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Abstract

The phenomenon of 'run-away' migrant contract workers in Asia has attracted considerable media attention. Drawing on a qualitative study in Vietnam and Taiwan, I examine the critical links between the neoliberal governmentality rationalities and technologies, the structural vulnerabilities that they produce, and the migrant worker's 'technologies of the self.' In so doing, I point out that the 'manufacturing' of the 'ideal' migrant subject is a multi-actor and multi-layered process that involves not only state and market actors but also the migrants themselves through their internalization of subordination. I emphasise that illegality is not just a legal status but also a political tool for the state and its proxies to discipline neoliberal subjects and a social image that informs individual practice in the context of transnational labour migration.

Keywords: transnational labour migration, runaway, illegality, governmentality, Vietnam, Taiwan

Introduction

Vietnam is reputedly responsible for the largest population of ‘run-away’ migrant contract workers in East Asia. A recent government source reported that around 50 per cent of Vietnamese workers in South Korea whose contracts finished and visas expired in 2012 did not return home while the average visa-overstaying rate of other nationals in South Korea was only 21 per cent¹. Taiwan faces a similar situation. There were 101,798 Vietnamese workers in Taiwan as of March 2013² and around 39,000 workers are deployed to the country annually³. The Vietnamese ‘run-away’ rate in Taiwan was 8.66 per cent by the end of 2012 - twice the equivalent figure for Indonesian workers⁴. In an attempt to cut down the Vietnamese ‘run-away’ incidence, the Taiwanese Government imposed a ban on the importation of domestic workers, carers and seafarers – three occupational categories with the highest rates of contract violations - since 2005 which has just been lifted on 1st July 2015.

Media attention to ‘run-away’ Vietnamese migrants in Taiwan was intensified by the launch of a book entitled ‘*Chạy trốn*’ (‘Run away’) in 2012. Published by ‘*Báo Bốn Phương*’ (‘Four Ways’), the only Vietnamese language newspaper in Taiwan, 26 stories featured in ‘*Chạy trốn*’ were selected from hundreds of true ‘runaway’ accounts narrated by the workers themselves in the newspaper over the course of six years. In contrast with the common media portrayal of ‘run-away’ workers as unruly, greedy villains, intriguing stories in ‘*Chạy trốn*’ reveal their fears, frustration, hesitation, and agony over the decision. ‘Running away’ was the last resort for the workers featured in the book.

While taking my cue from the contradictions between media accounts and ‘*Chạy trốn*’, I am more concerned in this paper with the role of state and market in the production of migrant workers’ vulnerabilities that are conducive to this ‘run-away’ phenomenon. While there is ample scholarly attention to the illegal migration industry, Friman (2011) points out, the various ways structures and politics intersect to shape this industry have been strikingly underexplored. Drawing on a qualitative study conducted in Vietnam and Taiwan in 2011-2012, I discuss how neoliberal governmentality as a set of

ideologies and technologies adopted by state and market to regulate and discipline labour mobility perpetuate and instrumentalise the migrant worker's subordination and vulnerabilities for economic gains. Through this study on the Vietnam-Taiwan labour migration corridor, I seek to contribute to the evidence base on the political economy of Asian labour migration and to nuance governmentality as an important concept in migration research.

Neoliberal governmentality and the Asian migration industry

Governmentality, a concept introduced by Foucault (1991) to discuss 'the conduct of conduct,' is not restricted to political government but also extends to forms of individual self regulation (a.k.a. 'technologies of the self') within state institutions and outside them. It is in line with his idea of power as widely distributed across society through discourses and practices that produce knowledge (Williams and Baláz 2012: 175). Governmentality is a particularly apt conceptual tool for migration studies as it allows us to understand complex social, economic and political relations at both institutional and individual levels across national borders and social boundaries. In the age of globalisation, unprecedented increases in the volume and velocity of human mobility go hand in hand with the securitisation of migration and the tightening of territorial borders (cf., Phillips 2011, Geiger and Pécoud 2013). The treatment of the migrant as a threat to national security, economic stability and social harmony has led to the intensification and diversification of control strategies that serve to discipline human mobility and to defend receiving states from unwanted migrants (Geiger 2013: 18-19, Pécoud 2013: 1). Fassin (2011) and Bigo (2002), among others, have used the concept of governmentality to discuss the political games involved in the securitisation of migration, the policing of borders and the production of boundaries in Western contexts. In this so-called 'biopolitics of otherness' project, governmentality relies on political economy and policing technologies. Rudnyckyj (2004) and Rodriguez and Schwenken (2013), on the other hand, are concerned with the mundane, everyday practices involved in processes of regulation, discipline, and subject-making that aim at producing subjects capable of domestic labor transnationally.

