Maids and Ma'ams in Singapore: Constructing Gender and Nationality in the Trans-nationalization of Paid Domestic Work

Shirlena Huang and Brenda S.A. Yeoh
National University of Singapore*

This paper examines the migration of women to work as domestic helpers in a foreign country as part of the global and regional systems of labor movements associated with global economic restructuring. A growing component of labor flows from less developed countries has been that of female migrants seeking work as paid domestic helpers in the households of their richer neighboring countries whose women have gone out to work in the formal economy. We argue that while the availability of foreign domestic helpers helps to alleviate the shortage of local maids in well-off economies like Singapore, it is a solution that is predicated on certain nationalistic and gendered stereotypes: while each nationality of women is 'valued' for a specific quality seen as enhancing their worth as domestic helpers, their valorization rests on attributes perceived as feminine, viz., a willingness to do a repetitive, boring and menial job for relatively low wages. Thus, while Third World women may see working as domestic helpers in a higher-growth economy as a means of improving their economic future, it is an option that reinforces existing social ideologies of the low worth of Third World women's labor.

Keywords: *Domestic helpers, gender, nationality, Singapore, Southeast Asia.*

Structuralist approaches to migration which generally locate 'choices and constraints within an understanding of wider institutional and market processes' have been 'most fully developed in relation to international labor migration, where the roles of direct long-distance recruitment and the interconnection between migration, investment and production strategies within a changing global division of labor have been most evident' (Gordon, 1995: 139). The use of such approaches in the analysis of female migration coincided with global shifts in the world economy, the changing gender division of labor and the emergence of gender-differentiated mobility on an international scale (Chant and Radcliffe, 1992). Within the context of the international division of labor, countries lower down the development hierarchy have been assigned labor-intensive and menial aspects of production which are generally dependent on the incorporation of female migrants into the lowly-paid workforce.

While the high dependence on female workers in factories located in developing and newly industrializing countries has long been acknowledged, it is only more

* Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Kent Ridge, Singapore, 119260.

recently that research has been extended beyond examining the links between global restructuring and women's formal employment to include women's roles in the informal sector as well as the reproductive sphere. As Ward (1990:5) has pointed out, 'by examining only women's formal work, researchers have perpetuated the artificial divisions between the so-called public (male) and private (female) spheres. In so doing, they have failed to analyze the permeable or overlapping boundaries between women's formal and informal work and housework relative to the distinct boundaries between men's formal work and their contribution to housework, or lack thereof. As a consequence theoretical integration of all facets of women's work has suffered'. Ward (1990:3) notes that the challenge for research is to examine 'how capital's demand for the economic participation of women has generated contradictions and economic tensions at the intersections of home, the informal sector, and the formal sector and the patriarchal institutions and ideologies that define women's work and family roles'.

This paper aims to meet this challenge by examining an oft-neglected aspect of the impact of global restructuring on women, viz., that of the international migration of women from developing and newly industrializing countries to work as domestic helpers in more developed economies. Indeed, one of the most dramatic of such flows within South and Southeast Asia has been the flow of women from the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, India and Myanmar migrating to work as paid domestic workers in the region's higher-growth economies of Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. As we have demonstrated elsewhere (Huang and Yeoh, 1996), global restructuring has not only intensified the shift in reproductive work from the household to the market, but has also been predicated on the international mobility of labor because the needs of the reproductive sphere in many industrialized countries can no longer be met internally. Transnationalized paid domestic work provides an ideal site to examine the contradictions and tensions of women's entry into the labor force for various reasons.

First, the dependence on migrant women as a crucial substitute in the reproductive sphere essentially rests on the idea—and reality—that reproductive labor is not only commodifiable, but that it can be transnationalized, that is, bought and sold across national borders. Unlike the demand for labor in global factories wherein capital crosses political and economic boundaries in search of the 'right kind' of workers, the demand for migrant domestic helpers is dependent on the mobility of the workers across geopolitical boundaries because the worksites are 'fixed' at the employer's home. However, the demand for workers at both types of worksites (whether the global factory or home) is embodied in the persons of women from less developed countries who are willing to work for much poorer rates of pay and conditions than would be accepted by their counterparts from more developed economies for the same kind of job. It is important to remember, however, that the women who cross national boundaries to work in homes located in another country are not merely just another form of commodified labor. As we have argued elsewhere (Huang and Yeoh, 1996; Yeoh and Huang, 1998a), the case of the migrant domestic helper

is a special one because her worksite is what is generally regarded as private space—the home of her employer; her work belongs to the traditionally invisible realm of women's material work within the home (usually provided as a woman's labor of love and hence, unpaid); her employer is usually another woman, and almost always, one of another nationality; and her new country of residence and employment often does not accord her much employment protection.

Second, the migrational flows of domestic helpers from Third World countries to better-off economies in industrialized and newly industrializing countries may be seen as a response by women from the former set of countries to new opportunities brought about by the global economy, as with other forms of employment associated with capital accumulation such as that in world market factories. Yet, such work merely transforms the nature of women's subordination rather than provides a means of alleviating it. In the case of migrant domestic workers, the highly differentiated quality of the flows not only draws upon but in turn reinforces established stereotypes of Third World women based mainly on gender and nationality.

We argue here that while paid domestic labor is a different context of Third World labor demand from that of the global factory, it rests on the same 'ideology of the naturalness of women's skills and capabilities, [and] capital in fact adapts the regulation of the labor force to different structures of subordination... The ways in which women are incorporated into the wage labor force in different contexts both reflect and determine the process of gender subordination' (Pearson et al., 1984). Employers—often also women, as already noted—draw upon the transnational labor force for reproductive help in their homes. This is an extension of the 'nimble finger' ideology (Elson and Pearson, 1984) assumed by industrialists—usually males—who move production facilities into Third World countries and thus contribute to perpetuating the stereotype of Third World women as docile and exploitable in terms of pay and working hours, and well suited for tedious monotonous assembly work.[1] Furthermore, in the case of domestic work, feminist literature clearly argues that by employing a female to take over the reproductive sphere when both husband and wife work, middle-class women are exploiting other women in the same way that men used women to free themselves of reproductive responsibilities to advance in the productive sphere (Romero, 1992; Gregson and Lowe, 1994; Macklin, 1994), what Heyzer and Wee (1994:39) call a 'genderized mode of labor substitution' (emphasis added).

As an aspiring global city, Singapore is very much locked into the geographies of labor migration in the Southeast Asian region and presents an ideal case by which to examine the region's 'maid trade'. In the rest of the paper, we first examine how Singapore women, in responding to social and economic structuring, interpret and negotiate the set of practices which make up domestic work. We then interrogate the relations between the demand for foreign domestic helpers from the perspective of how gender cross-cuts with nationality, arguing that negotiations around paid domestic service are ultimately filtered through gendered and nationalized lenses. While recognizing that race and nationality are different 'animals', we follow Smith

(1989) in arguing that racism intersects with nationalism, not least in the case of foreign domestic maids who are often described and differentiated using fixed categories conflating 'race' and 'nationality' (along with other characteristics perceived to be immanent such as 'color' and 'culture').[2] What adds to this conflation of ideas in the Singapore case is that there is as high a likelihood of the Singapore employer and her foreign maid sharing similar racial and/or cultural characteristics (as in the case of a Singapore Malay-Muslim employer and an Indonesian Muslim maid), as there is a likelihood of apparent similarities (such as a Singapore Indian family employing a Sri Lankan maid) disguising major differences, including language (for example, Tamil as opposed to Sinhalese) and religion (for example, Hindu as opposed to Buddhist or Christian).

