Tricky Contracts in Precarious Times: Filipino Teachers in China

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Abstract: China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” has the internationalization of education through the English language as its strong agenda. In December 2018, the Department of Labor and Employment of the Philippines released the official guidelines for deploying Filipino teachers to China. News sources indicate that about 2,000 Filipino teachers will be recruited to work in China from 2019, but other news sources reveal that the demand could swell up to 100,000. In this paper, I present on my first interviews with Filipino teachers already working in China that will serve as a baseline study for investigating the life and work experiences of English-speaking Filipino teachers in the Mainland. Stories of migration told by Filipino teachers indicate experiences of, and struggles with, working within “tricky” contracts signed within precarious conditions of labor in both the Philippines and China.

Introduction

The “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) is Xi Jinping’s grand project towards the production of a new world order through “regional connectivity.” In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte’s grand plan is called “Build, Build, Build” (BBB), which is supposed to usher in a golden age of infrastructure in the country, which currently has the lowest score for infrastructural development among the ASEAN-5 (Estrada 2018). Duterte had been courting China to fund his BBB ambitions. Meeting with Xi in Beijing shortly after he was elected in 2016, Duterte announced the Philippines’ “separation from the United States.” This rather bold declaration of “independence” from the Philippines’ former colonizer, helped Duterte return to Manila with a political promise for USD24 billion worth of investments and loans. In April 2018, Xi and Duterte signed six memoranda of understanding, the 5th of which concerns the recruitment of Filipino English teachers to China. Beginning this year, 2,000 Filipino English teachers will be recruited to work in China, but news sources suggest that the demand could swell up to 100,000 in the coming years.

My presentation today is based on my new research on Filipino teachers already working in the Mainland. I will present today on what may also be called “tricky contracts” that entangle Filipino teachers already working in the Mainland in shadowy working conditions. The five narratives that I will read shortly include testimonies about visa loopholes and euphemistic job descriptions that are navigated by hiring agencies and business owners and that draw Filipino migrants into conditions of precarity. On the other hand, these narratives altogether also paint a
picture of the Philippines as a migrant-sending country harrowed by inequalities which propel people to seek more “secure” sources of livelihood elsewhere.

The implementing guidelines for deploying Filipino teachers to China were already released by the Philippines’ Department of Labor and Employment on December 18, 2018. The guidelines indicate that the hiring conditions will be re-negotiated in 2020. Therefore, I hope to signal my initial recommendations for improving the conditions of the bilateral exchange. Filipino migrants in Wuxi, Shanghai, and Beijing who have heard different versions of this presentation requested that I bring the results of my research, albeit preliminary, to the representatives of the Philippine government here in Shanghai who are in the position to influence change. I look forward to your comments and questions on the possible directions for this research, especially on the level of policy recommendations. As a practicing anthropologist, I hope to be able to make my research relevant to benefit my fellow OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers).

**Visa Loopholes: Elle**

Elle, an Indigenous Igorot, was a math teacher at a public school in the Northern Philippines when she decided to leave due to her dismay and frustration with the corruption in the Philippine educational system. She was tired of what she called “wrongkings,” her pun on “rankings” that affect teaching placements in the Philippines as rankings are colored by bribes. She said that she had neither cows nor pigs to “slide under the table,” the idiom used for bribery in the Philippines. She left the Philippines to work as a tutor in Macau in 2009. Encouraged by a Filipino friend who had connections to a Chinese human resources agency, she moved to Shanghai in 2011 as a “home-in tutor” for a Chinese family with children aged 2 and 5. She said that she had to stay in the same room with the two children, but her work did not exactly fit in the domestic worker category, as a Chinese “ayi” or helper worked part time doing domestic chores. Her work primarily required her to engage with the children in the English language all throughout their waking hours.

Unable to accept these working conditions, she asked around for other opportunities and learned from Filipinos about an international school to which she then applied to work as a math teacher. At this school, she held a business visa which meant that she had to exit China every 6 months. She also had to “buy” this visa at 600RMB every time. But the school closed when its owners migrated elsewhere. She swung from one visa type to another to work part-time at several schools.

