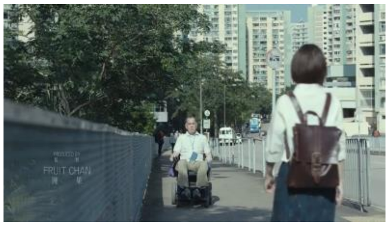

Figure 117

Figure 118

pensive piano accompaniment to the sequence and the sound from the motorized wheelchair operating are punctuated by noises from a squeaky object that Cheong-wing uses to alert pedestrians of him passing by. His staring straight ahead with pursed lips conveys the notion that he is the one who is closed off from or even unreasonably resentful of the world.

The film makes evident its disapprobation of the paraplegic man supposedly lacking in emotional intelligence and openness in a later sequence where Cheong-wing passing by alarms a couple and Evelyn apologizes to them on his behalf (Figure 118). Again, the man extends his arm to wrap around his partner's shoulders in a protective manner. Evelyn's acknowledgement of the offense and smoothing it over with a heartfelt apology to the couple renders Cheong-wing's crankiness all the more pronounced. It does not help that this character is described as a "[a] bitter, wheelchair-bound curmudgeon" on Amazon Prime[15] or "a quadriplegic embittered by circumstance and experience" by film critic Andrew Saroch, to name but a few instances of the construct taken for granted beyond the film itself. The construct of an individual with disability indulging in misery is "often at odds with the way disabled people themselves feel about their disabilities and adapt to them" (Norden 12). It is disheartening to note that this reminder from the film and disability studies scholar Martin Norden penned three decades ago in 1994 has gone largely unheeded by the general public and the film industry.

In addition to falling short of honoring what scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder thoughtfully term "adaptive diversity" (97) among us and appreciating "disability […] as a fortunate dishevelment of normative coherency" (98), *Still Human* constricts

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[15] Watch Still Human | Prime Video (amazon.com)

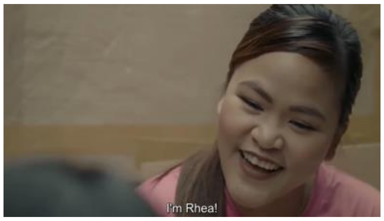


Figure 120

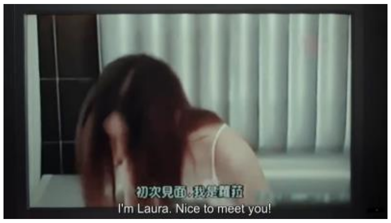

I'm Laura. Nice to meet you!

Figure 121

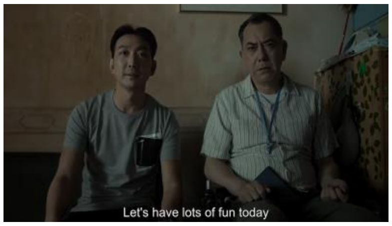

Let's have lots of fun today

Figure 122

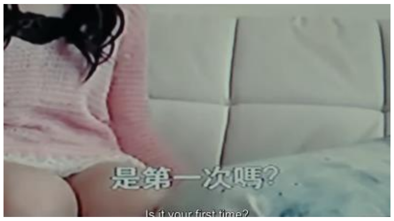

是第一次嗎?
Is it your first time?

Figure 123

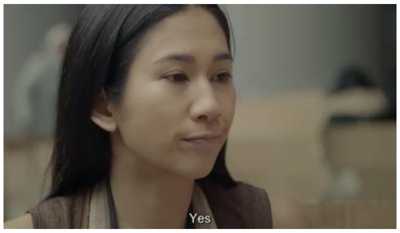


Figure 124

viewers' imagination further by presenting Cheong-wing as a squarely heteronormative subject. The initial othering of the paraplegic protagonist serves to pique viewers' interest and is swiftly attenuated by an appeal to heteronormativity. It is the first day-off during the weekend Evelyn has and crosscutting is used to show how the employer and employee spend the day respectively. Cheong-wing's only friend, Fai Cheung (Sam Lee), proposes having "porn marathon" (Figure 119). Fai's wide-eyed excited look as he makes the proposition sets the tone for the sequence as one of comic relief. Viewers and critics alike appear to take it lightly accordingly as there is no existing assessment of the critical import of this part of the narrative in any reviews or academic essays.

Yet, I find the frivolous equivalence drawn with cross-cutting between the domestic workers, whether it is Evelyn or her new friends, and the adult video actors disturbing. The close-up shot of Rhea introducing herself to Evelyn is immediately followed by a frame-within-a-frame shot of the Japanese pornographic video in low resolution that Cheong-wing and Fai are watching (Figures 120 &121). The actor is also giving a self-introduction there, creating a match cut in terms of the parallel in dialogue. Two-shots of men engrossed in the video ensure that viewers are aware that Cheong-wing is the one consuming pornography just like his straight able-bodied guy friend would (Figure 122). The fact that the two stare straight ahead at their common object of desire in the opposite sex on screen, occasionally making quips about what they see without any physical contact with each other, let alone eye contact, serves to forestall any homoerotic reading of the sequence.

Point-of-view editing presents viewers next with a typical objectifying medium shot that showcases the actor's thighs without her face in the adult video precedes a close-up of Evelyn (Figures 123 & 124). The shots are connected by the actor being asked if it is her first time performing in an adult video and Evelyn her first time working as a domestic worker in Hong Kong. Rather than juxtaposing the actor and domestic worker to draw attention to the longstanding exploitation of women in both the pornography and domestic work industries, the film is more concerned with sustaining viewers' interest with its "clever" use of the crosscutting editing technique.

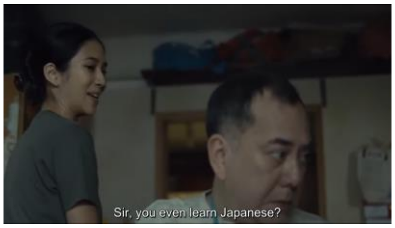

Sir, you even learn Japanese?

Figure 125

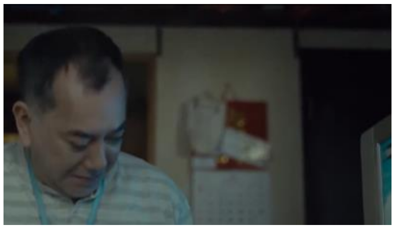


Figure 126

The "joke" carries over to a later sequence when Cheong-wing accidentally plays the adult video when he means to play a language instruction one to work on his English. Even though he manages to turn the video player off quickly, Evelyn catches it and makes sure he knows that she knows by commending him for attempting to learn Japanese as well (Figure 125). Cheong-wing is shown in the foreground slightly flustered initially but shortly afterwards trying to suppress a smile himself too (Figure 126). The fact that Evelyn finds the incident amusing and not in the slightest bit taken aback confirms that the film never sets out to make any pointed commentary on the patriarchal societal structure as the common ground adult video actors and domestic workers tread. It is the "cute" and unfortunately essentializing boys-will-be-boys jab at Cheong-wing to establish his relatability *despite* his disability that matters for the narrative.

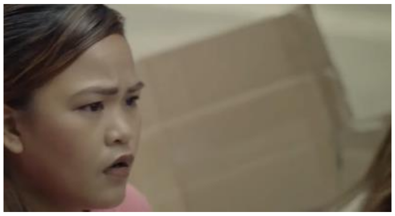


Figure 127

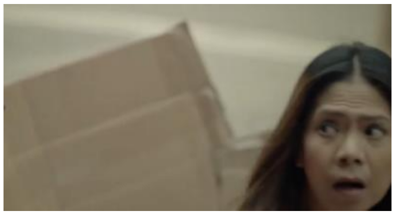
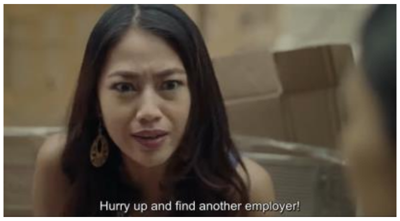
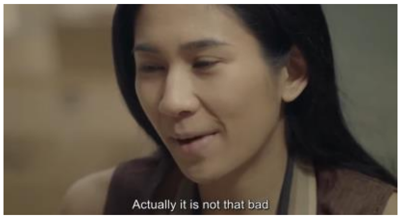


Figure 128



Hurry up and find another employer!