To support our arguments, we draw upon both secondary sources (mainly census reports, data published by interest groups and press reports) and our field work in Singapore which included a random questionnaire survey of 162 pairs of foreign domestic workers and their employers. This was followed by in-depth interviews of 15 employers and 30 domestic helpers, not necessarily paired; interviews generally lasted between two to four hours each. Interviews were also conducted with representatives of maid agencies and a number of interest groups directly or indirectly concerned with foreign maids, such as the relevant embassies and church groups. The decisions made by the larger players—such as the governments of sending and receiving countries and the employment agencies—in the maid trade, particularly over 'recruitment and transfers..., play a crucial role in initiating and directing migrational flows as any taken by individual migrants' (Gordon, 1995, 139) and in creating and maintaining or modifying existing stereotypes of foreign domestic workers. Yet, it is important to also hear the voices of the women who live out the results of these decisions at the everyday level. The in-depth interviews were therefore essential in providing us with the women's own interpretation of their work and migration histories, as well as negotiations of domestic practices and employer-employee relationships.

As we have noted more comprehensively elsewhere (Yeoh and Huang, 1998b), in conducting this research we were faced with certain issues in terms of our positionalities as both researchers 'outside' the process (for example, in the interviews with maids, we were always conscious of the asymmetrical power relations between ourselves as highly-educated professional women and our interviewees as migrant women who were less educated and working in a job generally regarded as undesirable) and as complicit 'insiders' in the sense that as middle-class Singaporean women, we ourselves employed foreign maids to help us resolve our own 'domestic crisis' in the home while we were at work. Often, we found that the quality and direction of our interviewing and analyses were shaped not only by our reading of the wider academic literature on the subject, but also by both our own personal experiences and our interviewees' perceptions of us as employers. The research has made us more fully aware of the vagueness of the insider/outsider and public/private dichotomies, as well as the interconnections between power, ethics and knowledge. Coming face-

to-face with the reality in which we are actually participating has been uncomfortable but hopefully, it has also made us more self-reflexive and conscientious in living up to what we aspire to do in our writing.

NEGOTIATING CONCEPTIONS OF DOMESTIC WORK IN SINGAPORE

Much has been written about the ideology of domesticity and the association of women with housework, childbearing and child rearing in the private sphere in western capitalist countries. It has been argued that nineteenth-century industrialization and suburbanization led to a separation of the productive from the reproductive sphere and a hardening of gender-specific roles for men and women (McDowell, 1983; Miller, 1983; Mackenzie, 1989; Little, 1994). While the public/private dichotomy has been criticized for being dualistic, for universalizing women's oppression, and for leaving unchallenged the assumption that women's oppression is a separable and hence peripheral element of social life (Nicholson, 1992; Chowdhry, 1995), the fact remains that the failure to include or valorize the invisible work of the home and its immutable association with women remains fundamental to understanding gender inequalities. Indeed, the gender division of labor is 'endemic cross-culturally' and 'remarkably resistant to macro-level economic circumstance' (Sanchez, 1993:454), a finding supported by a recent report on the sexual division of labor issued by the International Labor Organization (*The Straits Times*, 8 October 1992).

Singapore's female labor force participation rate (LFPR) has been consistently rising alongside its standard of living since the 1960s. The female LFPR stood at 50.3 percent in 1990, a level relatively higher than other Southeast Asian countries, and closer to rates found in developed economies. More significantly, the LFPR of married women rose from 14.7 percent in 1957 to 43.2 percent in 1990 (Huang and Yeoh, 1996) and dual-career households rose from 27 percent of all married couples in 1980 to 40 percent in 1990, almost equaling the number in which only the husband worked (Department of Statistics, 1994). Another important change which has had implications for domestic practices has been the rise of the nuclear household. With the proportion of single family nucleus households[3] in Singapore climbing steadily from 63.5 percent in 1957 to 85.1 percent by 1990 (Quah, 1993), many families no longer have convenient access to traditional sources of help from members in an extended family for housework and childcare (Yeoh and Huang, 1994; Huang and Yeoh, 1997). Despite these rapidly changing circumstances of the 1980s and 1990s, women, regardless of whether they join the labor force, have continued to bear the main brunt of domestic responsibilities (Wong and Leong, 1993).

The view that women are naturally suited to and should assume the 'traditional' roles of caregiver and homemaker regardless of whether they have taken up paid work is a prevalent one which not only undergirds various state policies (Soin,

1996) but also apparently has popular support (*The Straits Times,* 10 September 1994). The Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has noted that it is 'neither possible nor wise for the sexes to be treated equally' because there are 'anthropological asymmetries—traditions in a patriarchal society' which have to be accepted (*The Straits Times,* 10 September 1994). Policies such as the availability of subsidies to offset part of childcare fees offered only to 'working mothers', the absence of paternity leave, and tax relief to offset the employment of a foreign maid only if the Singapore employer is a married working woman further reinforce a woman's primary roles as mother and caregiver. There appears to be popular support not only for the gender division of roles but also the state's view that men are the heads of households. A 1994 survey by the Singapore Council of Organizations for Women found that three-quarters of both men and women were of the opinion that husbands should always be considered the head of the family and its main financial provider, two-thirds felt that wives should spend more time than husbands on household chores, and 60 percent considered that mothers rather than fathers should have the larger role in childcare (*The Straits Times,* 24 December 1994). The image of women being the linchpin of domestic life is also reinforced in the way dysfunctional families and juvenile delinquency in Singapore have been conflated by the media with maternal deprivation brought about by an increasing percentage of working mothers in society. For example, one (male) journalist contended that as a panacea to social ills, mothers should 'put their families first, raise children in their own homes, set the tone for family life and make up for absent fathers who have to work late or travel on business', further advocating courses on family life to 'train stay-home mums to do a good job and feel good about their choice' (*The Straits Times,* 29 November 1995).

That housework and childcare are the lot of every woman is not only an accepted notion but also a reality in Singapore. The 1994 survey cited above found that 80 percent of wives compared to 25 percent of husbands were the main or sole person responsible for daily chores such as grocery shopping, cooking, house cleaning and washing dishes (*The Straits Times,* 24 December 1994). Women are also primarily responsible for childcare: our own research (Yeoh and Huang, 1995); Huang and Yeoh, 1997) has consistently found that the majority of mothers who have no paid employment act as their children's main caregiver while women who have taken up paid work resort mainly to female domestic helpers, the children's grandmothers, aunts or other female relatives, other 'housewives' who double up as babysitters, or childcare centers staffed predominantly by female teachers. The following quote, taken from one of our respondents (Swee Lee), is reflective of the general acceptance by Singapore women that they have to—and can—live up to society's expectations of women's ultimate responsibility in the home, whether or not they are in waged work and regardless of whether or not they like it:

> Singapore men are like any Asian Chinese, Muslims, Hindu. Any Asian I think has still got the concept that women should stay at home. If

> you want to work, go ahead, but make sure you come back and cook me a meal. I think that a woman can handle that they can go to work and come back and cook a meal and we are actually the stronger gender. And we can cope. We can. And if we can't, [the men's attitude is] if you are not going to cope, fine, let's go out and eat or find somebody else to do the cooking... Singapore men will not put in the effort at home. They are not going to give up that macho thing...