The Asian migration industry is built on neoliberal governmentality rationalities. In its

tenacious pursuit of economic goals, the neoliberal state sees open markets as '*the optimal mechanism for economic development*' (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 350). In this market-triumphalist spirit, floodgates are opened to the foreign labour that is vital to the growth and competitiveness of the national economy while the market has the discretionary power over the volumes and parameters of labour imports. In neoliberal thinking, one is solely responsible for him/herself and the system within which one is located is held to no accountability with regard to his/her success or failure (Harvey 2005). Concerns about migrants' rights are, as such, overshadowed by the focus on controlling access to labour markets and extracting benefits from it (Basok, Piper et al. 2013: 165). In an economy that is characterised by state's minimal accountability, the lack of social safety net, and hostility to workers' solidarity and resistance, workers become disposable, individualized and powerless. They form an underclass whose exploitation is elemental to the neoliberal labour market. Neoliberal governmentality, argues Ong (2006), is but another more recent technique of biopower (cf. Foucault 1991) that valorises particular types of labour while devaluing others. Specifically, neoliberal criteria reward skilled transnational elites with citizenship-like claims while disenfranchising those considered less competent, exposing them to the likelihood of exclusion (Ong 2006: 4). A range of disciplinary tactics and technologies is deployed to entice the 'best and brightest' foreigners to come and stay as well as to keep settlement and membership prospects beyond the reach of less 'desirable' populations (cf., Kapur and McHale 2005, Yeoh 2006).

In recent decades, mobility organisation in Asia has been increasingly commercialised with the introduction of state-regulated contract labour migration (ILO 2006, Castles and Miller 2009, Lindquist 2010, Xiang and Lindquist 2014). The central importance of market actors is a distinctive feature that sets Asian labour migration apart from other major migratory systems such as Latin America-North America or Africa-Europe (cf., Massey, Arango et al. 1998). Private recruitment agencies, Goss and Lindquist (1995) remark, have the upper hand in negotiations about the modalities of interaction within the migration institution thanks to their privileged access to specific bundles of allocative and authoritative resources, particularly the control over information. They thrive on increasingly restrictive immigration and border control measures imposed by

labour-receiving countries that have made transnational labour migration both more accessible and more cumbersome (Xiang and Lindquist 2014).

As migration regimes grow more restrictive, migration management becomes more formalised, decentralised and fragmented at the same time (Lindquist, Xiang et al. 2012: 11). Yet, decreased government does not necessarily translate to less governance (Larner 2000). The state retains its overarching regulatory power at the macro level while entitling market actors to considerable degrees of autonomy and discretion over the migrant worker's day-to-day life. State and market are not independent and distinct but mutually constitutive entities in a symbiotic relationship. In Lemke's (2002: 57) words, there is no market independent of the state, and economy is always political economy. In the context of China, Xiang (2012) observes, broker networks are integral to new forms of governance and governmentality rather than external to state power. In other labour-sending societies such as Indonesia and the Philippines, it is not easy to discern boundaries between state and market at times when individuals act in the capacity of government officials in certain contexts and as informal brokers in others (Goss and Lindquist 1995, Lindquist, Xiang et al. 2012: 8). Inflated migration costs and related issues such as the run-away prevalence are in many ways attributable to bureaucratic practices and rampant corruption in the state's management of labour exports (Lindquist, Xiang et al. 2012, McKeown 2012, Hoang and Yeoh 2015).

The 'structural vulnerability' of low-waged contract workers (Ball and Piper 2006: 219) is, therefore, not accidental. Neoliberal governmentality creates a disfranchised category of migrant workers to whom political rights and civil liberties are circumscribed and whose recourse to state welfare is closed off (cf., Walzer 1983: 58). In my study of Vietnamese contract workers in Taiwan, governmentality offers an excellent conceptual lens for an examination of relationships between individual's capacity for self-control and economic exploitation as well as links between micro- and macropolitical levels (Lemke 2002: 52; 60). I am interested in how technologies of neoliberal governmentality render low-waged migrant workers subordinate and vulnerable as well as the various self-disciplinary practices adopted by the latter in response to such instruments. Its universality as an ideological rhetoric

notwithstanding, neoliberalism transmutes into diverse political economic realities in practice. In my analysis, I heed Nicola Phillips's (2011) call for maintaining a dual attention to both the structural context around migration and the different forms of agency that constitute and shape migration processes.

Methodological notes

This paper primarily draws on a qualitative research in Taiwan in 2012 but also uses some data collected for a related study in Vietnam in 2011. I conducted 44 in-depth interviews with husbands of migrant women in Thai Binh Province, Vietnam, in 2011 and travelled to Taiwan in June-July 2012 to interview 30 Vietnamese women, half of whom were married to male participants in my Vietnam study. My initial aim was to understand changes in migrant women's and 'left-behind' husbands' gender identities and sexual lives but encounters with irregular migrants subsequently drew my attention to the migration industry. Apart from in-depth interviews with these women, I also held informal conversations with three brokers (one Vietnamese, two Taiwanese) and did ethnographic observation at various sites across Taiwan.

