

The Critical Discourse Analysis of Domestic Helper Abuse Case by Different News and Social Media Platforms

– A Case Study of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih

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Abstract: The paper discusses the unfair treatment of Indonesian domestic worker (DHs) based on a case study of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach. Both official statements and unofficial comments are thoroughly analyzed to demonstrate the media's hidden power in influencing public opinion. We identify polarity in attitude (positive and negative) towards the case in NGOs (non-governmental organization) and comments from social media and Hong Kong forums. NGO are essential in raising awareness about the discrimination and racism faced by domestic helpers and in shaping public opinion to support more inclusive policies for immigrants. Conversely, discussions on social media and Hong Kong forums show that opinions on Erwiana's case were not unanimous. Some comments even displayed racial discrimination. However, these descriptions and labels of foreign domestic helpers can be seen as objective statements or based on life experiences. Commenters are unaware of the stereotypes and discrimination against East Asian women that are concealed within the racial ideology of Hongkongers.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Hong Kong Domestic Worker, Stance-taking, Media Discourse.

1. Introduction

In 2014, a case of abuse of a domestic worker received world attention. Erwiana Sulistyaningsih was an Indonesian domestic worker working in Hong Kong who was publicly well-known for being abused by her employer. Different media sources had reported the case based on different stances though they are seen as either advocating for the interests of domestic workers and condemning the perpetrator or questioning the worker's claim. We will apply critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze the positive and negative stances from local and international media discourses in different discursive levels; show how the media reports are constructed to achieve their major objective for their interests and what different stances different entities (local government, international society, non-governmental organization, the public) take. The discourses from both official sources and unofficial comments are all analyzed in detail to show the hidden power of media sources to shape public opinion.

2. Literature Review and case background

2.1. Case background

According to the report of Justice Center Hong Kong in 2016, Erwiana was subjected to excessive work hours exceeding 20 hours per day. She was confined to the house with no permission to leave, and denied access to the phone. Her employer withheld her salary completely and verbally and physically abused her, which included frequent punches and beatings to her head and body. Besides, she was not allowed to have access to the toilet, publicly stripped and humiliated, and made to sleep on the floor. In February 2015, Erwiana's employer faced criminal charges and was found guilty on 18 charges including various assaults, intimidation, non-payment of wages, and denial of statutory holidays or rest days. The employer received a six-year prison sentence and a fine of HK\$15,000. [1].

2.2. Critical discourse analysis

In our study, critical discourse analysis is adopted here. To begin with, discourse analysis can serve as a significant research tool to hold a microscopic view to see how the power functions in information dissemination and public interaction. Critical theory is termed by Frankfurt School as a philosophy questioning modern social and political life by a method of inborn critique [2]. A critical theory is an approach in humanities and social disciplines that stresses on society and culture to devote to revealing, criticizing, and challenging power structures in society. The aim of critical analysis is to make unequal social relationships visible through analysis. The objective of a critical approach to discourse analysis is to help reveal some of these hidden and 'often out of sight' values, positions and perspectives of those who enact them.[3].

3. Stance-taking and Discourses Analysis for Erwiana's Case – Positive Stance by Supporting Erwiana

According to the Otherness Theory by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* [4], otherness is associated with marginalized people, those have different beliefs, attitudes, culture from the dominant group and are robbed of their voice in the social, religious, and political world. Positioned as racial Others, DHs experience various forms of social injustice.

Therefore, to empower DHs to access their rights and improve the livelihood, NGOs (non-governmental organization) in Hong Kong actively use their media influence to urge the government to act and draw public attention to this group. The representatives are: HandsOn Hong Kong (handsonhongkong.org/), HK Helper's Campaign (hkhelerscampaign.com/), HELP for Domestic Workers (handsonhongkong.org/), Pathfinders Hong Kong (<https://www.pathfinders.org.hk/>), Enrich Hong Kong (<https://www.pathfinders.org.hk/>).

In this section, we collect comments and reports from two of the major NGOs in Hong Kong to conduct an analysis on the NGO discourse on DHs relevant cases.