Purushotam (1992:339) argues that any significant change in this gendered division of domestic work would be seen to 'violate... the expression and experience of male dominance in Everyday Life'.

In support of the policy promoting the ideology of housework as women's work, the state first allowed a limited recruitment of migrant domestic workers in 1978. The inflow of foreign domestic workers was initially moderate with only about 20,000 working in Singapore by 1987 (*The Straits Times,* 7 February 1987). In the last decade, however, their numbers have grown rapidly and there are currently an estimated 100,000 foreign maids in Singapore, with three-quarters from the Philippines, one-fifth from Indonesia and the rest mainly from Sri Lanka (*The Straits Times,* 5 November 1997). To prevent perceived social and economic ills generated by the presence of these foreign maids (Yeoh, Huang and Gonzalez, 1999), the state has in place a series of mechanisms designed to control their influx including immigration laws, a stringent allocation system based on a number of criteria such as household income, and the imposition of a maid levy[4] (Huang and Yeoh, 1996). The gendered nature of these mechanisms is most obvious in the issuance of work permits. These are issued and subsequently renewed only on the condition that the female domestic workers do not marry Singaporeans or become pregnant; to ensure this, six-monthly medical check-up tests for pregnancy and venereal diseases are compulsory. Each employer pays a security bond of several thousand dollars which is forfeited should these conditions be violated. In contrast, as Heyzer and Wee (1994:64) have noted, "there is no corresponding anxiety of AIDS and venereal disease being spread by male foreign workers" who are not subject to the same tests.

One major area of concern related to the increased use of foreign women as paid domestic helpers substitutes is their impact on Singapore's future. As the rate of their influx was beginning to rise, the then Minister for Labor, Lee Boon Yang asked "What would a future generation of Singaporeans be like if so many grow up used to having maids to perform all the household duties?" (*The Straits Times,* 2 February 1988). More recently, nominated Member of Parliament Lee Tsao Yuan expressed concern over the 'insidious influence' that 'foreign maids employed here might have on the values transferred to the young' (*The Straits Times,* 20 March 1996). Other reasons the state has forwarded to justify the regulation of the number of foreign maids in Singapore include the long-term social problems and increased burden on public facilities imposed by a large number of foreign maids, and the

dampening effect on other local alternatives for childcare and housekeeping leading to such alternatives not being developed fully if foreign maids continue to flow in, thereby affecting those who could not afford to have maids (*The Straits Times,* 21 January 1989). Hence, working mothers are continually urged to depend on alternative options, such as part-time domestic help, sharing household duties among family members, child care centers, babysitters and grandparents for child care help, or undertaking part-time employment themselves, to meet the demands of the reproductive sphere; and, if employing a foreign maid becomes too expensive an option, women should just stop working (*The Straits Times,* 15 February 1988; 21 January 1989; 6 March 1989). Such 'alternatives' continue to place the burdens of the reproductive sphere primarily on women.

Because they view foreign domestic helpers primarily as a means of resolving the domestic crisis that face Singapore households—especially those where the women have entered the formal labor force—employers, both male and female, however, are complicit in perpetuating gendered notions of the reproductive sphere by shifting household responsibilities from local to migrant Third World women. Households in which both husband and wife work are much more dependent on foreign domestic workers than those with the more traditional arrangement in which only the husband worked: in 1990, 12.6 percent of dual career households employed foreign maids in comparison to only 3.4 percent of single career households (Department of Statistics, 1994). Although the bulk (97 percent) of those who employ maids have children, the advantage of using maids as a childcare option (over that of other suggested alternatives such as grandmothers, foster parents, or childcare centers) is that housework, and often other domestic chores such as the washing of cars or marketing, are usually taken care of as well.

THE 'RIGHT KIND' OF MAID: GENDERED AND NATIONALIZED CHARACTERISTICS

Profile of Maids and Employers Surveyed

Of the 162 employers in our survey, all but five were women. Over half (53.1 percent) employed Filipino maids, 27.8 percent Indonesians, 12.4 percent Sri Lankans, while 6.8 percent had maids from other nationalities (Indian, Thai and Burmese) (Table 1). Regardless of nationality, most of the maids were in their twenties and thirties, single rather than married, and had some formal education; most had worked before coming to Singapore and had held jobs in the informal sector (usually as domestic helpers, itinerant hawkers or unpaid family labor) or worked as production workers or in the sales and service industry. However, there were some interesting variations: the Indonesians had the greatest proportion of young maids, the Filipinas were the best educated and the Sri Lankans the least likely to have worked before. Greatest national variations were found in terms of religion: most Filipinos were Catholic, most Indonesians Muslim and most Sri Lankans were Buddhist.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of foreign domestic workers surveyed.

Characteristic	*Filipino* *n=86*	*Indonesian* *n=45*	*Sri Lankan* *n=20*	*Others* *n=11*	*Total* *n=162*
I. AGE (in years)					
<20	1.2	15.6	5.0	-	5.6
20–29	45.4	66.7	60.0	45.5	53.1
30–39	39.5	11.1	25.0	56.6	30.2
40–49	13.9	6.6	10.0	9.1	11.1
II. MARITAL STATUS					
Single	67.4	64.4	75.0	72.7	67.9
Married	17.4	24.4	20.2	18.2	19.8
Widowed/Divorced/Separated	15.1	2.2	5.0	9.1	12.3
III. RELIGION					
Catholic	79.1	-	10.0	18.2	44.4
Christian	19.8	4.4	10.0	9.1	13.6
Muslim	1.2	95.6	5.0	-	27.8
Buddhist	-	-	60.0	36.4	9.9
Hindu	-	-	15.0	18.2	3.1
Sikh	-	-	-	18.2	1.2
IV. EDUCATION					
No education	-	2.2	5.0	18.2	2.5
Some primary	3.5	2.2	-	18.2	3.7
Completed Primary	5.8	46.7	35.0	27.3	22.2
Secondary	22.1	31.1	25.0	36.4	25.9
Vocational	5.8	-	-	-	3.1
Pre-U/High School	54.7	17.8	35.0	-	38.3
University	8.1	-	-	-	4.3
V. PRIOR OCCUPATIONS*					
Never worked before	23.3	31.1	40.0	54.5	29.6
Domestic helper	14.0	28.8	5.0	18.2	17.3
Informal reproductive labor	14.0	22.2	10.0	-	14.9
Production worker	24.4	13.3	45.0	27.3	24.7
Sales and services	19.8	15.1	5.0	9.1	16.0
Clerical/secretarial	17.4	2.2	10.0	9.1	11.7
Administrative/supervisory	3.5	-	-	-	1.9
Teachers/tutors	4.7	4.4	5.0	-	4.3
Nurses/midwives	5.8	-	-	-	3.1
Farming/agricultural work	1.2	2.2	15.0	9.1	3.7
Other occupations	1.2	-	-	9.1	6.8

* Percentages add up to more than 100% because respondents provided multiple responses.

In contrast, most employers were older (in their thirties and forties), married and with at least a secondary school education (Table 2). The majority worked in the formal sector, mainly in management, executive, professional, administrative, secretarial or clerical positions; one-quarter were housewives or had retired. It is not surprising that none of the employers held production or related jobs, or worked as hawkers or manual laborers. Although there is no official figure, it has been esti-

Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics of employers surveyed.