In 2013, she started “buying” an entertainment visa to be able to continue to work in China. Assisted by Chinese agents, the team of Filipino teachers in which she worked part-time, assembled a faux band, to make a video to present at the immigration office. The singing was a bit off-key, she said, but she beamed to say that she was the guitarist. For the two years that she held an entertainment visa, she and her fellow teachers were always on the lookout for visiting police officers. In 2015, one school was finally able to get her out of the entertainment visa, but this time, she signed a new contract with the title “curriculum consultant.” She said that she at least no longer has to run or hide when the police officers come. She would only need to exit the classroom and introduce herself as the in-house consultant. But even with such visa, she says that her status remains questionable, and that certainly, she can get deported anytime.

**Euphemistic Job Descriptions: Woody**

The confusing statistics of Filipino workers in Mainland China are mystified by the foreign worker categories that seem to be in a state of constant revision. The Philippines’ Department of
Labor and Employment Secretary was quoted in 2018 that there are 12,254 Filipinos officially working in the Mainland. This number is vastly different from the 2016 estimate of 200,000 Filipinos that were reported to be working “illegally” in the Mainland as “ayis” (domestic helpers). However, the case of Elle illuminates the ambiguities in the domestic worker category as Filipino migrant workers arrive in China to hold puzzling duties as stay-in nannies cum English-speaking teachers. The range of available visa categories sometimes provides a refuge for those looking for interim solutions to continue their work in China. The range of visas are also being used to fill the demand for foreign teachers in the context of China’s shifting educational and middle-class aspirations for “globalization” that have spurred the growth of the “international schools market.”

Woody worked for 5 years at a public school in the Philippines, and for 4 years in Malaysia and Singapore as a teacher. He decided not to renew his contract in Singapore when he received an invitation on LinkedIn to work at an international preschool in Beijing. The salary offer of 10,000 RMB per month was attractive as it was easily 3x more than what he was earning in Singapore. But he was told by his prospective employers that he had to set foot in China first. So Woody packed his bags and arrived in China on a tourist visa to meet with his employers. It was upon arrival that he realized that he was “hooked” by his employers to China. They wanted him to use his 30-day tourist visa, extend it for 30 days more as allowed by the law, after which he would have to return to the Philippines to repeat the tourist visa application process. This would have been a cyclical and expensive process. His employers promised work visa but that meant a few months of unsalaried waiting in the Philippines. Making acquaintance with Filipinos, he heard about obtaining a student visa as a solution to his dilemma. He told me, “My source of livelihood had to be continuous. I could not be idle as I had bills to pay, so I laid out all my options and this (the student visa route) was the wisest one.” Through such recruitment tricks that pull Filipinos to China, migrants arrive and find themselves needing to choose from limited and often illicit options. Accepting the new job on a student visa was illegal, but it was a gamble that he was willing to take.

It was on the fourth month at his job that Woody met a traumatizing experience. One day at lunch, 10 policemen came to the school for inspection. The school hours went on as usual but policemen were deployed at the gate and within the school’s premises so that none of the teachers could escape. The other foreign teachers (2 Serbians, 1 white American, and 1 African American) did not have to worry about the “lock-in,” because “negotiation is easy for them, which is not the case for Filipinos.” Scared of getting imprisoned or deported, he devised a plan for himself and the four other Filipinos in the school who, like him, held non-teaching contracts. He removed the jalousies from one window, and from this opening, they jumped off the second floor of the school building, one after another, and ran as fast as they could despite injuries. He rolled up the sleeves of his sweatshirt to show me his scarred elbows, “Look,” he said, “these spots are still rough.” The school moved to another location after that incident. On the sixth month of his employment, he was promoted, receiving praise from the school owner who told him, “Woody, you’ve been good to us… and you’ve made Filipinos safe.” He was given the new job title “Business Development Manager.” He giggled upon saying this rather fancy title. His salary rose to 16,000 RMB, which did not include housing benefits, but which still looked too good when converted to Philippine pesos. His new salary, however, was not commensurate with the increase in his duties. Being Manager meant that he had to work for five days “like a principal” at the school, and on weekends, work as an English teacher in the owners’ after-school centers. He was exhausted without rest, sick leaves, and holidays. Working with a fancy executive job title but with an ever-expanding job description, he realized, placed him in danger. He could die, he said, “either because of high blood
pressure or because of the police as the visits never stopped.” Unprotected by labor laws while working under haphazard arrangements, Filipino migrant lives in China then become aggravated by grinding working conditions. He told me that the nature of his first job was applicable “only to Filipinos.” “And to Africans,” he added, indicating that such work invites a culture of subservience that is often acceptable only to those already precartized by structural conditions back home. Woody was able to leave this job after paying the school 40,000RMB for his release papers. He now has time for rest, and for taking photos such as the ones featured on my slides today.