All the migrant women were married at the time of the fieldwork and their age ranged from 30 to 51 years old. Twenty-three were working as domestic workers cum carers for private households, three – care workers in nursing homes, two – cooks in coffee shops, one – factory worker, and one works on the farm belonging to her new Taiwanese husband. Their migration duration varied from one to eleven years and three of them were irregular migrants. The majority of them (n=19) were living in Taipei and the adjacent New Taipei City while the rest were in Taichung city and rural counties of Taoyuan, Hsinchu, Miaoli, Changhua, Nantou, and Yunlin. In addition to audio-recorded interviews with these 30 women, I also had multiple casual phone conversations with other irregular migrants who, for various reasons, declined to meet me in person.

'Queen Mosquitoes' on Jade Island

Taiwan experienced massive outflows of manufacturing capital to Southeast Asia and China in the 1980s-90s due to labor shortages and rising wages (Tierney 2007: 215). To

stem the accelerated relocation of capital to overseas sites, the Taiwanese government passed the Employment Services Law in May 1992, allowing the recruitment of foreign workers in enterprises deemed important for the country's economic development. Vietnamese workers debuted in the Taiwanese market in 1999, initially at a negligible scale. By the end of March 2013, 20 percent of Vietnamese workers were employed in the service sector and 80 per cent in manufacturing industries⁵ - an occupational make-up that reflects the 10-year long ban on domestic workers, carers, and seafarers since 2005. They are allowed to work in the country for a maximum of 12 years. In a migration regime predicated on rationales of classism and meritocracy (cf. Lan 2006: 44), low-waged contract workers are ineligible to apply for permanent residency or citizenship. The Law of Nationality allows only individuals possessing 'sufficient property or professional skills' or earning twice more than the basic wage, which is around NT\$430,000⁶ a year, to apply for naturalisation. The bifurcated citizenship/residency law that, to paraphrase Fassin (2011: 215), separates the wanted from the unwanted is not unique to Taiwan but a common feature across Asian emerging economies (cf. Yeoh 2006). The economic elite and the exploitable migrant are two sides of the same neoliberal coin (Bauder 2011: 42). Migrant workers are subject to rigid mobility restrictions - they are not allowed to freely circulate in the Taiwanese labour market and any changes in their employment arrangements must be initiated or endorsed by employers and brokerage agencies. The relegation of low-waged migrant workers to a category of second-class foreigners with multiple restrictions, in Foucault's (1991) terms, constitutes an 'art of government' which ensures the host society's neoliberal economic goals are achieved while circumventing the unwanted's claims on membership as well as the rights, privileges, and entitlements associated with it.

'Những con muỗi chúa trên đảo Ngọc' ('Queen Mosquitoes' on Jade Island) is the title of an investigative article in the June 2012 issue of *'Báo Bốn Phương'*, authored by 43-year-old Thảo - one of the irregular migrants in my study. *Đảo Ngọc* (Jade Island) is the name Vietnamese workers use to refer to Taiwan, possibly deriving from the country's nickname - Ilha Formosa (beautiful island). *'Muỗi chúa'* (queen mosquitoes) is a metaphorical reference to the so-called *'môi giới đen'* (black brokers) who are

described as ‘sucking the blood’ of Vietnamese irregular migrants without mercy. All the three ‘*muỗi chúa*’ featured in Thảo’s article are married Vietnamese women who, together with their Taiwanese boyfriends, run brokerage services for ‘runaways’ in Taiwan. In this account, not only do these women prosper on excessive brokerage fees, they also capitalise on vulnerable situations of irregular migrants to siphon off profits. Typically, the ‘*muỗi chúa*’ collect wages on the workers’ behalf and withhold the money for months only to eventually turn them in to the police. In so doing, they appropriate all the withheld wages and reap a police bounty for reporting on the ‘run-away’ workers. The irregular status renders ‘runaways’ vulnerable to ‘black’ brokers’ deception, exploitation and abuse. Yet, the latter is the only lifeline available to many of them given their limited language skills and lack of connections in the Taiwanese labour market.