(I) AGE (in years)		(IV) EDUCATION	
<20	-	No formal schooling	1.9
20–29	7.4	Primary	4.9
30–39	40.7	Secondary	29.6
40–49	34.0	Pre-Univ./Junior College/High School	19.1
>=50	17.9	Polytechnic/Vocational	8.6
(II) MARITAL STATUS		University	26.5
Single	9.9	Post-graduates	6.8
Married	84.0	Other	2.5
Widowed/Divorced/ Separated	6.1		
		(V) OCCUPATION	
(III) RELIGION		Housewife	25.3
Catholic	13.0	Managerial/Executive	13.0
Christian	40.7	Professional	26.5
Muslim	6.8	Administrative	6.2
Buddhist	17.3	Secretarial/Clerical	11.7
Hindu	4.9	Business	4.3
Atheist	13.0	Sales	3.7
Others	3.1	Technical	1.2
		Service	3.7
		Others	1.9
		Retired	2.5

mated that only those with a minimum yearly income of S$30,000 (approximately equivalent to US$20,000) are granted permits to employ foreign domestic helpers to ensure that employers have the means to upkeep a maid (*The Straits Times,* 5 April 1992)[5]. As with the foreign domestic workers, there was a great variety in terms of the religious affiliations among employers, but not in the same proportions as the former group.

The disparities in social, economic and cultural backgrounds between the foreign domestic workers and their employers provide the bases for examining paid domestic labor as a site through which intersecting and unequal relations pertaining to gender and nationality are negotiated and defined. The inequality of the relationship is heightened by the fact that almost all (93.8 percent in our survey) maids work alone in the household: while she has technically one employer, she is usually answerable to (the sometimes contradictory instructions of) all the adults in the household.

A Genderized Mode of Labor Substitution

Women employers in Singapore see the main role of their foreign domestic workers, whether married or single, with or without prior experience, as largely reliev-

ing them of basic household tasks, thereby freeing them for other activities that were luxuries before:

> The main benefit [of having a maid] for me, was that the relationship between me and my husband would be much better, you know, because I would not be so stressed out. And with the children, I would be able to spend quality time. I can let the maid do everything and I spend quality time with my kids. (Hasniza, a Muslim employer who works as administrator and has two young preschoolers; employs an Indonesian maid)
>
> It was actually easy to have somebody do all the mundane chores, so that I can really concentrate on my teaching plus the kids, at least I have more time to do the reading to them rather than being involved in cleaning up. (Cheng Ee, a Chinese employer who is a home-based music teacher with three young children; employs an Indonesian maid)

Thus, one woman's rights to 'quality time' with her family have been purchased by employing another woman to take over selected household responsibilities. Singapore employers seldom see the contradiction in this economic solution, even when the Singapore employer's greater wealth has meant taking away her less wealthy counterpart away from her own children. This 'right' to purchase a domestic substitute is not only an accepted norm in Singapore, with women from China being the earliest migrant domestic workers employed by middle—and upper—class families from as early as the 1930s when Singapore was still a British colony, but today it is often justified as a chance for employment that Singaporeans are providing for these migrant women (see Huang and Yeoh (1996) for details).

Because the reproductive sphere, paid or unpaid, is seen as 'women's work', it is usually the women in the household who not only take on most of the household responsibilities in the absence of a maid, they are also the ones who take charge of the search for a suitable maid, and who are primarily responsible for supervising the maid once the latter has been employed. Regardless of the fact that only about half (54.3 percent) of the foreign domestic workers were employed under the name of the lady of the house, it was almost always (96.9 percent of all households surveyed) a woman who was identified as having the main charge of the maid on a daily basis. Working women often took leave of absence from work to 'break the maid' into the household. In the event that maids had to leave (for reasons including the non-renewal of the maid's contract usually decided by the employer but occasionally reflecting the decision of the maid; dissatisfaction of working performances or conditions on the part of the employer or maid respectively; and unforeseen circumstances such as retrenchment of the employer or medical problems on the part of the maid), it was again the women who had to take over the main household chores, often sacrificing their own rest, calling upon the help of female relatives or exhausting all available leave to tide them through until the next maid came.

Few of the women questioned this 'natural' assumption of duties. In most households, the men were only called in when the women felt that the maids required a reprimand that would be taken seriously, and women felt that their own voices would not be sufficient. Thus, even in paid domestic work, we see a replication of the gender division of labor in society: men at the top, and women in the middle and at the bottom. Apart from this, most women dismissed their husbands' involvement in household responsibilities with the excuse that "he does not know anything and would be of little help" (April, a Chinese employer with two pre-schoolers).

April, for example, recalled her husband's incompetence in taking over the household responsibilities while they waited for a maid to replace their previous maid who had left. When her leave ran out after five of the six weeks during which they had no maid, her husband took leave from work to take over for the last week. Although April had coped singlehandedly with the housework and a toddler, April's elderly aunt was called upon to help with the childcare when April's husband took over, leaving him responsible for only the household chores. Despite these lessened responsibilities, her husband had some problems managing on his own:

> First he called [me at work] to say how do you work the washing machine, which buttons to press and so on, you know? A few minutes later he called to ask about how much soap powder to put in and where does it go...

After continuing problems with a string of maids, April decided to quit her job but, like Hasniza and Cheng Ee above, soon yearned for the little luxuries that came with a maid—such as being able to "sit down and watch TV after dinner, or spend time with the kids instead of having to cook and clean up". Her husband, however, felt that they were "managing quite well without a maid". April felt that this was because her husband

> never actually saw what life is like without a maid, ahh, except for that one time, the one week he stayed home and did the laundry [laughs heartily]... I always had the dinner cooked by the time he came home, the kids washed and all ready for bed, all so nice and huggy. I usually tried to do everything before the weekends. Weekends, he made sure we went out so I could have a break. There was no extra work for him to take up on weekends.

While many women, like April, laugh off the inability of their husbands to cope with responsibilities in the reproductive sphere, they are not as easily forgiving of what they often perceive as incompetence on the part of their maids, regardless of their maids' (in)experience in this area. Shirley (a Chinese employer who is a professional with two pre-schoolers), for example, on the one hand, complained of her first (Indonesian) maid:

> I cannot believe that my maid can walk past a piece of paper on the floor and not pick it up! She appears to be blind to litter or toys scattered all over the floor... Perhaps it's because she's so young [only nineteen] and has never done housework before although the agency claims she was trained before she came to Singapore.

On the other hand, she accepts her husband's untidiness which she attributes to his upbringing in a very traditional Chinese household:

> His mother never expected any of her sons to do any housework. His sisters did all the cooking and cleaning up in the house. And as the eldest son in the household, he never even poured his own glass of water, his sisters had to do it... To this day, from the time he sits down to dinner until he finishes, he will not get up to get anything. He will call out to the maid for more water, chilli, whatever he needs. Then after dinner, he just gets up and leaves, although my children and I will bring our plates and cups to the sink when we're done.