Figure 129



Actually it is not that bad

Figure 130

Returning to the day-off sequence, heteronormative gender norms are similarly mobilized to render Evelyn relatable vis-a-vis her marginalized positionality as a woman of color and migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong. As her employer is bonding with his friend through consuming pornography catering to straight men's sexual needs and fantasies, Evelyn engages in a lively conversation with her new friends. Close-up shots are used to highlight their animated expressions upon learning about Cheong-wing's disability (Figures 127, 128 & 129). On the one hand, this sequence may reinforce essentialism pertaining to women being necessarily more socially expressive and prone to gossiping. On the other, the tight frontal shot of her in the center of the frame as she gently declines her peers' suggestion for her to find an easier employer without a disability sets Evelyn apart from them (Figure 130). Her caring and pure-of-heart nature, a much lauded and instrumentalized virtue coded as feminine, is to be admired against her "calculating" counterparts. The legitimate question of the drastic discrepancy between the meager compensation for foreign domestic workers and their taxing workload, especially so in Evelyn's case where she is the sole caregiver for Cheong-wing and has to wake up at 4am every morning to turn him over in bed to prevent bedsores among her many duties, becomes a petty one within the narrative.

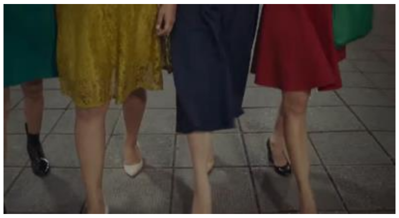


Figure 131

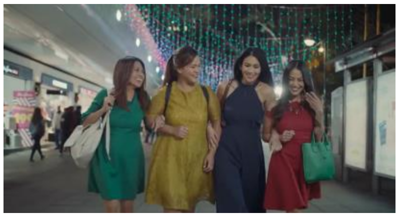


Figure 132

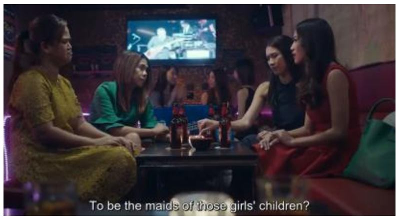

To be the maids of those girls' children?
Figure 133

Figure 134

Evelyn's characterization is in fact a curious mix of the timeless ideal as selfless nurturer women have been held to and the figure of the modern woman "empowered" as a consumer adorning herself whichever way she wants to. Again, the protagonist as the ideal consumerist feminist subject is presented in comparison to the Filipina domestic workers she has befriended. If the sequence where viewers alternate between adult video footage and a social gathering shows a degree of originality, albeit with highly problematic implications as discussed above, the girls' night sequence is nothing but formulaic in its way of portraying straight women having a great time as consumers. To celebrate Evelyn's officially breaking free from an abusive marriage with the successful annulment petition back home, her friends take her to a boutique to dress up for a night out. The group link arms and take confident strides down an avenue in Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong's major shopping district, in their new dresses in different vibrant colors and high heels (Figures 131 & 132). The playful nondiegetic bass music with the women's laughter and the pedestal camera movement revealing their new looks from bottom to top convey a jovial mood affirming the gratification commodities adorning a woman's body is supposed to bring.

Another missed opportunity to invite critical reflection on the unfinished business of feminism, just like the lighthearted juxtaposition of adult video actors and domestic workers in the first day-off sequence, can be detected in the medium-long shot at the pub where Evelyn and her friends occupy the foreground, flanking a group of local Hong Kong women in the background (Figure 133). The social hierarchy among these women and their inequitable access to opportunities are touched on with Ann (Xyza Cada), Evelyn's friend in the red dress, asking the rhetorical question of whether they can come to terms with their children growing up to perform domestic work for the children of those Hong Kong women. Yet, the composition of the shot and the earlier depiction of sheer joy derived from consumption as one of the core "perks" of middle-class womanhood seem to validate the pecking order. Indignation is directed at the fact that privileges are denied to some women when they all purportedly want the same thing. The cliché of girls just wanting to have fun is buttressed with both groups, Evelyn's and the local women, dressed up in a similarly feminine manner to enjoy a night out. In fact, Rhea's (Marie M. Cornelio) response to Ann's mood-dampening question highlighting the divide between women from Hong Kong and those from the Philippines is that "[t]oday [they] are no different than [the local Chinese women]. [They] all can dance!" The film then shows viewers the group dancing and having a great time (Figure 134). The film's validation of aspirational consumerist feminism is unmistakable by the end of the sequence when Evelyn realizes her friends plan on returning their new outfits all along. They have the tradition of determining who is to perform the unpleasant chore

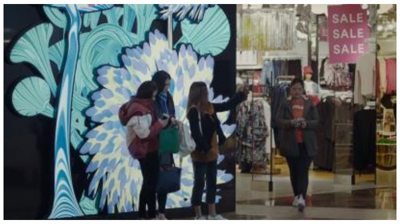


Figure 135

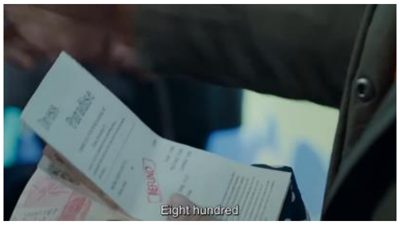


Figure 136

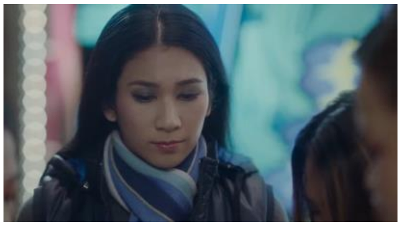


Figure 137

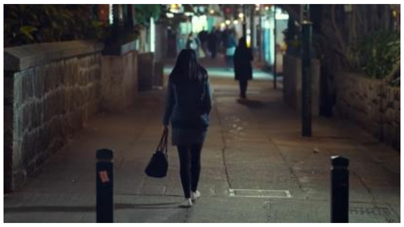


Figure 138

with a game of rock, paper, and scissors. A long shot observes the group reconvening after Rhea, as the loser of the game, returns the dresses and shoes for the group (Figure 135). Apart from helping viewers register that the group have left the bar and are back to the store where the sequence begins in, the camera placement seems to communicate the film's desire to distance itself from the women's "abuse" of the return policy. An insert shot shows the stamped receipt and dollar bills being distributed (Figure 136), followed by a medium close-up shot of Evelyn looking down at the objects with a pensive expression on her face (Figure 137). Evelyn's reaction is in stark contrast with her friends, who giggle and thank Rhea in a cheeky manner for her service. The celebratory night ends on a bitter note for Evelyn when the sense of empowerment through consumption dissipates. She walks away from the camera in solitude to head home after parting ways with her friends (Figure 138). The low-key lighting in this long shot conveys a forlorn mood where Evelyn dwells on the supposed humiliation of being a deceitful customer rather than an "honest" one.

