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Embodying transnationalism: The  
making of the Indonesian maid

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# **Embodying transnationalism: The making of the Indonesian maid**

Dr Lenore Lyons

Female domestic workers are emblematic of the increasing movement of peoples across national borders. The global economic and cultural flows associated with transnational migration play a significant role in shaping the construction of gender in both sending and receiving countries by creating new forms of subjectivity and community, and destabilising traditional national boundaries. The interplay between local expressions of gender relations, and macro-level global processes, is central to the processes of nation-building and nationalism. This paper examines the material and discursive practices that produce foreign domestic workers as ‘symbolic border guards’ (Armstrong) between ‘here’ and ‘there’, between ‘us’ and ‘them’, within Singapore. The increasing presence of migrant domestic workers in Singapore has given rise to a series of moral panics represented in local Singaporean media about deviant, lascivious female sexuality and/or inappropriate, surrogate mothering. Within these discourses, women from different national groups become marked in gendered and raced ways. Domestic workers, however, are not simply produced through discourse. A range of material practices, both in the sending countries and in Singapore, serve to ‘make’ the maid. These include training courses run by recruitment agents that teach the women about ‘being a maid’, and disciplining processes within the homes of employers that seek to shape the domestic worker’s behaviour and actions. These disciplining processes, however, are not simply imposed by external agents, but are conditioned by normative rules and cultural constructions of appropriate gender roles. By exploring women’s own stories of bodily and

behavioural transformation, this paper examines both the production of docile bodies and the ways in which these women challenge and reinforce such disciplining practices.<sup>1</sup>

## **Border guards**

The increasing feminisation of transnational migration in Southeast Asia is associated with labour movements into the domestic service sector by women from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, and Thailand. There are no precise figures on the numbers of transnational female migrants from the region working as domestic maids<sup>2</sup>. As an indicator, however, some estimate that there are between 4.2 to 6.4 million Filipinas working abroad as domestic helpers and entertainers (Wee and Sim 2). While these women typically migrate to the Middle East, Japan, Europe and North America as maids, large numbers also find employment in the rapidly developing countries of the region. As increasing numbers of women in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia enter paid employment outside the home, demand for relatively cheap female migrant labour to perform household tasks has risen. It is estimated that there are approximately 140,000 foreign workers employed as maids in Singapore (Chiam). The Singaporean Ministry of Manpower (MOM) does not release details on the gender or nationality of foreign workers, making it extremely difficult to determine actual numbers of domestic workers among the more than 600,000 foreign workers on work permits. Huang and Yeoh ("The Difference Gender Makes") ascertain that there are almost equal numbers of women from the Philippines and Indonesia working as maids, with a significant minority from Sri Lanka. In a country where women's labour force participation in 2003 was 53.9% (Singapore Department of Statistics), this equates to approximately one foreign domestic worker to every seven households.

The employment of foreign domestic workers in Singapore is highly regulated. The Singapore government introduced the Foreign Maid Scheme in 1978 in an effort to encourage the continued participation of Singaporean women in the paid workforce. As a condition of their work permits, all foreign maids are required to live in the homes of their employers and must return to their home country at the end of their two-year contract. They are not permitted to marry Singaporeans or Singapore Permanent Residents (PR). On top of the salaries that they pay to their domestic workers, employers must also pay a 'maid levy'<sup>3</sup> and a one-time security bond (S\$5000 per maid) to the government; purchase a personal accident insurance policy for their maid (because the Workers' Compensation Act does not cover foreign domestic workers); and ensure that their workers undergo a twice yearly medical examination (including pregnancy test) to ascertain medical fitness to work. Employers forfeit the security bond if their employee is found to be pregnant, to have contracted a sexual disease, or to have married a Singaporean or PR. From the government's perspective these requirements are aimed at increasing the costs of hiring maids and thus reducing the country's reliance on foreign labour, referred to colloquially as the 'maid dependency syndrome'.