HK Helper's Campaign aims at abolishing the 2-week rule. Hong Kong's immigration law stipulates that foreign domestic helpers must live with their employers and find a new employer within two weeks if they are dismissed or quit the current job. This ruling can be unfair and discriminatory, especially when they are exposed to abusive situations. Also, according to Hong Kong law, helpers can take one day off a week. And yet there are no effective measures in place to ensure that the enforcement. Long working hours without any rest can seriously damage their physical and mental health. Thus, the campaign is committed to imposing the maximum working hours rule.

Below is a comment from the manager of Helpers for Domestic Helpers (DHs) on the Erwiana case:

I don't know about you, but I find the comment of police commissioner Andy Tsang Wai-hung that the annual average of 30-40 cases of wounding and serious assault of domestic workers means they are "very rare", quite chilling... One should also ask whether Erwiana would have had a chance at seeking justice if her case was not reported by the media and did not receive International coverage. Numerous such cases dealt with by my organization have languished in obscurity as the victims decided to abandon their complaints due to police indifference and because they could not afford to stay in Hong Kong without a job as their cases drag on.

The manager thinks that it is "quite chilling" to have 30-40 cases and express sympathy for those domestic workers who are going through racial discrimination as subdominant group in the Hong Kong society. She mentioned inhumane mechanism of the local legal system and that the police fail to fulfill their responsibilities and are unwilling or unable to carry out their duties. By aligning with the DHs' appeal, the discourse is trying to revise the existing social structure where DHs is placed in the bottom of the power pyramid. Therefore, looking at the ideology behind, the NGOs discourse is challenging dominant power behind the government discourse which is responsible for maintaining the inequalities, unfairness and injustice.

HELP for Domestic Workers is an independent charity organization that provides services for DHs to meet the appeal needs of migrant domestic workers by providing rights consultation and casework support to ensure their access to the knowledge and resources. The following text is chosen from the personal story sharing column:

Like many Hong Kongers, Rachel grew up with a migrant domestic worker - her "Jie Jie." She loved singing karaoke, trying Filipino food, and spending time with her Jie Jie.

"Domestic work is work, and migrant domestic workers have the same rights as other workers. Yet the contribution of domestic workers in our society is often overlooked. I am proud to support this incredibly strong, vibrant and resilient community of women." says Rachel.

The article tells the story of a lawyer who works for a group of domestic workers. The protagonist Rachel grew up with DHs in her house and then interned at HELP at university. During her internship, she witnessed the mistreatment of DHs at the police station after physical assault. She now serves as Head of Case Management in HELP to provided DHs with case counselling, basic needs and mental health support. Rachel holds that migrant domestic worker as a profession should take an equal footing with other professions and identity with them in their female roles in society.

According to Wong et al. [5], Amnesty International reported that 97 Indonesian DHs in Hong Kong worked for 17 hours every day on average. Two-thirds of them involved in the survey went through physical or mental violence. And reports by NGOs usually take this as the focus point to unfold their discourse.

After analyzing the titles of the latest posts collected in the HELP website ((seen in Appendix). We can see from the table that the high-frequency words are "mental health" and "human rights". The posts try to portray the status quo of DHs as disadvantaged group that is being tortured and marginalized. Thus, the power behind the discourse is shifting towards the socially powerless workers as opposed to the institutions with authority.

In conclusion, NGOs plays a vital part in unveiling the prejudice and racism DHs suffered from and steering the public opinion in the direction of immigrant-friendly policy making. Meanwhile, they provide free assistance for those who seek legal and psychological counseling and guidance.

4. Stance-taking and Discourses Analysis for Erwiana's Case – Contesting the Claims of Erwiana: Discourses from Social Media and Hong Kong Forums

In Hong Kong, major media outlets take a stance to support Erwiana. However, public debates about the truth were sparked in social media and forums. The accusations of Erwiana were questioned by some of the Hong Kong citizens, discourse involved racial discrimination also arose from this issue. Therefore, comments from social media and Hong Kong forums will be analyzed from a sociolinguistic perspective to indicate how ethnic stereotypes are formed along the discourses.

The accusations of Erwiana were challenged by some commenters from the Hong Kong forum. As mentioned above, Erwiana has been portrayed as a typical victim – “a modern slave of Hongkongers” by foreign media, while some commenters believed that those allegations were illogical.