If we see the lure of consumerism as aiding further accumulation of wealth for corporations with workers spending their income on owning objects that bring instant gratification not sustenance, Evelyn's friends taking advantage of the return policy

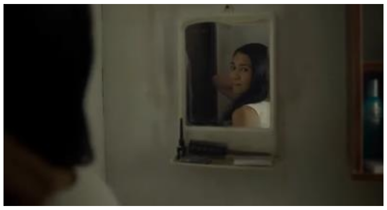


Figure 139

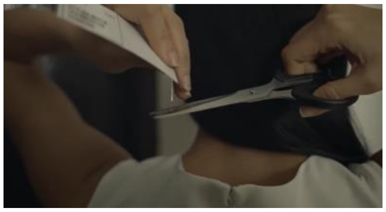


Figure 140

originally conceived to have consumers let down their guard and spend more liberally is far from shameful. Yet, *Still Human* makes it a point to hammer home what a "confident strong" woman should look like and do through Evelyn. In another celebratory sequence later on in the narrative, when Evelyn is attending an award ceremony for a photography competition as the winner of the special mention award, Evelyn puts on a new dress for the occasion. A frame-within-a-frame shot places viewers in her shoes regarding her reflection in the mirror, preparing them for her bold move shortly afterwards (Figure 139). The camera then hone in on Evelyn cutting the tag for the dress with a pair of scissors, communicating her resolve to make good on her purchase instead of returning it after wearing it once (Figure 140). The diegetic sound of the strings snapping being the only sound present emphasizes her resolve and its gravity.

The white dress is likely chosen to signal a clean slate where Evelyn's dream of becoming a professional photographer is materializing. It is as much about validating her pursuit of passion as celebrating her approximation to the positionality of a middle-class woman in terms of purchasing power and the way she is expected to adorn herself. If we put the question of whether one should aspire to be a "proper" consumer in the first place on hold, the film drastically underplays the obstacles in place preventing foreign domestic workers from participating in the consumerist economy on the level the film's target viewers, middle-class Hong Kong citizens, are entitled to do so. An issue of inequitable access is recast as an issue of whether one adopts the right aspirational

Figure 141

mindset, whether one *believes* in one's ability to assume ownership of oneself and the commodities one so desires. In this light, with Evelyn stepping into her "power" as a self-assured woman, she is "one" with the otherwise significantly more privileged viewers. The gendered and heteronormative nature of this character's relatability as conceived by the film is reinforced with the crosscutting between Evelyn putting on her dress and Cheong-wing wearing a suit to attend the award ceremony (Figure 141). By this point of the narrative, both initially othered characters are firmly situated in the one-of-us realm of bourgeois heteronormativity.

Father and Lover

In addition to heteronormative gender norms, the film takes for granted and mobilizes entrenched patriarchal values in its supposedly normalizing depiction of the bond between a foreign domestic worker and her paraplegic employer. The concomitant characterization of Evelyn as a woman with her own aspirations, whether it is to be a photographer or consumer deserving of respect, likely renders her role as the damsel in distress for Cheong-wing more palatable to relatively progressive viewers today. She helps her employer snaps out of the state of dejection he is in at the beginning of the narrative by reactivating his paternal instinct. The damsel's distress in many a fairy tale is caused by an evil woman or more, be it a stepmom, bad witch, or jealous sisters, and can only be cleared by a noble prince charming or benevolent patriarch. For Evelyn, it is her biological mother who threatens to disown her if she continues to pursue photography instead of working solely to support her family. The lighting for the medium-close-up

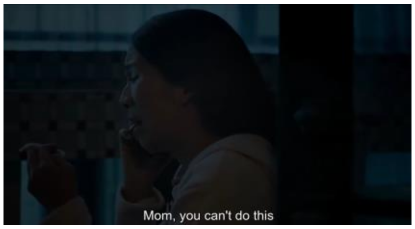

Mom, you can't do this

Figure 142

shot of Evelyn on the phone and in tears responding to the ultimatum issued by her mom is so dim that her figure can hardly be distinguished from the structure of the balcony in the background (Figure 142).

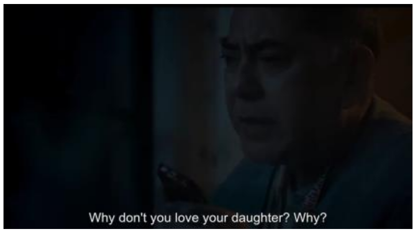

Why don't you love your daughter? Why?

Figure 143

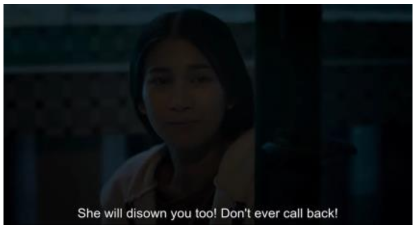

She will disown you too! Don't ever call back!

Figure 144

Noting Evelyn's agony, Cheong-wing steps in and demands to know why this mother does not love her own daughter (Figure 143). The voice on the other end simply reiterates what Evelyn is expected to do as a dutiful daughter. The "conversation" ends with Cheong-wing declaring that the daughter can disown her mother too and that the latter should never call again. Viewers are guided to appreciate his intervention with another medium close-up shot of Evelyn facing the camera and gazing at Cheong-wing tenderly with a smile on her face (Figure 144). This is the last viewers hear of the "merciless mother" (57), as scholar Ting-Ying Lin puts it in her interpretation of *Still Human* as a feminist narrative of Evelyn exerting "female agency" against all odds. How Evelyn's friends are presented as selfish caregivers and irresponsible consumers in contradistinction to her, as I illustrate in the previous section, in addition to her mother showing up as nothing but a domineering matriarch to be put in her place by Cheong-wing should give us pause as to where the film's allegiance lies. While one's family can certainly be a source of oppression, the narrative's construal of Evelyn's mother as a mere roadblock to her self-actualization risks reductively favoring neoliberalism-inflected individualism over the supposedly backward family-oriented culture Evelyn is from.

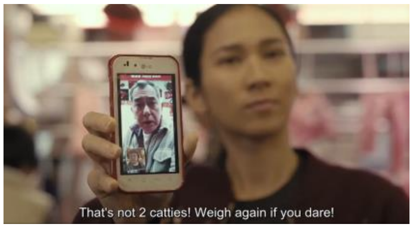

That's not 2 catties! Weigh again if you dare!

Figure 145

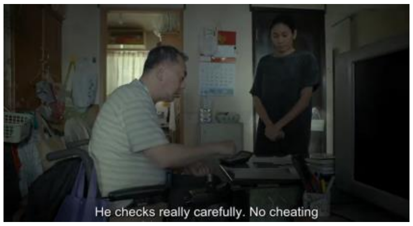

He checks really carefully. No cheating

Figure 146

Figure 147

Alongside the Filipina "feudal matriarch," Chinese women in Hong Kong play the role of villains for the narrative. The vegetable stall owner at a local wet market ventriloquizes demeaning comments about Filipina domestic workers, wondering why Hong Kong people do not boycott these "Filipina girls 賓妹" in earnest, and always gives Evelyn less vegetables than she pays for. Again, Cheong-wing is the one who teaches the bigoted woman a lesson. Evelyn discretely livestreams the stall owner's deceitful practice on a video call with Cheong-wing and later flips the phone so that he can tell the woman off in Cantonese (Figure 145). While scholar Alex Cockain concedes that Cheong-wing's display of an "entrepreneurial spirit" in conceiving the plan to expose the stall owner and its success "may inadvertently silence the need for structural strategies and solutions to remedy micro-aggressions," he posits the way the two "operate as a team may register the promise and potential of sustained alliances between stigmatized persons and groups in disabling milieu" (25).

Just like the film itself, the scholar assumes equivalence between Evelyn and Cheong-wing as "stigmatized persons" without confronting the latter's power over his employee. The stress Evelyn is under when she first starts doing grocery shopping for Cheong-wing as he would pour over the receipts to make sure she does not pocket any money is conveniently forgotten. His having her stand by until proven innocent by the

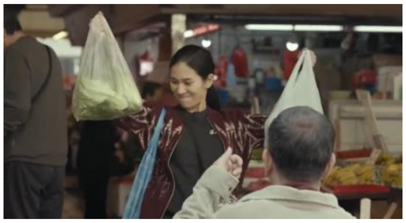


Figure 148

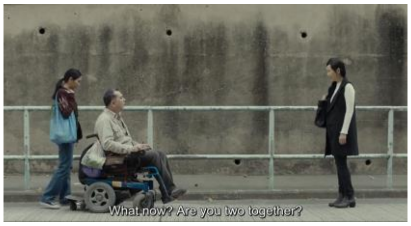

What now? Are you two together?

