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Reworking of care during workday outings: On migrant domestic workers' everyday negotiation of migration infrastructure in the global city of Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper examines care as a contested bio-political arena defining the daily lives of live-in domestic care migrants in Hong Kong. It asks what roles migration infrastructures and mundane city landscapes play in mediating associated everyday care dynamics. Empirically, it examines two sets of care-related infrastructures in the city that intimately mediate the population's everyday experience of care. The paper first examines the ways the regulatory infrastructures of the city state, whose operational logics are aligned with the production of 'permanent temporariness' and disposability, systematically deny migrants' access to institutional care for themselves. Second, the papers examine the ways care migrants improvise with the city's situational urban geographies and their human bodies as infrastructure resources during regular work-bound urban outings to elaborate provisional, localised and informal care infrastructures. While not without challenges, these improvised informal care infrastructures essentially allow the migrant care-labor population to live with their institutionalised precarity. Overall, the paper makes three contributions. First, it reconceptualises live-in domestic care migrants as urban actors capable of both navigating and crafting their own care infrastructures in the city, even during workdays. Second, it foregrounds 'care' as an urban and socio-technical construct in relation to both bio-political control and interpersonal coping. Third, it employs the ideas of precarity, provisionality and robustness to unpack the bio-political systems that shape migrants' experiences of care. The findings are based on an analysis of the city's migration regulations and the actual urban work-life stories of a small group of live-in domestic care migrants based on participants' personal diaries and interviews with the participants.

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KEYWORDS

care infrastructure, diary-interview method, Hong Kong, migrant domestic workers, migration infrastructure, neighbourhood

1 | INTRODUCTION

East Asia has been a significant centre of global care migration developments for the past few decades. Centred on the movements of women as domestic care workers from Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam to receiving societies in East Asia like Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, this migration flow has been characterised by a notable ‘care paradox’: namely, that the women hired to provide care far from their own homes have been repeatedly denied interpersonal care for themselves. Treated as ‘permanent outsiders’ in the so-called host societies, the domestic care migrants are subject to the controlling kinds of institutional care tied to migration management while also relying on their husbands and the care networks of other family members to carry out parental roles. Care is therefore always a contested and conflicted bio-political arena for domestic care migrants.

Migrants’ experiences of care are also deeply shaped by global city contexts. These cities mediate the transnational care dynamics in a variety of ways. They pull in care workers to address the local care deficit (Knowles & Harper, 2009; Lan, 2006). They provide a compact spatial setting for regulation and domestication (Law, 2002; Yeoh & Huang, 1998), including control through multiple urban governance practices (Constable, 2007, 2009). And yet, they can also function as suppliers of facilitative resources – like a kind of provisioning machine (Amin, 2008) – for interpersonal care relations that can compensate for the care deficits experienced by migrant domestic workers.

Drawing on the recent infrastructural turn in migration studies, care studies and urban studies, this paper foregrounds the ‘everyday city’ to study care migrants, care spaces and care infrastructures. It shows how cities mediate migrants’ workday care exchange through studying the everyday situational resilience of live-in migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. This is a global city context where multi-layered migration control infrastructures are actively deployed to turn care migrants into ‘use-and-discard’ labour (Constable, 2007; Yeoh, 2006). But away from the formal control regime, it is also a city that affords domestic care migrants opportunities for finding compensatory kinds of care in alternative interpersonal ways. Researching these ways in which those who are hired to provide care rework their own experiences of care control and care deficits, this paper asks two key questions. First, how is care for care migrants channelled and contorted by the regulatory infrastructure of care worker management and control? Second, how do everyday city landscapes take part in constituting a kind of compensatory care infrastructure for migrant care workers through interpersonal exchange?

In analysing the city’s formal institutionalised migration infrastructure, the study highlights how migration controls are aligned and maintained to produce care deficits for care migrants. Ethnographic accounts are presented to illustrate the actual care dynamics of the migrants during workdays, revealing how the migrants’ workday urban outings (cf. Chan & Latham, 2022; DeLand & Trouille, 2018) play a role in circulating care among the population. It contends in turn that the migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong effectively take advantage of their brief work-bound urban outing opportunities and the city’s unique urban resources to elaborate a provisional, informal and ‘peopled’ care infrastructure of their own. This ‘peopled’ care infrastructure allows the migrants to live with the care deficits produced by the regulatory care control. Overall, the paper makes three conceptual contributions. First, it reconceptualises live-in domestic care migrants as urban actors capable of both navigating and crafting infrastructures in the city even during workdays. Second, it addresses ‘care’ as an urban and infrastructural construct in relation to both bio-political control and interpersonal coping at the same time. And third, it employs the ideas of precarity, provisionality and robustness to unpack the bio-political systems that shape migrant experiences of care.

The paper begins by outlining how the recent infrastructural thinking in migration, critical care and urban studies offers new intellectual resources to unpack the socio-technical relations behind care and broaden the study of care from typical micro-spaces of care. Live-in migrant domestic workers, as the subject-target of the care control migration regime of Hong Kong, are then introduced to illustrate the operational logics and infrastructural workings of a range of formal migration controls in the city-state that have been actively deployed to produce care deficits for care migrants. Subsequent sections draw on a body of ethnographic accounts, personal diaries and interviews with a small group of care workers to demonstrate the everyday elaboration of ‘peopled’, provisional care infrastructure in urban neighbourhoods during the migrants’ quotidian urban work trips. These sections unpack the becoming of the informal care infrastructure through the workers’ urban mobility patterns, everyday urban encounters and their active use of human bodies. The paper then

demonstrates how the formal, institutionalised, uncaring infrastructures and the informal, non-institutionalised, caring ones interact with each other when shaping workers' workday care dynamics before concluding with three project conceptual contributions.

2 | INFRASTRUCTURAL APPROACH ON MIGRATION, CARE RELATIONS AND URBAN ENCOUNTER

2.1 | Heterogeneous migration infrastructures

Migration studies recently witnessed an infrastructural turn with the growing use of 'migration infrastructure'. The concept, understood as 'the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions and [living and non-living] actors that facilitate and condition mobility' (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014, p. 124), is deployed to unpack the lived experiences of various migratory trajectories and the complex mediation of mobility controls that organise migration. Accordingly, migration is a process composed of multiple networked socio-material assemblages that exceed the straightforward change in national domicile. While migrant subjects remain crucial to the understanding of migration, this new theoretical lens stresses the entanglement of migration in the actions of mediating human and non-human actors, such as migration agents and recruitment companies (Wee et al., 2020), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local neighbourhoods (Meeus et al., 2019), temporary return policies or family reunification policies (Bélanger & Candiz, 2020), marriage law (Constable, 2020) in managing the transnational movement, the continuous making of migrant subjectivities and the contours of everyday migrant living.

