Introduction

By embodying notions of home, family, gender, masculinity, femininity and sexuality, Southeast Asian families are central sites for the cultural expression and reworking of ideas of the ‘modern’ as well as for the expression of anxieties around the costs (and benefits) of reproduction and development (Brickell and Yeoh 2014). Intra-familial relations represent a continuous, fluid process of negotiations, contracts and exchange — whether altruistic, reciprocal, unequal or oppressive — within the context of broader political, economic and social change. Relations of equality and complementarity between Southeast Asian men and women have long been thought to be a regional characteristic (Andaya 2007), but much has changed with the advent of neoliberal globalization in recent times. Within the family/household,1 Southeast Asian women play a critical role in ensuring the physical and social reproduction across generations, even though the normalization of the gendered division of labor and feminized care work often leave women’s sacrifices and resilience unrecognized and unrewarded. Inasmuch as women are expected to be the lynchpins of the household responsible for shoring up the reproductive sphere, they are sometimes also blamed for household negligence in cases of marital dissolution or breakdown, as vividly demonstrated by Cambodian women’s struggles for legitimacy in the face of stigma and shame resulting from the physical division of the marital house into two after a divorce (or other forms of marital disruption) (Brickell 2014).

The ideological and practical placing of women within the domestic sphere, alongside the overall expectation that the household functions as a major provider of care and welfare, is reinforced by prevailing government policies and discourses in the region (Ochiai 2009). The neoliberal strategies of the state in minimizing institutional support for household reproduction as part of economic restructuring in both developing and more advanced nation-states in Southeast Asia have led to the privatization and commercialization of care work. Where citizen women are unable to fill care deficits in middle-class households, these gaps have been plugged by migrant women from less developed economies in the region. This has led to the formation of gendered circuits of labor migration linked to the globalization of care work, or what Hochschild (2000, 132) calls ‘global care chains,’ referring to “a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring.” While these global care chains transfer social capital from the poorer to the richer countries and receive economic capital in return, it is also
important to note that the economic value of the labor declines as it moves down the care chain (Parreñas 2012, 269), thus resulting in diminishing returns for each subsequent woman. In this vein, Rhacel Parreñas’ notion of the ‘international division of reproductive labor’ alerts us to the fact that by moving down the care chain as opposed to across the gender divide, a system of gender substitution of care labor dependent on exploitative practices of extracting cheap labor from migrant women is emplaced. These migrant women are increasingly inducted “the global world’s newest proletariat, into the global capitalist activities of the North, all under severely diminished citizenship regimes” (Dobrowolsky and Tastsoglou 2006, 3).

In Southeast Asia, the development of global care chains has resulted in a ‘feminization’ of migration to meet the gender-differentiated demand for care labor in order to plug care deficits in the family. This chapter examines the gender politics of care in families and households at both ends of the global care chain, and across the class spectrum. It begins with exploring the dual class-differentiated care strategies in the more developed Southeast Asian economies of importing migrant domestic workers as paid care labor, as well as drawing in migrant wives as unpaid care labor. It then turns to discussing the gendered care strategies among households at the southern end of the care chain that are affected by a significant outflow of parents – particularly mothers – as labor migrants. The final substantive section gives attention to the care strategies of more privileged Southeast Asian families as they navigate transnational migration circuits.

**Importing paid care labor: migrant domestic workers**

In the case of the more developed economies in the region such as Singapore and Malaysia, the rapid decline in fertility rates, coupled with increasing life expectancy as well as higher proportions of delayed or non-marriage, has led to looming child- and elder-care deficits within families that have to be plugged by global householding strategies. Coined by Douglass (2006) to refer to the way households sustain themselves by adopting market- and non-market-based options predicated on the international movement of people in order to resolve care deficits, global householding strategies include, for middle-class households, the market-based option of bringing in women from less developed economies in the region to serve as low-paid, surrogate care for children, the elderly and the infirm as well as perform domestic work. While eldercare work may also be ‘outsourced’ to (mainly female) migrant healthcare workers laboring in the institutionalized space of the nursing home, the prevalence of gendered ideologies based on ‘Asian familialism’ means that families continue to prefer to relegate the duty of elder-care to the privatized family sector in order to conserve some semblance of filial piety (Yeoh and Huang 2009). In this context, the ‘live-in foreign maid’ emerges as an increasingly common substitute to provide the care labor needed to sustain the household.