When it came to her subsequent maid, Shirley selected a married woman with children. She, like others in our survey, attribute greater confidence to a woman's experiences gained naturally as she moves through the life cycle. This is reflected in their criteria for choosing a maid:

> Age was very important. I looked for one in her late twenties and above, and preferably, they would have had looked after young children, having families of their own... My first maid went through a training period in Jakarta for a few months but my second one did not. I see no difference [that training has made to their performance]. In terms of material impact, I feel that it doesn't really make any difference. (Gek Lee, a Chinese employer who works as a technician and has a pre-teen)

> Previously, the two maids we had were single, about twenty-odd [years old] on the records. Later, we thought it's good to get someone slightly more mature, and married, as well as with two children, or something like that. (Yoon, a Chinese employer and mother of two teenagers)

Because employers assign to women, especially those later in the life cycle, a natural ability in the reproductive realm and expect of them a greater competence in reproductive roles while relieving men of responsibility in the household, they contribute to making domestic service both a product and a reinforcement of the patriarchal ideology of gender roles in society.

Nationalized stereotypes

Beyond the gendered dimension of domestic work—whether paid or unpaid—and its assumptions that it rests primarily on a 'special' combination of skills found 'naturally' in women but not men, are nationalized stereotypes which prevail in the perceived and socially constructed needs of the employers which are projected on to their prospective employees.

This is clearly evident in the way employers juxtapose and weigh assigned characteristics of the different nationalities of foreign domestic workers available in Singapore in the process of selecting a maid for employment. When asked directly whether the maid's 'nationality' made a difference in her ability to fulfill her role as a domestic helper, over half (52.5 percent) of the respondents said yes. In ranking the criteria used to select their maids, nationality (23.5 percent) ranked second only to language ability (39.5 percent) (Table 3).

Closer examination revealed that 'language ability' is not an external yardstick based on indicators of language proficiency such as educational levels, but filtered through the lenses of nationality. For example, Filipinas are credited with some proficiency in English as most speak at least 'Taglish' (a mixture of Tagalog and English), while most Indonesians are perceived as being incapable of speaking more than a few words of English. 'Nationality' is thus an important signifier and often conflated with race and culture—including perceived associations with linguistic ability, religion, personality-types and even the color of the person's skin:

Table 3: The most important criterion cited for selecting a foreign maid.

Criterion Cited by Employer	*Number*	%
Maid's language ability	64	39.5
Maid's nationality	38	23.5
Maid's personality as portrayed in the video*	14	8.6
Maid's religion	9	5.6
Maid's age	8	4.9
Maid's marital status	8	4.9
Maid's stated preference of duties**	8	4.9
Maid's working experience	6	3.7
Other criteria	7	4.3

* Most maid agencies make video recordings of maids who sign up with them. In most cases, the maids talk about themselves, usually in broken English, for a few minutes explaining their reasons for wanting to work as maids overseas. These recordings are shown to prospective employers to help them select their maids.

** When applying for an overseas position as a maid, the women are asked to rank their preferences for housework, looking after children, or taking care of invalids or the aged.

> I did not consider other nationalities, I was really going only for Indonesians. The reason is because being a Muslim, I was hoping that when she takes care of my children, she imports religious values to my children. (Julis, a Muslim employer in the sales line, with one toddler and one child in primary school)
>
> I didn't want to get a Sri Lankan maid because my mother-in-law doesn't really like them... I think it's because they are black.... Indonesians are also quite dark but I think (laughs), closer to our color. (Josephine, a Chinese employer and a professional with two pre-schoolers)

In general, employers argue that it is difficult to discern an individual's character, ability or personality from her bio-data or a short three to five minute video clip and that it is easier to base their choice first and foremost on national stereotypes. Of the 85 employers who selected their maids based on nationality as the primary criterion, the three reasons which topped their list of why a certain nationality made the 'best maids' are first, aspects associated with industry and ability to be trained (47.1 percent); second, submissiveness and obedience (37.6 percent); and third, language ability (32.9 percent) (Table 4).[6]

Filipinas are perceived as the most naturally hardworking and quickest to learn (61.5 percent), being more competent, meticulous and having more initiative than foreign domestic workers of other nationalities, besides having good language skills (51.9 percent):

Table 4: Which nationality makes the 'best maids' and why.

Reason	*Filipino* $n=52$	*Indonesian* $n=23$	*Sri Lankan* $n=5$	*Others* $n=5$	*Total* $n=85$
Language skills/easier communication	51.9	4.3	-	-	32.9
Higher educational levels	17.3	-	-	-	10.6
Cultural similarities	-	-	20.0	40.0	3.5
Hardworking, easily trained, competent	61.5	30.4	20.0	-	47.1
Submissive, humble, simple, quiet, homely	19.2	82.6	20.0	40.0	37.6
Good cooks and caregivers	1.9	17.4	20.0	-	7.1
Other reasons	5.8	8.7	20.0	20.0	8.2

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100.0 percent because respondents were allowed to give more than one reason each.

> Most of [the Filipina maids] know how to do the work. You don't have to tell them much. Sometimes, all you have to do is just write the instructions for them and they'll know how to do it. (Kim Eng, a Chinese employer with two grown-up children and who has had two Filipino maids)

> They are more advanced, not so backward. Fairly adept at using electrical equipment, telephones... and they can cope with emergencies when no adult is around. Also, they are socially compatible with Singaporeans, so there is less of a cultural gap. But Filipinos are better caregivers rather than good cooks. If I needed someone to cook, I would have gotten an Indonesian. (Li Ying, a Chinese employer of a Filipino maid and who has two toddlers)

At the same time, however, Filipinas are generally seen as 'bold' and 'streetwise' and hence, more likely to be unreliable, dishonest and more assertive in the employer-maid relationship (50 percent) (Table 5):

> We decided not to have Filipino maids mainly because there are already quite a lot of them around, and I think they are more daring, you know. They dare to go out, make phone calls, and do whatever they want to do. Harder to control them compared to Indonesians. (Josephine)

Table 5: Which nationality makes the 'worst maids' and why.

Reason	*Filipino n=8*	*Indonesian n=3*	*Sri Lankan n=38*	*Others n=3*	*Total n=52*
Language differences/ communication problems	-	-	42.1	66.7	34.6
Poorly educated	-	33.3	5.3	-	5.8
Cultural differences	-	-	7.9	-	5.8
Lazy, slow learners, dawdlers, backward	12.5	66.7	73.7	-	59.6
Unreliable, dishonest, demanding	50.0	33.3	15.8	66.7	25.0
Other reasons	50.0	-	18.4	33.3	23.1

Note: (1) Percentages do not add up to 100.0 percent because respondents were allowed to give more than one reason each.
(2) Interestingly, 38.8 percent of the 85 who ventured to say that nationality does influence a woman's ability to work as a domestic helper, refused to identify the nationality they thought would make the worst maids and to give specific reasons as to why they thought so.

While generally perceived as slow learners and workers (66.7 percent) (Table 5), Indonesians are valued overwhelmingly for their docility, compliant and submissive nature, simplicity and homely characters (82.6 percent) (Table 4), and a good compromise between 'Filipinos [who] don't have a good reputation and Sri Lankans [who] are too blur [or slow to catch on]' (in the words of Josephine):

> My general perception is that, as a rule, Indonesians are simpler in outlook, you know, and especially when you choose the older ones, they are quite earnest about earning a living... they take the responsibilities seriously, more so than the younger Filipinos I would say, I mean, I have a general perception that Filipinos are more fun loving. (Gek Lee)

At the bottom of the racial hierarchy, Sri Lankans stand out in popular perception as lazy, difficult to train because they are slow learners and rather backward (73.7 percent) and most problematic in terms of language (42.1 percent) and other cultural differences (usually referring to hygiene) (7.9 percent) (Table 5). Yoon's account of her newly-arrived Sri Lankan maid reflects many of the fears and problems that employers prefer to avoid:

> On her very first day here, instead of hanging clothes up on the bamboo pole, she laid out the clothes on the back lawn... Maybe in Sri Lanka they don't [hang their clothes on bamboo poles], just lay them in the fields, I don't know. So I told her, "Don't put the clothes there because the grass is full of insects, germs, bacteria and all that." I also have to tell her not to mix the cloths for cleaning the floor with those for the table... Once, when I told her to clean up a bit of dirt on the kitchen floor, she went to the pedal bin, stepped on it to get a piece of used tissue to clean up the dirt. I suppose that's just their different way of life—to them things can be used again and again.