Plateauing Demand for Overseas Migrants: Anna and Maria

The third case study is an interview with bestfriends Anna and Maria who both hold nursing licenses in the Philippines. They have now found themselves employed as teaching assistants at an international kindergarten in Southern China. Laughing, they introduced themselves to me as “those who have gone astray.”

The demand for nurses in the Global North has led to the ballooning of nursing graduates in the Philippines. There was a six-fold increase of Filipino nursing graduates between 1999 and 2005. By 2006, the demand for Filipino nurses had already “plateaued” (Crisostomo 2008). Nurse-turned-scholar Yasmin Ortega (2018) argues that the overseas-migration oriented education of Filipino nurses created a “migration trap” in which overseas-qualified Filipino nurses are unable to leave due to the unpredictable demand and immigration policy changes beyond the control of migrant-sending countries. Resisting unemployment, Anna and Maria found themselves applying for English-teaching jobs in Manila targeting Korean tourists.

For 5 years, they were able to gain experience and obtain several language teaching certificates. They then applied together to work in China, and worked for two years in the North in 2013, at a school which already employed about 50 Filipinos — all working in the kindergarten level. In 2015, they moved to another city after signing a teaching contract with a year-old international school. Arriving at the school, they learned that they were not to serve as the primary teachers in the classrooms. They were to assist the white teachers, and they were also the ones to clean and mop the classrooms. Anna said, “We eventually accepted the condition that now we will be like this — that we will be assistant of American teachers.” The owner of the school runs his own hiring agency which is able to offer prospective teachers contracts which then curiously fall through, and which are eventually revised to incorporate less desirable terms.

Unequal Exchange: Eric

The Education Action Plan for the BRI was released in July 2016, but as Simone McCarthy (2018) observes, this dimension is a “carefully conceived but little publicised aspect” of the BRI.

The last story that I present today is about Eric who came to a city in Southern China in 2018 for a one-year contract as Assistant Professor at a Chinese university. He is among the first deployed to teach in the Chinese university’s newly formed Philippine Studies Program. To come to China, he was required by his home university in the Philippines to redesign his dissertation project to include China as a field site. Arriving in China, Eric realized that the Philippine Studies program and his teaching appointment are directly linked to the BRI’s “people-to-people” exchange component. The first speech contest in the Filipino language that was held at the school had the BRI as a theme, he said. The program, which enrolled its first batch of Chinese students, included both required and optional study abroad at his home university. When asked for his insights on the new Filipino teaching contracts signed between China and the Philippines which did not directly affect him as he was recruited via an inter-university MOU, Eric carefully weighed his response. His father has been away for over 20 years working as a mechanic, first in Kuwait,
and now in Saudi Arabia. Balancing both economic and emotive effects of migration which he knows on the intimate level, with his critical and activist roots grounded in his university in the Philippines, Eric critiques the relations between the Philippines and China. This year, when the MOU between the two universities was being renewed, his university in the Philippines returned the document to request the omission of the line which said that any dispute arising out of the educational exchange will be resolved in a Chinese court — a clause that is curiously reminiscent of the resolution of court cases in the American court involving erring American soldiers serving in the U.S. Naval Bases in the Philippines. Unlike other teachers that I have interviewed so far who hope to stay and earn a bit more, Eric is ready to go home. He told me, “Because of the territorial dispute, debt trap, and the BBB, I began to think if what I am doing and my being here in China is right. I want to teach the Filipino language, but where are they going to bring this knowledge? In this situation, China is the hegemonic country, and the Philippines is the colonized one. I wouldn’t have this dilemma if I were teaching Koreans. I am resolved with returning to the Philippines after this contract, because there, taking a critical stance would be easier.”