By outsourcing domestic and care work to other Southeast Asian women from less developed economies in the region at a low cost, socially and economically privileged women trade in their class privilege for (partial) freedom from the burden of household reproductive labor. This has the simultaneous effects of subordinating other (migrant) women to work conditions governed by retrogressive employer-employee relations and minimal occupational mobility; devaluing, racializing and commodifying household labor as unskilled and lowly paid work; and further entrenching and normalizing domestic and care work as resolutely ‘women’s work.’ This is further compounded by state policies that treat migrant domestic workers as transient labor with hardly any socio-political rights to participate in wider civil society. In Singapore, for example, exacting policies have been instituted to ensure the surveillance of migrant bodies and that they gain no permanent foothold in the geobody of the nation; these include tying the validity of the work permit to specific employers, preventing family formation and settlement by...
disallowing accompanying dependents, prohibiting marriage to Singapore citizens and permanent residents, and immediately repatriating workers found to be pregnant. Similarly, in Malaysia, medical surveillance is also used to assert control over transnational domestic worker bodies, commonly associated with notions of contamination, prostitution and such related health issues as unwanted pregnancies and venereal diseases.

For middle-class households, drawing in transnational domestic workers as substitute reproductive labor has become a major strategy in releasing citizen women’s labor into the sphere of paid work in contexts where the prevailing household division of labor remains ossified in patriarchal norms. Citizen women do not necessarily relinquish every aspect of care work to migrant workers, but exercise discretion in holding on to some tasks while delegating others. Middle-class mothers, for example, often draw on the ‘maid’ to take the drudgery out of domestic work and childcare while conserving maternal ‘quality time’ with the children in order to enact their identities as good mothers, even if such identification is not achieved without constant negotiation and a degree of ambivalence (Yeoh and Huang 2010). While the availability of a global workforce of transnational domestic workers has created space for women employers to reconstitute and redefine their roles in the provision of household care labor, “they are not necessarily able to disregard the conventional ideology of womanhood and motherhood as their frame of reference” in their dealings with their transnational domestic workers (Cheng 2003, 3–4). Indeed, negotiating motherhood vis-à-vis a foreign other woman in the house is a ‘fraught terrain’ as it lies uncomfortably at “the crossroads of anxieties of sameness and difference” (Pratt 1997, 173). Mothers who rely on the transnational domestic worker as substitute caregiver to juggle the demands of home and work often continue to wrestle with pangs of maternal guilt that they are failing their children, as well as fears of being supplanted by the domestic worker in the children’s affections. This dilemma is often resolved – at least in part – by dividing mothering work into physical tasks that can be relegated to the transnational domestic worker and those involving emotional and/or nurturing labor that are seen to be embodied in the personhood of the ‘real’ mother.

In a similar vein, where it comes to taking care of elderly parents and relatives, many families who can afford it have devolved the responsibility (or at least the physical aspects of caregiving) to foreign domestic workers, particularly in the case of dual-career households striving to maintain middle- and upper-class lifestyles (Yeoh and Huang 2009). Ochiai (2010, 233) calls this ‘liberal familialism,’ where the cost of purchasing care labor is borne by the family but where filial piety is outsourced to others whose services are bought from the market.

The gender politics of the home is thus negotiated between local and foreign women vis-à-vis a racialized grid of highly asymmetrical power relations, while men continue to abdicate their household responsibilities. This genderized mode of care work substitution confirms the prevailing global gender order as it reinforces the construction of such work as women’s work, while allowing host-countrymen to continue to play truant from the manual aspects of reproductive work. The politics of household reproduction that develops in many middle-class homes in Southeast Asia hence features mainly women – migrant women struggling to present themselves as docile bodies amenable to the disciplinary gaze of local women on the one hand, while disengaging from the role of the deferential inferior on the other.

**Importing unpaid care labor: migrant wives**

Somewhat analogous to the practice of middle-class families recruiting migrant domestic workers for householding purposes in the cities of Southeast Asia, working-class families without the financial means may turn to drawing on unpaid care labor by recruiting ‘foreign brides.’ With globalization and expanding educational and career opportunities for women in the more
developed economies in Southeast and East Asia, working class men from the lower socio-economic strata who feel positionally ‘left behind’ by local women’s participation in the workforce may seek to fill the care deficit in their households through international marriage with women from the less developed economies in the region who are considered more ‘traditional’ and willing to take on procreation and caring roles in sustaining the household.