It should be noted that the ‘*muỗi chúa*’ in Thảo’s article, like many other ‘black’ brokers, run illegal brokerage services in parallel with legally registered ones. That boundaries between the legal and illegal segments of transnational labour migration are for the most part blurred has been observed across East and Southeast Asia (see Tyner 2004, Rodriguez 2010, Lindquist, Xiang et al. 2012). It was confirmed by Năm – a Vietnamese employee of a Taiwanese brokerage agency in Taoyuan:

‘Many employees and even bosses of brokerage agencies work as black brokers, dealing with legal and illegal labour at the same time. We have connections already. We use the same networks and mechanisms for legal and illegal workers. Employers of illegal workers would receive a hefty fine if it is found out – about 70 wan’⁷,

(Interview with Năm, 8th July 2012)

The black labour market in Taiwan is fostered by restrictive state policies concerning the hiring of foreign workers. Taiwan’s labour laws, for example, allow the hiring of foreign domestics only when employers: (a) ‘*have triplets and/or three children under the age of three*’; or (b) ‘*are foreign employees with incomes over NT\$3 million*’⁸.

Similarly prohibitive is the hiring of foreigners for family care work. A family care worker can be hired only when the care-receiving person is determined through ‘*professional evaluation conducted by medical institution through team method*’ as

requiring 24 hours care because s/he has '*especially grave physical or mental diseases*'⁹. The Taiwanese government's efforts to contain the commercialisation of intimate labour are reflective of both familistic care regime rationalities and conservative gender norms that uphold the woman's social roles as wife and mother.

This should be seen in a context where an export-oriented economy is heavily dependent on female labour and dual-income families have become a social norm (Lan 2006: 35). Increased female labour force participation alongside the nucleation of the family unit creates a vacuum in the domestic sphere. The significant unmet needs for domestic service in Taiwanese society provide a fertile ground for the development of an informal labour market. In this regard, my study corroborates Friman's (2011: 94) observation that the same measures that state develops to restrict and control flows of low-skilled, low-waged migrants set the parameters within which the market for illegal migrant labour have emerged. Restrictive laws are also attributable to the overexploitation of migrant workers and illegal worker transfers between households. All the domestic workers in my research reported being overworked or performing more tasks than they were contracted to do. Someone hired to care for a senior member of the family, for example, is also expected to look after young children, provide domestic service for the whole extended family (who may be scattered over several households) and/or participate in the employer's income-generating activities. Exploitation is not restricted to Vietnamese workers but also commonly observed among Filipina and Indonesian workers in Taiwan (Lan 2006: 53).

In a context where labour supply outstrips demand and brokers face increasingly stiff competition in the labour market, workers possess little bargaining power and find their rights easily traded away in order to secure scarce jobs (Gamburd 2000, Lan 2006: 51). As of 2012, the Vietnamese worker typically paid US\$6,000 (NT\$180,000) upfront for a two-year contract in Taiwan that is renewable for another year. Besides, they were also subject to monthly wage deductions between NT\$1,800 and NT\$ 1,500¹⁰ as part of the brokerage fee. The average monthly salary was around NT\$17-18,000 in 2012 with little variation across occupations. This means many workers are barely able to put aside any savings during the first contract and thus inclined to remigrate. My

conversations with Taiwanese agencies reveal that, on average, it costs Vietnamese workers at least three times more than Indonesians and Filipinos to migrate to Taiwan. While it is common for brokers in Indonesia to advance workers capital to finance their deployment and to recover the loan through monthly salary deductions (see Rudnyckyj 2004: 414), Vietnamese migrants are responsible for paying for all the expenses upfront. I have discussed extensively elsewhere the financial stress this system causes to the family left behind (Hoang and Yeoh 2015). The burden is more strongly felt for the migrant abroad who is responsible for debt settlement and household upkeep.

This financial pressure, I argue, explains higher rates of contract violations among the Vietnamese. Hard-working and fast-learning Vietnamese workers, according to the three brokers I interviewed, are highly valued by employers but they are also known to be more likely to ‘run away’ and to be the ‘whinging guys’ at work.

‘They (employers) like Vietnamese workers because they learn fast. But they are very petty, forever nickling-and-diming about overtime pays or clocking out time. They are always those who make grievances about miscalculations in the payslip. Indonesians and Filipinos don’t do that... probably because they pay lower fees to migrate... about two thousand dollars. Vietnamese workers also top the runaway chart. We have a client who used to hire only Vietnamese workers but has recently switched to Indonesians. It’s because so many Vietnamese have run away.’

(Interview with Năm, 8th July 2012)

The large debts migrants acquire to migrate constitute a source of constant stress that shapes their overseas work and life in powerful ways. Debts, Constable (2007: 78, 79) notes, help ensure that a worker remains ‘in her place’ since it is the employer who holds the power to terminate their contracts and return them, in debt, to the home country. The bondage of contract employment explains employers’ preference for migrant workers over locals as it compels the former to work hard and tolerate maltreatment, granting employers exclusive control over their lives (Lan 2006: 54).