Figure 149

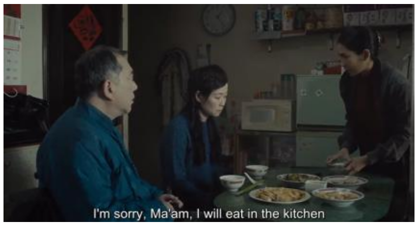

I'm sorry, Ma'am, I will eat in the kitchen

Figure 150

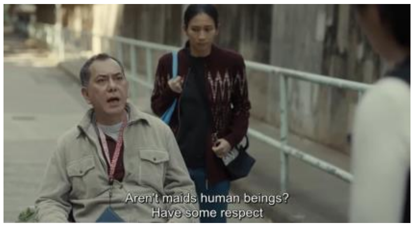


Figure 151

meticulous tally (Figure 146) shows him sharing similar biases against Evelyn as the vegetable stall owner. As she earns his trust over time, the narrative arranges for him to redeem himself by joining hands with Evelyn against the spiteful stall owner devoid of back story and character development. Same as the confrontation with the mother, Cheong-wing has the last word with the woman in stunned silence (Figure 147). He gives the overjoyed Evelyn an approving thumbs-up as she emerges from the wet market with two full bags of lettuce (Figure 148). The gratitude the latter feels towards the former is so effusive that she wants him to teach her how to say "love" in Cantonese.

The joyful moment is cut short by yet another woman, Cheong-wing's sister Jing-ying Leung (Cecilia Yip), who sarcastically asks if the two are in a relationship. The blocking of the encounter in a dramatic, tableau-like three-shot with Evelyn standing behind Cheong-wing and avoiding eye contact with Jing-ying confirms her need for protection (Figure 149). In response to Jing-ying's accusation of him being so shameless as to be with a "Filipina girl," he righteously reminds her that domestic workers are human beings deserving of respect too. It is noteworthy that prior to this confrontation that calls for Cheong-wing's defense of Evelyn's honor, he is eager to please his distant sister and would take her slights with equanimity. In an earlier sequence when the characters celebrate Chinese New Year, Cheong-wing, decentered in the frame, defers to his sister regarding whether to have Evelyn sit at the table with them (Figure 150). The later reiteration of Evelyn's vulnerability in the face of Jing-Ying's even more blatant discrimination thus serves the purpose of redeeming and "repaternalizing" Cheong-wing vis-à-vis his sister. His stern face is thus the one in focus even though Evelyn, with both hands clutching her bags and doe-like eyes fixed on him, occupies the center of the frame (Figure 151).

The fact that the film's diagnosis and concomitant rehabilitation, as in straightening up, of Cheong-wing as an unhappy man with a disability is rooted in a patriarchal heteronormative conception of individuals and their relationships with one another is most evident in a fantasy sequence. Remembering the stove is still on while taking a shower, Evelyn rushes to get to the kitchen and ends up slipping and breaking her arm. The sharp pain left her immobilized on the floor, crying out for Cheong-wing's help. The ground-level shot exemplifies her agony (Figure 152). A fluid tracking shot is employed to follow Cheong-wing, in his fantasy, getting up from his bed and taking wide strides to get to Evelyn (Figure 153). The medium close-up shot of the two gazing into each other's eyes in a bridal carry pose is significantly more well-lit than

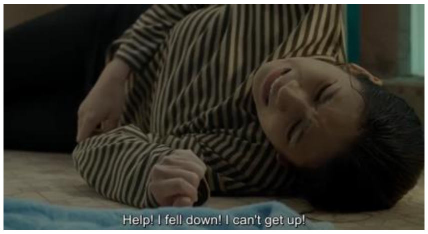

Help! I fell down! I can't get up!

Figure 152

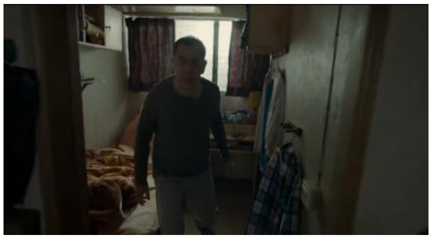


Figure 153

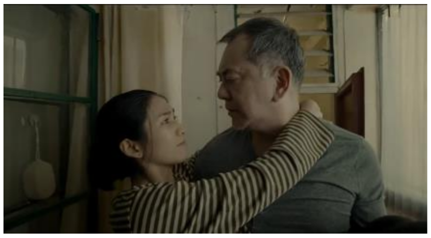


Figure 154

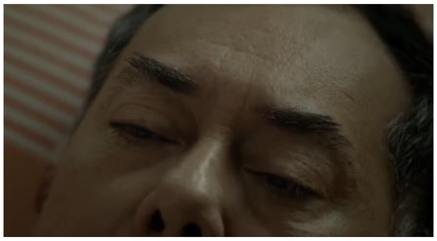


Figure 155

the previous one of Cheong-wing stepping out of his room, accentuating his “heroism” and strength as a man (Figure 154). The triumphant moment of rescuing a damsel in distress in one swoop painfully dissipates for viewers with an abrupt cut to reality signaled by an extreme close-up shot of the bedridden Cheong-wing’s eyes with a forlorn look (Figure 155).

In this restaging of the age-old tale of a woman being swept off her feet, the supposed invincibility of an able-bodied man and the contrasting “impotence” of a disabled man and frailty of a woman are perpetuated. If earlier in the narrative, viewers are guided to emotionally align with Cheong-wing as a benevolent father figure to Evelyn, this fantasy sequence flirts with the notion of the two having a romantic relationship. The ostensibly innocuous sequence is indicative of how easily a man is given license to alternate between playing the authoritative father and sensual lover within the circuit of patriarchal heteronormativity. Yet, Cheong-wing’s disability is imagined to be circumscribing his entitlement. The piano accompaniment for the duration of the fantasy conveys a melancholic mood, lamenting Cheong-wing’s inability to get to Evelyn’s rescue and foreshadowing the eventual stillbirth of the budding romance.

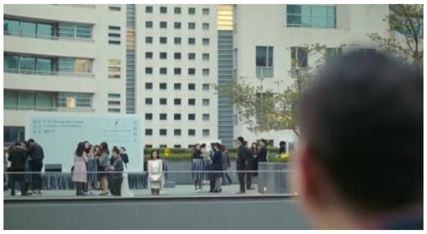


Figure 156

In fact, upon a closer look, Cheong-wing is curiously “grounded” throughout the narrative. In the wet market sequence analyzed above, he is shown to be waiting for Evelyn at the entrance to the market (Figure 148). The two vanquishing the discriminatory vegetable stall owner draws attention away from the space of the wet market being an inaccessible one to individuals in wheelchairs. Considering other moments in the narrative, the film likely never intends to question the ableist structuring of physical spaces. At times, it goes so far as to romanticize it. Echoing the concluding shot of the wet market sequence with the camera placed behind Cheong-wing patiently awaiting Evelyn's return from a space he is denied access to, a long shot is employed with the back of his head out of focus when he locks eyes with Evelyn at the award ceremony from afar (Figure 156). The fact that the high tables set up for the event and the labyrinthine structure of the place are designed without someone like Cheong-wing in mind falls away as viewers are invited to appreciate his tender support for Evelyn, who only has time to look for him after socializing with other award recipients and attendees of the ceremony.