For example, the increasing proportion of Singaporean men of Chinese ethnicity seeking ‘foreign brides’ from the less developed parts of Southeast Asia reflects the growing mismatch in marriage expectations between the two largest groups of singles: on the one hand, independent-minded, financially well-resourced graduate women with sophisticated expectations of marriage partners, and on the other, Chinese-speaking blue-collar male workers with low levels of education with a preference for women willing to uphold traditional gender roles and values (Yeoh et al. 2012). In a context of rapidly rising educational levels among young women, cultural and social impediments to women’s ‘marrying down’ and men’s ‘marrying up’ (in terms of education, occupation and income) have remained stubbornly resistant to change. Singaporean men continue to hold traditional attitudes about wifely roles while Singaporean women are increasingly unwilling to play such roles. A weakening in family and community match-making networks and the loosening of family ties have also led to young single adults being relatively free and independent in marriage decisions. At one level, the resulting delay in marriage and rise in singleness may be an outcome of individual preferences; at the same time, structural difficulties such as the limited marriage market and a lack of match-making mechanisms also present themselves as major obstacles, particularly to men at the lower social scales who wish to marry. While marriage to men at the lower rungs of the socio-economic hierarchy may appear unattractive to their women co-nationals, their prospects may be more appealing to women from countries that are on the whole poorer (Yeoh et al. 2014). The resultant pattern hence features men from more affluent countries marrying women from poorer countries, with the women migrating to the men’s home countries upon a successfully match-made marriage, following the logic of the ‘marriage gradient,’ or what Constable (2005) calls ‘global spatial hypergamy.’

In this context, the larger structural inequalities of gender, race, class, culture and citizenship operating across a transnational stage are integral to an understanding of familial politics and household reproduction in Southeast Asia. Focusing their work on the incorporation of Southeast Asian marriage migrants in Taiwan, Wang and Belanger (2008, 92) draw on Aihwa Ong’s concept of ‘partial citizenship’ to show “how the operation of differential legal and social citizenship justifies the perpetuation of a hierarchy of immigrants and serves to prop up the notion of a superior national Taiwanese identity.” While the immigrant wives are theoretically folded into the nation-state as ‘new citizens,’ they are “set in relationships with the state, family and community, which together constitute their identities, and at the same time produce and reproduce a racialized and gendered society in Taiwan” (Wang and Belanger 2008, 92–93). For example, cast in the role of “a good wife, a good mother and a good daughter-in-law” (Wang 2007), female marriage immigrants are expected to be only interested in integration courses that tie them to their families and that help them improve their roles as carers of “their husbands (cooking, hairstyling), children (parenthood, healthcare, women and children safety) and the elderly (medical care training). There are no choices like political participation, Southeast Asian language media offering, local community facilities information, and so on” (Wang and Belanger 2008, 98). The links between marriage migration and citizenship are thus not only based on but constrained by notions of the patriarchal family, and of women as domestic caregivers and biological and social reproducers.

At the same time, marriage migration as an increasingly common form of social and geographical mobility within Southeast and East Asia provides women from less developed
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economies a range of opportunities to re-construct their positions vis-à-vis their natal families across transnational topographies, albeit with differing degrees of success in altering their roles and identities. The question of “whether remittances have the effect of reaffirming or reconfiguring gender ideologies and relations across transnational space” (King et al. 2006, 429) remains a complex one in the case of marriage migrants. Belanger and Tran’s (2009) study on Vietnamese women-as-foreign brides in Asian countries, for example, suggests that while marriage migrants who have the opportunity to engage in paid work have the ability to negotiate disposable income to send remittances to their natal families, the majority who do not work find themselves largely dependent on their relationships with their husbands and family members if they wish to raise funds to remit. An interesting finding from their work shows that women who have children tend to have a greater ability to remit, suggesting that child-bearing improves the status of the marriage migrants within their marital families, which in turn confers greater bargaining power on them in carving out funds to send home to their natal families. In the context of Vietnamese migrants who marry Singaporean men, Yeoh et al. (2012) show how sending remittances are significant to the women as ‘acts of recognition’ in the construction of gendered identities as filial daughters, and in the re-imagining of the transnational family through the ‘connecting’ and ‘disconnecting’ power of remittances. Indeed, the act of sending remittances back home is an integral part of the project of mobility, where remittances represent “a special kind of transnational family money. . .[which] is equated with or measured against filial care” (Singh 2006, 375). This, however, has to be balanced against making contributions in building up resources to support their marital families. Placed between their natal and marital families, marriage migrants often find themselves navigating two sets of expectations in performing their care roles and identities as ‘dutiful daughters’ and ‘sacrificial sisters’ vis-à-vis ‘worthy wives’ and ‘devoted daughters-in-law.’ As Thai (2008, 166) notes, “international marriages present complex social expectations and imbalanced reciprocity among [marital] couples especially in confronting issues of allocation of wages to family left behind in the community of origin.”