The subject making of *wailao*¹¹

In Taiwan, the social expectation that sons take care of ageing parents persists despite increased mobility and the shrinking Taiwanese household. Because placing parents in a nursing home is stigmatised as immoral and irresponsible (cf. Lan 2006: 102), Taiwanese turn to foreign workers for the fulfilment of their filial duties. All the 23 domestics in my study were hired to take care of elderly Taiwanese, many of whom had been bedridden and/or in a vegetative state for years. Among foreign workers, the Vietnamese are considered particularly suited to caring for the elderly (Lan 2006: 101). That migrant populations are segmented along racial and national lines is common in both Western and Asian host societies (Nonini 2002, Shipper 2002, Fassin 2011, Williams and Baláz 2012). Migrants, Tyner (2004: 3) argues, are made discursively. By putting migrant subjects into categories, state and market actors seek to better define the appropriate treatment for each group (Pécoud 2013: 7) as well as to maximise their economic utility. In the West, these practices of biopower (Foucault 2003) are tightly related to the policing of territorial borders while in Asian migration regimes, they primarily serve to further economic interests of capital owners and state actors, which at times overlap. In the Taiwanese context, a national typology of migrant workers is constructed by market intermediaries to rationalise their disciplinary measures and to strategise their marketing practices. In what follows, I discuss three cases of Vinh, Thảo and Nguyệt to illustrate how biopolitics are implicated in the subject making of the *wailao*. Migrants, I point out, are complicit in their subordination as they, too, subscribe to the neoliberal discourse about the disposable, low-value migrant worker that underpins every disciplinary technology employed prior to and after their embarkation on the migration enterprise.

Vinh – the ideal wailao

Thirty six-year-old Vinh had been in Taiwan for nine years by the time we met. Vinh recounted her extraordinary migration journey to me while we sat on a bench outside an apartment building in Taichung where she lived with her employer's family. She had been working for the same family since 2003, caring for an elderly man and sharing the apartment with him and his middle-aged divorced son.

Vinh's account confirmed what I had learned from her family in Vietnam six months earlier. In 2003, Vinh decided to borrow a sum of VND21 million¹² (USD1,400) - a fortune for her at the time - from relatives to pay for a domestic contract in Taiwan, hoping that wages in the following three years would change her family's life. For reasons unknown to her, Vinh was fired one month after she arrived in Taiwan. Her agency neither transferred her to another employer nor agreed to give her a refund. Petrified by the prospect of imminent bankruptcy, Vinh followed a Vietnamese broker she met in Taiwan to Ho Chi Minh City in southern Vietnam so that the woman would get her a new job. She waited there for two and a half months before landing a new contract in Taiwan, which subsequently cost her three years of earnings and compelled her to remigrate.

Vinh's family was not informed of this unfolding drama as she feared it would devastate them or even instigate family conflicts. On her return to Taiwan, Vinh's contact with the family was completely blocked by her new employer's no-communication policy. Her family, after multiple futile attempts over three years to find out what had happened to her, resigned themselves to the idea that she had died or been sold to a brothel:

'She was terrified. 21 million dong was a lot of money...Her new Taiwanese employer was very difficult. She did not let my wife contact us. Vinh had gone through such a nightmare so she would not dare break the employer's rules. We thought she was missing...or she had been trafficked to China....you know, those places. We even took the date of her departure as the anniversary of her death. Three years...no phone calls...no communication at all...'

Giang - Vinh's husband, interview 15 December 2011

Vinh's story is a typical example of how the Asian migrant contract worker is treated - an inanimate and silent commodity bounced from one broker to another and easily discarded by employers at their convenience. She fits the stereotype of the Vietnamese worker as cheap, docile and trouble-averse that is widely circulated within Taiwanese society [as opposed to the educated but 'savvy,' 'assertive,' and 'demanding' Filipinas (see Constable 2007: 38)]. The fact that Vietnamese workers come from a communist country with an enduring Confucian legacy is marketed by Taiwanese recruitment

agencies as their competitive advantage (see Lan 2006: 76). This national background is believed to endow them with ideal servile qualities— obedience, a respect for established social hierarchy and a fear of authorities. Moreover, Vietnamese workers' lack of highly prized cultural capital such as college education or English proficiency – the language associated with colonial supremacy (Lan 2006: 19, Constable 2007) – which is more common among Filipinas, makes them even more desirable as a labour deal. Without these attributes, they are not seen as having the potential to pose threats to employers' authority and status. Practices of stratification, polarization and racialisation of migrant labour, Schierup and Castles (2011) note, constitute crucial strategies by which labour can be recommodified according to the logic of neoliberalisation. In the Taiwanese labour market, social attributes including ethnicity and cultural capital determine the migrant worker's economic value and the specific technologies developed to regulate and discipline them.