Significantly, these measures are not designed to protect the rights of women working as maids. Foreign domestic workers fall outside the Employment Act and despite the efforts of local NGOs, the government has refused to consider mandatory standardised contracts and employment regulations for domestic workers on the grounds that the nature of housework and carer responsibilities within the home makes such regulation impossible (Lyons). Women are kept marginalised and vulnerable by tacit state support for practices that determine how they are allocated to employers and what work they do within the private space of their employers' homes. Most work arrangements are based on negotiated agreements between agents and employers. The women themselves are rarely privy to these discussions. This can lead to extremely long working hours, dangerous work conditions, and few (if any) days off. Local and regional media frequently

report instances of problems between employers and maids, 'run-a-way' maids, maid abuse, and even maid deaths in the workplace (Huang and Yeoh, "The Difference Gender Makes:").

State regulation of the 'maid market' in Singapore serves to inscribe the 'otherness' of the domestic worker and to safeguard the geographical and symbolic boundaries of the nation. The Singaporean government not only limits access to the geopolitical territory of the state by determining who is eligible for entry, but strengthens the symbolic boundaries of the nation by regulating access to civil rights. By limiting her access to labour laws and containing her within the private space of her employer's home, the maid remains 'outside' the formal labour market. Enconced within the home of her employer, her status is re-inscribed by traditional gender roles that mark the distinction between the public and private (housework as women's work), and by state discourses that support the 'privacy' of the domestic sphere (ie. a space where the state takes a 'hands-off' approach).<sup>4</sup> With few formal avenues for complaint and limited citizenship rights (including the right to procreate or to marry), she relies on informal and often tenuous contacts with agents and embassies to address problems in the workplace. In this way, state policies not only serve to mark out the boundaries of the nation-state but also to produce docile bodies with limited opportunities for formalised resistance. The state is aided in this program by a range of willing accomplices, including recruitment agents, employers and even the women themselves.

## **Producing docile bodies**

The process of 'making' the maid begins in the woman's home village, where recruitment agents constantly seek out 'new blood' to meet the demand for cheap domestic help. Thousands of licensed and unlicensed employment agencies operating in Asia are linked through complex transnational recruitment networks. Scouts earn a commission from these agencies for each new recruit (Hugo). It

is the job of these recruiters to sell an image of domestic work as a guaranteed source of income and stability to poor rural women. Once the women are recruited they travel long distances from their home village to a transit node or nodes where they are trained as domestic workers while waiting for their placement. Recruiters in the sending country in turn are linked with agents in the receiving countries who match up employers with employees. The 'maid trade' operates within an explicitly market oriented frame of reference – the women are commodities to be traded between suppliers and buyers. At each step, the women are moulded into an appropriate image of subservient help: hardworking, submissive, and obedient. This process, however, is never complete. Employers try to ensure that their maids meet their expectations about appropriate behaviour through a continuous disciplining regime.

### ***The 'maid trade'***

Agents or scouts in the sending country, as the first stage in the recruitment process, help to transform 'village women' into 'domestic workers'. From the agent's perspective, the way the women are treated at the recruitment stage is an important part of the disciplining process designed to "elicit from the very start of the process, a sense of dedication, loyalty, and sacrifice, a sense of how to present herself as a domestic worker" (Constable 73). Agents amass individual dossiers for each woman, including photographs, videos, results from aptitude tests, medical reports, and sometimes even personal essays or testimonials. The women learn that deferential behaviour is embodied through physical appearance, dress and bodily stance. In many cases, these behaviours serve to reinforce a set of culturally inscribed gender scripts that the women have learnt from a young age. At the same time, however, the women are acutely aware that they are competing for placement with thousands of other hopefuls, and that 'playing along' and providing the 'right' answers are crucial in the quest to secure a good employer. The women report that they dress in certain ways and adjust their personal details (including marital status, age, number and age of any

children) in order to meet the agent or employer's perceived expectations. For many women, re-writing their bodies in these ways is an act of resistance to the homogenizing effects of the recruitment process. Although through their actions they end up conforming to the agent's model of a marketable maid, deep 'inside' they know that these performances are contrived and have little bearing on who they 'really are'. The implications of these performances on the individual's sense of self, however, can be devastating. Nicole Constable notes in her study of Filipina women working in Hong Kong that some women by playing along actually internalise a sense of inferiority.