Care provisioning for the left-behind at the end of the care chain

In the wake of the increasing feminization of labor migration in Southeast Asia, relationships of care at the southernmost end of the care chain are evolving, resulting in millions of left-behind children growing up for part or all of their young lives in the absence of a migrant father, a migrant mother or both, and under the care of a ‘single’ parent or other surrogate caregivers. The transfer of care work and domestic duties down a series of personal links between people stretched across a hierarchy of nation-states and sub-regions often results in the ‘off-loading’ of care work to the migrant woman’s family and kin who supply unpaid care labor at the least developed end of the chain.

Until recently, research on how care deficits are dealt with in families and communities with migrant members in sending countries at the southernmost end of the global care chain has been rather limited. From the turn of the new millennium, however, a broader range of migration studies featuring Southeast Asian source countries points to both the flexibility and durability of notions of familyhood underpinning transnational migration. For example, while out-migration in rural Thailand has become so widespread that it has a ‘demonstration and emulation’ effect on aspirations among members of these communities (Jones and Kittisukathit 2003, 528), Knodel and Saengtienchai (2006) show that far from being deserted by migrating children, left-behind parents actively participate in providing financial and emotional support for their children’s mobility, leading to the emergence of a translocal extended family linked by multi-stranded, fluid relations between members across geographical space.
Similarly, studies on migrating mothers and their left-behind children highlight the (re)enactment of episodes of family interaction through distanced communication as the family takes on transnational dimensions (Parreñas 2001; Asis et al. 2004). New work has also called attention to the gender politics implicit in a range of mutually constitutive interactions between migrants and the left behind: in areas such as rural Indonesia and Vietnam where feminized out-migration streams predominate, established gender ideologies may either be challenged by changing social practices where women assume breadwinner roles, or continue to regulate traditionally scripted roles for men and women but in new ways (Elmhirst 2000; Resurrección and Van Khanh 2007).

A major strand in current research on migrant mothers emphasizes the resilience of gender ideals surrounding motherhood even under migration in the transnational context. While mothering at a distance reconstitutes ‘good mothering’ to incorporate breadwinning, it also continues maternal responsibility of nurturing by employing (tele)communications regularly to transmit transnational circuits of care and affection to their families and children left in source countries. Asis (2002) and Graham et al. (2012) observed that most migrant mothers actively worked to ensure a sense of connection across transnational spaces with their children through modern communication technologies, while Sobritchea (2007) argued that ‘long-distance mothering’ is an intensive emotional labor that involves activities of ‘multiple burden and sacrifice,’ spending ‘quality time’ during brief home visits, and reaffirming the ‘other influence and presence’ through surrogate figures and regular communication with children. Migrant mothers often make considerable efforts to ensure that care work and responsibilities are transferred to other family members in their absence, although the available evidence seems to suggest that the ‘intangibles’ of the mothering identity are less yielding and not so easily reassigned. For example, Asis et al.’s (2004, 208) work shows that migrating mothers who depend on long-distance mothering tend to leave the children “in an indeterminate state of being ‘neither here nor there’ – of having a mother, yet not being able to enjoy her daily involvement in their lives.” At the same time, it is important to guard against undue focus on “a discourse of maternal loss and absence” as such a discourse “not only works through conventional, potentially conservative notions of the family, but can and does quickly turn to blame” (Pratt 2009, 7–8). As Parreñas (2005) notes, migrant mothers are often stigmatized for leaving their children behind, while fathers working overseas are not. Long-distance mothering, often performed for the sake of advancing the children’s education opportunities as part of what ‘sacrificial breadwinner mothers’ do, thus has to contend with highly entrenched views of what constitutes a sanctioned gender division of labor in the household. Gender ideals, particularly those concerning motherhood, continue to remain resilient even under migration in the transnational context.