This is not to say that cultural disparities are automatically overcome when both maid and employer come from what may appear on the surface to be more similar backgrounds. Salmiah (a Malay/Muslim employer) admitted that despite choosing an Indonesian maid because "firstly they speak Malay or Indonesian, right?", when her Indonesian maid first arrived, differences between the two languages posed a problem: "A lot of things, huh, when she first came, I didn't understand what she was saying. For example, when she wanted to cook, she says she needs *kemidis.* We didn't know what it was until we opened a book. Then we said, 'Oh, *buah keras!*" As for Kaladevi (an Indian employer working as a university lecturer) who "chose a Sri Lankan mainly because I thought the food habits are more or less the same, and I think I would understand Sri Lankan mentality a lot more than Filipinos, for

instance", she proclaimed her first maid "a crackpot [who] would be glued to the TV screen", the next one stole from her, and her current maid:

> ...this Sri Lankan girl came without a word of English... she spoke Sinhalese and I don't understand Sinhalese, not a word. I learnt a few words from her. I used to draw pictures [laughs], how to switch on the gas, what is a lizard [laughs], things like that... And food-wise, it has changed because when I was doing the cooking, I would cook a lot more European food, or Chinese or whatever. But since she can't cook European food, so we have more Indian style cooking.

Advertisements put up by maid employment agencies attempt to reinforce the positive qualities and override the negative ones in employers' reservoir of nationalized images. Daily advertisements in the newspapers promote Filipinas as not only having 'good English', and 'pleasant' personalities, but also as women who are 'honest'; Indonesians as 'homely' women who are 'hardworking' and 'obedient' and who present 'no social problems'; and Sri Lankans as 'helpful', 'obedient', 'English speaking' and with good 'personal hygiene assured' (Figure 1).[7] These stereotypes are further translated into the hierarchy of wages paid to foreign domestic workers of different nationalities. While all foreign domestic workers receive low monthly salaries,[8] Sri Lankans tend to be paid the lowest, and Filipinas the highest. In our survey, 25 percent of the Sri Lankans were paid a monthly salary of S$150–199 and another 40 percent earned S$200–249 per month (Table 6). Indonesians also earn low incomes: although the minimum monthly salary was in the S$200–249 range, about two-thirds (approximately the same proportion as Sri Lankans) earned less than S$250 a month. In comparison, while two-thirds of all Filipino foreign domestic workers earned between S$250–350 per month, a significant proportion (31 percent) had monthly salaries of S$350–449. This hierarchy of wages reflects employers' perceptions (and agents' promotions) of varying levels of natural intelligence and ability to learn of the foreign domestic workers,[9] qualities perceived as more natural to one nationality than another, and hence becomes in itself an act of discrimination. Hence, despite being largest in terms of supply, Filipina maids in Singapore command the highest wages.

Ultimately, however, the variations in the valorization of migrant domestic labor are also tied to the way they are seen as reflecting the 'worth' of their Singapore employers. As one maid agent summarized:

> Sorry to say, no matter how, we are still human beings and there are still some racial problems. [Sri Lankans are] black, you see. You take one black, [and you are regarded as] low class. Most employers [are] still the same, what. [For example], your sister takes one Sri Lankan, you take one Filipino. This one, steady [a local colloquialism referring to someone who has high standards], you know, he's taking a Filipino. That one, [the sister], no class, takes a Sri Lankan.

Figure 1: Gendered and nationalized notions of foreign maids in the advertisements of maid agencies in *The Straits Times*, Singapore's main English language newspaper.

Table 6: Salaries paid to foreign domestic helpers by nationality.

Salary Range (S$)	*Filipino n=86*	*Indonesian n=45*	*Sri Lankan n=20*	*Others n=11*	*Total n=162*
150–199	-	-	25.0	27.3	5.6
200–249	3.6	63.6	40.0	9.1	24.1
250–299	27.4	22.7	20.0	18.2	24.1
300–349	38.1	11.4	10.0	9.1	24.7
350–399	15.5	2.3	-	9.1	9.9
400–449	15.5	-	-	9.1	8.7
>=450	-	-	5.0	18.2	3.1

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100.0 percent because respondents were allowed to give more than one reason each.

In other words, the 'worth' of the different nationalities of maids in Singapore have become an issue of class and status, reflecting as it were, the employer's own social and economic 'worth' in the latter's own society.

The Maid's Perspective

Most maids in Singapore recognize their employers' preference for Filipina maids; indeed, among those surveyed, all (100 percent) of the Filipinas, 43.3 percent of the Indonesians and 33.3 percent of the Sri Lankans felt that maids from the Philippines were the most preferred because "I hear my ma'am say that Philippine maids better. Can speak English. Can understand what ma'am want" (Rosa, Kim Eng's Filipino maid). To some extent, the maids themselves subscribe to their employers' cultural prejudices. When Ellen (a Chinese employer and mother of three young children) employed a second maid—an Indonesian—to help out in the household, Lucy, her Filipina maid, complained:

> I cannot *tahan* [Malay for tolerate or withstand], you know, the Indonesian. Indonesian, quite different. Cannot do work! I cannot understand her! Make me so angry. One time, [it was] raining and I [had to] go [to the] toilet. She take Jon (their one-year old and youngest charge) to the back to close the window. I say, "Jon jump how? Why do you do like that? Next time wait for me!"

There is also some agreement that older women with more experience were better equipped to work as maids. Kamila, for example, noted with a laugh that her mother had predicted quite accurately that she (Kamila) would be a poor domestic helper because of her inexperience:

> Actually, my mother very scared to send me because she knows actually I didn't do housework [at home]. After that, come here, so many mistakes!

This idea was also supported by Hasniza (Cheng Ee's Indonesian maid). When Shirley (Cheng Ee's sister-in-law) commented to Cheng Ee about Hasniza's better working skills as compared to her (Shirley's) maid Tutik, Hasniza exhorted Shirley to be more patient with Tutik as she was still young and "not like me, old already with two grown up children!"

However, the maids themselves noted that one of the key reasons they make 'so many mistakes' is not only because they are unfamiliar with the work but because of the cultural differences between their society and Singapore. Linda, despite the training she received from the agency on 'how to clean, to use the vacuum', admitted being worried about her own adequacies as a domestic helper (she had worked as a clerk for most of her adult life in the Philippines) as well as the differences in the way domestic chores are carried out in Singapore and the Philippines:

> It was [a] difficult decision. I don't know how to work as a domestic, lah. Because Singapore and Philippine is different, lah, for cleaning the house, and for taking care of baby...

In general, the maids interviewed perceived that despite such problems, the Filipinas have the least problems overcoming the cultural gap because of their better facility in English, and this is why Filipina maids are the most popular in Singapore and are able to earn a premium salary.