The film is adamant about assigning Cheong-wing the role of a passive hopeless romantic. Rather than picking up Evelyn from the hospital after the fall, he is shown to be home waiting impatiently for his friend Fai to be back with her. The placement of the camera at the door looking in as Cheong-wing moves in and out of the frame checking time in anticipation (Figure 157). As entrenched as ableism is in the Hong Kong society, individuals in wheelchairs have found ways to navigate the city. Cheong-wing is only shown venturing out on a taxi once in the narrative. The narrative begins and ends with Cheong-wing at the bus stop waiting for Evelyn's arrival and seeing her off respectively.

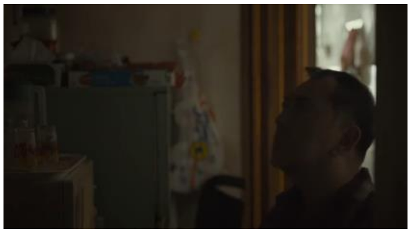


Figure 157

Figure 158

Figure 159

The idea that he could have boarded a bus, which is equipped with at least one wheelchair position and ramp, is somehow not entertained at all. The Mass Transit Railway and the rehabilitation bus service, which wheelchair users would avail themselves of, have no place in a narrative bent on delivering a bittersweet love story where the man can be counted on to be "right here" waiting for his loved one. Shortly before the ending sequence, the medium shot of Cheong-wing in the living room staring wistfully at Evelyn standing in the balcony highlights the latter's unreachability and ephemerality for the former, supposedly tied down by his disability (Figures 158 & 159).

Granted, it can often be an unnecessarily time-and-energy-consuming process for individuals in wheelchairs to board a bus or train with the assistance of trained staff as able-bodied passengers' convenience is still prioritized above all else. Yet, by showing no desire or possibility at all on Cheong-wing's part to venture out of the public housing estate runs the risk of justifying the bare minimum accommodation and support available for people with physical disabilities currently.

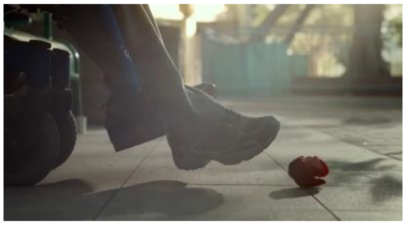


Figure 160

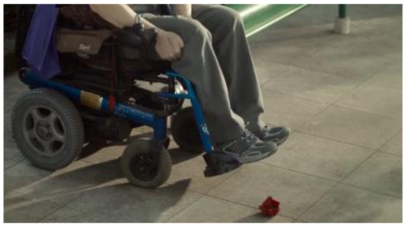


Figure 161

Even more alarming is the analogy drawn between Cheong-wing and the red cotton tree, known for its medicinal and culinary uses and snow-like seeds. Having successfully arranged for a meeting between Evelyn and a British photographer to give the former a final push in achieving her dream, Cheong-wing reflects on having found a new lease on life as Evelyn's "dreamgiver." The formerly dejected protagonist has completed his transformation into at once a discerning patriarch who determines and grants what is best for his charge and a self-sacrificing lover. A flower of the cotton tree is shown by his feet in an over-exposed ground-level shot (Figure 160). The sunset and the fallen flower remind viewers of Cheong-wing in his middle-aged years. The following medium shot shows him moving his leg so that his foot is properly placed on the footrest of the wheelchair (Figure 161). Cheong-wing straightening up his body himself for the first time with the flower still in frame implies that by expending his life force for another person, he finds value and purpose in his own life.

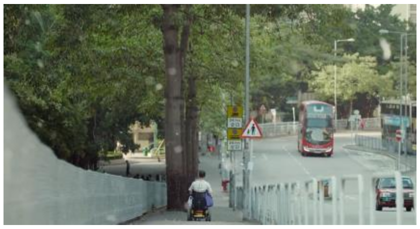


Figure 162

Apart from further normalizing Evelyn's need for a selfless patron in order to access opportunities outside of the domestic work industry as a woman of color, the conclusion of Cheong-wing's character arc disposes viewers favorably towards an individual with disability who not only refrains from making any claims on society's resources, but also be content to dream someone else's dream within the confines of an ableist society. The final shot of the film shows Cheong-wing on his way back to his apartment with the seeds of the red cotton tree blowing in the air. Rather than causing other pedestrians' alarm as he is shown to do in theopening sequence, the sidewalk is empty. Now that Cheong-wing does not wear a chip on his shoulder, he is "blessed" with a serene solitary life, finding solace in how far his acts of kindness may take Evelyn like the seeds carried far away from the cotton tree by the wind (Figure 162).

What Are Neoliberal Dreams Made of?

In *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance*, Robert McRuer offers the sobering insight that "[d]isability in our neoliberal moment […] simultaneously exists as never before as a niche, an identity, even a market that is potentially quite useful to the guardians of austerity politics" (30). While McRuer draws attention to the ever-expanding market of products promising to fix, enhance and preserve our bodies measured against the ableist ideal, I have laid out above the ways in which the characterization and character development of Cheong-wing can buttress claims that austerity policies under neoliberalism do no harm when individuals can simply help themselves and each other. In conjunction with appealing to traditional gender norms in its domesticating and subsequent overcoming of Cheong-wing's disability vis-à-vis Evelyn's marginality as a foreign domestic worker, *Still Human* indulges viewers in a celebration of the resilient human spirit supposedly shared by all irrespective of race, class, gender and other stigmatizing identity markers setting one apart.

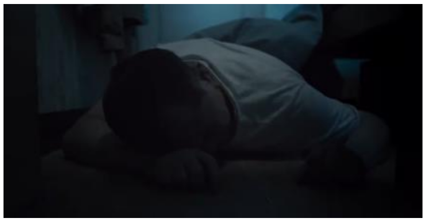


Figure 163

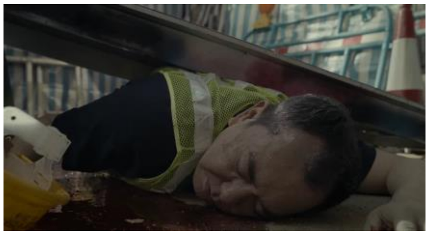


Figure 164

The neoliberal pull-oneself-up-by-the-bootstrap mantra is poetically visualized in a dream sequence foreshadowing Cheong-wing's eventual straightening up, contributing to the making of Evelyn as a promising neoliberal subject. Having accidentally fallen from the bed and decided not to wake Evelyn for assistance as he has offended her earlier for calling her a mere "Filipina girl," Cheong-wing spends the night laying on the floor. A match cut takes viewers to him dreaming of reliving the accident at the construction site (Figures 163 & 164). The camera placement emphasizes the prone position Cheong-wing is in, how he is beaten down by crude reality. The sense of despair is reinforced by the dream fast forwarding in time and showing viewers a close-up shot of a listless

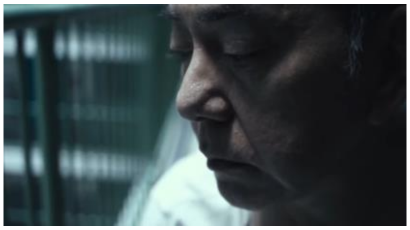


Figure 165

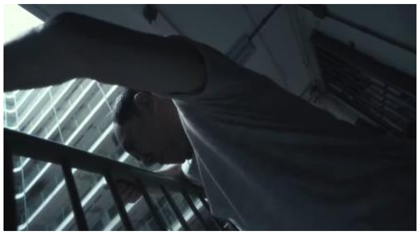


Figure 166

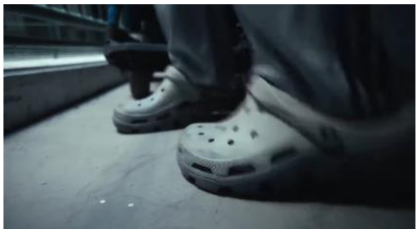


Figure 167

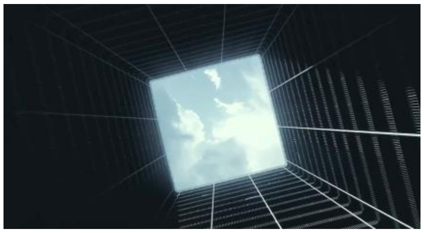


Figure 168

Figure 169

Cheong-wing by the fence on a corridor at the public housing estate looking down (Figure 165).