This infrastructural approach stresses the complex ecology and socio-material nature of mobility management initiated across time-spaces. It implies an ecological viewpoint that defies the strong reliance on unitary capitulo-centric narrative, state apparatus or global actors in understanding migration. 'It is not migrants who migrate, but rather the constellations consisting of migrants and non-migrants, of human and non-human actors' (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014, p. 124), that select, accelerate, uproot, block, constrain and emplace, migrate. It is the combinational ecology of heterogeneous migration infrastructures that organises the contemporary. Migration infrastructures often differ across 'the leading actors, the driving forces, the central strategies and rationalities, and the defining modus operandi' (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014, p. 124), but these differences in operation logic do not suggest they necessarily operate in discrete domains. Instead, multiple infrastructures interact, collide and contradict each other, always in the same social field, to produce provisional outcomes that regulate, commodify, mediate and expand migration across scales synchronically and diachronically.

More importantly, migration infrastructures do not only manage mobility, but oftentimes serve as bio-political infrastructures that shape migrant subjectivities and migrants' life chances (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020; Meeus et al., 2019; Yeoh, 2006). Different forms of migrant 'becoming' happen to be precipitated when multi-scalar migration controls are mobilised to sediment, splinter and sort migrants into different social positions across transnational social fields. Migration infrastructures, hence, possess extraordinary powers to either foster a migrant's life or disallow it to the point of 'living death' in the course of migration. Examining migration infrastructures through the lens of bio-politics, therefore, illuminates the need to consider the involvement and coming-together of disparate living and non-living bodies in managing migrants' movement/non-movement and their 'politics of life'. This does not only foreground a processual commitment to unpack the synchronic and diachronic 'becoming' and cross-working of socio-material assemblages that regulate migration in the background. It also highlights the splintering capacity of different background socio-technical systems of mobility management to foster or diminish individuals' lives in the migration process.

2.2 | Care (space) as a relational and socio-technical construct

One of the social fields that migration controls overlap to exercise life-management is 'care'. Migration scholarship has explored the relation between (im)mobility and the political economy of care labour with the ideas of 'global care chain' (Hochschild, 2000), 'precarity chain' (Silvey & Parreñas, 2020) and 'immobility paradox' (Chatterji, 2017). On the other hand, emergent care migration scholarship recently turned to infrastructural thinking to study the selective socio-technical structuring of care flows among the migrants and the corresponding adaptive measures they took to deal with the reduction, disruption and blockage of care circulation (Bélanger & Candiz, 2020; Constable, 2020). These works shed light on the workings of 'care' as both a contested bio-political arena and an infrastructural construct, where different mobility controls meet and interact to differentiate migrants' lives and experiences of care.

When 'care' is studied in spatial terms, it illuminates the ambivalent landscapes in real-world settings where migrants variably, if not simultaneously, experience both meaningful interpersonal care and regulatory control that is often felt as a kind of un-care (Conradson, 2003a). Studies in geography have already examined care in typical care settings like households, drop-in centres and food banks (Cloke et al., 2017; Conradson, 2003b; Imrie, 2004) – settings with relatively rigid physical boundaries, established spaces designed to service clear target groups, defined ideas about the form of care transferred and distinct identities of caregivers or care-receivers. A growing body of research in critical care studies now asks how 'care' emerges in non-institutionalised settings as relations afforded or maintained by powerless, marginalised, care-needing humans or non-human bodies (Alam & Houston, 2020; Buse et al., 2018; Power, 2019; Williams, 2020). This body of work connects feminist (Tronto, 2013) and infrastructural thinking to scrutinise the complex socio-material underpinning that affords the emergence of care spaces, enables ongoing and regular care circulation, flourishes caring capacities of bodies and patterns people-holding practices outside typical care settings. Power and Mee question academics' inclinations to limit care as a private domestic practice by demonstrating how housing tenure arrangements – a public governance concern – shape individuals' possibilities and capacities to practise care within a domestic household (Power, 2019; Power & Mee, 2020). They argue that individuals' domestic care possibilities are always 'threaded through the housing system' (Power & Mee, 2020, p. 500), which patterns tenant dynamics, promotes the market imaginary around home ownership, and legitimises 'good' and 'acceptable' housing-mediated caring practices through various governing practices. Ivanova et al. (2020), alternatively, use a baby foundling room in the Netherlands as an example to illustrate the emergence of new care infrastructure by tracing how the room temporarily aligns multiple established legal, media, political, information and health infrastructures beyond the room to enable essential caring for abandoned infants and abandoning mothers.

Researching care from the perspective of infrastructure reworks care and care space into a relational and socio-material construct threaded with socio-technical systems across scales. This decentres care from the 'locus of individual practices' (Power & Mee, 2020, p. 497) and reworks it from typical micro-spaces of care. This also goes beyond the conventional boundary underlying the idea of what lies inside and outside a care setting and allows us to 'see the socio-technical relation behind care' (Weiner & Will, 2018, p. 272). This raises new questions about where and how alternative care spaces for marginalised migrants emerge and thread with broader social systems or socio-technical networks in multiple embodied ways. It also sensitises researchers to the previously unnoticed importance of informal care spaces, on which the population heavily depends to deal with its care deficits.

2.3 | Emergence of informal care-space and ordinary care(–ful) work in cities

Riding on the long-standing concern about 'urban encounters', other geographers turn to the city to study the caring capacities of ordinary urban dwellers and cities as spaces of care (Alam & Houston, 2020; Amin, 2012; Kullman, 2014; Williams, 2020). Drawing on ethnographies of libraries, streets, parks or urban neighbourhoods, these urban scholars look at how informal urban care spaces emerge through urban dwellers' everyday mundane, boring, dirty, but care-ful acts such as picking up empty bottles, petting dogs, ensuring the safety of zebra crossings, sharing free produce, book-crossing, preserving animal habitats, sorting mail, maintaining facilities, answering inquiries and organising events, etc. Despite being small or routinised, these acts are difficult 'care-work' that develops the caring potential of different bodies, and connects care-needing people to form resilient 'care collectives'. These care-ful acts, when played out repeatedly, further produce and stabilise provisional informal care spaces so people entangled in the collectives could better negotiate with the larger systems of injustice that permeates the non-ideal world. Investigating small care-works and how they are practised in and across everyday city spaces reveals the power of ordinary urban acts to forge meaningful care relationships and craft care spaces. As Williams (2020) writes, focusing on the actually existing everyday care-work sensitises a recognition of how 'implicit' or 'quiet' activism are manifested in everyday practices. This helps uncover ordinary care networks that are brought into being through the ongoing assembly and situational collaboration of heterogeneous bodies in mundane urban spaces.