Once the women have been recruited, the two-fold process of training and marketing begins. Most recruitment agents provide training in the sending country through registered training centres or by informal arrangements. Among the skills that women learn during their training period is the importance of displaying complete deference to their employers. These are often prescribed through detailed 'Codes of Discipline' or 'Rules for Domestic Workers'. For example, in one book under a section titled 'How to be a good maid', women are told 'Listen attentively and obey instructions given by your employer', 'Always be cheerful and truthful', 'Respect your employer's religion by not praying in the house', 'Don't talk to other maids in your neighbourhood', and 'Don't argue with your employer' (Tan and Suhardy).

In Singapore, approximately 80% of domestic workers are procured through licensed employment agencies and the remainder through informal networks of families and friends (Leong). The women are marketed to potential employers through agency shop-fronts, as well as advertisements in local newspapers and via the Web. Maid agencies are generally located in major shopping centres where consumers can easily compare the products of different agents, and where foreign domestic workers can come to make arrangements for transfers or repatriation. Until recently, photographs of the agent's product, the potential maid, were pasted on agency windows, and in many cases the women themselves were displayed standing/sitting in front of or inside the office. MOM banned these

displays in 2003 arguing that such practices were unacceptable because they treated maids like 'commodities' and because they "created international disrepute for Singapore, as we are perceived not to have accorded the foreign domestic workers basic human dignity" (Ho).

Unlike agency shop-fronts, however, web-sites are unregulated. The amount of detail provided on each web-site varies from agency to agency. In addition to photographs and bio-data, these sites may include 'star ratings' on a range of variables, including looks and appearance (skin colour), cleanliness, ability to perform different household tasks, and behaviours/attitudes. Agency web-sites and print advertisements also inform prospective clients about the costs associated with hiring a maid, as well as 'special deals', 'replacement warranties', and 'trial offers'. This 'cyber-commodification' (Tyner) serves to market the domestic worker "as though she were an inanimate household appliance: she comes in various models, goes on sale, includes a warranty, and can easily be replaced if the customer is not satisfied" (Constable 62). Some agencies have recently begun to offer overseas visits for potential employers to meet with maids and observe their behaviour in specially set up training centres in the sending country. These package tours include airfares, transport, lunch (cooked by the maids), and even overnight accommodation and sightseeing (Loh).

In marketing domestic workers to potential employers, maid agencies rely on a range of stereotypes that serve to differentiate between products. The key marker of product differentiation is nationality, which in turn draws on common-sense assumptions about gender, ethnicity, religion, language ability, class and educational qualifications (Huang and Yeoh, "Maids and Ma'ams in Singapore"). The women I spoke to were very familiar with these stereotypes. Filipinas informed me that although they were 'outspoken' they were more 'hardworking' than Indonesians, who were 'quiet and stupid'. Similarly, Indonesian women commented that Filipinas were 'loud and difficult' compared to 'hardworking, shy' Indonesians. Employers are told that despite their expense and demanding nature, Filipinas are 'good with children', whereas Indonesians are better at mundane

household chores. Experience is another important marker of difference exploited by agents – the advantage of new workers (newbies) is that they are less informed about labour conditions, haven't learnt 'bad habits', and are easier to 'break in.' In contrast, veteran workers are more skilled, require less 'training', and are unlikely to feel homesick.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to learning product differentiation, employers are also advised how to 'manage' their servants (Phua). A number of books have been written to assist them in this task (see Short Sierakowski; Tan and Suhardy). For example, in a book aimed at both employers and employees, the maid is advised:

Never pull a long face when asked to do a little more work or when scolded by your employer. When they scold you, there must be a reason. It must be that you have done something wrong or something not to their liking. Find out from them first and then apologise (Tan and Suhardy 61).

Don't ever challenge your employer by saying that 'If you don't like me, send me back to my agent/Indonesia or transfer me'. Remember, you are not the one who decides or tells the employer what to do. Just do your work to your best as required by your employer and leave the rest to him/her. Everybody likes a hardworking and obedient worker (Tan and Suhardy 64).