Conclusions and Initial Recommendations

Contracts are powerful documents that press on the very intimate processes of everyday life. Different forms of illegality arise from contracts drawn up by hiring agencies and by schools which in the end are capitalist ventures which consign humans to conditions of precarity. Filipino-American scholar Neferti Tadiar (2013) argues that the production of surplus labor is exactly capitalism’s important machination: the surplussed workforce is made flexible to ensure that the circulation of capital remains uninterrupted. From these narratives, some conclusions and initial recommendations can be made. First, the experience of surplussed Filipinos educated in overseas-oriented occupations such as Anna and Maria’s should remind the Philippines that bilateral agreements about the promise of employment overseas could get halted, leaving personal lives and ambitions suspended and a whole cluster of people trapped in a situation of ambivalence. The demand for up to 100,000 English teachers already signals the wide range of uncertainty that both the BRI and the BBB have opened up. The Philippines will see in the coming months a rise in teacher training centers based on overseas demand. The Philippines needs to begin to affirm an educational agenda that considers the needs at home first, and not the contingent demands abroad.

Second, it is important to look at the situation of Filipinos already working in China. The stories that I presented so far indicate degrees of illegality that arise from the ever-changing immigration regulations in China. While there is a big cloud of uncertainty about the number of Filipinos already working here, granting amnesty to those in illicit contracts could potentially more fully utilize a significant labor force that China requires for its fast-growing international schools market. This move for granting amnesty could also soften China’s overseas image and paint it as a country concerned with amnesty and the alleviation of suffering. As we wait for better working conditions for Filipinos in China, Filipinos that I have interviewed also expressed the urgency of establishing Philippine Overseas Labor Offices (POLO) both in Beijing and Shanghai.

Third, the five respondents that I introduced today and also all the Filipino teachers in China that I have so far interviewed all expressed doubts about the implementing guidelines. They find the starting monthly salary of $1,200 too low, especially for the long list of requirements and the high stakes which include family separation and lack of security due to China’s ever-changing immigration rules. This salary means that the incoming Filipino teachers, despite qualifications, will not hold primary teaching positions but will continue to be recruited as English-speaking assistants in the international classroom with euphemistic job descriptions. The placement of
Filipino teachers within duties that are based on their training and qualifications are also rendered impossible by the current 5-country limitation (US, UK, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia) for teaching English in China.

Fourth, China’s preoccupation with the 5-country limitation for English teachers brings me to my final point on the primacy of a decolonizing framework in future negotiations. The Philippines’ labor negotiation with China focuses on slotting in Filipinos as English teachers. On the side of China, the demand for English teachers is driven by expectations based on the 5-country limitation. On the side of the Philippines, its American colonial legacy is actively being deployed by agents of the state to assert the legitimacy of Filipinos as “native” speakers of English.

China sees the formation of an English-speaking citizenry as critical to its future. The Philippines, as articulated by Duterte, will be looking up to China as it turns away from the U.S. while still capitalizing on the American legacy of language. Filipino teachers in China are acutely aware of possibilities for themselves outside English teaching that both countries could consider more seriously. Filipino teachers that I interviewed appeal to be considered as subject teachers in the Chinese curriculum as they await for China to reframe its orientations about foreign expertise that could be less based on their country of origin, but rather, on skills, training, and experience. Therefore, following recommendations from the Filipino teachers, future negotiations could appeal for their entry to China as certified teachers within China’s other core subjects such as Math, Philosophy, Art, Science, and others.

My final conclusions centers on the balancing of the bilateral exchange. Eric had signed a short-term contract in which he was to transfer knowledge and help build language skills and cultural understanding. On other hand, classrooms of future experts on the Philippines will be shuttled back and forth in both countries. Contracts, as we see in this educational exchange, express relations of power. Eric told me that we are “losing big time” within these terms. But these new migrations to China would add to overseas remittances that are keeping the Philippine economy afloat these precarious times as the Philippine peso is currently at its worst exchange rate in 13 years. Bilateral agreements and contracts need to consider their human signatories and their repercussions more carefully as futures could be radically altered with a mere stroke of a pen.

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