Overall, studying care in care migration as a socio-spatial, socio-material, relational and infrastructurally managed construct that heavily mediates everyday migrant living means we should reconsider migrants' proactive interest in the well-being of others, and their capacity to improve others' well-being as actively structured, disrupted or facilitated via a wide range of networked bodies, migration infrastructures and everyday practices in and across urban settings that are typically assumed to be care-unrelated. Care does not flow unilaterally from one to another as if it could be fixated on a particular body; instead, it emerges ecologically and managed infrastructurally across assembled bodies involved in the

making of care ecology. This echoes the call for an ethnography of infrastructure (Star, 1999) to look at the ‘invisible’ inner workings, labours, structures and effects of socio-material constellations that sink into the background yet simultaneously mediate movement/non-movement and care in cities.

3 | HONG KONG: THE PRODUCTION OF ‘PERMANENTLY TEMPORARY’ CARE MIGRANTS THROUGH UN-CARING MIGRATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Hong Kong, like many global cities, has witnessed a transnational turn of household formation to global householding in the age of globalisation of care and intimacy. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of domestic care migrants from countries like the Philippines and Indonesia have come to the city to provide domestic care work to local families. They help local middle-class families overcome their ‘time and care deficit’, and keep Hong Kong functioning as a global city (Boersma, 2019; Constable, 2007). Despite their contributions, multiple state-coordinated migration infrastructures, including migration documents, employment visas, statutory wages, family reunification arrangements, co-residence requirements and the right to permanent residency have been put in place to actively transform them into a kind of ‘use-and-discard’ labour force (Constable, 2009; Lai, 2018; Lan, 2006, see also Chan & Latham, 2022). These infrastructures of migration are aligned with the bio-political logics of ‘permanent temporariness’ production (Collins, 2012), and together they actively select, discriminate and engineer the migrants’ (trans)local immobility, temporality and caring potentials across social fields at a distance. They allow the migration regime to produce disposable subjects that could be abandoned with ease once they are found unnecessary, so the city could be kept ‘globally competitive at both ends of the labour and wages spectrum’ (Huat, 2003, p. 70).

These infrastructures of migration are not without challenge though. Like all bio-political systems, these infrastructures have lives (Amin, 2014). They change reflexively to accommodate shifting social configurations and power topologies through redeployment, intensification, reconfiguration or removal of existing components within infrastructures, at times through introducing new arrays of elements or encountering unwired infrastructures (Star, 1999). Among the dynamic lives of uncaring migration infrastructures in Hong Kong, judicial work has been pivotal to preserving the ‘uncaring-ness’ of the migration controls. In 2011, a ground-breaking constitutional challenge was filed to courts by a domestic care migrant to challenge the state’s denial of domestic migrants’ right to permanent residency (*Vallejos Evangeline Banao v. Commissioner of Registration*, 2013). Landmark judicial decisions were made to affirm the migration regime’s exclusionary controls against the migrant group. Across the judgement,¹ the migrant population has been repeatedly described as ‘out of the ordinary’, ‘exceptional’ or ‘far from regular, particularly from society’s perspective’, that their ‘permission to enter [the city] ... is tied to [their] employment solely as a domestic helper’. More importantly, they are ‘obliged to return to the country of origin at the end of the contract’ as their admissions to the city are ‘not for the purposes of settlement and that dependents cannot be brought to reside in Hong Kong’. These judgements set a definitive tone for the controls against the migrant population and are repeatedly cited in subsequent cases to enforce constitutional exclusions of the group.²

The bio-political logic of ‘permanent temporariness’ production is embodied in the judgements to reproduce the uncaring system. The migration regime, supported strongly by the law, actively seeks out and develops a specific subject: a self-help care worker who is expected to provide care, but not receive it. Formal care is actively blocked from reaching this group of caregivers through a series of uncaring practices exercised across stages, from recruitment, training, working, to contract renewal, contract termination, home leave and expatriation. This ensures the migrants ‘gain[ing] no permanent foothold’ (Yeoh, 2006, p. 32) in the city and hence becoming de facto ‘use-and-discard’ care-service providers. Care, thus, functions as a critical social field and the object-target of bio-politics in Hong Kong, aligning multiple formal infrastructural regulations in order to enforce systematic care control and instil disposability in the care migrants. Workers are *just* workers, and they shall remain only as workers in the global city.

4 | RESEARCHING ON EVERYDAY NEGOTIATION OF INFRASTRUCTURAL CARE CONTROL DURING WORKDAY URBAN OUTING

Migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are continuously fashioned as *just* workers and non-citizens by the uncaring migration regime. The reality, however, is that the migrants are not exclusively self-help workers, nor could they be completely cut off from care networks in the actual world. Previous studies establish that domestic care workers across

East Asia always tacitly mobilise the ‘power of the powerless’ to re-embed themselves into formal and informal care networks by organising protests (Constable, 2009; Lai, 2018), collectively appropriating public space (Law, 2002) and performing impression management at the workplace (Constable, 2007; Lan, 2006).

While these studies tend to consider the migrants as exploited labour groups or rights-seeking crowds (Ong, 2006), this paper takes a step back to conceptualise them as ordinary urban inhabitants who live in and across the city to improvise care circulation. The paper presents their actual urban work lives and unpacks their everyday actual ordinary care circulation without undermining their world-making and care-circulating capacities. This is not to say the migrants’ ‘urban everydayness’ is unaffected by their labour status (as will be discussed in Section 6); instead, while the population might be discriminated against in various senses, they equally experiment and improvise livings that stretch beyond their labour status to plug into existing care networks in the city.