The training and marketing processes serve two purposes: to induct women into appropriate maid behaviours; and to shape the employers' expectations about what their maid will/should be like. The training the women receive in housework and caring is usually inadequate to prepare them for the actual workplace. Inadequate training often creates tension between the employer, the maid and the agency, with employers blaming agents for exaggerating the 'qualities' of their product:

... *finding a good maid is like taking a strike at the jackpot* - you just hope to strike the right combination with the right agency. If all agencies could ensure proper training and orientation before a

maid is placed, that would pave the way for more happy relationships between maids and employers. (Boon, emphasis added).

This tension emerges out of the agent's desire to procure domestic workers as cheaply as possible by minimising the costs associated with training. From the agent's perspective, it is better if employers conduct training because each home and each family is different. As one agent commented, "The way each sets a table or makes coffee is different. ...Even if you train maids till the cows come home, it will not solve maid problems and employers will still complain" ("Maid to Order"). For the agent, the most important part of the training process is not to develop skills, but to produce docile bodies that respond easily and quickly to employer demands. The training and marketing processes are designed to strip women of their individuality and teach them the value of deferential behaviour towards those in authority, including agency staff, government officials and employers. These behaviours are reinforced in the workplace.

### ***'One of the family'***

In many cases, when a woman is first delivered to her employer, she is ignorant not only of the family's personal circumstances but also the conditions of her employment. The job of informing her usually falls to the woman in charge of household tasks – the 'Ma'am'. She is sometimes assisted in her task by another senior woman (usually her mother-in-law who also lives in the household) or by children. In the stories that domestic workers tell about their employment experiences the 'Sir' is noticeably absent, suggesting that he plays a much smaller role in the disciplining process. In some cases, the busy Ma'am expects her new employee to instinctively know what is required of her, a circumstance that is exacerbated when there are language barriers between the women. Many of the women reported being bewildered at the Ma'am's instructions, and consequently being fearful of making mistakes. Family members are often enlisted to supervise

the maid's activities, or to report back to the Ma'am on the maid's behaviour. Where family members are not available to undertake these surveillance activities the employer may rely on neighbours or come home during the day for surprise visits.

Many employers consciously seek to reinforce the subordinate role of the maid by controlling her spatial movements within the household. In referring to the 'boundaries of spatial deference' Parreñas notes that a maid's access to space within the household is more contained than it is for the rest of the family (165). While she is expected to have access to all rooms in the household for cleaning purposes, the same rooms are 'off-limits' at other times of the day. Amongst the limitations placed on the women's use of household space include being restricted to the use of one bathroom/toilet that is distinctively marked as her 'own'; prohibitions against sitting on sofas or spending leisure time in the living room; and the requirement to eat her meals separately to the family (often in the kitchen or her bedroom). In this way, she is constantly reminded that her employer's house is her workplace and never her 'home'.

Very often, domestic workers have almost no personal space within the household. Where they care for infants and small children, they may sleep in the children's room and/or bed. Some women sleep on mats in the kitchen or living room, a space that is not only 'publicly' available to all members of the household at all times, but a space that only becomes available for sleeping once all members of the family have retired to their own rooms. Several women reported to me how 'lucky' they were in their present employment situation because they had their own bedroom, sometimes fitted with a television and en suite. Even these spaces may be visible marked as inferior by their size, location (next to the kitchen/laundry), or physical layout (windowless, mattress on the floor, no cupboard space). The separateness of the maid's physical space, however, does not denote privacy; the employer may enter her room without invitation and inspect it without permission. Employers not only determine which spaces a domestic worker can inhabit, but also when she may use those

spaces. Many women reported that they are required to ask permission to use the toilet, to sleep, or to eat. Consequently, although the women may spend almost all their time within their employer's homes, they have almost no opportunity to create a space of their own.

The women's access to space outside the house is also restricted. Many domestic workers report that they are locked in the house during the day while the employer's family are at work/school. It is not unusual for domestic workers in Singapore to be provided with only one day off per month. Several of the women I spoke to had contracts that involved no time off at all during a 2-year period. Many of the women reported that they were given strict curfews if they went out. While some women are allowed to leave the house on their own to run errands, buy groceries, or drop off/pick up children from school, many others can only leave the house if they are accompanied by a member of the employer's family. Women who get to leave the house use this valuable time alone to telephone their families and buy personal items or food. Sometimes, clawing back her 'own time' in this way attracts the anger of the Ma'am, who complains about how long it takes for the woman to return to the house. Repeated offenders may find that this 'privilege' is removed. For many women, taking children to a local playground may be one of the few opportunities that they have to interact with other domestic workers. They use this time to share news and information, including details of their individual employment circumstances. These contacts form an important support network and thus attract the ire of employers who may try to limit the opportunity for the women to interact with each other. They may deliberately timetable off days during the week to minimise the opportunity for women to meet, or drive their maid to and from religious meetings (an acceptable outing) on their days off (Yeoh and Huang).