A low-angle shot with a dutch tilt captures him lifting his body up against the fence with his arms (Figure 166). The sequence ends with Cheong-wing miraculously managing to jump over the fence (Figure 167) with the intention of ending his life but the camera decides to roll as it pushes in towards the blue sky till the prison-like public housing structure disappears from view (Figures 168 &169). It is after this dream that Cheong-wing opens up to Evelyn, sobbing and calling himself "rubbish," prompting the latter's motivational speech about how although he cannot decide whether to sit on a wheelchair, he has a say over the way he would like to sit on it. The ending of the dream sequence where Cheong-wing is shown to be defying gravity aptly anticipates the pep talk. It seems to imply that if only Cheong-wing's resolve to end his life out of despair, which is how able-bodied folks tend to imagine as the only response people would have towards acquired disabilities, can be channeled otherwise, nothing would be in his way towards happiness.

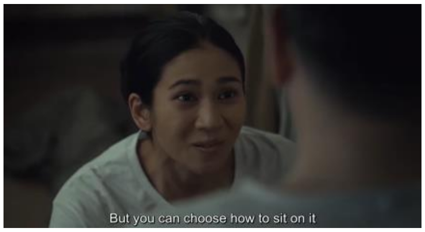

But you can choose how to sit on it

Figure 170

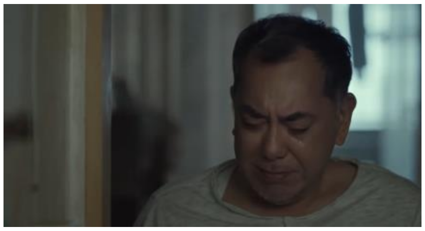


Figure 171

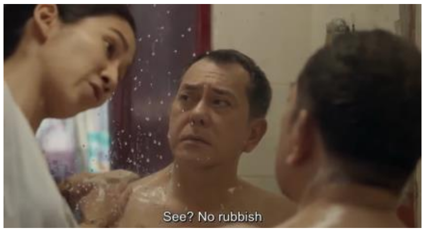


Figure 172

The can-do lesson for Cheong-wing and by extension viewers is spelt out through Evelyn. A high-angle, over-the-shoulder shot shows her smiling encouragingly with teary eyes as she delivers the aforementioned speech in a compassionate and emphatic manner (Figure 170). Cheong-wing is shown nodding to Evelyn's teaching (Figure 171), apparently comforted by the idea that his sheer will and attitude would suffice in turning his life around. The lesson continues as the two move to the bathroom, where Evelyn cleans Cheong-wing's body. Evelyn recalls assisting the birth of a baby who was born deaf and blind back when she worked as a nurse with the intention of convincing Cheong-wing that no one is "rubbish," even those who are even more "miserable 慘" than he is from an ableist standpoint. Evelyn's sharing reminds Cheong-wing of the legendary Helen Keller, whom he describes as the "same" as the baby in being miserable owing to deafblindess but really famous. Evelyn then seizes the opportunity to reiterate the fact that everyone can be useful and valuable in society. She tilts her head specifically to lock eyes with the school-kid-like Cheong-wing as she does so (Figure 172).

The iconic story of Helen Keller is mobilized yet again to inspire and instruct. As artist-activist Liz Crow reminds us, "Helen was the first deaf blind college student in the United States—and the last for half a century. In the public image, her education was a triumph; in reality, she struggled throughout, remembering her college years as times of deep loneliness and exclusion" (848). Her fame came at an exorbitant price with her image carefully curated by stakeholders such as the American Foundation for the Blind, which would only release photos of her with a cheery smile on her face. Her ongoing struggles during her college years, given the predominance of visual sign language over tactile ones, constitute just one facet of her life that has been conveniently left out of the grand narrative. The public dismissal of her views as a radical socialist activist by misogynistic and ableist detractors is certainly not what the film alludes to when characterizing her as a famed figure, let alone her life-long endeavor to speak and cater to the hearing public to no avail or reciprocation (848). How swiftly Evelyn and Cheong-wing move from expressing pity to admiration for Helen Keller is not simply sloppy scriptwriting. The affective leap echoes the necessary omission of struggles and sufferings for the construction of success stories within the careless neoliberal regime, just so it can stay careless.

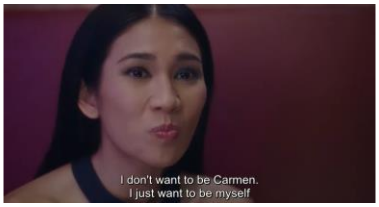

I don't want to be Carmen.
I just want to be myself

Figure 173

While Helen Keller is used to illustrate Cheong-wing has nothing to mope about, Carmen (Vinia Pamplona Peralta) plays a comparable role for Evelyn. She is first mentioned by Ann as a legendary figure who used to be a domestic worker and is now married to an expat and living in a mid-levels mansion in Hong Kong, more well-off than her former employers. In response to Ann wishing her good luck in finding "a good man" like Carmen did, Evelyn declares that she "just want[s] to be [herself]" and would marry for love rather than convenience. The feminist message of the need for women to achieve self-sufficiency is conveyed explicitly with a close-up shot of Evelyn sharing her stance and "enlightening" her peers (Figure 173). The

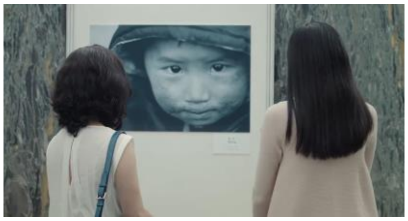


Figure 174

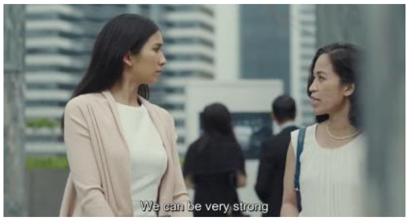

We can be very strong

Figure 175

camera stays with her throughout her speech with the soft and high-key lighting presenting her in an especially flattering manner. It is at the award ceremony for the photography competition that Evelyn meets Carmen in person. They happen to be appreciating a photo of a toddler's smeared face together (Figure 174). The photo of an impoverished child reminds Evelyn of how fragile human beings can be. This time, Carmen is assigned the role of a motivational coach, urging Evelyn to keep in mind that "even at the most fragile moments […] we can be very strong." The latter has her brows slightly furrowed as an attentive student would (Figure 175). Carmen then reveals that she used to be a domestic worker but that does not limit who one can become. Her success is confirmed when a group of people recognize her and address her as Professor Lumaban. Before leaving Evelyn to converse with the group, Carmen's final words are "sky's the limit."

Contrary to Ann's story of Carmen, this encounter communicates to viewers the idea that her success should be attributed to her inner strength and drive, that of pursuing higher education. Although viewers are presented with this legendary figure in flesh and blood, Carmen serves a function similar to Helen Keller, who is just mentioned in passing. There is no accounting for how she has gotten to where she is now and her current position is taken for granted as the happy place. The acknowledgement of struggles is beyond nominal to sustain a hopeful and celebratory affective circuit. It turns out that Evelyn can and should be another Carmen, transcending the various obstacles in place between her and her dream with determination and aspiration.