The empirical argument is achieved by examining vignettes of migrants’ everyday ‘workday’ urban outings. As part of migrants’ informal care exchange in the city, the everyday ‘workday’ urban outings are a highly underexamined topic in studies of migrant domestic workers when compared to ‘day-off’ urban outings (Law, 2002; McKay, 2006; Yeoh & Huang, 1998). DeLand and Trouille’s (2018) idea of ‘outing’ provides the conceptual framework for the outing stories. Here, ‘outing’ asserts that the domestic workers live in and across the cities where they work. It thereby draws our attention to the different possibilities that migrants are offered when residing in urban environments, as well as their diversity of experiences and trajectories while interacting with or sharing urban facilities with other urban actors during workdays. The workday outing vignettes are drawn from different ethnographic approaches, including field observation, hanging out with the group, participants’ diaries and multiple in-depth interviews with eight migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong in summer 2019. These workday stories demonstrate that the migrants can build their care systems ‘from below’ and exchange care with each other by capturing multiple urban affordances during their very brief workday outing. Most of the eight migrants were recruited from a Filipino Christian church, some came from snowball sampling or case referrals. All participating migrants were invited to record the preparation, planning and their post-hoc feelings of each workday outing, either in a paper or digital diary, for a week. After that, the respondents were interviewed to elaborate on their diary accounts. The author also conducted informal face-to-face interviews ($N=15$) and joined in several workday outings with the migrants. While it is recognised that the small sample of participants cannot capture the full picture of migrants’ workday outing experiences (cf. Knowles & Harper, 2009), the extended research encounter, and the participants’ multifaceted and more-than-verbal empirical accounts enabled by the diary-interview approach have nevertheless provided perceptive and valuable insights that were under-discussed in previous studies. All names of migrant domestic workers presented in the following sections are pseudonyms.

5 | ELABORATION OF ‘PEOPLED’ INFORMAL CARE INFRASTRUCTURE IN URBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS

In Hong Kong, live-in domestic migrant workers are never entirely domestic, but always work beyond the confines of the domestic sphere. They enter the city to buy groceries or housekeeping items, accompany the older household members to community parks or elderly centres, drop off and pick up their employers’ children at schools or other extracurricular activities. Many walk their employers’ pets or run other errands for the household here and there. Although these urban outings might last for merely 1 or 2 h or even shorter, they constitute an essential part of the migrants’ everyday life in the city.

Workday outings are part of the domestic workers’ core work duties, and they always imply the necessary accommodation to other family members’ daily schedules and mobility patterns on their part. Whether it is accompanying the children to schools, the elderly to elderly homes, or walking dogs in parks, the migrants’ everyday rhythms of going out are usually in forced synchronisation with the changing outing rhythms of household members: the employers, their children or parents, or even their dogs. An outing does not necessarily provide more freedom than being at ‘home’. Nonetheless, although there are considerable mobility constraints imposed by the aforementioned work trips, going out still allows the group to plug into networks of urban assemblages to regain autonomy and rework transnational intimacy (Chan & Latham, 2022). Everyday outings also enable them to meet other fellow workers legitimately and regularly to exchange informal care. These repeated urban encounters provide a favourable condition for the group to craft emergent care infrastructures through everyday recognition, interaction and care exchange. The main focus of the remaining discussions is then on how such repeated urban gatherings afford the production of repeated interactions, everyday care circulation and the elaboration of informal care infrastructures for less unbearable migrant living.

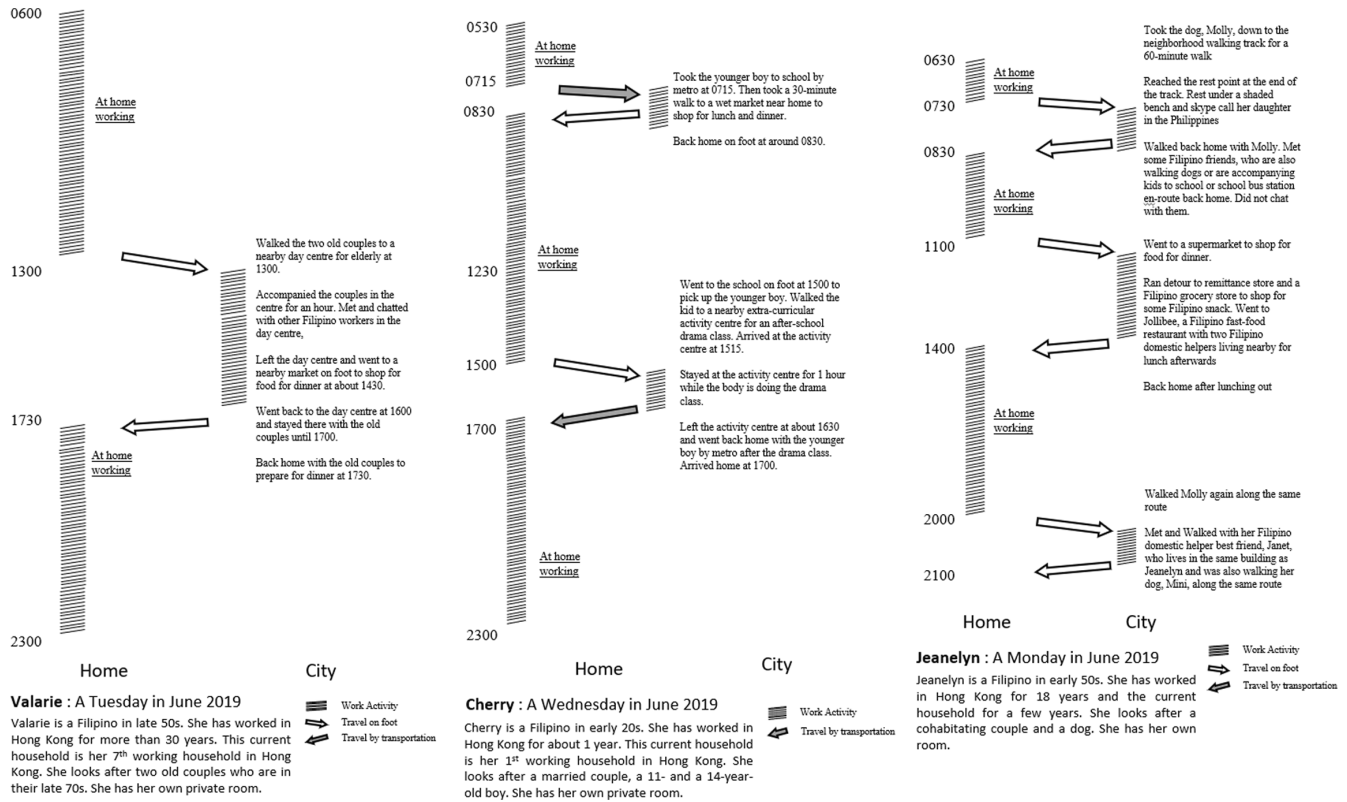


FIGURE 1 Workday urban mobility pattern of three migrant domestic workers, Valarie, Cherry and Jeanelyn.