Vinh is an 'ideal' *wailao*. She engages in the so-called 'internalised disciplining' (cf., Eriksson and Tollefsen 2013: 190) whereby social hierarchies are constructed as natural and subordination is equated with competence. Unlike its English neutral equivalent (foreign labour), *wailao* is loaded with negative connotations. It is used exclusively to refer to low-waged contract workers, as opposed to other categories of foreigners who are referred to as *waiji-renshi* (foreign persons). The distinction between *wailao* and *waiji-renshi* is the lack of humanity in the former (Lan 2006: 63). *Wailao*, to borrow Bigo's (2002: 71) terms, is not just a legal status but also a social image. It is a label designated to an underclass of foreigners who are brought into the country to fill gaps in the labour market and easily discarded when the economy no longer needs them. The Vietnamese workers in my study commonly refer to themselves as '*con wailao*' – a semantic combination of the Vietnamese pronoun '*con*' (used by superiors to address the inferior) and Taiwanese '*wailao*.' Domestic service is highly stigmatised in Vietnamese society. The Vietnamese terms for household maid such as '*con ỏ*,' '*con sen*,' and even the foreign term '*ô sin*' borrowed from a Japanese TV drama series have denigratory overtones. '*Con wailao*' signals the workers' poignant consciousness of disparaging public discourses about their job and their quiet resignation in the face of entrenched social discrimination in both origin and host societies.

The social labelling of low-waged migrant workers is just one of many biopower practices that serve to draw a line between them and the society they come to serve. A number of measures have been introduced by the Taiwanese government to hold employers accountable for their workers' mobility. Not only do employers have to pay a bond equivalent to a migrant worker's two-month salary and a monthly levy, they also face the possibility of having their quota temporarily frozen if workers run away (Lan 2006: 56). As a result, it is common for employers to impose strict mobility restrictions on their workers and to withhold their wages and travel documents. By delegating disciplinary power to market actors, the state not only further cements the disenfranchised status of *wailaos* but also legitimates employers' absolute authority over them. In response to such a state-sanctioned social order, brokerage agencies devise the so-called '*technologies of servitude*' (Rudnyckyj 2004) that prepare the women physically and emotionally for domestic service. Similar to what has been observed in India, the Philippines and Indonesia (e.g., Rudnyckyj 2004: 419, Lan 2006: 84, Constable 2007: 87, Rodriguez and Schwenken 2013), pre-departure trainings for Vietnamese workers primarily aim to acclimatise them to harsh living and working conditions of domestic servitude which are presumed to be awaiting them at the destination:

'So I went to Thái Bình City to attend the training....oh my...more than 100 people altogether... They gave us congee for breakfast. I was used to having a proper meal in the morning but they made me eat congee...watery congee...tasteless...I sneaked out of school to buy pancake and they caught me. They locked us up. We were not allowed to go out. They were very strict. They modelled it after the life we would live in Taiwan: locking up, food deprivation...then they punished me, making me scrub toilets for a week. I had to clean the whole row of toilets every morning.'

Lụa, 45 years old, interview 17 June 2012

Through such preparations, brokerage agencies seek to cultivate a mindset of servitude and instill a sense of fear in migrant workers. Workers, to quote Rodriguez and Schwenken (2013: 376), become migrants even before they leave home. Together, the debt bondage nature of contract labour migration, the social label of *wailao*, the

technologies of servitude, as well as the bond and levy charged to Taiwanese employers, are part and parcel of a system of neoliberal governmentality that aims at creating submissive and governable migrant subjects. The ‘manufacturing’ of the ‘ideal’ migrant subject is thus a multi-actor and multi-layered process. Yet, Michael Foucault (1977) notes, where there is power, there is resistance. As stories of Thảo and Nguyệt illustrate below, not every migrant worker cooperates with such a system like Vinh. By ‘running away’ from their legal contracts, Thảo and Nguyệt contest and subvert the ideology of the docile *wailao* while carving out their own windows of opportunities within the same system. A preoccupation with the formal, organised forms of agency with a strong transnational articulation, Phillips (2011: 4) contends, tends to obscure the everyday forms of agency exercised by informal, unorganised and disenfranchised actors who have few or no possibilities for influence or participation. It is the latter that Vietnamese workers engage in – a choice that reflects the specific politico-economic contexts they are embedded in.

Nguyệt and Thảo – the unlikely ‘outlaws’

Like the ‘runaways’ in ‘*Chạy trốn*,’ Nguyệt and Thảo had not planned to turn themselves into what they described as ‘outlaws’ (*tội phạm*). Both were 42 year old and had been in Taiwan for nine years when we met in 2012. Thảo had held countless jobs of varying nature in different parts of Taiwan and experienced dramatic moments in the six years of her fugitive life including multiple encounters with police and a few violent near arrests. Nguyệt, on the other hand, stuck to domestic service within the vicinities of Taipei. Two years prior to our meeting, Nguyệt was able to settle down with a kind and wealthy family in Taipei who paid her generously and allowed her to go out as she wished.