In addition, the research thus far suggests that the care vacuum resulting from the absence of migrant mothers is often filled by female relatives such as grandmothers and aunts (Gamburd 2000; Scalabrini Migration Centre 2004; Parreñas 2005; Save The Children 2006). The continued pressure to conform to gender norms with respect to caring and nurturing practices explains men’s resistance to, and sometimes complete abdication of, parenting responsibilities involving physical care in their wives’ absence. These studies conclude that the “delegation of the mother’s nurturing and caring tasks to other women family members, and not the father, upholds normative gender behaviors in the domestic sphere and thereby keep the conventional gendered division of labor intact” (Hoang and Yeoh 2011, 722).

More in-depth studies combining quantitative and qualitative analyses, however, have begun to reveal a more complex picture of more flexible gender practices of care in sending countries. In place of the image of the delinquent left-behind man who is resistant to adjusting his family duties in the woman’s absence, some Southeast Asian men strive to live up to masculine ideals of being both ‘good fathers’ and ‘independent breadwinners’ when their wives are working abroad.
by taking on at least some care functions that signified parental love and authority while holding on to paid work (even if monetary returns are low) for a semblance of economic autonomy (Hoang and Yeoh 2011).

In the Philippines, for example, families are said to be traditionally ‘patriarchal in authority’ with the husbands’ breadwinning role taking precedence over women’s position (Castro et al. 2008). In terms of parenting, Harper (2010, 67) found that the Filipino childrearing style has also gradually altered from that of “strict parental discipline and child obedience” to one that is “nurturing, affectionate, protective and at times indulgent.” While some researchers observe that the Filipino father’s role continues to adhere solely to the provider and disciplinarian model, Medina (cited in Harper 2010, 68) suggests that Filipino fathers are actually involved in “activities such as storytelling, playing with children, helping with homework, driving children to and from school, and going on walks with their children,” contending that a new role for fathers – as warm and supportive yet authoritative – may be emerging.

Given the longstanding migration of Filipino women to become global care workers over the last three decades (Asis 2005; Asis et al. 2004), role reversal of the traditional gender ideology that men are the ‘pillars’ while women are the ‘lights’ of the home is increasingly common in Filipino society. While Castro et al. (2008) found that the majority of Filipino men still reject and denigrate the notion of becoming househusbands, they would set aside their pride and perform household tasks for the sake of their family’s survival needs. This finding aligns with that of Pingol’s (2001) study on Filipino migrant wives and househusbands where she found that male respondents project themselves as important providers of care, even if they perform care differently from their wives. Her study reveals that while Filipino men may “experience sudden shifting of gears that heavily disorients them,” the maintenance of their productive self keeps them going (Pingol 2001, 220). Filipino men shared that their ability to perform the additional caring tasks well “enhances their sense of self worth . . . and gives them pride not only as they view themselves but also as they are looked upon by the community” (Pingol 2001, 221).

Transnational care strategies among privileged migrant families

As noted above, the literature on the provision of transnational care by migrants to their family members in Southeast Asia and elsewhere has given considerable weight to mid- to unskilled (female) migrants providing long distance care to their ‘left-behind’ (non-adult) children. In comparison, there has been limited scholarship on the nexus between migration, care and the elderly, especially in the families of skilled and/or relatively well-off migrants to and from Southeast Asia. This neglect is not only because parents are considered outside the realm of the nuclear family (often taken as the conventional family unit in the Anglo-American scholarship that dominates this literature) but also because in Western societies, the care of the elderly is more often than not conceived as necessitating proximate physical care because eldercare usually only begins when the latter become physically or mentally frail (Kofman 2004; Baldassar et al. 2007; Masselot 2011). In Southeast Asia, as with much of the rest of Asia, however, the notion of ‘family’ and familial obligations often encompasses extended family members, and providing both material and emotional care for one’s parents begins with the “mere negotiated recognition of ‘getting old’” (Liu and Kendig 2006, 6).