Most maids do not directly challenge the cultural stereotypes, salary structure or other demands imposed on them. Indonesian maids, in particular, often attributed their circumstances to fate, arguing that their lives were in Allah's hands, and it was for them to accept their fate and work hard. When asked about how she felt about her salary (as opposed to what Filipinas were paid), Putri (an Indonesian whose employer is also a Muslim) argued:

> We Indonesians can discipline ourselves, and God willing, we will make it. Even if we are paid more and our salary is a lot, if we are spendthrift, we won't make it. If we can't discipline ourselves, we won't make it.

Despite the fact that she feels much better off with a Muslim employer than a Chinese employer who might not allow her to pray or provide her the right kind of food, she also admits that she would not approach her employer for a change in working conditions, such as asking for a day off work:[10]

> An off-day? Yes, I want it. But how to put it? If it's given, I'll take it. I am the kind of person who will accept it. If it's not offered, then it's not. It up to the employer's discretion, not for me to ask.

In general, the maids' acquiescence to their situations reflects their recognition of their lack of a power base to effect change. Hence, they 'generally prefer to keep silent; the fear of losing all they have invested so far... to earn a future for themselves and their families acts in very real ways to keep the women stoically submissive' (Huang and Yeoh, 1996:486). Molly noted that despite being unhappy at times about her work situation:

> I just keep, just keep lah. I don't think about it. Sometimes I feel I have [the] right to complain. We are human being but what for I complain?

Similarly, Rosa recounted how she just persevered through an abusive situation with a previous employer (who fed her only leftovers and locked her in the apartment when the family went out) because she had many debts to pay off:

> I'm thinking to just finish my contract then I stop... I complain to my cousin. I don't want to complain to the embassy. Just only, if I can stand to finish my contract, that's it, because all the time, I, I owe money to some people for all my expenses like my passport, like all that.

Because they have accepted that they should accept their lot rather than negotiate for a reframing of their working conditions, they unwittingly contribute to the perception that they are docile.

Ironically, however, this perceived docility is the one quality which employers place a high premium on. Many employers simply prefer their foreign domestic workers to simply follow instructions rather them question them:

> We normally just want them to do what we want them to do, you know, so they just have to obey, just do what we tell them. They don't have to use their initiative or whatever. We don't expect it of them. We just tell them to do this, this, this, this, you know. This is how you do it: step one, step two, step three. So long as they can follow the instructions, it's fine. So long as they are obedient, willing to follow, it's okay. (Josephine)

The desire for a hardworking yet docile woman as a maid parallels the qualities associated with the female labor market that world market factories seek out in relocating to Third World countries: long-suffering, non-subversive and a willingness to work long hours for low wages. The hierarchy of wages also reflects that paid out to factory workers of different nationalities across the globe, depending on whether the factory is located in the core, semi-periphery or periphery. In the case of paid domestic service, the maid takes on a 'mirage of docility'[11] (Elson and Pearson, 1984:26) often accepting the stereotyped images of herself and her fellow workers because of economic necessity ("I'm here to work, not to make trouble" (Sandra, Filipino maid working for a Chinese employer) and because she feels relatively powerless to act otherwise ("I gave my employer the paper from the Embassy [specifying maids' working conditions] to read, but she didn't say anything, so I keep quiet, never mind lah" (Dora, Filipino maid who has just renewed her contract with the same Chinese employer).

CONCLUSION

It is increasingly recognized that international migration has become more feminized and racialized (Kofman and England, 1997). In Singapore, while waged work has brought about some degree of emancipation to local women, social perceptions

and the performance of gender roles have not kept pace with the rapid socio-economic changes of recent decades; women have continued to bear the brunt of the reproductive sphere. In a sense, however, economically well-off Singapore women have been able to transfer part of this aspect of patriarchal subordination by purchasing the services of foreign women who enter the country to work as paid domestic workers. While the reassignment of domestic burdens to another woman does little to reduce the fixity of traditional gender roles, the availability of foreign domestic helpers has complicated 'the articulation of gender and social economy' (Pearson et al., 1984: ix) by introducing issues of nationality and race.

On the one hand, each nationality of migrant domestic worker is 'valued' differently, depending on qualities seen as enhancing or depreciating their worth as domestic helpers. On the other hand, the valorization of these foreign women rests on their gendered characteristics (more perceived than real), viz., a perceived willingness and ability of women to do the more boring and menial domestic chores assigned to them for relatively low wages. These 'genderized' and nationalized images become reinforced not only through press reports and the onslaught of advertising by maid agencies which highlight selected 'desirable' qualities of the pool of maids put on the market, but also because the sharply unequal power relations between maids and their 'ma'ams' prevent the dismantling of stereotypical images in the course of everyday routines and interactions. The social distance maintained between employer and employee means that even though both interact within the confines of home space on an everyday basis, employers dictate the terms of the interaction, conceding little ground to their employees to express their individuality in the everyday spheres of their working life. Employers thus continue to view their domestic helpers through refracted lenses of race and nationality, evaluating their 'worth' on the bases of their 'degree of fit' for domestic work rather than women with individual life experiences, struggling to make their living and defining their own identities.

Ultimately, the material divisions of the paid reproductive workforce which have emerged among the different nationalities of women—differences in pay, in perceptions of their 'natural' abilities and hence competition for jobs—allow employers to maximize output for minimal wages. Thus, while women from less developed countries may see working as domestic helpers in a higher-growth economy as a means of improving their economic future, it is an option that reinforces existing social ideologies of the low worth of Third World women's labor.

NOTES

1. While we acknowledge that there are other stereotypes of Third World women, for example, as 'housewives cloistered within the confines of a patriarchal male-dominated environment' as passive victims of patriarchy and modernization, and as 'inferior and subjugated—the object of sexual desire' (Chowdhry, 1995:27–28; see

also Sen and Grown, 1987), we have dealt with some of these aspects in another paper (Yeoh and Huang, 1996).

2. Racialization refers to the social process of being assigned to discrete racial category, usually on the basis of innate and cultural characteristics (Jackson, 1989; Anderson, 1991). Racial categorizations result from both ideological and material pressures which intersect in irreducible ways.

3. As defined for the Singapore census, a family nucleus may be formed by a married couple with or without young children; one parent only with unmarried children; or one grandparent only with unmarried grandchildren (Khoo, 1981). Thus, the increasing proportion of single family nuclei may be taken only as an indicator, rather than a direct measure, of the general trend towards nuclearization of the family-household in Singapore.

4. While employers of all foreign workers in Singapore are subject to paying a foreign worker levy, the maid levy is regulated separately (e.g., in terms of payment rates and the scheduling of changes to the rates) from other categories of foreign workers in the country.

5. *The Straits Times,* the main English language daily in Singapore, is usually identified as a pro-establishment newspaper and often used as a main outlet to announce state policies and convey official information. While this presents difficulties on account of the 'objectivity' of the information, we have drawn upon it considerably as a source precisely because of the important roles it plays in communicating state rhetoric, and providing (albeit limited) space for the ventilation of public debates and alternative views.

6. As we have shown elsewhere, the embedding of deeper meanings into employers' perception of nationality extends even to the existing social network of maids of a particular nationality within Singapore and its ability to 'corrupt' their maid (Yeoh and Huang, 1996).