Both women ‘ran away’ after years of slavery-like work. Thảo had been caring for a bedridden woman and performing domestic service for a family of 14 for nearly three years when woman recovered from her illness, hence became ineligible to hire a foreign carer. Thảo’s broker decided to send her back to Vietnam rather than finding her a new job. Desperate to stay in Taiwan as she had only managed to break even, Thảo took flight. Meanwhile, Nguyệt was in a less fortunate situation:

'I paid 1,500 dollar to come here...My monthly salary was NT\$18,400 (USD700) but the broker gave me only NT\$800 in the first month and NT\$3,000 in the second month (after being confronted by my employer.) I was not allowed to go out or to make any phone calls for eight months...I was caring for a paralysed man. I had to wake up every two hours at night to turn him over and massage his whole body for 10 minutes...I also looked after a three-year-old boy and an elderly woman. I bathed him and the boy everyday...He was 70 kg and I had to carry him in my arms. I worked non-stop from 6am to 1pm and woke up several times at night. I was exhausted When I could not take it anymore, I left. I left behind NT\$62,500. They withheld my salary so I would not run away...'

On her first job as a 'runaway' migrant, Nguyệt worked for a wealthy Hong Kong family in Taipei who subjected her to both exploitation and daily acts of abuse and deprecation such as making her eat dogs' leftover food. Nguyệt was particularly upset when compared to the employer's dogs, which is considered the worst insult in the Vietnamese culture:

"You should forever be grateful to my dogs in this lifetime. Without them your children would not be able to go to school." She said so to me. Do you know how humiliating it was to me? I was mortified by the insult. It hurt me deep down inside. Because I was a "con ỏ," I was lesser than the dogs.'

Nguyệt, interview 9th July 2012

The criminalisation of 'runaway' workers, as illustrated by Nguyệt's story, is more than just a disciplinary measure. It is a governance technique that shapes social imaginings and regulates power hierarchies among workers, employers, brokers and the state itself. To workers, the 'runaway' label implies an illegal status that takes away their already minimal rights and the ability to stand up to everyday injustices. By constructing subordination as natural/normal and/or impossible to change, it informs and reinforces migrants' practices of internalised disciplining within a neoliberal economic order (Acker 2006). To brokers, employers and police, illegality affords them a sense of impunity and justifies their acts of exploitation, abuse, and even violence. Brokers and employers, who themselves would be prosecuted if found dealing with 'runaways', took advantage of migrants' internalised subordination. As Thảo and other migrants in

my study recalled, brokers' most common response to their complaints was to threaten to send them back to Vietnam:

'Brokers are worst of the worst, you know? They block our information sources. When we dare say something, they bark "Do you want to go home?" Threatening, intimidating and blackmailing are what they are best at.'

Thảo, interview 7th July 2012

The act of 'running away,' I argue, can be better explained if situated in the socio-political context the migrant comes from. The fact that Vietnamese workers come from lower socio-economic strata of a society with an autocratic political regime explains why many of them choose to run away when trouble arise, rather than confronting the 'wrong' party and/or seeking help from formal institutions. The Vietnamese migrants I met in Taiwan kept comparing themselves to their Filipina peers who rarely resorted to 'running away' in troubled situations. Not only do the Filipinas tend to come from more urban and educated backgrounds [and are thus known for being assertive and cognizant of their rights and entitlements (Constable 2007)], they also have strong backing from the Philippines government and civil society groups within and beyond the home country (cf., Rudnyckyj 2004). In a context where informal social networks become the only lifeline (see Hoang Forthcoming), 'running away' appears to Vietnamese workers as the only option.

As illustrated by Nguyệt and Thảo's experiences, the debt bondage nature of transnational labour migration and the criminalisation of 'runaway' workers are important biopolitical tools in the neoliberal restructuring of the global labour market (Bauder 2011: 43). The more vulnerable workers are, the more productive and disciplined they become (Acker 2006). The state, through its instrumental role in setting and enforcing rules, is complicit in the rise of informality, irregularity and illegality in cross-border flows and labour markets.

Conclusion

Power is exercised rather than possessed (Foucault 1980). As such, the best way to analyse power is to look into its direct relationship with its targets and where the techniques and tactics of domination can be analysed (Bigo 2002: 68). In doing so, it is

important to bear in mind that power is not exclusively vested in the ruling class or authorities. The decision to run away reflects workers' sense of powerlessness as much as an active exercise of agency. The case studies of Vinh, Thảo and Nguyệt show that migrant workers do not have a uniform response to techniques and tactics of domination. Their 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1991) vary along the continuum between coping, accommodation, and resistance. Yet, there is neither a discrete distinction between those who resist and those who accommodate nor clear cut boundaries between acts of coping, accommodation, and resistance (Lamphere 1987: 30). As Constable (2007: 15) observes in Hong Kong, migrant workers both actively resist and willingly participate in their own 'oppression', in different ways and to different degrees. Painstakingly, migrants carve out every little room for manoeuvre when situations permit and adjust their strategies accordingly. These everyday forms of power and resistance (Foucault 1982, Scott 1985) tend to prevail over more institutionalised and organised forms of power, though at a considerable cost for migrants and their families (see also Hoang and Yeoh 2012, Hoang and Yeoh 2015).