Particularly noteworthy, however, is the way in which the celebration of triumphant self-reliance for a neoliberal subject unfazed by systemic racism, sexism and the likes coexists with the heart-warming arc of Cheong-wing being Evelyn's benefactor within the narrative. The contradiction can be understood as the film's tacit yet unwitting acknowledgement of the fantastical nature of neoliberal subjects' gravity-defying stories. Also, the fact that it is Cheong-wing who lets Evelyn go, rather than her breaking free all by herself from the exploitative domestic work industry as the film at times would want viewers to believe to be possible as fellow neoliberal subjects, speaks to our unfinished business of interrogating and moving away from patriarchal values posing as feminism-informed ones.

Cheong-wing taking the initiative to return Evelyn's passport which he has been holding on to against the law, letting her know that he is ready to see her spread her wings and fly away, as a deeply moving gesture received by Evelyn with teary eyes is just one among many instances of the film's affective attachment to the exercising of power in a loving guise within a social hierarchy. The tears of joy Evelyn sheds, perhaps eliciting some among viewers too, in several occasions over the unexpected acts of kindness from Cheong-wing would not have been legible and affecting had viewers lived in a world where sustenance were guaranteed and whimsical charity rendered obsolete. The concluding chapter for this dissertation ruminates on what this world can look like, in a sense in contradistinction to the one my objects of study have emerged from and buttress.

CONCLUSION

Rather than offering closure, the following is meant to pry open conversations concerning the expectations, distribution, and provisions of care in our current reality by picking up where this project's objects of study left off or foreclose. Let us begin by revisiting the three films' conclusion.

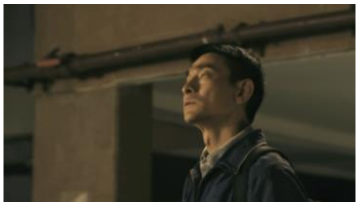


Figure 175

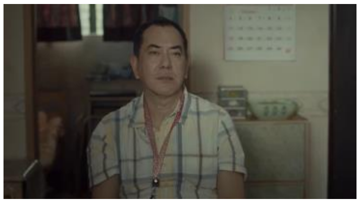


Figure 176

Figure 177

The juxtaposition of the respective endings for *A Simple Life*, *Ilo Ilo* and *Still Human* reveals strikingly similar portrayals of the protagonists as an employer and/or care recipient futilely longing for care and companionship from their domestic workers. For its final sequence, *A Simple Life* takes viewers back in time when To ze is still alive and Roger can count on coming home after a business trip to a well-kept apartment. The travel-wearied Roger is shown looking up at the living room of his apartment, where To ze awaits his return, and basking in the warmly-hued light from the domestic space (Figure 175). Preceded by To ze's funeral service, Roger's gaze in this flashback sequence is suffused with poignancy for the living room he returns to at present within the narrative would be a dark and empty one. Although a frontal shot is employed instead, *Still Human* also presents viewers with Cheong-wing gazing off-screen at Evelyn hanging up laundry for him one last time before heading off in pursuit of a career in photography (Figure 176). Again, the longing comes with a palpable sense of melancholy, evident in the employer's facial expression, soft lighting and muted colors.

The penultimate parting sequence in *Ilo Ilo* is more pathos-laden with Jiale in tears while holding on tightly to a few strands of Terry's hair he cuts off before she exits the car and enters the airport (Figure 177). Instead of following Terry with his eyes, he clings desperately to her presence through retaining the scent of her hair. He is shown to be in a calmer but equally melancholic state in the final sequence at the hospital when his mother gives birth to his sister, listening to a song in Tagalog with the cassette player Terry left behind. The death or departure of the domestic worker in each film's ending aligns viewers emotionally with her employer or charge as the wistful desiring subject.

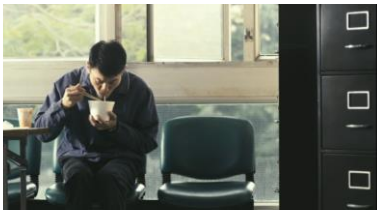


Figure 178

Inferring from the earlier moments in the narrative, Roger in *A Simple Life* is likely to perform minimal self-care for himself while continuing to focus on his work as a producer/chief financial officer in the film industry. After To ze has a stroke and can no longer work for him, he struggles to do laundry and is shown reading the user manual for the machine to no avail. Visiting the apartment again after staying at the nursing home for a while, To ze runs her palm along the surface of a cabinet and finds it to be covered in dust. Viewers are also given a glimpse of his "careless" future in the sequence at the hospital when he ruminates whether to follow his work schedule as planned and go on his business trip in mainland China or stay in Hong Kong for To ze's final moment. In stark contrast with the rich and nourishing meal To ze prepares for him at the beginning of the film, he is shown slurping up some takeaway noodles in a styrofoam container absent-mindedly (Figure 178). The camera never moves closer to show viewers what exactly he is consuming, signaling its nondescriptness vis-à-vis the photogenic delicacies To ze used to make for her employer. The closest Roger gets to cooking is making a drink for his mother and a dessert soup for To ze.

While the film itself seems to attribute Roger's "uncared-for" future to the supposed unprofessional or calculating new generation of domestic workers unable to fill To ze's shoes (detailed analysis of the interview sequence in Chapter 2 from pages 26 to 29), I find its characterization of Roger as necessarily inept in performing self-care no less essentializing as that of To ze to be uniquely adept at caring for others. It is as if the sequences where Roger expertly exerts pressure on a banker to secure cash flow for the film production he oversees and manipulates a mainland Chinese investor into pour more capital into the already overbudget project constituted an explanation for his cluelessness when it comes to matters of taking care of oneself. Even after To ze's retirement, there is little incentive for Roger to familiarize with social reproductive work. The character's disinterest in tending to and sustaining his own well-being is in line with the prioritization of productive, profit-generating activities under neoliberalism. Roger's subscription to the neoliberal logic is most glaring when he informs the doctor of his decision to leave for the mainland for work and instructs him to send To ze straight to the morgue when she passes. The next viewers see of To ze is her photo at the memorial service.

The phenomenon of productive work taking precedence over care needs and responsibilities, which *A Simple Life* takes for granted and reinforces, drives the ongoing outsourcing and undervaluation of care labor. It is perhaps surprising to learn that Marxist feminist activist and thinker Angela Davis, whose critiques of the racist, classist and patriarchal capitalist regime are as galvanizing as they are incisive, similarly holds care work in contempt. In her essay "The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A

Working-Class Perspective," Davis declares that "neither women nor men should waste precious hours of their lives on work that is neither stimulating, creative nor productive" (128). Her critique of the wages-for-housework campaign initiated in the 1970s for potentially further entrenching the uneven distribution of care labor across the gender and racial divides is certainly well-founded. However, stemming from strong aversion to reproductive labor *and* an awareness of the reformist nature of agitating for remuneration for housework, the alternative Davis proposes – "to call upon women to "leave home" in search of outside jobs […] in order to challenge the capitalists at the point of production" (136) – may do little to unsettle the status quo. The idea seems to be that when no one takes it upon themselves to ensure workers' social reproduction, the capitalist system would capitulate and fund the industrialization of housework, which Davis envisions to be liberating.

Whether it is wise to entrust the capitalist system with care provisions aside, the aspiration to render domestic labor people perform for themselves and others obsolete risks reinforcing, if not exacerbating, the neoliberal reduction of individuals to their labor power in service of profit generation. Granted, the tasks social reproduction entails, such as dusting, doing grocery shopping, changing water filters and so on, can be repetitive and uninspiring. Yet, as long as we are not overburdened and trapped only doing such activities all day every day, they have the potential of grounding us in the present moment and helping us stay in tune with our body and environment, which require tending to and in turn reciprocate our care. Wresting time away from supposedly productive activities to devote oneself to nourishment and comfort for the sake of continued existence, not heightened productivity later on, can be more promising than either attempting to elevate the status of social reproductive labor to that of productive one or washing our hands of the former.