7. Bakan and Stasiulis' (1995) work on Canada clearly shows the influential role of maid agencies as gatekeepers in reproducing a highly racialized set of practices and criteria in the recruitment and placement of foreign maids in Canadian households.

8. The low wages are tied to several factors. First, globalization has increased the relative supply of paid domestic workers across geo-political borders and affected the wages such workers can command (World Bank Report, 1995). Second, the wages of foreign workers in Singapore are largely tied to the income levels in their country of origin (*The Straits Times,* 24 October 1996). While employers in Singapore realize that they cannot get local help at the wages paid to foreign domestic workers, they feel that the low pay foreign maids receive is justified because of 'the poor social and economic conditions of the maids' home countries, their low educational qualifications, and the free board and lodging that come with the job' (Huang and Yeoh, 1996:486). Third, as pointed out at the beginning of the article, the low wages also reflect the general invisibility of domestic work which is traditionally provided free of charge by women for their families. When referenced against this

ideology, work in the reproductive sphere when commodified and produced for wages is seldom highly valued in monetary terms.

9. While this differentiation of ethnic lines partially reflects the relative difference in wages and costs of living between receiving countries like Singapore and the sending countries (Heyzer and Wee, 1994), it can also be attributed to the national policies of each country involved in the maid trade, an issue we take up in another paper (Huang and Yeoh, 1996).

10. The employment contracts of Indonesian maids stipulate no off-days for the entire two year period.

11. As we have discussed elsewhere (Yeoh and Huang, 1998a & 1998b), while these women do not necessarily challenge many of the gendered and nationalized stereotypes discussed in this paper, they are not entirely passive participants of the power relations between their employers and themselves. Instead, they employ a variety of styles and strategies to express their own personal, and occasionally national, identities in both private and public spaces.

REFERENCES

Anderson, K.J. (1991) *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875–1980.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Bakan, A.B. and Stasiulis, D.K. (1995) Making the match: Domestic placement agencies and the racialization of women's household work. *Signs,* 20:305–35.

Chant, S. and Radcliffe, S. (1992) Migration and development: The importance of gender. In Chant, S. (ed.) *Gender and Migration in Developing Countries.* London: Belhaven, pp. 1–20.

Chowdhry, G. (1995) Engendering development? Women in development (WID) in international development regimes. In Marchand, M.H. and Parpart, J.L. (eds.) *Feminism/Postmodernism/Development.* London: Routledge, pp. 26–41.

Department of Statistics (1994) Dual-career couples in Singapore. Occasional Paper No. 13. Singapore: Department of Statistics.

Elson, D. and Pearson, R. (1984) The subordination of women and the internalization of factory Production. In Young, K., Wolkowitz, C., and McCullagh, R. (eds.) *Of Marriage and the Market.* London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, pp. 18–40.

Gordon, I. (1995) Migration in a segmented labor market. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* 20:139–55.

Gregson, N. and Lowe, M. (1994) *Servicing the Middle Classes: Class, Gender and Waged Domestic Labor in Contemporary Britain.* London: Routledge.

Heyzer, N. and Wee, V. (1994) Domestic workers in transient overseas employment: Who benefits, who profits? In Heyzer, N., Lycklama, A., Niejholt, G., and Weerakoon, N. (eds.) *The Trade in Domestic Workers: Causes, Mechanisms and Consequences of International Migration,* Vol. 1. Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Centre and London: Zed Books, pp. 31–102.

Huang, S. and Yeoh, B.S.A. (1996) Ties that bind: State policy and migrant female domestic helpers in Singapore. *Geoforum,* 27:479–493

——. (1997) Household structure and childcare strategies in a transitional society: The case of Singapore. *Asian Profile,* 25:193–209.

Jackson, P. (1989) *Maps of Meaning.* London: Unwin Hyman.

Kofman, E. and England, K. (1997) Guest editorial. *Environment and Planning A* (Special issue on citizenship and international migration), 26:191–193.

Khoo, C.K. (1981) *Census of Population 1980.* Singapore: Department of Statistics.

Little, J. (1994) *Gender, Planning and the Policy Process.* Oxford: Pergamon.

Mackenzie, S. (1989) Women in the city. In Peet, R. and Thrift, N. (eds.) *New Models in Geography,* Vol. II. London: Unwin Hyman, pp. 109–126.

Macklin, A. (1994) On the outside looking in: Foreign domestic workers in Canada. In Giles, W. and Arat-Koc, S. (eds.) *Maid in the Market: Women's Paid Domestic Labor.* Halifax: Fernwood, pp. 13–39.

McDowell, L. (1983) Towards an understanding of the gender division of urban space. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space,* 1:59–72.

Miller, R. (1983) The Hoover in the garden: Middle-class women and suburbanization, 1850–1920. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space,* 1:73–87.

Nicholson, L.J. (1992) Feminist theory: The private and public. In McDowell, L. and Pringle, R. (eds.) *Defining Women: Social Institutions and Gender Divisions.* Oxford: Polity Press, pp. 36–43.

Pearson, R., Whitehead, A., and Young, K. (1984) Introduction: The continuing subordination of women in the development process. In Young, K., Wolkowitz, C., and McCullagh, R. (eds.) *Of Marriage and the Market.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 18–40.

Purushotam, N. (1992) Women and knowledge: Notes of the Singaporean dilemma. In Ban, K.C., Pakir, A., and Tong, C.K. (eds.), *Imagining Singapore,* Singapore: Times Academic Press, pp. 320–361.

Quah, S. (1993) Marriage and family. In Wong, A. and Leong, W.K. (eds.) *Singapore Women: Three Decades of Change.* Singapore: Times Academic Press, pp. 20–85.

Romero, M. (1992) *Maid in the USA,* London: Routledge.

Sanchez, L. (1993) Women's power and the gendered division of domestic labor in the Third World. *Gender and Society,* 7:434–459.

Sen, G. and Grown, C. (1987) *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives.* New York: Monthly Review Press.

Smith, S.J. (1989) *The Politics of 'Race' and Residence: Citizenship, Segregation and White Supremacy in Britain.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Soin, K. (1996) National policies: The impact on women and the family. In The Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) (ed.) *Ties That Bind: In Search of the Modern Singapore Family,* Singapore: Armour, pp. 190–208.

Ward, K. (1990) Introduction and overview. In Ward, K. (ed.) *Women Workers and Global Restructuring.* Ithaca, New York: ILR Press, pp. 1–22.

Wong, A. and Leong, W.K. (eds.) (1993) *Singapore Women: Three Decades of Change*, Singapore: Times Academic Press.

World Bank (1995) *World Development Report 1995*. Oxford University Press, New York.

Yeoh, B.S.A. and Huang, S. (1994) Between tradition and modernity: Childcare arrangements among Malay women in Singapore. *International Journal of Comparative Family and Marriage,* 1:100–118.

——. (1995) Childcare in Singapore: Negotiating choices and constraints in a multicultural society. *Women's Studies International Forum,* 18:445–461.

——. (1998a) Negotiating work practices in home space: Migrant female domestic workers in Singapore. Paper presented at the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers Conference, Surrey, 5–8 January 1998.

——. (1998b) Negotiating public space: Strategies and styles of migrant female domestic workers in Singapore. *Urban Studies*, 35:583–602.

Yeoh, B.S.A., Huang S. and Gonzalez III, J. (1999, forthcoming) Migrant female domestic workers in Singapore: Debating the economic, social and political impacts in Singapore. *International Migration Review*.