In addition to these restrictions, the women are frequently confronted with a series of 'rules' that dictate their access to household items. In many cases the women may be given separate items that are visibly marked as different to those used by other members of the household, including plastic

plates and cups for eating, or cheap brands of soap or shampoo for bathing. They may be barred from using telephones, televisions, air conditioners, and hot water. Many women I spoke to raised the issue of showering as a constant source of conflict with employers who frequently complained that the women were using too much hot water and taking too long to shower. One woman I spoke to reported that her employer only allowed her to bathe once a week. Other women reported that their employers would frequently come knocking on the toilet door if they took 'too long'.

Such disciplining behaviours are also applied to the maid's physical appearance. While few employers in Singapore require their domestic workers to wear a uniform, there is conformity of dress amongst maids consisting of knee-length shorts and long T-shirts. In some instances, the employment agent supplies this 'de-facto uniform' during the training period. Many women remarked that their employer did not allow them to wear skirts, jeans or short tops. These restrictions extended to the women's days off, with the employer insisting that the women change their clothes before leaving the house. Similar restrictions apply to the length or style of hair, and the wearing of make-up. Speech habits are another important marker of deference. Referring to their employers by the terms 'Ma'am' and 'Sir', and using a quiet voice accompanied by ingratiating postures such as downcast eyes or head, are common. At the same time, however, workers are expected to perform their tasks eagerly and with a smile, a process Parreñas describes as the 'emotional labour of smiling' (171).

While some of these disciplining behaviours seek to mark the otherness of the domestic worker by separating her from members of the household, other processes seek to embed her within the family in a gender specific role. The Ma'am is often protective and nurturing towards her 'childlike' worker and may interpret the restrictions she places on the maid's behaviour and dress as in her 'best interests'. She may use the language of 'one of the family' to explain her actions. For example, accompanying the domestic worker on her day off or imposing a strict curfew may be re-

interpreted as acts aimed to ensure the safety of the woman, that is, to treat her 'like a daughter'. Employers may deliberately invoke familial ties in order to encourage greater loyalty and service from their maids, and to minimise the opportunities for transgressions. In this way, patriarchal gender norms are reinscribed on the body of the maid as a means of securing greater control over her labour. Where the women are responsible for looking after infants and small children, these relations build upon pre-existing emotional bonds that tie the nanny to her charge. For their part, domestic workers may use the discourse of being 'one of the family' to de-emphasise servitude psychologically. They may also use it to enjoy a more lax work routine and greater flexibility. For many women, the decision to purposefully embrace intimacy rather than distance may thus be an important survival mechanism (Parreñas 182).

The eagerness with which some women insert themselves into their employer's family points to the complexity of theorising everyday resistance amongst domestic workers. As Nicole Constable (59) notes, while "agencies, employers, and government all attempt to mold women into docile and obedient domestic workers, the women themselves are also involved in the disciplining process, both as willing accomplices and as unknowing victims." It would thus be a mistake to attribute oppressive power to the employers and view workers as capable only of resistance. Subordinates respond to domination in mundane, informal, diffuse and individualistic ways, what Ozyegin refers to as a routine action, a "constant process of testing and renegotiating of relations between classes" (21). Among the women I spoke to, examples of conscious resistance include the use of emotional displays as a way of negotiating working conditions. The women may cry or appear sad in front of their employers as a way of making them feel guilty. Where the employer has used a familial mode of reference to position the maid within the household, such displays require motherly intervention in the form of making the 'child' feel better. Other tactics, used less successfully, include arguing back or sharing personal information. The women use these tactics sparingly, however, recognising that to be effective they should not be used too frequently.