Those who are socialized into despising or at least slighting care work and feel compelled to outsource it when they have the capacity to do such work, like Roger, may very well be short-changing themselves. In her analysis of the Greek societal structure, philosopher Hannah Arendt notes how Greek citizens led "vicarious life for real life" by shifting the responsibility for their social reproductive needs entirely to slaves (qtd. in Myers 116). In this light, such an uneven distribution of care labor benefits no one when even those supposedly free from the burden are rendered not only inordinately dependent, but also alienated from themselves. I suspect *A Simple Life*'s forlorn nostalgia for To ze as the ideal domestic worker who bends over backwards to satisfy her employer's needs and requests might not be as affecting had more middle-class viewers value and practice self-care against the neoliberal careless grain.

Paradoxically, carelessness under neoliberalism works in tandem with its own brand of "self-care" revolving around both consumerism and individualism. As cultural critic Landon Sadler puts it in an analysis of the latest iteration of the reality television show *Queer Eye*, each episode of the individual and their dwelling's makeover foregrounds "self-care as a skill to refine, a resource to milk" (808). With the plethora of products introduced to 'upgrade' each subject's body and home, Sadler rightfully notes that within the neoliberal narrative "self-care seems to come without a price tag" (813). Apart from translating care needs into demand for goods, I am wary of the conception of self embedded within the neoliberal delineation of self-care. While a feel-good makeover show like *Queer Eye* revolves around a group of experts/friends doling out lifestyle diagnoses and advice, the individual undergoing transformation receives coaching to be competent in caring for oneself and is supposed to 'do it right' on one's own after the team's whirlwind intervention. Support and the holding of hands are meant to be transient as proper self-care is equated with self-sufficiency.

The fantasy of self-care as a solipsistic endeavor one simply needs to put one's mind to is upheld in *Ilo Ilo* as well, despite the film's intriguing commentary on the awkward coexistence of exaltation and debasement within the neoliberal subjecthood. Upon arrival at the airport to fly back to the Philippines as Jiale's parents can no longer afford to hire her, Terry's parting words for her charge – "Learn to take care of yourself" – communicate the belief that the boy can only rely on himself from here onwards and acceptance of this fact is the last thing she can do for him. The sobering advice from Terry is portrayed to be indicative of her genuine care for the boy. His appreciation and attachment to Terry as a caretaker-turned-mentor is shown by his tight clutch of the few strands of hair he takes from her to remember her by (Figure 177). Taken for granted and promoted by the film through the exchange between Terry as the seasoned neoliberal subject and Jiale as the fledgling is self-sufficiency as a matter-of-fact virtue. Whereas Roger in *A Simple Life* is not expected to ever be proficient in caring for himself as a privileged professional from a well-to-do family, Jiale in *Ilo Ilo* is meant to fend for himself as the only child in a double-income household. The former perpetuates the irresponsibility of those occupying upper rungs of the social ladder and the latter normalizes the growing over-responsibilization of middle-class subjects for their own well-being.

How To ze and Terry as domestic workers care for themselves is another question elided altogether. The deterioration of To ze's body is vaguely attributed to old age with no consideration of the particular ways in which decades of domestic labor take a toll on the body. The abrupt termination of Terry's employment is portrayed as devastating to Jiale with no consideration of its ramifications for Terry as a single mother who likely goes in debt to be able to secure employment in Singapore through an employment agency in the first place. The expectation of proficiency and resourcefulness in self-care is ironically the highest for women receiving the least support and having to expend most of their energy on caring for others.

Both the increasing self-responsibilization of middle-class neoliberal subjects and the historical self-responsibilization of domestic workers for their own well-being conveniently overlook the conditions necessary for the exercising of self-care. The idea that each is responsible solely for oneself more than likely sets ourselves up for failure since will power, no matter how tenacious, cannot prevail over the fact that we depend on one another and the environment for the fulfillment of our physical and emotional needs. Professor of political science Joan Tronto posits that "the world consists not of individuals who are the starting point for intellectual reflection, but of humans who are always in relation with others" (36). Tronto specifically argues for the primacy of "people engaged in relationships of care" (27) in her conceptualization of a democratic societal structure that moves away from privileging workers as political subjects. As such, "[b]oth time and space can be reordered so that they make it easier, rather than more difficult, for care" (166). This suggestion is certainly applicable in Hong Kong and Singapore where the dominant work culture and urban landscape are far from conducive to care activities. Middle-class citizens' dependence on foreign domestic workers for care, which necessitates exploitation and negates reciprocity in most cases, can and should be shifted to dependence on one another within well-supported local communities.

The creation of the conditions for women of color and in poverty from Southeast Asia to perform self-care, which is next to impossible when many of them have to leave their families and friends to devote themselves to caring for their employers for a living as domestic workers, entails more radical changes. Different non-governmental organizations' efforts to agitate for the formalization and respect of domestic workers' rights as workers and fellow human beings, such as the National Domestic Workers Alliance's campaign to pass the domestic workers bills of rights across the States, are no doubt worthwhile. Yet, the amelioration of egregious exploitation and abuse can end up further sustaining a fundamentally exploitative enterprise. Particularly pertinent is sociologist Adam Shireen Ally's nuanced account of "one of the most extensive efforts [made in post-apartheid South Africa] at the formalization, modernization, and professionalization of paid domestic work" (68). Domestic workers are thus included fully within the rubric of labor legislation. Ally's fieldwork, however, reveals the persistence of grievances and hardships among domestic workers. The scholar notes that "[f]ormalizing rights for domestics as workers cemented their position in the political economy of reproductive labor and constrained the possibilities for a more radical redistribution of care" (190).

As feminist scholars of color Jina Kim and Sami Schalk posits provocatively, building on radical Black feminist Audre Lorde's conceptualization and practice of self-care within a racist and heteropatriarchal structure, "self-care is less about caring for one's individual body, and thus replicating what is, than about speculating on what could be," constituting “a practice that necessarily goes beyond the boundaries of the self and toward the genesis of other ways of being” (338). No amount of appreciation and respect for domestic workers, which all three films in this project promote, can make up for the foreclosure of these women’s potentialities and capacities to tend to themselves beyond mere survival. The international division of labor itself as the aftermath of colonialism and imperialism, which render Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines poverty-stricken and dependent on exporting women as domestic and healthcare workers to affluent economies, has to be taken into account with a view to making reparations in order to create the conditions for self-care for all.

Struggles on different fronts and communities are necessary for us to move past the false dilemma of caring for ourselves or caring for others. I share the Care Collective’s belief that “adequate resources, time and labour would make people feel secure enough to care for, about, and with strangers as much as kin” (42). Within “a new ethics of ‘promiscuous care’ ” (33), where one is enabled and encouraged to care beyond themselves, spouses and blood relations, it would be less likely for someone like Cheong-wing in *Still Human*, living with paraplegia, to be left behind or ‘choose’ to stay put and having to find consolation by romanticizing marginalization. Neither would Evelyn’s successful pursuit of her interest in photography remain a fairy tale steeped in patriarchal values. Both the characterization of Cheong-wing as a self-effacing yet paternalistic benefactor and that of Evelyn as the domestic worker version of a Cinderella reinforces care as something hard to come by, utterly dependent on whom one encounters. One’s luck would determine whether care is available. Rather than leaving it up to fate or a lottery system amid neoliberal austerity, “state’s role in supporting or hindering ongoing activities of care needs to become a central part of the public debate” (Tronto 154).

From tracing three Sinophone films’ misgivings and unpacking their affective attunements to the neoliberal care deficit to considering briefly what different tunes we can co-create and dance to, I hope to add nuances to the much overdue “needs-talk”, to use Nancy Fraser’s concise wording, more and more of us are engaging in and catalyze “the self-constitution of new collective agents” (“Struggle Over Needs” 210) who can care for themselves and one another without the hindrance or fear of deprivation.

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