5.1 | Repeated urban encounter: Overlapping mobility patterns and urban co-presence

Massey (2005) writes about ‘thrown-togetherness’ when describing the city as assemblages where unknowing people are repeatedly drawn together while performing private agendas in the city. Similarly, migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are drawn together every day in the city by various work duties. These repeated urban encounters are highly related to the city’s packed urban morphology and the migrants’ overlapping work duties.

First, Hong Kong has an extremely dense urban setting where clustered residential high-rises largely define local neighbourhoods and hundreds of thousands of migrant domestic workers live in close proximity. In the city, most neighbourhoods are self-sufficient, meaning that the workers could generally fulfil their everyday work duties in the same living community within walking distance. During the daytime, one could easily spot the care migrants in urban neighbourhoods, sometimes doing outings alone, sometimes along with one or two children, a senior or a dog – each going out as an individual for similar urban work tasks. The clustered spatiality and the resourcefulness (Chan & Latham, 2022) of the immediate urban landscape provides a geographical and social condition for migrants’ ongoing convergence of time–space trajectories, and their crossing of intimate lives and personal perspectives in the city when they are out in the city for work.

Second, workday urban outings done by care migrants are mainly organised around standard work duties at certain places like markets, parks, schools, playgrounds and elderly care centres, etc. – somewhere the group could legitimately and regularly visit. These outing trips usually take place at a certain time of the day: going to the market before lunch, dog walking in the morning or evening, playground time with children in the evening, depending on weather conditions or the relatively standard schedules of household members (see Figure 1). These overlapping urban mobility patterns mean these urban workplaces within walking distances could quickly turn into legitimate encounter sites, where workers are brought together again and again, and where sociality among the group gradually emerges through routinised recognition, meeting and interaction (see Figure 2). These spaces are what sociologist Klinenberg (2018) called ‘social infrastructure’ – physical spaces that regularly draw people together because they effectively serve urban inhabitants’ individual interests. Notwithstanding this, the care workers are repeatedly drawn into these spaces not merely because they perform their work duties or unnoticed private agendas there (Chan & Latham, 2022), but because these spaces are also where



FIGURE 2 (Top-left) Some migrant domestic workers (in front of the fish stall) shopping for groceries in a wet market at about 10:00 AM on an ordinary workday. *Source:* Author. (Top-middle) Some migrant domestic workers (standing in the grandstand) accompanying children to ice-skating classes at about 3:00 PM on an ordinary workday (the children are not shown in this picture; the white surface is the ice-skating rink). *Source:* Author. (Top-right) A few migrant domestic workers waiting next to a secondary school entrance to pick up children from school at about 12:30 PM on an ordinary workday. *Source:* Author. (Middle-left and middle) Children of different ages, along with their migrant caretakers, gather in the playground at 5:00 PM on an ordinary workday. The playground is materially furnished (e.g., with shock-absorbing cushion on the ground, an all-age-welcome climbing rack, and benches, etc.) and well-maintained, which enables both the children and their caregiving workers to enjoy the playground and mingling time. *Source:* Author. (Middle-right) A group of elderly people, together with the migrant caretakers who take care of them, in a shopping mall at about 3:00 PM on an ordinary workday. The air-conditioned space provides a comfortable setting for informal gatherings among the elderly, who can stay away from the humid and hot weather during summertime. *Source:* Author. (Bottom-left) The elderly and the domestic workers accompanying them (sitting at the back) are drawn together in an elderly day-care centre every day. *Source:* Courtesy of the participants. (Bottom-middle) A migrant domestic worker performing dog-walking duty at about 11:00 AM on an ordinary workday. *Source:* Author. (Bottom-right) Two migrant domestic workers doing the laundry at a self-service laundromat at about 9:00 PM on an ordinary workday. *Source:* Author.

the serviced household members repeatedly play, relax and mingle with the others – in other words, they are the social infrastructures of the locals in the first place. When migrants' everyday caregiving inevitably implies forced synchronisation with their servicing households' urban mobilities, the 'social infrastructures' frequented by the children, the elderly or the dogs naturally translate into the regular gathering points for the care migrants. They become the migrants' 'social infrastructures'. These ordinary gathering spaces eventually bring about repeated urban encounters and opportunities for emergent sociality among the care migrants.

Third, repeated urban encounters across the care migrants are always materially mediated and pre-configured by the well-furnished working neighbourhoods (Amin, 2008; Koch & Latham, 2012). The translation from regular encounters to routine interactions and the subsequent production of sociality among workers is often facilitated by the landscape's material design, which encourages the routine use of the site by dependent family members and/or the workers. For example, the long benches in playgrounds allow workers to sit together and develop friendships while attending to the children. The playground is also well equipped with different amenities to encourage repeated use by children of various ages. The playground thus constantly attracts the children along with their caretakers. Similarly, the air-conditioning in shopping centres, the shaded gazebos in parks or the sofas in elderly centres create favourable conditions for their repeated use by congregations of the dependent household members. These material designs furnish the neighbourhood spaces into plausible 'social infrastructures' for both the locals and the domestic workers, contributing especially to the latter's subsequent emergence of sociality.

5.2 | Informal care circulation and emergent care infrastructures in urban neighbourhoods

With the right social and material facilitation, migrants' everyday habitual encounters can lead to various meaningful interactions. A small hug in the supermarket, a brief chat at the school entrance, a half-hour pet co-walking journey, or a mini food-sharing party when accompanying the elderly to the neighbourhood park. Sometimes, the interaction can be as simple as a smile, a high-five or even just a flicker of recognition. The migrants develop an emergent understanding of what the city could offer them through daily urban outings. Such urban knowledge goes beyond factual information such as where to buy daily necessities for themselves or slack off without being seen (Chan & Latham, 2022); it also concerns where to see, meet or chat with other fellow workers and, more importantly, where and how to garner support and care during their workday urban outings.