## Sites of rupture

In December 2001, Muawanatul Chasanah, a 19-year old Indonesian woman, died in Singapore after months of brutal assault by her employer (Ho and Chong). Tragically, her case is not an unusual one. Embassies, churches and mosques frequently report cases of physical and sexual assault among domestic workers who have run-away from their employers. Not all domestic workers who die on the job are killed by their employers. Between 1999 and 2003, over 100 foreign domestic workers in Singapore fell to their deaths from high-rise apartments. Many others survived but were left with crippling injuries. The majority are believed to have fallen while cleaning windows or hanging out laundry<sup>6</sup> (Zainol). Maid deaths are often attributed to poor training, as evidenced in the responses of sending and receiving governments, recruitment agencies and employers, all of whom advocate ‘better training’ in order to avoid future deaths. What remains unspoken in most accounts of these tragedies, however, are the numbers of domestic workers who ‘fall’ from apartments as an act of suicide.

Cases of death point to extreme instances where disciplining processes have fatal effects. They also underscore the great variability in the women’s experiences of working in Singapore. Many of the women I spoke to recounted extremely positive employment experiences. Employers and agents have at their disposal a range of disciplining repertoires as they undertake the work of inscribing deference. Not all employers or agents use all of these techniques or employ them at all times. They are successful precisely because they draw upon and reinforce culturally available gender scripts. Even so, the process of producing docile bodies is never complete. The women employ tactics of everyday resistance to overcome situations and circumstances that constantly inscribe their servitude. It would be tempting to put these women’s experiences down to chance; to consider them

as simply the 'lucky ones'. To address the rights of domestic workers, however, we need to look beyond individual circumstances (the luck of the draw), and attend to the structural factors that support these disciplining processes.

Competing state policies on immigration, labour and population growth create a situation in which the production of a docile foreign labour force becomes an easy solution to the contradictions inherent in the demand for Singaporean women's paid labour on the one hand and the need to maintain strict border controls on the other. The Singaporean state simultaneously encourages middle-class women to enter the paid workforce as a means to ensure continued economic growth, and to have three or more children as a means to ensure the country's economic future. For many of these women, employing a foreign domestic worker is an essential means of balancing the competing demands of paid work, housework and child/elder care. The government, wary of taking on responsibility for a large unskilled foreign workforce, uses immigration and labour laws to ensure that they have the flexibility to remove such workers in times of economic downturn. Disciplining processes that constantly inscribe deference act as a means to demarcate the boundaries between citizens and non-citizens, and ensure that both employers and the government have a docile workforce at their convenience. They mark the bodies of female migrant domestic workers in gendered and raced ways such that these women become the very embodiment of transnationalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Data presented in this paper is based on in-depth focus groups with 20 domestic workers from the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka carried out in Singapore in February and March 2004. Special thanks to Noorashikin Abdul Rahman, Siti Muyasaroh, Theresa D/O Wilson Devasayaham, Genevieve Kannangaea, Bridgit Lew, and Beatriz Lorente for their assistance in organizing the interviews. This research was conducted while I was a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore.

<sup>22</sup> Data on transnational migration in the region is extremely difficult to verify due to the large numbers of 'illegal' or 'unofficial' migrants, as well as the reticence of national governments to release migration data.

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<sup>3</sup> In 2004, the levy was S\$345 per month (US\$0.58 = S\$1). The government sets standard salary levels (ranging from \$350 for Filipinas to \$200 per month for Sri Lankans), but employers can provide higher salaries to workers. According to the Singaporean Ministry of Manpower the levy is necessary to curb the flow of foreign domestic workers into Singapore, and to reduce the ‘unhealthy’ dependency on foreign workers.

<sup>4</sup> I am referring here to dominant state discourses rather than actual state practices. The PAP government has a long history of intervention in the private sphere.

<sup>5</sup> These comments are drawn from a brief survey of employment agency web-sites and discussion forums in Singapore.

<sup>6</sup> In Singapore, laundry is typically hung out to dry on long bamboo poles slotted into steel pipes on the outside of the apartment. To place the pole into the slot, one must lean out of the window while holding the pole laden with wet washing. The women often climb onto stools or chairs in order to reach out far enough, and the risk of toppling over is increased.