Although usually able to move as a nuclear family unit, the families of skilled migrants face the challenge of providing inter-generational care to aging parents. While they are usually able to tap into new technologies and frequent flights home to fulfil their filial duties, members of this more privileged group still face their own politics of intergenerational obligations in trying to negotiate transnational caregiving. Beyond the employment of migrant care workers (usually
female) for eldercare in nursing homes and other old-age institutions, or as live-in domestic help (as discussed earlier; see also Huang et al. 2012), there are other ways in which care, the elderly and migration intersect for middle class and more privileged families. Existing research done internationally suggests that these ‘diasporas of care’ (Williams, cited in Lie 2010, 1435) include issues of how migrants facilitate transnational eldercare for left-/stay-behind parents especially as the latter grow old and frail; healthcare options for elderly migrants who move when (or because) they are old, either to join their children who are overseas or as retirement migrants on their own; the cultural negotiations of providing eldercare for those who migrated when they were younger but who have different expectations of eldercare from that of the society into which they have settled; and importantly, the reciprocity of care with the ‘zero generation’ – the parents of first generation migrants – often acting as transnational caregivers rather than care receivers (van der Geest et al. 2004; King et al. 2014). While very limited, available research and anecdotal evidence suggest that several of these forms are important and growing in Southeast Asia.

In many Southeast Asian societies, there are strong cultural obligations on the part of adult children to provide care for aging parents who remain in the country of origin, leading to various negotiations by migrating family members to continue to provide care from a distance. Migrant adult children may provide parents with financial remittances even if not needed (hence acting more as a symbolic representation of the obligation to care) and care advice as well as maintain constant communication about physical and emotional health issues. For example, Lam et al. (2002) found that both single and married Chinese professionals from Malaysia who had migrated to Singapore to work made it a point to maintain regular contact with their parents, and even grandparents, who remained in Singapore, and/or send remittances that they saw as a substitute for physical care. Notably, while sons spoke about maintaining commuting or providing financial support, it was the daughters(-in-law) who ended up shuttling between Malaysia and Singapore to fulfil their obligation to care for frail, ill or widowed parents(-in-law) on the one hand, and their own children and spouses on the other, if the relocation of their parents to be with them was not a possibility even when the adult children wanted their aging parents to join them in Singapore. Thus, while often male-led, the physical burden of providing transnational care still falls on the women in these more privileged families.

Although parents are not always able or prepared to migrate permanently to live with their children in the host country (as Lam et al. 2002 found), Southeast Asia has become the recipient of increasing numbers of retirement migrants from the global north. Many have been drawn by the emerging ‘retirement industry’ bolstered by the governments of countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia in promoting retirement migration as a national development policy, targeting ‘quality foreigners’ over 50 years old and with financial capability from neighboring Singapore, but also China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan as well as the Middle East, Europe and North America. These later-life migrants are also drawn by the lower cost of living, the easy availability and affordability of live-in domestic workers – transforming them from “average pensioners in one country” to “high-power[ed] consumers in another” (Toyota and Xiang 2012, 716), and for some single, Western male retirement migrants, the possibility of marrying a younger local woman who would hopefully take care of them at a later stage (Green 2015b, 3). While research suggests that these retirement migrants often continue to depend on their families and/or healthcare systems in their home societies to deal with health issues in the initial years, they may present burdens on local care systems in the longer term. Toyota (2006) found that some Japanese men ended up renting small rooms in local Thai neighborhoods because they had no regular incomes, while Green’s (2015a, 2015b) study of educated, middle-class later-life migrants from the UK, US and Australia living in Thailand and Indonesia revealed that many of
them preferred to stay on in Southeast Asia even as they aged and faced concerns about how to manage their chronic health issues, with some ending up destitute. A case in point was a 2011 *Bangkok Post* report about 400 or so older foreigners who were unable to pay their bills after receiving treatment in a state-run hospital in Phuket, Thailand (cited in Green 2015a, 7).

But retirement migrants may also be active care providers, either to their grandchildren (for example, Green [2015b] highlighted how grandchildren would fly in from the retirement migrants’ homeland to spend time and receive care from their grandparents) and even to their older parents (for example, in the course of their fieldwork, Toyota and Xiang [2012, 711] “came across a number of elderly who had migrated to Southeast Asia with their parents who were in their 90s”). More commonly, however, as recent literature has increasingly recognized, grandparents have remained a significant resource for their families especially as caregivers to their grandchildren (Thang et al. 2011) even in transnational families. In particular, the care provided by ‘flying grandmothers’ – as Baldassar and Wilding (2014, 241) termed them – is a crucial aspect of maintaining intergenerational relationships in the transnational families of skilled migrants.