Valarie has worked as a migrant domestic helper in Hong Kong for more than 30 years. She currently looks after an elderly couple in their seventies. Every afternoon after lunch, Valarie would accompany the couple to a nearby elderly day-care centre, where she stays for an hour and watches the couple have fun with other elderly members, before heading for a nearby wet market. Over the past few years, she has made several good migrant friends who also keep their elderly employers company in the centre. Valarie and her worker friends would always sit in a corner of the centre while their elderly employer was playing *mahjong*, watching TV or eating light snacks, exchanging updates on their distant families in the Philippines, gossiping about their demanding bosses or fretting about their struggling long-distance marriage. To Valarie, the elderly centre provides her with a valuable space for mutual listening, comfort and support. It is a place where she can feel being cared about. Similar stories were told by Cherry, who has worked in the city for slightly more than 1 year and whose main responsibility is to take care of two 11- and 14-year-old children of her employers. Assigned the task of taking one of the children to and from school and after-class activities, Cherry will always arrive at the school entrance or activity centre at least 15–30 minutes early. Sometimes she might even stay at the activity centre while the child is having the extra-curricular classes so she could spend more time with her worker friends, chit-chatting and sharing anecdotes with one another. Like Valarie, Cherry only meets these migrant friends during workdays in work-related settings. Since Cherry only moved to Hong Kong a year ago, she has very few friends aside from those she made in a Filipino church. Therefore, the school entrances and the activity centre are one of the very few places where she could expand her social networks, ventilate all her work-related grievances, gather survival tips and exchange informal care.

Ordinary cares exchanged are more than just emotional. They can be informational or even instrumental, manifested as job opportunities, data sim-cards sold below market price or dropping by a friend's house during a return trip to the home country. Occasionally, an act of care can be an investment or commitment based on expected reciprocity rather than altruism. For example, Joyce was introduced to her current employment by a friend whom she met at an after-school activity centre. She offered to visit the friend's family on her trip back to the Philippines. Her friend returned the favour by privately referring her to a job and Joyce thus did not have to pay the recruitment agency, saving about 2 months' salary.

Similarly, Valarie manages to expand her data sim-card side-business by recruiting the worker friends she made in the elderly centre – also her clients whom she sold the sim-cards to at discounted prices – to be her distributors. However small or brief, these ordinary care exchanges slowly transform individual migrants into resilient ‘care-collectives’ (Alam & Houston, 2020). Through repeated performances and regular coming-together of bodies, affects and senses that embody care, these small acts enable the group to co-develop provisional, informal and localised care infrastructures ‘from below’ for sustainable ordinary care exchange.

These infrastructures provide the migrants a feeling of regularity and stability in terms of care circulation among care migrants, despite the fact that uncertainty and contingencies appear to have entered their daily lives. The infrastructures have three main qualities. First, the informal care infrastructure operates like a patterning ground (Amin, 2008) that repeatedly embodies and teaches the migrants the skills of caring by continuously enrolling them into the informal care networks and facilitating proper care exchange practices among them. A convention of practice (Star, 1999) in care exchange emerges from repeated successful care reciprocation. The practice norm infused with expected reciprocity becomes embodied among the migrants and is encoded into the informal care system like an informal protocol, helping regularise and pattern daily care exchanges among the group and hence reproducing the provisional informal care networks. As a social surplus arising from repeated care reciprocation, the convention sometimes infuses direct reciprocity with empathy and commitment to care for others. This further builds regularity in the provisional, informal care infrastructures by nurturing altruistic care. Jeanelyn has nearly 20 years of experience as a domestic migrant worker in Hong Kong. For the past few years, Jeanelyn’s workday outing routine includes walking her employer’s dog, Molly, twice a day (at around 7:00 AM and 8:00 PM) for 30–60 min around the neighbourhood. The following vignette of Jeanelyn’s regular dog-walking in one workday evening illustrates how she demonstrated more-than-reciprocity commitment to caring for others when she encountered a fellow migrant:

I walked Molly ... but I met one Filipina helper sitting on the bench ... I asked how is her boss now, the way the employer treated her. Her employer is getting [treating her] worse. So, I just encourage her because most of the employers are like that. I comfort her and tell her that she is still adjusting here in Hong Kong because she only works in Hong Kong for just two months only (Jeanelyn, diary excerpt on a Saturday).

The emergent conventions of care exchanges function as an attitude towards encountering an ethical disposition. Migrants like Jeanelyn are thereby trained to be sensitive to the fragility of domestic workers’ everyday living, and are motivated to actively locate opportunities to enrol other care-needing workers into the care networks. By embodying the more-than-reciprocity practice norms encoded in the informal care system, migrants’ ongoing care acts become more than ‘care-of’ by nature but instead, ones of ‘care-for’ that are increasingly entangled with collaboration, sharing and trust. These accumulated dispositions to care continuously pattern and facilitate care exchanges, enrol new migrants into the care networks and eventually stabilise and reproduce the emergent, provisional, informal care infrastructures.

Second, the infrastructure is not a mere product of the gathering of migrant bodies or their readiness to care, nor is it maintained simply by their repeated practices of sharing and caring. It is also a product of repeated socio-material assembling – an ongoing agglomeration of migrant bodies, cooking tips, circulated pictures of distant loves, gossips about employers, the distinctive aroma of national cuisines, updates on health conditions, frustrations about contract termination, happy news about the children from afar or tears shed for cheating husbands. Such ongoing socio-material assembly continuously connects workers and affords them the ability to resist, negotiate and address hardship collectively. In other words, while the tentative yet stabilised relational configurations between living and non-living bodies are the products of daily practice of mutual support, the continuous gathering, circulation and distribution of living and non-living bodies still play vital roles in mediating and facilitating the circulation of care as an embodied and circulating affect.

Third, the infrastructure is highly localised in certain neighbourhood spaces and primarily maintained by the use of human bodies. Ordinary cares occur mainly in specific community spaces where the migrant population could legitimately meet to exchange care. Since these meeting places tend to be somewhere that is frequented by the servicing family members, the actual place where migrants’ care exchange takes place depends heavily on the quality of the place, for instance, its accessibility, security, plausibility of use and the facilities’ material conditions. In a way, the infrastructures are highly localised in specific places with particular social or spatial qualities. In addition, since the formal uncaring migration controls always actively route institutionalised care away from the group, the informal care infrastructures can build on a little fixed infrastructural base but profoundly rely on everyday human labour as the underlying infrastructure resource for the continuous working of the support system. Migrant bodies are therefore ‘the conduits of exchange and connection’, and their ‘face-to-face or hand-to-hand interactions’ on their brief outing journeys ‘provide the basic

network of communication and distribution' of care (Tonkiss, 2015, p. 389). The care infrastructure is 'peopled' in this sense since human bodies are primarily used for its everyday working, reproduction and maintenance (Simone, 2004). Therefore, urban worksites where migrant bodies are continually drawn together are simultaneously where repeated care exchanges and the 'peopled' infrastructure are most intensely performed and visibly articulated.

