



In China's hands: Filipino maids light candles and call on the Hong Kong government to improve migrant workers' rights, but now a more urgent question burns. PICTURE BY DANTE PERALTA

MaryAnn Benitez

Things aren't all quiet on the home front for thousands of Filipino maids facing an uncertain future

A burning domestic issue

HONG KONG has been good to the Laguindam sisters.

Working as domestic helpers in the territory since 1981, the Laguindams have saved enough to buy a house for their parents and to give them a house.

Another domestic helper, MaryAnn Bangcawayan, still has to work to realise her dream of going to college. She thought she could do so in a year in Hong Kong, but it was in 1984.

As her family's only breadwinner, she has to continue working for the sake of her nephews and nieces. About her Hong Kong, she says the youngsters would have left school a long time

ago. Their fates might have been different but they share a common concern. As 1997 approaches, the Laguindams and Bangcawayans remain in Hong Kong?

The answer is unclear. The issue is like many other transitional issues affecting Hong Kong, the answer lies with China and the future of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government.

For the Filipino domestics — along with other fellow foreign workers from neighbouring South Asian countries — the hope is Beijing will let migrant domestics continue working in Hong Kong until July 1997.

Ms Bangcawayan, 36, said: "The change of government is not worrying, so long as the rights and welfare of the domestic helpers are guaranteed."

No amount of statements indirectly quoting Chinese officials could convince the domestics they could ride the through-train.

The most recent reassurance came from Governor Chris Patten who was told in a 5 June meeting with Philippine Foreign Secretary Domingo Siazon that Hong Kong policy on Filipino maids will remain unchanged after the handover.

"I said that I saw no reason why their position should change after 1997, but pointed out that was entirely a matter for the SAR government."

"I also noted that a number of Chinese officials had given the same reassurance to Filipino ministers and the same reassurances unofficially to us in Hong Kong."

Given that the status quo will remain, domestics are uneasy over whether policies will stay the same. Any tightening of rules will force many to go home.



Writing on the wall: Connie Bragas-Regalado is worried that policies will change and salaries will be cut.

"The talking point is that Hong Kong would be taken over by the communists. Their fear is that many policies would change, salaries will be cut," said chairwoman of United Filipinos in Hong Kong Connie Bragas-Regalado said.

Manila has reasons to be worried.

At last count, Hong Kong has taken in about 127,800 Filipino domestics — women and men — or about 3 per cent of the four million working overseas.

While the two-week rule in Hong Kong continues to rankle, the migrants here are generally working under some of the best conditions anywhere in the world.

The government sets a minimum salary (currently at \$3,750 a month), mandates almost yearly pay rises and has set out a work contract that spells out their rights and employers' obligations.

Compare that with say, a bond Singaporean maids have to pay to ensure they do not break their contracts or the mandatory pregnancy tests they have to go through every six months.

Still others say better not to rock the boat — especially with China. Some of the more vocal groups who do not have qualms fighting for the workers' rights have yet to decide what tack to take to make their concerns known to the future sovereign.

Cynthia Tellez, director of Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers says: "The future is still very uncertain. The maids do not know what to do."

"They say status quo but some policies might

change. You can't ask if they will stick to it. There is no clear reassurance."

But she says her own government should have acted more firmly earlier on in addressing the "1997" issue, which is closely tied with the migration problem.

The problem is her own government has no clear solution in mind in the very real possibility that the doors will gradually shut down in the face of foreign domestics.

Mrs Tellez said Manila had not spelled out "serious plans" to absorb the returning migrants.

"Are there livelihood projects, are they sustainable, what are the plans of the Philippine government?"

Many doubt the viability of jobs and economic growth promised in President Fidel Ramos's Philippines 2000 vision, as socio-economic program is only one facet of the solution.

Without a firm future in Hong Kong, some are looking at other destinations. In the past year Taiwan, for instance, is growing to be a popular option after Singapore.

Many are letting the future sort itself out, in the Filipino belief that "Que sera, sera" (what will be, will be).