Migrant workers' 'technologies of the self' mirror their socio-political background. Research in Taiwan and Hong Kong has discussed how Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers empower themselves through organised forms such as rallies, public demonstrations and protests or more subtle forms of resistance such as maintaining their occupation of public spaces despite resentment from locals (Lan 2006, Constable 2007: 159-172). The fact that Vietnamese workers haven't been able to organise themselves is attributable to various factors specific to the Vietnamese context. The mobility restrictions that are self-imposed due to financial pressure, a deep-rooted fear for and distrust of state authority, and weaker social networks (cf., Hoang Forthcoming), among others, explain their inclination for individual and isolated acts such as running away. Lan (2006: 79) sees the phenomenon of 'runaway' as occupation-specific – something that arises from the prohibitive nature of domestic workers' life. My study, however, suggests that the 'runaway' prevalence is closely related to the absence of organised forms of power and resistance within the Vietnamese community.

In policy discourse about irregular migration, intermediaries in the migration industry are subject to demonization and condemnation while state actors tend to be referred to in the language of the law and transparency (Alpes 2013: 145). Yet, I point out in this study that while state holds the ultimate power in disciplining irregular migrant workers, it concurrently plays a complicit role in producing such illegality. It echoes Fassin's (2011: 217) view that not only does it create illegal immigrants by making and enforcing the laws whose infraction constitutes illegality of residence, the state itself may not respect its own law and engage in illegal practices. In Asian migration regimes, migrants' illegality is engendered by state and market actors' illegal practices in the first place. Illegality is thus both produced and experienced (Willen 2007). As an instrument of neoliberal governmentality, it disciplines immigrant labour and at the same time turns others into surveillers of immigrants' subordinate sociospatial position (Hiemstra 2010). It further accentuates ethnic and class lines dividing locals and 'illegal aliens' and magnifies the perceived difference and exclusion (Chock 1991, Mehan 1997, Nevins 2002). Through the case of Vietnamese migrant workers in Taiwan, I argue for shifts in our thinking about the legal-illegal dichotomy in transnational labour migration.

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¹ <http://dantri.com.vn/nghe-nghiep/lao-dong-bo-tron-noi-nhuc-nhoi-cua-nganh-xuat-khau-lao-dong-656413.htm>

² Table 12-5 Foreign Workers in Productive Industries and Social Welfare by Nationality and Sex, Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training, <http://statdb.cla.gov.tw/html/mon/c12050.htm>, accessed 10 May 2013

³ <http://dantri.com.vn/c20/s20-582367/lai-nhuc-nhoi-nan-lao-dong-viet-nam-bo-tron-tai-dai-loan.htm>

⁴ Table 12-6 Missing Status of Foreign Workers in Productive Industries and Social Welfare, Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training, <http://statdb.cla.gov.tw/html/mon/c12060.htm>, accessed 10 May 2013

⁵ Table 12-3 Foreign Workers in Productive Industries and Social Welfare by Industry and Nationality, Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training, <http://statdb.cla.gov.tw/html/mon/c12030.htm>, accessed 10 May 2013

⁶ The exchange rate at the time of fieldwork in July 2012 was US\$ 1 = NT\$ 30

⁷ One wan is NT\$10,000.

⁸ Chapter III Housemaid jobs, 'The Reviewing Standards and Employment Qualifications for Foreigners Engaging in the Jobs Specified in Items 8 to 11, Paragraph 1 to Article 46 of the Employment Service Act (2011.09.16 Modified) at <http://laws.cla.gov.tw/Eng/FLAW/FLAWDAT0201.asp>, accessed on 23 April 2013.

⁹ Chapter VII, Family Nursing Jobs, 'The Reviewing Standards and Employment Qualifications for Foreigners Engaging in the Jobs Specified in Items 8 to 11, Paragraph 1 to Article 46 of the Employment Service Act (2011.09.16 Modified) at <http://laws.cla.gov.tw/Eng/FLAW/FLAWDAT0201.asp>, accessed on 23 April 2013.

¹⁰ The exchange rate at the time of the fieldwork in July 2012 was US\$1 = NT\$30

¹¹ *Wailao* is a Chinese word for 'foreign labour'

¹² The US\$ - VND exchange rate in 2003 was about US\$1 = VND15,000