6 | INFRASTRUCTURAL ROBUSTNESS OUT OF PROVISIONAL INFRASTRUCTURAL ENGAGEMENT

Migrants' daily infrastructural embedment in localised and 'peopled' care systems builds on their legitimate reasons to regularly visit specific community spaces to perform care exchange. However, their lack of control over daily outings and their broader institutionalised precarity mean their daily embedding in the infrastructure has always been temporary. Nonetheless, this provisionality poses little challenge to the informal care infrastructure as a whole. This is because, despite being a highly precarious workforce, the care population has essentially remained 'permanently present' in the global city due to the city's structural needs for domestic care services. Such permanent presence allows the 'peopled' infrastructure to be robustly articulated and operated by transient migrant workers.

Workers' everyday mobility patterns profoundly rely on their employers' structuring of the day. Changes in family members' schedules would significantly affect workers' chances of visiting various legitimate encounter sites and plugging into the informal support systems. Joyce recalled that she stopped visiting after-class activity centres when her employer's child started to study abroad. Since then, she rarely sees many of the worker friends she used to meet weekly at the centres. Jenny's main caregiving duties involve taking her employers' two children to the community playground every day at around 4:00 PM. While she always makes certain the children are having fun safely during their playground time, she would also be enjoying herself – sharing latest family news, weekend plans and Filipino food with other fellow domestic workers who are also accompanying their employers' children to the playground. Occasionally, though, Jenny loses these valuable socialising opportunities in the summer because one of her dependent boys suffers from severe eczema and must avoid outdoor activities in humid and hot weather; she would have to stay at home during those days. Cathy, another live-in Filipino domestic worker with more than 20 years of work experience in the city, had been 'trapped' at home for almost a year in her previous job when her female employer then remained jobless for a year and decided to handle all outing tasks herself. Cathy explained that that year was one of the hardest in that employment because she had most of her legitimate outing opportunities 'taken away' and was 'trapped' at home/workplace 6 days a week under the watchful eye of her employers. Others shared similar stories about how their company was rendered unnecessary when the dependent elderly or dogs became too old for walks, or even passed away. These uncertainties of urban outings and the lack of autonomous mobility control put a big question mark over the migrants' everyday routines and hence the urban care exchange among them.

Contract non-renewal affects the group's access to localised informal care infrastructures even more directly. In Hong Kong, many employers tend to assume that the migrants will get 'smarter' and no longer be as docile to follow their instructions after working for the family for some time. As a result, these employers tend not to renew the migrants' contracts after they have worked for them for a few years. They also do so to avoid paying long-service payments to the migrants (Constable, 2007). This propensity for contract non-renewal puts the care migrants under permanently precarious conditions. For one thing, they must constantly stay alert to job terminations, and be ready to secure a new one and relocate to an unfamiliar neighbourhood. For example, Cathy has worked in six neighbourhoods during her 21 years of working in Hong Kong; Valarie, seven neighbourhoods in 30 years. Delia's employers refused to renew her contract as they preferred 'fresh' workers. For others still in their first or second terms like Cherry and Jenny and some others informally interviewed, very few are sure that they could stay in the same household after the current 2-year contract. Contract non-renewal and the subsequent relocation to unfamiliar neighbourhoods represent more than a need to adapt to a new environment; they also entail a difficult experience of uprooting and the forced removal from the localised care ecologies that the migrants have heavily invested in and relied upon.

The imposed precarity from above makes individual migrants' lasting engagement with the localised informal care infrastructures difficult. However, the 'peopled' care infrastructures are barely contested by such human precarity since the loss of old migrants is always offset by the introduction of new care workers to the neighbourhoods. Over the past 20 years, notwithstanding the deliberate production of employment precarity from above, the migrant population has almost doubled and reached about 400,000. Although individual migrant bodies might only be temporarily present in the neighbourhood, the entire population remains 'permanently' present in the city to maintain and repair the localised,

informal care infrastructures. It means the fundamental infrastructure resources for the informal infrastructure – the migrants – are never in short supply in the city.

A steady supply of migrant bodies matters, but the availability of skilful and experienced infrastructure builders is even more critical to the robustness of the care infrastructures. Although relocated workers might have little knowledge of the exact infrastructural configurations when moving into unfamiliar neighbourhoods, they carry within themselves ‘traces of past collaboration and an implicit willingness to interact with one another’ (Simone, 2004, p. 408) as accumulated from previous rounds of care reciprocation. These prior experiences of care exchange, as well as their heightened sensitivity to informal care networks, prepare the migrants to plug into localised care infrastructures whenever they relocate. For instance, when asked how to adapt to a new neighbourhood upon relocation, Jeanelyn shared her tricks of plugging into the local care networks she learned through years of working in different neighbourhoods: ‘I meet them (other care workers) outside everyday [while I was walking my dog], [and] I always greet them, so they know I am here’. The trick is to be visible and actively seek recognition from others so as to create opportunities for enrolling oneself in the local care infrastructures. Prior experiences of infrastructural engagement do not only imply skills to navigate in new community landscapes, but also project and maintain concrete expectations of what individual migrants could derive from and offer to others in different localised informal care systems. Each infrastructural experience, thus, plays a role in constituting the practical knowledge and memories that could reach beyond on-site practices and are reusable for future infrastructural engagement. These transferable skills and care commitment enable the continuous articulation of informal infrastructures so the localised care system could remain robustly composed and operational for everyday care exchange.

Precarious infrastructural engagement and system robustness out of provisionality represent two perspectives in understanding the informal care infrastructures. They describe how precarity, provisionality and robustness are synchronically balanced in the domestic workers’ everyday care dynamics. Even if the imposed precarity from above has challenged the sustainability of individual infrastructural engagement by forcibly disembedding the population from localised informal care infrastructures, the society’s structural needs for care labour warrant the ‘permanent’ presence of the migrant population in the urban landscape. Subsequently, heterogeneous migrant bodies with traces of care reciprocation continue to be regularly drawn together to exchange care, even though the exact bodies or practices that make up the localised care infrastructures might differ across time and space. The city’s structural needs for migrant service, and individual migrants’ accumulated sensitivities and care exchange techniques by and large reduce the threat of imposed precarity, ensuring the provisional informal system can remain robustly and continuously articulated by the come-and-go migrant workers.