(1) 辣椒紅 2014-12-09 14:07

呢單野好多都用常理講吾通！個印傭外表看起來都吾似一個誠實人！

ni1 daan1 ye5 hou2do1 dou1 yung6 seung4lei5 goong2ng4tung1 go3yan3yung4 ngoi6biu2 hon3hei2loi4 dou1 ng4chi5 yat1go3 sing4sat6 yan4

(Many of these people are unable to use common sense to explain, this Philippine helper seems to be how honest a person!)

佢講個僱主剩系俾下午睇 4 個鐘，跟著要做通宵，吾通個僱主都系晚晚通宵吾睇覺？

keui5 gong2 go3 gu3 jyu3 jing6hai6 bei2 ha6ng5 kwan3 sei3go3jung1 gan1jeuk6 yiu3 jou6 tung1siu1 ng4tung1 go3 gu3jyu2 dou1hei3 maan5maan5 tung1siu1 ng4kwan3gaau3

(This case has many doubts, which is illogical. The Indonesian maid does not look like a soul of honor. She said her employer only let her sleep 4 hours in the afternoon and then work all night. It is inconceivable for the employer to stay all night (to watch her).)

(2) 藥材 2014-12-10 12:21

行都行唔到仲過到海關，呢一點點諗都無可能啦，佢咁傷唯一解釋就係回國後才被打。

haang4 dou1 hang4 m4dou2 jung6 gwo3dou2 hoi2gwaan1 nilyat1dim2 dim2nam2 dou1 mou4ho2nang3 la1 keui5 gam3 seung1 wai4yat1 gaai2 sik1 jau6hai6 wui4gwok3 hau6 choi4 bei6da2

(How could she go through immigration smoothly when she was seriously injured? This was impossible. Maybe she was beaten after returning to Indonesia.)

In (1), the commenter questioned that forcing Erwiana to work all night was not feasible for the employer, Law Wan-tung, unless she stayed all night just to supervise Erwiana, and it seems to be a kind of torment to Law. It is also implausible for Erwiana to go through the immigration by herself when she is seriously injured; her injuries might be caused after returning to Indonesia, as stated by the commenter in (2). These attacks were trying to undermine the public support and confidence for Erwiana and counter those discourses accusing cruel abuse. Thus, commenters repositioned Erwiana as a dishonest witness and intended to separate her from the role of victim. Likewise, the fairness of the court judgement was skeptical by some commenters. As the abuse case was widely reported by media before the trial, the verdict of the jury and the judge may be affected by “internet judges”, so doubts about Erwiana's testimony were neglected.

In summary, dissenting opinions are found in comments on social media and Hong Kong online forums. Some commenters proposed that Erwiana's claims are not beyond reasonable doubt and that her integrity is questioned. Also, the objectivity and neutrality of the local news media are re-examined; statements supporting Erwiana were discredited by commenters and maintaining Hong Kong's reputation was regarded as the responsibility of the local media. Besides, racial insults and stereotypes are shown in the public discourses, indicating that implicit discrimination existed in the ideologies of Hongkongers.

5. Conclusion

NGOs play a crucial role in highlighting the discrimination and racism experienced by DHs and in influencing public opinion towards more welcoming policies towards immigrants. In contrast, the discourses from social media and Hong Kong forums reflect that the opinions of the overwhelming majority on Erwiana's case were not one-sided; some of the comments even involved racial discrimination. However, those descriptions and appellations of foreign domestic helpers may be regarded as objective statements or attributed to life experiences; commentators are not aware of the stereotypes and discrimination against East Asian women hidden in Hongkongers' racial ideology.

References

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Appendix

<https://helpfordomesticworkers.org/category/news-en/page/2/>

Time of the post	Title of the post
OCTOBER 9, 2023	How Hong Kong domestic workers' mental health and silent struggles are systematically neglected—and how that impacts local families
SEPTEMBER 14, 2023	Hong Kong's domestic workers, worn down by Covid, call time on poor pay
OCTOBER 8, 2023	'I felt so alone': domestic workers in Hong Kong suffering mental health issues like depression can find support in MeHeal, a new, free counselling service
MAY 16, 2023	'Tools more than humans': HK domestic workers fight for rights.
SEPTEMBER 12, 2023	She overcame civil war and dad's early death to lead a charity pushing human rights for domestic workers
MARCH 10, 2023	CNBC highlights the importance of inclusivity to achieve true gender equity.
MARCH 1, 2023	The HK HUB article highlights the eight dimensions of wellness and its importance in maintaining a balanced life