For ethnic minority communities, grandmothers often cross international borders to meet family commitments by contributing to child-rearing not just in a physical sense, but also in terms of language maintenance, religious development, cultural identification, etc. (Lie 2010). As with the grandmothers of PRC Chinese households studied by Lie (2010) in the UK, Japanese grandmothers (Huang and Lin 2014) and Chinese-Singaporean grandmothers (Baldassar and Wilding 2014, 242) were found to be willing to spend extended periods of several months or more, visiting their relocated sons/daughters in Singapore and Australia respectively, to assist with childcare, cooking, housework or simply to fulfill ‘grandmothering duties,’ especially during the birth of a grandchild or times of crisis. Elsewhere, Da (2003) and Mujahid et al. (2011) also observed that young children from professional Chinese families may be sent back to the home country to be taken care of by their grandparents, or very young children are left with grandparents while parents migrate first.

Transnational grandmothering is usually tied to gender ideology and gender role practices of migrants’ home societies. Ethnic Chinese grandmothers are among the most documented global grandparents. Not only is it deemed important for the modern Chinese woman to work, but also, there are high level of intra-family responsibilities within Chinese families where the “Confucian belief in filial piety obliges children to care for elderly parents, and in return grandparents, especially grandmothers, often help to care for grandchildren” (Mujahid et al. 2011, 193; see also Da 2003; Lie 2010; Lee et al. 2015). The engagement of the elderly in ‘transnational back-and-forth mobility’ that is ‘care-driven’ challenges the view of elderly as purely care receivers and instead highlights how transnational care within families – though still highly gendered – is not only often multidirectional and multigenerational (King et al. 2014) but can also be asymmetrical and dynamic, transforming over time as families evolve and travel and communication technologies become increasingly affordable and flexible (Baldassar et al. 2007; Baldassar and Wilding 2014). The migration of the more privileged class highlights the ‘knock on’ effect of mobility. As observed above, the movement of one family member “tends to provoke the movement of another” (Baldassar and Wilding 2014, 244). For these more well-off families, distance is not necessarily a hindrance to providing care to elderly family members, or receiving care in return. However, much research has demonstrated that the specific practices and processes of long-distance care are mediated not only by each family and family member’s commitments and capacity to exchange care, the strength of the family’s transnational networks of solidarity, but also what is considered culturally acceptable within the prevailing norms of one’s home society (Baldassar 2008; Merla 2015). For example, outside the context of Southeast Asia, van der Geest et al. (2004) found that
while it was acceptable to hire a private carer for elderly parents left behind in Crete, it was unac-
ceptable for a non-relative to care for an ailing old person in Ghana; additionally, the presence or absence of social support systems beyond the family are also crucial. Further, not only are “middle-class and privileged families . . . relatively absent in the transnational migration literature” (Conradson and Latham 2005) in Southeast Asia where the focus has been on migrants lower on the skills and class ladder, but even fewer studies have addressed the issue of transnational care of/ by the elderly in skilled migrants’ families (Masselot 2011, 301). The complex cultural and societal contexts across Southeast Asia as well as the differing gender regimes call out for more attention to be paid to the gender politics of the roles of and relationships between aging parents and their adult migrant children. Such research will provide deeper and more nuanced understandings of the social and policy implications of transnational families as societies age in a globalizing world.

Conclusion

As migrations and mobilities in the region accelerate, Southeast Asian households across the class spectrum – and at both ends of the care chain – are reworking care provisioning in order to sustain the ‘family’ as a social morphology and a regime of power. As Southeast Asian women migrate – whether as domestic workers or foreign wives – to fill care deficits in households of the more developed economies, the families they leave behind in the source communities are impelled to (re)negotiate prevailing gender discourses and the household division of labor. Similarly, transnational care strategies among the more mobile, elite Southeast Asian families are experiencing considerable flux. In the process, gender identities that are scripted into the performance of everyday and generational care within the family are being reconstituted or reaffirmed across the transnational stage. Amidst the dynamism of change, the fact that Southeast Asian women are playing increasingly agentic and varied roles holds out hope that forces have been awakened in the unmaking of patriarchal worlds in a region undergoing rapid transition.

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Note

1 The two terms ‘family’ and ‘household’ usually connote different meanings – the ‘household’ is concerned with activities such as production, consumption and reproduction directed toward the satisfaction of human needs while ‘family’ is seen as inhering symbols, values and meanings. However, as Croll (2000: 107, quoting Rapp) argues, it is important not to miss the “essential connections” between them for “it is through their commitment to the concept of the family that people are recruited to the material relations of the household.”

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