7 | CONCLUSION

Building on the call for an ‘ethnography of infrastructure’ (Star, 1999), this paper traces the ways domestic care migrants in the global city of Hong Kong negotiate with and rework a range of migration and care infrastructures during their workday outings. It establishes that care migrants’ brief, routine and work-bound urban outings do not translate into insignificant everyday living experiences, nor do they rule out the possibility of extraordinary accomplishments in store. Despite being the subject-target of deliberate and systematic denial of formal institutional care, many domestic care migrants in Hong Kong still manage to draw on the city’s unique urban morphology and resources, the repeated urban encounters and their own human bodies to elaborate an informal, provisional, localised and ‘peopled’ care infrastructure for mutual caring. This allows them to better inhabit a social world that has been challenging for them. While conceptually this paper sees ‘infrastructure’ as one version of ‘assemblage’ with a particular style of infra-relation among networked bodies (Barua, 2021; Bosworth, 2022), the deliberate use of ‘infrastructures’ rather than simply ‘assemblage’ in this paper to describe the emergent care system aims to foreground the intense relationships and the strong conditioning capacity exemplified by the trans-individual bodies that compose, operate and sustain the bio-political system in the background, and hence create grounds upon which sustainable care exchange activities could be built. The deliberate reference to ‘infrastructure’ beyond the concrete and inorganically organised socio-technical systems further illustrates the essential potentials of precariously assembled human bodies to function as robust supporting grounds for various social processes and relations (McFarlane & Silver, 2017; Simone, 2004).

This paper adds to the studies on urban migration, urban care space, and care infrastructures in three ways. First, domestic care migrants are foregrounded as ordinary urban actors and infrastructure builders during workdays through the lens of ‘outing’ (DeLand & Trouille, 2018). This conceptualisation provides an analytical focus for the study of the

multiple ways in which the not-so-domestic live-in migrants actually conduct their everyday excursions, improvise relation-making with the broader urban ecologies and regularise daily informal care exchanges. The paper acknowledges that migrants' well-being is continuously acted against in global cities via multiple powerful disciplining institutions. It also recognises the discourse of at-risk bodies, and that the site of 'bare life' is often where effective political claims for progressive reforms are mobilised (Ong, 2006). However, the paper considers these migrant-as-victims/—underdog representations, as well as their implicit tendency to confine migrant daily labour to the domestic arena, to be conceptually inadequate (cf. Faier, 2013; Gibson et al., 2001). Primarily zooming in on 'hardship' and the 'domestic', these representations are under-equipped to capture the group's not-always-negative, at times joyful, urban experiences and their many diverse achievements in the city during workdays.

For these reasons, de-domesticating the population as urban actors matters. It matters because, first and foremost, it brings the population's often understudied urban work lives and hard work in the city into academic inquiry; and second, this illuminates the enormous urban potentials of the domestic-oriented migrant bodies in reshaping everyday urban landscapes and creating grounds for other social processes during workdays. As presented across the paper, the workers' seemingly ordinary, sometimes boring, work-bound outings are in fact indispensable to the quotidian making of care spaces and care ecologies on which they heavily rely to live with their institutionalised precarity. Such workday work of inhabitation and 'infrastructural crafting' (Amin, 2014) might be comparatively less visible than the population's weekend enclavisation during days off (Law, 2002; McKay, 2006; Yeoh & Huang, 1998), thereby receiving little attention among migration scholars and urban scholars. However, this paper argues that they are no less extraordinary than the well-studied weekend enclavisation as they continuously weave the population into resilient collectives and make possible their everyday endurance in uncaring global cities.

Second, care is foregrounded as an urban and socio-technical construct in relation to both bio-political control and interpersonal coping in order to better understand migrants' lives in global cities. This group of migrants is actively uncared for by multiple formal institutionalised migration infrastructures that have been designed to develop self-help caregivers and produce care deficits for the care workers. The migrants, however, constantly improvise to tackle their own care deficits by plugging themselves into various informal care networks in cities. Through teasing out how Hong Kong care migrants' everyday care entwines with wider infrastructures of mobility regulation, this paper reworks care into a set of socio-material relations as both infrastructurally managed by formal migration controls, and supported across ordinary urban spaces. In particular, this paper sheds some light on the multiple ways in which various situational socio-spatial qualities displayed by Hong Kong public spaces facilitate the continuous reproduction of care infrastructures, namely, by pulling together the migrant bodies – the primary infrastructure resources of the informal care system – and by creating user-friendly and legitimate gathering points for the migrants' face-to face care exchange.

Foregrounding care as an urban and socio-technical construct further reveals the potentials of broader urban social processes such as gated urbanisation, gentrification or other contentious uses of public space, and various socio-spatial fields in cities traditionally assumed to be outside of the care sphere like the schools, parks, markets or shopping malls, in reshaping the established care ecologies in cities and urban individuals' everyday care dynamics. As such, this paper advances a geographical dimension of care by examining the emergence, dissipation, stabilisation, maintenance and repair of (provisional) care as an urban ecology project.

Lastly, the ideas of provisionality, precarity and robustness are employed to disentangle the becoming process of two different care-based bio-political systems. The three ideas provide essential resources to appreciate the infrastructural logic and working mechanisms of two individual migration infrastructures – one formally institutionalised and uncaring, another informally stabilised and caring. Although the two bio-political systems, which shape life through care, indicate distinct logics of operation, modes of stabilisation and leading actors, they invariably intersect on the field of care and co-evolve synchronically and diachronically to mediate the care migrants' everyday urban experiences and care possibilities in the city.

By unpacking the becoming process of the two systems through provisionality, precarity and robustness, this paper elucidates the two background constellations (Star, 1999) that play a role in structuring the moving equilibrium of demographic permanence, employment precarity, provisionality of infrastructural making and system robustness in care circulation. The ideas of provisionality, precarity and robustness, therefore, generate new potentiality to grapple with the logic and social lives of bio-political systems that flourish, inhibit or splinter particular kinds of actions and migrant living in the city. They also provide fresh perspectives on how a complex mix of formal or informal mobility controls, social support systems, labour regulation frameworks, legal or media infrastructures, public amenities or ordinary city spaces may at times intersect to produce structural challenges for migrants while also offering opportunities for reworking and resilience.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared as the participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Full judgement decision: https://legalref.judiciary.hk/lrs/common/search/search_result_detail_frame.jsp?DIS=81019&QS=%2B&TP=JU and https://legalref.judiciary.hk/lrs/common/ju/ju_frame.jsp?DIS=86304&currpage=T.

² By searching on the international legal data base, LawCite. LawCite allows the public to locate judgement decisions and how they have been subsequently treated and cited (at [http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/LawCite?cit=\[2013\]%20HKCFA%2017](http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/LawCite?cit=[2013]%20HKCFA%2017)).

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